



Poor Unfortunate Souls: Disney, Poverty and Mental Illness

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Introduction

One of the most prominent myths in the late nineteenth century is that anyone could just work hard and become rich. This fantasy of the self-made man was is called the *Horatio Alger* myth and Walt Disney himself thought he was a living example of the concept made flesh.¹⁰ In Horatio Alger Jr stories, the main character were usually a poor, homeless orphan who ascended to fortune based solely on their unique vision, intelligence and relentless industry. The formula of Horatio Alger novels often incorporates a layer of moral superiority in his characters, and readers are constantly reminded of this morality. In this sense the main characters are seen as the virtuous poor who never let their circumstances corrupt their nobility and separates them from the rest of the impoverished and contemptuous dredges of society. This portrayal of the noble poor is a troubling lie that Disney incorporates into his own story telling. While the man thought himself the poster child of the *Horatio Alger* myth, he went on to represent many of his characters in situations where while they portrayed the virtuous poor their hard work was replaced instead with finding a wealthy spouse. From this new recipe Disney moved away from the formulaic story patterns of his predecessors to depict poverty, mental illness and class inequality as being benign and harmless.

The Walt Disney Company has been shaping the way children view the world for close to 95 years. While more recent films have taken steps to diversify the Disney universe, by adding characters of various ethnicities and backgrounds, the way the company romanticizes poverty and those struggling with trauma continues to be problematic. This is concerning because no thought is given to the social constructs which have created an environment rife for exploitation and crime. Disney has built a hierarchy that tells impressionable youth that “poor” characters who have experienced severe trauma throughout their childhoods can gain social status, not through hard work or change, but through good looks, pure hearts, and a wealthy spouse.

Studies have shown there is a strong link between mental health and poverty, yet society continues to stigmatize those who seek mental health treatment or other services to improve their quality of life. If we want to end the stigma of poverty and mental health, then pop culture should show accurate examples of how people can break the cycle.

Methods

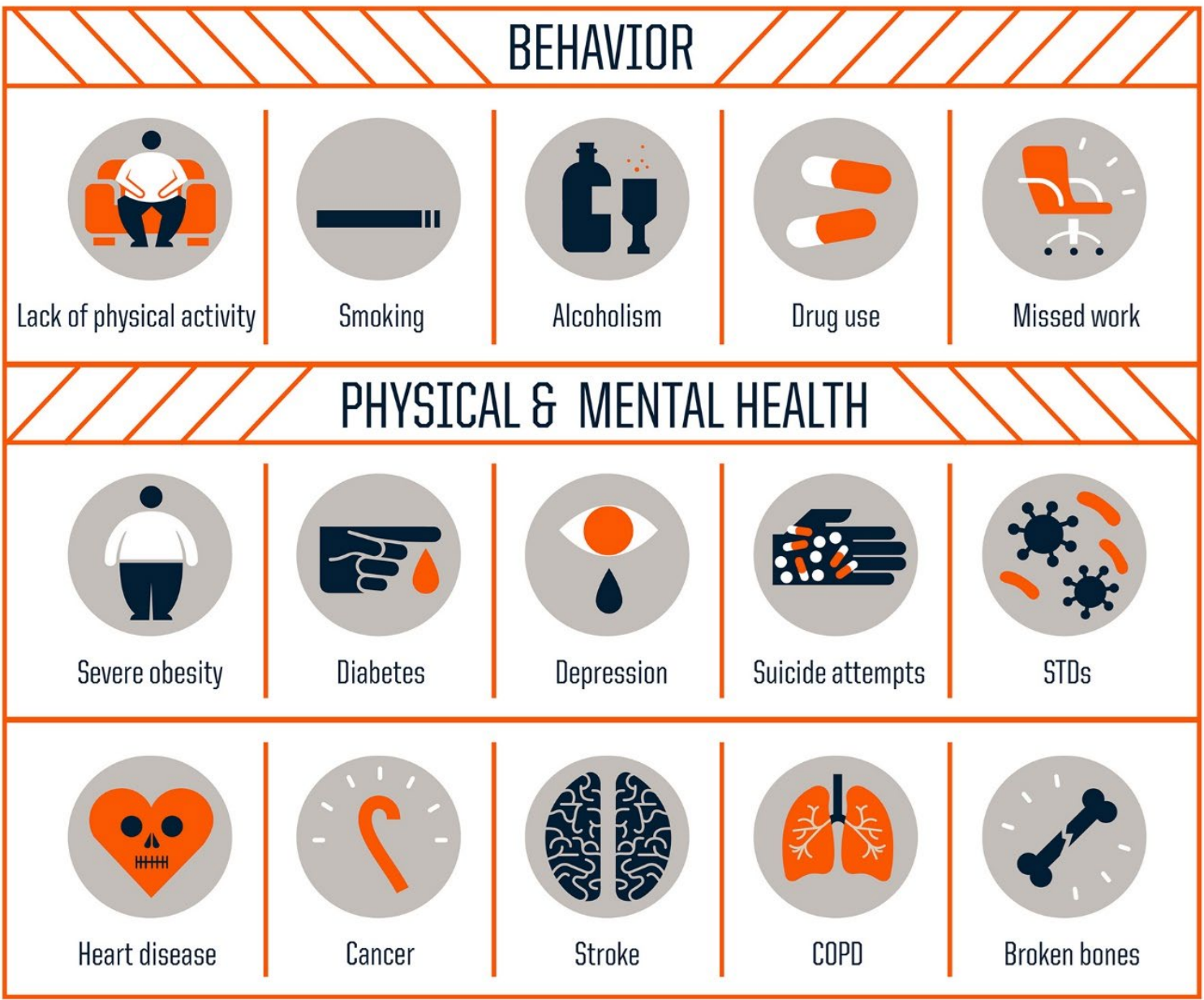
A total of 56 feature-length animated films released by *The Walt Disney Company* from 1937 to 2016 were reviewed. Films were included if they featured primary or secondary characters experiencing poverty, inequality, or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs):

Inclusion Criteria		
Film	Main Character Presents with Mental Illness	Element of Poverty
Lilo and Stich	Lilo: Adjustment Disorder; Stich: Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder	Parents death has caused heavy financial burden on older sister
Meet the Robinsons	Goob: Persistent Depressive Disorder	Inner city orphanage
Robin Hood	Robin Hood: Histrionic Personality Disorder	Refugee camp in Sherwood forest due to war torn London
The Emperor's New Groove	Kuzco: Narcissistic Personality Disorder	Rural low income farming community
Treasure Planet	Jim Hawkins: Oppositional Defiant Disorder; Long John Silver: Antisocial Personality Disorder	From poor seaside town where family inn is experiencing financial problems
Aladdin	Aladdin: Borderline Personality Disorder	Lives in abandoned hovel
Cinderella	Cinderella: Reactive Attachment Disorder	Forced to be family's servant
Wreck it Ralph	Ralph: Major Depressive Disorder; Vanellope: Tourette Syndrome	Both main characters live in "junkyards" on the outskirts of games
Zootopia	Nick Wilde: Avoidant Personality Disorder	Lives under a bridge
The Princess and the Frog	Prince Naveen: Narcissistic Personality Disorder	Projects of New Orleans during the 1920's
Beauty and the Beast	Beast: Schizoid Personality Disorder	Poor provincial town
Exclusion Criteria		
Films that had live action components		
Made by Pixar		
Not readily available for public release		

Analysis proceeded in two steps. First, films were qualitatively examined for frames of poverty, mental illness, and social relationships, recorded in a structured coding table. Second, each film was coded for ACEs exposure (e.g., abuse, neglect, household dysfunction) using the CDC framework. Two coders independently reviewed films, with discrepancies resolved by consensus. This approach allowed us to identify both narrative frames and ACE prevalence across the Disney canon.

The known associations between early adversity and subsequent adverse outcomes are substantial. Previous research has shown that as your ACE score increases, so does the risk of social and emotional problems. With an ACE score of four or more, the likelihood of depression increases 460 percent, and suicide, 1,220 percent.⁷ For our study, we viewed parental death as a separation qualifier, a factor that is not clearly defined within the ACE criterion.

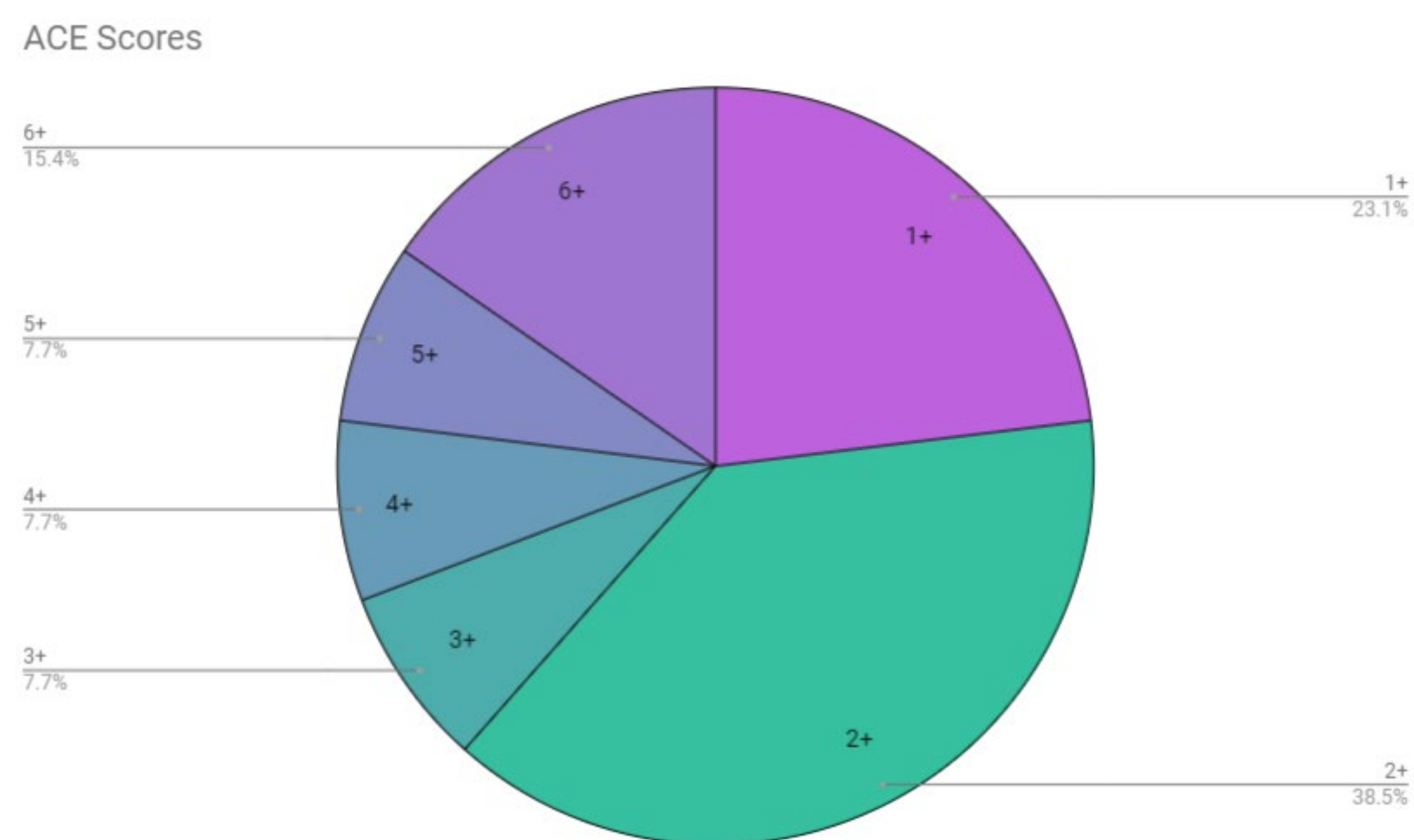
ACEs and Impact on Mental Health



Szarecheski L. Take The ACE Quiz - And Learn What It Does And Doesn't Mean. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2015/03/02/387007941/take-the-ace-quiz-and-learn-what-it-does-and-doesnt-mean>. Published March 2, 2015. Accessed April 2, 2018.

Results

Overall ACE prevalence rates for the films analyzed are shown in Table 3.



Of the 22 main characters evaluated, 13 (59%) had at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE). Among these, 31% had four or more ACEs, and 29% also experienced poverty. Of those with both poverty and ACEs, 64% showed indicators of possible mental illness. A highly significant association was observed between the presence of all three factors (poverty, ACEs, and mental illness). This suggests that even in Disney’s idealized fantasy worlds, the intersection of poverty, trauma, and mental illness is consistently reinforced.

Discussion

When we investigated the three categories of poverty, inequality and mental illness further discussion presented itself in the following categories. These include frames concerning protagonists being born into poverty or experiencing poverty later in life, having a potential mental health diagnosis, and developing relationships that appears to fix either the mental illness or poverty the character suffers from. Each is described below. Most frames depict poverty, mental illness and class inequality as being benign.

Frames of Poverty

Out of the 11 films eight showed a common theme where the class conditions witnessed on screen tend to minimize the poor and working-class hardships. Although poor and working-class characters often experience some material deprivation, their hardships are generally downplayed or erased. Hardships associated with poverty are also curtailed. An example of this would be in *Aladdin*. In the film, Aladdin lives in a hovel and often goes hungry. Although Aladdin views his life as challenging, Jasmine, a princess, views her own life as equally hard. Disney uses the interaction between the two to establish that the problems of a pauper and a princess are equally difficult. By doing this, Aladdin’s situation is diminished by drawing a false parallel.

Also in the sampled movies, primary poor characters are often framed as morally upstanding, ambitious, intelligent and kind. Again, we see frameworks of the virtuous poor in characters like Aladdin who despite being a thief is a “diamond in the rough”, along with Robin Hood who literally robs from the rich to feed the poor. Even Nick Wilde from *Zootopia* hides a kind, sensitive persona underneath a sly grifter personality. All of these characters personify the *Horatio Alger* myth and are “good people” despite the crippling poverty they are surrounded by. In contrast, Disney treats most secondary characters who are poor with contempt. These side characters are often are framed as morally corrupt, unwilling to play by the rules, and often seen as unintelligent or backward. The framing for this shows Disney’s unspoken bias that most characters born into poverty deserve to be there and we shouldn’t sympathize with them.

Frames of Mental Health

Studies show that there is a gender bias in the perception of mental health; in fact, statistics show that women are twice as likely to be diagnosed with depressive disorders, but men are more likely to commit suicide^{2,4,11}. While none of the 11 films specifically mention mental health, of the 22 characters examined, 14 had traits consistent with a mental health diagnosis. Of these 14 characters, 11 were male and three were female which is inconsistent with gender stereotypes surrounding mental health¹¹. However, the mental health representations of the 11 male characters focused on typically masculine traits including narcissism, anger, and violence. In fact, of the 11 male characters studied, seven of them met the diagnostic criteria for a personality disorder. Of the three women, two were presented as victims of their own experiences and in need of being “rescued”. Only one character, Vanellope from *Wreck it Ralph*, embraced their disorder and learned to use it to their advantage.

Frames of Relationships

Love conquers all - at least, that’s what Disney tells us. Unfortunately, statistics do not support this idea.^{1,2,3} Despite this fact, the trope of love being a cure is firmly demonstrated in 10 out of 11 of the films studied. In this case love also crosses class and lines of poverty. Of the 11 movies with classed characters, seven of the films contained a couple where in each partner is in a different class at the time the courtship begins. Once cross-class relationships are formed, they are portrayed as easy and continuing without regard to characters’ economic differences. In many of the remaining movies, the cross-class relationship is solidified at the end of the movie, with the implication that the cross-class couple will live happily ever after.

The love conquers all frame then portrays the economy as open and mental illness as non-threatening. The frame downplays the effects both of these have on spatial segregation, social relationships, and opportunities for mobility.

Even in the case of friendship or adoption into a new family, 10 out of 11 of the sampled films used relationships as the key method to solve a protagonist's poverty situation and/or mental illness, with only one leaving the aftermath ambiguous. While it is true that relationships are key to overcoming hardships, this isn’t the only factor to consider and there is no quick fix for either of these situations. People struggling with poverty and/or mental illness need to feel connected to a community as well and often need the supports of others in their lives to not just recover but to maintain that recovery.

Conclusions

Alan Beveridge noted in 1996 that Walt Disney disliked psychiatric interpretations of his films, yet his work is filled with images of madness. These depictions, reaching vast audiences, often present mental illness as something to fear and suppress—while heroes are affirmed in their “essential sanity” by avoiding it altogether. Our analysis shows that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) exert harmful effects independent of poverty and demographic risk. Yet Disney frequently conflates poverty, trauma, and mental illness, framing them interchangeably as obstacles to be hidden or overcome. This simplification is problematic: by masking the real scars of trauma and hardship beneath the illusion of a “happily ever after,” Disney reinforces harmful stereotypes and dismisses the lived realities of those affected. As educators, clinicians, and cultural critics, we must recognize how these narratives shape public perceptions and work to counteract them with accurate, compassionate, and inclusive representations of poverty, trauma, and mental health.

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