

Every woman dreams of being a princess? Problematization over Princess Schools

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Abstract: Countless achievements can be the result of women's struggles for more equitable conditions in society. The adage "a woman's place is wherever she wants to be" has gained more and more strength. However, the idea that there is such thing as a feminine essence among all women is still very present socially, which ends up considering certain choices undervalued and judged as not belonging to this essence. The present article, from a narrative review, problematizes the existence of Princess Schools, which proposes to teach girls how to be in the world properly. By teaching traditional behaviors associated with modesty, beauty, and domestic activities, such schools ignore the importance of socially positioning in a country where thousands of women suffer several kinds of prejudice and violence on a daily basis, representing a setback for accomplishments women who have fought and still struggle for a more equitable world have achieved.

Keywords: gender; women; princess; stereotypes; feminine.

TODA MULHER SONHA EM SER PRINCESA? PROBLEMATIZAÇÕES SOBRE ESCOLAS DE PRINCESAS

Resumo: Inúmeras conquistas podem ser resultado das lutas das mulheres por condições mais equânimes na sociedade. A máxima "lugar de mulher é onde ela quiser" tem ganhado cada vez mais força. No entanto, a ideia de que há uma essência feminina ainda está muito presente socialmente, o que faz com que determinadas escolhas sejam desvalorizadas e julgadas como não pertencentes a essa essência. A partir de uma revisão narrativa, problematizamos a existência de Escolas de Princesas, as quais se propõem a ensinar meninas a como ser e estar no mundo. Ao ensinarem comportamentos tradicionais associados ao recato, à beleza e às atividades domésticas, tais escolas ignoram a importância de se posicionar socialmente em um país onde milhares de mulheres sofrem preconceitos e violências diariamente, representando um retrocesso no que se refere às conquistas já tidas pelas mulheres que lutaram e ainda lutam por um mundo mais equânime.

Palavras-chaves: gênero; mulheres; princesas; estereótipos; feminino.

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¿TODA MUJER SUEÑA CON SER PRINCESA? PROBLEMATIZACIONES SOBRE ESCUELAS DE PRINCESAS

Resumen: Innumerables conquistas pueden ser el resultado de las luchas de las mujeres por condiciones más equánimes en la sociedad. La máxima “lugar de mujer es donde ella quiera” ha ganado mucha fuerza. Pero, la idea de que hay una esencia femenina aún está muy presente socialmente, lo que hace con que determinadas elecciones sean desvalorizadas y juzgadas como no pertenecientes a esta esencia. A partir de una revisión narrativa, problematizamos la existencia de Escuelas de Princesas, las cuales se proponen a enseñar niñas a cómo ser y estar en el mundo. Al enseñar comportamientos tradicionales asociados al recato, a la belleza, y las actividades domésticas, tales escuelas ignoran la importancia de posicionarse socialmente en un país donde miles de mujeres sufren prejuicios y violencias diariamente, representando un retroceso en lo que se refiere a las conquistas ya obtenidas por las mujeres que lucharon y aún luchan por un mundo equánime.

Palabras clave: género; mujeres; princesa; estereotipos; femenino.

Introduction

Even though different elements of the feminist movement have common ground, it is characterized by multiple discourses of varied tendencies. For this reason, the term feminisms, in the plural, seems to be more faithful to the multiplicity of struggles women have faced – and still face – in society. In Brazil, the feminist movement had its greatest expression in the 1970s, as it was born already committed to opposition to the military dictatorship. Feminist groups, which were linked with social and political movements, demanded both improved living conditions and the establishment of nurseries in factories and universities, as well as the amnesty of political prisoners, fighting for democratic freedom (Mayorga, Coura, Miralles, & Cunha, 2013).

Countless achievements resulted from women’s struggles for more equitable conditions in society. The adage “a woman’s place is where she wants it to be” has increasingly gained momentum, allowing lesbian women, women who do not desire to be mothers, women in leadership positions, among so many other ways of women to be in this world, to coexist with women who choose to marry and care for their homes, a situation that was once the only option given to them. The idea of feminine essence, however, which would encompass elements of modesty, sensitivity, and caring, is still present in society. As a consequence, some choices, considered not to belong to this essence, are undervalued.

As early as 1949, Simone de Beauvoir signaled that in using the word woman and/or feminine, we should not assume an immutable essence, that is, one that evidences eternal truths. On the contrary, it is about “describing a common ground on which the entire singular feminine existence develops” (Beauvoir, 2016, p. 7). This is to say that there is not only one way to express femininity and “no one is born a woman: one becomes a woman” (Beauvoir, 2016, p. 11).

In opposition to this understanding, the Brazilian media has recently publicized the opening of the School of Princesses: an enterprise offering programs and events for girls with the slogan “every girl’s dream is to become a princess.” The school’s mission, according to its website, is to:

Offer services of excellence providing experiences of an intellectual, behavioral and experiential nature for the day-to-day life of royalty, for girls aged between four and 15 years old who dream of becoming princesses and enable them to allow the feminine essence that exists in their hearts to emerge (The School of Princesses, 2016).

Having in the background the representations of femininity disseminated by the media, especially the Disney Princesses franchise, as well as the writings of Simone de Beauvoir, this study's objective is to discuss the existence of schools intended to teach girls to be in the world, in addition to understanding the impact these schools might have on a girl's experience of femininity. For that, a literature review was developed, which, according to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2010) is defined as a method intended to gather and critically analyze published documents addressing a given subject.

Gender

Finding out a baby's sex is usually enveloped by much anticipation on the part of the pregnant family. The reason is that, in addition to finding out whether the baby is a boy or a girl, a world full of social constructions based on biological aspects presents itself to the child and family. Such constructions, when merely based on biological sexual differences, become simplistic, since they disregard the daily cultural-historical construction of our physical bodies (Botton, Cúnico, Barcinski, & Strey, 2015).

When we consider the differences between men and women, some characteristics are seen as excluding and inflexible. The idea of masculine is associated with strength, reasoning and activity, while femininity is considered to be fragile, emotive, and passive (Vieira & Amaral, 2013). Even though passivity is something that women may develop in their first years of life, this is not a genetic predisposition, rather it may be an imposed condition (Beauvoir, 2016).

Simone de Beauvoir (2016, p. 318) grounded herself on the notion that the "eternal feminine" is a myth – a mechanism socially created with a nature that is stronger than direct coercion – to explain the difficulty in deconstructing essentialist notions of femininity. The author considers it to be impossible to fight or dialogue using arguments of concrete reality against dogmas and truths that are considered to be absolute: "by means of religions, traditions, language, tales, songs, cinema, myths penetrate even the most hard-packed existences of material realities". In this context, the myth of the eternal feminine holds women to be "Truth, Beauty, Poetry, she is Everything: once more, everything in the figure of Another, Everything except herself" (Beauvoir, 2016, p. 295). Therefore, this "being everything" deprives women of their autonomy of being subjects by themselves.

It is known that gender stereotypes feed significant inequalities between men and women based on a biological and naturalistic conception of what is expected of and allowed for both sexes. Stereotypes are cultural products that originated from the

very process of humans' adaptation to nature. In our culture, the propagation of certain stereotypes implied further domination, considering that power among men, which was initially manifested through strength, became veiled violence, that is, propagated through words or subtle actions (Crochik, 1996). One example is the division of work itself, which considers men to be more appropriate for the work performed in the public sphere, while women are destined for domestic work. The notion that women are suited to domestic tasks rather than public positions, imposed as being natural, illustrates the aforementioned model of an existence of "no-subject."

Assuming that there is an essential feminine vocation for certain positions or behaviors, marriage – and what it implies: motherhood and a heterosexual nuclear family – becomes the only place where women can possibly find realization. So that the valorization of marriage and good manners, together with the assumption of a "maternal instinct," constantly leads women to the private sphere and reaffirmation of impeccable beauty, which are recognized forms related to controlling the woman subject.

Representations of femininity

There are several narratives aired by the media that are based on a certain representation of femininity, that is, soap operas, feminine magazines, TV shows, among others, that are grounded on a model of femininity and that are not committed to the concrete reality of many women. On the contrary, such a model maintains a status based on female subservience and supposed fragility (Sobral & Beraldo, 2015).

One example of such narratives is fairy tales; they are presented from early on with the phrase "once upon a time, a princess married a prince, and they lived happily ever after." These are stories that are generally permeated by romantic love, by the anticipation of true love, and have a happy ending (Bastos & Nogueira, 2016; Sobral & Beraldo, 2015; Xavier Filha, 2011). We consider that both girls and boys, influenced by these tales, see models of femininity and masculinity in these princesses and princes. The meaning shared by children is the same that society constructs and expects from the gender identities of men and women (Xavier Filha, 2011).

We acknowledge that it may not be possible to raise a child in a universe isolated from social influences and detached from media exposure. However, other narratives – cartoons, movies, and books – are important to presenting children with different models of femininity and masculinity. After all, the problem does not lie in teaching practices that are useful in the private sphere, but in considering that such practices are intrinsic to women, referring to them as a responsibility of girls only, consequently depriving them of other possibilities of existence. In addition, a discussion on how stereotypes affect children's subjectivities is necessary, considering that culture is a social and psychological construction (Cechin, 2014).

The most classic Disney Princesses' movies have been indicative of a process of a perpetuation of the eternal feminine myth previously asserted by Simone de Beauvoir.

Created in accordance with the models of a traditional society, we verify that the “first” princesses – Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora of *Sleeping Beauty* – fitted the model that corresponded to women exalted, idolized and idealized by men according to a “wife-mother-housewife” profile (Lopes, 2015). In fact, for a long time, in addition to these characteristics linked to the passive role of women in society, other traditional cultural values were incorporated into Disney’s stories, such as romantic love, beauty standards, heterosexuality, courage, and kindness (Cechin, 2014).

In turn, the main characteristic of the second generation of more “rebellious” princesses, such as Ariel of *The Little Mermaid*, Belle of *Beauty and the Beast*, Jasmine of *Aladdin* and Pocahontas, is a deviation from the previously imposed rules, even if subtly, valuing liberation from conformism through acts of courage, strength, and independence. Contemporary princesses – Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog*, Rapunzel from *Tangled*, Merida from *Brave* and Anna and Elsa from *Frozen* – are transgressors, as they become more autonomous and follow a model of woman who seeks balance between individuality and emotions, tending to revisit some traditional values and customs of the “old” princesses, but with a comic touch (Lopes, 2015).

Another story that challenged the gender stereotypes presented so far in the fairy tales is Mulan. Disney created this character in 1998 and, even though she is technically not a “princess,” the company included her in the franchise. Although not the most popular, Mulan is considered the most progressive of the Disney series. The movie portrays a general recruitment to fight an invasion in China, and since Mulan’s father is sick, she goes to represent her family, integrating the Chinese army disguised as a man, proving her skills as a warrior throughout the movie and gaining everyone’s respect (Souza et al., 2016).

Simone de Beauvoir (2016) became uneasy when she realized that women’s youth vanished as they waited in expectation for a man. Men, even though also waited in expectation for a woman, had other objectives and intentions, as such an expectation was not the center of their lives. Women, on the other hand, were prepared throughout their entire lives to be protected by a future ‘charming prince.’ Simone de Beauvoir was much ahead of her time, considering when she wrote her works, and it is impressive when we compare her ideas to our contemporary times and how current lagging society is in terms of gender equality. We need to pay attention to the way femininity and masculinity is presented to girls and boys in their daily lives. In the best-known children tales, such as Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty, the princesses wait for the arrival of a strong, heroic and courageous prince, who will awaken, rescue or free them from some dangerous and threatening situation.

In this respect, Cechin (2014) elucidates the importance of language and discourse in the formation of children’s identities. Language constitutes objects about which it narrates. So that, certain ways of behaving, thinking and being are understood and recognized as legitimate by children. The perception of culture is identified through toys, movies, images, and magazines that permeate subjectivities.

It is worth noting that, in addition to a nonexistent mother figure, (except in cases in which there is an evil stepmother), the aforementioned classics do not portray friendship among women. In their solitary lives – without friends – the objective always seems to be the anticipation of an enchanted prince (Sobral & Beraldo, 2015). The appearance of characters, in turn, also occupies a prominent place in the narratives. The protagonists are represented as white, young, pretty and having slender bodies, reproducing hegemonic patterns of beauty that privilege thinness and youth. Even though their attire contains a wealth of details, what is highlighted is the naturalness of their appearances; that is, the princesses do not use makeup to beautify their features, they are represented as naturally beautiful and attractive. To conquer the prince, therefore, the princesses do not need to have a voice, since they already have body language (Rael, 2007).

Even though we can now find stories that seek to break from the stereotypes of young, white, lean and beautiful princess, who wait for their princes in order to be happy, a study conducted by Xavier Filha (2011) reports very traditional conceptions in terms of what girls imagine a princess is supposed to be. For the girls, being a princess is to have fair skin, be slim, and have long blond hair. Additionally, being delicate, intelligent, gentle, kind, and being able to cook for the prince are characteristics they long for. The boys, in turn, believe a princess should have red short hair, wear jeans, be clumsy, and wear blue dresses.

Dividing the world between pink and blue, cars and dolls indicates a stereotyped separation between men and women. In fact, suggesting the colors blue and pink for boys and girls, respectively, is not necessarily related to what pleases children. This is a context to which children are presented beginning early on at school, and through cartoons and soap operas, while some parents teach them that these elements differentiate men and women. Clearly, it is a social construction transmitted to children at all times over the course of life.

Inevitably, the consequences of this unequal treatment may cause discomfort in the future. One example is the persistent need for men to prove all the time that they are men and are far from being feminine. Women, in turn, do not face the same situation, because even if they do not identify themselves with femininity, they are still considered women. There is greater apprehension among boys to avoid possessing feminine features (Rosistolato, 2009).

In fact, gender models are based on a relational pattern, expressing socially accepted standards of masculinity and femininity. Hence, what is perceived to be masculine in a given culture only makes sense if what is perceived to be feminine is also taken into account and vice-versa. In this context, the identities of men and women are reaffirmed by approximating or distancing oneself from behaviors, attitudes, and emotions that are considered to belong to one of the genders (Gomes, 2008). In a context in which women are still subjugated and viewed as inferior, it is not surprising that men fear to be seen as having feminine characteristics since it supposedly would lower them to an inferior status.

This unequal relationship between men and women conforms with what Simone de Beauvoir (2016) called the myth of eternal femininity, mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The trap of domination and passivity presents itself to women when it puts them in a position above that of human, that is, women are almost seen as “goddesses.” Being a goddess, a woman needs care, affection, and reverence. This strategy means that, even if treated as a servant, women are persuaded that they are being treated as queens.

Hence, femininity emerges at an early age in girls depending, on different ways of being treated, being “pampered” and protected by their parents at various moments, in addition to being presented tasks inherent to the “feminine world;” while boys are encouraged and authorized to perform courageous and adventurous acts. Therefore, the narratives of the ideal of femininity reach girls on a greater scale precisely because they listen to and live with such an ideal since they are born into normative pedagogies that are related to the feminine gender (Xavier Filha, 2011).

School of Princesses

The School of Princesses was founded in 2013 in the city of Uberlândia, in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. A couple idealized it: she, a psycho-pedagogue and he, a business administrator. The concept emerged from a dream in which she saw herself working in a “school of princesses.” After conducting research and encouraged by her husband’s entrepreneurial vision, the idea was put into practice. The proposal conveyed by the school is based on values that are traditionally attached to princesses, such as humility, solidarity, and kindness. In an interview published by the *O Estado de São Paulo* newspaper, the founder reported the school’s success and the success of her traditional three-month program and added that, if she had a daughter, she would like to enroll her in an institution like this (Freitas, 2016). The founders want the school to be a “benchmark among educational institutions worldwide in terms of values, principles, behavior, and character, which are transmitted through innovative proposals.” There are currently franchises of the School of Princesses in Manaus (AM), Cuiabá (MT), Uberaba (MG), Belo Horizonte (MG), Rio de Janeiro (RJ) and São Paulo (SP).

The school offers two modalities of programs. These modalities are presented using the attraction of the “girls’ precious character” and the “need to prepare them early on for their hearts to be able to discern between right and wrong, between actions that produce good and those that cause embarrassment” (The School of Princesses, 2016). Hence, the school’s website disseminates the main educational proposal based on “to give the girls’ hearts values and ethical, moral and social principles that will help them to lead their lives with wisdom and discernment.”

The first modality, “Life of a princess,” is a three-month program that focuses on characteristics that are seen as necessary for a princess: well-defined identity, hetero-normative relationships – which becomes apparent considering content addressing

rules of etiquette, care with aesthetics, and the “Castle” – presenting a clear limitation to domestic tasks – and finally, a “happily ever after” marriage as the ultimate goal of life. The second modality does not differ from the first in terms of topics, only that it is more similar to a summer camp. The modality “Princess’ vacation” works as a test-drive or compact model of the “Life of a princess” modality, in which “girls have the opportunity to know the Castle and ‘have a taste’ of each class presented in the program” (The School of Princesses, 2016).

The psycho-pedagogue responsible for leading the Schools of Princesses in Brazil argues, in a article for the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper, that her method is not a setback, stating that girls do not need to give up being mothers, or having a relationship or taking care of their homes because of a professional career (Mena, 2016). This is a false counterpoint, which defends an updated, more “modern” model of being a princess, admitting the insertion of women in the job market. This same model, however, disregards the heavyweight of dealing with a double-work journey, that of having to work outside and inside home, in the future of girls.

The pattern of happiness of the first princesses (Snow White, Aurora and Cinderella), who are currently considered by the transgressor princesses as having lived out a setback, is a pattern considered to be the only one possible, dependent on impeccable beauty and successful marriage. Having said that, we argue that an enterprise such as the School of Princesses aims at nothing more than reaffirming this hegemonic aesthetic and relational pattern while distancing those girls who do not fit in – or, making them believe they should mold themselves to fit into this universe.

Therefore, the very conception of being a “modern princess,” brought by the school’s founder, still encompasses notions of traditional and retrograde femininity, ignoring other possibilities that do not necessarily include being a mother, wife, or homemaker. Valuing, above all, lessons of etiquette, morality and good manners, indispensable for the formation of a – passive and docile – lady does not take into account the extent this model will influence the upbringing of future women, who may not question or problematize their social position.

Workshops that teach how not to be a princess

Opposing and offering an alternative to the Schools of Princesses, the team at the Child Rights Protection Office in the city of Iquique, Chile, idealized a project – supported by the National Service of Minors (SENAME) – that resulted in the first “deprincess” workshop, where girls are taught how not to be a princess, in Latin America (“Insólito taller”, 2016). This workshop is directed to nine to 11-year-old girls and is intended to deconstruct social norms that are generated by the conceptions of what belongs or does not belong to the feminine. Ideals of empowerment and feminine emancipation guide this practice that antagonizes that of being a princess, due to the beliefs of the team that women in current society can attain much more besides motherhood, marriage, and domestic retrenchment.

According to the Argentinean newspaper *El Patagónico*, the first class had only 20 slots, which resulted in a large waitlist, surpassing the Office's expectations. The meetings were held in the Culture House of the Chilean city in the summer of 2016, and the girls participated in classes that included handicrafts, songs, and self-defense, in addition to debates ("Insólito taller," 2016). The objective was to enable the girls to reflect upon issues that involve "being a girl," the stereotypes of beauty and gender, in addition to deconstructing romantic love.

The sociologist and project's coordinator points out in an interview for the *Folha de S.Paulo* newspaper that, despite the linguistic barrier, Brazil and the remaining countries where the workshop is currently implemented – Chile, Mexico and Argentina – present very similar cultures in terms of gender inequality (Mena, 2016). In this regard, we argue that even though the type of education enabled by the School of Princesses is supposedly directed to the education of the real world, it fails to prepare the girls for the violence women have to face and other situations in which girls have to stand up for themselves. When they focus on being docile, kind and modest, they lead this future woman into submission.

In Brazil, these workshops were first implemented in São Caetano do Sul, São Paulo, headed by a journalist, and a philosopher and pedagogue, after both obtained online training made available by the Chilean project (Lima, 2016). According to information provided by the *Revista Crescer*, the events took place in the state of São Paulo and encouraged reflection upon the roles socially imposed on women, also including the children's caregivers in one of the three days of intervention. In regard to the content presented, the topics were similar to those addressed by the Chilean pioneer workshop and also intended to deconstruct restricting models, thus, providing many alternatives to the models given by the School of Princesses.

This national workshop model with classes administered by women, having from 20 to 30 slots available and girls aged from six to 15 years old and their caregivers, was expanded in 2016 and gained strength in 2017, basically maintaining the same characteristics in other Brazilian regions: Minas Gerais, Santa Catarina, Rio Grande do Sul and some states in the northeast. Additionally, the topic "teaching how not to be a princess" is addressed in different seminars, congresses, and events in Brazil.

Regardless of where the workshop is implemented, the discussion focuses on the same issue: how restricted it is having only one model of what it necessarily means to be a woman. Agreeing with Beauvoir, who states "parents still raise their daughters with a view on marriage rather than on their personal development" (2016, p. 185), those responsible for the workshops implemented in São Paulo question, in an article for the *Folha de S.Paulo* newspaper, to what extent stating that the dream and objective of every woman is to get married is really different from the concept of a dowry, a practice that was very common in past times (Mena, 2016).

As already mentioned, the new fairy tales (2000-currently) have increasingly questioned the roles assigned to femininity, within the limitations of what it is possible to address in children's movies. Hence, we verify there is a paradox between the

changing stereotype of Disney princesses and the School of Princesses. Such a situation develops when world-renowned major studios and content distributors rethink their media products due to a search for deconstructing oppression, as opposed to the existence of an enterprise that still rewards extremely traditional and restricting ideals.

In summary, we defend a constant debate over stereotyped views of femininity so we can avoid the dualism indicated by Simone de Beauvoir (2016, p. 125):

Having no access to public life and virtues, when the dissolution of the family renders old private virtues obsolete and useless, no moral is proposed to women. They can choose between two solutions: be obstinate and respect the same values their grandmothers had once respected or acknowledge none.

Hence, we state that the role of society is to enable girls to be “enough” of a subject to choose their own destinies, be that as a princess or not.

Final considerations

Recognizing the plurality of what it means to be a woman is essential to reflect upon the Schools of Princesses and the Workshops that teach how not to be a princess. After all, when we identify the diversity of fairy tales and stories of princesses that are currently available in the media directed to children, this plurality becomes apparent. There is no universal, immutable and common way of being a woman, as well as there is not a correct or wrong way of being a princess. And, for this reason, we believe this is one of the main axes of this study. Is it needed to teach a girl to be a princess or to teach not to be a princess? What may result from teachings addressing the experience of femininity?

We cannot state for sure what will be the impact of these Schools of Princesses on the lives of children, but we do understand the importance of girls being free to be whatever they desire. Even though there are children who appreciate the idea of becoming princesses, there are others who disagree with this idea, and it cannot be interpreted as something “deviant” or “wrong.” Precisely because children are not the same, the imposition of certain teachings does not ensure they will be prepared to lead their lives.

Additionally, even though girls are the main targets of this culture, note that the effects of a hegemonic way of being a woman are felt by the entire society, which corroborates the need to discuss the role of these schools. In this sense, one of the topics that we highlight in the workshops is that of reflecting with the girls themselves upon the responsibilities associated with femininity in our society. Other forms of being a woman, in addition to those preconceived as being inherent to femininity, are emphasized.

While Disney is producing fairy tales that broaden and encompass other ways of being a princess and a woman, there are schools that still today sell a discourse that

extols only one way of being a woman, hegemonized by the culture of princesses, downplaying and disregarding the plurality of the feminine constitution, portraying the different ways of being a woman as deviant or “wrong.” In addition to teaching traditional behaviors associated with modesty, beauty, and domestic activities, these schools ignore the importance of girls socially positioning themselves in a country where thousands of women still face discrimination and violence on a daily basis. Considering these aspects, we problematize the setback these schools may represent in terms of achievements that have already been made by women who have fought and still fight for a more equitable world.

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