Bending More Than the Elements:
Avatar: The Last Airbender and Gender Socialization
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In media, "strong" characters are usually those idealized for their skills or outward displays of power. As a traditionally heteronormative masculine attribute, this relegates female-identifying groups into the opposite category (submissive, passive, weak.) For children, media consumption contributes significantly to socialization. In order to make positive advancements towards social equality, we must change the way we tell children's stories and create more programming that positively features underrepresented and misrepresented groups. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is an example of a success story in this regard as well as one of successful storytelling in general. In *Avatar*, creators Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko defy and disprove media's extreme, polarized view on gender roles, developing a children's series with a refreshingly positive impact stretching well beyond its target audience. Set in an alternate universe where individuals can "bend" one of the four elements to their will, exempting the Avatar who can manipulate all four, the show features three-dimensional yet realistic characters of both genders that demonstrate a wide variety of behaviors and ideologies, very often against the aforementioned norm. Through character design, overall arcs, and notable behaviors/dialogue, *Avatar* provides viewers with a thematically-mature, well-paced, and culturally rich series that helps significantly to reshape Western constructs regarding gender roles in the media, redefining what it means to be "strong."

On-screen representation communicates the value of the self as much as those around us. Children exposed to media "absent of same-group portrayals" have a higher tendency to develop negative self-concept and self-esteem (Akerman et al 2008, pg. 9). Although the male-to-female ratio for individuals under the age of 18 only differs by 1.7% according to 2010 U.S. Census data,

female representation in media remains severely lacking, with females comprising only 33.1% of roles (Hoffman et al 2008) regardless of positive verses negative character coding. While surprisingly little research has been conducted on the subject despite its enormous and serious impact, patterns in findings across many studies indicate that "television inculcates in children forceful and compelling images about socially approved gender roles that are often stereotyped, biased, or outdated" (Al-Shehab, 2008).

With animated fictional series dominating much of children's programming (Hoffman et al, 2008) it is important to take into account character design in regards to the coding of gender roles. Because animation allows for exaggerated motion and facial expression, emotion can be conveyed more dramatically in both male and female characters, allowing children to identify various emotional displays more clearly. This may influence perceptions of given characters and subsequently of the self when compared to characters a child may identify with regardless of gender, modeling behavior based on how a character emotes in addition to other characters' reactions towards said self-expression (Scharrer, 2013). On the other hand, superhero comics, videogames, and animation frequently sexualize female heroes, who are seen wearing impractical costumes unsuitable for the lives they lead or their disproportionate and unrealistic figures. While not all of these series are aimed at children necessarily, exposure to similar images in other media remains unavoidable, with some children's series perpetuating the problematic pattern that quantifies female worth with sexiness. ATLA's character and costume design starkly opposes this trend, featuring females of different ages in clothing that fits their figures and their lifestyles. Although the majority of the show's female presence manifests as young women, older or more physically mature females are not sexualized by the narrative or the other characters through either their dialogue or actions.

Interestingly, the main protagonist Aang is portrayed as rather gender-neutral, his appearance textually justified by his monkhood upbringing. Small and bald, Aang appears unassuming and potentially androgynous, even slightly infantilized compared to other characters in his age group, despite his wisdom as the Avatar. His clothing flows and breathes in a way that complements his airbending ability and light-hearted nature rather than highlighting his physique. While the character Sokka typically wears a sleeveless gi-inspired outfit, he also wears a bone choker and on occasion full face paint. Both boys are shown comfortably wearing the traditional makeup and wardrobe associated with a recurring faction of all-female fighters, the Kyoshi warriors, whose garments pay homage to one of Aang's former female incarnations. Although his friends Katara, Toph and some of the other female characters at one time or another wear dresses or dress-like clothing, they are most often seen in modest, gender-neutral clothes that allow them to move freely and perform functions typical of their characters. All of these design choices help construct a positive representation regarding body image, fashion, and beauty standards among younger kids.

According to Akerman et al, the process of attaining positive representation in a more general sense occurs in two stages: recognition (quantity and/or frequency of appearances) and respect (the types of roles group members hold – are they stereotyped, favorable, varied, etc.?) (2008, pg. 8). *Avatar: The Last Airbender* succeeds in both these capacities, with a 7:5 female-to-male ratio among primary characters, featuring females with diverse characterization, all of whom act independently of the male characters' goals and serve their own as well as larger thematic purposes.

For instance, Katara single-handedly triumphs against gender discrimination in her society, effectively dismantling a segregated system assigning female waterbenders as healers

and only male waterbenders as soldiers. Yue, a princess of the Northern Water Tribe forced into an arranged marriage, sacrifices her life to save her people, altering her fate from victim to martyr and redefining familial duty in the process. The recurring character Suki, a Kyoshi Warrior, offers a middle ground, stating that she "is a warrior, but a girl too," proving that females do not have to exist only as "girly girls" or "tomboys," and should define themselves however they choose regardless of labels or cultural expectations. As the two main female leads, Toph's character embraces her individuality, while Katara demonstrates continuous self-expression, reinforcing messages promoting self-esteem in young girls throughout the series. Though the show explores a few romantic pairings, the female characters in each all exist separately from their love interests, with individual passions, abilities, and motives for their distinct behaviors.

Oftentimes, otherwise "strong" female characters still demonstrate other traditional feminine traits presumably to counterbalance the challenge they present to gender conventions (Baker & Raney 2007, pg. 37). While Katara maintains some of these characteristics, such as beauty and emotionality, they are not overemphasized, nor does she allow others to selectively value said traits and disregard the rest of her personhood. She owns her anger, her pride, her tears, her outbursts appropriately and often selflessly motivated, and rarely characterized as hysterical or dismissible. Similarly, Toph, usually quite tough and cheeky, has more vulnerable moments as well that do not code said vulnerability as weakness. Her character defines strength in a new way, through the courage it takes to be gentle. The male characters, in particular Aang, are allowed to show emotion without being shamed or punished by either the other characters or the narrative. They are given time to cry, grieve, and admit to and atone for mistakes, to hesitate and to doubt. The take-away here is that ultimately, the cultivation of respect for the characters by the narrative,

the other characters, and by extension the audience, creates a space for young viewers to identify their emotions and choices as valid, that it is perfectly normal to form and express personal opinions and to expect respect for having done so, as opposed to reinforcing the stifling of self-expression in order to conform to the still-current male-dominated, male-favoring oppressive ideologies in American media.

Continuing with this trend, Banet-Weiser argues that many Nickelodeon series can be read as feminist texts, where third wave feminist ideologies translate on screen as "girl power," with examples of older animated series like *As Told by Ginger* providing consistent sources of female empowerment (2004). *Avatar* takes this idea of "girl power" to the next level by presenting females with more varied characterization, rather than focusing on one female lead coded as "strong" or characterized by a few tired tropes. In the world of *Avatar*, many women are fighters, but some are not, and those that do fight employ individual styles that further expand on and fit with their characters. Traits and goals are motivated in a way that is subtle but identifiable to a child audience, rather than being arbitrarily assigned or left ambiguous. The females contribute equally to the narrative as the male characters, helping to create and drive a complex story about friendship, love, and acceptance along with more complicated themes relating to politics, war, and the struggle towards peace.

In a 2007 study on superheroes in animated programming, Baker & Raney state that "children are more likely to identify with heroic characters, in turn increasing the likelihood that they might imitate the characters' behaviors" (pg. 27). While the female heroes in their sample shared more traits with their male counterparts, they postulate that the unexpectedly high number of similarities in portrayals stems from the masculinization of said female characters, suggesting that masculinity is inextricably linked to heroism (pg. 37). The heroes of *Avatar* demonstrate

more of a natural spectrum of feminine and masculine qualities, showing that that heroism is not a males-only attribute, and that heroes and acts of heroism can come in all shapes and sizes.

Due to his upbringing as a monk, where many animated male-coded heroes are eager to fight or show off their powers, Aang preaches nonviolence and morality, more hesitant to take action at the risk of hurting others in any way, including his enemies. He has some difficulty coming to terms with his duty as the Avatar, wanting to end the war and restore balance to the world, but not wanting to cause harm to innocent people. At the end of the series, he must face off against the Fire Lord, but instead of killing him, he defeats him instead by taking away his bending, shocking the world he has just saved, but ultimately earning even greater respect as it allows him to make peace with the whole of the Fire Nation.

Another unconventional case is Toph, a blind but powerful earthbender, who turns her weakness into her greatest weapon, besting some of the greatest earthbenders in the land and providing a unique take on how to fight what can't be seen (real-world examples including various forms of discrimination) and the importance of trusting oneself. Her expertise earns her a spot in the "Gaang" as fans affectionately call it, where she helps Aang master earthbending, quickly becoming an instrumental member of the team. Originally conceived as male, her character retains many stereotypical masculine traits – she is scrappy, abrasive, bossy, loud, and unforgiving. Like Aang, she is small, but her size does not prevent her from kicking some serious butt. She is a fierce friend, at one point inventing a new kind of bending (metalbending) through sheer will in order to save her companions.

Similarly Katara is more than just "strong," or a mother-figure, love interest, teacher or sister. Though she harbors a lot of bitterness at the Fire Nation for killing her mother, she is also compassionate, conscientious, and assertive as much as she is a gifted waterbender and a loyal

friend, vowing that "she will never turn her back on people who need her." She can be very short-tempered and intimidating despite her looks, and demands honesty and respect from and for those around her. While she does off and on conform to the nurturing or healing archetypes, she takes on such roles always by choice, and they never become the sole defining aspect of her character, simply supplementary ones that allow for further growth.

In addition to exemplifying another atypical hero, her brother's character arc presents an interesting take on masculinity and feminism in the male sphere. In season 1, sarcastic, pessimistic, slightly sexist Sokka wants to be a leader and a fighter, putting up somewhat of a macho front that lends itself to moments of comic relief in addition to his loquaciousness and well-timed quips. As a non-bender, he laments that he cannot fight on the same level as his sister, friends, or various enemies, and has trouble coming to terms with his self-worth and place in the group. However, he is shown to be resourceful and creative, and learns to take pride in his analytical abilities, traits frequently associated with femininity, countering the idea that where a woman thinks or emotes, a man takes action or assumes responsibility/control. As the series progresses, he learns to respect women and that being "manly" does not automatically imply superiority. Once he sheds his macho act and embraces himself as the lanky, clever guy that he is, he finds himself able to take charge of situations in ways that not only play to his strengths, but his allies' as well, supporting rather than commandeering their roles. He helps to define strength by demonstrating alternative but equally important forms of competence and contribution that positively reinforce the idea of versatility and mutual respect in decision-making as opposed to harsher methods such as acting angry, aggressive, or dismissive of others' needs or opinions.

In a study conducted by Hensley and Borges, children disapproved more of displays of anger than fear in females compared to males in given story samples, considering "helping" or

"giving" roles more appropriate for females and subsequently approving of a wider range of behaviors for males (2002). Conversely, an article published a decade later posits that:

> …children who have less-stereotyped attitudes may feel more comfortable viewing themselves as gender-atypical than children who endorse gender stereotypes more strongly…and that the viewing the self [as such] may be less stressful or threatening to the sense of self among individuals with egalitarian gender role attitudes than those with more traditional or rigid attitudes (Patterson, 2012).

Comparing the above sources of research suggests that an ideological shift regarding gender roles is indeed occurring, though its extent and prevalence remains as of yet undetermined. However, with increased development of television programs like *Avatar: The Last Airbender* that encourage gender equality by featuring characters that are not merely "strong" but well-written, we may see a positive correlation of said egalitarian attitudes in children becoming more universal, helping to transform the future of American culture.

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