THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF CHILDHOOD IN AMERICAN FILMS (1927-2018)

by

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This study explored the social construction of childhood in American films from 1927-2018. A content analysis of 30 films was conducted. The sample consisted of films that were near the top of the list of the highest grossing films of each year and that featured a child in a lead or supporting role. Data were obtained to examine children's character and role types; children's activities, locations, coactors, behaviors, and characteristics; and the attitudes and behaviors of adults towards children. Children were overwhelmingly portrayed negatively, stereotypically, and in need of socialization to become fully evolved adults. In relation to adults, children were oppressed and controlled while being socialized, enculturated, and used in adult plans to achieve selfish ends. However, positive portrayals included children being helpful and caring, intelligent, deserving of empathy and protection, and competent in interpreting and acting on their social world. These themes were explained within the context of significant sociohistorical factors occurring between 1927 and 2018. Finally, using Foucault's analyses of knowledge, power, and discourse as a framework, childhood as a social construct was positioned and explained within a larger system of power relations.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF CHILDHOOD IN AMERICAN FILMS (1927-2018)


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TABLE OF CONTENTS

## LIST OF TABLES

The Social Construction of Childhood in American Films (1927-2018)

The socially constructed basis of modern understandings of childhood can best be encapsulated by a quote from James and Prout (2015): "While the immaturity of children is a biological fact of life, the ways in which this immaturity is understood and made meaningful are a fact of culture." Accordingly, taking a deeper look at common perceptions of childhood can reveal how children's lives are lived through childhoods constructed for them by adult perceptions of what children are and should be (Mayall 1996). Although adult understandings are grounded in traditional beliefs about childhood and are generally assumed to be for the benefit of children, this is not always the case. Unequal adult-child power relations are an almost inevitable result of an unquestioned superiority of adults over children and it is this inequality that is explored in more depth in this study.

Strides have been made in recent years to globally draw attention to children's subordinated social status, such as the advancement of children's rights via the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the emergence of the "new" sociology of childhood. Despite these advancements and especially in the United States, the sociology of childhood has found little resonance in mainstream sociological analysis and a full acknowledgement of childhood's place in sociology has yet to come (Alanen 2014).

To address the dearth of attention afforded childhood in mainstream sociology, this thesis investigates how childhood is constructed in American films via actual portrayals of children. Through a content analysis of 30 films spanning the years 1927 – 2018, the extent to which assumptions about age cut across other identities such as race and gender is examined. The films were analyzed to collect information about the roles that children are cast in;

children's locations, coactors, activities, and behaviors and characteristics; and adult attitudes and behaviors towards children.

Based upon a review of relevant literature and previous studies and guided by Foucault's theories of power and knowledge, this study attempts to answer the following research questions: (1) How are children portrayed in American films?; (2) How have these portrayals changed over time from 1927 to 2018?; and (3) Can these portrayals be explained within a larger hegemonic system of power? Each of these questions addresses factors that contribute to the social construction of childhood and unequal adult-child power relations and will hopefully add to the growing literature in the "new" sociology of childhood.

This thesis is divided and organized into several sections. The first section includes a review of literature review involving overviews of: the current state of childhood sociology; the social construction of childhood; elaborations on the concept of "childism," which is operationally defined here as "the automatic presumption of superiority of any adult over any child" (Pierce and Allen 1975:15); and theories regarding the role of the media in transmitting ideologies of childhood.

Next, the study's significance to the field of sociology and the wider public is explained. The next section describes the theoretical framework used to guide the study. Following this section, the methodology used to conduct the study is outlined and detailed. The next two sections contain a reporting and subsequent interpretation of the data findings. Finally, the conclusion gives a summary of the study and its benefits to both researchers and consumers of films that feature children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

*The Sociology of Childhood in the United States and other Western Countries*

In the United States, the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies has dominated the social sciences' views on children, which in turn has been dominated by developmental psychology and socialization theories (Morrow 2011). Within the sociology of childhood, it is still commonly accepted to think of children as "human becomings" - objects to be studied in the sense that they are incomplete people on the way to adulthood with value only as future human capital. However, some sociologists fall at the other end of the spectrum and view children as "human beings" - competent social actors capable of constructing meaning in their worlds (Qvortrup 1994; Pugh 2013; Matthews 2007). Others view *both* adults and children simultaneously as both active agents and constantly in a state of becoming (Pugh 2013). Missing from each of these theories – especially in the United States - is an emphasis on children's lack of power in their relationships with adults and an overemphasis on peer relationships and socialization processes (Morrow 2011).

The "new" sociology of childhood appeared during the mid-1980s when scholars began to criticize one another for not taking the study of children and childhood seriously (Matthews 2007).  Pugh (2013:71), for example, explains that this school of research posits that "children are active social agents (not passive), knowing actors strategizing within their constraints (not innocent), with their capacities and challenges shaped by their contexts (not universally the same)." This view differs from the "old" sociology by conceptualizing children as more than objects of socialization, hidden within families and educational institutions, who cannot speak for themselves. Furthermore, Tisdall and Punch (2012:11) found that even when children are

allowed to speak for themselves, the discipline of childhood studies has been critiqued by its own members for producing too many empirical accounts of children's everyday lives while becoming "complacent and uncritical on a more theoretical level." James (2010) argued that steadily accumulating research on children's perspectives of their everyday worlds and how they construct their own childhoods does not add to the theoretical understanding of childhood. Echoing this position, Matthews (2007) asserted that an acknowledgment of how these everyday worlds are experienced "with adults who control institutions that justify and support the type of dependency that children experience" (p. 327) would be a good starting point.

*The Social Construction of Childhood and its Differentiation from Adulthood*

Scholars from various disciplines have offered evidence that the definition of childhood differs across time, place, and cultures. These findings have culminated in the universal acceptance of the idea that childhood is socially constructed. Arguably the most influential research in solidifying this claim was a book released by Philippe Ariès in 1960, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (as cited in Stearns 2017) in which he argued that childhood is a relatively new concept that emerged in the 1600s following a decrease in infant mortality, changes in the education system, a steady withdrawal of the family from the wider society, and increasing class stratification. Ariès (1962) also maintained that during medieval times, childhood was not recognized as a distinct phase of human existence, separate from adulthood.

Applying this theory to contemporary Western societies, Pilcher (1995) asserted that the most significant characteristic defining childhood is separateness.  She pointed to laws

4

regulating children's activities, differences in dress, and specialty spaces and products created exclusively for children. Resulting from this separateness is the notion that children are helpless and vulnerable and need to be shielded from dangers in the adult world. School and home have become these safe places with adults deciding how children should be cared for and protected. Jones (2001) stressed the role of the "otherness" of children in fueling this separateness and suggests that the younger a child is, the more mysterious and distant he or she is to adults. However, Jones (2001) also argues that children should not be viewed as less than adults, only different from adults. This difference is something adults can never grasp after they have been socialized; while accumulating stocks of knowledge by virtue of having been in the world longer than children, they lose the innocence of childhood. The author argued that this natural separation need not be seen as a negative and should be respected because it is inevitable, affecting the study of children in meaningful ways.

Historically, in the United States, two main legal events helped shape the modern conception of childhood: child labor and compulsory schooling laws in the early 1900s redefined appropriate places and activities for children and laid the groundwork for the colonization of children's worlds. Globally, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 called attention to children's inequality and sparked debate concerning the rights of children. In line with the United States' cultural position on children's place in society, it is the only UN country who has not ratified the treaty (Morrow 2011). According to Matthews (2007), in the United States, children's rights do not resonate the same as in other countries. As a result, socialization processes, competence as compared to adult standards, and peer relationships dominate thoughts about children; not much attention is given to power

differentials between adults and children. These are a few of the sociohistorical factors that

have influenced and changed the image of the child and the sociology of childhood.

Anthropology offers empirical evidence, in contrast to the normative Western ideals

found in the United States, and additional insights into cross-cultural conceptualizations of the

stage of life referred to as childhood. Examples include Holmes (1987), who found that unlike

Western children, Samoan children did not enjoy a "carefree childhood without

responsibilities" (p. 75) and they engaged in "dangerous" tasks, like wielding a bush axe,

whenever the children felt they were ready to (Holmes 1987:75). Firth (1963), in his studies of

the people of the remote island of Tikopia, found that children were not forced to defer to

adult authority; "Conformity to the will of a senior is regarded as a concession to be granted,

not a right to be expected" (p. 145). Schildkrout's research (as cited in Morrow 2011:14-15)

shed light on the "children's economy" in Nigeria where boys and girls earn their own money

through investments and by performing work for strangers. Additionally, Malinowski (2001:45)

found that adults in the Trobriand Islands of Melanesia either ignored or expressed

amusement, rather than shock and disapproval, at the sexual exploration of children. These

studies suggest that childhood differs between societies and is not universally defined.

*Childism and Adult-Child Power Relations*

The limited impact of the field of childhood studies on research, especially in the United

States, further supports the idea that childhood is socially constructed. As Pugh (2013) argued,

"childhood scholars have found that age inequality can be as profound an axis of meaningful

difference as race, gender, or class, and yet the impact of this understanding has not

permeated the discipline of sociology as a whole" (p. 71). Pierce and Allen (1975) defined this

age inequality as childism and described it as:

> ...the automatic presumption of superiority of any adult over any child; it results in the adult's needs, desires, hopes, and fears taking unquestioned precedence over those of child. It goes beyond the biologic necessity that requires adults to sustain the species by means of authoritative, unilateral decisions. What is at issue is how the child is afforded dignity and respect. (P. 15)

The authors go on to illustrate how television commercials teach viewers to devalue children

because they are portrayed as being dirty, whiny, inconvenient, dishonest, sneaky, and

disorganized. Children were depicted as physical creatures who were inferior to fully evolved

adult beings and were therefore expected to be disciplined and kept in a dependent position.

Adults' preferred method of discipline is through microaggressions in which "the child is not

rendered a gross brutalization, but is treated in such a way as to lower his self-esteem, dignity,

and worthiness by means of subtle, cumulative, and unceasing adult deprecation" (p. 18).

According to Pierce and Allen (1975), these apparently well-meaning adults are products

of childism themselves and perpetuate the cycle of oppression through hazing behaviors that

serve to mentally justify the abuse they have suffered. The authors further argued that what

makes the cycle so difficult to break is childism's "technical aims of brainwashing" (p. 18). A

child quickly equates "big" with "good" and "powerful," and learns to conform to adults'

unpredictable demands to avoid being punished and humiliated. This study, the research that

inspired and followed this study, the authors' findings on adult-child power relations, and the

role of the media in reinforcing these relationships were especially significant in the design of

the present study.

7

Nearly 40 years after the publication of Pierce and Allen's (1975) study, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (2012) released a comprehensive book detailing childism in its many forms. In it, she defined childism as "prejudice against children" (p. 4) and argued that well-intentioned advocacy initiatives and efforts can produce the latent effect of undermining children's access to equal rights. When the disregard of children's position as subjects permeates a society, even those who genuinely desire to make the world better for children can find it difficult to realize the existence of childism (Young-Bruehl 2012: 6).  An important question posed by Young-Bruehl (2012:6) is: "Why do we refuse to recognize prejudice against children as a prejudice?" The most obvious answer is that the inferiority of children and their subordination to adults has been naturalized in American culture; at the heart of childism is the belief that children are inherently unequal to adults. She traced the root of this inherent inequality to the natural dependency of children that allows adults to either refuse to acknowledge prejudice against them or to rationalize the prejudice (Young-Bruehl 2012:7).

By tracing her adult clients' psychological disorders to their childhood experiences, Young-Bruehl (2012) found three main causes that coincide with Pierce and Allen's (1975) explanation of how childism operates. Her patients either felt they were not wanted, were controlled and manipulated, or were not allowed to be who they felt they were. Although Young-Bruehl (2012) emphasized physical abuse in contrast to Pierce and Allen's (1975) focus on emotional and psychological abuse, both approaches underscore the negative consequences of unequal adult-child power relations.

Young-Bruehl (2012:6-8) also compared childism to racism and sexism, arguing that all three assume the target is naturally inferior and needs to be kept in line by the dominant

group. Pierce and Allen (1975) took the relationship between childism and society's other "-ism's" a step further. Similar to Young-Bruehl's (2012) thesis that childism lies at the heart of her adult patients' psychological disorders, the authors argued that childism lies at the heart of all other systems of dominance afflicting society. According to them, "childism is the basic form of oppression in our society and underlies all alienation and violence, for it teaches everyone how to be an oppressor and makes them focus on the exercise of raw power rather than on volitional humaneness" (Pierce and Allen 1975:18).

*The Media as a Socializing Agent*

Mass media have long been thought to play an important role in socialization. With the rise in popularity of television and movies during the twentieth century, the role of media became even more salient to women, racial and ethnic minority groups, youth, older generations, and any other groups who felt they were being depicted in ways consistent with traditional stereotypes (Dagaz and Harper 2011). Examples of stereotypical portrayals in films and television that have also been found to be reflected in society are: women being shown in predominately subservient, comedic, and domestic roles; women being overly concerned with appearances and longing for a man when they appear in counter-normative roles; individuals over age sixty making up a disproportionately small percentage of major characters; and African Americans occupying less authoritative roles, being less likely to be used as standards of beauty, and more likely to be involved in unthinking pursuits (Pierce et al. 1977).

One of the main reasons that films have such an effective socializing effect is because viewers tend to more easily suspend their critical judgments while watching a movie (Demerath 1981). Going to the movies or even watching a movie at home is considered a leisurely pastime

when one can escape the stress of everyday life. However, when the relinquishing of critical judgements combines with a personal identification with an individual character or social relationship, the situation is ripe for a viewer to unconsciously accept the points of view and portrayals of the characters as natural and valid. Audiences who experience a storyline that evokes perspectives that have been deeply internalized are less likely to question the legitimacy of the ideologies in the narrative (Getz 2016). This is unfortunate since theories and cultural studies research both support the idea that the media project hegemonic ideologies and messages that reproduce hierarchical relations (Eschholz, Bufkin, and Long 2002).

Several studies have investigated the media's role in reproducing stereotypical depictions of various minority groups. Getz (2016) uses a social cognitive approach to explain how female subordination ideals are transmitted in the film *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*; this theory can easily be applied to the understanding of how the transmission of ideologies regarding children and childhood operates. In Dagaz and Harper's (2011) study of the depiction of professors in popular film, the authors used a content analysis and found stereotypical portrayals professors' dress, overall appearance, race, gender, and interests. The stereotypes in these films were found to negatively influence actual incoming students' perceptions and evaluations of professors in a college setting.

The literature is also rich with research supporting the theory that films are especially effective in transmitting hegemonic ideologies to children. Some examples are: a pervasive thin, white, "beauty is good" ideal (Northup and Liebler 2010); the labeling of "bad" behaviors and the demonizing of perpetrators (Fouts et al. 2006); the normative model of the Caucasian nuclear family with warm supportive interactions (Zurcher, Webb, and Robinson 2018); ideal

romantic expressions in heterosexual relationships (Hefner et al. 2017); and the stereotypical

gendered representations of male and female characters (Hoerrner 1996).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Foucault's theorizations of power/knowledge and discourse provide a useful framework for analyzing the concept of childhood. Applying Foucault's theories and following Gadda's (2008) use of this theory to analyze the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), it is suggested that the film industry can be viewed as an institution that produces a particular type of knowledge about childhood. Just as the children's rights movement was not organized by children themselves, films depicting children are not produced by children themselves. Therefore, the manner in which they are portrayed can be seen as an endorsement of general Western values as well as values particular to American society. The ongoing discourse produced by these films further defines the concept of childhood, produces truths concerning how we think about childhood, and is inextricably linked to power relations that serve the interests of certain groups.

Foucault (2010) linked truth and knowledge to relations of power and argued that "truth" does not exist outside of a system of hegemonic power. Applying this perspective can potentially show how the current discourse surrounding the concept of childhood is a direct product of dominant regimes of truth, which are the result of the historical progression of the acceptance of children as irrational and inferior. According to Foucault (2010), discourses do not reveal pre-existing, essential truths about people and the world, but rather create them through particular practices of power/knowledge. This "enables us to link an intensification of the interventions of power to a multiplication of discourse" (Foucault 2010: 311). In other words, the more a concept or topic is discussed and elaborated upon, the more the reality of the social world concerning that topic is defined in terms of culturally constructed belief

systems. These belief systems define normal behavior and are essentially "negotiated

discourses amongst all individuals in society, shifting and changing as knowledge changes" (Bell

2011: 106), dictating valid options of thinking about reality, the world, and the people in it.

According to Foucault, power is best understood in terms of how it operates as opposed

to who is in possession of it. He asserted that "power is neither given, nor exchanged, nor

recovered, but rather exercised, and [it] only exists in action." (Foucault 1980:89). Furthermore,

the mechanics of power cannot be studied if viewed in Marxist terms, subordinate to

economics, or if viewed as revolving around the sovereign leader or state, ignoring the entire

field of power relations that the state's power is rooted in (Foucault 2010). Thus, an analysis of

power:

> should not concern itself with the regulated and legitimate forms of power in their central
> locations, with the general mechanisms through which they operate, and the continual effects
> of these. On the contrary, it should be concerned with power at its extremities, in its ultimate
> destinations, with those points where it becomes capillary, that is, in its more regional and local
> forms and institutions. (Foucault 1980:96)

Foucault suggested that in juridical theories of power that relate to the administration of laws,

power is regarded as something that is possessed and can be passed along to another person as

a commodity (Foucault 1980). When power is viewed in this way, it takes on characteristics of a

dominating force that comes from above and represses that below it. He opposed this

conceptualization of power because it is incomplete. In this interpretation, the effects of power

are viewed negatively, as being a force that prohibits, says "no," and oppresses. Foucault thus

pursued an alternative non-juridical analysis of power in which power is not seen as purely

repressive. In an interview (Foucault 1980:183), Foucault asserted that he realized that his

traditional conception of power as "an essentially judicial mechanism, as that which lays down

the law, which prohibits, which refuses, and which has a whole range of negative effects: exclusion, rejection, denial, obstruction, occultation, etc." was inadequate. He proceeded to reconsider the ideas of power as also being productive and the mechanisms of power as facilitating more than just oppression. In contrast to juridical power, people more readily accept the type of power Foucault defined because "it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse" (Foucault 1980:119); individuals serve as the vehicles of power, not as the points of application of power.

In order for power to exert its influence and to be effective, Foucault (1980) argued that it is exercised and operates through discourses that work within the limits of the "rules of right" and regimes of truth. The "rules of right" refer to the sovereign right of that of the central authority figure that formally delimits power. These "rules of right" influence the ideas and beliefs embodied in regimes of truth that, in turn, have developed from discourses; discourses create our social reality and govern societal norms and behaviors. Society is organized around regimes of truth that dictate available ways to talk about the world. Therefore, Foucault asserted that a triangle exists between power, right, and truth and that "in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse" (Foucault 1980:93).

Foucault argued that he was not concerned with whether discourses are true or false, but rather how the effects of truth are reproduced within discourses. He interrogated this process by looking at the ways in which disciplinary measures are enforced and have evolved

since the 18th century.  In the 19th century, according to Foucault, power became more productive and efficient and less risky and wasteful. Procedures were developed and perfected that "allowed the effects of power to circulate in a manner at once continuous, uninterrupted, adapted and 'individualised' [sic] throughout the entire social body" (Foucault 1980:119). Power began to extend beyond the established rules of right and became embedded in institutions, embodied in techniques, and equipped with tools that allow it to effect change at the micro-level of everyday life.

Foucault (1977), in *Discipline and Punish*, highlighted the changing attitudes toward discipline in the West by tracing the changes that occurred in systems of punishment in the 1800s (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983). Public executions were replaced by imprisoned criminals whose bodies were put under surveillance, arranged, and regulated rather than tortured. Instead of physical punishment of the body, the focus of punishment was now on the soul – but not in a religious sense. The soul was born out of the exercise of power as methods of punishment, supervision, and constraint and became "the prison of the body" (Foucault 1977:30). Power being used in this way to coerce individuals to self-regulate resulted is referred to by Foucault as discipline. Discipline is defined as a "political anatomy of detail" that focuses on small scale manipulations of the body that produce both docility and utility.  It takes away power from the body while at the same time constantly training the body to operate in a certain way to achieve certain ends. Disciplinary power, Foucault (1977) argued, employs three main instruments: hierarchical observation that produces an unceasing authoritative gaze; normalizing judgement that rewards and punishes based on deviations from correct behavior; and examination which combines the previous two and produces a normalizing gaze that

qualifies, classifies, and punishes (pp. 170-194). With this form of power, subjects could be

easily controlled as domination did not need to be violent or obvious.  Individuals do much of

the work themselves because behaviors are ingrained in them and their behavior is self-

regulated (Foucault 2010).

According to Foucault (2010), changes in how criminals were punished were actually

about creating subjects through the objectifying, disciplinary gaze of authority. Foucault

identified three means of objectification of a subject: dividing practices that combine scientific

knowledge with exclusionary practices to physically and/or socially separate people; scientific

classification that uses scientific reasons to turn people into objects of knowledge ; and

subjectification that creates a self-understanding which is ironically mediated by an external

authority figure. Subjectification is the only process in which the individual is an active

participant (pp. 7-11).

Foucault (1977) used the image of Bentham's Panopticon to illustrate how the process

of subjectification operates. The panopticon is a building with a central watchtower surrounded

by circular building of cells which allows the guard in the tower to always see inside of each cell.

The prisoners, however, cannot see the guard and so they are never certain when they are

actually being observed – or if they are being observed at all. Due to this uncertainty, the

prisoners discipline themselves at all times. The self-discipline is not the result of an encounter

with an actual authority figure, but with an imagined, assumed authoritative gaze. The prisoner

has therefore internalized the external rules and the rules have become self-imposed, even in

the absence of an actual enforcer of the rules (pp. 200-202).

The spread of normalizing power began in the prison system with the expansion of the panoptic techniques and principles (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) argued that in order to be most effective, power should be visible and unverifiable, and the subject of power should have a state of conscious and permanent visibility (p. 201). This perspective of power eventually permeated various institutions and resulted in in an entire carceral continuum in which the authoritative gaze became a way for individuals to monitor themselves, their bodies, their thoughts, and their feelings. Institutions utilizing the Panopticon's principles allow supervisors to oversee, study, and alter its inhabitants; the supervisors are also supervised and the system functions like a piece of machinery. A constant awareness of being surveilled, according to Foucault (1977), causes individuals to strive to live in alignment with accepted norms while modifying and altering themselves appropriately. The punishment of the soul had created docile bodies that "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault 1977:136) as a means of disciplinary control.

Drawing on Foucault's theorizations of power, knowledge, and subjectification, Gadda (2008) critiqued the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The analysis rests on the notion that the concept of childhood is socially constructed; the criticism of the CRC and the children's rights discourse as a moral crusade to endorse Western values; and the idea that the children's rights discourse produces a specific kind of knowledge that is intertwined with the retention of an existing set of power relations. According to Gadda (2008), control and discipline are maintained through the creation of the category of "child" which is normalized based on the idea of a universal, ideal childhood. Similarly, the film industry can be criticized as

endorsing and normalizing its characterization of children through discourses based on a

universal definition of childhood.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

This study focused on childhood as an age category to investigate how it is presented in American films from 1927-2018, with an emphasis on uncovering biased, oppressive representations and placing these representations within a larger hegemonic system of power. According to Pierce and Allen (1975), these oppressive representations are examples of childism which could be at the root of all other systems of dominance afflicting society, including racism and sexism. Childism teaches children that inequality and the exercise of power are acceptable and expected in interactions with others. Uncovering how childism operates and why childism exists could help reduce its impact on children as well as its impact on race and gender relations. Furthermore, the study of the category of childhood and the dynamics of adult-child power relations among American sociologists is rare (Matthews 2007). This is partly because research that encourages children to express their views of adults may have little appeal to research funders, parents, teachers, or any other adults who have power over them. As a result, the sociology of childhood in the United States has been subsumed by an interdisciplinary approach to childhood and has focused on pragmatic concerns for children's assumed well-being. Furthermore, American sociologists' interest in issues considered more profound, such as the reproduction of gender, race and class inequalities, has taken priority (Bühler-Niederberger 2010).

This study also takes the study of popular culture seriously as it used a content analysis of films to research the topic. Although content analysis is used to study sociological phenomena, its use in the study of popular culture, outside of studying "hot topics," is still underutilized in sociology (Lewis 1978). Grindstaff (2008) and Lewis (1978) argued that popular

culture is seen as mainly reflecting society and not reflexively influencing it, therefore it has been deemed of little interest when the goal is to tackle social problems. However, Kidd (2014) asserted that pop culture does influence society as it helps create shared meanings about the world and the human experience (p. 6). Grindstaff (2008) also maintained that pop culture has extended beyond the spheres of leisure and entertainment and has become more influential in political and social life (p. 207). This is partly because consumers of films use the interpretations in films to inform their strategies when navigating the social world (Swidler 1986). Furthermore, the media share many functions with more traditional social institutions and are therefore equally as important to the socialization process of both children and adults (Silverblatt 2004).

Finally, this research has practical implications since the mainstream acceptance of the assumptions surrounding childhood translate into real effects on children's actual, lived lives. As Pugh (2013) points out, "childhood scholars have found that age inequality can be as profound an axis of meaningful difference as race, gender, or class, and yet the impact of this understanding has not permeated the discipline of sociology as a whole" (p.71). Even when it has, there is still a weak link between theory and practice. The results of this study will hopefully inform future research by questioning some core assumptions about how childhood is understood and how children's lives are intertwined with the social, cultural, and economic structures of society.

METHODOLOGY

*Research Questions*

In light of the aforementioned literature review, three questions were developed that guided my research. Each of them is described below.

Q1: In general, how are children portrayed in American films? For example, do the portrayals reflect and reproduce Western values such as competition, individualism, competence, and hierarchical relationships? Furthermore, are these portrayals stereotyped and oppressive, analogous to the portrayal of women and racial minorities in films and on television?

The first research question sought to find out if children are portrayed in a one-dimensional manner in films with their main concerns being restricted to the spheres of home and family. To capture this effect, children's activities along with where they were shown (e.g., home, school, outside); children's coactors; the behaviors and characteristics they displayed; and their representations in relation to adults were recorded. This was to measure the degree of the separateness of childhood that is portrayed in films. Overall, the goal was to track aspects of the films that were not overtly oppressive and were not expressly intended to influence the audience.

Furthermore, referencing the literature on childism and the corresponding studies investigating the oppression of other social groups in films, it was hypothesized that the portrayal of children would be stereotyped and oppressive. Since adults oversee all aspects of film creation, the representations of childhood would inevitably reflect adult ideals about children. It was also hypothesized that the manner of these representations would mirror the

representations of other minority groups who are portrayed by the dominant group, especially when they have no input in the process.

Q2:  How have these portrayals changed over time from 1927 to 2018?

Films, as cultural artifacts, can be used to understand the socio-historical contexts in which they were created (Kidd 2014). They simultaneously reflect and are reflected by each other. Therefore, any changes in the portrayal of childhood over time may point to a change in how Americans actually view childhood and/or in how filmmakers construct images of childhood. Given the historical progression of children's rights, perceptions of childhood, general civil rights, and filmmaking movements, it was hypothesized that the portrayals of children would reflect these changes.

Q3:  Can these portrayals be explained within a larger hegemonic system of power?

Films, as part of the mass media, have been shown to have a major role in transmitting cultural beliefs. These beliefs can be expressed by individuals involved in creating the films and can reinforce hegemonic ideas. Therefore, after the data were collected, they were analyzed to determine if any patterns were revealed that may not have been apparent before. Using Foucault's theories on power and knowledge as a framework, the aims were to uncover any connections between film characteristics, the portrayal of childhood, and the web of forces involved in the power/knowledge process and to further determine if these connections fit into a broader system of influence and dominance.

*Study Design*

A content analysis was chosen for its relevance for the investigation of the research questions. Specifically, this study utilizes a critical content analysis which, according to Carr et

al. (2018), is useful for exposing certain ways of thinking that are so pervasive in a society that

they can be found in nearly any representation of reality (p. 410). Furthermore, taking a critical

approach can aid in uncovering rules that are so taken for granted that the adherents to these

rules do not even realize the extent to which they shape their lives (p. 410). Another benefit of

content analysis is that this method of research is well suited for understanding culture, in

particular popular culture. Being that the units of analysis are films that feature children, a

method suited for analyzing popular culture was appropriate.

Additionally, a method suited for discovering potential biases in the way children are

portrayed in American films was required. A content analysis also met this requirement as Carr

et al. (2018) state that content analysis is also an effective method used by sociologists to

uncover evidence of stereotyping. Stereotyping occurs when the creators of films and various

other forms of media use these traditional images in their portrayals of their subjects in ways

they believe will appeal to audiences. In fact, one of the first uses of this method of analysis was

by Harold Lasswell to analyze Nazi propaganda broadcasts in World War II (Schutt 2012;

Macnamara 2005). His famous, succinct statement encapsulates the goal of media content

analysis as "Who says what, through which channel, to whom, with what effect" (Macnamara

2005).

Serving as additional support for the decision to use a content analysis was Pierce and

Allen's (1975) findings from their study of mass media and children. Initially focusing their

research on the prevalence of racism in television commercials, they eventually noticed the

similarities between racism, sexism, and generationalism. They linked their findings to their

hypothesis that television has a direct impact on how we learn what is "permitted, accepted,

and expected" (p. 18). Thus, a content analysis can also be used to show how mass media

simultaneously reflects and molds society. Several other media content analyses will also be

used to inform the study and to serve as examples of how to choose the sample, operationalize

concepts, and code and analyze the data.

*Sampling*

American films that were near the highest grossing in the year of their release were

included in the study sample. These films were suitable because the focus of the study was how

the portrayal of childhood in films has a mass influence, and box-office earnings are a reliable

predictor of the feature-length films that have been the most favorite, successful, and popular

(Filmsite.org). Specifically, box office earnings were used as a measure of film exposure to the

general public. Rankings based on box office earnings were obtained from IMDb (Internet

Movie Database), an online media information database.[1]

In order to track any changes in childhood portrayals over time, films since 1927 were

sampled. The year 1927 marked a change in the film industry as the silent film era gave way to

sound films. The conversion to sound of all three sectors of the American film industry took

place between late 1927 and 1929, and the profits of the major companies increased during

that period by as much as 600 percent (Cook and Sklar 2018). This conversion signaled the

beginning of the popularity of films, with moviegoers spending increasingly more time and

money at the theatre.

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[1] These rankings for feature-length American films are based on theatrical box office receipts, excluding video rentals, television rights, product placement fees, international box office earnings, and other revenues.

As indicated by Carr et al. (2018), in order to uncover societal blind spots, it is best to avoid material that is explicitly related to the research topic. The creators of these materials would most likely pay conscious attention to how the target subject is portrayed, whereas typical examples more generally represent a slice of ordinary life that is free of overt and explicit biases. Therefore, the list of films was reviewed to identify those that are animated and removed them from the sample frame.

The final sample consisted of the films from each year from 1927-2018 that are not animated and that include a child in a lead or supporting role. The sample consisted of 30 films which provided enough data to reach a point of saturation in which additional films were deemed to offer no new insights into the subject. First, the following six eras in U.S. history from 1927-2018 were identified: the late twenties/Depression Era/World War II (1927-45); post WWII and The Civil Rights Era (1946-65); The Civil Rights Era and Vietnam Era (1966-79); the Reagan Era (1980-89); The Information Age (1990-2010); and The Experience/Innovation Age (2010-18). A random number generator was then used to select five years from each era. For each of these years, a list of films was obtained from IMDb, sorted in order of earnings. Finally, for each of the thirty years, each film in the list was reviewed until the first film in which a child had a notable role was encountered. This criterion was met if a child was either a lead or supporting actor; extras and children with bit parts were not considered.

The films were accessed via YouTube, Netflix, DVDs, and other online streaming sites to give the researcher the ability to pause the films as often as needed to record the data. The coding charts were prepared before data collection began. Please see Appendix A for a complete list of the films chosen for the study.

*Coding*

Coding forms were prepared and from these, the concepts and categories to be measured were operationalized. See Appendix B for a sample coding form and Appendix C for the codebook. The main concept being studied was childhood. Sociologically, and for the purposes of this study, childhood is defined as a stage of life that is socially constructed. It is ideas about this stage, which exists independently of the people who occupy it, that were investigated. However, children were the units that were observed in order to draw conclusions about childhood. "Child" can be defined in several different ways depending on the context – legal, psychological, medical, etc. For this study, a child was defined as a person between the ages of five (preschool) and 12 (puberty). These ages were chosen as the cut-off points because the period between ages five and twelve is represented by a distinct set of societal constructs. Before preschool, even sociologists acknowledge that children are limited due to biological constraints. Also, after the onset of puberty, social expectations change and these expectations will most likely be reflected in the portrayal of childhood in films. With the age range defined, there needed to be a consistent way to identify children. The most obvious way was by size, clothing, voice, and other sensory cues. When necessary, the plot summary was consulted to determine a child's age.

For each film, the child character type and role were also recorded. The categories for character type are lead and supporting. These categories measure a combination of the importance of the character to the main plot, the number of lines spoken, and the amount of screen time. If a film featured a least one child as the lead, the film was categorized and coded as "lead." If a film featured at least one child as a major character who was not the lead, the

film was coded as "supporting." Character role categories were conventional and nonconventional. Conventional characters displayed behavior and other defining characteristics that adhered to accepted, stereotypical expectations. Nonconventional characters possessed some unique or unusual quality not normally observed in children. Other information that was recorded included children's activities, who they were shown with, and where they were shown in the majority of the scenes of each film.

*Data Collection*

The data were collected and coded solely by the researcher. The films were viewed as often as needed to record the data, but at least twice; first to become familiar with the overall plot and again to isolate scenes with children for data collection. Before viewing the films, the following several key characteristics about each film were recorded: release year, rating, and length. These characteristics were recorded to determine if a correlation between any of them and the portrayal of childhood exists. The year of release was used to track any changes over time that may have occurred simultaneously with sociohistorical factors. Film length is a measure of the time that the audience's attention is captured with the opportunity for ideologies to be transmitted.  Finally, a film's rating, even pre- and post-1968 when the ratings system was changed,[2] can be used to infer the creators' marketing intent and the age range of the target audience. This information was obtained from the online film database IMDb.

Next, data from the films were collected. The order of viewing the films was randomly selected so that the researcher was not unintentionally biased by content from similar eras. The

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[2] The MPAA ratings system was instated. Ratings moved from an emphasis on moral acceptability to suitability for children (MPAA 2018).

coding forms were used along with the codebook to collect the data. Scenes featuring children were viewed multiple times to ensure that all relevant data were observed and recorded. In addition to looking for the presence of study measures, the researcher also documented any unexpected themes and unusual examples that were present.

Character role and type were recorded by a mark on the coding form each time an indicator was noted as present. For the location category, the place where the majority of scenes featuring children was recorded. This process was repeated for the coactor category. Information about children's activities, behaviors and characteristics, and adult attitudes and behaviors towards children was also documented. During the initial previewing of the films, it became evident that predetermined indicators for these categories were too varied to yield meaningful results. Furthermore, much information would have been lost if the measures of these concepts were narrowed to fit into predetermined categories. The concepts were first operationalized as shown in Appendix C. Then, based on these operational measures, descriptions of character actions and interactions with other characters, quotes, expressed emotional states, attitudes of characters towards other characters, etc. were recorded to be later analyzed thematically.

*Data Analysis*

The number of films featuring children as lead actors and the frequencies and percentages of conventional and nonconventional child characters were recorded. Next, the data concerning child behaviors and characteristics and adult attitudes and behaviors towards children was analyzed thematically. First, specific details about character actions, interactions, quotes, emotional states and feelings, and attitudes towards other characters were observed

28

and noted. Next, common occurrences of words and phrases were grouped together. These

groups were then classified as representing individual concepts and these concepts were

further grouped and categorized under overarching themes. The most significant themes are

reported in the data findings section.

DATA FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study. The section begins with a summary of the data regarding film and actor characteristics that were collected and analyzed. They include the character and role types, location, and children's coactors. The section ends with a description and analysis of the data collected regarding children's activities, behavior and characteristics, and adult attitudes towards children, including significant themes that emerged.

*Character and Role Types*

From the films chosen, the actor types could be classified as either lead or supporting. Among child actors, the role types were either conventional and in line with prevailing stereotypes or unconventional with characters displaying extraordinary powers or possessing unusual abilities. During the sampling process, it was noted that many films did not feature children in any roles or they were featured only as minor characters or extras without speaking roles.  Please see Table 1 for a summary of the character and role types for children.

In 14 of 30 (47%) of the films sampled, children were lead actors such as in *Home Alone* and *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. The remaining 16 films (53%), featured children as supporting actors. These include films such as *Just Go with It*, *Goodbye, Columbus*, and *The Golden Child*. Surprisingly, many of the films that seemingly starred children, either by title or rating, only featured children as supporting actors.

The majority of the films, 20 of 30 (66%) featured children in conventional roles. In these roles, children displayed behaviors and traits stereotypically associated with children. Examples include the noisy, annoying younger brother in *Old Yeller*; the group of rambunctious orphans in *Little Orphan Annie*; and the innocent frightened little girl in *War of the Worlds*.

In contrast, 10 films featured children in nonconventional roles in which they possessed superior or supernatural abilities or characteristics. These films comprised 33.3% of the total sample, yet 57% of the films with children as a lead actor. Thus, when children were cast in a leading role, they were 1.3 times or 33% more likely to be shown as "special" in some way that deviated from normative portrayals. Characters include the gifted engineer and pilot, in *Star Wars: Episode 1 – The Phantom Menace* who was also the prophesied "Chosen One"; the ingenious star of *Home Alone* who thwarted would-be robbers; the young boy in *Big* who woke up in an adult body; the mystical boy who was hailed as the savior of humankind in *The Golden Child*; the boy who developed a psychic connection with an alien in *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*; and the pre-teen girl in *The Exorcist* who was possessed by a demonic spirit.

Notably, in 23 of the 30 films (77%), the starring or supporting child actors who served as the units of observation were white males. In 16 films (53%), the starring child actor was a white male and in seven films (23%), white males and females appeared together as supporting child actors; in five films (17%), the starring child actor was a white female. Therefore, in 28 films (93%), white children were the starring actors or supporting actors who were used in data collection.  Minority children had starring roles in only two films (7%), *The Golden Child* and *The Jungle Book*. In 3 other films (10%), minority children appeared in smaller roles as friends of the main child actor.

*Locations, Coactors, and Activities*

Though children's locations and activities were varied and dependent upon the film's plot, the common link between these behaviors is that they mostly occurred in the presence of adult characters. Children were mainly featured with other adult characters or an adult

guardian. They did appear in scenes with a variety of other characters, but in comparison to adults, children's coactors were limited. The locations where the majority of the scenes (per film) featuring children took place were varied and were not restricted to home. Although many of the scenes did take place in the child's home, they did not occur frequently enough to be considered a theme.

Children participated in a variety of activities, only one of which was repeated enough to be considered a theme. As compared to other characters, children were disproportionately shown playing ball games (basketball, football, and soccer). Although children's activities varied greatly, nine of 30 thirty films (30%) showed them involved in ball games either alone or in teams. These films include *The Champ*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Bad News Bears Go to Japan*, *Follow Me, Boys!*, *Ransom*, *The Exorcist*, *The Golden Child*, *Goodbye Columbus* and *Heaven Is for Real*. The list includes both the oldest and newest films in the sample, suggesting that this theme was consistent throughout the time frame of the sample. Other activities that were recorded several times were doing chores, watching television, playing, eating, singing, and dancing. In many scenes, children were shown standing or sitting in the background while adults were the focus of the action.

*Behaviors and Characteristics*

Children's behavior and characteristics were recorded and common behaviors and characteristics that were repeated in multiple films were grouped into overarching themes. Children were often depicted as being emotional, honest and curious, noisy and unruly, and willing to help others. In addition, they were regularly shown undergoing some type of growth transformation, orphaned or in need of a stable family, taking care of younger children and as

32

being exceptionally intelligent. Each of these themes is elaborated upon below. Please see

Table 2 for a summary of children's behaviors and characteristics.

*Emotionality*

In nearly every film sampled (29 of 30 or 96.7%), with the exception of *The Golden Child*,

children freely and openly expressed their emotions, whether anger, fear, sadness, or

happiness. The range of emotions expressed was in contrast to the range of emotions

expressed by adults which mainly included anger, crying due to physical pain, etc.  Many times,

children's emotions were used for comedic effect. Some significant examples include the two

young sisters in *Meet Me in St. Louis* who repeatedly displayed their anger. In one scene at the

beginning of the film when the oldest believes the maid has harmed her cat, she exclaims "If

you've killed her, I'll kill you. I'll stab you to death in your sleep and then I'll tie your body to

two wild horses until you're pulled apart." Towards the end of the film, the youngest child was

upset about the family's upcoming move and in a crying rage, destroyed a family of snowmen

(who have been fashioned to look like real people) violently with a stick, knocking their heads

to the ground. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, all three children were terrified of their neighbor, Boo

Radley. This fear was important enough to warrant a subplot in the film and in one scene, the

children were shown fleeing his yard in horror with one child so frightened that he left his pants

behind after they became stuck in a fence. In *War of the Worlds*, the daughter was scared and

anxious during an alien attack and was the only one who consistently cried and expressed fear

throughout the film. When the attack first began, she repeatedly said to her amazed and

excited dad, "I wanna go inside." She was also traumatized by dead bodies floating in a river

and her eyes are constantly being shielded due to her sensitivity. These are a few examples of times when children were shown to express emotions without shame or embarrassment.

*Honesty and curiosity*

Another recurrent theme was children's direct honesty and curiosity. In 29 of 30 films (96.7%), with the exception of *The Golden Child*, children made observations or asked questions that that no one else did. For example, in *The Exorcist*, when Reagan suspected that her mother had a new boyfriend, she recommended inviting him to spend the day with them. She told her embarrassed mother, "You can bring Mr. Dennings if you like . . . you like him . . . you're gonna marry him, aren't you?" In another example from *Meet Me in St. Louis*, one of the older sisters came home infatuated after talking to her love interest. Others reacted with concern and asked if she was okay, but the two youngest sisters sang, "Roses are red. John's name is Truitt. Esther's in love and we always knew it." Another sister remarked that the "ghastly children" had humiliated the sister and the mother threatened to send them out of the room. In *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial,* the mother told Elliott to call his father to which he replied, "I can't. He's in Mexico with Sally." The little sister then innocently asked, "Where's Mexico?" It is apparent that the family does not speak about the parents' separation and the father's new girlfriend because the mother became visibly upset. Later the older brother scolded Elliott by telling him he should grow up and think about how other people feel for a change.

Children's honesty and curiosity often seemed shocking and tactless as judged by the reactions of others. However, sometimes children's curiosity was hidden from others when they eavesdropped on adult conversations. Eavesdropping was a common occurrence that took place throughout the sample of films. Notably, in many instances children's curiosity advanced

the plot by allowing another to explain unseen events or to fill in unknown information by answering the child's questions.

*Annoyance, noisiness, and unruliness*

Children were portrayed as noisy and unruly in 26 of 30 films (86.7%) especially when they appeared in groups. Overall, groups of children were depicted as one indistinguishable unit; children in groups did not have separate identities. The group would move and act homogenously often loudly and disruptively. For example, a group of children set a bon fire and burned neighbors' furniture at a Halloween celebration in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, the group of orphans in *Little Orphan Annie* argued and talked at the same time with their voices being unintelligible, the cousins in *Home Alone* ran, played, and ruined dinner, and the children screamed, ran, and played uncontrollably at a restaurant in *Just Go with It*. In other films, individual children displayed similar behaviors. A young girl in *Cavalcade* cried loudly and uncontrollably when she lost a dance competition. In the opening scene of *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy continuously interrupted her aunt and uncle as they were tending the chicks, fell in the pig pen and needed to be rescued, and her dog chased the neighbor's cat and destroyed the garden in the process. Furthermore, a child was shown running around while playing in a toy store in *Big*, and a player's younger brother constantly followed the coach around and asked annoying questions in *The Bad News Bears Go to Japan*.

*Helpfulness*

Child characters were shown in helpful roles or displayed concern for the well-being of others in 27 of 30 films (90%). In *The Champ*, the son effectively played the "father" role to his alcoholic father while encouraging and convincing him to stop drinking and find steady work.

When the newcomers meet young Anakin in *Star Wars: Episode 1: The Phantom Menace,* he was concerned for their welfare and proceeded to warn them of dangerous individuals, offered them food, and invited them to stay at his house when he anticipated that they would not have time to return to their ship. At his house, he also showed them a robot he had built to help his mother with chores. Elliott, in *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, helped take care of an alien by providing him food and shelter, hiding him at his house, rescuing him from the government officials, and helping him return to his home planet.

In smaller scenes, Kevin in *Home Alone* offered comfort to his older neighbor by suggesting that he reconcile his differences with his son to repair their strained relationship. He told the man to "call your son . . . then you can stop worrying about it and you won't have to be afraid anymore . . . just give it a shot. For your granddaughter anyway. I'm sure she misses you." Other examples include Mowgli helping to rescue a trapped baby elephant in *The Jungle Book*; the daughter in *War of the Worlds* who tried to help her father eat healthier and gives him advice on how to have a better relationship with his older son; and the boy in *Iron Man 3* who calmed Iron Man during a panic attack.

*Experiencing a transformation*

In 20 of 30 films (66.7%), children experienced some type of transformation, whether it was overcoming a fear, learning to appreciate loved ones, accepting death, or even learning to realize and experience the "magic" of childhood.  These transformations most frequently served the purpose of moving the child towards a mature version of him or herself. However, in some films, a child was the catalyst for an adult experiencing a similar type of transformation.

Dorothy, in *The Wizard of Oz*, was the epitome of a child who experienced one of these internal transformations. The change was a result of Dorothy realizing the power she had possessed all along as she used her ruby slippers to transport herself back home. Similar to Dorothy, other characters learned to overcome some seemingly limiting, irrational emotion or mindset. For example, the youngest sister in *Meet Me in St. Louis* and the two siblings in *To Kill a Mockingbird* all conquered their fear of a terrifying, intimidating older neighbor.

In other instances, children learned to navigate a world with real external threats. The oldest brother in *Old Yeller* was forced to kill his beloved dog after it contracted rabies and posed a danger to his younger brother and mother. Kevin in *Home Alone* defended himself and his home against a pair of robbers after he was left alone by his family. Additionally, the son in *A Quiet Place* and the daughter in *War of the Worlds* both learned to survive among alien invaders who came to occupy Earth; although they were both still afraid, they managed to find a way to avoid meeting the same fate as other characters in the films.

*Orphaned/Lacking a two-parent household*

In 18 of 30 films (60%), children were either orphaned or lived in a household with one parent. In each of these films, this fact was a point of focus during the film. In some instances, the child expressed feelings that something was missing from their lives and desired a relationship with the other parent or a parent figure of the same gender. These characters include the young boy in *Just Go with It* who frequently referenced broken promises by his biological father and who looked to his mother's new boyfriend to fill that void; the young girl in *To Kill a Mockingbird* who constantly asked her older brother to recall memories about their

deceased mother; and the young boy in *Witness* who gravitated towards the police officer staying at his home after his own father dies.

At other times, the adults realized the missing influence in the child's life and sought to provide it for him or her. In *Little Orphan Annie*, Annie was forced to live in an orphanage although she enjoyed her independence while her benefactor is away; ironically, Annie served as a mother figure to a younger orphan she encountered and took him to an orphanage, effectively taking on the same adult perspective that she disagreed with. In *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* the three orphans were sent to live with a foster mother, but tried to escape because they did not want to stay. However, they grew to appreciate the living arrangement and even wanted her love interest to stay to complete their family. In *The Jungle Book,* Mowgli was given to a family of wolves to be raised, but eventually the council of "adults" agreed that he needed to leave the jungle and find a village of humans to belong to.

*Older children taking care of younger children*

Another recurrent theme was that of older children taking on the guardian role and taking care of younger siblings or fellow orphans whether willingly or reluctantly. This theme was present in 11 of 30 films (36.7%). In the majority of these situations, the older child did not approach the caretaker role begrudgingly. Even when they were instructed by an adult to take care of younger children, they accepted the role willingly and appeared to enjoy teaching and/or providing protection for the younger child. The older child did not completely imitate existing adult-child relations; they usually expressed more empathy and compassion towards the younger child than adults.

With 11 sisters and brothers, the older children were tasked with this responsibility in *Cheaper by the Dozen.* In *The Jungle Book*, Mowgli is told by his wolf-mother to "take [his] brothers with him" before he runs off to play. The older sister in *A Quiet Place* took her role so seriously that she blamed herself when her youngest brother is captured by aliens, even though the parents and the rest of the family were present when it happened. In *Old Yeller*, while the father is away selling cattle during the majority of the film, the eldest brother served as the father figure for his younger brother. Finally, Annie in *Little Orphan Annie* encountered a young orphan, took him home, cooked for him, nursed him when he was sick, and even continued the mother role when they were both sent to live in an orphanage.

*Above average intelligence*

In six of 30 films (20%), the main child actor was portrayed as exceptionally intelligent for his age. In *Star Wars: Episode 1: The Phantom Menace,* the nine-year-old Anakin was an engineer who builds robots and also a pilot who built and raced his own race craft. He also displayed his intuitive insightfulness when he figured out a Jedi's identity. His intelligence was so apparent that he was eventually recognized as the "Chosen One." Eight-year-old Kevin, in *Home Alone*, built and rigged booby traps to stave off two would-be burglars. In *Ransom*, ten-year-old Sean built a drone that he was shown flying at a science fair. Josh, at twelve years old, was a computer expert who manages to land a job as a data entry clerk in *Big*. Additionally, the tech-obsessed young boy in *Iron Man 3* helped Iron Man repair his armor. Notably, all of these characters are white males.

*Adult Attitudes and Behaviors Towards Children*

Adult attitudes and behaviors towards children were also recorded and categorized as they appeared in the films. Overarching themes that emerged included: children being told what to do, children being trained to follow in adult ways, adults showing love and affection towards children, adults making important decisions for children, and adults using children as part of their selfish plans. Each of these themes is discussed below. Please see Table 3 for a summary of adult attitudes and behaviors towards children.

*Children told what to do*

One apparent theme concerning children was that compared to other characters, they were overwhelmingly told what to do. In every film, a child's actions were dictated by another at least once. The most common person providing the orders was the child's mother or a mother figure such as a maid; these characters were often shown as authoritative disciplinarians to children.

Examples of children being commanded are: from *Shane* "Joey, come back here.", and "Get back into bed."; from *Cavalcade*, "Come on, put this on.", "Edith, run off.", "Be very good and learn your lessons.", and "Go away, go away, all of you."; from *Time Bandits* "Turn that light off!," "No more noise!", and "You must eat your food and then wait for it to go down."; from *To Kill a Mockingbird,* "Scout, call your brother," "Scout, now hurry!", "Now don't go tugging at that dress, Scout," and "Jem, go home."; and from *The Wizard of Oz* "Don't bother us now honey," and "Go find yourself a place where you won't get into any trouble."

A particular kind of demand noted, especially in older films, was children being sent out when another adult entered the room. The child was usually told to run along, run off, or go to

his or her room. Instances of children being segregated from the scene when an adult entered were present in *Cavalcade, Cheaper by the Dozen, Ransom,* and *Goodbye Columbus*.

*Children being trained in adult ways*

In all 30 films, children were shown being taught, verbally instructed, imitating, being forced, or being negatively sanctioned when they engaged in behavior considered as childish. For example, in one scene in *Witness*, the entire Amish community gathered to build a barn. In addition to the children generally being raised by the adults to live an Amish lifestyle, in this particular scene, the young girls and women played a supporting role by preparing food for the men who were actually performing the physical labor. Alongside the men, the young boys practiced their carpentry skills on scraps of wood. As other examples, in the opening scene of *The Jungle Book*, Mowgli is shown being trained to hunt like a wolf as he is overseen by the adult panther and young Joey in *Shane* is taught how to shoot a gun by a family friend even against his mother's wishes.

At other times, adults impart their moral values directly to children. The three farmhands in *The Wizard of Oz* each give Dorothy advice by instructing her to use her brains, heart, and courage, effectively teaching her that rationality, empathy, and bravery are all characteristics of a well- rounded adult. The children in *Heaven is For Real* are inculcated with Christian ideals and values as they are shown attending church, worshipping, and listening to sermons.

*Children in need of love, support, and protection*

Children were also depicted as in need of love and protection by other characters in all 30 of the films in the sample. Adults' love and affection towards children was expressed in

various ways from several types of characters. A common trend was the "doting father" role occurring many times along with "daddy's little girl." Examples include the adoring father in *Cavalcade* and the father in *Goodbye Columbus* who spoils his daughter and lets her win at basketball.

Another common occurrence was the empathetic older female who was usually in her late teens or early adulthood and did not have children of her own. This role was comprised of an older sister as in *Meet Me in St. Louis* or an older female who simply felt the child needed protection as in *Star Wars: Episode 1: The Phantom Menace* and *The Wizard of Oz.* Although this person occasionally disciplined the child or became frustrated with him or her, they nonetheless affectionately filled a void that the mother did not. The loving caregiver role also came in other forms such as the grandfather in *Meet Me in St. Louis* who served as a partner in crime to his grandchildren.

In 10 of 30 films (33.3%), a main feature of the plot was that children should be protected and saved at all costs. *Ransom* provided an extreme example of children needing protection and features distraught parents who work nonstop to rescue their kidnapped son through the entirety of the film. In *Witness*, an entire Amish community risked their safety and lives to protect a young boy who had witnessed a murder. The young boy in *The Golden Child* was at the center of a battle between good and evil and the star of the film worked endlessly to save the kidnapped child. Additionally, the father in *A Quiet Place* ultimately ended his own life by going on a suicide mission to save his two children.

*Parents making important decisions*

Another recurring theme (in 22 of 30 films or 73.3%) was that of parents making important decisions affecting children's lives. These decisions were made without the input from the child, even when the child was older and capable of comprehending the circumstances and consequences of the decisions. In *The Jungle Book*, the council of adults decided that Mowgli should leave the jungle and live with humans, against his own wishes. The father in *Cheaper by the Dozen* moved his entire family to another state, without consulting them even as they were crying and begging not to go. In *Star Wars: Episode 1: The Phantom Menace*, the Jedi won young Anakin's freedom and decided to have him leave his home to go live and train on another planet. Additionally, the mother in *The Exorcist* consulted with the doctor, approved painful tests, and accepted medical treatments for her young daughter without her consent. A final example is Annie being forced to live in the orphanage in *Little Orphan Annie* although showed that she was capable of taking care of herself and fought and cried not to be held there; another orphan is also sent to live with a rude older woman as he also cried, fought, and begged not to go.

*Children being used as a pawn in adult schemes*

In 13 of 30 films, children were recruited or manipulated into helping adults carry out plans that served their own interests. In some films, the child's innocence and naivety was exploited and in others, the child willingly went along with the adult's plans. Additionally, in some films, children were used directly to perform some action in order to accomplish an end. Examples include the boy in *Christmas with the Kranks* who helped the main character take his neighbor's fully decorated Christmas tree across the street to his own house in a wagon; the group of young boys in *Oliver Twist* who were recruited and trained as pickpockets by a selfish,

stingy older criminal leader; Mowgli in *The Jungle Book* who climbed a cliff to retrieve

honeycombs for his bear friend after the bear convinced Mowgli that the type of bees they see

do not sting and that Mowgli owed him this favor because he saved his life; and the two siblings

in *Just Go With It* who were recruited as actors to play the main character's children so he could

impress his love interest.

Alternatively, adults used children as the middleman to garner sympathy from other

adults which convinced them to perform some action. The coach in *The Bad News Bears Go to*

*Japan* chaperoned the little league team in Japan as he attempts to gain support for the team

through endorsement deals that he can profit from; the coach wanted to use the money to pay

off his mounting debts. *Christmas with the Kranks* provided another example as the

neighborhood Boy Scouts leader took the scouts door to door as they solicited their adoring

neighbors to buy Christmas trees to raise money for the troop's camping trip.

DISCUSSION

This section presents a discussion of the results as they relate to the research questions and existing literature. Each of the research questions is answered sequentially. Finally, limitations of the study and directions for future research are addressed.

*How Are Children Portrayed in Films?*

*Summary of results*

Many top grossing films from the initial sampling frame were not included in the sample because they did not feature a child in any role or featured children only as extras without speaking roles. Among the films that were included in the sample, children most commonly were cast in conventional roles in line with stereotypical actions and behaviors. However, when appearing in nonconventional roles and possessing some extraordinary quality, children were usually the star of the film. Furthermore, children were mainly shown in the company of a family member or adult guardian. They were shown engaging a variety of activities, but disproportionately shown playing ball games, especially basketball.

Concerning children's characteristics and behaviors, they were often depicted as emotional, honest and curious, exceptionally intelligent, noisy and unruly, being helpful to others, as orphans, taking care of younger children, and undergoing some type of transformation. From the perspective of adults in the films, children were to be told what to do, have important decisions made for them, trained in adult ways, and used in adult schemes. Yet, they are also shown in need of protection, love, and support.

*Relationship to previous studies*

Overwhelming support for the children as "becomings" viewpoint was found in the sample of films. Those who hold this perspective view children as objects to be studied in the sense that they are incomplete people on the way to adulthood with value only as future human capital. Inherent in this perspective is an overemphasis on socialization processes, children's psychology, and children's peer relationships along with an underemphasis on children's lack of power in their relationships with adults. In the 30 films, filmmakers seemed to embrace this same perspective and the assumptions that form its basis. Support for this perspective came in several different forms. The most common form was the message that children should be trained in the ways of adults either physically, mentally, or emotionally.  In addition to adults directly influencing children, older children reinforced messages concerning appropriate adult behavior as they passed them along to younger children; this resulted in a seemingly endless cycle of indoctrination in which adult habits, thoughts, and values were transmitted unquestioningly.

Related to this cycle of enculturation was the theme of children being orphaned or in a single parent household and in need of and/or yearning for a stable family environment and the guidance of adults. In 18 of 30 of the films, a child was shown without two biological parents and this fact was presented as a deficiency in the child's life. In these films, either the child or nearby adults expressed that the child needed to be enrolled in school, fed properly, disciplined, protected, or taught values and skills relevant to their gender. It was suggested that children needed to be a part of a family with two opposite sex parents or at the very least, a home with an adult to watch over them. These messages are consistent with the research that found the media especially effective at transmitting hegemonic ideologies that reproduce

hierarchical relations. Zurcher, Webb, and Robinson (2018) found evidence of the normative

model of the Caucasian nuclear family with warm supportive interactions and Hoerrner (1996)

found stereotypical gendered representations of male and female characters in films that

targeted children. The majority of the films in the sample were in line with the findings from

these two studies.

Another form was children undergoing a transformation in which they evolved into

more mature versions of themselves. The most common growth transformations involved

overcoming some fear, learning to appreciate loved ones, and accepting a difficult fact of life

such as racism, evil, or death. Being courageous, forgiving, and advanced enough to understand

negative life events are all traits of a mature adult according to American culture. However, in

the films, a child who experienced one or more of these transformations was portrayed as a

more mature version of themselves and the transformation was only a step towards becoming

a fully evolved adult - it was made clear that the child was still viewed as a child. Chronological

age was still the main factor in defining a child versus an adult and the audience was reminded

that children were deemed psychologically inferior and in need of additional socialization no

matter how mature they appeared.   An example is young Anakin from *Star Wars: Episode 1:*

*The Phantom Menace* who was the prophesied "Chosen One" yet expected his mother to

accompany him to another planet for his Jedi training.

Support for the perspective of children as "becomings" came in a final form of parents

making important decisions for children without their consent. This fact may seem

unremarkable since children are often viewed as naive and incompetent regarding the serious

business of life and parents and other adults are assumed to have good intentions and

children's best interests in mind. However, these assumptions hinder adults from providing

children with information, valuing their opinions, and consulting them when it comes to

significant decisions that will affect their health, social networks, or chances in life. If, as human

"becomings," children are viewed as potential human capital, then decisions made for them by

adults, whether intentional or not, will be in line with their future roles and not necessarily in

line with their best interest in the present.

The results from this study also echoed Aries's (1962) and Pilcher's (1995) findings that

support the idea that childhood is socially constructed; these two authors found support that

the definition of childhood differs across time, place, and culture. In this sample of films,

childhood is depicted as a separate concept from adulthood by several means. One of the steps

in constructing childhood and differentiating it from adulthood is to define children as "others"

and to separate their lives from the rest of the world inhabited by adults where the serious

business of life takes place. Another is to colonize children's worlds so that they can be filled

with content that ensures that they are socialized accordingly. An additional step is for adults to

protect these special, vulnerable beings at all costs.

Several findings in this study specifically lend support to Pilcher's (2005) idea of the

separateness of childhood. According to Pilcher, children are separated because they are

vulnerable and need to be shielded from dangers in the adult world. Evidence of childhood's

separation from adulthood was found while creating the film sample. Among the top grossing

films of each year which mainly featured stereotypical adult plots and situations, children were

often cast in minor roles, as extras, or in no roles at all and these films could not be included in

the sample. Additionally, children were mainly shown with family members or in the care of an

adult guardian and participating in stereotypical activities (such as playing ballgames), further

suggesting that children are largely excluded from the serious business and perceived dangers

of adult life as represented in film.

Jones (2001) stressed the role of the "otherness" of children in fueling this separateness

and suggests that children are mysterious and distant to adults, with the youngest children

being the most mysterious and distant. This perspective is evident in films such as *Heaven Is for*

*Real*, *The Golden Child*, and *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* in which a child was depicted as having

visited heaven, being the savior of mankind, and having a telepathic connection with an alien,

respectively.  Also, children were sometimes shown possessing unnatural intelligence/wisdom

for their age, as in *Star Wars: Episode 1 – The Phantom Menace.* At other times, the distance

between children and adults was made apparent by scenes and plots which showed adults,

consumed with their own lives and careers, largely ignoring children. Examples include the well-

meaning, but dismissive aunt and uncle in *The Wizard of Oz* and the stoic lawyer father who is

preoccupied with his current case in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The data suggest that filmmakers

tend to view children as worthy of starring roles when their "otherness" is emphasized, such as

when they display some unnatural ability or possess some supernatural quality. For although

children most often appeared in stereotypical roles that did not challenge common

assumptions about their roles and how they should act, when they did appear in non-

stereotypical roles, they possessed some extraordinary quality and were 1.3 times more likely

to be the star of the film.

These findings also coincide with Eschholz, Bufkin, and Long's (2002) findings from their

study of women and racial/ethnic minorities in film. The authors found that representations of

these two groups in films suggested that in terms of character quality and real numbers, images of women and minorities failed to capture the breadth of their real-world experiences. Similarly, representations of children fail to capture the details of their everyday lives as experienced in the real world. After all, real children do not possess superpowers and they have involvements outside of family and home. In films, children's lives have been colonized and filled with content that adult filmmakers find appropriate. Additionally, Eschholz, Bufkin, and Long (2002) found that modern films continue the trend of disproportionately featuring males in key roles; white males had more screen time than both females and minority males. These findings point to a similar inequality between children and adults. Films featuring a child in at least a supporting role were as low as number 34 (in this case out of 299 films [IMDB 2019]) in the earnings rankings list. In contrast, an adult could be found in a starring role in the number one top grossing film of each year sampled (excluding animated films).

Finally, children were often depicted in vulnerable positions in which they needed to be protected or saved by adults. In these situations, the adults' willingness to risk everything, even their own lives, to save the child at all costs, reinforced the idea of the "otherness" of children. In films such as the *Ransom, The Golden Child, Oliver Twist, The Exorcist, Witness*, and *The Jungle Book*, the entire main plot revolved around the notion of adults rescuing a child from some type of threat. Because it is naturally assumed that children are not able to defend or protect themselves, similar plots involving endangered adults would most likely not be as readily received by audiences or as believable to filmmakers. Another negative consequence of portraying children as vulnerable and in need of protection is that children become more restricted in what is assumed to be appropriate behavior for them. Ariès (1962) argued that the

premodern approach to children actually provided several advantages over the modern approach. He claimed that although a lesser focus on childhood in the past may appear to have been a drawback, this perspective in fact gave children more freedom than they have amid the careful monitoring of modern societies.

The findings from this study can also be compared to and contrasted with Pierce and Allen's (1975) study of children's portrayals in television commercials in which children were often depicted negatively in the media. The authors found that children were specifically shown as dirty, whiny, inconvenient, dishonest, and sneaky. Likewise, the results of this study also found negative qualities in children's representations, including being prone to emotional displays and outbursts, expressing socially inappropriate curiosity and honesty, and being loud, disorderly, and annoying.

As a result of negative representations, Pierce and Allen (1975) argued that children were viewed as inferior to fully evolved adults and deserving of discipline through microaggressions that lower their self-esteem. This study similarly found that because children exhibited more negative behaviors and characteristics in contrast to adults, the message conveyed was that children are inferior and less evolved, particularly in regard to social norms. Consequently, adults reacted by disciplining children by regularly telling them what to do, dismissing them from adult situations, and using them as pawns in their selfish schemes.

Most of the negative portrayals of children found in this study could be left out without changing the meaning or creativity of the films, similar to Pierce et al.'s (1977) study that found gratuitous, unnecessary negative portrayals of minority groups in films. Pierce et al. (1977) attributed this excess of negative portrayals to a symptom of racism - both blacks and whites

51

"accepting as unremarkable that the black's time, energy, space, and mobility will be at the service of the white" (p. 64). Childism, analogous to racism, and as supported by the results of this study, also results in both children and adults accepting that children's time, energy, space, and mobility will be at the service of the adult. This unremarkable acceptance of inequality persists and goes unnoticed, resulting in unequal adult-child relationships. This is especially true in films such as *Christmas with the Kranks* and *The Bad News Bears Go to Japan* in which children are shown in supporting roles and several of them involve the children being used to carry out plans that serve an adult's selfish interests.

However, although negative representations constituted the majority of the data findings, this study also found more positive portrayals of children in films than Pierce and Allen (1975) found in television commercials. Please see Table 4 for a comparison of negative and positive portrayals of children found in the sample. In films, children were also shown as being intelligent, helpful and caring to others, and in need of protection, love, and support. The discrepancy in these depictions could be due to the length of time available for each medium to deliver its message and also the practical intention of each medium. Films have over an hour to develop characters and plots, whereas television commercials have only a few seconds to sell a product or promote a brand.

Nevertheless, the sample of films depicted children positively in their own right, and not simply as a counterpoint to adults' less respectable traits. Characters such as the young boy in *Iron Man 3* and the boy turned man in *Big* had extreme intelligence as one of their main qualities, but other child characters proved themselves valuable in smaller instances even when they were underestimated, unconsidered, or doubted. Child characters also displayed caring,

helpful qualities as they watched over younger siblings, gave adults profound advice in their childish innocence, and stood up against injustices they saw in the world. Furthermore, although children's vulnerability was often emphasized when they received support and protection, at other times, they were portrayed as deserving of this empathy on a more human level, not different from that of adults.

Other positive portrayals came in the form of support for the new sociology of childhood. Several films from this sample support this perspective by portraying children as "active social agents (not passive), knowing actors strategizing within their constraints (not innocent), with their capacities and challenges shaped by their contexts (not universally the same)" (Pugh 2013:71). Mowgli from *The Jungle Book* is an ideal example of a child who is portrayed in this light. He loses people, almost dies multiple times, and learns the hard way that there is good as well as evil in the world, all while using his ingenuity, intuition, and "man tricks" to save both himself and those around him. Another example is the young girl in *Just Go with It* who negotiates a pay rate, overtime, and prepaid acting classes when she is recruited by her mother's friend to take an "acting job" playing his daughter. In these examples, children from vastly different backgrounds figure out how to manipulate their environments to achieve their own desired outcomes.

*How Have These Portrayals Changed Over Time from 1927 To 2018?*

The portrayals of children remained considerably consistent over the span of the 91 years considered in this study. Although the frequency of overt negative depictions per film decreased, they were not necessarily replaced with more positive depictions. Rather, the extreme portrayals diminished and overall characterizations became more subtle. Due to this

subtlety, context as opposed to blatant details became more important in determining how children were portrayed. For example, in film *Little Orphan Annie* from 1932, extreme emotionality came in the form of the young boy leaping out of a second story window because he wanted to leave the orphanage with Annie. However, in *A Quiet Place* from 2018, an example of extreme emotionality was the son trembling with fear in anticipation of going out to search for food among creatures with supersonic hearing. The boy from *Little Orphan Annie* is blatantly portrayed as irrational and emotionally immature, whereas, on the surface, the boy's reaction in *A Quiet Place* can be viewed as "normal." However, when his reaction is compared to the adults' reactions and placed in the context of the gravity of a post-apocalyptic world, the boy from *A Quiet Place* is seen as being equally as irrational and emotionally immature as the boy from *Little Orphan Annie*. This is one example of how portrayals of children became less explicit and more implied and rooted in the overall plot.

Additionally, the frequencies of some depictions as well as the degree of focus on children in films were found to vary over time. Taking the analysis of the findings in context according to the film characteristics shown in Appendix A, the films can be grouped into three approximate periods: 1927-1971, 1973-1999, and 2004-2018. After 1971, the trend of children being excessively depicted as annoying, noisy, and unruly tapered off. The period from 1927-1971 and the period from 2004-2018 contain the majority of children in supporting roles and as conventional characters. The middle period, 1973-1999, featured the majority of films (seven of 10) that showed children in nonconventional roles ranging from a mystical savior of mankind to a demonically possessed pre-teen. This was also the period when children were featured in nearly half of the lead roles (six of 14).

The aforementioned periods roughly coincide with eras of the film industry, which, in turn, coincide with significant sociohistorical periods. Resultantly, the portrayals of children in film reflect a combination of socially and culturally informed understandings of children and the objectives of filmmakers. These portrayals of may not directly coincide with social and film industry eras since, according to Eschholz, Bufkin, and Long (2002), movies lag behind reality many times.

The period from 1927-1971, concurrent with the Golden Age of Hollywood, was characterized by the Great Depression, WWII, the post-war era, and The Civil Rights Movement. Children, subject to child labor and compulsory schooling laws during the Great Depression in the 1930s, became restricted in their options of activities and locations (Morrow 2011). As a result, they became segregated from adult life and confined to home and school. This fact is reflected in the portrayals of children that featured them at home and engaging in activities under the supervision of or in the company of adults.

Furthermore, during the Depression, four events, each in their own way, facilitated women taking on more authoritative, disciplinary roles in regard to children. WWII sent husbands and fathers to war, leaving women to act essentially as single mothers and women's primary role became to be a mother whose job was to keep the family together. Wartime propaganda also helped recruit women into jobs outside of the home. Post WWII, as families moved to the suburbs, many women again returned to their roles as mother and wife (History 2010; McDermott 2018). Correlated with this redefinition of motherhood, children were excessively portrayed as annoying and unruly and in need of being told what to do, especially

by their mothers and/or mother figures such as maids and older siblings. Portrayals of this type, between mother figures and children, were found throughout the study sample.

The next period from 1973-1999 contained the majority of films that featured children as major characters and in nonconventional roles. This new emphasis on children and their radical portrayals directly followed the emergence of the New Hollywood era in the late 1960s. The New Hollywood era came at the end of a transformative decade marked by the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and political assassinations. It was also characterized by a creative peak in filmmaking. Studios sought out exciting, innovative ideas and young directors created films that were a rebellious opposition to existing conservative Hollywood scripts. Child stars and storylines featuring children in provocative roles were certainly anti-conservative. The new films dominated the box office with themes emphasizing alienation and anti-authoritarianism (Welky, Mintz, and Roberts 2016). These themes characterize the films and nonconventional roles children were cast in from 1973-1999: *Star Wars: Episode 1 – The Phantom Menace, Home Alone, Big, The Golden Child, E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, *Time Bandits*, and *The Exorcist.* In each of these films, the child characters experience some type of alienation. Additionally, the child characters in *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial, Home Alone, Time Bandits,* and *Big* all defy authority at some point.

The New Hollywood era had a lasting impact on the film industry. However, the turn of the century also saw increased globalization which brought population growth, resource scarcity, and terrorism to the attention of both the makers and viewers of films. Fears of these issues leading to the creation of a dystopian society permeated the film industry in the twenty-first century (Peters 2015; Welky, Mintz, and Roberts 2016). The films of this era reflected these

fears and the period from 2004-2018 featured three of the four films in which children inhabit globalized, dystopian science fiction worlds. With concerns about survival being of the utmost importance, entire families became the focus of these films and the role of children took a back seat. As a result, children appeared as supporting actors in the three science fiction films from this period: *War of the Worlds*, *Iron Man 3*, and *A Quiet Place*.

*Can These Portrayals Be Explained Within a Larger Hegemonic System of Power?*

The portrayal of children in films has been examined, related to previous studies, and explained over time. Now it is suggested that the film industry can be viewed as an institution that produces a particular type of knowledge about childhood and that this knowledge can be situated within the system of power and knowledge explicated by Foucault. Inherent in this perspective are two main presumptions: the film industry functions as a social institution and the stage of life known as childhood is not natural, but socially constructed. After these two points are addressed, an explanation of how power operates in the fictional accounts of adult-child relationships presented in films and in the real-life production and consumption of these films is offered.

Although Foucault focused his research on real-world examples of the ways power affects the subject, this analysis rests on the principles that Foucault's conceptualizations are rooted in and it treats the fictional accounts of children found in films as valid data for investigating the category of childhood. According to Swidler (1986), consumers of films combine the interpretations provided onscreen, their own personal experiences, and other elements of culture to create a toolkit that they use to decide how to navigate the social world. Therefore, fictional accounts of adult-child relationships and interactions in films cannot be

entirely separated from nonfictional accounts when consumers are using them to devise real-life strategies of action based on their perspectives of childhood.

Additionally, Silverblatt (2004) argues that the media share many elements with other social institutions and have undertaken many of the functions once served by traditional social institutions such as the school, church, and family. These functions are often tied to tradition and contribute to the stability of a society by means of their constant presence. Although the media's latent function has gradually emerged as a source of purpose, direction, and meaning for a public looking to it for answers formerly reserved for other institutions, their manifest function has been, from the start, to make the most profit by attracting the largest audience possible. Roles that the media is expected to fulfill are related to successful functioning in the larger society. These include uniting diverse groups of people, helping individuals cope with change, defining success and failure, defining values, establishing rules of behavior, furnishing role models, educating, and providing a buffer from society. According to Silverblatt (2004), the only function that the media – because they are not state owned - do not share with traditional social institutions is directly controlling aberrant behavior. This is because media presentations can indirectly promote deviant behavior by depicting a world with no consequences or with unrealistic consequences for the behavior.

In addition to suggesting that the film industry is a social institution, this study also found support for the social construction of childhood. In this sample of films, the portrayal of children in America was shown to differ from ideas about children found in other societies, as evidenced by prior anthropological studies. Furthermore, since American children's portrayals were also found to vary over time along with significant social, cultural, and political events,

they can be understood as being socially constructed. The social construction of childhood is rooted in Berger and Luckmann's (1966) conceptual framework regarding the social construction of reality as a whole. This perspective emphasizes the historical and cultural aspects of phenomena assumed to be natural. Berger and Luckmann emphasize how meanings are not inherent in the phenomena, but develop through understandings which are created in social interactions. Both children and adults bring their own unique assumptions and expectations to social interactions that color the negotiated understandings that develop between and within them.

With the understanding that the media can be understood as a social institution and that the category of childhood can be understood as being socially constructed, the portrayals of children in films can be explained within the network of power and knowledge elaborated by Foucault. In a lecture entitled *The Order of Discourse,* Foucault (1971) argues that the "will to knowledge, thus reliant upon institutional support and distribution, tends to exercise a sort of pressure, a power of constraint upon other forms of discourse" (p. 11). This pressure allows some discourses to prevail while subjugating and marginalizing others. The prevailing discourses that exercise power over individuals can be considered as the dominant, hegemonic discourses. These discourses exert social and cultural control in the general sense of hegemony which refers to the "relatively dominant position of a particular set of ideas and their associated tendency to become commonsensical and intuitive, thereby inhibiting the dissemination or even the articulation of alternative ideas" (Rosamond 2016). The social constructs found in this study involving children and childhood are hegemonic and part of a discourse that defines the reality of what it means to be a child or a person who occupies the category of childhood. The

properties of a child are not preexisting, dormant, and waiting to be discovered inside of a person occupying a certain age group. Instead, the properties are created and the category of child is socially constructed through discourses about what being a child implies.

Discourses create regimes of truth that are part of a triangle that exists between truth, power, and right (Foucault 1980). In America, the rules of right regarding children pertain to compulsory schooling laws, child labor laws, parental rights, and other laws governing children. Due to these real-world laws limiting children's activities, the range of locations and situations that children could be realistically shown in was limited in many films. Children were shown playing and engaging in childlike, unimportant behaviors, and were excluded from the serious business of life except when they were portrayed as being exceptionally intelligent. Additionally, portrayals of adult-child relationships reflected the fact parents' rights provide a legal basis for parents to make important decisions for their children, usually without the child's input. These points serve as examples of how "power surmounts the rules of right which organise [sic] and delimit it and extends itself beyond them" (Foucault 1980:96). There are no laws that say children must spend their time playing or that parents have the right to choose their child's religious beliefs, whether or not they can remain in a room when another adult enters, or whether they can speak "out of turn." However, the inequality inherent in laws governing children's rights has spilled over into other areas of children's lives and parents and other adults feel justified in exerting influence and control in these areas as well.

Adults' disciplinary power in their interactions with children also stems from truth, another point in the triangle. Truth here does not refer to objectively true statements, but discourses that have developed, evolved into regimes of truth, and have been accepted as true.

Disciplinary power foremost entails surveillance. Children in films were shown in a state of

hierarchical surveillance by mainly having adult coactors. The relationship of the adults to the

children varied; adults appeared as parents, neighbors, teachers, nannies, and doctors. These

adults served as guardians and children were rarely shown unsupervised except when they

were in a separate part of the home, yet still at home with an adult guardian. In instances

where children were unsupervised or orphaned, such as in *Little Orphan Annie*, *Oliver Twist*,

and *The Jungle Book*, the lack of supervision was always presented as a problem that needed to

be solved. In these films, the satisfactory ending revolved around the child characters finally

finding a family that included adults who could oversee their activities and provide an

authoritative gaze.

With a system facilitating the hierarchical surveillance of children established,

objectification takes place. As stated by Foucault (2010), objectification involves the three

modes of dividing practices, scientific classification, and subjectification. In this sample of films,

children were separated from adults both physically and socially. A physical separation took

place when children were shown engaging in child appropriate activities, different from that of

adults. For example, children engaged in play and, in particular, were shown playing ball games

disproportionately as compared to adults. They were shown at school, sent out of the room

when adults appeared in the scene, and left with nannies while adults went off to tend to

serious, important business. A social separation occurred when children were presented as

"others" who were distant and mysterious and who possessed unnatural or supernatural

abilities. The division between adults and children was further emphasized when children were

depicted as "becomings" or incomplete human beings who possessed immature characteristics,

displayed immature behaviors, and who were incompetent. Children's assumed incompetency was emphasized when adults overwhelmingly dictated children's actions, trained them to emulate adults' actions and to accept adults' views, made important decisions for them, and used them as pawns in adult schemes. In these instances, it can be inferred that children are not fully evolved and therefore should be excluded from situations and decisions that fully evolved adults are more capable of handling.

Children, in these films, were now in a position to be classified, though not necessarily scientifically, and subjected to normalizing judgement. Categories of classification include the type of role the child appeared in and the behaviors and characteristics of the child. As with any system of classification, children were grouped based on characteristics they possessed. Roles in general were reserved for white children, mainly males. As stated in the data findings section, in the sample of thirty films, white children (whether male or female) accounted for the child actors observed in 93% of the films. Additionally, the majority of starring roles were reserved for children who portrayed nonconventional characters. Regarding behaviors and characteristics, children were classified as being emotional, being honest, being curious, being noisy and unruly, helping others, undergoing some type of growth transformation, being orphaned or in need of a stable family, or as being exceptionally intelligent. In many films, children were classified in categories opposite of these. This dichotomy emphasized the underlying valuation and normalizing judgement inherent in the classifications themselves. For example, a child who experienced a transformation and became more mature was contrasted with a child who did not; the child who matured and advanced successfully and ideally toward adulthood was implied to be "normal" and "better."

Normalizing judgment came in the form of other characters' reactions, both direct and indirect. At times, children were outright told to "grow up." At other times, children were negatively sanctioned by disapproving looks, blatant disregard, and other nonverbal sanctions and microaggressions. Adults were also classified and judged in their interactions and relationships with children. They were determined to be either good or bad supervisors of children. As an example, the divorced father in *War of the Worlds*, who was more lenient and egalitarian that most parents, was scolded by his young daughter for not being stricter and experienced a transformation of his own in which he became a "better" parent. This example illustrates how disciplinary power works by engaging supervisors who are perpetually supervised and how power operates, according to Foucault (1977), in a network of relations - not simply from the top down.

Families are the primary networks of relations that children are enmeshed in and are especially effective at dispensing normalizing judgement to its members.  As a result, an overemphasis on the need for children to belong to a family was found throughout the sample of films in this study. In 12 of the 30 films, children were part of a two-parent household and in 18 of the 30 films, children were either orphaned or lacking a two-parent household and this fact was presented as a point of deficiency. The overemphasis on family is one effect of the spread of normalizing power. Part of the current discourse surrounding children involves them having responsible adults in their lives who will ensure that they are enrolled in school, fed properly, disciplined, protected, and taught values and skills relevant to their gender. Foucault (1977) even suggests in *Discipline and Punish* that:

> ...intra-familial relations, essentially in the parents-children cell, have become "disciplined," absorbing since the classical age external schemata, first educational and military, then medical, psychiatric, psychological, which have made the family the privileged locus of emergence for the disciplinary question of the normal and the abnormal. (P. 215)

Thus, parents and children have both internalized external rules for how they should behave, and families have become sites for the effects of disciplinary power to flourish. This is another way, according to Foucault (1977:215), that existing authorities have found to reinforce their own internal mechanisms of power.

As a final mode of objectification in films, children were transformed into subjects. Subjects were created from a group of people who simply belonged to a certain age group. The political anatomy that Foucault (1977) speaks of occurs as adults dictated where children could go and what they could do. A basic assumption in the entire sample of films was that children's time, space, energy, and mobility would be at the service of the adult. Children were told what to do, enculturated and trained in adult ways, and used as pawns in adult schemes. By complying to these commands from adults and carrying out actions initiated by adults, children's bodies were turned into docile bodies. Child subjects could be easily controlled as their domination did not need to be violent or obvious.

Children internalized the rules they were expected to obey and behaviors become ingrained in them. The realization that they could be observed at any given moment caused them to monitor themselves, their bodies, their thoughts, and their feelings and self-imposed norms caused them to discipline themselves. Children also submitted to being controlled because as in each of the 30 films, they were given love, support, and protection and in 10 films, adults even risked their own lives for the child's salvation. Thus, they obeyed power

because, in return, they received protection from a world they perceived they may not have the skills to safely navigate. This example supports Foucault's claim that power induces pleasure and does more than bear down on us as a force that says "no" and it also provides an answer to a question he posed in an interview: "If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it?" (Foucault 1980:119).

Resulting discourses about childhood are derived from this process of objectification of children in films. These discourses then lead to regimes of truth based on: the acceptance that the socially constructed category of child is natural, what it means to be a child, and how to relate to individuals occupying this specific stage of life. The hegemonic discourse surrounding childhood and reinforced through films is composed of the "truths" found during the data analysis: children are segregated from adult life, worthy of being the focus when they are endowed with extraordinary qualities, emotional, honest, curious, exceptionally intelligent in some instances, noisy and unruly, in need of socialization, and capable of being helpful to others. Furthermore, they need to be told what to do and to have important decisions made for them without their input. Yet, they are also in need of love and protection. The portrayals of children found in this study are can be integrated to produce a discourse regarding children and childhood in American films: children are innocent, dependent subordinates, who are not fully evolved and who need to be controlled and protected with young white males sometimes serving as an exception to this rule.

This discourse regarding childhood pervades society, but is also constantly being negotiated. According to Foucault (1990),

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Pp. 100-101)

Children did rebel against power and attempts to dominate them in many of the films, however, the consequences were rarely realistic. The children either failed miserably or succeeded without any punishment. Attempts to thwart power are still tied up in unceasing power relations that continue to exert influence on all who are involved. The films were not always transparent about these networks of relations and did not show how the effects of power were felt by everyone in the system.

Until this point, Foucault's theories have been applied to the fictional accounts of children's lives as depicted in films. These fictional accounts, however, have their basis in the real-world experiences of the film creators and can be argued to reflect actual social life. Furthermore, because the film industry, as part of the media, functions as a social institution, it has real effects on consumers of films. As noted by Kidd (2014), producers of films draw on their experiences of the social world and audiences internalize the meanings they create from the films. It is beyond the scope of this study to analyze the details of how power and knowledge operate in real-world adult-child relationships and the extent to which the fictional accounts in films reflect and are influenced by these real-world relationships. However, it can be argued that a connection exists between the two; films, as cultural objects, are linked to the social world through production as well as reception (Kidd 2014).

A film's content is filtered through the perspectives and interests of those who make it (Kidd 2014). Creators of films produce discourses about childhood that are simultaneously

influenced by existing discourses they have accepted as well as discourses audiences demand

to see. Furthermore, each of these discourses is influenced by the rules of right concerning

children, including the ways in which the rules of right overstep their boundaries. Regimes of

truth based on these dominating discourses limit the ways possible for individuals to think

about the world. As Foucault (1977) argued, alternatives to the modern prison system are

unfathomable in places where freedom and liberty are paramount; taking away this freedom is

the only plausible method of punishment. Similarly, alternatives to the portrayals of childhood

found in this study are unfathomable when in real-life, children are assumed to be innocent,

dependent subordinates, who are not fully evolved and who need to be controlled and

protected, with young white males sometimes serving as an exception to this rule. Resultant

regimes of truth concerning childhood limit the possible ways for film creators to think about

children.

Portrayals of children are partly a reflection of the discourses and regimes of truth film

creators have negotiated and accepted as true. According to The Hollywood Diversity Report

2018, film creators - the writers, directors, and producers credited for developing films - are

overwhelmingly white and male. Furthermore,

> The outsized role of White males at the dominant [talent] agencies is key because these
> agencies function as brokers who "package" together the source material and talent that
> ultimately constitute the film and television projects greenlighted by Hollywood's studios and
> television networks. The lack of agent diversity in the process most certainly affects the types of
> packages the three dominant talent agencies are predisposed to initiate. (Hunt et al. 2018:44)

The talent agents, who are concentrated in three dominant agencies, are 90.8% white and

68.1% male (Hunt et al. 2018:44) and, most importantly, are all adults. Additionally, 86.1% of

actors are white and 68.8% are male (Hunt et al. 2018:14-15).

As part of the classification mode of objectification, those involved in film creation have the power to portray childhood as a time to be classified and to decide how children should be classified. As a group of predominately white men, film creators inevitably classify and portray young white males more favorably than other children. However, even young white males are still seen through the lens of childhood and are depicted in a subordinate position along with all other children. In films, all portrayals of children as exceptionally intelligent consisted of white males. Similarly, in real-life, partly through the process of examination as described by Foucault (1977), a similar scientific classification of children takes place and becomes a hegemonic discourse.  The focus here is not on the film creators' race and gender, but on how their truths about childhood, children, and adult-child relations are multiplied and reproduced in films. If the demographics of existing film creators were different, then the discourses regarding childhood in films would also be different and would reflect different negotiated truths - because these film creators would now have the power to proliferate their own truths.

Consumers encounter the discourses produced in films regarding adult-child relations and must decide whether they will submit to the normalizing power of the discourses or attempt to thwart it. Audiences have the opportunity to thwart normalizing power by using their own power to influence the discourses played out in films. By deciding which films to see, consumers use their economic power to infiltrate the discourses of the film industry. Consumers can also exercise their power on a smaller scale as a part of focus groups and market research (Kidd 2014). Alternatively, consumers can accept the discourses and submit to the power the discourses exercise since they receive the benefits of a social institution in exchange; the media serve as a source of purpose, direction, and meaning for consumers

looking to it to provide a support system as they struggle to become members of a larger social network (Silverblatt 2004).

Acceptance of the hegemonic discourses in films requires accepting that children naturally belong in a subordinate position and that only certain kinds of children are worthy of being focused on and of possessing desirable traits. Furthermore, children are viewed as "becomings" who have value only as future human capital. Even the aspects of childhood that can be considered positive and potentially embraced, such as innocence and a sense of wonder, cannot be maintained; they are contingent upon chronological age and are inevitably lost as individuals grow out of this stage of life. Given these unfavorable depictions of children, children are eager to leave the stage of childhood behind and adults view children with a patronizing pity. Therefore, children and adults alike both embrace the characteristics and behaviors that define an adult and reject those that define a child. They both then discipline themselves to live in line with prevailing norms that stress the importance of being mature, evolved, and adultlike. Thus, as Foucault (2010) suggests, no one person, group, or structure is required to enforce power. The actions of individuals are self-regulated based on negotiations of regimes of truth surrounding childhood and these individuals live their lives accordingly.

Here, it was argued that the film industry can be viewed as a social institution that produces discourses about childhood and that these hegemonic discourses can be located within the system of power and knowledge governing adult-child interactions and relationships. Foucault (1980) conceptualized power as being a series of normalizing practices as opposed to something that is merely used or possessed by individuals. This perspective was applied to the portrayals of children in film in order to better understand power and inequality in adult-child

power relationships; incomplete definitions of power that view it from a top down perspective do not fully capture how power functions at the micro-level of everyday life and overlook the complicity and significance of those who serve as the vehicles of power.

*Limitations of Study*

Several limitations can be identified for this study. The films chosen for the study were not a random sample, but a purposive sample of films featuring children. Not all films featuring children were analyzed and data was not collected for children with minor roles. Thus, the external validity of the results is limited and may not be generalizable beyond this sample of thirty films. Another limitation is that the primary researcher coded all 30 films in the sample due to time and cost constraints. The study would have benefitted from multiple coders coding the same films and achieving a high rating of intercoder reliability.

*Directions for Future Research*

Several directions for future research were identified during the course of this study. Firstly, although this study sought to find common themes underlying the portrayal of all children, considerations of race, gender, and class could not be avoided. An overwhelming majority of the films did not feature children of minority races/ethnicities; a disproportionately low number featured female children; and representations of exceptionally intelligent children were all white males. Therefore, future research should investigate issues of intersectionality in relation to the social construction of childhood, building on the research of Emily Kane (2006) regarding gender and of Annette Lareau (2011) regarding class and race.

Secondly, subsequent studies could include smaller sample sizes of films in each era to allow closer readings of each film and more detailed quantitative content analyses. Finally, not

all themes uncovered during the data analysis process could be explored in this study. These

include: children entertaining adults; children being extremely gullible and easily deceived (e.g.,

believing in myths such as Santa and the stork); and children having more higher pitched,

anxious sounding voices as compared to adults.

CONCLUSION

This study gave an overview of representations of children in a sample of 30 films from 1927-2018 with a focus on how these representations contribute to adult-child power relations. Based on the research findings, portrayals of children followed several consistent themes - some positive, some negative. A look at the historical context of the sample suggested that the frequency and strength of these themes varied according to the social, cultural, and political climate of the time period. Therefore, it was concluded that the portrayals of children in films are in line with previous research that views childhood as being a socially constructed category. Furthermore, these social constructions inform discourses about children and how adult-child relationships and interactions should operate. These discourses, in turn, produce regimes of truth that result in persistent ways of thinking about childhood being accepted as reality by both adults and children. Consequently, while imbuing reality with the meanings given in films, viewers may fail to realize that these meanings are not (1) true representations of the lives of actual children, (2) the only interpretation of childhood, nor (3) the only way for adults to perceive their relationship to children.

The findings show that childhood depictions in films are largely determined by a complex web of adults involved in using children to tell stories that reflect adults' own understandings, fears, experiences, and constructions of reality in their own worlds. This study can be taken together with other studies detailing empirical accounts of children's everyday lives to highlight the differences between the depictions of childhood in films and the lived experiences of actual children. Connections between the two can then be explored, especially in regard to adult-child inequalities.

In this sample of films, children were portrayed as and assumed to be inferior to adults. Pierce and Allen (1975), in their study of children in mass media, found that children were depicted similarly. As a result, the authors argued that adult-child inequality, or childism, lies at the root of other forms of discrimination, including sexism and racism (p. 18). Under childism, an unavoidable inequality in relationships is one of the first hegemonic discourses that children encounter. This leads to the taken for granted assumption that power operates from the top down and that in any relationship or interaction, one party will be the bearer of power and one will be the recipient of power. As these children grow into adults, this line of thinking makes it easy for them to assume either a subordinate or dominant position according to the prevailing discourses about who they are and should be – whether black or white, male or female, patient or doctor, employer or employee. These adults will not be aware of power's vulnerability and the points of resistance available to them and therefore may not take advantage of opportunities to truly and effectively challenge certain discourses and their role in unequal power relations.

Moreover, if an individual is consumed by one node in the web of power relations they are caught in, they may be blind to the entire web, complete with all of its dominating discourses. For example, not only is a member of a racial minority group part of a network of power relations involved in racism, but he or she is also a part of networks involved in sexism, childism, patriarchy, capitalism, heterosexism, etc. However, if the individual's focus is only on race, they may not realize the extent to which the effects of power emanating from all hegemonic discourses affect their everyday lives at the micro-level.

In sum, films have the power to heavily influence both children and adults. Those who spend a substantial amount of time watching them can be influenced by their images, stories, and messages. Furthermore, depictions of children can have a powerful impact on individuals' perceptions of actual children and the way they interact with them. This is not to say that films are inherently bad and should be censored so that they represent reality. Rather, both consumers and researchers should recognize the messages embedded in films that communicate hegemonic discourses about childhood and how adults should relate to children. Then we can all be in a better position to critically evaluate these messages; recognize the leverage points where discourses can be challenged and power can be thwarted; and ensure that the messages and discourses do not influence our reality to the extent that children exist as second-class citizens.

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# APPENDIX A: LIST OF FILMS

| YEAR | FILM | LENGTH (minutes) | RATING |
|------|------|------------------|--------|
| 1931 | The Champ | 87 | Passed |
| 1932 | Little Orphan Annie | 70 | NR |
| 1933 | Cavalcade | 112 | Passed |
| 1939 | The Wizard of Oz | 112 | PG |
| 1944 | Meet Me in St. Louis | 112 | NR |
| 1948 | Oliver Twist | 116 | NR |
| 1950 | Cheaper by the Dozen | 85 | Approved |
| 1953 | Shane | 118 | NR |
| 1957 | Old Yeller | 83 | Approved |
| 1962 | To Kill a Mockingbird | 130 | NR |
| 1966 | Follow Me, Boys! | 131 | Approved |
| 1969 | Goodbye, Columbus | 102 | R |
| 1971 | Bedknobs and Broomsticks | 118 | G |
| 1973 | The Exorcist | 122 | R |
| 1978 | The Bad News Bears Go to Japan | 91 | PG |
| 1981 | Time Bandits | 110 | PG |
| 1982 | E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial | 121 | PG |
| 1985 | Witness | 112 | R |
| 1986 | The Golden Child | 94 | PG-13 |
| 1988 | Big | 130 | PG |
| 1990 | Home Alone | 103 | PG |
| 1996 | Ransom | 139 | R |
| 1999 | Star Wars: Episode 1: The Phantom Menace | 136 | PG |
| 2004 | Christmas with the Kranks | 99 | PG |
| 2005 | War of the Worlds | 118 | PG-13 |
| 2013 | Iron Man 3 | 131 | PG-13 |
| 2014 | Heaven Is for Real | 99 | PG |
| 2011 | Just Go with It | 127 | PG-13 |
| 2016 | The Jungle Book | 106 | PG |
| 2018 | A Quiet Place | 90 | PG-13 |

APPENDIX B:  CODING FORM

| Film Title: |  |
|---|---|
| **CHARACTER TYPE** | |
| Lead | |
| Supporting | |
| **CHARACTER ROLE** | |
| Conventional | |
| Nonconventional | |
| **LOCATIONS** | |
|  | |
| **COACTOR(S)** | |
|  | |

| **ACTIVITIES** |
|---|
|  |
| **CHILD BEHAVIORS/CHARACTERISTICS** |
|  |

**ADULT ATTTUDES/BEHAVIORS TOWARDS CHILDREN**

APPENDIX C: CODEBOOK

| CATEGORY | DESCRIPTION |
| --- | --- |
| Child | A person appearing to have a chronological age between 5-12. If age is not stated in film or obtained from film description, it will be determined by voice, dress, height, or other sensory cues. |
| Lead actor | The character is the main character, is featured in a significant portion of the film, or is essential to the main plot. |
| Supporting actor | The character is not essential to the main plot but plays a supporting role to the main characters and main plot. May be at the center of a subplot. |
| Conventional role | The character displays no unusual qualities relative to other characters. |
| Unconventional role | The character displays unusual and/or supernatural qualities relative to other characters. |
| Location | The place where a scene takes place. |
| Home | The place where a character lives and the areas immediately surrounding it. Can be inside or outside. |
| Coactor | Other actors(s) who appear in the same scene as the child character and who are also involved in the action of the scene. Does not include extras. |
| Activity | What the child is shown doing. |
| Child behavior/characteristic | The way a character conducts him/herself, acts towards other characters, or acts in response to what is done to him/her. Also, any distinguishing traits or qualities. |
| Adult attitudes/behaviors towards children | The way an adult acts towards a child or in response to a child and his/her actions. Also, any expressed feelings or opinions towards a child. |

**TABLE 1. Frequencies and percentages of child character's roles and type**

| Character role/type | # of films / 30 | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Lead actor | 14 | 47% |
| Nonconventional role | 10 | 33% |
| Lead actor + Nonconventional role | 8 | 27% |

**TABLE 2. Frequencies and percentages of child behaviors and characteristics**

| Child behavior/characteristic | # of films / 30 | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Emotionality | 29 | 97% |
| Honesty and curiosity | 29 | 97% |
| Helpfulness | 27 | 90% |
| Annoyance, noisiness, unruliness | 26 | 87% |
| Experiencing and transformation | 20 | 67% |
| Orphaned/lacking a two-parent household | 18 | 60% |
| Older children taking care of younger children | 11 | 37% |
| Above average intelligence | 6 | 20% |

**TABLE 3. Frequencies and percentages of adult attitudes and behaviors towards children**

| Adult attitude/behavior | # of films / 30 | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Children told what to do | 30 | 100% |
| Children trained in adult ways | 30 | 100% |
| Children shown love, support, protection | 30 | 100% |
| Parents making important decisions | 22 | 73% |
| Children used as pawns in adult schemes | 13 | 43% |

**TABLE 4. Comparison of positive and negative portrayals of children in films**

| Negative portrayals of children | Positive portrayals of children |
|---|---|
| Inferior and deserving of microaggressions | Caring, helpful |
| Time, energy, space, mobility at service of adults | Watched over younger siblings |
| Negative portrayals gratuitous and unnecessary | Gave adults profound advice |
| Portrayals do not capture breadth of real-world experiences | Stood up against injustices |
| Number of key roles disproportionately low compared to adults | Exercised agency |
| Not fully evolved | |
| Separated from adults and adult situations | |
| Distant and mysterious | |
| Future value as human capital | |