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Gender Performativity and Postfeminist Parenting in Children's Television Shows

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Abstract

In North American society, children learn about gender through language acquisition and interaction with their environment. Since most media consumed by children is screen-based, it has become an influential force in contributing to children's knowledge of gender. Using gender performativity (Butler, 1999) and postfeminist perspectives (Gill, 2017; Riley, et al., 2017), this study investigates how gender is presented through on-screen parenting in children's television shows. We conducted a mixed methods analysis of 16 shows aimed at children 0-5 years on broadcast television and streaming services in Canada. Results showed stereotypical gender roles and relations persist in children's shows, with mothers carrying out more nurturing and childrearing responsibilities, and fathers having more on-screen and speaking time and performing more teaching and playing with children compared to mothers. Stealth sexism, un/doing gender over time, and postfeminist masculinities emerged as prominent themes across shows, indicating that gender stereotyping endures but in subtle, postfeminist ways that assume gender equality while presenting gendered conventions in mothering and fathering as natural and desirable. This study provides an important contribution to existing literature on learning gender as it demonstrates how subtle portrayals of sexism in media persist amid assumptions of gender equality within white, middle-class families in North America.

Gender stereotypes are ubiquitous in children's media, including in books, on television and in movies (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005; England, et al., 2011; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). Despite 50 years of sustained feminist critique, these stereotypes continue, reinforcing powerful discourses and reproducing normative binary gender roles/relations in North American society (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005; Rice, 2014). From a poststructuralist vantage on gender, this is harmful to young children, who are learning to make sense of and embody gender through interactions with others and from institutional influences (Davies & Banks, 1992; Rice, 2014). A substantive body of literature now exists that examines stereotypic gender performances in screen-based media such as television and movies (Coyne, et al., 2016; Hentges & Case, 2013; Primo, 2018). However, existing media research focuses on the reproduction of conventional male/masculine and female/feminine roles in child characters' generally, neglecting to explore how these norms might play out in representations of parenting specifically. This is an important distinction because there is a growing interest in understanding parents' gendered practices and how these might impact young children, many of whom may be forming their sense of gender (Katz-Wise, et al., 2010).

Portrayals of normative gender in parents (with male/female and feminine/masculine mapping onto the uptake of mothering and fathering roles/relations) in children's television is important to consider when seeking to understand children's

gender acquisition (Rice, 2014). Judith Butler's feminist poststructuralist view of gender does not see gender as complete, but rather as continually in process—as an ongoing accomplishment that occurs through speech and bodily acts (1999). Importantly, her formulation accords agency to subjects who become recognized as human beings through their embodiment and enactment of a gender that is intelligible to themselves and others. Thus, one way that children acquire subjectivity is through how they draw on and experiment with cultural associations between gender and language practices and body movements (Davies, 2003). Drawing on contemporary gender theory, we designed a study that would examine parents' gender portrayals on children's television shows to provide insight into one possible way that children might acquire gender: through observing and learning about embodying normative gender from these representations.

POSTFEMINISM AND GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AS SENSITISING CONCEPTS

Rosalind Gill describes contemporary westernized media as "postfeminist" in its propagation of a "postfeminist sensibility"—postfeminist because media representations intertwine and ignore incommensurable conflicts between feminist and anti-feminist ideas, and sensibility because gendered representations combine affects with attitudes to present a certain desired way of being that serves neoliberalized political economies (Gill, 2007, 2017; Riley et al., 2017). Gill argues that postfeminist media culture constitutes several themes about femininity/femaleness (Gill, 2007), including the following: femininity is a woman's bodily property, and female-coded bodies are not objectified but are sites of subjectification for women; bodily self-surveillance and self-

discipline are chosen and empowering sources of and routes to women's individuality; makeovers are pleasurable and productive activities since bodywork leads to an improved self and a happier life; and gender equality exists alongside natural sexual difference. Her analysis indicates that gender inequality has transformed by going underground; sexism continues but in more nuanced, less obvious forms, which remain under critique in postfeminist scholarship (Smoliak et al., 2021; Smoliak et al., in press; Sutherland, LaMarre, & Rice, 2017). When considering masculinities, a postfeminist approach clarifies how men, too, are affected by, and respond to, feminist ideas and movements. The postfeminist man has been theorized as a "melting pot" of masculinities; this hybrid is embodied by subjects who attempt to balance feminist demands, for example, to share childrearing responsibilities, with those of patriarchy, such as being the family's main breadwinner (Gruson-Wood, et al., 2021; Rumens, 2017). Hamad (2014) notes that paternal characters proliferate in popular media as a key trope of postfeminist masculinity, making postfeminist fatherhood "the new hegemonic masculinity" (p. 1). Importantly, since contradiction is the root of postfeminist sensibilities, we consider ambiguities and incongruities in performances of femininity and masculinity in media, and specifically, in characters who perform mother and father in children's television shows.

Recent Canadian studies have noted positive trends related to improved gender equality in Canadian households (Statistics Canada, 2017). For example, 30% of fathers took, or intended to take, parental leave in 2015, compared to only 27% of fathers in 2014; and the proportion of fathers providing help and care to their children is

up from 33% in 1986 to 49% in 2015 (Statistics Canada, 2017). However, even with these modest improvements, gender inequalities in parenting within households remain (Sary & Turnip, 2015; Schieman, et al., 2018). For instance, mothers continue to be the primary caregivers for children, and fathers continue to be the primary earners for families (Donnelly et al., 2016). The most recent national studies report that 90% of mothers, and only 12% of fathers, took parental leave in 2017 (Statistics Canada, 2018). It is salient to note that this data was obtained from the Canadian Census, and the proportions of the population for this segment of the Census were not described in detail regarding ethnicity, race, family structure, age, gender expression, or sexuality. The difference between the proportion of mothers compared to fathers taking parental leave is important as it references and contributes to the gendered wage and care gaps that persist, in part, due to mothers changing jobs or renegotiating terms of employment after having children to have more flexibility in caring for their family (Pelletier, et al., 2019).

Organizational scholars have explored how postfeminist discourses urging working mothers to improve their time management and work-life balance contribute to reproducing gender inequities (Lewis, et al., 2017). These discourses reproduce gender asymmetries by making individual women responsible for self-managing potential time, money, and career losses associated with carework rather than making the collective responsible for ensuring equitable distribution of income, carework, and leisure time (Lewis, et al., 2017; Smoliak, et al., 2021). The rhetoric of free choice that frames conversations about whether to continue in the paid workforce after having a child

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disguises the constrained choices faced by many mothers that uphold systemic inequities in paid work and unpaid care arrangements. Systemic barriers precluding choice include our neoliberalized workforce, which, in reinforcing overwork, sidelines mothers in heterosexual cis-gendered couples from advancing in their careers because they are often the parent primarily responsible for childcare (Kim, et al., 2016). As many researchers have found and those of us who are working mothers know, the COVID pandemic has exposed and exacerbated these inequities (Johnston, et al., 2020).

One obstacle to overcoming these inequities is the entrenchment and wide circulation of gendered stereotypes used to justify them. Stereotypes endure in contemporary children's media, which perpetuate and validate a gendered division of labour (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005). Representations of families on television play a significant part in this process. Butler (1999) argues that gender is not a natural fact, but rather a learned fiction that children take on to meet societal expectations for gender. She differentiates between performance and performativity to gesture toward a non-voluntarist understanding of how children learn gender: gender is not so much a *performance* in the sense that people have control over the gender they assume as it is *performative* in the sense that they learn to take on gender norms as a way of working out their place in a binary gendered order. Post-Butler, scholars have fought to invent new language for non-binary gender; yet in many communities and families, children still learn that they need to acquire a recognizable gender to be understood as human.

CHILDREN'S MEDIA AS GENDER PEDAGOGY

Douglas and Olsen (1996) describe television's portrayal of family life as a vector for young children to learn the "appropriate" gender because television is one of the primary ways that they observe family culture (Douglas & Olson, 1996). Indeed, higher amounts of media viewing is associated with stronger expressions of gendered play (Coyne, et al., 2014), more formulaic views regarding gendered chores (Signorielli & Lears, 1992), and greater awareness of stereotypes about gender hierarchy (Halim, Ruble, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2013). Coyne et al. (2014) found that boys' exposure to superheroes in media was associated with male-coded play, and that active mediation by parents, through verbal expressions of their feelings about the characters' actions, did not negate this finding. Further, a study examining preschool girls' perceptions and enactments of gender tropes from "Disney Princess" media found that their play predominantly focused on four themes: commenting on physical beauty, trying on Disney Princess clothing and accessories, moving in Princess-coded ways (e.g., twirling, ballroom dancing, hand posing), and excluding boys (Golden & Jacoby, 2018). Similarly, Coyne et al. (2016) found that, for girls, engaging with Disney media was associated with feminine-coded activities such as playing house. Children of all genders have play preferences that interrupt and align with gender stereotypes and these studies are limited to adults' perception of children's play based on observations. Therefore, while the studies cited cannot comment on children's play preferences regardless of their media exposure, the findings reflect associations between children's uptake of gender tropes from screen-based media and their gendered play and embodied practices (Ward & Aubrey, 2017).

Studies conducted in the 1970s reveal the overt operations of gender binaries and asymmetries on television, with men appearing more than women, women having fewer lines, being less active and more juvenile than men, and mothers working solely at home and men never participating in housework (Streicher, 1974). These binaries and asymmetries have blurred and become less blunt in the wake of feminist critique, with women characters appearing stronger, less emotional, and showing less helplessness than previously and male characters engaging in more verbal aggression, expressions of excitement, and gossip (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). However, imbalance remains despite moderate moves towards gender parity on children's screen-based media. In a more recent analysis of children's television shows, Hentges and Case (2013) identified that male-coded characters outnumbered female-coded ones at a rate of 1.9:1, and these differences varied depending on whether the sponsoring network targeted boy or girl children. To date, studies of representations of families on children's media have not taken an intersectional approach to examine how gender might interact with family structure, race, class, disability, and sexuality; and our research found that in this genre, families largely remain white, heteronormative, and middle-to-upper class.

Robust evidence exists to support the idea that children's movies also propagate gender norms. For example, in their examination of popular Disney Princess movies from 1937 to 2009, England et al. (2011) concluded that Disney movies incorporated gender normative representations such as princes being physically strong, assertive, and athletic, and princesses being affectionate, helpful, and troublesome. They noted

that female-coded characters became slightly less stereotypical but that male-coded

characters changed less over the study timespan, leading them to conclude that gender

portrayals in this genre are complex and have not evolved linearly. A small body of

literature has challenged this conclusion, arguing male characters have become more

nuanced (Gillam & Wooden, 2008; Primo, 2018). In a postfeminist analysis of

masculinity representations, for example, Macaluso (2018) suggests that *The*

Incredibles, Frozen, and other recent Disney movies offer modes of doing masculinity

beyond the usual tropes of hero/prince, coming-of-age boy, and villain. Here, the new

Disney man experiences vulnerability in his masculinity and its relationship to work,

family, and expectations. In contrast, other researchers analyzing masculinity in *Moana*

and *Frozen* argue that male-coded protagonists hold many "traditional" masculine

features associated with Disney men such as physical strength and extreme

musculature (Streiff & Dundes, 2017a, 2017b). Taken together, these findings suggest

that gender norms endure in children's media, although aligned with a postfeminist

analysis, and some messages endorsing freedom of gender expression exist alongside

older, more rigid ideologies of gender.

Watching Parents 'Do' Gender

Gender tropes likewise persist in portrayals of mothers and fathers in children's

media. Studies have found a prevalence of gender asymmetries and binaries in

representations of fathering and mothering in British and US children's books, with

fathers showing less affection to their children compared to mothers and mothers

engaging more in child-rearing activities compared to fathers (Adams, et al., 2011;

Anderson & Hamilton, 2005). Looking at screen-based media, research investigating gender performativity among parents is limited and mainly focused on mothers in film. For example, Fraustino (2015) has argued that during the Cold War era, Disney's animated films and nature documentaries worked together to reinforce an ideology of mothering under patriarchy to spread/embed the desire for girls to grow up to mother children who would reproduce and defend the nation. Exploring depictions of parents in Pixar films released since 2003, Brydon (2018) argues that despite obvious flaws in the gendering of parents, less stereotypical gender expression is evident in select movies. For example, in the films *Finding Nemo* (2018) and *Incredibles 2* (2018), stereotypically male-coded characters engage in "mothering" duties. In *Finding Nemo,* the father performs many activities coded as mothering after the death of his partner; and *Incredibles 2* offers an example of collaborative parenting where parents share child-rearing responsibilities (Brydon, 2018). These examples highlight both the emergence of proto-feminist representations of parenting and the ongoing need to explore representations of collaborative parenting and of diversity in the performativity of mothering, fathering, and parenting in children's media.

Contributing to the perpetuation of gender tropes in children's media is the limited diversity in family structure presented. Heteronormativity is pervasive in children's media and Martin and Kazyak (2009) describe it as taking two forms in children's movies: heteroromantic love is depicted as powerful, transformative, and magical; and heterosexuality outside of romantic love is shown through renderings of sexy female characters who draw the gaze of male characters (Martin & Kazyak, 2009). These

constructions remain the purview of white, affluent families (Hurley, 2005; Martin &

Kazyak, 2009). The overwhelming dominance of white, affluent, heteronormative

families in children's media emphasize children's limited exposure to gender, parenting,

and what it means to be part of a family.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Studies show that children now consume more screen-based media than

literature, potentially resulting in screen-based media having a more persistent influence

over their notions of gender for themselves and other children and adults, than print

literature (Rideout, 2014; 2017). However, current research exploring gender

performativity in parenting has mainly focused on children's literature, with very few

studies aimed at examining children's screen-based media, especially with respect to

the role of fathers (Brydon, 2018; Fraustino, 2015). Further, no studies have examined

representations of parents' gendered performances in children's television shows. This

is a major gap in the literature as young children spend an average of approximately

one hour per day watching television, compared to only 17 minutes per day viewing a

video (Rideout, 2017). Thus, through combining a quantitative content analysis with a

qualitative reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) of television shows

targeting young children (0-5 years) in Canada, our mixed-methods study examines

how fathers, compared to mothers are represented. Findings from this research provide

us with a fuller understanding of children's screen-based exposure to representations of

gender and parenting in the current media environment.

Based on this research foci and informed by Butler's (1999) gender performativity theory and Gill's (2007, 2017) understanding of contemporary media portrayals of men and women as postfeminist, we developed six hypotheses. Aligning with Butler, we rooted our understanding of gender in performed actions rather than internal attributes, and in so doing, predicted the following of parents on screen:

1) Relative to mothers, fathers would be less physically and verbally nurturing toward children

2) Fathers would be portrayed as hands-off with parenting, while mothers would be shown as taking on more child-rearing activities

3) Fathers would engage in more activity and playing with children than mothers

4) Fathers would do less of the indoor household chores, and more yard work and repair work

5) Fathers would be more involved with disciplining and educating their children, and mothers would provide more direction to children (e.g., instructing their child[ren] to do certain tasks like tidying up their room or washing their hands before a meal, or directing an action such as keeping their voices down) than fathers

6) Relative to mothers, fathers would appear less on screen and have less verbal communication.

In-keeping with Gill's formulation of postfeminist sensibilities as contradictory and blurry, we also conducted a qualitative reflexive thematic analysis to identify and analyze instances of ambiguity and subtlety in parenting characters' gender relations and performances in children's shows.

METHOD

SAMPLE

We based this sample on 16 children's television shows currently available in Canada that target children 0-5 years of age. We excluded shows that had no parents or single parent households so that we could compare roughly equal numbers of depictions of gendered roles and relations among mothers and fathers on screen. In our thorough search of current children's television shows, we found no shows featuring families with queer, trans, or gender non-conforming parents or more than two parents. We included television shows that were available in Canada on broadcast television, free online streaming platforms (such as YouTube or Daily Motion), and Netflix. Although US-based services such as Amazon Prime and Disney Plus have increased in popularity among Canadians in recent years, we chose to analyze Netflix shows as this platform remains the most popular subscription streaming service across Canada; it is forecasted it to grow to 18.4 million users by 2024, and industry experts predict that it will likely remain the predominant streaming service in this country (Briggs, 2020).

From these sources we found 16 television shows that targeted children under the age of five and included two parents: *Arthur, Peppa Pig, Daniel Tiger's*

Neighborhood, Dinosaur Train, Doc McStuffins, Caillou, The Berenstain Bears, Franklin, Ben and Holly's Little Kingdom, Ready Jet Go, Barbie Dreamhouse Adventures, Sofia the First, Martha Speaks, Rolie Polie Oli, Hello Ninja, and *Vampirina*. For our analysis, we focused on the gender performativity of parents of the primary family in each show. The observed children's television shows centred white, cis-gendered, English-speaking, seemingly middle-class families, often living in suburbia. We found a few representations of racialized families, for example, in *Doc McStuffins, Hello Ninja*, and *Martha Speaks*; and for the purposes of this study, we did not attempt to determine race/ethnicity in television shows where characters were cartoon animals.

CODING FOR QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

Douglas and Tang adapted items in our quantitative coding scheme from Adams et al. (2011) and Thompson et al. (1995). After making a list of items used in these studies, we test coded two episodes of each show to adjust and adapt this list for applicability to young children's television and for alignment with Butler's gender performativity theory. Douglas and Tang then independently coded another three episodes of each show and came together to discuss coding discrepancies and make small changes to the coding items. To create the second stage coding items, we observed activity, gesture, and physical presentation and used these markers to identify codes based on previous studies, performativity theory, and our own judgement and observation. Our final coding scheme consisted of 26 items in the following categories: Physical nurturing (hugging, carrying, patting/touching, handholding, kissing), verbal nurturing (consoling, encouraging, singing), childrearing (bathing, bedtime routines,

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dressing, feeding), indoor housework (cleaning, cooking, doing dishes and laundry), and activities (reading, doing arts and crafts, playing). Items such as "reading" were counted if a parent read to their child but not if they read alone. We did not find enough content in the shows selected to create second stage codes for yard work, repair work, disciplining, direction, and teaching; and therefore, these items remained stand-alone. Notably, fathers on screen performed yard work, repair work, and teaching more often than mothers, possibly indicating greater stereotyping and lesser variation and nuance in masculine-coded than feminine-coded parenting activities represented in children's television.

We originally had items that measured parent emotions, but after test coding these, we concluded that parents did not consistently display emotions, which made this coding inconsistent. Using a stopwatch, we measured on-screen presence by calculating the time a mother appeared on screen and time father appeared on screen; and we measured total speaking time for mothers and fathers by measuring the total time that mothers spoke and that fathers spoke during each show. We considered any form of verbal communication to qualify as speaking.

To ensure that we represented potential character development from one season to the next over the show's arc, we coded the first episode of each season, followed by the second episode of each season, followed by the third episode of each season, and so on until we reached two hours of content for each show. We coded only those episodes that were available online in English and that depicted a mother, a father, or a

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parent. If an episode was either unavailable online or parents were not part of the storyline, we replaced it with the next episode following the order stated above.

To test inter-rater reliability, Douglas and Tang independently coded the first episode in each of the 16 shows. This accounted for 12.8% (approximately 4 hours) of the 32 total hours of children's television completed for the final analysis. Interrater reliability was calculated with SPSS (Version 26) using the statistical test Cohen's Kappa. Cohen's Kappa is an inter-rater agreement statistical analysis that calculates the agreement between two coders, while controlling for the agreement that would be expected based on chance alone (Burns, 2014; Ingraham, 1994). We found substantial agreement (Viera & Garrett, 2005) between the two coders, with a kappa value of .893, $p < .001$. Based on previous research, we observed and coded two hours of content for each television show (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995), for a total of 32 hours of children's television. We split the two hours of coding per show between Douglas and Tang, who each coded one hour of the 16 television shows, totalling 16 hours of children's television per coder. In addition, each coder viewed the same one-hour content for every show a minimum of four times to ensure nothing was missed. Although coders viewed different episodes, this even split of one-hour per television show per coder ensured that content from each of the 16 television shows were viewed by both coders thereby reducing bias. This even split, along with the high reliability between coders, allowed for coding consistency among the shows.

QUALITATIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The results of the quantitative content analysis provide important insight into the quantifiable actions made by parents in the children's television shows. However, we identified limitations to our coding scheme which prevented a deeper understanding of the gendered nuances at play in families on screen. Based on this limitation, we developed a qualitative thematic analysis component to our study to bring to light some of the themes that we found could not be captured by quantitative codes or statistical analyses alone. In their content analysis of representations of parents in children's literature, Adams and colleagues make a similar observation, concluding that:

> The placing of parents in relation to each other, their positioning in relation to an overall narrative, associated descriptive terms, and the nuances of relationships between parents… often remain opaque; subsequently a strong case could again be made for qualitative content or narrative analysis to provide a thicker description of gender representations (2011, p. 267).

Filipović (2018) also combined quantitative with qualitative methods in their content analysis of gender in children's literature, arguing that a mixed method approach best captured overt and covert instances of stereotyping and sexism. Both studies offer support for our decision to extend our quantitative analysis by developing a complementary qualitative thematic analysis using critical theory perspectives with an aim to deepen current understandings of parents' gender representations and performativity in children's television.

All co-authors undertook reflexive thematic content analysis using Braun and Clarke (2013) as a guide to coding and analyzing qualitative data from the selected shows. As we coded the shows according to our quantitative scheme, we noted subtle interactions and incidents that appeared to disrupt normative gender performances in mother-father-parent roles/relations, which we could not capture quantitatively. We revisited these scenes and incidents to track their significance to the narrative arcs and storylines of each show, and to attend closely to verbal and non-verbal communications and micro-interactions that were occurring between parenting characters on screen. In doing this, we identified parents' performance of gendered affects and activities, which we coded accordingly. We then organized these initial observations into themes based on thematic analysis at a latent level to allow theory and interpretation rather than merely a description of the data to drive our analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After our initial analysis, we drew from feminist theories of performativity (Butler, 1999) and post-feminism (Gill, 2007, 2017) to understand these data.

RESULTS

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSES

Based on previous research (Adams et al., 2011; Anderson & Hamilton, 2005; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995), we conducted a series of paired sample T-tests to determine whether significant differences exist between the traditional gender displays of mothers and fathers. We conducted statistical analysis using SPSS (Version 26). The means of each category and items within categories, and *t*-test results are presented in

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Table 1. We tested five of our hypotheses based on counting the number of times

mothers and fathers engaged in different activities of parenting. To begin, we

hypothesized that relative to mothers, fathers would demonstrate less physical and

verbal nurturing toward children. *T*-tests did not reveal significant differences between

mothers' and fathers' physical or verbal nurturing; however, a mean comparison

showed that mothers physically nurtured children 96% more than fathers and verbally

nurtured children 58% more than fathers. By examining the individual items within the

physical nurturing and verbal nurturing categories, we found that mothers did

significantly more consoling than fathers, $t(21) = 2.33$, $p = .029$. There were no

significant differences between the remaining items in these categories, however,

means for each item were higher for mothers compared to fathers.

The second hypothesis predicted that fathers would be portrayed as hands-off

with parenting, while mothers would be shown as taking on more child-rearing activities.

This prediction was upheld: results showed that mothers participated in childrearing

significantly more than fathers, $t(24) = 2.13$, $p = .044$. For the activity category, which

included reading, arts and crafts, and play, no significant differences were found

between mothers and fathers; however when examining the item for play, fathers were

shown to play with children significantly more than mothers, $t(21) = -2.21$, $p = .038$,

therefore partially upholding the third hypothesis.

Our next hypothesis was that relative to mothers, fathers would do less

housework and more yard and repair work. *T*-tests did not reveal significant differences

between mothers' and fathers' housework overall; however, mothers did significantly more dishes compared to fathers, $t(22) = 2.24$, $p = .036$. Yard work and repair work did not result in significant differences between mothers and fathers.

Our fifth prediction, that fathers would be more involved with disciplining and educating their children and mothers would provide more direction to their children than fathers, was partially upheld. Mothers were shown doing significantly more directing/managing of the child and family life (e.g., instructing children to get dressed, put their shoes own, keep their voices down) than fathers, $t(30) = 2.44$, $p = .021$, and there were no significant differences between mothers' and fathers' disciplining and teaching.

The final hypothesis predicted that relative to mothers, fathers would appear less on screen and have less verbal communication. This hypothesis was based on our previous hypotheses that mothers will be shown doing more parenting-related activity. This hypothesis was not upheld, and results indicated that fathers appeared on screen more and had more speaking time than mothers, however these results were not significant.

Table 1: *Means and T-test Results Comparing Mothers and Fathers' Parenting Scores*

Parenting Behaviour	Mean Differences (Mothers vs. Fathers)		
	M (*SD*)		*t*-test
	Mothers	Fathers	Comparing Mothers & Fathers
Physical Nurturing	16.13 (18.2)	8.25 (8.9)	$t(30) = 1.56$, $p = .130$
Hugging	2.75 (3.8)	1.56 (2.5)	$t(30) = 1.05$, $p = .304$
Carrying	2.81 (4.4)	1.69 (1.6)	$t(19) = 0.96$, $p = .351$
Patting	8.56 (9.5)	4.25 (4.8)	$t(30) = 1.62$, $p = .117$
Handholding	1.13 (1.9)	0.63 (0.8)	$t(20) = 0.99$, $p = .335$
Kissing	0.88 (1.7)	0.13 (0.3))	$t(16) = 1.69$, $p = .111$
Verbal Nurturing	10.75 (7.3)	6.81 (4.3)	$t(30) = 1.86$, $p = .073$
Consoling	2.13 (1.7)	1.00 (0.8)	$t(21) = 2.33$, $p = .029^*$
Encouraging	6.38 (3.9)	4.63 (3.2)	$t(30) = 1.40$, $p = .173$
Singing	2.25 (5.1)	1.19 (2.6)	$t(30) = 0.75$, $p = .462$
Child Rearing	3.38 (2.9)	1.56 (1.7)	$t(24) = 2.13$, $p = .044^*$
Bath	0.25 (0.4)	0.19 (0.4)	$t(30) = 0.42$, $p = .681$
Bedtime Routine	0.75 (1.0)	0.50 (1.0)	$t(30) = 0.72$, $p = .478$
Dressing	0.5 (0.9)	0.13 (0.3)	$t(19) = 1.57$, $p = .133$
Feeding	1.88 (2.2)	0.75 (0.9)	$t(30) = 1.87$, $p = .071$
Housework	2.69 (3.0)	1.50 (1.9)	$t(30) = 1.34$, $p = .189$
Cleaning	0.5 (1.3)	0.19 (0.4)	$t(30) = 0.94$, $p = .354$
Dishes	0.38 (0.5)	0.1 (0.3)	$t(22) = 2.24$, $p = .036^*$
Cooking	1.44 (1.6)	1.25 (1.6)	$t(30) = 0.33$, $p = .746$
Laundry	0.38 (0.9)	0.00 (0.0)	$t(15) = 1.70$, $p = .111$
Yard work	0.88 (1.4)	1.00 (1.2)	$t(30) = -0.28$, $p = .781$
Repair work	0.44 (0.6)	0.88 (1.5)	$t(30) = -1.10$, $p = .278$
Disciplining	0.38 (0.8)	0.19 (0.5)	$t(30) = 0.77$, $p = .447$
Direction	10.13 (6.6)	5.06 (5.0)	$t(30) = 2.44$, $p = .021^*$
Teaching	2.31 (3.5)	3.25 (5.0)	$t(30) = -0.61$, $p = .544$
Activity (Total)	4.13 (5.5)	5.38 (4.8)	$t(30) = -0.7$, $p = .497$
Reading	0.19 (0.4)	0.06 (0.3)	$t(25) = 1.05$, $p = .302$
Arts & Crafts	0.19 (0.4)	0.13 (0.3)	$t(30) = 0.47$, $p = .640$
Play	1.50 (1.9)	4.00 (4.1)	$t(21) = -2.21$, $p = .038^*$
Screen time	14.35 (9.8)	14.85 (8.7)	$t(30) = -0.15$, $p = .897$
Speaking Time	4.80 (3.5)	5.39 (2.7)	$t(30) = -0.53$, $p = .598$

Note. $^*p < .05$.

We identified subtle gendered relational patterns in our qualitative analysis of narrative arcs and storylines (context/environment in which the action was occurring, what mothers and fathered were doing, how they were responding to each other's actions, etc.), verbal and non-verbal communications, and micro-interactions (e.g., facial expressions such as looks, expressions of affect such as showing surprise or laughing) between mothers and fathers. Qualitative thematic analysis of these instances enabled us better account for the contradictions that we quantitively found in parents' gender expressions on-screen. After discussing the relational patterns that we observed and putting these instances into conversation with performativity and post-feminist theory, the following three themes surfaced: *stealth sexism, un/doing gender over time*, and *postfeminist masculinities*. We summarize and describe these themes along with examples from television shows in Table 2. While these themes could not be captured in our quantitative coding scheme, they emerged as significant in our theorizing of parents' incongruent and ambiguous performances of gender, thus thickening our understandings of the quantitative findings.

STEALTH SEXISM

Analysis of children's television programs showed that gendered representations of mothering and fathering varied across all 16 television shows. Shows depicted parents' gendered practices of mothering and fathering in more contradictory and nuanced ways that related to postfeminist articulations of sexism, which we call *stealth sexism*. Sutherland et al., explain how stereotypes that "support inequality are retained,

but nuanced, transformed, or qualified, making sexism less detectable and challengeable," and thus "more difficult to counter" (Sutherland, LaMarre, Rice, Hardt, & Le Couteur, 2017, p. 687). We argue that these "softer," more subtle expressions of sexism are important to surface. In many cases, we could not fully capture them using our quantitative coding scheme alone, which suggests that they may discursively and affectively reproduce sexism in family relations in ways that are difficult to identify and hence, difficult to undo. For example, an episode of *Rolie Polie Oli* shows a mother and father saying goodnight to their children, and when one child asks for a bedtime story, the father looks to the mother for approval or permission before reading the story to their child. This approval request could be an example of a father negotiating the conflicting demands of postfeminist fatherhood—to become more involved in caregiving whilst still being perceived as a masculine man who is not a childrearing expert. A father participating in a bedtime routine of reading to his child exemplifies the feminist man and involved father even as his request for approval keeps hold of the notion that mothers still have primary responsibility for the routine, as per tradition. Another example of stealth stereotyping is found in an episode of *Berenstain Bears* where Sister Bear returns home from school upset. Father and Brother Bear plan to go fishing but Father expresses to Mother his willingness stay home and help identify why Sister Bear is upset. Citing that "it's good to let us girls talk sometimes," Mother Bear kindly declines his offer. This statement stealthy implies that mothers are more suited than fathers to helping their daughters with their greater emotionality, thus reinforcing the stereotype that mothers nurture, and fathers engage in fun activities with children.

Our quantitative analysis did not have sufficient power to test for mean differences between older and more recently produced episodes; however, based on the original release dates of each television show analyzed, we could make several observations. We noticed a trend toward less normative representations of the work of mothering over time; however, we did not notice a similar trend toward less stereotypical representations of fathering over time. Thus, normative gender was both done and undone over the timespan of the shows analyzed. Specifically, we noticed a trend toward mothers working outside the home in the more recently released shows (approximately 2010 to 2020) compared to the shows with earlier production dates (approximately 1996 to 2009); the opposite trend was not as clear for fathers. Representations of fatherhood remained consistent with fewer differences in depictions of the extent of father involvement over time. One characteristic example is the trope of fathers being the "butt" of jokes. For example, an episode of *Rolie Polie Oli* featured a mother asking a father to mind their two children and to keep the house clean as she goes bowling. They make a mess but when the mother returns, she is surprised to find that they have cleaned up after themselves—as though this was an unexpected, non-normative occurrence. In another example from the children's show *The Berenstain Bears,* Father Bear gets lost in the mall during a family shopping trip. Mother Bear navigates the mall with expert precision and is unsurprised to find out that Father Bear got lost. The show concludes with Mother Bear finding Father Bear in the childcare centre for lost children, sucking on a lolly pop. A final example from *Dinosaur Train*

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depicts a father and his father friend leaving for the day to collect food as mothers stay home to mind the children. The mothers remain unsurprised when they find out that the fathers got lost.

POSTFEMINIST MASCULINITIES

Several studies tracking depictions of masculinities in Disney films have noted a trend toward characters who enact postfeminist masculinity. Gillam and Wooden (2008) describe this trend as "one characterized by emotional wellness, sensitivity to family, and a conscious rejection of the most alpha male values" (p. 8). Yet *postfeminist masculinities* and femininities, as amalgams of contradictory ideas about gender, are often more indirect and less coherent than this view suggests. Postfeminist sensibilities simultaneously encourage men to integrate progressive feminist ideas such as sharing and incorporating parenting responsibilities into their daily activities and at the same time, to hold onto traditional, even reactionary, values such as being/becoming primary breadwinners and authoritative heads in households (Gruson-Wood et al., 2021; Rumens, 2017; Smoliak, et al., 2021). We noted this trend running across the television shows by observing how often fathers remain the working parent in the family, while at the same time engaging in parenting responsibilities and integrating themselves into family life. To illustrate this idea, we observed that while we found few significant differences between mothers and fathers in many of the parenting practices we coded for, in several of the shows (e.g., *Franklin*, *Berenstein Bears*, *Caillou*, and *Rolie Olie Polie*) fathers remained the primary (paid) working parent.

Table 2: *Summary of qualitative themes, description of themes, and examples*

Theme	Description	Example
Stealth sexism	Nuanced representations that gender parenting practices in ways related to postfeminist ideas about femininity and masculinity that reproduce sexism.	Parents in *Ben and Holly's Little Kingdom* performing traditional aristocratic gender roles in that the father leads the kingdom, and the mother often remains a silent figure standing behind him. In *Sophia the First*, the mother and father gift their daughter a unicorn and their son a bicycle.
Un/doing gender over time	How representations of mothering and fathering have changed and/or persisted over the period in which the television shows studied were produced and released (1996 to 2020).	The trend toward less normative representations of the work of mothering over time. For example, in older television shows such as *Rolie Polie Olie, Franklin,* and the *Berenstein Bears*, it was more common for mothers to be stay-at-home parents than to work outside the home. In more recent shows such as *Doc McStuffins, Barbie Dreamhouse Adventures*, and *Martha Speaks* it is just as common for mothers to work outside the home as it is for mothers to be stay-at-home parents. In both cases, fathers were more likely to be the parent engaged in paid work.
Postfeminist masculinities	The simultaneous encouragement of men to integrate progressive feminist ideas and to hold onto traditional masculinist values.	The father in the television show *Franklin* participates actively in parenting (feminist idea), while at the same time remains the primary working parent (traditional value). In *Peppa Pig*, the father announces that he is going to save their grandparents' lost parrot from a tree, thereby coming to the rescue and solving the family's problem. Peppa pig tells him "don't fall out of the tree like you always do!" The brother pig successfully lures the parrot out of the tree with birdseed, as the father pig promptly falls out of the tree as expected.

DISCUSSION

In the present study, we examined young children's television shows currently available in Canada to determine representations of mothers' and fathers' gender performances in children's television media. Release dates for the episodes analyzed were between the years 1996 to 2020. Overall, our results show that conventional gendered parenting roles/relations persist in children's television shows. Findings from this study are consistent with previous research that examined gender stereotypes in children's literature and Disney films (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005; Coyne et al., 2016; England et al., 2011; Hentges & Case, 2013; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995); and our study provides further insight into the nuances of how postfeminist discourses have reshaped adult gender portrayals available to children in television media specifically. In our quantitative analysis of parents' roles/relations, we found that mothers were more physically and verbally nurturing, more consoling, and more involved in childrearing activities compared to fathers. Fathers had more speaking and screen time, and engaged more in teaching, repair work, and general activities with children compared to mothers. In our qualitative thematic analysis, we theorized the nuances and complexities of gender performances and gender power dynamics amongst parents in the shows, and by putting moments of complexity/uncertainty into conversation with gender theory, identified three reflexive themes: *stealth sexism, un/doing gender over time*, and *postfeminist masculinities*.

Quantitatively, we uncovered several notable differences between mothers' and fathers' gender performances in the shows. Results showed that mothers engaged in

more physically and verbally nurturing practices with children compared to fathers; and this highlights how binaries in parenting activities gender-coded as mothering and fathering endure in children's television. The findings are consistent with previous research on children's literature, which found that books portray fathers as being less affectionate toward their children (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005) and as engaging in less physical touching compared to mothers (Adams et al., 2011). Our analysis also showed that fathers did significantly less consoling than mothers. This finding aligned with results from Thompson et al. (1995), who found that children's cartoons tend to represent men as being less warm and showing less emotion than their female counterparts. Further, our results showed that fathers displayed significantly less involvement in child-rearing activities, which is consistent with previous research on children's books that demonstrated fathers were depicted as less involved in child-rearing (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005).

Our results support previous research that determined children's media is abundant with portrayals of paternity because fatherhood is an important component of postfeminist masculinity (Hamad, 2014). However, representations of fathers in children's television remain largely stereotypical in the sense that they align with pre-feminist ideas about how one performs fathering. The unexpected finding that fathers had more screen time and speaking time than mothers is important because despite fathers getting extra time on screen, mothers carried out most of the parenting duties, at least the parenting activities that we coded for in this study. Fathers participated in more teaching, repair work, and general activities with children than mothers, which

positioned fathers as knowledge holders, physical problem solvers, and playful parents and mothers as primary physical and emotional labourers, especially in the white affluent heteronormative families depicted in these shows.

Qualitatively, we put post-feminist and gender performativity theory into dialogue with moments or scenes in the shows that we identified as significant in teaching children something about gender but that we could not capture or make sense of through our quantitative code counts alone. Using reflexive thematic analysis, we distilled themes of *stealth sexism, un/doing gender over time*, and *postfeminist masculinities* from these moments, which we now understand as representing (and perhaps attempting to resolve) the complex and contradictory ways that gender operates in and through parenting characters on contemporary children's television. We observed *stealth sexism* operating through parents' subtle interactions and expressions of post-feminist masculinities and femininities. Our quantitative results demonstrate that while many parenting activities we coded for did not yield significant differences between mothers and fathers, the means indicate that on-screen mothers performed mothering in accordance with female/feminine gender norms and fathers performed fatherhood in alignment with male/masculine ones.

These differences indicate that there still exist stereotypical differences in how children's television represents mothers and fathers; however, the lack of significant differences in areas such as housework and nurturing make it appear that there is a trend toward greater equality in representations of parenting roles/relations. This trend

could indicate the influence of postfeminist sensibilities on television in that fathers try to embrace becoming breadwinners and involved dads, and mothers to embrace values of individualism and choice with both demonstrating an apparent contentment with/acceptance of inequities in income, carework, and leisure time that come with mothering under neoliberalism. *Stealth sexism* results in less obvious bifurcation of gender on children's television. Yet these portrayals have consequences, not the least that parents may perceive children's shows as progressively advocating greater gender freedom and hence, not engage in discussion with their children about gender norms and expression.

Our second theme, *un/doing gender over time*, points to a novel trend toward less normative representations of the work of mothering over time, which was incommensurate how the work of fathering developed over time. These findings echo results from England et al. (2011) who found that gender performances in Disney movies between 1937 and 2009 changed more for women/girls over time than men/boys, with the range of gender performances available to girls/women expanding more over time than the range available to boys/men. This might indicate that whilst gender boundaries, aided and abetted by neoliberalism and postfeminism, have stretched in representations of mothers and fathers in children's media over the past twenty years, the gender binary remains firmly in place in the family, a critical site in the reproduction of the heteronormative gender order.

Postfeminist masculinities, the final analytic theme identified throughout the television shows, we considered to encompass representations of fathers who navigated between performing as a conventional breadwinning father-knows-best character and that of an enlightened, though bumbling, proto-feminist dad. Gill (2014) describes how postfeminist masculinity finds expression "in the repeated depiction of men as somewhat hapless, bumbling 'victims' or 'losers' in the 'sex wars,' alongside the presentation of feminism as extreme, old-fashioned and unnecessary/superfluous" (p. 191). This characterisation of fathers is abundantly evident in the sitcom genre (Scharrer, 2001). Similarly, we found that children's television often presented fathers as clumsy or less capable than mothers. We found these examples of *stealth sexism* present throughout the television shows analyzed. Fathers being presented as clumsy and less capable than mothers can contradict the idea of fathers being the knowledge holders and problem solvers of the family. This contradiction supports masculinity and fatherhood being a postfeminist sensibility, since fathers are framed as simultaneously trying to enact both feminist and traditional ideas about fathering.

Rumens (2017) notes the importance of exploring *postfeminist masculinities* in part because media research has surfaced incommensurate constructions of women as able to achieve success in the marketplace and empowerment in the home-space in postfeminist media, whilst paying little attention to how portrayals of men have responded to this shift. Understanding representations of men is important when considering postfeminist enactments of gender because gender is relationally constituted and because the relations that it constitutes often reproduce an uneven

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gendered division/distribution of power, privilege, and care-work (not to mention a regulatory gender binary) that may influence young children, especially those who regularly view television shows. These postfeminist representations of fathers being less involved in nurturing and childrearing and more involved in playing and transmitting knowledge in the present study might reflect the impact of the neo-liberal political economy on white middle-class heterosexual families in the Anglo-West (Gruson-Wood, et al., 2021; Smoliak, et al., 2021; Smoliak et al., in press). Fathers' apparent lack of involvement in nurturing and child-rearing coupled with fathers' greater involvement in teaching/ learning and playing with their children, and more speaking and screen time compared to mothers might represent a postfeminist attempt to strike an uneasy balance between presenting fathers as involved, progressive parents and as the main household earners/authorities whilst leaving space for mothers to do hands-on parenting.

Previous media research has emphasized narratives of men "in crisis" in response to women's empowerment and to the contrary demands of *postfeminist masculinities* (Rumens, 2017). While narratives in children's television do not show fathers in crisis over masculinity or the push to negotiate the conflicting demands of patriarchy and feminism, we did observe a postfeminist sensibility operating in presentations of parenting in children's media. Mothers and fathers reproduced gender binaries and performed gender according to cultural expectations, thus reinforcing children's understandings of socially acceptable gender practices. Further, mothers' access to a wider repertoire of acceptable parenting practices, ranging from child-

rearing and nurturing, and their discursive and affective positioning as vital to the

functioning of the family, in contrast to the narrower repertoire available to fathers,

brings into question how children are perceiving the rightful place and roles of mothers

and fathers in and beyond these shows.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

We recognise several limitations to this study. First, we analyzed only those

television shows available on broadcast television, Netflix, and free online streaming

platforms; therefore, our results do not capture shows created for other streaming

services such as Disney Plus and Amazon Prime. Second, we focused on shows

available in Canada, and although many of these are available internationally, our

results may not be generalizable outside Canada. Third, the television shows we chose

targeted children under five years because this age has been identified as critical time

in children's construction of gender (Halim, Ruble, Tamis-LeMonda, & Shrout, 2013).

However, we acknowledge that the selection of this age range reflects a normative view

of child development that may not be relevant to those children who form a sense of

gender outside its bounds and further, that the results may not be generalizable to

television programs that target older children. Fifth, our inclusion criteria required that

the primary family in each television show be comprised of a mother and a father,

therefore the families analyzed do not represent gender performativity among parents in

other family structures such as queer, trans, poly, or single parent households (though

as we noted earlier, we found no queer, trans or poly families in our sample). Relatedly,

the study reflects the one family form that dominates children's television—the

heterosexual, nuclear, white, middle-class family. Due to the lack of representation of diverse families, our analysis of gender is likewise limited. Sixth, we followed the coding scheme strictly, and as a result, subtleties in gender performances and relationalities may have been missed in coding and thus in the statistical analysis component of this study. Finally, while we infer about the possible implications of stereotypical representations of mothers and fathers in children's television programing, we do not consider how children themselves might interpret these portrayals.

Future research examining gender performativity and stereotypes in children's media should consider examining a wider range of children's media, rather than focusing on television shows with two parents only. There are now some shows with single parents, grandparents, and other family structures that could provide further insight into how gender is presented to children in television media. Similarly, in the time since we completed the analysis for this study, we have witnessed a substantial increase in the number of children's shows available on other streaming services such as Amazon Prime and Disney Plus. Although Netflix remains the predominant streaming service in Canada, these newer streaming services have become more popular across our country in the last two years; therefore, future analysis of newly released children's shows on multiple subscription streaming services is warranted. Finally, it would be valuable to conduct research on how children interpret the performativity of gender on television shows.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Findings from this study can be of practical use. For example, our findings on the operations of *stealth sexism* can inform practitioners working with families by bringing to the fore how broader structures might shape and delimit gender and power dynamics in families (Gruson-Wood, et al., 2021; Smoliak, et al., 2021). The post-feminism literature highlights the contradictory ways that parenting discourses in popular culture often assume gender equality and ignore or downplay the gendered power imbalances that continue to operate. These imbalances endure in large part because of neoliberal employment structures, especially in the affluent managerial and professional classes, which reward those who can (over) work long hours, usually men, and punish those who require more flexible schedules and steady hours, usually women (Cha & Weeden, 2014).

Our research also highlights the importance of using critical theory as a lens to understand data. While our quantitative results provide insights into certain gender differences and dynamics at work in representations of mothering and fathering in children's shows, we needed post-feminist and gender performativity theoretical lenses to surface certain contradictory instances of these and to understand how and why they persist.

CONCLUSION

This study was the first to look at gender presentations and performances through parenting in young children's television shows and contributes to the limited existing literature on gender representations in children's media. The research provides

a mixed methods analysis of children's television shows available on broadcast television and streaming services and is representative of the media environment in the Canadian context. We found that pre-second wave feminist depictions of gendered parenting continue to dominate children's television shows, with mothers performing more of the nurturing and child-rearing responsibilities despite fathers having more time on screen than mothers and more speaking time than mothers. Further, fathers performed more teaching and playing with children. Representations over time showed more diversity and nods to gender equality in mothers compared to fathers, and these gender presentations did not evolve linearly over time. *Stealth sexism* emerged as a prominent theme throughout, highlighting the nuances and subtleties in how ongoing gender inequalities between women and men in white heterosexual families are being portrayed to young children. The theme of post-feminist masculinity emerged and presented a pattern of fathers trying to strike a balance between traditional and contemporary or liberatory ways of fathering. Portrayals of gender enactments are complex and objective coding schemes are unable to account for the diversity and complexity of minute and subtle intricacies that surface in critical readings of visual media. Future research should consider examining newly released children's shows on multiple subscription streaming services and children's perception of gender and parenting roles/relations from the media they consume.

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