2015-12-01

# Reject or Redemptive Fathers? A Content Analysis of Father Portrayals in Top Box Office Family Films

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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December 2015

ABSTRACT

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More research is needed to fully understand the way in which parents, particularly fathers, are portrayed in family films and the effects those portrayals might have. Viewers, particularly parents, need to understand how the material their children view presents reality and how it may shape their children's perspectives of the real world, particularly where the family unit and parenting role are concerned. By exploring these portrayals through the lens of Cultivation Theory, this study sought to answer this overarching question: How are fathers portrayed in family films as opposed to television? This quantitative study explores the top twenty films from the 1980s, the 1990s and the decade spanning 2004-2014 in order to ascertain this. Families within those films, particularly parents and most specifically fathers, are the primary subjects of study. Observations were made through content analysis. The findings show that fathers are portrayed more positively in family films than they are on television. The data suggests that the differences between fathers and mothers in film is not so marked and sexist as it is in television shows, and that fathers exert a stronger and more positive role in film families than they do in television families. This study begins to establish film as a genre to further be explored as a medium for family relations studies as television has been. Film is a powerful media tool in its own right and should further be studied with regard to portrayal of families in its material.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First thanks go to my parents. Without the vision of my father, David, I would not have attempted the first semester of classes for this degree, much less have completed classwork and a thesis. I set out to study fathers in media because of how much I admire my own father. To my mother, Chirine, who didn't have a master's degree in Mass Communication but nevertheless knew media effects when she saw them and raised her children with strict media rules. I didn't realize how right you were, Mom, until I enrolled in this program. This study is a result of your wise parenting.

Special thanks go to Rebekah and Joseph, who spent their summer with me coding 60 films when they could have been watching movies—or doing anything else—for fun. To my siblings, who often took up slack at the family business so I could spend all day on campus. Also thanks to my former professor, Tom Robinson, and my former classmate and research partner, Samantha Wiscombe—much of the material for this thesis came from the Comms 610 study we did together first semester. Thank you to my other classmates, who befriended me and who sent me their own theses to edit; referring to yours has helped me format and make sense of how to write my own. To my engineer husband, Scott, for helping me with chi square and for encouraging me and letting me work, and even helping me do it, amongst wedding preparations, receptions, and law school and life.

Finally, thank you especially to Dr. Clark Callahan for working through all the bugs and problems with me, and to Dr. Mark Callister, and Dr. Kevin John for your feedback and support.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to provide a synthesis of research dealing mainly with the influence of films on audience perceptions of the family unit as well as to explore how fathers are portrayed in family films. While a plethora of studies exists regarding gender roles and family relations in television, the same cannot be said of the film genre. Little to no research exists to date detailing family portrayals in films, and searching for media effects studies on films, as opposed to television, has turned up less material than hoped for. Thus, the purpose of this study is to help build a case for the importance of studying film portrayals of families as opposed to solely focusing on television studies—if for no other reason than to point out that such a study is useful because it has not been previously undertaken and there remains much research to undertake in this sector.

Particularly, study of the family is a point of interest, for the development of children depends on the homes/families they observe as much as from the homes/families they live in. For example, Marks and Palkovitz (2004) echoed past research in stating that, "child developmental outcomes are associated with various patterns of father involvement and absence" (p. 113).

Media offer children some of the patterns through which they observe and understand the role of fathers. Research has showed that fathers are portrayed negatively in television. Such portrayals may be simply an exacerbation of a societal malady. Marks and Palkovitz (2004) found that four types of father exist in current American society: "(a) the new, involved father, (b), the good provider, (c) the deadbeat dad, and (d) the paternity-free man" (p. 113). Concerning these types, involved fathers help with the housework and childcare to a limited extent and come from the "middle-to upper-middle class" (p. 115). They are educated and have educated wives

who work to sustain the family as well. The good provider is a distant but financially profitable

figure. The deadbeat dad is lazy, unsupportive, and fails in his role as breadwinner, a quality that,

through the generations, has signified utter failure as a father. And the paternity-free type of

father is a man who treats fatherhood as simply an option, not a responsibility (the researchers

argue this is partly because of the state of the economy). Consequently, these men are unlikely to

become fathers or, if these men become fathers against their intentions, are less likely to fulfill

their paternal obligations. Marks and Palkovitz (2004) found that this last type of father is on the

rise in American society. They likewise questioned the perpetuation of the paternity-free father

trend—the transformation of male identity for a culture of men who prefer to live their own lives

without the responsibility of fatherhood: "If American manhood and adult male development are

no longer to be defined by marriage and fatherhood, what will the future American male do,

aspire to, and ultimately become?" (p. 123).

       Wall and Arnold (2007) studied the concept of involved fathering in American society.

They argued that,

> while popular cultural representations portray the 'new father' of the past two decades as
>
> more involved, more nurturing, and capable of coparenting…actual fathering conduct has
>
> not kept pace…mothers continue to be positioned as primary parents. Support for father
>
> involvement, to the extent that it exists, occurs within the framework of fathers as part-
>
> time, secondary parents whose relationship with children remains less important than
>
> mothers. (p. 508)

Further, the researchers stated that, "the culture of fatherhood, which encompasses a society's

values, norms, and beliefs, must be distinguished from the conduct or actual practices of fathers,"

maintaining that, "American fatherhood appears to have undergone more changes in culture than

in conduct" (p. 510). Their study of fatherhood portrayals in print articles showed that mothers are portrayed as more concerned with the family, more responsible for the family, more responsible for dealing with the balance of work and family life, and that fathers are often absent or only marginally represented in them, a stereotype that pervades family television as well.

The research cited here and further in this study would suggest a male standard less responsible, respected and able to parent America's rising generations, at least as far as television goes. The same cannot be said of film, simply because nothing has been said about these trends in film to date.

Marks and Palkovitz (2004) feared that as the proportion of involved parents to children decreases, children will "turn increasingly to peers for direction, guidance, and models in a predicament reminiscent of the blind leading the blind" (p. 124). Scholars in previous decades have asked the questions concerning what makes a quality father; but Marks and Palkovitz stated that due to the rising trend of contented bachelors or irresponsible, unwilling fathers, the new question is, "Will there be *enough* fathers?" (p. 125).

While Marks and Palkovitz's (2004) concerns may ring true to American society, people may question if those concerns have anything to do with the family and American media. As presented in this study, television and film are mediums through which people, especially children, learn to view the world and the roles of people in it. Portrayals of irresponsible, unwilling or uninvolved fathers, portrayals that have been heavily researched on television, may very well contribute to a societal trend of irresponsible fathering tendencies. This study seeks to ascertain if such portrayals are common in the films families, particularly children, watch as well.

The study of media with regard to children's consumption carries hefty weight, according to research. Gentile and Walsh (2002) cited that "the 'average' American child between 2 and 18 spends 5 hours and 48 min/day with electronic media and 44 min/day with print media (Roberts et al., 1999). Television still dominates children's media landscape" (p. 159), and children are the most susceptible audience demographic. Referencing an earlier study (Goodman, 1983), the researchers stated that the American family unit includes both the family members as well as the television set (and nowadays, computers and cell phones). Indeed, television (and, as this study seeks to point out, film) acts as an important family member, even an authority figure or central member, taking up family members' time, lessening their communication/mediation with each other, etc., as Considine (1981) cited in his argument for media as powerful authority figures in society.

The Gentile and Walsh (2002) study was geared toward television, but its findings may hint at other Internet and film media consumption more than a decade later. The researchers further found that class and education contribute to children's level of television consumption. Children from low-income or single-parent households were more engaged in television and other forms of media and often (in fact, 85% of the time); children watched television without parental supervision; indeed; only 1/3 of the children in the study said their parents used a rating system to limit their children' media choices. Perhaps the most disturbing research cited by this study involves the fact that "children as young as 14 months of age have been shown to copy behaviors shown on a TV screen (Barr & Hayne, 1999; Meltzoff, 1988)" (p. 12). The fact that children, at impressionable ages, are allowed so much media freedom because their parents lack the education or disciplining factors to monitor what their children are exposed to, or even to discuss it with them and co-view it, is a disturbing finding.

Signorielli's (1993) study provided the perfect example of the way television (and, more largely, entertainment media) influences children's perceived realities. Signorielli found that prime-time television on average showed an overrepresentation of "prestigious" jobs while showing much less of the actual job market that exists in American society. Likewise, the important jobs were not portrayed as involving a lot of hard work to accomplish. Signorielli's same study found that adolescents exposed to these types of shows were more likely to aspire to prestigious jobs while not desiring the hard work or busy schedules that come with them. Media show life in an ideal situation; it can be argued, then, that it teaches something negative to children if the "ideal situation" it exposes them to includes images of distant fathers, inept fathers, irresponsible fathers, or simply carefree, rich, paternity-free bachelors.

Alexandrin (2009) took Gentile and Walsh's concerns to a higher level, stating that, "Television is a lifelong educator and shapes people's beliefs and attitudes, values, perceptions, and knowledge of themselves and other. Decisions and actions people make are also influenced by TV" (p. 150). Alexandrin also found that television went beyond teaching group stereotypes; "it also can validate false ideas a person has about a group" (p. 150). As such, the possibilities of children being exposed to and altering their perceived reality about negative father stereotypes in media—all with no more than marginal mediation by their parents or guardians—produce cause for concern.

The studies cited in this literature review will, pronouncedly, dealt with television—again, because television has been studied far more than has film. But this study provides research and builds the argument that film media exert influence as well and need to be studied with the same dedication television has. Research should see if such evidence presented about family relations in television holds true for film as well—and if such media effects as cited in

television studies holds true for a film-viewing society too. The purpose of this study is to take the findings of research on television genders and families and provide a context for them to be answered within the realm of film as well.

The research cited in this study show that media play an integral role in audiences' perceived reality and social learning and that films portray families in influential ways, for negative or positive. To the extent that film studies are available, film portrayals sometimes line up with, and sometimes differ from, television portrayals. But films are cited as having equal, or even more probing, influence on audience perceived reality. This lends to the importance of studying film portrayals/effects. Too, those themes that permeate both television and film genres have double-fold potential to influence audiences.

As this study will show, film exerts a formidable force in its own right in the media-influence world, particularly for children. The portrayal of father roles in family films and whether those portrayals appear similar or different to father-portrayal trends in television bodes interesting and relevant. Television research shows that fathers do not fill a prevalent or positive role in entertainment. This study questions the contribution film makes to this picture.

The literature review begins with an examination of the role media play as an authority figure, particularly for children. It then explores the reported weight of social authority with regard to television and film genres separately and then undertakes a comparison of the two genres. With the context of the nature of influence these two media genres can have on audiences, the review will then explore the dominant themes in gender roles and family/parenting roles portrayed on television and will compare that with what sparse research exists along the same lines in film. Cultivation Theory served as the research lens for this study,

and the study proposed research questions and a method for determining the frequency and

favorability of father portrayals in the top-grossing family films for the last three decades.

## Review of Literature

**Media as Authority**

As stated above, media exert pronounced authority on the daily experience and perspective-shaping of audiences. This review of literature will explore this theme generally, as well as with regard to the two genres of interest in this study: television and film. The review will explore television research because most of the studies on family relationships and parental portrayal, as well as those dealing with Cultivation Theory, involve television as the medium for research. The review will also show that film exerts its own authority on audiences, particularly child audiences, and will highlight what little research exists already with regard to family studies in film. By so doing this, the review will build a case for further study of family portrayals in film, particularly parental portrayals, and even more particularly the portrayal of fathers. Cultivation Theory, as used in television, will be used in this adaptive study on film to understand media portrayals and how these portrayals affect audiences.

**General media authority.** Media, particularly entertainment media, have a strong potential to affect audiences because of their use of narrative. By its very nature, narrative involves a reduction of "counter-arguing and increase(d) elaboration of a narrative's assertions, resulting in increased persuasion (Green and Brock, 2000)" (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2011, p. 47); this occurs because people perceive story as a nonthreatening form of entertainment and, thus, let their guard down when consuming a narrative. Probst (1983) termed this narrative's power of "lulling us into an uncritically receptive state" (p. 87). Humans are willing to "be lulled," as it were, because narrative enables an audience to escape from the real world, to "experience events and emotions that are otherwise not accessible in actual life" (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2011, p. 35);

humans, thus, seek after and hold on to narratives because of their novelty in comparison with audiences' daily life.

Research explains *that* media exert a narrative influence on audiences. Bilandzic and Busselle (2011) enumerated on *how powerful* that influence can be. They defined narrative's influence as having the potential to "give (audiences) insights into their own lives…instigate reflection about the appropriateness of moral rules, norms and values…(and) prompt reflection about one's own fate" (p. 35) as reflected in a character's fate. This happens because of three states that potentially occur to audience members as they partake of media: *telepresence, transportation,* and *identification*, in which "audience members 1) devote full or near full attention to the media stimulus, 2) perceive the stimulus from a point of view situated within the mediated world, and 3) lose awareness of the actual world around them" (p. 32). Audience members may not experience these states all the time, but the researchers noted the potential for such experiences, and the emotional impact they can have on audiences, particularly with regard to films.

*Identification*, in particular, holds interest for researchers because of its influence on audience members' self-identity. Addis and Holbrook (2010) brought up the attraction audiences feel toward film celebrities with this argument: Media are most powerful when audience members identify with characters and, thusly, try to imitate or increase similarity with those characters. "Motion pictures," they said, "have long been studied as a source of imaginative and emotional states that derive from their ability to influence imitation, thinking, and daydreaming" (p. 284)—escapism from the real world. When audience members "identify" with characters/celebrities, they "are engaged cognitively and emotionally so as to get lost in the narrative" (p. 284).

In this state, audiences create an emotional bond with the narrative because they interpret the story "as if the events were happening to them" (Cohen, 2001, p. 245)—they lose, in effect, their self and experience the events as if they were the character. As per the Elaboration Likelihood Model, they focus more on the message when they are *identifying*; their elaboration of messages increases, as does their potential for persuasion. The stronger the identification episode, the stronger the potential for change of self-identity (molding to match, in some way, the identity of the character); the more repeated the identification episodes, the more far-reaching the results may be.

*Identification* has been defined as "crucial to the socialization of children and the development of personal and social identities through the life cycle" (Cohen, 2001, p. 248), as it teaches them how to behave and who to look up to, and Konigsberg (2000) stated that such episodes do occur when children view films. Cohen identified the value of such experiences (as when a hero wins and the audience member learns, by *identification*, that good wins over evil), but not all media portray positive models. Indeed, Cohen's observation that "identification is used to persuade by making the source of a message [the character identified with], rather than the message itself, attractive" (p. 259) raises questions about what sorts of messages audience members are espousing simply because they identify with the characters promoting them.

For young people in impressionistic stages, this concern holds, perhaps, even more weight. The sheer volume of use children make of media renders this a reason for concern. Kirsh (2011) found that children and teens "spend more than 40 hours per week using some form of media" (xvi) and voiced the concern that at this age, children have little knowledge of the outside world and thus accept more readily the "world" they find in media. The fact that children have a thirst to learn (from any available source) compounds the influence of media in their lives. Each

new experience/scenario, according to Kirsh, forms a child's schema and the attitude with which he/she will continue to receive, process, categorize and accept new information.

Other researchers, for instance Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, and Lund (2003) and Villani (2001), have proposed that children learn about family relationships first from their own families and then from observation—particularly media observation. They use media for self/world identification. Tanner et al., (2003) pointed out that socially/emotionally undeveloped children (so, particularly, young children or pre-teens) depend on media more than do their peers for their knowledge of the outside world and the family dynamic; and Villani (2001) pointed out that as media shape children's attitudes it has the causal potential to change their behavior as well. George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory dealt with and studied this change of attitude or schema through media exposure. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory takes Cultivation Theory one step further, arguing that change in schema results in behavioral change as well. This study deals with the preliminary step, a change in schema, and will thus use Cultivation Theory.

Beginning with television authority, since it is the most studied and shows general and widely accepted trends in media families, this section will address the kind of schema-changing authority media present to their audience. The next sections will introduce film and its own unique media presence and then compare the two genres.

**Television authority.** In 1990, Huston, Wright, Rice, Kerkman, and St. Peters found that "by the time American children are 18 years old, they have spent more time watching television than in any other activity except sleep" (p. 409). With turn-of-the-century innovations like the personal computer, YouTube, and the plethora of television shows available via the Internet, that estimate has only risen. Viewing this mass demand for the medium, Probst (1983) argued that television was "the most pervasive fiction" in society (p. 87), a view supported by Gerbner's

Cultivation Theory. Dail and Way (1985) found, too, that adults "accept television as reflecting life realistically" (p. 491) and have the attitude that television has the power to help them make sense of their own lives.

The fact that television shows represent such a widely used force in American society has led to concern about, or at least interest in, the effects that themes, patterns, and outright messages communicated through television have on viewers. Cultivation Theory has been used in hundreds of studies to ascertain just such effects, in subjects ranging from violence and sexual conduct to gender portrayals to work ethic to basic moral values, all with the goal of ascertaining the connection between television and the perceived reality of viewers.

The effect of television on children has been particularly studied (Wilson, 2008; Moore, 1992; Krcmar & Vieira, 2005; Huston et al., 1990; Fingerson, 1999; Ex, Janssens, & Korzilius, 2002; Morgan, Leggett, & Shanahan, 1999). It has been argued that "television is a source of vicarious learning competing with parents, teachers, and other socializing agents in providing models for children to emulate" (Moore, 1992, p. 42) and that children and young adults are particularly apt to cultivate perceived realities of the world around them, as defined by television (Morgan et al., 1999). Indeed, it is the opinion of some that even "a single exposure" to certain values on television can change a child's perception of that value (Wilson, 2008, p. 91).

Buerkel-Rothfuss, Greenberg, Atkin, and Neuendorf (1982) stated that viewing television "reinforced attitudes" children already held "about a particular social role or behavior" (p. 191). The 1982 study found that 1) children tended to give "television answers" to real-life questions about occupations; 2) that the subject of family is of particular interest to children because it is largely their entire world; 3) children who watched family interactions on television tended to exhibit more positive attitudes toward family life. The researchers stated that not only do

children (as all humans) learn from models but that they choose to follow a proffered model based on how much personal reward they view in the behavior—how the characters portrayed are rewarded for their behavior.

Some political leaders have noted the negative portrayals of family values and moral systems in media. Dan Quayle cited the corrosion of the family unit as the source of rising crime rates (Wainryb & Turiel, 1993), and George Bush referred to the decline of the "American television family" as responsible, specifically, for the corrosion of the American family in society (Douglas & Olson, 1996, p. 74). Former vice president Al Gore ("Media Quotes") also noted the negative effects and "bitter fruit" that modern media, with their dearth of values, promote in formative youth audiences. More recently President Barack Obama (2013a) has noted the decline of the family unit in society, particularly the decline of fathers, as an issue of concern. "Too many fathers … are … missing. … They have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. And the foundations of our families are weaker because of it." President Obama (2013b) urged parents to step up, turn off the TV, and separate their children from the all-powerful media schoolteacher and take a more active role in teaching children values and being involved in their lives.  "There's no more important ingredient for success … than strong, stable families, which means we should do more to promote marriage and encourage fatherhood."

Television cannot be accused of neglecting the theme of family values. Indeed, Morgan et al. (1999) found that 85% of television programs utilized the theme of "home and family" (p. 50), while in prime-time television itself "over 50 percent of the moral messages focused on three moral themes: family, civility, and civilization" (Krijnen, 2005, p. 370). Morgan et al. (1999) found that the conventional family was still well represented even as nontraditional

family structures gained representation in television; the same study concluded that, though this was the case, television was indeed "contributing to the fraying of traditional family values" (p. 58). Krijnen (2005), however, asserted that prime-time shows supported family values "as the cornerstone of society" (p. 370). Contradiction may exist as to the positive or negative effects projected on families and on children's perceived realities, but regardless of opinion, parents voice concern about the values being "taught" on television.

With that, the influence of media on children's views of their parents (and, thus, the respect they give the parental role) is of importance; a healthy family unit is the basis of a healthy society, as highlighted by President Obama above, but in recent decades the American family has declined, and, as referenced above, notable figures blame this at least partly on the decline of the American television family. Traditionally, fathers have stood at the heads of their homes, offering financial support and protection to spouses and children. The lack of this kind of role model and protector for many families is evidenced in the numbers of fatherless children, teen pregnancies and single-parent families on welfare. Jones and Mosher (2013) found that between 2006 and 2010 only (44.8% of men aged 15-44 had ever had a biological child, and 45.0% of men aged 15-44 were living with biological, adopted, step-, or partner's children, or had adopted or biological children living elsewhere" (p. 3). According to Rosiak (2012), 1/3 of the children in the U.S. live with single mothers (15 million children), with 1/3 of that number (5 million children) living without a mother. Only 11% of children in the U.S. lived without a father in 1960, according to the article.

The media family has also changed in a departure from the traditional father-breadwinner, mother-nurturer family structure. Starting in the 1980s, the roles of men and women on television changed, with women being less marginalized and men exhibiting less

machismo. Nowhere was this trend more prevalent than in the American television home. The literature shows that television mothers are seen, at present, as the primary caregivers, nurturers, and adept parents in the home, while fathers are portrayed as being distant, nonexistent, inept, or even just "one of the kids," leading to an undermining of their role in the American television home. (See, for example, Reimers, 2003; Scharrer, 2001; and Tsai & Shumow, 2011). However, little research exists that studies such portrayals of fathers in the film genre, particularly in major family-centered films.

  **Film authority.** In recent decades media have taken an unprecedented authority role in the teaching of children. For instance, in the 1980s, film attendance accounted for 50% of "spectator amusement expenditures in the United States" (Tesser, Millar, & Wu, 1988, p. 441), a figure attesting that filmgoing is a major entertainment venue among Americans, particularly the teen demographic. Considine (1981), observed that with a lessening of influence from social units like schools, parents and church authorities came a gaping hole of authority, into which media has inserted itself. Especially for young audiences, media stands as an authority more important than "traditional sources." Considine continued, "There is little doubt that Hollywood has contributed to the ethos of adolescence, depicting the rituals and rites of passage it imagines to be youthful reality" (p. 136). More recently, Huczynski and Buchanan (2004) expounded on potential reasons for the attraction audiences feel to media. They stated that entertainment media, particularly film, can be more powerful as a teaching tool than traditional teaching forms because of the multiple senses it utilizes. Audiences' visual and emotional/physiological responses to/involvement with entertainment media support Considine's observation.

  Researchers admit that media do "not convey reality directly and completely" (Probst, 1983, p. 86). Considine (1981), focusing on film, reflected that "Hollywood dramatizes life,

looking for the off-beat and bizarre, ignoring the common place" (p. 136) and raised a concern

for how young people, especially, would interpret such portrayals as the reality of life.

Researchers express such concerns because audiences generally react to media as if it did in fact

reflect reality—a reality they don't have experience with in their own small circles and, thus, a

reality they look to the media authority to inform them of. Indeed, people build their realities by

"images, concepts, and symbols" that reflect "the fiction of the culture" (Probst, 1983, p. 87).

Cultivation Theory posits media as the venues to which people go to learn about the

world around them, though they may not know, themselves, that this is their reason or the result

of their media consumption. People may engage with entertainment media (particularly films)

for several specific (on the surface, unrelated) reasons that, unknown to them, have the ability to

shape their cognition/beliefs: escape, self-development and entertainment (Tesser et al., 1988).

Addis and Holbrook (2010) posited that general audiences identify better with films in

which the settings are unfamiliar, enabling escapism from the real world to be that much easier.

They went so far as to prescribe that "in order to become one of the most appreciated films, a

motion picture should conform to one or more of the crime, music, war, action, or family genres"

(p. 837) because of their greater removal from reality—even family films operate away from the

real-life everyday home life.

Especially among child audiences, for whom stories are a major part of growth and

learning, this narrative power is significant. Brydon (2009) posited that, "animated films…are

widely distributed, financially successful and have significant cultural impact" (p. 132). Disney

films are seen by millions of children; some of these children's films make it into the top-

grossing films list of all time (see Brydon, 2009), attesting to not only the popularity of media in

general but the popularity of media with children.

Why are children's media so popular? Sedney (2002) spoke of the importance of "literature, particularly fairy tales" (p. 279) in helping children mold their idea of the world and stated that "television and movies are at least as likely as books to be mediators through which children are introduced to stories of their culture (Bell, Haas, & Sells, 1995)" (p. 279). Wynn & Rosenfeld (2003) agreed, hinting at the broad cultural tradition of story (or *myth*, as they termed it) that builds societies. Sedney (2002) noted that the more fantastical the film, the more it may influence a child audience.

If adults (as in Dail and Way's [1985] study) think of entertainment media as mirroring/helping explain real life, what sort of effect do media have on younger, more impressionable audiences with more time on their hands for media consumption? Konigsberg (2000), in an argument for the influence of films on the young, posited that children are not adept at separating make-believe from reality and brought to bear the heightened effect films would have on them as opposed to adults, whose sense of reality is more firmly defined. The effects of films on children's penchant for mimicry have been studied since the medium's inception. Butsch (2001) summed up the earliest film studies by stating that scholars feared media effects on children due to "belief that they [films] were unusually effective in 'implanting'…ideas in children's minds" (p. 113). These early studies, Butsch posited, saw films as menacing because "'the mind is so completely given up to the moving pictures'" (p. 113)—as the argument for *identification* would support—and is thus more open to impressionism.

The repetition of media messages made possible by technology in the home particularly interests film researchers. Smith, Pieper, Granados, and Choiueiti (2010) remarked that "a majority of children in this country have access to a variety of videos and/or DVDs in their homes, and many may be G-rated" (p. 774). He cited a "Kaiser Family Foundation study (2003,

p. 10) [that] found that over half (53%) of the parents of 0- to 6-year olds indicated that their

child had at least 20 videos or DVDs in the home. Further, almost half (46%) of the children in

this age bracket watch at least one video or DVD on a 'typical' day (p. 10)" (p. 774). A more

recent study (Strasburger, 2009) observed that "U.S. youth have unprecedented access to media

(two-thirds have a television set in their bedrooms, half have a VCR or DVD player, half have a

video game console, and almost one-third have Internet access or a computer), making parental

monitoring of media use difficult" (p. 2265). This, Strasburger argued, enables audiences,

including children, to receive media messages in repeated form, potentially leading to

stereotyping and the formation of unfounded social expectancies.

This section has examined studies of media influence in general, making distinctions here

and there about television or film. As my thesis has to do with film studies, I examined

researchers' defined characteristics of film that set it apart from television. I present my research

on this subject in the next section and make further argument for the influence, not only of

media, but of film in particular.

**Film vs. TV Genres**

Powers, Rothman, and Rothman (1993) credited television with the transformation of the

film industry to what it is today. The inception of television took from parents control over what

media their children consumed and also resulted in transforming "the economics of the movie

industry, helping to break up the studio system, to the point that movies now constitute an

economic colony of television…rather than the entertainment empire of studio days" (p. 279).

Colony or not, the authors were quick to add that while television "is now the interpreter of the

outside world" for Americans, the artistic portrayal of that outside world is presented "in an even

more unfettered way" in Hollywood films (p. 279).

This opinion stems from the perceived atmosphere of the Hollywood business. As a result of television's competition, American filmmakers largely abandoned black-hat-white-hat morality themes and adopted a more sensational, society-problems form of portrayal—what Gans (1964) called the "problem film." (This term will be explained in greater detail later.) Powers et al., (1993) claim originated from their view that Hollywood films, viewed by billions worldwide, are produced by a relatively few liberal individuals and that liberalism is thus conveyed in more undiluted form to the audience via film than it was through the myriad of different television stations/producers that exist (one reason for this, Black and Bevan [1992] stated, was that "higher levels of violence [are allowed] in the movie theatre than on television, and films shown on television are often edited to conform to these standards" [p. 39]). As previously stated, television producers have traditionally targeted conservative and moderate viewers, creating a potential difference between television and film values portrayed. Powers et al. (1993) focused on "the bureaucratization of Hollywood" and the supplanting of original artists by "like-minded moviemakers and executives [that] contributed to the predominantly liberal slant of motion pictures beginning in the late 1960s and continuing" (pp. 264-265) into the present day. They went so far as to suggest, via data, that "Hollywood liberalism might be even more pronounced in the movies" (p. 275) than in television; if true, this is another important difference between television and films, and one worthy of accounting for.

Whereas Konigsberg (2000) stated that children spent less time with movies than with television shows, McDonald (2009) stated that film "is the most influential media entity shaping consciousness today, with the worldwide industry generating a record US$26.7 billion at the box office in 2007 (Pritham, 2003; Motion Picture Association of America, 2008)" (p. 22).

Citing Hart (1997), Wynn and Rosenfeld 2003argued for the importance of studying film

effects (and particularly their own subject of fathers and families) because

"(1) rhetoric is most powerful when it is not noticed, and nobody notices popular culture;

2) people are easiest to persuade when they are in a good mood, and entertainment

creates such moods; (3) some of our most basic values come to us when we are young,

and the young consume entertainment voraciously; and 4) the mass media disseminate

entertainment far and wide, thus affecting millions. Perhaps the only thing sillier than

studying popular culture, then, is not studying it at all (p. 204)." (p. 104)

The researchers argued that films have the potential to cause young viewers to develop

idealizations of family life/the real world because they possess enough elements of reality to

cause audiences to believe they are in fact real. They called attention to the responsibility of

parents to monitor their children's media use, as a result, as well as to explain the differences

between film and real life.

Yet there has been a relative dearth of research regarding the effects of films, partly

because television is seen as more pervasive (it's on 24/7) (Villani, 2001) and partly because

researchers sometimes clump the two mediums together as one (Black & Bevan, 1992). While

traditionally television and film differed from each other greatly, today's television episodes are

beginning, more and more, to appear like their own, shorter, versions of films—"'condensed or

exaggerated versions of reality' (Tan, 1996, p. 51) with an 'unusually high concentration of

emotional stimuli' (p. 50)" (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2011, p. 35)—and thus the influence of the

film genre needs even more to be taken into consideration. Addis and Holbrook (2010) argued

that film is indeed an influential medium because it can "influence imitation, thinking, and

daydreaming" (p. 824) in audiences and because its effect on "attendees' sensitivities appears to

be a crucial goal" (p. 283) for society—effect on audience sensitivities is what keeps Hollywood in business, after all. What follows are some views of the use of television and/or films in processing/studying media effects.

Buerkel-Rothfuss et al. (1982) defined "family shows" on television as "series in which main characters were featured in family roles" (p. 192); they also found that "situation comedies" (often with a family setting) "contained the highest rate of verbal aggression" (p. 193). If films were to be defined in the same way, would similar trends be found? And how would such trends potentially influence viewers' perception of family life?

Film, even if not as pervasive as television, nevertheless exerts its own influence in American society and needs to be studied as such. In many ways films are as accessible as television series: audiences can access them "in theaters, on cable and network television, through video-DVD rentals and pay-per-view, and downloading them on the Internet, thereby producing a significant influence on American culture" (Callister, Stern, Coyne, Robinson & Bennion, 2011, p. 456). Linden (1989) quoted film producer David Puttnam's distinction between the two mediums: "I think television has far more impact on society at large. I think a movie can have the most impact on the individual. Cinema is insidious in a way. You're on your own in the theater, seeing images that are bigger than life. It almost steals into your subconscious. Like a great teacher, cinema can provide something you refer back to year after year." If such a distinction is to be accepted, some characteristics unique to the film medium should be examined in order to better understand its influence.

Levy (1991) defined film as both a "cultural institution" that imparts social myths/symbols and a "business, pure and simple" (p. 188) that was recognized by the Supreme Court in 1915 as a for-profit industry. Films, though made by a relatively few producers, "have

always been designed to appeal to the largest possible audiences." McDonald (2009) reminded

readers that while television shows are largely produced for national audiences, American films

have an international market—a "globalized medium" of influence (p. 25). Films "are not

neutral" projectors (McDonald, 2009, p. 32) but carry with them the biases, and perhaps even

agenda-laden messages, of filmmaker preferences or filmmaker belief in "what the audience

wants" or should want (p. 25). McDonald posited that even if filmmakers are unaware of the

biases they portray, those biases exist nonetheless, a reminder of not only the power of film

effects but of the responsibility audiences have to be informed. Because they are seen by so

many, films have a potential for effect on an enormous audience (Levy, 1991). Levy referenced

Kracauer's (1947) position that "'the films of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way

than any other artistic media'" (p. 188). Film producers, then, are "'bound to adjust [their

products] to the change in mental climate'" (p. 188) in order to secure profit and maintain

cultural significance.

Gans (1964) noted that as television became more popular, filmmaking had to shift its

methods and reach out to every possible audience in order keep its place in the entertainment

world; thus came about the production of "large budget spectaculars that try to appeal to every

public, with care being taken to provide enough action and spectacle—not to mention violence—

for the low brow group, a 'serious' story line for the middle brows, an array of stars that will

attract teenagers as well as adults" (p. 331) and at least one romance per film to attract different

demographics. Konigsberg (2000) cited conglomerization of media corporations as yet another

step in the process of Hollywood becoming "a single enterprise in a vast entertainment and

informational conglomerate" (p. 287). Gans (1964) observed that films began to rely less on

"original screenplays" (p. 331) than on remakes of already popular stories as another mode of coping with the television competition, a trend quite evident in today's blockbusters.

Having cited the influence television exerted on film, Gans nevertheless argued that film exerts influence because "the same people who read only the headlines in the daily newspaper or watch the five-minute news telecast will spend two hours or more seeing films" (p. 336); the film industry has tried to ensure this through adapting to appeal to a television-saturated audience, as cited above. It has succeeded, to the extent that it pervades the culture outside the theater and the family room. According to Allen and Lincoln (2004), American films have been "consecrated" in U.S. culture, even internationally, with *consecration* being defined as "a distinct form of valorization" because the object is seen to "deserve admiration and respect" at the expense of other objects/mediums, granting the consecrated items "cultural legitimacy to certain cultural producers and their products" (pp. 873–874). The level of prestige film celebrities and producers enjoy, as well as the awards ceremonies the nation follows and the profits films rake in from the public show this to be true.

Such consecration means the power of film to influence does not stop once the narrative reel stops playing and audiences leave the theater or the television. Allen and Lincoln (2004) made the case that, not only are entertainment media (particularly films) influential because of their narrative material but because of the vast commercial/consumerist profits, driven by fan merchandise, that accompany them. Hollywood conglomerization began the trend of consumer products/memorabilia, extending the influence of film messages/narrative through "posters, toys, magazines and books for the image to continue to be absorbed long after the film has ended" (Considine, 1981, p. 136), and this represents a concern researchers have about such effects, not just on a general audience but especially on children. Konigsberg (2000) stated that the effect of

a screening alone on a child could have an impact because "the world on the screen is so immediate and seems so real, the picture so large and threatening" (p. 282) that it leaves an impression. This in and of itself confuses children's sense of reality. The merchandise associated with films makes it even harder for children to distinguish film from reality, Konigsberg (2000) claimed they can access not only images on screen but actual objects off screen representing the films; thus their perceived reality of the story is supported past the viewing experience. This is accomplished through the film's

> appearance on videocassette for purchase or rental—think of the number of times a child
> watches, over and over again, the same film…The film's availability on tape is soon
> followed by its appearance on pay-per-view television, followed by its appearance on a
> premier cable channel, followed by its appearance on network television. While all this is
> going on there are also the spin-offs from the film in ancillary markets: the CD recording
> of the soundtrack, the novelization of the story, the video games, the theme-park rides,
> the tie-ins with fast food chains, not to mention all the collectibles that stories are urged
> to buy from Disney or Warner Brothers stores or toy stores in general—the toys, dolls, T-
> shirts, and lunchboxes for example. (p. 281)

This lengthy list of off-screen film influence provides evidence, Konigsberg claimed, that gives it an edge over television; indeed, he argued, "no television program or series has had anywhere near the influence on our culture, and especially on our children's psyche" (pp. 287-288). Konigsberg's claims may not hold as much water now as when the study was published, as the television industry likewise rakes in billions of dollars on merchandise. However, this fact, rather than decreasing the relevance of academic film studies, gives even more emphasis to the fact that

film exerts a powerful influence alongside television and should, therefore, be examined empirically right alongside television.

Historically, one of film and television's greatest differences was the ability of films to be viewed over and over again in the home; traditionally, viewers could not repeatedly view television episodes unless they recorded them. Such is not the case now, with Internet providing television reruns and film repeat viewing alike, but again, this puts film on a level of significance beside television.

The ability of children to watch their favorite films over and over again has been termed a daily "ritual" (Smith et al., 2010, p. 774) in American society; television involves repeated viewing too, but it more often involves repeated viewing of different episodes (and thus messages) rather than the same narrative/message with every viewing. Smith et al. (2010) remarked that young people 2–17 years of age watched the same films repeatedly and that G-rated films earn "the highest total revenue per film, the largest portion of which was from video' (Mares, 1998)" (p. 775); we can thus determine that children's films and children's videos/DVDs play a large role in the social learning of young audiences.

The setting of film screenings likewise gives film a perceived edge over television viewing. Researchers argue that while television may be more pervasive, the setup of the movie theater gives films more pointed influence on the audience-persuasion spectrum. Freedom from the distractions supplied by lighting, commercials, other people talking, and the household/school tasks associated with being in one's home environment ensure that when audiences are in the theater, they are *in the theater*—and they are there for much longer than a 60-minute television program time slot (Black & Bevan, 1992; Callister et al., 2011). Black and Bevan (1992) argued that commercial interruptions on television enable viewers to "leave

periodically, talk, read, or otherwise watch with low attention" (p. 39) when consuming

television. In a theater, however, such activities are not an option, and thus audiences give their

full attention to the story on the screen. Their attention is further secured because "the images are

large and both sound and image are projected with great fidelity," (p. 39), they said. Cohen

(2001) added the component of "back projection, the long shots and cinematic techniques"

characteristic of films (p. 258) as having potential to capture viewers' full attention and thus

attain the states spoken of earlier, particularly *escape* and *identification*. Gans (1964) likewise

posited that, though films could change audiences per se, "the magic of the medium is such that

it can encourage audiences to think, and to question their preconceptions as they sit in the

darkness of the theater, temporarily isolated from society" (p. 336).

Young's (2000) treatise on films as "equipment for living" refers to the potential of films

to "influence everyday life" (p. 338). Stating that films are "valued for their ability to arouse

emotions, alter experience, and provide vivid visual images" (p. 458), Young argued that viewers

can recall movies that changed their view of world, culture or even self, positing that film

enables audiences to see their own problems in light of the film plot and influences them to feel

about/solve their problems according to the message of the films. Young cited that "'stories do

not merely pose problems, they suggest ways and means to resolve the problems insofar as they

follow discursively a pattern that people might follow in reality [Brummett, 1984]'" (p. 448) and

pointed to the use of films as means of therapy for improving human behavior. The principle of

*identification* spoken of earlier plays a large role in Young's study and in the espousal of film as

a way to influence positive change/coping mechanisms in viewers. Indeed, with regard to

attending film screenings, Bilandzic and Busselle (2011) stated, with regard to media

consumption, that films can be more easily experienced because the setting itself (dark theater,

huge screen, surround sound) is a setting removed from the distractions/issues of viewers' daily lives. Young, like Gans (1964), admitted that a change in behavior is less likely than simply a change in belief or cognition; but if viewers set their moral standards/ideals for life according to the films they see, this sort of influence is notable in and of itself; and indeed, cognitive changes may lead to behavioral changes.

The research presented so far shows that film and television can exert like amounts of influence in society and that, in some ways, film prompts a more pointed, memorable media experience for viewers. Film does not necessarily have the same corner on the market it used to, thanks to the prevalence of TV reruns and commercialism, but it nevertheless can stand on its own as an industry, as shown. And, truly, film is indeed still unique in some ways in its influence on viewers.

For instance, talk of *identification* pervades film studies, and Cohen (2001) cited previous researchers who did not believe television could involve *identification* because of its potential for interruption. However, he posited that "television makes up for its interrupted form with the sheer volume of exposure and repetition" (p. 258) and that *identification* has been noted through television. "The longer an audience member is exposed to a character, the more likely he or she is to be able to imagine being that character" (p. 258), he stated; thus the diluted exposure to a character over a television season may exert effect similar to that of a concentrated exposure in a two-hour-long film.

Films and television are both viewed in the home setting, with potential for interruption and a lessened *identification* effect, though some measurable effect has been seen to occur. However, the argument for the setting of a film screening presents compelling evidence that film has just as much, or greater, influence on viewers than does television for the very fact that

audiences give the film their undivided attention and because of the sheer volume of

merchandise that is produced afterward to promote the films. Thus, media effects studies on

films should be undertaken in order to ascertain what influence such have on audience members'

(especially children's) schemas, not only in the U.S. but on an international scale, as Hollywood

finds its most profitable market more and more outside America (see, for example, Pulver,

2013).

Having established some differences between the film and television genres, I now

proceed to highlight some findings on demographics found within both television and film, as

relates to family relationships in media. Studies in television are more developed than those of

films. My purpose, again, is to take the information that exists regarding television families and

fill out the information available on film families to see if the different genres project the same or

different images/portrayals of families.

**Relationships in the American Television Family**

**Gender roles on television.** The concept of gender roles on television over the last

several decades has changed based on depictions of the roles of men and women and how often

those roles appear. Studies showed that gender roles have progressed from the stilted, black-and-

white parameters exhibited in older shows like *Leave it to Beaver*, but perhaps not as much as

one would think when considering a lengthy half-century time lapse, particularly with regard to

the roles of women.

Studies undertaken during the last decade of the 20th century (Elasmar, Hasegawa, &

Brain, 1999; Glascock, 2001; Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Signorielli, 1990; Signorielli &

Bacue, 1999) found that women tended to be portrayed more often on television as compared to

the '60s, '70s, and even '80s, with as much as 40% of the characters on prime time being

females in 2001, a rise from 18% in the 1970s (see in particular Elasmar et al., 1999, and Glascock, 2001). However, studies have also shown that women appeared more often in minor roles; if they played major roles, those roles were comically based. Women likewise tended to be younger and dress more provocatively than men; they were portrayed as more affectionate but also more verbally aggressive than male characters. Signorielli and Bacue (1999) concluded that the female persona was strongest in situation comedies, with weaker presences in drama- and action-genre shows. With regard to conflict, the stereotype of the hen-pecking female seems still to thrive. Comstock and Strzyzewski (1990) found that, overall, females tended to be engaged in conflict more than men and that their conflicts lasted longer than did those of men.

Likewise, television women were often employed in stereotypical female jobs (secretarial, nursing, entertainment-oriented) and unlikely to have a career if they were married; if they did have a career, the prime-time shows focused more on the women's family roles than on their career lives, projecting that the characters could not be successful career women and homemakers at the same time (Signorielli, 1990). Independent women seemed just as shackled to the male-dominant projection of American society as the homemakers, gravitating toward men in television shows and spending significant effort and time trying to attract them. Signorielli and Bacue (1999) found that employed women in prime time held more gender-neutral jobs at the turn of the century, which showed progress from Signorielli's 1990 study. However, Signorielli's 2009 study found that to date men held prestigious jobs more frequently on television than did women, thus putting into question the actual ground gained by prime-time television in the progression of gender roles. Signorielli's conclusion (1989) that prime-time television simply created an ambivalent gender role for women because often the roles are cast ambiguously still holds true, it seems; women have made progress, but that progress is still stunted.

**Gender roles in the television home.** Would it make sense, then, that women are likewise marginalized when cast as television parents? Perhaps not. Studies show that women have actually made strides in the television family. The late decades of the 20th century saw a rise in the status of women in the home, at least as portrayed on television. Dail and Way (1985) found that single-parent, male households were overrepresented in their sample and that fathers were "portrayed as active, nurturant parents" (p. 497), with greater variety in their "parenting behaviors" (p. 497) than females, though female parents were portrayed more often. Fathers were seen as more instrumental (or active in tasks) than mothers, but mothers did not appear more emotionally expressive than fathers, casting mothers in a poorer light than fathers in the home. Children responded better to mothers when they were instrumental rather than expressive (portraying mothers as more effective when they're not emotional) and responded positively to fathers overall.

Continuing the trend, but with noting a difference in mother portrayals, Reep and Dambrot's (1994) study almost a decade later noted that mothers appeared more independent on situation comedies, working outside the home and making decisions without necessarily speaking to their husbands first, while fathers were more involved domestically than they had been in earlier television shows. Reimers (2003) found, in examination of the father-mother roles from the 1960s to the 21st century, that fathers became more likely to bow to their wives' wishes and that mothers had become more often the problem solvers in the home. Ex, Janssens, and Korzilius (2002) found that "women are more independent, and that mothers are more often seen outside the home. Mothers also have professions, and fathers are more caring and domesticated (Cantor, 1990; Douglas & Olson, 1996)" (p. 957).

Research has found that as mothers have gained authority in the family, respect for

fathers has decreased. Scharrer (2001) concluded that this corrosion of respect/reverence for

fatherhood found its source in the fact that women have infiltrated the workplace in society,

providing for themselves and for their families. While mothers used to be portrayed as much

more feminine and submissive to their husbands, fathers more recently appeared less wise and

dignified, and with less authority, than they did during the era of Ward Cleaver and his television

counterparts (Callister, Robinson, & Clark, 2007).

Scharrer's study (2001) likewise focused on the portrayal of mother/father power levels

through the use of comedy in television. He noted that, "sitcom mothers are enjoying stronger

and more powerful positions in humorous interactions with sitcom fathers in television

programming" (p. 27). The father was the butt of more jokes per episode than was the mother in

situation comedies, while the mother made jokes "at the expense of the father much more" (p.

35), contributing to the lessened importance of the father role in modern television. Thus, while

the importance of women outside the home has progressed more slowly, women inside the home

enjoy a new sense of independence and authority, undermining the traditional paternal structure

of not-as-recent television families.

*Parent-child relationships.* With this blurring of parental roles evident in modern

television, the relationships between parents and children have also changed over the years, and

not for the better. During the 1980s, television parents were portrayed as "superparents—

rational, loving, wise, nurturing, and active" (Reep & Dambrot, 1994, p. 13). Indeed, the surly

examples of the Bunkers and Sanfords were exceptions to the rule in a decade in which the

family structure was "reminiscent of the 1950s television family in which parents construct and

maintain an affectively positive home environment and function to moderate relatively mild sibling conflict" (Douglas & Olson, 1996, p. 75).

However, the more modern family has become "less able to provide affection and companionship and has lost authority over family members… [thus] less able to rear children effectively" (Douglas & Olson, 1996, p. 79). This may be influenced by the decreasing importance of parental authority and the increased role of the children in more modern television shows. Whereas Signorielli (1987) found that children and adolescents were marginalized in television and that they occupied mainly minor roles that complemented the adult character plotlines, Douglas and Olson (1996) found that "the real American family has become more child-centered" (p. 92). Thus, the role of children and adolescents has increased in television.

This change, however, comes at a price, particularly to the internal structure of the family and its cohesiveness among members. Comstock and Strzyzewski (1990) found that situation comedies presented the most instances of conflict on prime-time television, and Douglas and Olson (1996) found that "parent-child relationships seem to have become more hostile and less supportive" (p. 94). Douglas (1996) found that children projected a negative influence where "socialization in television families" was concerned, against both parents and siblings, and characterized the modern American television family as having "high levels of conflict, low supportiveness, low relational satisfaction and stability, and low ability to socialize children effectively" (p. 694). Douglas (1996) also cited the modern television family tendency to be evasive within its membership, more so than earlier television families. These findings agree with those of Douglas and Olson (1996), who concluded that "the general relational environment" in television families "was rated more conflictual and less cohesive—that is, less supportive, less satisfying, and less stable—in modern families than it was in earlier television

families" (p. 92), which were more likely to be a "comparatively conflict-free, supportive, and

stable version of the American family" (p. 94), and which, often, involved the traditional two-

parent family, particularly a respected paternal figure and nurturing maternal character.

In summary, the portrayal of television families stands in a more fractured environment

where spouses find humor at each other's expense and where respect for parents (particularly

fathers, the traditional authority figure) is less important than is the satisfaction of children.

Perhaps an examination of the parenting styles most commonly studied on television, and the

frequency with which either mother or father utilize them, will cast light on the situation of

cohesiveness and the traditional hierarchy in the American family as portrayed on television.

*Parenting styles.* Callister et al. (2007) selected four parenting styles to characterize the

portrayal of mother and father roles on television shows, following guidelines set by Baumrind

(1991). The four types were defined based on levels of demandingness (parents who demand,

supervise, discipline, and confront) and responsiveness (parents who support, acquiesce, and

foster individuality), as stated in Baumrind's study (1991). Parents who used the *authoritarian*

parenting style are defined as "demanding and directive, but not responsive," providing "an

orderly environment" and expecting "their orders to be obeyed without explanation" (Baumrind,

1991, p. 62). The *authoritative* parenting style was defined as both demanding and responsive—

they were supportive and assertive but not restrictive or intrusive (Baumrind, 1991). Parents

using the *permissive* parenting style were defined as "more responsive than they are demanding,"

showing lenience and avoiding confrontation (Baumrind, 1991, p. 62). The last parenting style,

*uninvolved*, described parents who were low in both responsiveness and demandingness. They

showed little interest in their children's lives and could be considered neglectful (Baumrind,

1991). Baumrind (1991) identified the *authoritative* parenting style as the most positive out of

the four examined, finding that authoritative parents were the most successful at protecting their

children from drug use. Baumrind further stated that authoritarian parenting was "harmful" to

some classes of children, permissive parenting produced "less self-assertive" and "less

cognitively competent" in some classes, and that uninvolved (or rejecting-neglecting) parenting

produced children who were "the least competent of all" (p. 63). Callister et al. (2007) found that

fathers exerted more authoritarian influence in children's television homes whereas television

mothers were more authoritative, casting mothers in a more positive role than fathers.

Dail and Way's (1985) study found that with regard to parenting style, fathers appeared

more authoritarian than did mothers, and children responded positively because, the researchers

posited, children respond well when parents act responsibly. Mothers were seen in traditional

roles and were less appreciated by children than were fathers in the study. More mother

characters were present, but fathers were portrayed more often in parenting roles, a trend that

could be seen in 1980s society as well with the resurgence of women in the workforce.

Kelly (2009) found that "the family sitcom (as cited by Olson and Douglas, 1997) has an

established history of portraying the idiosyncratic nature of the American family and bringing it

into viewers' homes" (p. 108). Citing Butsch (1992), Kelly stated that working-class fathers are

often portrayed as inept and that "middle class [fathers]…emerged as the most supportive,

enlightened fathers of all the sitcom dads" (p. 109), though recent trends (such as the *Modern

Family* sitcom hit) suggest that even middle-class television fathers are subject to ridicule too.

**_Immature/buffoon-like behavior._** Further findings by Callister et al. (2007) define the

extent to which paternal authority has been subverted on television. This study looked at the

maturity level of men and women in their respective roles as parents. Research has shown that

television parents are often displayed engaging in immature or buffoon-like behavior. Instances

of *immaturity* are defined as displaying behaviors or characteristics that are not befitting of a

fully developed adult parent, or as identifying more with children than adults in speech, dress,

and action (Callister et al., 2007). A *buffoon* is defined as a person who engages in ridiculous,

clownish, bumbling, or mildly inappropriate behavior (Callister et al., 2007). The study found,

backing up the research already covered in this review of literature, that fathers were portrayed

as buffoons or as engaging in immature behavior more often than were television mothers on

children's television programs, a disturbing finding with regards to the traditional family unit.

Why should children respect parents, especially fathers, who act as childishly as they themselves

do? Recently this issue of the "chickification" of fathers on television has come under scrutiny in

publications as widely read as *TIME Magazine* and *Redbook Magazine* (Poniewozik, 2012;

Traister, 2012). With regard to the literature, the question of what effects the subversion of

mother/father roles in the American television family has on audiences (or not) is a substantive

one.

**Portrayals in Commercials**

Television shows are not the only culprits for the negative portrayal of fathers. Tsai and

Shumow (2011) carried out a study detailing the portrayal of fathers in "American prime-time

commercials across different networks and cable channels" (p. 38). They found that men in

television advertisements are rarely shown in family settings; if they are shown they have only a

minor role in the family; they are shown playing with or goofing off with children rather than

taking care of them; are unlikely to be presented with children without a mother present too; and

are never seen with infants, lending support to a traditional, but unfavorable, stereotype that a

man must be distant from his children and must not perform "women's work" (p. 39). Thus, the

competency levels of fathers in their traditional role as fathers is marginalized, as found in this study.

Wall and Arnold (2007) noted that in commercials men are often involved in eating with children—more often than are women. "These commercials, however, are likely to be for breakfasts, desserts, and fast food, therefore promoting father involvement in a way that requires very little cooking or real work" (p. 511), perpetuating a stereotype of fathers as inept at household tasks and, perhaps, irresponsible where children's nutrition is concerned.

Advertisements tend to show the traditional family structure but stereotype it in such a way that fathers are seen unfavorably as absent, distant, childish or inept in home settings. Referencing Lamb's (1987) levels of involvement between father and child ("interaction, accessibility, and responsibility" [39]), Tsai and Shumow (2011) found that fathers in media have become more *accessible* because many mothers are portrayed in the workplace. However, television father-children relationships lack a level or quality of *interaction* and *responsibility*. Advertisements show that male characters are inept at household chores and childcare tasks, though 2.5 million households in 2006 were single-father homes. The researchers found that fathers are often portrayed as the children's friend or "pal," really "one of the kids" (43), while the more responsible mother is on the opposite side of the line, "overwhelmed with housework and childcare duties and…therefore not fun to be with" (43). Men were 75% less likely to be shown as responsible parents than were mothers. Tsai and Shumow's study states that fathers are rarely portrayed in commercials as "sex-role models or traditional solemn mentors who oversee children's religious, moral, and vocational education" (44), thus lending further to the idea of irresponsible, distant fatherhood.

In light of this research, more recent articles, such as the 2014 Cheerios "How to Dad"

commercial, has turned the trend and portrayed fathers in a more positive role; however, the

common trend appears as research has shown in this section.

**Film Portrayals/Effects**

With the differences between television and film established, I turn to some general

findings on film material/portrayals to show the empirical (though limited) work that has been

done thus far in the field. I will follow this general section with a section focusing on film

portrayals of families, specifically.

**Narrative themes in films.** As Hollywood films are produced by a relatively small group

of people, they exhibit trends in thematic material. Gans (1964) noted that prior to the 1950s,

films prevalently portrayed moral heroism, youthfulness, the priority of romance, and the

justification of social mobility, with black/white delineations between right and wrong that are

not so much seen anymore. The *problem film*, "which deals explicitly with social, sexual and

political problems and their solutions" (p. 327), has become more the order of the day since the

'60s. Heroes are more likely to be antiheroes or at least morally complicated characters; the lives

of the stars are fraught with intrigue and scandal; and, according to Gans, "psychological

explanations have replaced moral ones" (p. 328). Gans also noted that the films of his day

focused less on everyday problems like "poverty, segregation, or the emotional and social

conflicts of everyday living" (p. 329), choosing more edgy subjects.

Children's films likewise have been found to fall into theme categories. Konigsberg's

(2000) study, focusing solely on children's films, found six general categories children's films fit

into: child and animal; animation films/animal who is a child; child adventure; orphan girl

stories; dysfunctional families that become functional; and films in which children form their

own family units. As films are largely fantasy, and children learn how to deal with their worlds through fantasy (Sedney, 2002), Konigsberg noted the influences children's films could have on children. Konigsberg's claim was that these categories all allowed children to reconcile strains they may experience with their own parents by seeing children in positions of power through these films. More findings from this study will be examined later.

**Gender roles/relations portrayals.** The distortion of real life as portrayed on television, particularly in gender roles, has been noted and decried in studies over decades. A few researchers have found that films stereotype gender roles as well—stereotypes that may blind audiences to the real world in favor of "'reel' world" portrayals (Smith et al., 2010, p. 774). McDonald (2009), for example, found that men's occupations were twice as visible as were women's in films, that while portrayals of occupations in movies were more varied than in television, men appeared more in groups in work places and women were portrayed more often alone.

The Powers et al. (1993) study of films from the 1940s to the 1990s found that women from 1946 to 1965 were portrayed as young, beautiful, romantic, focused on helping men grow into domestic responsibility and performed traditional "women's work"; while some were portrayed as holding nontraditional jobs, most women in these films were married or involved with men. From 1966 to 1989, a different trend appeared, one in which "many, if not all, of the earlier kinds of representation of women characters were modified, or even reversed outright, albeit in complex, interdependent ways" (p. 269). The researchers noted that the goals of women in these films shifted, from getting their men to become happy family men to now pursuing careers and the finer things of "the man's world" themselves. Characters in general, they noted, were portrayed more often as "emotionally isolated, fearful, and Machiavellian, however

sympathetic" (p. 280), and portrayals of women declined in having "greater civility than men, maternal instinct, and devotion to others"; men "have become even more vicious, greedy, and villainous, particularly when they are in positions of authority" (pp. 280–281). Though Hollywood may claim to "reflect" the trends of the day in order to appeal to the public, the researchers stated that the ideals of filmmakers often conflict with those of a more traditional public and that these portrayals are exaggerations, rather than reflections, of society, particularly in their "alienated visions of how men and women relate to each other" (p. 281).

Smith et al. (2010) drew attention to the cultivation effects that may occur when viewers see men and women characters cast in traditional or stereotypical roles; they may become more convinced that this is how the world operates. The effects can be the same for viewers who see portrayals of men and women in nontraditional roles, men and women in conflict with each other, etc. The researchers noted that males are seen twice as much as females on the big screen. Of the 3,039 characters they studied in speaking roles on films, less than 1/3 were female. The researchers raised the concern about what such portrayals will potentially do for children who view films. "Children who watch skewed portrayals of males and females while they are developing cognitively may organize their views on gender into schemas driven by these stereotypes," (p. 783) they claim. Some other themes they found were that females were portrayed as having "better motives, and were more intelligent than men" and that men were portrayed as "stronger and funnier" than women (p. 783)—a trend that has been seen on television as well, particularly in family comedy shows. The researchers raised a concern that G-rated film portrayals "of women as wives and mothers and men as swinging singles" (p. 783) may send children skewed messages of what is expected of parents in family relationships, especially for young boys who look to male portrayals in film for learning. Young boys who see

more men in G-rated films see, nevertheless, few men who act as positive role models and may suffer in their perceived reality of their own future-adult responsibilities.

Romance is another subject that has been studied as pertaining to film portrayals. A recent study by Hefner and Wilson (2013) found that romantic comedy "was the sixth highest grossing category of films between 1995 and 2010" (p. 150), giving weight to the argument by Addis and Holbrook (2010) that romantic appeal is one of the biggest reasons audiences watch films. Hefner and Wilson (2013) argued for the importance of films in portraying romantic relationships because they can do it "from the beginning to the end in one packaged narrative" (p. 152), whereas television shows often take several seasons to develop relationships—again, films giving messages/portrayals to audiences without the dilution of time or distraction; they likewise cited that those who viewed romantic themes in media tended to give "television answers" to questions about dating/romance ideals, such as "love at first sight," the idea of soul mates, etc. Smith et al. (2010) found that females more often were parents than were males, that males were more likely to be seen independent of relationships than females, and that females were twice as likely to be shown as married or in a "committed relationship" (p. 780) than were males. Romance in Disney films projects some disturbing trends. Tanner et al. (2003) found that 78% of their sample involved "love at first sight" cases and that love was portrayed as "'easy' and (requiring) no work" (p. 364), though this trend seems to have taken a decline in more recent Disney films.

Such trends, especially appearing in children's films, may lead scholars to question the effects of such portrayals on audiences; how is "love at first sight" even to be accomplished, for example, if audiences likewise observe that, according to films, males and females can't get along with each other?

**Film portrayals of families.** Viewers do not learn solely about roles in society as portrayed in films. Film portrayals of family life also exert some influence in audiences' expectations for the family unit (Wynn & Rosenfeld, 2003). Levy (1991) stated that "the mass media serve as a major source of information about a variety of societal roles, including family roles" (p. 187). Specifically, he argued for studies regarding "popular films about family life" (p. 188) in order to reveal what filmmakers viewed as popular portrayals for audiences—audiences worldwide, as filmmakers produce films that will appeal to the broadest audiences possible.

Studies dealing with family relationships in films show that the film family has declined over the years in some instances, while traditional family structure is still fairly strong in the subgenre of family or children's films.

Considine's (1981) longitudinal study found that in film fathers and mothers were often portrayed as "obtuse parents who are never properly plugged in to the problems of their young" (p. 131). He stated that adolescents in films were often portrayed (starting in the late '50s) as more in tune, more responsible, and more sympathetic than their parents. Levy's (1991) findings continued this theme. Levy studied cycles of family film portrayals through the last few decades of the 20th century. He noted that the family declined in films in the 1960s, giving rise to "alternative family structures" (p. 190), that the 1970s were characterized by "films about white suburban families" (p. 190) and that family portrayals grew more troubled in the 1970s, leading to "youth-oriented films" in the 1980s and then, in reaction, a revival of the traditional family structure in the years just prior to the study.

Levy (1991) noted that when families were portrayed as troubled, parents were most often the ones portrayed as at fault. In his examination of certain popular films from those decades, he found that parents were portrayed as irresponsible, not understanding of their

children's struggles, that fathers appeared childish and self absorbed while mothers were "portrayed as less sensitive, less responsible, and less caring," in some cases, "than the father" (p. 196). He concluded that fathers were portrayed as better able to balance work and family than were women and that *Kramer vs. Kramer* began a trend that shifted fathers from "initially tough (macho) men into more sensitive and nurturing males" (p. 197), perhaps because of the absence of caring mothers. This study concluded that after the 1960s families were portrayed in films as no longer being sources of emotional and moral support for children/adolescents, instead portraying an "increasing and inherently irreconcilable gap" between parents/adults and children/adolescents in the movie world.

More recently, Konigsberg (2000) found that a sample of children's films dealt with "familial issues, and all of them, both explicitly and implicitly, point to some idealized vision of the family unit" (p. 296) while dealing with conflict in the family relationship. One theme Konigsberg noted was the process of resolving conflict with father figures as taking utmost precedence (For instance, *Star Wars*). As with Considine (1981) and Levy (1991), Konigsberg found that parents often behaved childishly or irresponsibly in *dysfunctional-to-functional* family films but that the parents learned from the children how to be better parents, something Konigsberg termed "a denigration" (p. 297) of parents' roles in films and in society. Konigsberg cited increasing divorce and unwed pregnancies in society as an exacerbation of the parent-denigration and responsibility problem; films did not lend support to an alternative view of parenting. In another category (*children forming their own family*), Konigsberg related that parents were portrayed as so incompetent/unaware in their parenting that children were forced to bond together to survive (*Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* being the spotlighted example) and develop a

"maturity in their self-sufficiency" (p. 300) their parents could not teach because, frankly, the parents did not possess it.

Tanner et al. (2003) studied family dynamics/demographics in Disney films specifically, films, a decidedly family genre. They found that families take precedence in those films. This is interesting considering that the researchers found that under 1/3 of their sample had a traditional family structure and under 2/3 had an alternative family structure. They did note that 65% of the time, "marriage and/or children were the expected course for couples" (p. 360) and that more than half of the time family relationships were portrayed as important. They found that while 42% of the films showed both parents, more fathers were visible than mothers; this led them to claim that "the development of fathers' role has taken place at the expense of the mothers' role" (p. 368) in these films (a finding opposite to that of television family studies [Callister et al., 2007; Scharrer, 2001]) and raise concern for what this might teach children about parental relationships. This concern is raised because while "marriage and children are presented as the ultimate goal of life" in many Disney films, "women are often depicted in marginalized and powerless roles once married with children" (p. 369). Nearly 40% of the sample portrayed a single-parent family. Almost 2/3 of the mothers portrayed were not related to their children, and almost 90% of the fathers portrayed were not biologically related to their children.

Tanner et. al (2003) also found that where the family was comprised of two parents, traditional gender roles prevailed but in a small percentage "couples shared power in their relationships" (p. 365). Mothers were more often portrayed as caregivers and protectors; fathers appeared most often as one of three portrayals: "controlling, aggressive, protective disciplinarians"; "nurturing and affectionate"; or "self-sacrificing" (p. 360).

Wynn and Rosenfeld's (2003) study took a deeper look at Disney films (four, to be exact: *Beauty and the Beast, Pocahontas, The Little Mermaid,* and *Aladdin*) and found that "the relationships in all four films reflect qualities of real-life relationships as found in the two father-daughter paradigms"[1] (p. 102). Though portrayals may have realistic motifs, however, the researchers found that "some unsupported and potentially dangerous messages" could be projected to viewers regarding adolescence—particularly to girls because so often Disney focuses on princesses. These messages include that 1) relationships where freedom is discouraged "foster positive changes in identity, self-concept, and self-esteem" (p. 102); 2) rebellion for selfish motives lead to positive results and, thus, are positive motivations; 3) fathers do not understand adolescents, and thus their authority can be justifiably undermined; 4) one does not need to feel responsible for his/her actions because happiness results whether you claim responsibility or not; 5) marriage at a young age is "advantageous" (p. 104). The films may portray father-daughter relationships truly in *some* facets, but they still employ the element of fiction, plot conflict, etc. Thus the trends should not be seen as real but may be anyway.

Clark's (2008) study of teen films from 1980 to 2007 found some of the same general trends applied to teen films as Tanner et al. (2003) found applied to Disney films. For example, stay-at-home moms were overrepresented, and fathers were portrayed as professionals or craftsmen rather than as day laborers or farmers; those day laborers who were portrayed were also portrayed as less competent than professional fathers/male caregivers, a trend that is the same for television and film (Kelly, 2009).

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[1] These paradigms are 1) families in which adolescence is easily understood because fathers allow their children to explore their freedom and 2) families in which the opposite occurs because fathers do not allow their children exploratory/decision-making freedom.

Clark (2008) also found that single-parent homes were more frequently portrayed than

two-parent homes, and in these single-parent homes mothers were shown more often doing

domestic work than were single fathers. Using the parenting models defined by Baumrind (1991)

and Callister et al. (2007), Clark found that the majority of parents fell into the "authoritative"[2]

category (p. 73), whereas on television fathers are more likely to be seen as buffoons. Fathers

were next most likely to be portrayed as authoritarians and mothers as permissive parents; the

uninvolved and permissive categories tallied up to only 7% of the male father roles studied.

However, Clark observed that the majority of parents' skills were classified as "adequate" rather

than "competent," though their *style* was Baumrind's ideal of authoritative (p. 85).

The studies cited show that families in films have declined in positivity. Parents have,

generally, not been shown in a positive light in film; the same is true of today's television

portrayals of fathers. Fathers seem to be, perhaps, more visible in films than they are on

television, and some positive examples (from Disney) exist of parenting relationships, but much

of film portrays families as conflictual, unrealistic, and dominated by inept or simply adequate

parents. The television study shows that some trends fit with film portrayals in the same decade

and some do not. Researchers for both genres have remarked on the unrealistic expectations the

media can cause to arise in audiences' minds with regard to interpersonal relationships,

particularly where children and young adult audiences are concerned.

Researchers for many of the studies cited in this literature review have used Cultivation

Theory for decades to study and explain the unrealistic expectations audiences build in their

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[2] Defined by Baumrind (1991) as "both demanding and responsive. They monitor and impart clear standards for their children's conduct. They are assertive, but not intrusive or restrictive. Their disciplinary methods are supportive rather than punitive. They want their children to be assertive as well as socially responsible, and self-regulated as well as cooperative" (p. 62). Baumrind casts this category as the ideal portrayal of parenting.

minds from watching media. A mainstream media theory, it has been used to explain how audiences who watch media heavily may have their perceptions altered or shaped by what they view on the screen. Certainly children, who interact with media for hours per day, fall into this category. The theory has scores of studies under its belt and has proven its sustainability under research.

Because this study deals with the perceptions viewers, particularly young viewers, may gain from film portrayals of parents, particularly fathers, the researcher will use Cultivation Theory as the lens through which this study will be focused.

**Cultivation Theory**

The term *homo narrans* was coined by Fisher (1984) to describe an integral human characteristic: storytelling. Indeed, the argument was that the human ability and need to tell stories are what differentiate the race from the animal kingdom. George Gerbner (1998) stated that, "humans are the only species that lives in a world erected by the stories they tell" (p. 175). And television has been one of the prime sources of both the telling and reception of stories, truly "the central cultural arm of American society" in modern times (Hughes, 1980, p. 299). Gerbner's 1998 study asserted that the television was on at least seven hours every day in a typical household and that people older than two years old viewed it at least three hours every day. Gerbner argued that television influenced people's worldviews even if they were not conscious of the change in outlook. Since Americans are exposed to television even as infants, television becomes "a significant source of general values, ideologies, and perspectives as well as specific assumptions, beliefs, and images" (Gerbner, 1998, p. 185).

Because people are so involved with television, a group of scholars, among them Gerbner, formulated theories to study and measure the effect of television on viewers'

conception of reality (termed *perceived reality*). Their Cultural Indicators Project consisted of

three branches: 1) *institutional process analysis*, which was "designed to investigate the

formation of policies directing the massive flow of media messages" (Gerbner 1998, p. 179); 2)

*message system analysis*, which "investigates broad structures and consistent patterns in large

bodies of those messages in the aggregate" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 338); and 3)

*cultivation analysis*, which studies "the relationships between institutional processes, message

systems, and the public assumptions, images, and policies that they cultivate (Gerbner, 1970,

p.71)" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 338).

> Cultivation analysis has become the most noteworthy of the three Project branches. Its

premise is that, over time, immersing oneself "in a symbolic environment in which certain types

of institutions with certain types of objectives create types of messages, tends to cultivate

(support, sustain, and nourish) certain types of collected consciousness" (Gerbner, 1998, p. 339).

People watch television not solely for information or entertainment but to find support for their

own systems of belief (Hughes, 1980; Shrum, 1999). Gerbner's defense for the theory stated:

> Television has become the common symbolic environment that interacts with most of the
>
> things we think and do. Exploring its dynamics can help develop an understanding of the
>
> forces of social cohesion, cultural dependence, and resistance to change, as well as the
>
> requirements of developing alternatives and independence essential for self-direction and
>
> self-government in the television age. (Gerbner, 1998, p. 192)

Cultivational research was defined by Signorielli and Morgan (2001) as a theory that studies the

"repetitive patterns of images and representations to which entire communities are exposed—and

that they absorb—over long periods of time" (p. 334) through the medium of television. The

longevity of study provided by the theory differentiates it from other theories and renders it, to

Gerbner, preferable above other theories because it exposes deep-seated world attitudes developed in people over prolonged exposures to television, rather than whimsical, transitory notions among audience members (Hughes, 1980; Gerbner, 1998).

Though originally criticized for its failure to take into consideration outside variables that could also lead to audiences' world perspectives (Hughes, 1980), cultivation analysis has been used extensively over the years. According to Morgan and Shanahan (2010), the theory has been used in more than 500 studies since it was first conceived.

Gerbner's primary interest with regard to cultivation analysis rested with heavy television viewers—those who watch four or more hours of television per day—for he argued that the world perceptions of heavy television users, as opposed to light viewers, are more moldable to, and often show more adherence to, the "realities" depicted on television (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; Hughes, 1980; Gerbner, 1998; Shrum, 1999). Heavy viewers (those who watched four or more hours of television per day) tend to more easily let down "the fourth wall," so to speak, than do light or moderate viewers, because "however contrived television plots are, viewers assume that they take place against a backdrop of the real world" (what Gerbner called *representational realism*) (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 178). Thus, Gerbner found heavy television viewers tended to give "television answers" to real-life questions more often than did light or moderate viewers (Hughes, 1980, p. 287). Of course, light and medium viewers were also influenced by the "cultural imagery" portrayed on television (Hughes, 1980, p. 287); however, while the entire audience demographic was influenced by television's depiction of "social reality" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 339), the perceived realities of heavy viewers were the most pronounced, and thus many studies have dealt with that sample group.

Furthermore, heavier viewers tended to come from the lower classes, where violence was more common than it might be in upper-class areas; thus they felt like the television images they saw only propounded the truth of what their world was like (Gerbner, 1998, p. 6). Researchers have stated that if a televised image matches a viewer's personal experience, the reality of that experience (and of television's level of authority) increases for the viewer (Calzo & Ward, 2009).[3] As such, television has the power to either alter people's perceptions of a reality they have not experienced (*mainstreaming*, mentioned below), or, in this case, to strengthen their views of a concrete personal experience (*resonance*), though there is often a marked dichotomy between what is portrayed and what the actual statistics are. For purposes of this study, resonance may have an effect on child audiences who identify negative or positive parent portrayals, particularly those of fathers, with their own experience. Children whose fathers are not present or children whose fathers are not positive or involved role models may be doubly impacted by the media messages they receive that seem to mirror their own experience.

Though Gerbner's research dealt mostly with violence on television, other researchers have expanded the theory to study viewers' attitudes about gender roles, marital status, politics, religion, body image, family, economics, minority issues, etc. (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Indeed, researchers have found that some topics covered on television become so widely encultured by the public that it leads to a change in social reality or socially perceived reality, a phenomenon known as *mainstreaming*. Mainstreaming, as defined by Gerbner et al. (1980), serves as "a relative commonality of outlooks that television tends to cultivate" (p. 15). Large groups, even entire social groups, tend to shift their outlook to television's perception of life because, according to Gerbner and Gross (1976), television is the most extensive source of

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[3] Note: Light and heavy viewers can both be affected by *resonance*.

"common background of assumptions not only about what things are but also about how they work, or should work, and why" (p. 179). Regardless of how the crisis points escalate in the plot of a given television episode, things usually wrap up nicely, the characters are physically attractive and successful, and the good guy wins; good triumphs over evil, leisure over hard labor, etc. Television offers people a view of how they wish their lives were—where characters are rich, handsome, successful, where trouble lasts 20–45 minutes and the ending is happier than the beginning was.

Assuming, then, that television is one of society's prime authorities on "the ideal life" or even "the real world" (as negative portrayals on television are often deemed) this study's objective is to review what television communicates about the family unit and compare it to what its sister medium, film, portrays. Morgan and Shanahan (2010) found that "television [continues to contribute] to traditional images and aspirations" as far as "gender and family roles" go (p. 346). This can be explained, stated Gerbner (1998), by the fact that television stations want to project to the largest audience possible, and thus their "messages are designed to disturb as few as possible" (p. 186). Gerbner (1998) found that heavy viewers labeled themselves as "moderate" in their views and that, in general, viewers tended to be conservative—thus the assumption that television stations will straddle a middle line in portrayal of social customs.

Since Gerbner's study, however, the parameters for conservatives and moderates have widened perceptively, including media portrayals of the family. Signorielli and Morgan's cultivation study on the American family and television (2001) found the following results: 1) family and home issues dominated "network drama programs" (p. 338); 2) families were most often seen on situation comedies; 3) families on television tended to be more conventional in makeup even though the portrayal of nonconventional families had increased; 4) higher

economic status equaled higher family coherence and functionality; 5) marriage tended to be

portrayed more positively in situation comedies than in dramas or soap operas; and 6) families

had become more child-centered rather than parent-centered, as some of the early family

television shows portrayed.

**Research Questions**

The literature shows that media influence consumers and that media, especially television, portray traditional family structure in an unfavorable light. The character of fathers on television suffers particular negative attention. This leads to an overarching question: 1) Do major family films portray fatherhood in as negative a light as do television shows?

As the family unit continues to decline in American society, the extent to which younger viewers cultivate media messages concerning the importance of parents (or their *un*importance) is a pressing question. But before the views of child and parent consumers can be ascertained regarding media portrayals of fathers, the portrayals of fathers themselves must be studied (which is the purpose and delimitation of this thesis).

In order to best answer the research questions, quantitative measures were utilized, and a content analysis of top-reviewed family films from the last three decades carried out. Comparing decades will give researchers a better view of any shifting trends in parental portrayal. Also, in order to ascertain how favorably fathers are/are not portrayed as compared to mothers, the study ran a content analysis on mother portrayals to serve as a point of comparison for the larger question, the portrayal of fathers. These films were selected based upon kid-friendliness. As the issue being researched concerns the family unit, the researcher selected films that children (the most impressionable audiences for family-themed media messages) would be allowed to watch. Children were defined as minors 3–18 years of age, an age at which they still live with their parents and are subject to authority. However, movies rated PG-13 or R were not considered because they are not advised for, or targeted toward, younger children (ages 12 and younger), according to the MPAA.

The research questions were as follows:

**RQ1:** How frequently are fathers and mothers presented in family films?

RQ1A: Is there a significant difference in the frequency of portrayals of mothers

versus fathers?

RQ1B: Is there a significant difference in the frequency of fathers and mothers

over time?

**RQ2:** Is there a significant difference in the portrayal of parenting type between fathers

and mothers?

RQ2A: Is there a significant difference in the way parenting types have changed

over time?

**RQ3:** Is there a significant difference in the portrayal of parenting styles between fathers

and mothers?

RQ3A: Is there a significant difference in the way parenting styles have changed

over time?

**Method**

Quantitative measures serve for purposes of this study as a means of assessing not only the frequency with which fathers are portrayed in major family films but also any trends in portrayal of parenting style using Baumrind's (1991) model. Quantitative methods enable us to ascertain *what* is present in a sample of family films, in terms of frequency. Specifically, *content analysis,* the method of analyzing messages, is a favorite method in mass communication studies and will be used here (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002, p. 587). Content analysis involves "tallying the number of specific communication phenomena in a given text (such as the number of references to a specific person in the news…) and then categorizing those tallies into a taxonomy from which inferences can be made" (Thayer, Evans, McBride, Queen, & Spyridakis, 2007, p. 268). For purposes of this study, the text will be a sampling of films, and the communication phenomena will be evidences of parent portrayals as defined below and in the attached coding sheet.

Content analyses serve as a scientific approach "(a) to describe trends in communication content and patterns of communication, (b) to test hypotheses of message characteristics, (c) to compare media content to the "real world,' (d) to assess the image of particular groups in society, and (e) to establish a starting point for studies of media effects" (Stroman, C.K., & Jones, K.E., 1997, pp. 272–273). The purpose of this study was to lay a groundwork for studying the media effects of film parent portrayal on younger audiences.

The strengths of quantitative study, in particular content analysis, include the ability to collect data from a wide range of sources, thus aiding external validity of the findings. Too, the sample is made up of data that are not subject to change of opinion or circumstance, and thus internal validity is also reached. Content analysis is less time consuming and expensive than

other methods of research; indeed, the only cost incurred would be paying for viewing films and, perhaps, giving compensation to those who aid in the coding process. Too, content analysis involves a process of rigorous adherence to established rules and steps in order to be most "objective and systematic," according to Lewis, Smith, and Hermida (2013), and ensure reliability in the study.

A weakness of quantitative analysis is that causality cannot be established; quantitative methods fall short of this goal. We can determine frequency and portrayal, but we cannot effectively delve into the *how* and *why* of these portrayals (interviewing filmmakers) and reception (interviewing audiences). Indeed, quantitative research must necessarily serve as a precursor to a more deep, complete study. The patterns must first be established, and content analysis will serve for this purpose; however, in order to understand how such portrayals affect audiences, further, research with actual audiences will need to be carried out at a later date.

This section will focus on selected methods for answering the research questions and the means that used to control for bias as well as to collect and analyze the data.

**Sample**

The unit of analysis for this study included each family in a selected film. Parents, in particular, were defined as adults who, whether through marriage or other arrangements, acted as caregivers for children or teens. Caregivers who were not related to children/teens biologically, through marriage to the child's parents, or through some other legal or understood agreement, were not coded as parents for the *Presence* variable (in order to show traditional vs. surrogate family portrayals) but were coded as parents for the other variables.

This study focused on family films because these films are most likely to be viewed by young, impressionable children. Whereas the researcher at first set out to differentiate between

children's films and family films, the two genres are generally confused and merged by the

public and by major film rating sites like IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes. The term *family film* is

generally understood by these sites to be an umbrella term for several different genres; however,

the genres that fall under the umbrella differed from site to site. From these different sites,

portions of definitions emerged to create, hopefully, a clearer picture of what a *family film* is.

For example, ScriptLab defines the family film as a film that "contains appropriate

content for younger viewers" with the caveat that it is not geared only toward children but to a

range of audience ages. Chiou (2008) stated that family films appeal to both child and non-child

audiences. Ultimately, the material in a "family film" is appropriate for children but also

enjoyable for adults; in essence, an entire family can watch it together.

When looking for a population to study and a more authoritative definition for the family

film genre, the researcher found that IMDb's list of Top Grossing Family Films served the

purpose. IMDb is generally accepted as a mainstream authority on films, actors, ratings, etc.,

with a parental guide per film. IMDb defines the genre *family film* thusly: "Should be universally

accepted viewing, e.g., aimed specifically for the education and/or entertainment of children or

the entire family. Note: Usually, but not always, complementary to Animation. Objective." Thus

for purposes of this study, a family film, as defined by IMDb, is a film that falls under IMDb's

list of family films, which, according to IMDb's definition, would render any movie in the list

appropriate for young viewers on their own or for children and adults alike to enjoy.

Using IMDb's list, the researcher made the following stipulations to more effectively cull

a sample: 1) The films chosen would be from the years 1980–2014; 2) the films chosen would be

rated G or PG.

In order to choose the films, the researcher drew from IMDb's Top-grossing Family Films list the top 20 films from all three decades. The films comprised a purposive population, selected based on date released and rating in order to draw a sample from which young, impressionable children are likely to watch. The sampling was limited to G and PG movies in order to choose films the MPAA has deemed appropriate for children to watch on their own as well as to enjoy with adults. The researcher likewise limited the sample to American films and films produced in 2D.

## Variables of Interest

The operational definition for each variable is provided below.

**Parental presence.** Parents were coded as *present* if they were in physical proximity to children during a film—this entailed being involved with them and their lives but also being physically present. Thus, a parent who died in the first scene of a film, or one who showed up for little more than one scene, would be coded as *not present.*

**Parenting types.** For purposes of this study, the variables of *Parental Centrality, Parental Competency*, and *Parental Maturity* fell under the umbrella term Parental Types. These definitions were used in the Callister et al. (2007) study but were not grouped into an umbrella. In order to better organize the research questions, this study used the different method.

***Centrality.*** Parents who were coded as *present* were then be coded based on their *centrality*. A parent coded as *central* played a major role in the lives of the children—either through physical, monetary, or emotional support or the extent to which they influenced a child's choices and decisions. This variable was coded to the extent that the children aw the parent as influencing their lives. A parent who was present but who had little clout as far as children's decision-making goes was coded as *marginal.*

***Competency and maturity levels.*** Parents were also coded based on how *competently* (or *incompetently*) they performed tasks related to their parental status; and on how often they displayed *mature*, *neutral,* or *immature* behavior. Instances of *immaturity* were defined as displaying behaviors or characteristics that ere not befitting of a fully developed adult parent, or as identifying more with children than adults in speech, dress, and action (with *maturity* defined as the opposite type of behavior) (Callister et al., 2007).

**Parenting styles.** Four parenting styles were selected in the study to characterize the mothers and fathers portrayed on the show. The four styles were defined based on levels of demandingness (parents who demand, supervise, discipline, and confront) and responsiveness (parents who support, acquiesce, and foster individuality), as stated in Baumrind's study (1991). Parents who use the authoritarian parenting style are defined as "demanding and directive, but not responsive," providing "an orderly environment" and expecting "their orders to be obeyed without explanation" (Baumrind, 1991, p. 62). The authoritative parenting style is defined as both demanding and responsive—they are supportive and assertive, but not restrictive or intrusive (Baumrind, 1991). Parents using the permissive parenting style are defined as "more responsive than they are demanding," showing lenience and avoiding confrontation (Baumrind, 1991, p. 62). The last parenting style, uninvolved, describes parents who are low in both responsiveness and demandingness. They show little interest in their children's lives and can be considered neglectful (Baumrind, 1991).

## Intercoder Reliability and Coding

The nature of content analysis lent itself to bias control already, as the data in the sample were objective sources. However, to further control for bias, intercoder reliability was reached when carrying out content analysis.  In order to do this, the coders conducted a pretest on a

sample of the films used to ensure that definitions on the coding sheet were clear

enough/objective enough to understand and study.

Three independent coders examined 20% of the sample (12 films) in order to assess

intercoder reliability. Four of these films were watched collectively in order to better define the

variable definitions; three of these collectively viewed films were coded for reliability along with

the other eight films watched, then placed back in the pool of films in order to be recoded

individually. Coder training also occurred prior to this with coders watching, together, one

family film not on the list and conferring about operational definitions for each variable. The

remaining 80% of the sample was coded by the three coders individually.

An average pairwise Cohen's kappa test was run in order to determine intercoder

reliability. Reliabilities must be greater than .8 for all variable categories that will be included.

The coders reached a correlation level of .845 for the 12 films included in the intercoder

reliability sample. This is above the .8 required and thus was found satisfactory.

The coding was completed using a coding sheet that lists the variables above (see

Appendix A). The variables were measured by adding a tally mark next to each variable when it

was evidenced in the film, per character, or by circling a characteristic seen in the films.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis included coding the films for portrayals of parental presence and parenting

style. The numbers were entered into an Excel spreadsheet, totals found, and chi square tests run

on the coinciding variables.

**Results**

The results for this study were reported and discussed using a 95% confidence level ($p<$ .05). Anything that fell greater than .05, therefore, was not deemed significant. Some of the variables resulted in confidence levels just above the .05 requirement and will be briefly discussed along with the significant findings.

In addition, using the power rule that 20% or less of the cells for each chi square analysis needed to be greater than 4, some of the results returned a lack of power and were thus not discussed, even if they returned significant, or close-to-significant, findings.

**RQ1: Frequency of Presence**

Results from the content analysis of the frequency of parent presence included 128 coded family units. Within those units, coders noted 83 female caregivers present and 91 male caregivers. Only two of the coded films (*Short Circuit* and *Cars*) featured no family units. Of the female caregivers, 83 were biological or adoptive mothers; 91 of male caregivers were biological or adoptive fathers. This study will define all female caregivers who served in a mothering role as mothers and all male caregivers who served in a fathering role as fathers. They are only differentiated from in this research question to show the difference in frequency between actual fathers and surrogate fathers. Seventy-five mothers were coded as present, with 50 coded as not present. Eighty-five fathers were coded as present, with 40 coded as not present. Figures 1 and 2 show the distribution of portrayal frequency overall.

**Figure 1: Parental Frequency Portrayals--Parents and "Other" Categories**
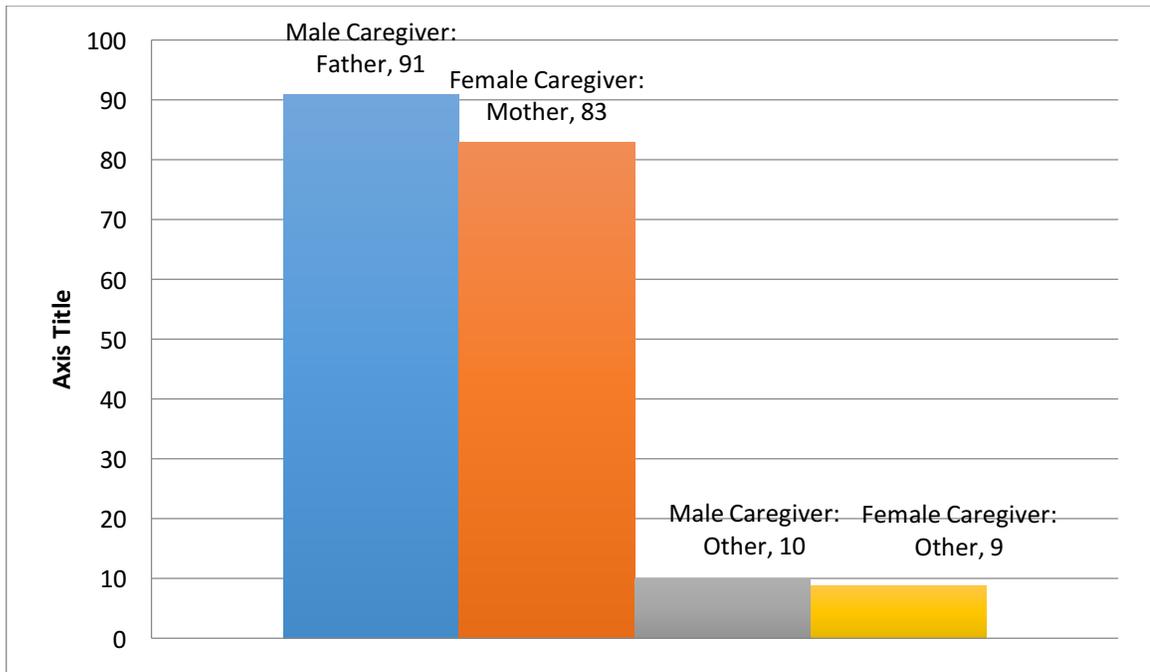


**Figure 2: Frequency of Father and Mother Presence in Films**
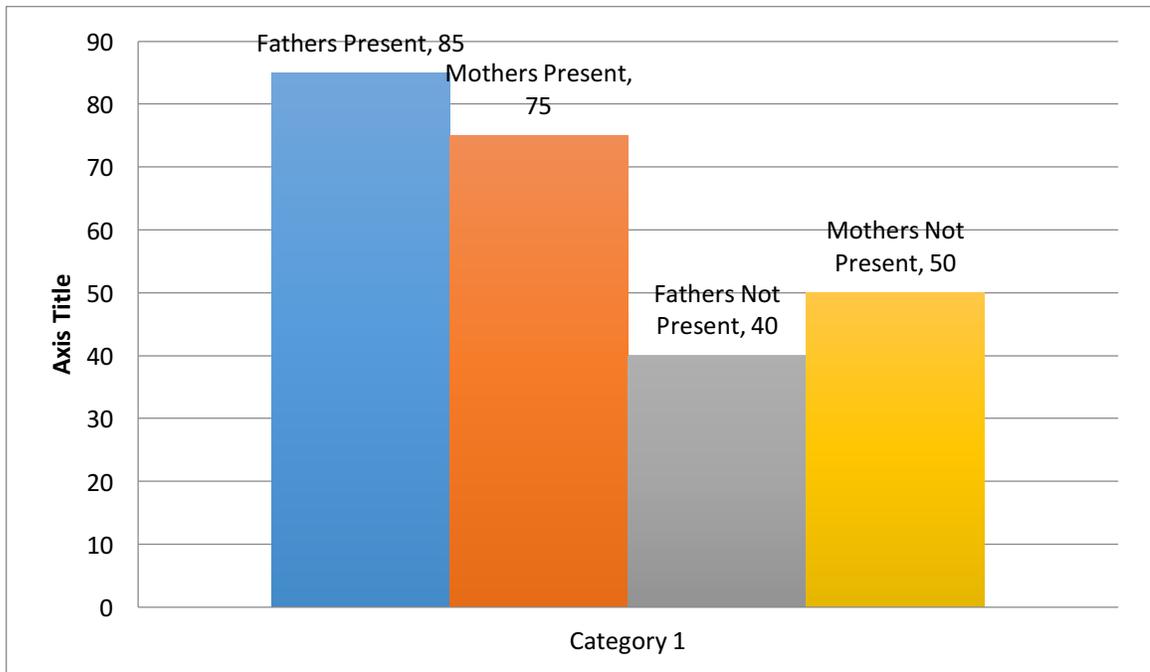
**RQ1A: Frequency of fathers versus mothers.** The results from the content analysis showed no significant differences in how often mothers and fathers are portrayed. An analysis of 60 films yielded 128 family units with total frequencies of 85 fathers present, 75 mothers present, 40 fathers not present and 50 mothers not present. The chi-square test showed no statistically significant results regarding the frequencies ($\chi^2$= 1.74, df= 1, $p$= .19).

Table 1: Parental Presence Portrayed Overall

|  | Present | Not Present | Total |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mothers Observed Frequencies | 75 | 50 | 125 |
| Mothers Expected Frequencies | 80 | 45 | 125 |
| Fathers Observed Frequencies | 85 | 40 | 125 |
| Fathers Expected Frequencies | 80 | 45 | 125 |

**RQ1B: Frequency of presence over time.** Results from the content analysis of the frequency of parent presence over the three decades analyzed showed that there are no significant differences in how often mothers and fathers were portrayed. The analysis of 60 films yielded 128 family units with total frequencies of 17 mothers present in the '80s, 30 present in the '90s, and 28 present in the 2000s; 10 mothers not present in the '80s, 22 not present in the '90s, and 18 not present in the 2000s; 19 fathers present in the '80s, 38 present in the '90s, and 28 present in the 2000s; and 9 fathers not present in the '80s, 14 not present in the '90s and 17 not present in the 2000s (see Figure 3). The chi-square test for parental presence over time showed no statistically significant results regarding the frequencies ($\chi^2$= .75, df= 2, $p$= .687).

**Table 2: Parent Presence Portrayals over Time**

|  | 1980s | 1990s | 2004-2014 | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mothers Observed Frequencies | 17 | 39 | 28 | 75 |
| Mothers Expected Frequencies | 16.88 | 31.88 | 26.25 | 75.01 |
| Fathers Observed Frequencies | 19 | 38 | 28 | 85 |
| Fathers Expected Frequencies | 19.13 | 36.13 | 29.75 | 85.01 |

The chi-square test for parental presence over time showed no statistically significant results regarding the frequencies ($\chi^2$= .429, df= 2, $p$= .81).

**Table 3: Parent Non-Presence Portrayals over Time**

|  | 1980s | 1990s | 2004-2014 | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mothers Observed Frequencies | 10 | 22 | 18 | 50 |
| Mothers Expected Frequencies | 10.56 | 20 | 19.44 | 50 |
| Fathers Observed Frequencies | 9 | 14 | 17 | 40 |
| Fathers Expected Frequencies | 8.44 | 16 | 15.56 | 40 |

The chi-square test for parental non-presence over time showed no statistically significant results regarding the frequencies ($\chi^2$= .76, df= 2, $p$= .68).

**Figure 3. Distribution of Parental Frequencies over Time**
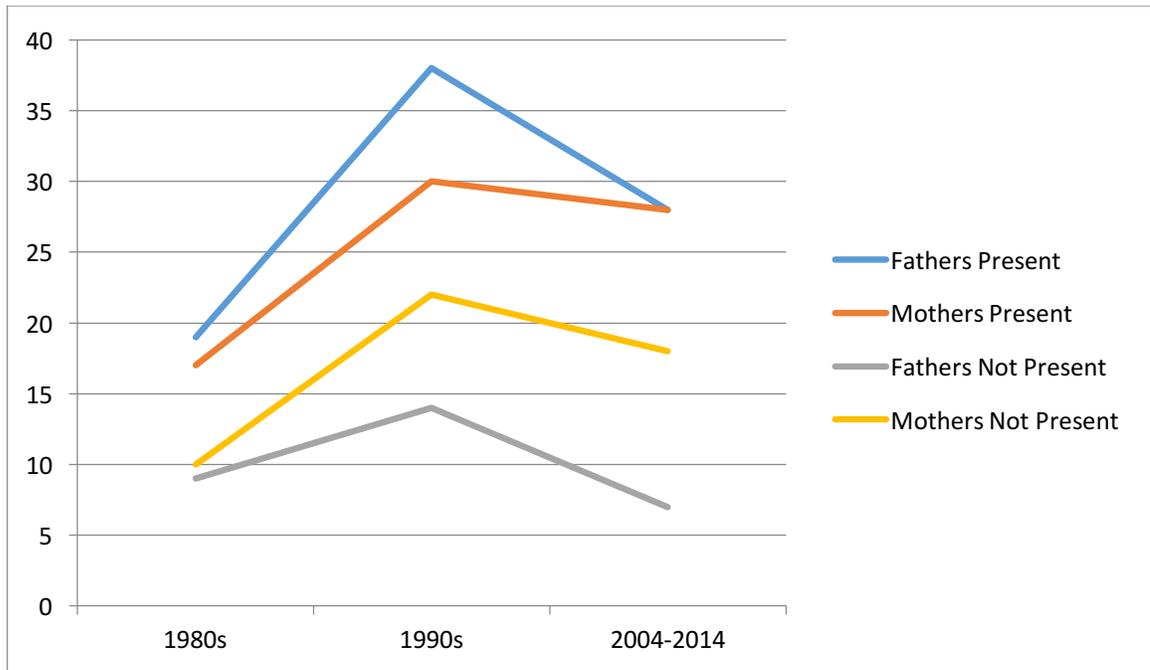


## RQ2: Parenting Types between Genders

**Centrality.** Results from the content analysis of the centrality or marginality of film parents in their children's lives overall returned no significant results. The data showed that overall 59 mothers were portrayed as central, with 74 fathers being portrayed the same; while 28 mothers were portrayed as playing only a marginal role in their children's lives, with 22 fathers being portrayed the same way. Figure 2 shows the relative distribution of these values between the genders. The data show that fathers/male caregivers were more likely to be portrayed as playing a central role, either physically or emotionally, in the lives of their children than were mothers. The chi square test showed significant results ($\chi^2$= 3.55, df= 1, $p$= .0595). Thus, there is no significant difference between the portrayals of fathers' and mothers' centrality v. marginality

in these films. Because the confidence level is so close to the required .05, the researcher

believes there may be enough of a hint at significance for this variable to warrant discussion.

**Figure 4. Centrality/Marginality of Parents Overall**
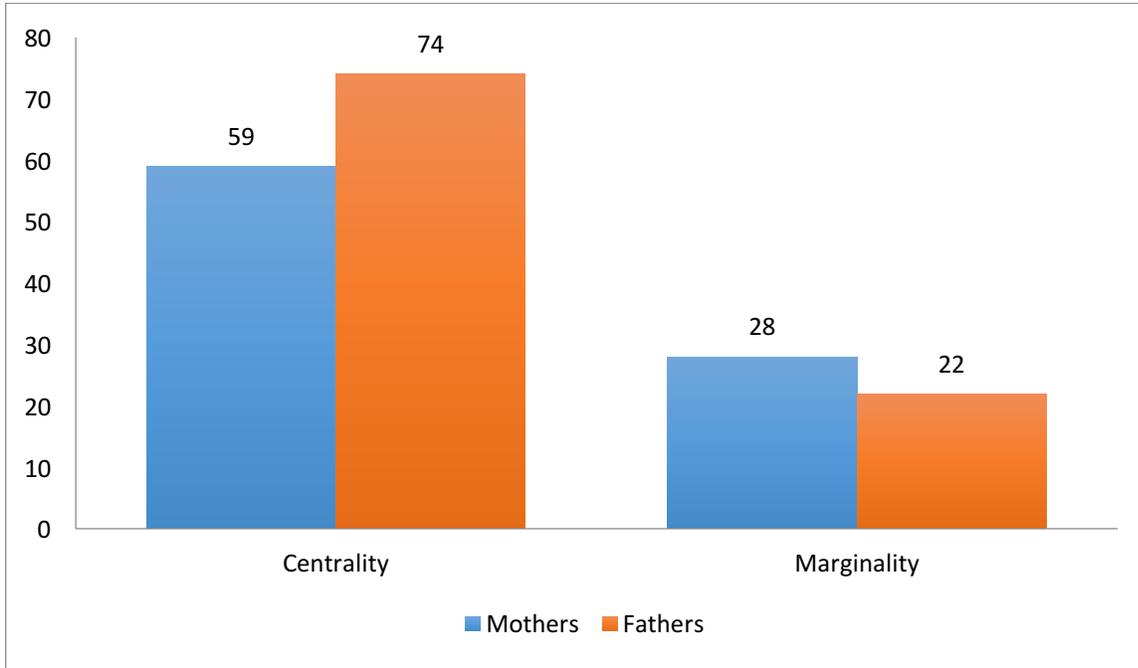


**Table 4: Parental Centrality Portrayals Overall**

|                                      | Central | Marginal | Totals |
| ------------------------------------ | ------- | -------- | ------ |
| Female Caregiver Observed Frequencies | 59      | 28       | 87     |
| Female Caregiver Expected Frequencies | 63.23   | 23.77    | 87     |
| Male Caregiver Observed Frequencies   | 74      | 22       | 96     |
| Male Caregiver Expected Frequencies   | 63.25   | 26.33    | 96     |

**Competency.**  Results from the content analysis of the relative competency of film

parents at their parenting roles (rated on a scale of Competent—Neutral—Incompetent) showed

no significant relationship between the portrayal of the two genders. Competency and

Incompetency were noted in coding if an obvious or overt action or example was portrayed (such

as Littlefoot's mother saving his life [competent] or Gepetto being overpowered and put up for

bounty by his puppet child Pinocchio [incompetent]); a parent was coded Neutral if no such

examples were presented. Data showed that there was enough coverage of parents in the films

for 174 cases to be analyzed, with the following figures for the three scale points: Competent—

50 mothers and 43 fathers; Neutral—25 mothers and 34 fathers; Incompetent—8 mothers and 14

fathers. The data show that fathers were portrayed neutrally more than were mothers, but where

the striking examples appeared in the films, fathers were less likely to be rated competent and

more likely to be rated incompetent. The chi square test showed no significant relationship

between the portrayals of the two genders ($\chi^2$= 2.82, df= 2, *p*= .244).

**Table 5: Parental Competency Portrayals Overall**

|  | Competent | Neutral | Incompetent | Totals |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mothers Observed Frequencies | 50 | 25 | 8 | 83 |
| Mothers Expected Frequencies | 44.36 | 28.14 | 10.5 | 83 |
| Fathers Observed Frequencies | 43 | 34 | 14 | 91 |
| Fathers Expected Frequencies | 48.64 | 30.86 | 11.5 | 91 |

**Maturity.** Results from the content analysis regarding portrayed maturity levels of

parents (coded on a scale of Mature—Neutral—Immature) in films returned significant results.

Parents were coded as mature if they demonstrated notable behavior acceptable to adults (such as

Belle's father in *Beauty and the Beast*, who, though not competent in saving Belle, nevertheless

works to support his family and looks after Belle's safety to the best of his ability); they were

coded as immature if they demonstrated, notably, behavior resembling the maturity level of a

child or teen (such as Donkey in *Shrek 3*, who acts like one of his own children). All other

instances were coded as neutral. Data showed 171 instances in which parents were coded for

these qualities, with the following distribution: Mature—57 mothers, 44 fathers; Neutral—22

mothers, 33 fathers; Immature—4 mothers, 11 fathers. Data show that fathers were more likely than mothers to display nondescript maturity levels, while they were more likely to be coded as immature and less likely to be coded as mature in instances where their behavior stood out. Figure 3 demonstrates this distribution. The chi square test showed that this difference is significant ($\chi^2$= 7.0035, df= 2, *p*= .0301).

**Table 6: Parental Maturity Portrayals Overall**

|  | Mature | Neutral | Immature | Totals |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mothers Observed Frequencies | 57 | 22 | 4 | 83 |
| Mothers Expected Frequencies | 49.02 | 26.7 | 7.28 | 83 |
| Fathers Observed Frequencies | 44 | 33 | 11 | 88 |
| Fathers Expected Frequencies | 51.98 | 28.3 | 7.72 | 88 |

**Figure 5: Maturity Levels of Parents Overall**
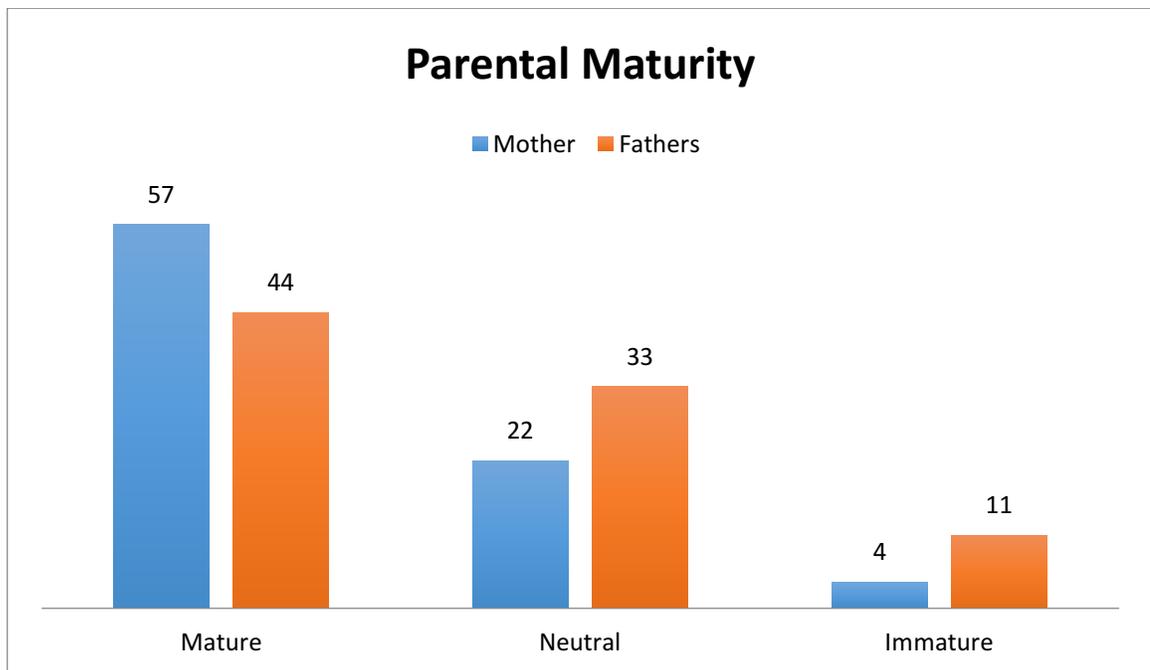
**RQ2A: Parenting types over time.**

*Centrality.* Results from the content analysis for differences in parents'

centrality/marginality over the three decades observed yielded no significant results. The coding

resulted in the following frequencies for portrayal of centrality: 13 mothers played a central role

in the 1980s, 24 in the 1990s and 22 in the 2000s. Regarding fathers, 15 were coded as central

for the 1980s, 32 for the 1990s and 27 for the 2000s. A chi square test showed no significant

differences ($\chi^2$= .1053, df= 2, *p*= .949).

Table 7: Parent Centrality Portrayals Over Time

|                                | 1980s | 1990s | 2004-2014 | Totals |
|--------------------------------|-------|-------|-----------|--------|
| Mothers Observed Frequencies   | 13    | 24    | 22        | 59     |
| Mothers Expected Frequencies   | 12.42 | 24.84 | 21.74     | 59     |
| Fathers Observed Frequencies   | 15    | 32    | 27        | 74     |
| Fathers Expected Frequencies   | 15.58 | 31.16 | 27.28     | 74.02  |

The content analysis for the portrayals of parental marginality in the films over time

returned the following frequencies: 5 mothers were portrayed as having a marginal role in their

children's lives in the 1980s, 10 in the 1990s and 13 in the 2000s. Six fathers were portrayed as

marginal in their children's lives in the 1980s and 1990s each, and 10 fathers were portrayed as

marginal in the 2000s, showing a gradual increase on the part of mothers and a sharper increase

on the part of fathers. A chi square test for parent marginality over the three decades observed

likewise revealed no significant differences ($\chi^2$= .7732, df= 2, *p*= .679)

Table 8: Parental Marginality Portrayals over Time

|                               | 1980s | 1990s | 2004-2014 | Totals |
|-------------------------------|-------|-------|-----------|--------|
| Mothers Observed Frequencies  | 5     | 10    | 13        | 28     |
| Mothers Expected Frequencies  | 6.16  | 8.96  | 12.88     | 28     |
| Fathers Observed Frequencies  | 6     | 6     | 10        | 22     |
| Fathers Expected Frequencies  | 4.84  | 7.04  | 10.12     | 22     |

*Competency*. Results from the content analysis for differences in parents' portrayed competency as parents returned no significant results. The content analysis returned the following frequencies for mother and father portrayals of levels of competency in the three decades observed: Mothers—11 competent in the 1980s, 21 competent in the 1990s and 18 competent in the 2000s; 4 neutral in the 1980s, 11 neutral in the 1990s and 10 neutral in the 2000s; 2 incompetent in the 1980s, 1 incompetent in the 1990s and five incompetent in the 2000s. Fathers—10 competent in the 1980s, 19 incompetent in the 1990s, and 14 competent in the 2000s; 9 neutral in the 1980s, 10 neutral in the 1990s and 15 neutral in the 2000s; 1 incompetent in the 1980s, 8 incompetent in the 1990s and 5 incompetent in the 2000s. Three chi square tests were run, for Competent, Neutral and Incompetent each over the decades, and none showed significant differences. The results from the Incompetent data did not have enough statistical power to assume or test for a significant difference, and thus only the Incompetent and Neutral chi square variables will be included here.

A chi square test for parental competency portrayals over the three decades observed showed no significant results ($\chi^2$= .1226, df= 2, *p*= .941).

|                                | 1980s | 1990s | 2004-2014 | Totals |
| ------------------------------ | ----- | ----- | --------- | ------ |
| Mothers Observed Frequencies   | 11    | 21    | 18        | 50     |
| Mothers Expected Frequencies   | 11.29 | 21.51 | 17.2      | 50     |
| Fathers Observed Frequencies   | 10    | 19    | 14        | 43     |
| Fathers Expected Frequencies   | 9.71  | 18.49 | 14.8      | 43     |

A chi square test for parental competency-neutral portrayals over the three decades observed showed no significant results ($\chi^2 = 1.61$, df= 2, $p= .448$).

|                                | 1980s | 1990s | 2004-2014 | Totals |
| ------------------------------ | ----- | ----- | --------- | ------ |
| Mothers Observed Frequencies   | 4     | 11    | 10        | 25     |
| Mothers Expected Frequencies   | 5.51  | 9.32  | 10.59     | 25     |
| Fathers Observed Frequencies   | 9     | 10    | 15        | 34     |
| Fathers Expected Frequencies   | 7.5   | 12.68 | 14.41     | 34     |

*Maturity*. The content analysis for parental maturity levels over the three decades observed yielded no significant results. Frequencies in maturity-neutrality-immaturity from the coding process include the following: Mothers—10 mature in the 1980s, 26 mature in the 1990s, and 21 mature in the 2000s; 5 neutral in the 1980s, 7 neutral in the 1990s, and 10 neutral in the 2000s; 2 immature in the 1980s, 0 immature in the 1990s, and 2 immature in the 2000s. Fathers—12 mature in the 1980s, 23 mature in the 1990s, 13 mature in the 2000s; 5 neutral in the 1980s, 11 neutral in the 1990s, and 17 neutral in the 2000s; 3 immature in the 1980s, 3 immature in the 1990s, 5 immature in the 2000s. Three chi square tests were run for each of the maturity

variables, with none returning significant results. The Immature data did not have enough statistical power to assume or test for a significant difference, and thus only the Mature and Neutral chi square test variables will be included here.

A chi square test for parental maturity levels over the three decades observed yielded no significant results ($\chi^2$= 1.48, df= 2, *p*= .478).

Table 11: Parental Maturity Portrayals over Time

|  | 1980s | 1990s | 2004-2014 | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mothers Observed Frequencies | 10 | 26 | 21 | 57 |
| Mothers Expected Frequencies | 11.94 | 26.6 | 18.48 | 57 |
| Fathers Observed Frequencies | 12 | 23 | 13 | 48 |
| Fathers Expected Frequencies | 10.06 | 22.4 | 15.54 | 48 |

A chi square test for parental maturity-neutral levels over the three decades observed yielded no significant results ($\chi^2$= .524, df= 2, *p*= .769).

Table 12: Parental Maturity-Neutral Portrayals over Time

|  | 1980s | 1990s | 2004-2014 | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mothers Observed Frequencies | 5 | 7 | 10 | 22 |
| Mothers Expected Frequencies | 4 | 7.2 | 10.8 | 22 |
| Fathers Observed Frequencies | 5 | 11 | 17 | 33 |
| Fathers Expected Frequencies | 6 | 10.8 | 16.2 | 33 |

**RQ3: Parenting Styles Overall**

Results from the content analysis regarding the differences in parenting styles between the two genders returned close but insignificant results. Parents were coded as exhibiting one of four parenting styles: Authoritarian, Authoritative, Permissive and Uninvolved. Data showed 148

instances where parents and guardians were given enough coverage to be identified by a style. Those instances were distributed according to the following numbers: Authoritarian—7 mothers and 11 fathers; Authoritative—42 mothers and 32 fathers; Permissive—18 mothers and 28 fathers; Uninvolved—2 mothers and 8 fathers. While the differences between the two genders seem markedly different, a chi square test showed no significant relationship ($\chi^2$= 7.369, df= 3, p= .061). Again, though this result is above the .05 requirement, it falls closely enough to it that some discussion is merited for further study.

**Table 13: Parental Style Portrayals Overall**

|  | Authoritarian | Authoritative | Permissive | Uninvolved | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mothers Observed Frequencies | 7 | 42 | 18 | 3 | 69 |
| Mothers Expected Frequencies | 8.39 | 34.5 | 21.45 | 4.66 | 69 |
| Fathers Observed Frequencies | 11 | 32 | 28 | 8 | 79 |
| Fathers Expected Frequencies | 9.61 | 29.5 | 24.55 | 5.34 | 79 |

**RQ3A: Parenting styles over time.** Results from the content analysis for differences in parenting styles trending over the three decades observed did not have enough statistical power to assume or test for a significant difference, except in the case of the Authoritative parenting style, which revealed no significant relationship ($\chi^2$= .459, df= 2, p= .795).

Table 14. Authoritative Parent Portrayals over Time

|  | 1980s | 1990s | 2004-2014 | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mothers Observed Frequency | 13 | 16 | 13 | 42 |
| Mothers Expected Frequency | 14.19 | 15.89 | 11.92 | 42 |
| Fathers Observed Frequency | 12 | 12 | 8 | 32 |
| Fathers Expected Frequency | 10.81 | 12.11 | 9.08 | 32 |

Table 14. Authoritative Parent Portrayals over Time

**Discussion**

This research sought to identify the prevailing portrayals of parents, particularly fathers, in major family films. Scholars have long used Cultivation analysis to analyze the influence of television on viewers' world perceptions. The results of television studies imply that mothers hold the gold standard in media parenting portrayals, and fathers often fall quite short in comparison to this standard. This study set out to see if such was true regarding films, and thus the results and discussion questions centered around this theme of how fathers in film compare to mothers in film.

Certainly the negative trends of father portrayals compared to those of mothers on television do not bode well for children whose views of fathers—or even their own future parenthood prospects—are colored by media portrayals of distant, inept, buffoonish or irresponsible fathers, as well as fathers who are often marginalized by and at odds with the mothers in those stories. As cited earlier, public figures such as George Bush and Dan Quayle have cited the decline of the traditional family structure and support system, both in society and media, as responsible for the decline in moral responsibility in American culture (Douglas & Olson, 1996; Wainryb & Turiel, 1993). President Barack Obama (2013a, b) has not neglected to address the concerns of the failing family structure in society either and has called for a reemergence of involved fathers in society. Citing Albada's (2000) study, Alexandrin stated "'that television family images are capable of influencing viewers' beliefs about what exists, what is normal, what is right, and how they should behave within families' (p. 104). This means that people view what happens on their screens as a reflection of what is 'normal' in society" (p. 151).

Studies have shown that people's moral reasoning, particularly that of children, is

influenced by their exposure to television (Comstock & Strzyzewski, 1990; Krcmar & Vieira, 2005). Film is another powerful medium, as evidenced by the studies cited in this thesis, that affects moral reasoning. Comstock and Strzyzewski (1990) attributed the power of media over moral reasoning to the fact that humans fill in social/moral areas wherein they lack direct experience with the experience they perceive vicariously—notably, as Bandura would argue, in media. Krcmar and Vieria (2005) stated that children include in their "moral schemas" the "differing perspectives of people in their immediate social environment" (p. 268). The same work has not been dedicated to films, but the genre warrants such research. Films can be included as a part of children's immediate social environment, and perhaps they should be. Steve Farella ("Media Quotes"), president of Targetcast TCM, juxtaposed the positive power of family films to the arena of television: "Just take a look at what Disney's The Incredibles did its first weekend. In two days, it grossed $70 million, and yet a family can't find a half-hour of programming in prime time they can watch together."

As the original form of screen entertainment and, for decades, the prevalent source of people's media entertainment consumption, the film genre lends itself to rich research regarding the perceptions of the world they may foster within their viewers. The lengthier format and traditionally more epic production process contribute to a more developed narrative into which an audience can escape from everyday life and, perhaps, identify with the characters and their situations. Cohen (2001) noted the important role *identification* (an effect studied with particular regard to films) plays particularly in the lives of children as a teaching tool—children learn from the characters they emotionally connect to in the films they watch. Wilson (2008) said that even "a single exposure" to a television show could shape a child's perception of a value portrayed.

Research argues that the same could be true with regard to a film, which, traditionally, requires more attention, involves more development, and enables more viewing instances.

While children's media consumption revolves more around YouTube than it has previously, the family film market still draws millions of families to its production every year. The availability of films for purchase and repeated viewing make these films a reckoning force in the development of children who spend the equivalent of an adult work week engaged with some sort of media. And the fact that children in the developing ages are still learning to separate imagination from reality makes media an even more powerful authority for them—equipping them with tools to deal with real life, according to Young (2000).

The results of this study provide encouragement for parents who may be concerned about what their children are learning about families from the media. The findings from this study show that there is a more positive alternative to the television entertainment genre.

The results of this study showed, most importantly, that fathers receive better treatment in family films than they do in television, with relation to the mother gold-standard. This gives more of a support system to young viewers who watch 1) the frequency of present parents in them, 2) the way children in film families are disciplined and treated, and 3) the characteristics of the parents—particularly the fathers—themselves. These portrayals can teach children how to perceive themselves, their own parents, and the general family structure.

Children who view bad examples of uninvolved or cruel parenting in films may be likely to take this perspective with them when the film is over. The same may be true of positive examples they see. Notably, research on father portrayals on television has showed them to be markedly less present in television families, and more incompetent, immature, and even buffoonish when they are present. According to Cultivation Theory, such portrayals teach

viewers, particularly impressionable ones (i.e. children) to expect fathers not to be around very much, not to be providers or protectors of their families, not to be depended on. And when the dads are present, television portrayals have the potential to teach young viewers to expect their fathers to exhibit the same level of maturity and general brain-wave activity as they themselves do. Dad is one of the kids, and Mom can boss him around just like she can the kids. Such portrayals would teach children to expect fathers to be irresponsible, to indulge in playtime as much as they do, rather than to provide when they are away from home and to help out and be an adult when they return from work.

The fact that this study produced data that returned no significant results, except for maturity levels of fathers, suggests that family films offer an attractive media alternative to parents whose young viewers are spending hours being entertained at the screen every day. The fact that the centrality variable for parenting overall in these films returned results so close to significant could also add to this suggestion—fathers are more present than are mothers in family films, and their children may deem them more central to their lives than they do mothers in these films. Fathers in these family films are present and, more often than not, involved with their children.

The data for these films failed to establish that these fathers were significantly less present, less mature, or less competent than were mothers. Parents should take encouragement from this and invest more in a more wholesome virtual parenting environment for their children. Rather than being immersed in television shows and commercials that downplay and downgrade fathers, children have an option for another genre of entertainment that offers more character development and more positive and competent role models as far as fathers go. The healthier portrayals of fathers in family films bode well for children's perceptions of 1) their own fathers

and those of their friends, 2) fathers in the U.S. in general, and 3) the role they themselves (or their spouses) can play in years to come, once they reach that stage of life. Fatherhood is not portrayed as a playground or as an inconvenient option in family films; thus, compared to television, family films may better encourage young viewers to set responsible goals and to see a more realistic portrayal of parenthood.

The results of this study suggest that family films are less sexist than television shows where fathers and mothers are concerned—the gold standard is not so unachievable for fathers in films. Wall and Arnold (2007) noted the discrepancy between the "culture of fatherhood" and the actual conduct of fathers, saying that while cultural representations have fluctuated, the role of fathers in society has not kept up with media portrayals. Their study showed that culturally, a great divide existed between fathers and mothers in print articles, a theme that pervades television too.

This study found that, at least in film, the divide is not so wide. The fact that the results of this study returned almost no significant finding in portrayal differences between fathers and mothers shows that parental roles in family films, overall, may be more traditional and positive than are parental roles in television. If such is true, then children who watch these films may develop more positively by watching the more positive—and less at-odds-with mothers—roles of fathers in these films, generating hopefully better results than Marks and Palkovitz (2004) speculated about in their study on the paternity-free father trend. Some question may exist as to the effectiveness of parenting styles in family films alongside television—fathers in this study were shown to be more authoritarian, less authoritarian, and more permissive and uninvolved than were mothers. The results from the chi square test almost showed significance, leading to the question of whether or not films in fact do show fathers in a better light, compared to

mothers, than television shows do. However, the fact that there were simply more fathers in the

population may have something to do with it—fewer mothers messed up because fewer mothers

were present and playing a central role in their children's lives than were fathers.

The very nature of the film genre provides for a heightened character arc of major

characters per film. In this study the researchers coded parents by their overall performance and

portrayal in the films—thus the fathers in *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* were coded as immature and

uninvolved, for example, because those were the prevailing behaviors they exhibited in the

majority of the film; thus, the results for the Parenting Styles variable returned a number almost

significant in the portrayals between the two genders. However, due to the story character arc,

both these fathers learned positive lessons during the course of the film and emerged as more

positive role models for and friends to their children by the end. Though the ending-scene

portrayals weren't coded, they nevertheless bring to bear some influence when arguing for the

importance of films as positive teaching tools. Those fathers who played only minor roles in the

films (for instance, Sid's father in *Toy Story,* whom we only see in one scene) often were the

only fathers who, if coded as having negative traits, kept those traits throughout the movies.

Those father characters who had a central role in the films, if they started out with negative traits,

had undergone the character arc and emerged as positive and involved fathers by the end of the

film.

The character arc associated with film may have a softening effect for those variables in

which fathers were seen to be significantly worse than mothers (such as Parental Maturity and

Parenting Style). Children are more likely to watch a film straight through and to see fathers

make these character-arc changes and, thus, to still receive a positive message about fathers from

the films. In television, this is not usually the case. Though television dads may experience little

character arcs per episode, and greater character arcs through the duration of a series, the chances of children watching every episode of a TV series in chronological order is slim—thus, children will usually not see any positive character arc that occurs with a television father character. This is yet another reason why, though fathers may still receive some more negative treatment as compared to mothers, films offer a more redemptive and positive portrayal of fathers to impressionable audiences who are learning messages about parental structure and importance from the media.

The fact that this study showed hardly any significant differences between portrayals of fathers versus mothers, and bad parenting versus good parenting types, by gender, seems to assure that children are not encountering the gender stereotyping of lame dads and sergeant mothers to the same level that research shows they may be exposed to on television. Fathers in family films are not significantly more likely to be portrayed as less present, less central, less mature, less competent, or less likely to practice unhealthy disciplinary styles than are the mothers portrayed in the same material. The numbers are close for some of these variables, as has been noted, and perhaps with a larger population the results would be more significant in the parenting styles variables. However, overall the results lean toward the finding that fathers are not treated as negatively compared to mothers in films as they are in television. Real-life parents can take encouragement from this finding—family films offer more positive portrayals of gender roles in families, showing more realistic and harmonious relationships than do the television shows historically fraught with familial friction.

These results are encouraging, as they indicate that children are not being treated to the more stark and outlandish mother-versus-father power wars portrayed on television. Not many studies have been attempted regarding family films. Tanner et al. (2003) examined the family

structures and corresponding roles of parents in Disney films, which generally fall under the "family film" genre. Their study showed that mothers were more marginalized in the Disney films. Wynn and Rosenfeld's (2003) study of father roles in Disney films found that father portrayals sent messages about the inability of fathers to understand their children and the lack of need for children to obey their parents. This study found more positive results. While mothers and father portrayals did fluctuate in terms of presence, centrality, competency, maturity, and discipline and involvement styles, these fluctuations were not notably or significantly different except in the case of Parental Maturity. Thus, this study shows that one gender of parent is not likely in the films studied to be significantly marginalized in favor of the other gender. The Authoritative parenting style was the most frequently coded style for both parents, lending assurance that children are, overall, viewing positive parenting examples in their favorite films.

Of course there were exceptions, and such is true in society too. But in family films fathers were even more likely to be present than mothers, and though the results did not yield significance, the trend itself may do something to put Marks and Palkovitz's (2004) fear about the effects of the paternity-free male roles in media to rest as far as the film genre goes. Fathers were more likely to be portrayed as incompetent and immature than were mothers in these films, and they were more often portrayed in less positive parenting styles than the Authoritative style, but again, the fact that the tests between fathers and mothers, overall and over time, yielded no negative-portrayal results, except in the case of Parental Maturity over Time and perhaps in the Parenting Styles, shows that the differences or portrayals are not striking. Strong father figures emerge in family films, by the very nature of the film genre: lengthier stories provide—even require—more character development, providing possibilities for fathers who start out as negative parents to "find themselves" by the end of the film. The theme of parental redemption,

for instance in *Hook* and *Tarzan,* also has something positive to teach children viewers: fathers are not perfect; but they can change. And films such as this celebrate a positive parenting type and style. Fathers are not forever and hopelessly pitted against mothers in these films. They exert a positive portrayal of their own, with more potential for redemption from their mistakes than is found in television because the format of films lends to such a possibility.

Where the test for Parental Maturity and Parenting Styles shows that some of the same negative trends show up in films (vs. fathers and mothers) as show up in television, the fact that this was the only test that had significant results shows that the extent of these trends in film is still less prevalent than in television. Fathers may exert a more important and positive role in film—and thus, perhaps, in society, through audience perceptions—than they do in television. Film may still exert an independence from television trends, particularly where the family is concerned.

The results of this study also showed no significant differences in parent portrayals over the decades. Studies have shown that, from television episodes and commercials, audiences see families in which fathers have taken on either an increasingly marginal role or an increasingly maternal role, and mothers are emerging as the authority figures, and where fathers are more likely to be seen as immature and incompetent than are mothers. As the decades advance, studies show, family relations and authority became more frictional and less traditionally distributed in television shows. Mothers and children began to rule the roost, and family members on television, particularly parents, became increasingly at odds with each other. In films, too, previous studies have shown a change in gender stereotyping over time (Powers, Rothman, & Rothman, 1993). This study set out to observe not only the most prevalent themes of the gender power balance in film families but also if such portrayals of mothers versus fathers have changed

over time.

While the results show that indeed some change has occurred over the decades, with the roles of mothers and fathers fluctuating in importance, maturity, competency and discipline style, there is no significant difference between portrayals of mothers and fathers over time. Blockbuster family films do not follow the trend of inept fathering and martial mothering prevalent on television shows—change occurs, but it does not do so in a way that is statistically notable. Indeed, in most cases, the '90s marked a peak for each type of behavior, with the most recent decade showing a decline again. In very few cases did coders observe a decline of positive father portrayals over time in a specific variable or a steady incline of negative father portrayals. Where such trends did occur, they occurred in such few instances that the data were inconclusive, or chi square reported no significance to the trend.

Parents should be encouraged by this finding, as well, at the evidence that films portray parent types and styles with more steadiness and longevity than do films. The negative portrayals do not overwhelm the positive portrayals over the decades, as has been shown in television studies. Thus children are more likely to be exposed to conservative, positive fatherhood portrayals in the films they watch today, and those themes are likely to be the same as their own parents found when they watched films as children. The steadiness of parent portrayals over time in films helps aid familial coherence in that sense, as parents and children can enjoy family films over the decades with relatively the same portrayals pervading them. Parents can, too, be better versed in the films their children watch today, since no significant differences have taken place in parent portrayals since they themselves were children. Family films, it would appear, hold steady on the more stable family structures and values with regard to parental roles and depictions, between genders, over time. Again, the format of a full-length film and the character

arc provided have aided those more traditional and positive portrayals between genders, holding them steady over time. Some narrative structures just seem to work over time, it would seem, and narratives that include a strong male figure are popular in films; in family films, these male figures are often fathers, because the films often include children. These fathers exert a strong influence over their children over the decades, often acting in a central role or in a supporting role across from the protagonist children (Ray Kinsella in *Field of Dreams* [1980s], Peter Banning in *Hook* [1990s], and Larry Daley in *Night at the Museum* [2004-2014]). They may be imperfect, but often they learn the same valuable lessons over and over again—about becoming responsible, loving, present fathers, heroes to their children, or at least functional members of their families. Parents can find value in such positive, prevailing themes as their children learn from media portrayals. These films present a genre with more traditional perspectives that hold steady over time. The fact that the portrayals have not significantly changed over time would imply that the portrayals aren't likely to change drastically in the near future. Parents thus have an array of family films to choose from over the decades, whereas a choice between *Leave It to Beaver*, *The Cosby Show*, *Family Matters*, and *Modern Family* yield much different, potentially confusing portrayals for children viewers—to many of whom the screen acts as a prime authority and teacher about social and family values.

The fact that this study found close to no significant findings tells parents something about the movies their children watch—as well as the television shows they watch. According to this study, family films present a healthier alternative to television shows, even "family" television shows, in terms of treatment of fathers in general, treatment of fathers as compared to that of mothers, and treatment of fathers over time. This study can help improve media literacy for parents and encourages them to take steps to become more media literate themselves.

Parental involvement and literacy where their children's media consumption is concerned has been encouraged by notable figures in media and politics. Reclaiming the American Dream, Obama (2013) said, "starts with providing the guidance our children need, turning off the TV, and putting away the video games." Former vice president Al Gore ("Media Quotes") stated that "It is time for parents to reclaim the living room, the neighborhoods, the schools, the lives of our children, and the culture," and that this takes root first in monitoring the media children watch and are influenced by. And child film star Jake Lloyd ("Media Quotes") spoke for children when he said, "That's why we have parents. Otherwise, kids would be saying, 'Oh, *The Matrix*—I'm going to watch that over and over.' It really is up to them to decide what their children go see, because it's up to the adults to decide how their kids will turn out and how they should teach their kids what to do." Parents may not be able to control what media are released, but they can control what media are available to their children.

In order for viewers to become media literate and responsible examples of media consumption, research must be done to discover themes and trends in portrayal of media, as well as potential effects on audiences from media use. Researchers posit that parents can still mediate the messages their children receive. For instance, Buerkel-Rothfuss et al. (1982) suggested that if parents point out positive messages in media, particularly in family media, children will see the family unit in a better light, for positive models will have been reinforced. Likewise, parents' comments about what is not acceptable can influence how children view media messages.

In order to best achieve such results, parents are encouraged to, first, become media literate themselves so they can understand what sorts of messages may be projected to their young, whether positive or negative (Tanner et al., 2003). Subsequently, parents should watch films with their children, "(comment) on show content, and (maintain) control over the amount

of viewing" their children do to whatever extent possible (Buerkel-Rothfuss et al., 1982, p. 200).

The more active a role parents take in their children's media consumption, the more influence

they have on how children consume media, and with what attitudes. Children watch how their

parents respond to media messages. Because parents play such a huge role in children's behavior

modeling (Smith et al., 2010, p. 784), their example can likewise influence children's attitudes

toward certain media genres and themes in turn. Konigsberg (2000) said that, especially in

dealing with disturbing images/messages, parents should help children understand and deal with

them so the children will not be overwhelmed.

Parents need to take an interest in media education, both for themselves and for their

children. They cannot control the kind of media that is produced, and to great extent they can't

control what kind of media their children consume; but they can control how savvy they and

their children are regarding the messages portrayed. Family films offer a positive alternative to

much of television family material, and parents who want to encourage social and familial

responsibility as values in their children can use this to the advantage of their children. Media-

literate parents can choose family films over television shows, for instance, in teaching their

children the importance of positive fathers and mothers; they can, too, choose among the family

films available to them in order to avoid some of the more exceptional cases of negative

parenting portrayals. Media-literate parents can wield a lot of power in the type of screen

material their children learn from. And family films—defined as films children and parents can

enjoy together—offer optimal opportunities for parents to sit down with their children, enjoy

some family time, and teach their children about the positive or negative portrayals they view.

Whereas research shows that in television shows parents may be pointing out significantly more

negative examples of father portrayals than positive ones, family films offer parents an array of

positive father portrayals to use in teaching their children how to 1) look at fatherhood in general, 2) aspire to become/find men who will be good fathers, and/or 3) encourage such values among their friends and with future generations. For the media-literate parent, the family film genre offers positive paternal portrayals they can encourage their children to use as role models in supporting the traditional family structure and the importance of fathers in their own families, their communities and in society at large. This study offers parents who wish to become more media literate a glimpse at the material trends their children may be exposed to in television and in film with regard to parental portrayal, particularly regarding the place of the father in the home.

**Conclusion**

This study set out to ascertain whether family films portrayed parents, particularly

fathers, the same or differently from negative parenting television trends. Specifically, it

involved a content analysis of the top 20 grossing family films from the last three decades. The

results showed no significant difference in how often fathers were portrayed versus mothers.

Likewise, there were no significant results for father parenting types or styles versus those of

mothers, whether to fathers' detriment or benefit, except the test for Parental Maturity Overall. In

this case, the fact that fathers are portrayed as immature more often than are mothers in family

films was significant. Thus, this study showed that the trends portraying fathers more negatively

than mothers on television and in commercials does not bleed into the film genre, specifically

family films.

Several limitations existed with regard to this study. As a preliminary study on the roles

of parents in family films, this study sought to duplicate the television study undertaken by

Callister et al. (2007) on family structure. However, applying a television coding sheet to a film

study turned out to be more complicated than originally anticipated.

Firstly, a television study lends itself to a larger sample size, as the episodes are shorter

and take less time to watch and code. Because films average 90 to 120 minutes, the sample size

of this study was limited to 60 films. This yielded a plethora of results for some variables and

hardly any results for others; thus not all of the tests could be run for all the variables, since there

was simply not enough data to warrant a search for significance.

Secondly, the limited length of each television episode lends less character development

to the characters per episode. Such is not the case in films, as the main characters often undergo a

significant character arc over the course of the film. Thus, defining parental presence, type and

style was more difficult and yielded more unwieldy results. The coders found that, as they

watched the films, original agreements for definitions of such thing as parental presence (number

of times portrayed with the child did not apply in some cases—for instance, in *Tarzan*, where

Tarzan's human parents are shown as involved in his infant life but are then killed, the question

arose whether to code those parents as present or not, because when they were alive they were

present. The definitions behind parental maturity and competency proved elusive as well, as

coders found it hard to accurately assign a uniform standard of these characteristics in cases

where parents, again, showed themselves in a variety of ways as they developed their character

arcs during the films. More thorough preliminary training would perhaps have helped settle some

of these discrepancies. But in general, the definitions that work for a television character may not

lend themselves to a film character. In cases where the parents coded were minor characters and

exhibited no arc, it was easier to code; but discrepancies arose in cases where the parents being

coded were main characters and thus may account for some of the numbers and test results in

this study.

     While the coding sheet used did include coding sections for single parents, nuclear

families, and other family structures, this study did not cover those variables. Some "parents" in

this study were merely caregivers, guardians and relatives but were all coded as "mothers" or

"fathers" because they acted in parental roles. Future study may want to include these variables

and see if parenting types and styles differ significantly based on whether the parents are single

or married, or if they're biological parents versus guardians or other relatives.

     Future studies could also include more films (perhaps the top 30 or 40 films in each

decade), which would yield more results and perhaps more significant findings. Too, future

studies would want to expressly define their variables of interest according to *film* characteristics,

not *television* characteristics. This adaptive study was a preliminary study in this area, and future research will benefit from the difficulties found here during the coding process.

Finally, future research should include a qualitative element—taking this process one step further from mere observation to an attempt at ascertaining whether these trends have any causal effect on audiences. Conducting interviews or focus groups, or even taking surveys involving young audiences, researchers should study not only how filmmakers portray families but how actual audiences perceive these portrayals—whether they notice parental presence, type and style in their films and to what extent, if any, that influences their own perception of their parents (or in parents' cases, their jobs as parents).

Every study comes with its own limitations and lends itself to further and more comprehensive study. This study is no different. But it is encouraging in the fact that it found fathers to be quite present in family films, more so than mothers. While fathers were more likely than mothers to be portrayed negatively, such may be because fathers were more present than were mothers—and the fact that these results for fathers were not significantly different from the results for mothers, except with regard to maturity, lends some assurance that the attitudes children are cultivating from films about parental roles is not as negative as those they may be cultivating from television.

Results from this study would indicate that father portrayals in family film are more positive than television in three categories: 1) portrayals of fathers overall, 2) portrayals of fathers versus mothers, and 3) portrayals of fathers over time. Fathers receive more positive coverage in family films than they do in television series, even and especially in series that deal with family relationships. They make mistakes in family films, as fathers do in real life, but the lengthier, more epic and more traditionally narrative structure of film gives them the chance to

redeem themselves in many instances, and they often end up as loving and positive role models for their film children. They are not significantly more likely to be portrayed negatively than are mothers in these films, and the portrayals have not become notably different over time. The results of this study provide encouragement for parents who want to teach their children the importance of the father role in families and in society as a whole.

The results of this study indicate that parents have a healthier parent-portrayal media alternative to television where their children's media consumption is concerned. Children often learn positive or negative behavior from their parents, and parents who are media literate can choose family films as a positive teaching tool for their children. Children can learn better through these films than perhaps through television how to 1) respect and support their fathers now and 2) become and support such fathers in the future.

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**Appendix A: Coding Sheet**

Title of Film: _____;        Coder: _____

Animated    Nonanimated

***Demographics*** (circle)

**Family** (name:_____)

Structure:
        ___**Nuclear** (both parents and dependent children living at home) (1)
        ___**Extended** (households that are populated by family members other than parents and minor children.  In other words, a group of relatives by blood, marriage, or adoption, living together, especially if three generations are involved.  For instance, could be grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc.) (2)
        ___**Single Parent** (households consisting of one parent only with dependent children) (3)
        ___**Childless** (married couples living in the same home without children) (4)
        ___**Reconstituted** (Families arising from merging of members from previous marriages thru a new marriage) (5)
        ___**Guardian (male)** (families headed by males, females, or couples who are responsible for one or more minor children and who are not the parent or parents of the children) (6)
        ___**Guardian (female)** (7)
        ___**Multiple Portrayals** (8) families in programs that featured more than one primary family as a story vehicle and where those family configurations consisted o more than one family type (i.e., nuclear, extended, and single-parent in same series.
        ___**Empty Nest**(9) (households comprised of married couples whose adult children are involved in the program but do not live in the same home)
        ___**Guardian (couple)** (10)
        ___**Other** (11)

Head of Household:
        ___**Married couple with children** (2)
        ___**Married couple without children** (3)
        ___**Single-father** (4)
        ___**Single-mother** (5)
        ___**Relative** (6)
        ___**Other** (7)
        ___**Nonrelatives** (8)

Parental Depictions:

  Female caregiver:    Mother                    Other: _____

                [Present/Not Present]    [Central/Marginal]  [Competent / Neutral / Incompetent]
                [Mature / Neutral / Immature]   [Authoritarian / Authoritative / Permissive / Uninvolved]

   Male caregiver:    Father                    Other: _____

                [Present/Not Present]    [Central/Marginal]   [Competent / Neutral / Incompetent]
                [Mature / Neutral / Immature]   [Authoritarian / Authoritative / Permissive / Uninvolved]
Comments:

Definitions:

**Competent**: having enough skill or ability to do something suitable to a person's position.  Sufficiency of qualification or capacity to deal adequately with a subject.

**Incompetent**: lacking the skills, qualities, or ability to do something properly.  Not suitable to a person's position.  Insufficient in qualifications or capacity to deal adequately with a subject.

**Neither** competent nor incompetent

**Mature**: Acting or seeming like an adult.  Showing mental, emotional, or physical characteristics that are typical of a fully developed adult person.

**Immature**: Not fully developed.  Lacking the wisdom or emotional development normally associated with adults.

**Neither** mature nor immature

**Central**: of <u>critical</u> importance or influence in the lives of their children.  Parents play a major or principal role.

**Marginal**: very small in scale or importance in lives of children.  Not of central importance or relevance.

**Authoritarian:** Firm enforcer of rules, demanding, uses negative sanctions.  Expects high levels of obedience from a child without the need to explain the rationale behind the rule or punishment.  Child is taught that all parental actions are oriented toward the good of the child, and the child is not autonomous. Authoritarian parents are highly demanding and directive, but not responsive. "They are obedience- and status-oriented, and expect their orders to be obeyed without explanation" (Baumrind, 1991, p. 62). These parents provide well-ordered and structured environments with clearly stated rules. Authoritarians value unquestioning obedience, tend to be very strict and rigid setting rules for behavior, are less warm, and favor punitive measures for controlling behavior. A parent of this style may have the attitude of "what I say goes" or "because I said so."  The parent values obedience as a virtue and favors punitive, forceful measures to curb self-will at points where the child's actions of beliefs conflict with what the parent thinks is right conduct. Parent believes in inculcating such instrumental values such as respect for authority, respect for work, and respect for the preservation of order and traditional structure. Parent does not encourage verbal give and take, believing that the child should accept her word for what is right. Authoritarian parents tend to be low in nurturance and high in parental control compared with other parents. Authoritarian parents also are less likely than others to use more gentle methods of persuasion, such as affection, praise and rewards, with their children. Consequently, authoritarian parents are prone to model the more aggressive modes of conflict resolution and are lax in modeling affectionate, nurturing behaviors in their interactions with their children.  Both authoritarian and authoritative parents place high demands on their children and expect their children to behave appropriately and obey parental rules. Authoritarian parents, however, also expect their children to accept their judgments, values, and goals without questioning. In contrast, authoritative parents are more open to give and take with their children and make greater use of explanations. Thus, although authoritative and authoritarian parents are equally high in behavioral control, authoritative parents tend to be low in psychological control, while authoritarian parents tend to be high.

**Authoritative:** Encourages discussion with child, flexible, encourages individuality in child.  Parent allows the child autonomy within the framework of the parent-child relationship and within reasonable

limits. The child is encouraged to verbalize his/her own ideas and feelings and receives explanations for parental decisions. Authoritative parents, in contrast to both authoritarian and permissive parents, tend to be high in nurturance and moderate in parental control when it comes to dealing with child behavior. Authoritative parents are both demanding and responsive. "They monitor and impart clear standards for their children's conduct. They are assertive, but not intrusive and restrictive. Their disciplinary methods are supportive, rather than punitive. They want their children to be assertive as well as socially responsible, and self-regulated as well as cooperative" (Baumrind, 1991, p. 62). to direct the child's activities but in a rational issue-oriented way. The authoritative parent encourages verbal give and take, and shares with the child the reasoning behind her policy. The parent exerts firm control at points of parent-child divergence, but does not hem the child in with restrictions. The authoritative parent affirms the child's present qualities, but also sets standards for future conduct. Authoritative parent uses reasoning as well as power to achieve her objectives. She or he does not base decisions on group consensus or the individual child's desires; but also does not regard herself as infallible, or divinely inspired.

**Permissive:** Allows child to be annoying, avoids confrontation, largely non-directive. The parent consults with the child about policy decisions and gives explanations for family rules. Parent makes few demands for household responsibility and orderly behavior. Parents of the permissive style are the opposite of uninvolved parents because they are extremely responsive to their children. They do not, however, demand much from their children (Steinberg, 1996). These parents are the types that let their children "walk all over them." The children of permissive parents are the ones in school whose peers say "I wish I had your parents…" Permissive parents are more responsive than they are demanding. They are nontraditional and lenient, do not require mature behavior, allow considerable self-regulation, and avoid confrontation" (Baumrind, 1991, p. 62). Indulgent parents may be further divided into two types: democratic parents, who, though lenient, are more conscientious, engaged, and committed to the child, and nondirective parents. The permissive parent allows the child to regulate his own activities as much as possible, avoids the exercise of control, and does not encourage him to obey externally defined standards. She attempts to use reason but not overt power to accomplish her ends. Permissive parents tend to be moderate-to-high in nurturance, but low in parental control. These parents place relatively few demands on their children and are likely to be inconsistent disciplinarians. They are accepting of the child's impulses, desires, and actions and are less likely than other parents to monitor their children's behavior. Although their children tend to be friendly, sociable youngsters, compared with others their age they lack a knowledge of appropriate behaviors for ordinary social situations and take too little responsibility for their own misbehavior.

**Uninvolved**: Uninvolved parents are low in both responsiveness and demandingness. In extreme cases, this parenting style might encompass both rejecting-neglecting and neglectful parents, although most parents of this type fall within the normal range. Neglectful parenting is when the parent does not take an active role in the child's life, and does not seem to take an interest in the happenings of the child.

**Appendix B: List of Films**

**2004–2014**

1. Shrek 2 (2004)
2. Toy Story 3 (2010)
3. Frozen (2013)
4. Despicable Me 2 (2013)
5. Alice in Wonderland (2010)
6. Shrek the Third (2007)
7. Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince (2009)
8. Up (2009)
9. Chronicles of Narnia: Lion, Witch, Wardrobe (2005)
10. Monsters University (2013)
11. Incredibles (2004)
12. Lego Movie (2014)
13. Despicable Me (2010)
14. Night at the Museum (2006)
15. Harry Potter Prisoner of Azkaban (2004)
16. Cars (2006)
17. Maleficent (2014)
18. Shrek Forever After (2010)
19. Brave (2013)
20. Oz the Great and Powerful (2013)

**1990–1999**

1. The Lion King (1994)
2. Home Alone (1990)
3. Toy Story 2 (1999)
4. Beauty and the Beast (1991)
5. Aladdin (1992)
6. Home Alone 2: Lost in New York (1992)
7. Tarzan (1999)
8. A Bug's life (1998)
9. The Santa Clause (1994)
10. Pocahontas (1995)
11. Stuart Little (1999)
12. Teenage mutant Ninja Turtles (1990)
13. Flintstones (1994)
14. Mulan (1998)
15. Hook (1991)

16. George of the Jungle (1997)
17. Prince of Egypt (1998)
18. Rugrats Movie (1998)
19. Casper (1995)
20. Jumanji (1995)

**1980–1989**

1. The Karate Kid, Part II (1986)
2. Honey, I Shrunk the Kids (1989)
3. Who Framed Roger Rabbit (1988)
4. 3 Men and a Baby (1987)
5. The Little Mermaid (1989)
6. The Karate Kid (1984)
7. Oliver & Company (1988)
8. Uncle Buck (1989)
9. Field of Dreams (1989)
10. Popeye (1980)
11. The Land Before Time (1988)
12. An American Tail (1986)
13. Pee-Wee's Big Adventure (1985)
14. Short Circuit (1986)
15. The Karate Kid, Part III (1989)
16. The Great Mouse Detective (1986)
17. E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial (1982)
18. *batteries not included (1987)
19. The Princess Bride (1987)
20. The Fox and the Hound (1981)