

# Disney films shaping expectations about work and organisation in young girls, study says

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Credit: University of Leeds

From Snow White washing the dishes to a bunny rabbit police officer in Zootopia, Disney's animated films have portrayed many memorable female characters in the workplace during the past 80 years.

The UK release this Friday (2 December) of Moana promises another such memorable character.

New research from the universities of Leeds, Bradford and Durham has suggested that these films are helping to shape expectations about [work](#) and organisation in young girls and indirectly preparing them for adult experiences of working life.

A team led by Dr Martyn Griffin of Leeds University Business School watched and analysed 54 classic animations made by Disney since Snow White and the Seven Dwarves in 1937, noting trends in the nature of the work undertaken by these female characters and how they act in, and perceive, the workplace.

While early animations such as Cinderella typically portray girls as weak and seeking to avoid work, later ones such as Zootopia and Frozen present strong, positive females in or preparing for work.

As a result, young women often receive mixed messages about work from watching a combination of older and more recent films.

These mixed messages, alongside other similar social and cultural influences, could partly help to explain why many women have different expectations about work compared to men, and have tended not to progress as quickly in the workplace.

Dr Griffin suggested that over time, the portrayal of more empowered female characters in more contemporary Disney films could even help influence a generation of [young women](#) who will not be willing to be passive and weak in the workplace.

He continued: "Our study highlights the importance of the themes of "work" and "organization" within these films and suggests that through repeated viewing within cinemas, and through DVD, Blu-ray and streaming services they are very likely to contribute towards the development of expectations about working life."

The research team recorded references to work in the 54 classic animated films and noted a five stage sequence of work which frequently recurred.

1. children are separated from their parents
2. they are forced to take work which is dangerous, dirty or unfulfilling
3. their managers manipulate or deceive them
4. the positive aspects of work are emphasised – they are encouraged to 'whistle while they work'
5. they are rescued and leave the workplace or in later animations re-define their identity in new roles.

Co-author Mark Learmonth, Professor of Organization Studies at Durham University Business School, said: "In this study we have used Disney as a lens to develop the idea of 'organizational readiness' – that is, children's expectations about work which are shaped by social and cultural forces that indirectly prepare them for experiences of their future organizational life.

"We have argued that Disney can be considered a contributory factor in this process - along with other films, books, computer games, comics, toys and other influences - adding towards a social reality in which children develop an understanding of the world of work."

Moana, which is released on 2 December 2016 in the UK, draws on Polynesian mythology to tell the story of a young girl who discovers that her people's history as ocean navigators has been hidden and sets out on an epic adventure to seek out a fabled island.

Dr Griffin said: "It's too early to tell yet whether Moana will offer another empowering representation of a woman 'at work' – although the signs certainly point towards this.

"It seems that Disney, once so famous for offering demure but essentially weak representations of women at work, will add yet again to its steadily growing body of strong female characters."

**More information:** M. Griffin et al. Whistle While You Work? Disney Animation, Organizational Readiness and Gendered Subjugation, *Organization Studies* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/0170840616663245](https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840616663245)

Provided by University of Leeds

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