

SUBVERSIVE MASCULINITY IN NICKELODEON SERIES

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Abstract

Nickelodeon series are all ages cartoon favorite series, that not only entertaining but also educating. From these three series, the writer tries to explain about studies of gender and gender representation in children's animated Media. Studies of masculinity are often limited to a discussion of toxic male behaviors, with masculinity relegated to a point of contention instead of a basis of study. Using hegemonic masculinity as a theoretical framework, this study examines the representation of masculinity in three characters in children's animated media Arnold from Hey Arnold, Aang from Avatar: The Last Airbender and Lincoln from The Loud House. Each of these characters subverts hegemonic or toxic masculinity. This study examines how each character does so. This study also analyzes what is seen within the narrative of the series that makes the characters' depictions of masculinity subversive or not.

Key words: hegemonic masculinity, subversive

INTRODUCTION

There are two young boys sit at the top of broken down amusement park ride. These boys can look at the entrance to the ride where their classmates look up at the broken attraction and most of the park, at their place [1], [2]. That is easy for the boys to see the entirety of the unnamed inner-city because of the broken attraction [3], [4]. Just below the ride, they can see a group beginning to form around their classmates. While both boys appear distressed, neither shows overt signs of fear [5], [6], [7]. One of them points out a cherry picker being wheeled toward them with a fireman, who introduces himself as "Lucky", comes up to try and rescue the boys [8], [9], [10]. However the machine breaks down before he can reach them, the stopping man just out of reach of the boys [11], [12]. While the man begins to cry, one boy consoles him through singing while the other finds a rope to bring the man up [13], [14], [15]. The singing boy doubts if they'll be able to keep themselves safe, let alone save the fireman [16], [17]. The boy with the rope appeals to his emotions and assures him that they'll all be ok [18]. They work together to get the fireman off the cherry picker and into the coaster's seat [19].

In another scene, two boys and a girl wait by the shore of a river. One boy is smaller than both of his friends [20], [21]. The smaller one sits near the shore as he fiddles with string in

his hands [22], [23], [24]. The other male struggles with trying to catch a fish without his fishing line, while the girl looks over the water, occasionally looking back at the smaller boy [25], [26]. He jumps up with an exclamation and runs toward the girl [27], [28], [29]. He holds up a hand-made necklace and hands it to the girl [30], [31]. The other boy saunters up to them and chastises him for working on jewelry when they need to plan for a war [32], [33], [34]. The smaller boy shrugs and retorts with a simple, “Why can’t I do both?”

The last seen is about a young boy holds a flyer advertising a V.I.P ticket to a concert in his suburban home [35], [36]. All day long his ten sisters come to him for his advice how to make their parents trust them and lend them some money [37], [38], [39]. He can tell every girl the best advice for what they want [40], [41]. However once he tries to ask their parents to buy the tickets, but the parents do not have any money to buy it [42], [43]. The boy knows that he gave advice to his own detriment but is unwilling to take from his sisters [44], [45]. Instead, he retreats to his room to solemnly deal with his emotions. He can hear music outside his window and sees that his sisters have all come together to make a song about how he is the best brother [46], [47]. He murmurs that his sisters’ performance was better than any other concert that he could have gone to [48], [49].

These three scenes from Nicelodeon series show us different action from the main characters [50], [51]. The 1990s series Hey Arnold is at the first scene. This first series is about the adventures of the titular character and his life as a young boy in an urban, inner-city neighborhood [52]. This Series was made on October 1996 by Craig Bartlett [53], [54]. Arnold is the character who was able to console his friend and get the rope to pull the fireman up [55], [56]. Throughout the series, Arnold appeals to the emotions of his peers while also using intuition to solve their problems [57], [58], [59]. The second scene is from Avatar: The Last Airbender. This series was created by Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko in February of 2005. This series follows the journey of the main character [60], [61], Aang and his group of friends as he simultaneously learns how to be the Avatar and bring an end to the 100 year that was instigated by the Fire Nation [62], [63], [64]. The third scene was from a series called The Loud House. This series was created by Chris Savino in May of 2016 [65], [66]. The main protagonist is Lincoln Loud, a kind hearted, eleven year old boy. The series follows the hijinks that he gets into with his

ten sisters. With the lack of a central antagonist, the adversity that Lincoln faces stems from his interpersonal connection with his family and friends. In the scene, Lincoln is the young boy that gave advice to his sisters even though it was to his detriment.

It is crystal clear show the differ. Every character is brought up in a completely different environment, and the characters' situations vary. However, there is one characteristic that these scenes highlight [67], [68]. The characters show a behavior or action that is subversive to hegemonic masculinity and is a concept that determines what is culturally considered to be masculine [69]. This theory was created by R. W Connell who, along with James W. Messerschmidt, states that "hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice... hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense... it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man," [70]. This understanding of this gender dynamic shows that masculinity and its portrayals have patterns, characteristics and behaviors that would make them gender norms. These include assertiveness, aggression, emotional distance, a position of authority and physical strength. Analice Pillar made note of these archetypes when she states that "... the hegemonic model of man related to force, brutality, rationality..." . In the first scene, Arnold used his intellect while simultaneously appealing to the emotions of those around him. In the second scene, Aang is quite overt in his removal from the typical portrayals of masculinity. He is unabashed in his tendency to feed into a more feminine behavior. In the third scene, as opposed to being forceful to get what he wanted, Lincoln chose to put his sister's needs over his own. He is unwilling to assert himself and is even emotionally expressive with his sisters' attempt to remedy the situation. Each of these characters displays behaviors and attitudes that subvert the gender norms and expectations set by hegemonic masculinity.

This study breaks down the ks down the analysis into three main categories. The first category is a section called "what makes a man." This section entails an analysis of the characters in each series that adheres to hegemonic masculinity. An analysis of these characters is a juxtaposition to Arnold, Aang and Lincoln's subversive representation of masculinity.

This study focuses on the subversive representation of masculinity in *Hey Arnold*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *The Loud House* using the theoretical lens of R. W. Connell's hegemonic masculinity. Framing theory, as understood by Robert Entman and Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory, also aid in examining the representation of subversive masculinity. Frame theory makes it possible to analyze what is being normalized within the narrative of the three shows and how subversive that is within the context of hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic Masculinity

To understand hegemonic masculinity, the writer needs Antonio Gramsci's cultural theory to have deeper understanding about hegemonic masculinity and how normative it is in gender representation. Hegemony is the foundation for societal norms. Gramsci presents two main arguments, each focusing on class. The first one is the difference between the ruling class and the lower class and what it is that makes these separate classes. Regarding the ruling class, Gramsci states that it is "the fundamental historical unity, concretely, results from the organic relations between State or political society and 'civil society'" and as for the lower class, he refers to them as the subaltern class and states that they "are not unified and cannot unite" (p. 34). With this social power imbalance between the two groups, Gramsci notes that it is often the class that has social and political backing that becomes the determinant of dominant ideologies. He describes ideologies as "the science of ideas" (p. 35). Within the context of this study, hegemony examines what representation of gender is upheld, as is the case with Connell's theory.

Connell uses her theory to examine men's pervasive dominance, typically over women and indicates a pattern of behavior that is normative for men who are hegemonically masculine. Connell stated that "hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice... that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" and further states that "hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative." Connell noted that the original application for this concept was "to explore relations to the curriculum and the difficulties in gender-neutral pedagogy." This statement showed that she created hegemonic masculinity to use within feminist theory. It spoke to the norms that was set on both genders, though specifying the more toxic norms set on men in media. Connell further states that "the

concept was also employed in studying media representations of men” (p. 832-833). Given that this study will analyze the representation of males in three different animated media, this concept is most certainly relevant.

Because of its strict binaries, hegemonic masculinity has been criticized however, this too has been addressed by Connell. In her article with James Messerschmidt, they state that “... ambiguity in gender processes may be important to recognize as a mechanism of hegemony” (p.838). These binaries show how this representation of masculinity has persisted..

METHOD

This study analyzed the subversive masculinity in three animated series from Nickelodeon: Hey Arnold, Avatar: The Last Airbender and The Loud House. Analyzing subversive masculinity was a major focus of this study and studied through the framework of masculinity within the narratives of each series. This study used Hall’s “preliminary soak” to analyzed each theory. Hall describes a “process of soaking oneself to define the categories and build a code (based on an intuitive sense of where the main clusters occur)”. This process determined the pattern of norms for the characters’ behaviors and portrayals of subversive masculinity. This study used the understanding of hegemonic masculinity developed through the research in the literature review. Hegemonic masculinity within these three series were studied by analyzing the subversions and adherences to hegemonic masculinity. This entails analyzing what pattern of behavior from the characters was an adherence and how it is framed within the narrative and in juxtaposition to the main male character of their respective show. The next method of study was in the environment. Studying the environment that the characters interact with highlight the intersection between their upbringing and their representation and expectation of gender. The final method of study was to analyze Arnold, Aang and Lincoln through the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. The four specific characteristics studied are assertiveness and aggression, position of authority, emotional dismissiveness and physical strength. This entail analyzing whether the characters’ pattern of behavior was subversive to hegemonic masculinity within the mentioned categories and how said behavior was treated by the other characters and within the narrative.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are several standards for gender that fit into the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which includes male characters that fit these norms. Some such characters are Bob Pataki, Wolfgang, Frankie G, Torvald and Harold, all of which are characters that Arnold encounters. Throughout the series, each of these characters are framed as the more typical hegemonic male, especially in comparison to Arnold. The roles that the other characters play is often a foil to how subversive some of Arnold's actions are within the series. In order to develop a framework for Arnold to be studied against, his other male peers and their representation of masculinity are necessary to study.

Regarding masculine framework, it takes more than a male character simply taking on what would normally be a woman's role to be considered subversive, however. Bob Pataki, Torvald, Harold and Wolfgang are characters that tend to consistently adhere to hegemonic masculinity. When in scenes with Arnold, their behaviors differ from how Arnold would act. This is seen explicitly for Bob in "Helga vs. Big Patty" (Season 3, Episode, 48). In this episode, two of Arnold's classmates; Helga and Big Patty get into an altercation. Through a series of miscommunication and running into the girl while she is at the tail end of an insult, Big Patty believes that Helga is picking a fight with her. In a panic, given the other girl's far more imposing stature, Helga goes to her father for advice. Bob halfheartedly reads from a journal that says that the two should work on communicating how they feel instead of fighting and that listening to one another is also key. Ironically enough, he only gave Helga a moment of attention to focus instead on a fight on his television. While Bob is far removed from the beliefs of the journal, Arnold's advice falls in line with it. His advice is the same as the journal, suggesting that she talk to Big Patty. The difference in their responses is indicative of Arnold's subversive masculinity. In this instance, Arnold appears to be the opposite of Bob, a male that adheres to hegemonic masculinity. As noted earlier, there is also significance in Arnold's other male peers. While the ones mentioned previously adhere to hegemonic masculinity, there are others whose behaviors don't align with hegemonic masculinity. Arnold's other male peers adhere to hegemonic masculinity by showing how normative the behaviors are. This is seen in the way that his male peers will react in certain situations. Throughout the series, there were moments that Gerald, Arnold's best friend, would suggest a means to solve a problem that adhered to the expectations of hegemonic masculinity. Gerald treats this manner of problem solving as

the better solution. In “Girl Trouble” (Season 3, Episode 19), Gerald suggest that Arnold retaliates against Helga’s berating in a way that adheres to hegemonic masculinity. While Gerald is rather like Arnold in his physique and in his behaviors; the behaviors that he suggests tending to adhere to hegemonic masculinity. Connell noted that hegemonic masculinity is pervasive because even the men that couldn’t be categorized as such, still normalize hegemonic masculinity as the standard for men.

The representation of Aang’s masculinity can also be noted. The expectation for what is considered masculine within the world of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is varied given its pre-industrial setting. Given the difference in plot representation, the characters, and by extension their representation of gender norms, are more nuanced and less binary than in *Hey Arnold*. There is a plethora of male characters that fit the expectation of hegemonic masculinity. One stark example is seen in the main antagonist, Firelord Ozai; the leader of the Fire Nation. This man has characteristics that seem as if they were based directly from Connell’s definition of hegemonic masculinity. Ozai is quite clearly in a position of power given that he is the leader of a nation that actively seeks to control all the other nations. He is aggressive, immensely powerful and a stark contrast from the representation of Aang’s subversive masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity and an adherence to gender norms is even seen in Aang’s close friend, Sokka. Throughout the series, there are scenes where Sokka pokes fun at his younger sister, Katara, about her expected role as a woman. In “The Warriors of Kiyoshi” (Season 1, Episode 4), the siblings and Aang are traveling. Aang tries to get Katara’s attention, but she is sewing a hole in Sokka’s pants closed. Sokka says “Stop bugging her, air head. You need to give girls space while they’re sewing,” (Season 1, Episode 4). When Katara shows irritation at the statement, Sokka continues by saying “... girls are better at fixing pants than guys and guys are better at hunting and fighting and stuff like that” (Season 1, Episode 4). This is indicative of how Sokka views masculinity and femininity, which again, clashes with Aang’s beliefs.

The Loud House has a more fluid representation of masculinity. *Hey Arnold* and *Avatar: The Last Airbender* still have male characters that strictly fit into the strict binary of hegemonic masculinity, as can be seen in Bob Pataki and Firelord Ozai. But in *The Loud House* there aren’t men whose pattern of behavior consistently adheres to hegemonic masculinity. Gender dynamics are more fluid given the overwhelming presence of women.

In Lincoln's home, he is one of only two male characters in a house of thirteen total. The fluidity of gender representation is that a lot of the examples of behaviors that adhere to hegemonic masculinity come from the women in the show. Two of the main examples are from Lincoln's sisters; Lynn and Lana Loud. Lynn is one of his older sisters, the athlete of the family. Lynn is consistently shown to be physically stronger than Lincoln and to be more assertive, as is seen in "The Loudest Yard" (Season 1, Episode 34) where Lynn is better at football. Lana is one of his younger sisters, a twin who is the tomboy of the two. A running joke in the series is how different Lana is from Lola, her twin. Lola is a pageant queen while Lana spends her time playing in the dirt. When Lana must take Lola's place in a pageant in "Toads and Tiaras" (Season 1, Episode 24), it's Lincoln that must teach her what to do. There is an intersection in the fact that patterns of behavior that adhere to hegemonic masculinity are seen in women and that Lincoln's representation of masculinity is subversive.

CONCLUSION

Aang's framework was a little different, given that the framework for gender in the series was more nuanced. While within the frame of the series, Aang's representation of masculinity was likely subversive. Avatar: The Last Airbender had more violence that was prevalent within the narrative. As such, while Aang was relatively non-violent within the narrative of the series, he could be considered more violent than Arnold or Lincoln. Within the series, Aang's framework of masculinity was often challenged. This came to a head in the finale of the series, where Aang was frequently pressured to set aside his beliefs and solve their problem in a way that adhered to hegemonic masculinity. However, by the end of the series, Aang's option was framed as the correct one. Like Arnold, there were times that Aang's pattern of behavior broke from his norms to adhere to hegemonic masculinity. Lincoln's representation of masculinity was subversive and was a bit more nuanced, given the fact that most of his gender representation comes from his sisters. Lincoln's subversions were framed against his sisters who would adhere to hegemonic masculinity. However, unlike Arnold and Aang, he would overtly make note of his departure from hegemonic masculinity. He was aware of his own subversions within the narrative. The environments the characters were raised in and interacted with was indicative of what behaviors were normalized. This was most prominently seen with Avatar: The Last Airbender. There is a clear difference in the cultures of the four nations. This leads to a

difference in the representation and expectations of gender and gender norms. The Air Nation, where Aang is from, is fluid in its gender representation. Thus, it is a significant influence on why Aang's representation of masculinity is subversive. The Air Nomads raised Aang in a culture of pacifism. Although he is still taught how to fight, seeing that air bending is a martial art form, he method of fighting focuses on evasion causing little to no damage to those around him. Because of the environment that Aang was raised in within the narrative of the show, Aang is far less aggressive. The subversive nature of Aang's upbringing is also notable in that the expectation of masculinity in the other nations adhere more to hegemonic masculinity. Both the southern and northern Water Tribe have cultural norms that normalize men adhering to hegemonic masculinity. The men of the Water Tribe are expected to fight in the war and they also hold power over women because it is the man who chooses his wife. While the cultures of the Earth Kingdom and Fire Nation are far too expansive to solidify the gender representation, both of their elements are indicative of a style of fighting that adheres to hegemonic masculinity, especially in relation to how Aang handles said elements.

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