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Death and Coping Mechanisms in Animated Disney Movies: A Content Analysis of Disney Films (1937–2003) and Disney/Pixar Films (2003–2016)

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Abstract: The purpose of this content analysis was to examine how death depictions in animated Disney films has changed in the past 14 years and the coping mechanisms used to process death within these films. A content analysis from 2005 was used to investigate the influence of Disney films on children's concepts of death based on 23 death scenes from 10 full-length Disney Classic animated films from 1937 to 2003 and 10 death scenes from 8 selected full-length Disney and Pixar animated films from 2003 to 2016. Our goal was to compare the findings across the two studies. Similar to the original study, the portrayal of death focused on five categories: character status; depiction of death; death status; emotional reaction; and causality. We expanded on the original study and more research by examining coping mechanisms used to process death within a selection of these films. Our findings indicated that some scenes from animated Disney and Pixar films obscure the permanence and irreversibility of death and often fail to acknowledge deaths emotionally. Our conclusions showed that Disney's and Pixar's portrayal of death in newer films might have more positive implications for children's understanding of death than Disney Classic animated films.

Keywords: death; children; Disney; coping mechanisms

1. Introduction

Death is a painful but unavoidable part of life. For children between 2–11 years of age, death is a complex topic to grapple with and can have a significant impact on their lives. Specifically, if we assume that if children think differently and are constrained by cognitive limitations, then they need adult protection. A contrasting view is that children are increasingly sophisticated as they encounter a greater variety of media content (Livingstone 2002). Children's media repertoires are increasingly independent of their parents' influence. The availability of media, in children's lives, as well as parents' lack of knowledge about modern digital media allow children to decide independently what media they use and what they acquire from it (Bovill and Livingstone 2001). This leads to fewer opportunities for shared media experiences of parents and children (Bovill and Livingstone 2001). Some media scholars attach more significance to the independence or agency of children rather than the idea of childhood as a preparatory stage for adult life.

While some media scholars have taken a more modern "agency" approach to development, the dominant approach in developmental psychology has been a more protectionist stance (Buckingham 2000). There are indeed pros and cons of both approaches in the field of death education, but this is not the focus of this study. We assume that children and adult's knowledge or experience with death differ from each other.

The current content analysis expands upon the previous research by Cox et al. (2005). Specifically, our goal was to compare how the top 10 grossing Disney films from 1937–2003 compared to the top 8

grossing Disney and Pixar films from 2003–2016. Similar to the original study, the portrayal of death focused on five categories: character status; depiction of death; death status; emotional reaction; and causality. A more recent study by [Tenzek and Nickels \(2017\)](#) describes and analyzes the portrayal of end-of-life (EOL) or death across a more comprehensive list of animated Disney and Pixar films. Unlike [Tenzek and Nickels \(2017\)](#), we included coping mechanisms displayed by characters dealing with death within a selection of these films. In the current study, we argue that children who watch Disney and Pixar films might learn about ways to cope with death. To examine the possible influence that animated cinema might have for children's processing and coping with death, it is necessary to provide some theoretical perspectives on how they conceive death. Specifically, we include literature related to children's comprehension of death, developmental level, life experiences, parental involvement and emotional coping mechanisms related to death.

1.1. Theoretical Perspectives on Children's Understanding of Death

1.1.1. Developmental Age

The Dougy Center, a United States national center for grieving children and families that provides support groups, education, and training (<https://www.dougy.org>), reported that two main factors contribute to a child's understanding of death: developmental level and experience. According to a 2009 Dougy Center table (as cited in [Favazza and Munson 2010](#)), children's understanding of death changes at different developmental stages. At the egocentric stage (i.e., 2–4 years), children see death as reversible, will notice changes in how they are cared for and may ask many questions. They may perceive death as abandonment. When in the developmental stage where they begin to gain a sense of autonomy (i.e., 4–7 years), children still see death as reversible, but questions begin to focus on how and why the death happened. Some children at this age may try to act as though nothing has happened. At the concrete thinking stage (i.e., 7–11 years), children begin to realize death is irreversible and become concerned with other people's reactions to understand what an appropriate response to death is ([Favazza and Munson 2010](#)). [Willis \(2002\)](#) noted four aspects of death that children and adults view differently: reversibility, finality, inevitability, and causality. According to [Brent et al. \(1996\)](#), children may not understand the permanence of death, the fact that death is inevitable for all living beings, and, because young children cannot think abstractly, they may not understand the causality of death. However, children who are older than eleven may still not believe death is permanent due to religious beliefs. Beliefs about death based on religious values may indicate a more mature mindset because abstract thinking is required ([Brent et al. 1996](#)).

1.1.2. Experience—Grieving Process

[Baker et al. \(1992\)](#) identified three stages of children's grieving process after a death. In the first stage, the child gathers a basic understanding of death. It is important for a child to understand that just because someone they know has died does not mean they are in any imminent danger. They must feel safe and secure. In the second stage, a child accepts the death as a reality and accepts any accompanying emotional response to death. In this stage, a child may reflect on happy memories with their deceased loved one. Adults should have an honest conversation with the child about death and allow the child to process any emotions they have. In the third stage, a child re-examines their concept of identity and their relationships with others after a death. The child should know that though someone they loved has died, other people in their lives are not in danger of dying. Ultimately, this final stage should culminate in healthy coping skills. Some scholars believe that children take longer to complete the grieving process than adults, as they tend to have less experience with death and developmentally have a limited understanding of death ([Baker et al. 1992](#)).

1.1.3. Experience—Parent Role in Children’s Comprehension of Death

Many parents use confusing language when talking about death with children. Some parents may try to protect young children from such a complex topic by using phrases such as, “sleeping for a long time” or “taken a long trip.” Though intentions are good, phrases like this may confuse children as to what death is. A child may believe that a deceased loved one will wake up or return from a trip someday (Willis 2002). A child may also become frightened about sleeping, for fear that they will not wake up (Grollman 1990).

In addition to language, parents should be mindful of their reactions to death, as, according to a 2009 Dougy Center table as displayed in Favazza and Munson (2010), children will look to and possibly mimic them to understand appropriate responses to death. If a parent is uncomfortable with the concept of death themselves, they may restrict their children’s comprehension of death and their ability to cope effectively (Favazza and Munson 2010). Most adults do not believe children have the mental and emotional capacity to cope with death and therefore attempt to avoid representations of death. Specifically, many parents try to shield their children from death in film and television programs (Gutiérrez et al. 2014). Gutiérrez et al. (2014) found that twice as many parents tried to shield their children from death representations in films than books, in part because it is easier to modify literature than movies.

1.2. Emotional and Behavioral Coping Mechanisms in Films

Sedney (1999) studied the grieving process of characters in children’s movies in reaction to a death. Children’s films generally maintained a positive outlook on life after death wherein characters could move forward and still be happy after the death of a loved one but in some films, deaths went unacknowledged. The lack of acknowledgment was particularly prevalent in cinema with missing parents (Sedney 1999, 2002).

Schultz and Huet (2001) found that most portrayals of death in the highest grossing American films and Academy Award nominees were dramatic and implausible. A lot of children’s movies mimicked protective parental language. The films were indirect in acknowledging death and the reality of life after a death, which is in part due to social stigma around conversations about death (Schultz and Huet 2001).

Some researchers describe coping as the way a person regulates behavior and emotion under stressful circumstances (Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck 2007). Children’s stress reactions include cognitive and behavioral coping (De Boo and Wicherts 2007). Children begin to develop coping mechanisms in infancy and evolve their strategies as they advance through different stages of life (Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck 2007). The development of healthy coping mechanisms in childhood is important to overall emotional, mental and physical wellbeing. Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2007) identified 12 families of coping strategies: problem-solving, information-seeking, helplessness, escape, self-reliance, support-seeking, delegation, social isolation, accommodation, negotiation, submission, and opposition. These families are present in developmentally appropriate ways at different stages of life. Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2007) found of the 12 families; children tended to use support-seeking, problem-solving, escape and distraction the most.

When children do not learn healthy, effective coping mechanisms, they may be incapable of adequately managing their stress levels. Higher levels of stress in children have been linked to unhealthy eating styles (Michels et al. 2015) and inadequate coping mechanisms related to psychological harm and stunted maturation (Corr 2010). Naturally, coping is not just an individual task. Family and support systems influence children’s ability to cope (Corr 2010).

Especially in modern times, children cannot easily ignore the topic of death, due to both direct experiences with death and indirect through the media. Many children’s books directly address death and attempt to model different coping mechanisms through characters. The primary purpose of the story in these books is to address the realities of death or serve as a guide to grieving children (Webb 2010). Though they are fictional and not involved in the real-life aftermath of a death a child has

experienced, children can identify with characters who have also experienced loss and learn practical and ineffective coping strategies from them (Corr 2004). These characters can also show children ways to release negative emotions healthily. For example, in one story Corr (2004) examined, a young boy continually asked questions about his father's death, leading to his older brother to release some anger he had been holding in. After expressing his anger, the older brother was able to engage in conversations about happy memories with their father (Vogel 2002, as cited in Corr 2004).

1.3. The Current Study

Cox et al. (2005) conducted a study of how Disney films portrayed death and grieving, and the potential influence of films on children's concepts of death. A more recent study by Tenzek and Nickels (2017) expanded upon Cox et al. (2005) by examining 71 EOL portrayals in Disney and Pixar animated films. We hope to contribute to the extant literature on portrayals of death in animated Disney and Pixar films by examining two research questions. First, we are interested in seeing if the portrayal of death in Disney films had changed in the past 14 years compared to Cox et al. (2005), and Tenzek and Nickels (2017). For our current research, we consider the Cox et al. (2005) study as Disney Film Analysis (1937–2003). We refer to the current study as Disney and Pixar Film Analysis (2003–2016). Our second research question extends the previous work (i.e., Cox et al. 2005; Tenzek and Nickels 2017) by addressing the relationship between film and behavioral/emotional regulation processes. Specifically, what types of coping mechanisms do characters dealing with death display within these films?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Sampling Strategy

We used a content analysis to examine how death depictions in animated Disney films have changed in the past 14 years, and the coping mechanisms used to process death within these films. We did not choose the films haphazardly; instead, the researchers carefully reviewed the plot outlines of all animated Disney Classic and Pixar films. We chose from that list 8–10 top grossing films over the two-time frames (i.e., 1937–2003; and 2003–2016) being careful to select films that children are familiar with today. The original analyzed content from 1937–2003 consisted of 10 Disney Classic animated full-length feature films. We selected movies in which a death occurred or was a theme in the plotline. The films included in this study were: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Bambi* (1942), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *The Lion King* (1994), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), *Hercules* (1997), *Mulan* (1998) and *Tarzan* (1999). No full-length feature Disney films from 2000–2003 included death scenes.

The analysis of the current study (i.e., 2003–2016) consists of 8 Disney and Pixar modern animated full-length feature films. In our selection of movies, we included both animated Disney and animated Disney/Pixar films, but the movies were also only selected if they occurred after 2002 because we wanted to focus on the modern, 21st-century depiction of death. The films examined for this study were: *Finding Nemo* (2003), *The Incredibles* (2004), *Up* (2009), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010), *Frozen* (2013), *Big Hero 6* (2014) and *Moana* (2016).

2.2. Coding Categories

In the original study by Cox et al. (2005) and the current study, two coders viewed all the movies and coded the data individually. The following five coding criteria analyzed each character's death in both studies. The coding categories are identical across the two studies. As noted in Cox et al. (2005), the data was analyzed using the following categories and operational definitions.

2.2.1. Character Status

This category refers to the role the character that died played in the plot. We coded as either a protagonist or an antagonist. First, a *protagonist* is a character seen as the “good guy,” hero/heroine of the movie, or the main character whom the story revolves around. An *antagonist* is a character seen as the “bad guy,” villain, nemesis, or enemy of the protagonist.

2.2.2. Depiction of Death

This category refers to how the character dies in the film. An *explicit death* would be when the audience sees that the character is dead because the body is physically damaged/killed or the dead, motionless body is on screen. An *implicit death* refers to one in which the audience can only assume that the death of a character because they do not appear again in the film or that they have encountered something that would presumably result in death. Examples include seeing a shadow of a dead body or a character falling off a cliff. Sleep death refers to an instance in which a character falls into a state of prolonged sleep.

2.2.3. Death Status

This category refers to if a death was a real end of life or if it was something negotiable that does not necessarily represent the absolute end of life. A *permanent/final death* is one in which the character does not return in any form. A *reversible death* is one where a character returns in one of two ways. A *reversible-same form of death* is one in which the character seemingly comes back from a dead or seemingly dead state in his or her original body. In a *reversible-altered form of death*, the character returns either in a physically transformed state or the form of a spirit.

2.2.4. Emotional Reaction

This category refers to how the other characters in the movie responded to or dealt with the death. *Positive emotion* refers to a character or characters being visibly happy (e.g., smiling, cheering) or showing signs of relief. *Negative emotion* refers to a character or characters reacting with frustration, remorse, anger, or general signs of sadness (e.g., crying). *Lacking emotion* refers to characters reacting to death as if it is inconsequential or the death is not dealt with or acknowledged by all characters.

2.2.5. Causality

Causality refers to what led to or caused the death and whether the death portrayed as justified or unjustified. In a *purposeful death*, a character dies as the result of another character’s intent to harm or kill him or her. An *accidental death* refers to one where the death was unintentional and was the result of an unplanned event. In addition to being either purposeful or accidental, we coded death events as being either justified or unjustified. *Justified deaths* were ones in which the character who died had done something that warranted punishment; the general message conveyed was that they “deserved” to die. *Unjustified deaths* were ones in which the character did not do anything wrong; there was a sense that they did not deserve to die.

2.2.6. Coping Mechanisms

Unlike previous studies, the original study, we also consider the coping mechanisms used by the characters after a death. Families who displayed *positive coping skills* included support-seeking, self-reliance, and accommodation. Specific positive coping mechanisms included getting support from friends and loved ones, allowing oneself to express sadness, hugging and trying to accomplish positive goals that a loved one who has passed would encourage. Families who displayed *negative coping skills* in movies included escape, social isolation, and opposition. Specific negative coping mechanisms included isolation, seeking revenge, and being overly cautious to the point of restricting oneself from opportunities and experiences.

2.3. Intercoder Reliability

In the original study, two coders rated the selected films. Intercoder reliability was judged as acceptable if the raters achieved more than 70% agreement on all categories, using Cohen's Kappa. We tested the reliability between coders on a subsample of four films (40% of the sample). Intercoder reliability was computed for each of the five categories of interest: character status ($K = 1.00$), depiction of death ($K = 0.92$), death status ($K = 1.00$), emotional reaction ($K = 1.00$) and causality ($K = 0.87$).

In the current study, two coders rated the selected films and we computed intercoder reliability for each of the five categories of interest: character status ($K = 1.00$), depiction of death ($K = 1.00$), death status ($K = 1.00$), emotional reaction ($K = 1.00$) and causality ($K = 1.00$).

3. Results

3.1. Character Status: 1937–2003 (Disney) and 2003–2016 (Disney/Pixar)

In the 10 Disney films from 1937–2003, a total of 23 death scenes were analyzed. There were nearly balanced portrayals of death for protagonists, main characters depicted as the “good guy” (52%; $n = 12$) and antagonists, depicted as villainous (48%; $n = 11$) in those scenes. From 2003–2016, a total of 10 death scenes occurred in the 8 Disney films used in our investigation. The majority of these deaths were of protagonists. Out of the 10 characters who died, 70% were protagonists ($n = 7$) and 30% ($n = 3$) were antagonists (see Table 1). Films, where a protagonist died, included *Finding Nemo*, *Up*, *The Princess and the Frog*, *Frozen*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana*. Films, where an antagonist died, included *The Incredibles*, *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*.

3.2. Depiction of Death: 1937–2003 (Disney) and 2003–2016 (Disney/Pixar)

From Disney films (1937–2003), implicit death, wherein death or a dead body was directly shown resulted in 43% of total deaths ($n = 10$) and explicit death, wherein death was implied and not shown accounted for 48% ($n = 11$). Based upon character status, implicit deaths was more common among antagonists (70%; $n = 7$) than protagonists (30%; $n = 3$). For explicit deaths, a total of 64% occurred among protagonists ($n = 7$) and 36% were of antagonists ($n = 4$). Sleep death represented a smaller percentage of death instances (9%; $n = 2$) in which both occurred among protagonists.

We found that there was a much higher prevalence of implicit deaths than explicit deaths in Disney films from 2003–2016. Implicit death represented 80% of total deaths ($n = 8$), while only 20% of deaths were explicit ($n = 2$). There was an equal amount of explicit deaths between a protagonist (50%; $n = 1$) and an antagonist (50%; $n = 1$). In contrast, implicit deaths occurred more among protagonists (75%; $n = 6$), than antagonists (25%; $n = 2$) in implicit death scenes. Sleep death did not occur in any of selected films (see Table 1).

Table 1. Depiction of Death by Character Type (2003–2016).

Depiction of Death	Protagonist	%	Antagonist	%	Total
Explicit death	1	50%	1	50%	2
Implicit death	6	75%	2	25%	8
Sleep death	0	0%	0	0%	0
Total	7	70%	3	30%	10

Note: Percentages are row percentages. Films containing explicit death included *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*. Films containing implicit death included *Finding Nemo*, *The Incredibles*, *Up*, *The Princess and the Frog*, *Frozen*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana*.

3.3. Death Status: 1937–2003 (Disney) and 2003–2016 (Disney/Pixar)

Most deaths depicted in Disney films from 1937–2003 were permanent, final and irreversible (74%; $n = 17$). For permanent deaths, the number was higher among antagonists (59%; $n = 10$) than protagonists (41%; $n = 7$). Reversible deaths ($n = 6$; all protagonists) accounted for 26% of death

scenes. Four of the characters (i.e., 67%) returned in their same form and two (i.e., 33%) reappeared in altered forms.

Like Disney films from 1937–2003, most deaths depicted in films from 2003–2016 were permanent, final and irreversible (90%; $n = 9$). For permanent deaths, the number was higher among protagonists (67%; $n = 6$) than antagonists (33%; $n = 3$). Reversible deaths ($n = 1$; protagonist; altered form) accounted for 10% of death scenes. None of the reversible deaths were same form reversible deaths (see Table 2).

Table 2. Death Status by Character Type (2003–2016).

Death Status	Protagonist	%	Antagonist	%	Total
Reversible/Same	0	0%	0	0%	0
Reversible/Altered	1	100%	0	0%	1
Permanent/Final	6	66.66%	3	33.33%	9
Total	7	70%	3	30%	10

Note: Percentages are row percentages. The film that included reversible/altered death was *Moana*. Films containing permanent/final death included *Finding Nemo*, *The Incredibles*, *Up*, *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, *Frozen* and *Big Hero 6*.

3.4. Emotional Reaction: 1937–2003 (Disney) and 2003–2016 (Disney/Pixar)

The most prevalent type of emotional reaction in the original study was negative emotions (i.e., sadness or anger), which occurred in 48% of death scenes ($n = 11$). The deaths of protagonists accounted for 91% ($n = 10$) of the negative emotional responses compared to only 9% ($n = 1$) from the death of an antagonist. The deaths of antagonists solely accounted for 13% ($n = 3$) of the positive emotional responses. In the original study, neutral or lacking emotion accounted for 39% of death scenes ($n = 9$) and the clear majority were connected to antagonists deaths (78%; $n = 7$) compared to protagonist deaths (22%; $n = 2$).

Negative emotional responses were observed for most death scenes (70%; $n = 7$) in Disney and Pixar films from 2003–2016. All of the negative emotional responses (100%; $n = 7$) were for protagonists deaths rather than antagonists deaths. Positive emotion occurred in only 10% of deaths ($n = 1$) and resulted from the death of an antagonist. Neutral or lacking emotion occurred in 20% of death scenes ($n = 2$) and associated with the deaths of antagonists ($n = 2$) (see Table 3).

Table 3. Emotional Reactions by Character Type (2003–2016).

Emotional Reaction	Protagonist	%	Antagonist	%	Total
Positive emotion	0	0%	1	100%	1
Negative emotion	7	100%	0	0%	7
Lacking emotion	0	0%	2	100%	2
Total	7	70%	3	30%	10

Note: Percentages are row percentages. The film that included positive emotional reaction was *The Incredibles*. Films containing negative emotional reaction included *Finding Nemo*, *Up*, *The Princess and the Frog*, *Frozen*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana*. Films lacking emotion included *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*.

3.5. Causality: 1937–2003 (Disney) and 2003–2016 (Disney/Pixar)

From Disney films (1937–2003), purposeful deaths, wherein a character was intentionally killed, resulted in 70% ($n = 16$) of all deaths compared to accidental deaths (30%; $n = 7$). For purposeful deaths, 38% of deaths were justified ($n = 6$) and 62% of deaths were unjustified ($n = 10$). For accidental deaths, 71% ($n = 5$) were justified and 29% ($n = 2$) were unjustified. The frequency of justified deaths (48%, $n = 11$), wherein the character who died had done something that warranted punishment, and unjustified deaths (52%; $n = 12$), wherein the character who died did nothing wrong, was nearly equal. When the interactions of the causality categories were examined together (i.e., purposeful-justified, purposeful-unjustified, accidental-justified, and accidental-unjustified), the findings indicated: all purposeful-justified deaths ended with the death of an antagonist ($n = 6$), and all purposeful-unjustified

deaths were among protagonists ($n = 10$). Furthermore, all the accidental-justified deaths were antagonists ($n = 5$) compared to accidental-unjustified deaths were protagonists ($n = 2$).

In the Disney/Pixar analysis from 2003–2016, accidental deaths occurred most frequently, that is, 70% ($n = 7$) of all deaths compared to purposeful deaths (30%; $n = 3$). For accidental deaths, 14% ($n = 1$) were justified and 86% ($n = 6$) were unjustified. Out of accidental deaths, 67% ($n = 2$) were justified and 33% ($n = 1$) was unjustified. The frequency of unjustified deaths (70%, $n = 7$) was more prevalent than justified deaths (30%; $n = 3$). When the interactions of the causality categories were examined together (i.e., purposeful-justified, purposeful-unjustified, accidental-justified, and accidental-unjustified), we found the following: all purposeful-justified deaths resulted in the death of antagonists ($n = 2$) and all purposeful-unjustified deaths was a protagonist ($n = 1$). The accidental-justified death was an antagonist ($n = 1$), and the accidental-unjustified deaths were protagonists ($n = 6$) (see Table 4).

Table 4. Cause of Death by Character Type (2003–2016).

Depiction of Death	Protagonist	%	Antagonist	%	Total
Accidental-justified	0	0%	1	100%	1
Accidental-unjustified	6	100%	0	0%	6
Purposeful-justified	0	0%	2	100%	2
Purposeful-unjustified	1	100%	0	0%	1
Total	7	70%	3	30%	10

Note: Percentages are row percentages. The film that included accidental-justified death was *The Incredibles*. Films that included accidental-unjustified death included *Finding Nemo*, *Up*, *The Princess and the Frog*, *Frozen*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana*. Films that included purposeful-justified death included *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*. The film that included purposeful-unjustified death was *The Princess and the Frog*.

4. Discussion

The primary goals of the current study were to examine the representation of death in full-length animated Disney Classic films (1937–2003) to full-length animated Disney/Pixar films (2003–2016). Based on the updated content analysis, several trends supported our first primary research objectives and confirmed the findings of previous work by Cox et al. (2005), and Tenzek and Nickels (2017). After analyzing these trends, we will also discuss how the portrayal of death in these films might influence children’s understanding of death.

4.1. Character Status

In the Disney Film Analysis (1937–2003), there were almost equal numbers of protagonist and antagonist deaths. The similar numbers demonstrated that both “good” and “bad” character types are susceptible to death and that positive characters may also die (Brent et al. 1996; Willis 2002). In Disney and Pixar full-length feature films from 2003–2016, there was not an equal distribution of characters. Surprisingly, there were more protagonist deaths than antagonist deaths. The unequal distribution, even more so, shows that all characters are vulnerable.

4.2. Depiction of Death

In their original study, Cox et al. (2005) noted that explicit deaths were more prevalent in scenes where protagonists died. They argue that it could be positive because the scenes demonstrate real, explicit deaths of characters to whom the viewer has developed an attachment, but that it could be potentially traumatic for some children. Throwing Mufasa to his death in *The Lion King* is an example of a death that could be traumatic. Overall, the Disney Film Analysis (1937–2003) had a relatively equal amount of explicit and implicit deaths, while the Disney Film Analysis (2003–2016) had very few explicit deaths. These results show how the depiction of death has changed over time to less direct and less traumatic representations.

Animated Disney and Pixar films have not stopped showing death, but it does seem that they are beginning to move away from scenes that may be especially distressing, such explicit death, like

findings by [Tenzek and Nickels \(2017\)](#). Implicit deaths occurred mostly among antagonists in the Disney Film Analysis (1937–2003). [Cox et al. \(2005\)](#) discussed how this might send the message that their deaths were inconsequential in comparison to those of the protagonists. This trend was not evident in the current investigation, and most deaths were implicit regardless of the protagonist or antagonist status. However, the increase in implicit deaths could make all deaths, even those of protagonists, seem incidental.

Lastly, [Cox et al. \(2005\)](#) discussed the sleep deaths that occurred in films from 1937–2003. Two sleep deaths occurred in two movies that came out before the 1970s: *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White*. They explained that the fact that sleep deaths did not occur in Disney films released post-1970s may be a trend that there is an increase in children's exposure to death and is now a more acceptable issue in American culture. This idea seems to have continued through the 2000s since there were no sleep deaths in any of the films examined in the current study.

4.3. Death Status

Most deaths as noted in the original study were permanent. [Cox et al. \(2005\)](#) asserted that this was positive because it enforced the idea of the finality of death. Witnessing death in Disney films might help some children experience and comprehend the complexities of death sooner. They further contended that it is essential that parents and teachers guide children through the processes of learning about death; otherwise, they might be upset at the permanence of death. Most deaths in the Disney Film Analysis (2003–2016) and [Tenzek and Nickels \(2017\)](#) were also permanent deaths. [Renaud et al. \(2015\)](#) discussed how it is possible that the irreversibility of death is a concept learned through experience, rather than an explanation. They continued to say that parents may want to explore ways to remember those who pass away, rather than focusing on the end of the physical relationship that we experience when someone dies.

In the Disney Film Analysis (1937–2003), six deaths were reversible, and all of them occurred among protagonists. The authors discussed how this implies that antagonists do not get a second chance at life, while protagonists are more likely to have this chance. Half of the protagonists "came back" in some form or fashion. [Cox et al. \(2005\)](#) used the example of a scene in *The Lion King* where Mufasa returns from the grave to communicate with his son Simba. The authors concluded that was meant to show children that loved ones can always be a part of them, even after death. However, young children may misinterpret this scene with the idea that their loved one may return ([Worden and Silverman 1996](#)).

In the current investigation, the film *Moana* had a very similar example of this where Moana's grandmother comes back in the form of a stingray to help guide Moana on her journey through the ocean. This scene was very similar to the intent behind Mufasa's return in *The Lion King*, but one could easily misinterpret the intent. *Moana* is the one and the only film where there is any reversible death in the Disney Film Analysis (2003–2016), which is a reversible altered form of death. This finding highlights one of the most significant changes among studies on the topic of death status (e.g., [Cox et al. 2005](#); [Tenzek and Nickels 2017](#)). Also, the direction of change indicates that Disney and Pixar films might be moving away from these ideas of reversible death. This finding also goes back to the thoughts about the positives of permanent deaths in children's movies.

It is worth reiterating that cultural and religious differences impact beliefs about death status. In some belief systems, death is not considered permanent. Beliefs about death may include reincarnation of a person; the body dies but, the soul lives on and many more beliefs that do not promote the idea that death is final. As a large corporation, Disney has viewers all over the world who may view films differently due to their religion. While some researchers may suggest that children who do not believe death is permanent are in a lower stage of development, this notion does not consider cultural differences. Instead, children who subscribe to a belief system wherein death is not considered permanent and espouse these views may be more developmentally mature because they have demonstrated abstract thinking ([Brent et al. 1996](#)).

4.4. Emotional Reaction

In the Disney Film Analysis (1937–2003), most of the negative emotion resulted as a reaction to a protagonist's death. This might serve as a model of grieving to some children who lack the knowledge or experience with death (Baker et al. 1992). This finding paralleled the Disney Film Analysis (2003–2016), where the emotional reactions to all protagonist deaths were negative.

In both studies, positive emotion occurred only in reaction to antagonist deaths. However, this was not very common and happened only three times in the Disney Film Analysis (1937–2003) and only once in the Disney Film Analysis (2003–2016). In both studies, all the deaths lacking emotional reactions were antagonists' deaths. These results continue to show the portrayal of antagonists' deaths as unacknowledged. However, the few antagonists deaths that are acknowledged, are portrayed positively and jubilantly. In the Disney Film Analysis (2003–2016), only the death of Syndrome, the antagonist in *The Incredibles*, has a response of relief and celebration. This finding shows that fewer deaths are being reacted to positively in these films. This finding has promise, as it teaches children that it is appropriate and entirely reasonable to feel negative emotions surrounding death.

4.5. Causality

In both studies, we found that all justified deaths were antagonist deaths. Similarly, all unjustified deaths were among protagonists. These results further demonstrate the trend to denounce the antagonists to a point where viewers perceive them as deserving death in Disney and Pixar full-length animated films. The deaths of antagonists often result from accidents; however, many animated films portray that the antagonists have done harmful things, so they deserve to die. Their accidental death allows them to “get what they deserve” while still permitting the protagonists to look good. It reinforces the idea that the protagonists are too good to kill others, which is why the antagonists must die accidentally. Cox et al. (2005) use a scene from *Beauty and the Beast* to illustrate this idea between Gaston (the antagonist) and the Beast (the protagonist). In the scene, Gaston purposefully stabs the Beast who “accidentally” causes Gaston to lose his balance on the castle tower and fall to his death.

A similar example can be seen in *The Incredibles* when Syndrome (the antagonist) is escaping in his plane. Mr. Incredible (the protagonist) throws a car up at the plane to try and stop it. This action does not directly kill Syndrome, but it results in Syndrome being sucked up into the engine. Mr. Incredible does not directly kill him and continues in his “good guy” image, but it still results in the death of the “bad guy.” In the Disney Film Analysis (1937–2003), protagonists were most often purposely killed by antagonists. The direct intent to kill further demonstrated the evil of the antagonists. In the Disney Film Analysis (2003–2016), almost all protagonists died because of an accident (i.e., illness, a fire, war, etc.). There was also only a total of 3 purposeful deaths overall, which is the biggest change from the Disney Film Analysis (1937–2003). It seems that children's films, specifically Disney films, are starting to move away from purposeful deaths where one character purposely kills another and toward more “realistic” and common causes of death. A universal portrayal of death is not only more relatable for children, but it moves away from fatalities that may make it seem like it is okay to take another life. The reasons for this shift are notable, but they are not the focus of the current investigation. We encourage future research to examine the economic, brand, marketing, or other factors related to this apparent shift with Disney and Pixar.

4.6. Behavioral and Emotional Regulation

Unlike previous studies, the original study, we also consider the coping mechanisms used by the characters after a death. Incorporation of coping mechanisms in a storyline that includes death is essential, as characters can serve as models for children on how to cope with death in their own lives (Corr 2010). Characters could demonstrate which coping mechanisms are positive and effective versus which mechanisms are negative and unhelpful. Families who displayed positive coping skills

included support-seeking, self-reliance, and accommodation (Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck 2007). Specific positive coping mechanisms included getting support from friends and loved ones, allowing oneself to express sadness, hugging and trying to accomplish positive goals that a loved one who has passed would encourage. At least three movies included a character trying to achieve a goal that their passed loved one encouraged. One example was in *Moana*, wherein Moana's grandmother helped her to retrieve a magical stone that would save their island, even as the grandmother was dying. Though she faces trials and tribulations, Moana is determined to accomplish this goal and finds motivation through her grandmother's spirit. In doing so, she becomes more confident and happier.

Families who displayed negative coping skills in movies included escape, social isolation, and opposition (Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck 2007). Specific negative coping mechanisms included isolation, seeking revenge and being overly cautious to the point of restricting oneself from opportunities and experiences. Characters in the films stopped using these coping strategies after realizing they did not feel better. For example, in *Big Hero 6*, the protagonist Hiro attempted to avenge his brother Tadashi's death by ordering a robot to kill the man who set the fire that killed Tadashi. However, Hiro's friends discouraged his malicious intent, and the robot questioned if killing this man would improve Hiro's emotional state. Hiro realized hurting other people would not make him feel better. While of course, this was an exaggerated version of events that would happen in a child's life after losing a loved one, the child may understand that taking out anger on other people after a death is never the answer. It is worth noting that coping mechanisms were not utilized after the death of an antagonist, because characters' lives were either unchanged or improved by an antagonist death. Therefore, *The Incredibles* and *Tangled* did not contain coping mechanisms.

Family and friend support were crucial to the characters' coping styles. In the film *Up*, without any support system, Carl, once vibrant and full of life, turned into a grumpy, aggressive person following the death of his wife. He became isolated from the world. However, once Carl made a true connection with Russell, Carl began to appreciate happy memories with his wife and regained a more positive outlook on the world. In all films, if a protagonist at first employed a negative coping strategy, they at some point came to understand this strategy did not work or was unhealthy. By all of the films' ends, characters found healthier ways to cope and express emotions. Each film ended with the protagonist happy and in positive surroundings.

4.7. Emerging Trends in the Disney Film Analysis (2003–2016) Films

Of the films in the current study, only *Finding Nemo* and *The Princess and the Frog* depicted non-human deaths, incorporating the death of a fish and the death of a bug, respectively. Both characters were protagonists. Though the characters were not human, they were humanized through abstract concepts like having aspirations and fears as well as concrete concepts like having a family and talking. Because the non-human characters were protagonists and were humanized, their deaths were treated no different than those of human characters and both deaths were met with negative emotion. It is worth exploring if the death of a non-humanized character would be met with the same level of emotion as a human character.

Another trend of the deaths in the current study was familial ties to the main character. Of the seven protagonists who died in these films, six were related to the main character either through blood or marriage. This could be an intentional mechanism to make the death more relatable and understandable to children who may encounter the death of a close relative. No antagonists were technically related to the main character. In *Tangled*, Mother Gothel attempted to portray herself as Rapunzel's mother, but she was her kidnapper. In simple terms, the bad guys were never related to the main character, who was always portrayed as good.

Of the ten total deaths, only two deaths seem to occur in old age. In *Up*, though Ellie's actual cause of death is not disclosed, she is an old woman when she dies. Likewise, in *Moana*, Moana's grandmother's cause of death is not disclosed, but she is also an old woman. All other characters are at least in early adulthood at the time of their death. Ray's age at the time of his death in *The Princess and*

the Frog is not entirely clear. It is interesting that the films do not depict the death of young characters and that there is only a small number of old characters who die.

5. Conclusions

The primary goal of this study was to examine how the depiction of death in animated Disney and Pixar films has changed in the past 14 years, keeping in mind past research on children's perceptions of death. We also examined the inclusion of coping mechanisms within these films. This study serves to gain more knowledge surrounding the findings of [Cox et al. \(2005\)](#), [Tenzek and Nickels \(2017\)](#) and to suggest areas worth further examination. These are not conclusive statements but observations of trends over time.

Developmental level and experience with death contribute to a child's ability to comprehend death ([Favazza and Munson 2010](#)). Experience with death can be direct, like the death of a relative, or indirect, like through media. Characters in media who have experienced loss might serve as models for grieving children by employing different coping mechanisms. Whether coping skills included in children's media are healthy or unhealthy, children could learn from them ([Corr 2004](#)). Coping mechanisms begin to develop in infancy and evolve as children mature ([Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck 2007](#)). This underscores the importance of fostering healthy, effective coping styles in children as early as possible.

Our findings indicate that Disney and Pixar films seem to be moving toward less explicit, more familiar and realistic displays of death. Many characters died as a result of illness, old age and tragic accidents (i.e., shipwreck, building catching on fire, war). These are more common scenarios that many children may hear about in real life. The films show most of these deaths partially, and almost all the deaths are made clear that they are irreversible. Many of these aspects seem to be pointing toward a more realistic portrayal of death. As discussed in [Cox et al. \(2005\)](#), [Tenzek and Nickels \(2017\)](#), these films may give children something to relate to when they are facing a loss.

The addition of identifying coping mechanisms also adds to this idea of helping children learn how to grieve and deal with a death. Films included in the Disney and Pixar Film Analysis (2003–2016) employed at least two of the four most common coping styles families use with children: support-seeking and escape ([Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck 2007](#)). This finding suggests that Disney characters' coping styles on-screen could be relatable to young viewers. Therefore, the fact that characters in these films replace ineffective coping mechanisms with healthy coping skills is a step in the right direction, as characters can serve as role models to children ([Corr 2004](#)). Further, the fact that characters who had or sought support from family or friends coped more healthily is positive for viewers, as it may demonstrate the influence of support systems in children's abilities to cope ([Corr 2010](#)). Overall, the coping skills related to death portrayed in Disney films are realistic and convey a message of importance about learning to cope healthily and effectively.

Though our content analysis provides compelling insight into changes over time in the portrayal of death and coping mechanisms related to death in Disney and Pixar films, there are some limitations of this study. First, like [Cox et al. \(2005\)](#), we used a convenience sample because the current study focused solely on Disney and Pixar movies that were known to contain death. Second, due to the small sample of films, the results may not generalize to other animated features. Third, our research focused on the idea that death is permanent, but many children may not agree with that idea, due to different belief systems.

Continuing studies in this field can focus on different types of animated films besides Disney or Pixar movies, as well as children's films that are not animated. Further, continuing studies could delve more into different trends in children's films, like how human versus non-human characters are treated or trends in characters' ages at time of death. Future studies could incorporate actual children as viewers into the study to analyze the actual impact these films have on their understanding of death, as opposed to researchers' interpretations of children's perceptions of death from animated films. Future research in this area should approach this topic from a more updated and empowering perspective, which moves away from viewing children as cognitively limited to sophisticated media

consumers. Finally, there is a pressing need for future research with an emphasis on cultural beliefs about death and how this relates to the depiction of death in children's media.

Through our research, we can begin to answer questions we previously posed: Do Disney and Pixar's depiction of death impact children's understanding of it? At some point in their lives, children will inevitably be exposed to death. If children are educated at a developmentally appropriate level, they can build on their understanding of death as they grow older. Media can tackle the realities of death and act as an example to grieving children (Webb 2010). The younger children begin this education, the more prepared they may be to cope with it in their life. Though we cannot definitively claim Disney and Pixar's portrayals of death have an impact on children's comprehension of death, we can state that we found examples of several coping mechanisms modeled by characters in these films. We assert that children could potentially learn what coping mechanisms are productive and healthy by watching characters enact different strategies and seeing the outcome of those strategies. While we can only speak to our specific study, we believe this is an excellent start to a complex concept.

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