


2021

**Portrayals of the Poor and Working Class in Children's Film: A
Thematic Analysis**

Christina Goldin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.assumption.edu/honorstheses>

 Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Portrayals of the Poor and Working Class in Children's Film: A Thematic Analysis

Christina Goldin

Faculty Supervisor: Cinzia Pica-Smith, Ph.D.

Department of Human Services and Rehabilitation Studies

A Thesis Submitted to Fulfill Requirements of the Honors Program at Assumption University

Spring 2021

One day this summer as I was driving the two children that I care for to the craft store, we came to a stop at a red light and an ungroomed old man emerged, clutching a shopping cart which held only two tattered plastic bags. I immediately began to reach for change, having taken immediate note of the cardboard sign propped up -- a desperate plea for money with which to eat -- when my little girl reached out and grabbed my arm to stop me. "Don't," she told me, her eyes wide and more serious than usual. "People like him don't deserve anything from people like you."

In that moment, frozen in the red light, it truly felt like time stood still as I fumbled for something to say through the fog of shock and confusion that resulted from her words. I began to remember each of the instances before, wherein these children had expressed to me in some manner that poor and/or working class individuals are violent, drug-users or alcoholics, or greedy. By the time the light turned green, I was overwhelmed with questions. What, besides these negative stereotypes, had my children learned about the working class and poor people, and where had they learned it? Where, in their sheltered affluent suburban life, had they drawn assumptions surrounding people with whom they rarely had contact -- including a superiority complex?

Most of the time, I can write off these types of exchanges; something made easier by the fact that they usually spill from the mouths of my grown relatives, whose decades of life experience have informed and hardened the assumptions they hold around poverty, homelessness and socioeconomic class. At first, I thought maybe the reason that this particular experience lingered was because my little girl is so young -- she has not even been alive a full decade and still remains convinced that she holds moral ground over those who are less economically privileged than her. After much reflection though, I realized that the main reason this experience felt so significant was that I, too, had embarrassingly enough been that little girl.

Growing up, I lived in two separate worlds. One was a fairytale, filled to the brim with modern-day monarchs, masquerading as lawyers, doctors, and dentists; and their children, my peers, were the heirs to their thrones. We roamed our heavily guarded castles, treated to only the best quality equipment, faculty, toys, and so on and so forth. The other was certainly not so glamorous; my friends at home spent their days in crumbling schools with rapidly cycling staff, and walked home each day to empty households that filled long after they had turned in for the night, often hungry. I wish I could write that I always recognized the immense socioeconomic privilege I experienced throughout my public schooling, but I did not.

When my best friend at home informed me that her oldest sister had to proofread her own college recommendation letter, I wish I would have questioned why rather than immediately concluding that her teacher was unintelligent. Perhaps I would have learned sooner than underfunded schools, such as that of my hometown, have significantly higher rates of staff turnover per year, leading to extensive difficulties with initiating and maintaining employment with qualified teachers (NCTAF, 2004). And, when my peers and I prepared for our third round of standardized testing that my friends at home considered themselves lucky to take even once, I wish I would have jumped to a conclusion other than perceiving their actions as laziness.

Each of these recollections made the main questions that guided this project exceedingly clear to me. Why did my classmates and I have this unspoken, yet unanimous and certainly negative view of individuals who were less socioeconomically privileged than us? Why, despite our having minimal to no contact with these groups, did we have clear ideas about what they look like, why they are poor, what they deserve from life, and other such things? After all, a large part of the reason that I went into working with children is that they tend to be far more flexible and open minded than adults, thus making it easier to teach them kindness and respect for human dignity – so where were we getting these ideas about class from at such a young age?

Certainly the ways that children learn about any construct are manifold. Children receive explicit and implicit messages from parents, extended family, peers, in community settings, and through participation in our institutions. One important way that children participate in society is through their participation in our media. Is it possible, perhaps, that children learn about social class from the media that they consume? In this paper, I will conduct analytical, thematic research on a handful of the highest grossing children's films of the past five years, in hopes of discovering the reigning frameworks of poverty that dominate children's media.

Literature Review

My literature review will focus on three main frameworks through which scholars understand the development and maintenance of poverty: deficit ideology, grit ideology, and structural ideology (Gorski, 2016). Deficit ideology, in its most basic sense, attributes an individual's economic misfortunes to his or her behavior, culture, attitudes, values, and/or spirituality rather than recognizing the institutional and systemic factors that contribute to that person's oppression. This ideology is often presented to the public eye to depict marginalized groups as undeserving of a better lifestyle, thus enabling those in power to reflect the idea that if people wished to climb the ladder of social power, they would simply try harder. Certainly, there is no shortage of evidence that deficit ideology has commonly been perpetuated throughout history to maintain power for the wealthy, and ensure the poor stay poor (Brantlinger, 2003; Gorski, 2006; Gorski, 2016).

Grit ideology is a particular manifestation of deficit ideology which has grown in popularity over the past couple years. Despite acknowledging that certain systemic factors contribute -- at least to some degree -- to poverty, proponents of grit ideology ultimately hold that such factors cannot be removed. Consequently, people living in poverty must simply deal with them, predominantly through developing grit and resilience. Those in opposition to grit ideology argue that merely developing grit

does not effectively solve the severe obstacles individuals living in poverty face on the daily; such as food shortages, housing discrimination and instability, or the shortcomings of the public education system. Furthermore, grit ideology ignores the fact that individuals who live in poverty are often discriminated against across multiple areas of their lives, and therefore generally possess substantially more grit than the average working or upper class individual (Gorski, 2016).

The first significant emergence of grit ideology can be located within *Poverty USA* (1967). Written by anthropologist Thomas Gladwin, this book served as a key endorsement to the Johnson Administration's War on Poverty. On the one hand, Gladwin seems to acknowledge certain obstacles that impoverished communities must navigate, and advocates for the redistribution of funds and other resources to poor individuals. On the other hand, he also seems to perpetuate and endorse Lewis's culture of poverty, going so far as to directly reference it within his work. In contrast to Lewis, however, Gladwin asserts that the only way to correct poverty is to make poor individuals more resilient. He writes: "if poverty is both the cause and result of a way of life in which self-defeating behaviors are learned by each rising generation, then any attack on poverty should try to modify these behaviors [...] if the cycle is to be broken, poor people must among other things be taught new and more effective ways of functioning" (Gladwin, 1967, p. 112). Such a sentiment clearly reflects grit ideology, as Gladwin clearly states that to combat poverty, individuals who deal with it should simply develop different, more resilient ways of functioning.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, structural ideology understands poverty and its related disadvantages as attributable to "economic injustice, exploitation, and inequity" (Gorski, 2016, p. 380). Within a structural framework, people experiencing poverty are seen as victims of a society tailored to disadvantage them, rather than the causes of their own misfortunes. Despite its popularity among a legion of scholars, structural ideology is presented to the general public far less than both grit ideology and deficit ideology.

Origins and Expansion of Deficit Ideology

The roots of deficit ideology and its accompanying “culture of poverty” can be traced back to the publication of Oscar Lewis’s *The Children of Sanchez* (1961). Prior to Lewis’s work, impoverished communities were viewed poorly, at best, and were thought to genetically transmit negative traits such as laziness, arrogance, and egoism to their children (Dworin & Bomer, 2008). They were unanimously viewed by society as undeserving of basic necessities (ie: food, water, clothing) due to their absence from the workforce; which was attributed not to societal prejudice, but rather to not trying hard enough and alleged alcoholism, drug addiction, and criminal activity. In order to “fix” these shortcomings, it was believed that poor communities were in need of a Christian religion, prohibition laws, and marriage counseling to fix their purportedly “broken” families (Dworin & Bomer, 2008).

The Children of Sanchez (1961) introduced the ‘culture of poverty,’ which portrayed impoverished communities and individuals as “lazy, fatalistic, hedonistic, violent, distrustful people living in common law unions as well as in dysfunctional, female-centered, authoritarian families, who are chronically unemployed and rarely participate in civil activities, vote, or trust the police and political leaders” (Dworin & Bomer, 2008, p. 105). Rather than a set of genetically transmitted undesirable traits, Lewis argued that these characteristics were perpetuated by the surrounding environment; that is, the lifestyle and traits common among the poor were responsible for keeping them impoverished. Lewis’s ‘culture of poverty’ shifted the very definition of poverty from a lack of financial resources to an inferior culture, consisting of various negative behavioral patterns and attitudes about the world. Importantly, even with the shift from genetic deficit ideology to Lewis’s ‘culture of poverty,’ the pathology remained within the individual rather than examining dominating oppressive systems of power that existed in society (Bomer, Dworin, May & Semingson, 2008).

Deficit ideology and its connection to race and poverty did not end with Lewis. Rather, a large body of scholars latched onto it, integrating it into the academic world. Its next marked appearance was in Daniel P. Moynihan's (1965) famous government report, titled: *The [Black] Family: A Case for National Action*, or, the "Moynihan Report." While Moynihan never mentioned Lewis by name, his paper is fraught with aspects of the culture of poverty; particularly those elements pertinent to the poor and dysfunctional families. In his report, he wrote "at the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure. Once or twice removed, it will be found to be the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior [...] to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation" (Moynihan, 1965, p. 30; Valencia, 2010, p. 72). In addition to perpetuating the idea that dysfunctional families are responsible for continued cycles of poverty, this sentiment is particularly problematic because it further reinforces the idea that impoverished communities are predominantly people of color -- in this case, African-American individuals. Within this context, it is important to note that Lewis's original culture of poverty was based on a case study of a Mexican community, thus prompting the initial association between people of color and poverty.

The next historically significant instance of deficit ideology can be located in *The Unheavenly City: The Nature and Future of our Urban Crisis* (1970). The author, Edward C. Banfield, focuses on one particular alleged defect of poor individuals and communities: the inability to think about or plan for the future. He writes that poor individuals are "unable or unwilling to plan for the future, to sacrifice immediate gratification in favor of true ones, or to accept the disciplines that are required in order to get and to spend [money]" (Banfield, 1970, pp. 125-126; Valencia, 2010, p. 73). This sentiment, particularly the latter half, heavily implies that poverty is caused by the inability to practice restraint, and the subsequent absence of thought about the future. After heavily emphasizing this particular deficit, Banfield also asserts that the poor are impulsive, imprudent, lazy, violent, and hyper-sexual

(Banfield, 1970; Valencia, 2010, p. 73). He concludes by writing that the culture of poverty is highly abnormal, and must be fixed, further cementing his deficit-orientation.

After the 1970s, the idea of the culture of poverty truly took off; most notably with the publication of *The Underclass* (1982). The author, Ken Auletta, wrote about four distinct categories of poor individuals, each of which endorses a different deficit which is stereotypically attributed to the poor. The passive poor promotes the idea that poor individuals are lazy and receive undue benefits which they have not worked for. The “hospital” group affirms that idea that the poor are violent, terroristic, and tend to struggle with addiction. The “hustlers” group perpetuates that the poor are prone to criminal and illegal activity. And, the “traumatized” group serves to strengthen the idea that poor individuals are victimized and weak. In analysis, academic scholar Valencia writes that: “Auletta focuses on deviant, pathological behavior of those individuals in the underclass, rather than examining systemic or structural factors in the larger society that lead to such grave economic and living conditions for the very poor” (Valencia, 2010, p. 74).

In 1995, popular administrator Ruby Payne published *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*; a book meant to assist educators with addressing issues of socioeconomic class in their classrooms. Payne’s book, a required read for educators in thirty-eight states, insists that children who are less economically privileged infiltrate the exceptional public school system with their ‘culture of poverty,’ therefore presenting major difficulties to educators simply trying to maintain order within their classroom. According to Payne, the ‘culture of poverty’ is discerned by examining its “hidden rules,” which Payne defines as “the unspoken cues and habits of a group” (1995, p. 37). Similarly to Lewis’ (1961) original work, the “hidden rules” offered by Payne can be understood as the behaviors and mindsets which serve to uphold a status of poverty. She offers several examples, including: the noise level is always high, communication primarily takes on a physical form rather than verbal due to poor linguistic skills, and entertainment/humor is valued over hard work (Payne, 1995). Evidently,

each of these “hidden rules” exists opposite to behaviors valued within the school system, such as speaking only when called on, using indoor voices, and working hard to achieve good grades. To “fix” children from impoverished backgrounds, Payne urges educators to teach children living in poverty the superior values of the middle class, which are allegedly vital to educational success, as well as future occupational opportunities (Gorski, 2008). Payne’s work reflects clear deficit-thinking within the public education system, wherein educators are encouraged to take on the mindset that, based on socioeconomic class, some children are inferior to others.

Framework (1995) has been heavily criticized by a multitude of scholars for the absence of a verifiable research method, a substantial lack of evidence, countless inaccuracies, and blatant classism (Barton, 2004; NCTAF, 2004; Carey, 2004; Gorski, 2005, 2008, 2016; Dudley-Marling, 2007; Bomer, Dworin, May & Semingson, 2008; Dworin & Bomer, 2008; Thomas, 2010; Pinto & Cresnik, 2014). Aside from its disregard for the systemic factors which both foster and enable structures of power that have traditionally caused poverty, particular aspects of the “culture of poverty” exist in direct contradiction with decades of past research. Examples include Payne’s portrayals of lower class family structure and values, criminal tendencies, language and register, work ethic, and ideas about the prevalence of substance abuse and addiction (Gorski, 2008; Bomer, Dworin, May & Semingson, 2008). Despite the evidence based rebuttal of “Framework,” it continues to implicitly influence school policy, educator’s attitudes, and children’s experiences with the school system at large simply by existing as a tool presented to educators. Despite harsh criticism, Payne’s book is still published -- both in English and Spanish -- and has sold over one million copies across the United States. Payne and her workshops have worked with anywhere between 70% and 80% of educators in the United States, reflecting how deeply entrenched deficit ideology is in our society (Thomas, 2010).

Frameworks of Poverty as Presented Directly to Children

Substantially less has been written on how deficit ideology impacts the mindsets and attitudes that children hold towards the poor, and that which does exist is focused mainly on books. Russell W. Belk (1987) found that comic books often portrayed wealth as being earned through hard work (Belk, 1987; Streib, et al., 2016). Belk saw comic books as important to exploring the attitudes children might have about materialism and wealth, seeing as they were quite popular among children at the time of his study. In his analysis, he found the behaviors of the wealthy and deserving poor positioned in stark opposition to those of the undeserving poor. So long as the wealthy displayed selflessness, honesty, and self-control in spending, they were able to maintain their wealth. Poor characters were deemed “deserving” of receiving money if they demonstrated similar traits, such as being “honest, intelligent, and clean,” with only the absence of opportunity impeding their ability to gain money (Belk, 1987, p. 38). In contrast, the second group of impoverished characters were coined the “undeserving” poor due to their exhibition of such traits as laziness, unintelligence, and/or lack of motivation to find work (Belk, 1987). Though Belk’s analysis was not looking for deficit ideology, it is clearly abundant within the comic books that were studied. Traits that are valued in society, such as selflessness, honesty, self-control, intelligence, and cleanliness were all rewarded with wealth or with receiving money. Meanwhile, traits that are not, such as unintelligence, laziness, and lack of motivation were all used as justification for impoverished living conditions.

In 2000, John Levi Martin found similar presentations of negative attributes in characters who were presumably meant to represent the working and under classes. He conducted a lengthy sociological analysis on the popular children’s picture book “What do People do all Day?” by Richard Scarry. Martin ultimately concluded that, through the usage of well-known animals to represent different groups of people, not only were children learning about what people do all day, but also which types of people did what work within society (Martin, 2000). For example, dogs are widely recognized by society as being unwaveringly loyal; therefore within the society depicted in the

book, dogs fill the service sector. Foxes, which are widely regarded as cunning, sly, and intelligent utilize those traits within the book, as they fill the political arena of society. And cats, which have long been recognized as a symbol for femininity by most societies, fill what could be classified as stereotypically female roles, such as nursing, nannying, and other care-taking jobs. Therefore, readers learn that people who work in the service field are loyal like dogs, politicians are sly like foxes, and care-takers are feminine like cats (Martin, 2000). The majority of the time, Martin is able to make direct parallels between the job or group of people being portrayed, and Scarry's choice of animal; however, he pays special attention to the usage of pigs to represent the working class.

In early childhood, we are bombarded by images of pigs as lazy, dirty, messy farm-animals who spend their days rolling around in the mud, eating, and sleeping. Martin therefore grapples with why such a hard working group of people as the working-class would be portrayed as such. After all, within the book, the pigs - representing the human working class - are portrayed as lazy, fat, clumsy, unintelligent, and most of all, incapable of performing their jobs. In fact, 75% of the many accidents depicted within the book are caused by pigs, as opposed to a mere 2% being the fault of another species (Martin, 2000). While Martin's analysis is not focused on deficit ideology, he does not attribute to it the usage of pigs to portray working-class individuals; although there is certainly an argument to be made for it. Presumably, the primary conflict and focus of the book is not a character trying to achieve upwards mobility; however, if a pig were to attempt to move up in the class system, it is unlikely that he or she would be welcome to do so, seeing as the traits of laziness, messiness, and unintelligence seem to be portrayed as inherent to being a pig. If we apply this same ideology to working class individuals, this is a clear instance of deficit ideology, wherein the class of working class individuals is justified by shortcomings in their traits and behaviors.

To add to previously existing studies focusing on negative depictions that were allegedly shared by people of the underclasses, Kelly and Darragh (2011) conducted a critical multicultural

analysis of children's picture books wherein they compared five separate dimensions of poverty to statistics from the US Census Bureau. Similarly to the aforementioned comic book study, the focus was not on deficit ideology, though it was certainly present. Of the five dimensions discussed, the one most relevant to considering the presentation of deficit ideology to children is entitled "action taken." This dimension considers two important factors: (i) whether or not any action was taken within the book to improve impoverished living conditions, and (ii) which characters took those actions (Kelly & Darragh, 2011). Across the fifty-eight books that were analyzed in this study, 52.3% of them showed a poor character taking action to improve his or her socioeconomic status. In comparison, only 17.54% of the books showed another character helping the poor to improve their living conditions, while only 1.75% of the books saw characters fighting for systemic change (Kelly & Barragh, 2011). These numbers show that the majority of children's picture books, at least in this large sample, communicate the message that poor individuals are responsible for lifting themselves out of poverty; presumably by changing certain behavior patterns or personality traits that are holding them back (ie: the culture of poverty). Evidently, there is a great deal of deficit ideology underlying this statement. By suggesting that people can escape poverty through taking such simple actions as getting a job, it is subsequently implied that people who continue to exist in poverty simply lack motivation, or some other entity like it within themselves, otherwise they would not be so financially challenged. Such an implication clearly endorses deficit ideology, as it implies that the individual is responsible for his or her own poverty, without considering systemic factors -- such as the fact that minimum wage jobs, which are often filled by people who cannot afford higher education despite their best efforts, do not pay enough to support a financially secure living.

While numerous studies have been conducted examining frameworks of poverty in children's literature, there exists another genre of media worth analyzing. Children's literature is instrumental to understanding the many ways in which children absorb information that helps shape their

understanding of the world around them. Equally as important, particularly in light of the technological advances of the twenty-first century, are children's films. To my knowledge, there exists only one published study examining which frameworks of poverty are presented to children through film. Streib, Wixed, and Ayala (2016) conducted a thorough coded analysis on each G-rated movie that grossed more than \$100 million as of January 1, 2014; a total of thirty-six movies. In a lengthy analysis, the authors identify two frameworks that dominate children's film: the benign metaframe and the malevolent metaframe.

The benign metaframe is that which undermines the legitimate barriers faced by individuals who are poor by framing poverty is nothing more than a minor inconvenience. Regarding the benign frame as a legitimate lens through which to view poverty is problematic, as it suggests poverty and socioeconomic class are relatively unproblematic and rare experiences which do not require attention or change (Streib et al., 2016). The authors found this frame most abundant in two particular areas of analysis: class representation and frames of class conditions. Relevant to the former, only 4% of the analyzed main characters represented the poor, and 16% were shown to be working class. In comparison, 22% were depicted as middle class, 25% were shown to be upper-middle class, and 30% were best described as upper class (Streib et al., 2016). Such skewed numbers are highly indicative of the benign frame. With only 20% of all primary characters across the most popular children's films representing the "under-class" (ie: the poor and working class), it is falsely implied that few individuals actually experience poverty.

Furthermore, in their analysis of frames of class conditions, the authors found that when the poor are present, their hardships are severely watered down, if present at all. In many instances, impoverished characters are often shown as having much bigger problems than financial stability; for example, Remy in *Ratatouille* finds his biggest problem to be the inferior tastes of the poor rather than being poor. Or, their struggles are compared to those of royalty (Streib et al., 2016).

Additionally, the benign frame is sometimes even applied to the origins of class inequity; for example, one of the themes identified by the authors is the naturalization of homophily, or the idea that it is natural for two characters to desire dating exclusively within their own social class. As a result of this theme, one might surmise that poverty is simply a natural consequence of preferences rather than something more complex (Streib et al., 2016). By enabling this frame to continually be presented in children's media, the result is likely that children learn to turn a blind eye to the legitimate worries and obstacles faced by people who are poor.

The malevolent metaframe, on the other hand, "highlights the hardships and unequal resources and validates them as just deserts for people of unequal worth" (Streib et al., 2016, p. 3). Through this frame, children are taught that poverty is a consequence of bad behavior or bad character traits. Streib and her fellow authors concluded that the malevolent frame was most present in frames of different classed characters and depictions of the class system as open; particularly when ideals of the American Dream were present. The "framing characters" theme of this study examined how different characters were framed based on their class. The authors found that, while primary characters who were born into poverty were generally kind and morally upright, secondary characters who were born into poverty were depicted as immoral, as well as deserving of their status. The malevolent frame was also present whenever a class system was portrayed as open -- that is, class mobility was possible -- particularly when the American Dream was present. The authors found that, rather than taking into account systemic factors that might be keeping an individual in poverty, a character's personality traits were often solid predictors as to what their class position would be at the end of the movie. They write: "all characters who are morally upstanding, care for others, play by the rules, are hardworking, and desire upward mobility achieve it. All characters who [are the opposite] are downwardly mobile or die" (Streib, 2016, p. 13). Consequently, poverty might

be viewed as a twisted form of serving justice to people who deserve it, leading children to form false perceptions about poverty.

From this literature review, one can safely say that both children's literature and children's popular media often portray individuals who live in poverty negatively. We can ascertain from Belk's (1987) study that comic books in (and prior to) the 1980s drew false parallels between the possession of acceptable characteristics, such as honesty and loyalty, and high socioeconomic class. Thus, a young child might conclude that, so long as individuals possess traits that indicate high morality, they have no reason to fret over their socioeconomic status. From Martin's (2000) study, we learn that the highest selling picture book to date depicted individuals who fill the lower classes of society as farm animals; particularly pigs, who perhaps have some of the least desirable physical attributes according to cultural beauty standards. Through reading Darragh and Kelly's (2011) analysis of popular children's books, it becomes clear that representations of the physical appearance and personality traits of individuals who live in poverty are misrepresented when compared to Census Bureau data. And finally, through examining Streib et. al's (2020) movie analysis, it is safe to say that the depiction of poor individual's does not improve when transferred onto the screen. Perhaps, then, that simply leaves one question: have these depictions improved over the past five years?

Methodology

This study was conducted to explore whether the most historically popular frameworks surrounding socioeconomic class continue to be presented to today's children through means of literature and film. To answer this question, I viewed and analyzed the eighteen highest grossing children's films airing between January 1, 2015 and January 1, 2020. These movies were: Aladdin (2019), Beauty and the Beast (2017), Coco (2017), Descendants (2015), Descendants 2 (2017), Descendants 3 (2019), Finding Dory (2016), Frozen II (2019), Incredibles 2 (2018), Inside Out

(2015), *Jungle Book* (2016), *Lion King* (2019), *Moana* (2016), *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018), *Secret Life of Pets* (2019), *the Grinch* (2018), and *Zootopia* (2016). It is, of course, important to note the handful of exceedingly high grossing films that were not included in the parameters of this study either because they were not accessible on the streaming platforms that were utilized (ie: Netflix, Disney+, Youtube), or they were rated PG-13 and therefore too mature for the targeted age group. Furthermore, three of the films never aired in theaters, yet were included because they rank among the all-time most successful Disney movies worldwide.

For this project, I conducted a coded analysis of critical themes, the methods for which were heavily inspired by the Streib et. al (2016) study, as well as Lewis's (1961) culture of poverty. To begin this process, I watched each of the eighteen Disney films three separate times, taking specific notes on descriptive data; specifically, demographic information (gender, race, age, etc.), physical traits, socioeconomic class, class mobility, relationships, family structure, and important quotes about class. As the study progressed, certain themes emerged that were congruent with ones from the literature surrounding the culture of poverty. Therefore, it became both efficient and beneficial to the development of this study to add a coded section for them.

Following the data collection, I embarked upon a thematic analysis wherein I cross-examined the full extent of my notes, beginning to pull potential thematic similarities shared by at least half of the movies. After a great deal of critical thought and analysis, five main themes were pulled from the films: (I) the poor and crime, (II) the poor and dysfunctional families, (III) the poor and unintelligence, (IV) the poor and chaotic living, and (V) the poor and deficit frameworks/bootstrap theory. After identifying these major themes, I developed a master chart for each including the specific elements that composed each theme, explicit examples pulled from quotes, song lyrics, and certain actions, and the degree to which each film embodied each theme. To make the latter easier, I developed a color coded system so that, in the actual thematic analysis, it would be easier to pull out

strong, moderate, and weak examples; green symbolized a strong example, yellow meant a moderate example, and red was used whenever the theme was absent. Further, if there was a particularly strong counter-example, light blue was used so that I would not forget.

Descriptive Data

Descriptive data was collected on the basic categories of gender identity, racial identity, socioeconomic class, and family structure.

Gender Identity

_____ Out of twenty-eight main characters across the eighteen films, thirteen were male and fifteen were female. Importantly, each character appeared to identify as cisgender as well as conform to the gender binary model.

Gender Identity	# of Characters	% of Characters
Male	13	46.4%
Female	15	53.6%
Non-Binary	0	0%

Racial Identity

In terms of racial identity, a staggering fifteen out of twenty-eight (53.6%) of the characters were white. One was Asian, one was Latinx, one was Pacific Islander, two were Black, and two were Middle Eastern. Interestingly, the group with the second highest proportional representation was the inconclusive group; that is, the characters who did not have enough context clues to determine a conclusive race. Six out of twenty-eight characters (21.4%) fit into this category: Dory (Finding

Dory), Rooster and Max (Secret Life of Pets), the Grinch, and Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde (Zootopia). While each of the aforementioned is an animal, it is important to note that certain characters who were not human were counted definitively as one race or another. For instance, because Scar was so dark in color in comparison to those around him, he was noted as a Black man, while Simba and his family were classified as White.

Racial Identity	# of Characters	% of Characters
Asian	1	3.6%
Black	2	7.1%
Indigenous/Native American	0	0%
Latinx	1	3.6%
Middle Eastern	2	7.1%
Pacific Islander	1	3.6%
White	15	53.6%
N/A	6	21.4%

Socioeconomic Class

When considering socioeconomic class representation, ten of the analyzed characters seemed to be upper-class, three represented the middle class, seven appeared to be working class, and another six belonged to the underclass. As was the case in determining racial identity, there were, of course, a handful of characters whose socioeconomic class was never revealed or never a central plot point in the movie. At first glance, it would appear that there is a higher representation of upper-class characters. However, when one combines the number of working class and poor characters, it is important to recognize that they constitute the highest proportional representation.

Socioeconomic Class	# of characters	% of characters
Upper-Class	10	35.7%
Middle Class	3	10.7%
Working Class	7	25%
Poor	6	21.4%
Inconclusive	2	7.1%

Family Structure

Moving on to family structure, seven of the main characters were orphans -- at least by the end of the movie -- eight lived in a single parent household, or had in their childhood, eight more lived in a two parent household, and there were five characters whose family backgrounds were never discussed. Of the characters who lived in single parent households, two lived in a family with a single-father, while the other six lived in a family with a single-mother.

Family Structure	# of Characters	% of Characters
Orphan	7	25%
Single Parent	8	28.6%
Two Parent	8	28.6%
Unclear	5	17.9%

Thematic Analysis

Theme #1: The Poor and Criminality

Throughout the eighteen films that were analyzed, poor and working class individuals and communities are depicted as substantially more violent and/or prone to criminal behaviors than

their middle and upper-class counterparts. This theme is further divided into three sub-themes: (a) *general portrayals of the poor and working classes as violent*, (b) *depictions of poor and working class individuals choosing violent and criminal solutions despite the presence of peaceful ones*, and (c) *the poor and a lack of moral compass*. This theme, along with its sub-themes, is vital to debunk, as there is little academic evidence indicating that poor individuals and communities are more violent than communities of other socioeconomic classes (Gorski, 2008; Gorski, 2016).

Subtheme #1: General Portrayals of Poor People as Violent

_____ In 1960, Oscar Lewis' denoted seventy traits which allegedly belonged solely to the poor -- traits which, when combined, formed the "culture of poverty." These traits included such things as "wife-beating," "frequent violence training in children," and "[a] high tolerance for psychological pathology of all sorts." Not only are each of these traits highly undesirable, but they also allude to the strong presence of violence within poor communities and individuals. The strong association between violence and the poor is both present, as well as emphasized, within each of the eighteen films analyzed for this project.

Finding Dory

Pertinent to this sub-theme is one particular scene within *Finding Dory* (2019), wherein the main character, Dory, swims around the ocean in an attempt to reconnect with her parents. She is accompanied by her friend, Marlin, and his son, Nemo. Each of these three characters usually inhabits the coral reef; a bright and cheery place with clean water, and plentiful resources. At one point in the film, Dory and her friends swim through a part of the ocean which is noticeably more decrepit than each of the other places they have journeyed through. Despite being just as close to the surface as the reef, this area is a dark and grimy shade of murky green-brown, causing the entire area to take on a far more daunting look than the reef. Dory does not seem to notice this drastic

change in scenery, and continues to call out for her parents with the same high volume and intensity she has all along. However, with each noise that Dory makes, Marlin grows noticeably more anxious and distressed. Eventually, he bursts out: “It’s not a good idea to come into a new neighborhood and draw this much attention to yourself!”

Due to the rugged appearance of this particular area of the ocean, one can safely infer that it is lacking the resources which are apparent in the more affluent coral reef. In addition to being dark, dirty, and murky, all of the inhabitants are hidden in the sand, suggesting that they probably do not attend school like Nemo does, as well as lack access to sufficient food and clean water. The idea that it is unsafe to call attention to oneself in poor or underfunded neighborhoods is one that has historically persisted; and Marlin’s harsh warning to his son and Dory certainly does not help to debunk it. Unfortunately, the film further demonstrates that there is, in fact, something to be afraid of in impoverished neighborhoods by having a large predatory fish chase down the three main characters. This scene as a whole is detrimental to the image of impoverished communities, seeing as both endorses and reinforces the idea that poor neighborhoods are unsafe and violent. Had the film set out to combat these stereotypes, perhaps viewers would have seen Marlin realizing the error of his thinking. Instead, the film relies on and adds to popular stereotypes concerning the poor and violence/crime.

Secret Life of Pets 2

A second film that portrays poor individuals as more violent than their middle and upper class counterparts is *Secret Life of Pets 2* (2019). Before delving into elements of the film which reinforce such stereotypes, it is important to note how viewers might go about determining the socioeconomic class of each character, seeing as each is an animal. Importantly, each animal is a common household pet, meaning that their socioeconomic class likely parallels that of the human family to which they belong. For example, since the main character, Max, belongs to a middle-class

family, his own socioeconomic class can best be classified the same way -- were he a human, he would have access to all of the resources that a middle-class child would.

Secret Life of Pets 2 (2019) reinforces the idea that poor and working class individuals are inherently more violent than their middle and upper class counterparts through drastically different portrayals of Max, who belongs to a middle class family, and Rooster, who belongs to a working class family. Max fills his days with what most viewers would likely perceive to be very average, mundane, and expected tasks. He walks with his owners, plays fetch, goes to the park, and spends many hours a day hanging out with his friends; including the second dog owned by the family to which he belongs. When the family welcomes a baby, Max takes on what might be viewed as typical parenting tasks. He plays with the baby, Liam, reads to him, watches him when they go on walks and drives, makes sure that all of Liam's feeding needs are met, and even sleeps at the foot of the infant's bed to make sure nothing bad happens overnight. Unfortunately, Max also experiences many of the stressors that one might expect a human parent to feel after the introduction of a new family member. Max consequently develops a severe case of anxiety, prompting the family to visit the remote farm where Liam's uncle lives. It is this location, at the farm, where we first encounter depictions of the working class, and that the theme of poor and working class individuals being more prone to violent and aggressive behavior emerges; most notably within the farm dog, Rooster.

Through his breed, his physical appearance, and a couple of his actions, Rooster is immediately established as harsh, blunt, and aggressive. Firstly, while Max is a Jack Russell Terrier, and his companion Duke is a Newfoundland Mix, Rooster is depicted as a Welsh Sheepdog. While neither Max nor Duke's breed of dog is very aggressive, Rooster's breed is renowned for being an excellent herding and guard dog, meaning that he is already the most aggressive of the three (Dogtime, 2020). Secondly, while Max and Duke are clean and well-groomed, Rooster has one ripped ear, often charges into the wilderness, and has a very rugged appearance. Furthermore, while

Max and Duke are depicted as well-mannered, Rooster is extremely anti-social and is often seen to be glaring down at everybody while perched on his favorite tractor or nipping at the animals he is meant to control.

In addition to physical appearance and personality traits, Rooster sometimes says things that hint at his blunt way of life, which is often perceived by Max -- and presumably viewers -- to be far more aggressive than the worldview allegedly held by the middle-class. For example, when Max worries out loud that Liam, the baby, will hurt himself being outside for too long, Rooster interjects and tells him that, by getting hurt, the baby will learn which actions not to repeat. This sentiment represents a key difference of ideology between the two dogs; seeing as Max's intention is to make sure that the baby never experiences pain, while Rooster argues that the baby should experience pain, as it will enhance his learning. When Max attempts to argue with Rooster, the latter tells a story about how he once chewed an electric cord, got shocked, and consequently learned never to do it again. He tells Max that there is no reason the same philosophy should not be applied to raising a child. The clash between Max protecting, sheltering, and nurturing Liam, and Rooster telling Max to let Liam hurt himself, is highly indicative of alleged classed-behavior, wherein the working class is often framed as far more aggressive. Therefore, although the theme of poor and working class characters generally being portrayed as more violent is subtle in this movie, it is certainly still present.

Descendants

Yet a third film in which the poor are generally depicted as more aggressive, violent, and criminal than their affluent counterparts is *Descendants* (2015). Within the first three minutes of the opening number, the four main characters (Mal, Jay, Carlos, and Evie), all of whom live in exceedingly impoverished conditions, exhibit the following illegal behaviors: breaking and trespassing, vandalism of public property, disrupting the public peace (ie: walking on tables,

ruining people's hard work, swinging from the pipes), destruction of private property, and theft -- particularly of food, stolen from others who share their socioeconomic class. Rather than facing repercussions for these actions as one might expect, their parents seem to reward them for this behavior; in fact, sometimes their parents go so far as to chastise them for not behaving "evil enough." A very potent example of such chastisement occurs when Mal steals candy from a baby, and her mother, Maleficent, tells her that evil is "in the deets," before licking the candy and handing it back to the child.

Such deviant behavior does not stop when Mal, Evie, Jay, and Carlos move from the impoverished Isle to the far more affluent Auradon. While residing on the latter, they attempt to steal private property (ie: the Fairy Godmother's wand), they violently break and enter the museum in which said magic wand is being held, they magically induce a man to prick his own finger on Maleficent's spinning wheel, they continue to vandalize private and public property, and they drug a prince as a means to getting what they want. However, the adults who inhabit Auradon do not encourage, reinforce, or endorse such behavior; rather, they often express disappointment in the children and ask them to do better next time. Such reactions serve to place the upper class on a moral pedestal, while reducing the children from poor backgrounds as deviants who simply need to have their natural behavior corrected by people who "know better." Furthermore, the royal children of Auradon are never seen committing such crimes; rather, they are displayed as lawful and peaceful citizens whose worst moments involve cheating on their homework, bursting into song directly at the wrong person, or ripping the seam of their dress by accident.

Aside from drastic differences in behavior and conduct, *Descendants* (2015) also depicts a stark contrast between the personality traits of royal and impoverished children. It is important to note that personality is often regarded in psychology and other related fields as being more influenced by biology than socialization, thus the film's portrayal of impoverished children might

serve to suggest that they are inherently more violent than their affluent counterparts. In general, the children of the Isle describe themselves as exceedingly more aggressive, threatening, and violent than the children of Auradon -- and, further, they seem to be quite proud of these traits. Within the first five seconds of Mal appearing on screen, she says: "they say I'm trouble, they say I'm bad, they say I'm evil -- that makes me glad." Not only does this statement serve to stick these labels onto both Mal and the poor children around her, but it also implies that they generally take pride in such traits. The other three secondary, and very prominent supporting characters who live in the same conditions, are no less guilty of perpetuating stereotypes of aggressive, violent, and other undesirable traits as being common among poor individuals. Within the same opening number, "Rotten to the Core," Jay introduces himself as "a dirty no-good, down to the bone," Carlos implies that he is referred to often as "callous [and] a low-life hood," and Evie states that she has "mischief in her blood." This last statement serves to imply that mischief -- and other undesirable traits by association -- are something that are biologically inherent within these children. The idea of biologically being evil is further enhanced by the fact that both the poor parents and their children demonstrate the same evil traits. Outside of the opening number, Mal, Evie, Carlos, and Jay describe themselves on numerous occasions as schemers, traitors, and rotten to the core, further solidifying the image of poor individuals as violent. And, of course, without parallel evil behavior on Auradon, the stereotype of poor individuals as more violent is rampant.

Beauty and the Beast

A final film which highlights working class characters as more violent than their middle and upper-class companions is *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), particularly in its portrayal of the main antagonist, Gaston. Of course, it is not just Gaston who displays violent behavior. Several of the working class townspeople are depicted as quick to anger, happy to engage in less-than-playful swordplay, impatient, and quick to pick up the mob-mentality when provoked. In fact, towards the

end of the film, the townspeople form a mob with little to no evidence against the Beast. However, it is certainly most prevalent within Gaston; a war veteran-turned-hunter who is profoundly violent within his appearance, words, and actions. More often than not, he is pictured with either his hunting rifle, or a sword when he is off the clock. He is often shown threatening people, losing his temper with people, or knocking his wing-man LeFou around like a human punching bag. Further violent behavior from Gaston is presented to viewers through the lyrics of the song “Gaston,” which LeFou performs to cheer Gaston up by reminding him of his violent tendencies. Within the lyrics, LeFou lists many alarming behaviors that Gaston is well-known for. He reports that: “no one fights like Gaston,” “in a wrestling match, nobody bites like Gaston,” “no one hits like Gaston,” and “in a spitting match, nobody spits like Gaston.” To add to each of these violent and aggressive behaviors, Gaston also demonstrates a nasty temper, which he allows to get in the way of his daily functioning. Worse even, Gaston’s temper can only be calmed in two ways; the first of which is when he is able to actually carry out the violent actions in his mind -- such as punching Maurice in the nose, or forming a mob to attack the castle and kill the Beast. The only other method which is shown to be temporarily effective is shown in the following exchange between Gaston and LeFou:

Gaston: “If you say ‘beast’ one more time, I will feed you to the wolves!”

LeFou: “Gaston! Stop it! Breathe, think happy thoughts -- go back to the war! Blood, explosions, countless windows...”

This exchange hints that the only thing, besides actually carrying out violence, that is effective in temporarily calming Gaston’s temper is when he remembers extremely violent aspects of war, such as blood and explosions. Presumably, for most people who have seen war, these might be the more traumatizing aspects, as they often indicate death, injury, or destruction. However, for Gaston, they seem to comfort him, indicating that perhaps he is even an exceedingly violent person even within the context of a war, where such behavior might be expected to some extent.

Additionally, even though Gaston does regain his composure for a moment or two, the scene listed above ends with Gaston knocking Maurice out when the latter says that he will never allow his daughter to marry somebody like Gaston. The only thing that LeFou has to say in response to this action is, "I tried," suggesting that these angry outbursts and displays of aggression are extremely common.

In addition to his violent leisurely activities and his raging temper, Gaston is shown to admit that he is unnecessarily cruel sometimes. At one point in the film, he tells LeFou that his key to success in hunting is sneaking up with his quiver, aiming for the animal's liver, and then shooting it from behind. When LeFou questions the fairness of this statement, Gaston shrugs and tells his companion that he does not care whether or not it is fair, so long as he gets what he wants. Thus, not only does Gaston display violent and predatory behavior, but he also intentionally acts in this manner. He knows that what he is doing is wrong, yet continues to do it, meaning that he deliberately disobeys the morals and values that he knows are acceptable.

Similarly to the movie *Descendants* (2015), Gaston's aggressive and violent tendencies are not punished by the working class community within which he operates. In fact, the townspeople in *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) seem to worship the ground that Gaston walks on; which not only normalizes his behavior, but seems to assert that it is the highest standard of behavior that everybody else should aspire to.

Viewers' first hint that Gaston is held on a pedestal within society is when he makes his entrance into town, and the women begin to fawn and fall over themselves. They call him "dreamy," "cute," and exclaim such things as "be still my heart, I'm barely breathing!" Furthermore, they begin to wave their fans around and show off their dresses, apparently hoping that he will begin courting them so that they can marry him. The reason that the ladies are so in love with Gaston, according to their own words, is that "he's such a tall, dark, strong and handsome brute." A brute, according to

the dictionary, is: “a savagely violent person or animal,” meaning that these women are in love with a man who is remarkably violent, and capable of committing animalistic crimes. The idea that he is “brutish” persists, as Belle sings about how frustrated she is with Gaston’s constant attempts to talk her into marrying him, and calls him “boorish” -- that is, “rough and ill-mannered” (Webster’s Dictionary, 2020). Each of these instances of character description only reinforce the idea that most of the women in town, with the exception of Belle, are infatuated by a man who is both savagely violent, as well as rough, coarse, and ill-mannered. The women almost seem to spend more time singing about how aggressive and “masculine” he is, than his actual physical looks.

Aside from the women that fawn over him, Gaston also has a large fan-club of men in town. This is best evidenced by the lyrics of the song “Gaston.” As LeFou attempts to remind Gaston how special he is, he says: “Every guy here would love to be you, Gaston! [...] You’re everyone’s favorite guy! Everyone’s awed and inspired by you!” Within the context of the song, it seems that the source of this awe and inspiration is due to the striking aggression and violence with which Gaston conducts himself. LeFou even goes so far as to gather a group of men and say: “You can ask any Tom, Dick, or Stanley, and they’ll tell you whose team they’d prefer to be on,” which is followed by all the men in question nodding their heads eagerly in the background. This idea that everyone in town loves Gaston is finalized by the fact that everybody joins in to sing about how great he is, just to get him back to his normal, bravado, violent, cruel self.

Sub-Theme #2: The Poor and Violent Solutions

In *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, Ruby Payne (1995) wrote that: “being able physically to fight or have someone who is willing to fight for you is important to survival in poverty. Yet, in middle class, being able to use words as tools to negotiate conflict is crucial. Many times, the fists are used in poverty because the words are neither available nor respected” (p. 41). These words clearly

hint at a second sub-theme which is heavily related to depictions of poor and working class individuals as far more violent than their upper and middle class counterparts -- that is, violence as the predominant and preferred method of conflict resolution among poor communities. Briefly placing aside ideas of inferior language skills, a stereotype which will be discussed at length later within this paper, it is important to focus on the idea that words, along with other peaceful conflict-resolution strategies, are neither valued nor utilized within poor communities. While there is plentiful evidence that poor individuals are no more or less violent than other socioeconomic classes (Strauss, 2013) -- and, studies which cite poor communities as more violent neglect to mention structural factors which contribute to these numbers, such as higher police presence within impoverished neighborhoods as compared to gated affluent communities -- this theme is still very present within the majority of the eighteen analyzed films of this study.

Coco

_____ In the film *Coco* (2017), there are numerous depictions of the townspeople, particularly those within the main character's family, solving their problems through impulsive displays of violence. A strong example of such behavior can be seen when Abuelita finds Miguel's music shrine and chooses to punish him by smashing his beloved guitar to pieces, rather than opting for a less violent solution such as confiscating the guitar, and/or having a conversation with her grandson about why she does not want him to play music. Interestingly, while Ernesto de la Cruz, who is extremely rich even in the afterlife, is shown to use violence in order to resolve the threat of being exposed as a "fake" by his companion, Hector, such behavior results in his real death. This particular plot-line is reminiscent of a particular element of Streib et al.'s (2020) study, which found that when rich characters demonstrated behavior that was typically attributed to the poor, they either experienced downward mobility on the socioeconomic ladder, or died as a result.

In addition to physically destroying things when they get upset, many of Miguel's family members seem to have a penchant for throwing the things around them at who or whatever has offended them. For example, when Dante, the stray dog who Miguel takes care of, comes running out to spend time with Miguel, Abuelita throws her chancla at him, effectively warding him off through means of aggression. And, when one of the mariachi band singers roaming town boosts Miguel's confidence in an attempt to get him to show off his musical talent at the plaza, Abuelita quickly shoves her chancla in his face and yells at him to leave her grandson alone. Furthermore, when Miguel enters the land of the dead, Mama Imelda (his *tartara abuela*) is shown to smash the computer screen in with her shoe when it does not locate her picture on an ofrenda, thus preventing her from returning to the land of the living. She even goes so far as to threaten the "life" of the man, who is diligently attempting to find a solution even as she commits this act. Each of these aggressive acts, though intended to add comedic value to the film, clearly promotes the idea that the working class (ie: the class inhabited by Miguel's family) opts for violence as a solution to problems, rather than other non-violent strategies such as compromise, having a discussion, or taking space from one another until tempers have calmed.

Descendants 2

A second film that clearly depicts the circumstances of poverty as meriting violent, or otherwise aggressive, means to solve problems is *Descendants 2* (2017). This sub-theme is perhaps more present within *Descendants 2* (2017) than within any other film that was analyzed; seeing as it most clearly depicts multiple classed responses to conflict. Through the depiction of Uma and her gang of pirates, the film clearly emphasizes the idea that poor individuals respond to conflict and tension through the usage of violence. However, the film also frames upper class characters as

always opting for discussion and compromise when possible -- something which is promoted by the movie as being the correct way to deal with tension of any sort.

At the start of the film, the main antagonist Uma, who lives on the Isle and is very poor, becomes determined to break free of her homeland and take over Auradon, in order to punish the royals for keeping her locked away because of her mother's mistakes. To achieve this goal, not only does she forcibly kidnap the king, but she also threatens on numerous occasions to kill him if she continues to experience obstacles in getting what she desires. As the film progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that Uma will commit murder if it will ultimately contribute positively to her progress. Such malintent is most evident when, at the peak of conflict caused by Uma's demand for the magic wand in exchange for Ben's life, Uma forces a restrained Ben onto the plank of her pirate ship and tells Mal: "I'll throw [King Ben] overboard, and let him swim with killer sharks -- you either hand over the wand, or he'll be ripped apart!" These words, in combination with the visible dorsal fins of killer sharks and the ropes which prevent Ben from saving himself, create a fairly daunting picture for the film's heroes.

Furthermore, Uma's accomplice Harry Hook, another resident of the impoverished Isle of the Lost, readily details the violent ways in which he will deal with Ben, should the wand not be handed over quickly, all while waving his hook-hand around menacingly. He says: "All it takes is one swing, and I'll humiliate him. As a matter of fact, make one wrong move and I'll debilitate him -- and if he even starts to slip, I'll eliminate him!" Moreover, the other pirate children who have sided with Uma further reinforce the severity of these death threats, telling Mal that they "want the wand, or else the king is gone" before warning her that time is running out. Such violent threats and displays, by both Uma and her pirates -- all of whom live in very impoverished circumstances -- reinforce the stereotype that, in order to solve their problems, impoverished people first opt for violence.

In order to deal with this very same conflict (ie: the threat on Ben's life), Mal, whose behavior and morals are supposedly "reformed" from her time on Auradon, initially attempts to compromise and bargain in the face of conflict. In response to the very first threat on Ben's life, Mal informs Uma that "[she will] get her wand, no one has to come to any harm!" Throughout the first minute or so of the exchange, Mal maintains the mindset of trying to compromise in the interest of not resorting to violence. However, when Uma and the pirates do not back down, Mal makes a decision to revert back to threats of violence -- which she would have made before being "reformed" on Auradon. Such is evident when she finally snaps: "If you don't give me back the king, I'll have no hesitation! I'll serve you right here, and I don't need a reservation, that way your whole 'pirate crew' can have a demonstration." Seeing as Mal and her friends are fully armed with swords at this point, it is safe to infer that this threat is not empty; and they fully intend to respond violently should Uma continue to threaten Ben's life. Mal's response to conflict is eerily reminiscent of Ruby Payne's words, which are mentioned above. Throughout the scene, it seems almost as though she realizes that Uma is either not capable of or does not understand the idea of trying to talk things out and reach a compromise, and thus she reverts to violence -- a language she knows that Uma speaks. This depiction is consistent with Ruby Payne's writings about poverty being a mindset, rather than an economic condition, seeing as although Mal has obtained the financial resources to escape poverty, she still has a "poor" mindset.

In addition to showing the poor, and formerly poor, responses to conflict, this very same scene also involves a royal presence, seeing as King Ben is the one whose life is being threatened. King Ben of Auradon decides to make his stance on violent conflict-resolution quite clear while Uma and Mal are fighting. He says: "Hey, we don't have to choose. We don't have to light the fuse -- Mal, whatever you do, it's gotta be a lose-lose, there's gotta be another way. Uma, I promise I'll give you a chance, you'll have your say." Even though it is his life in danger, Ben never once resorts to

violent language or actions, rather attempting to appeal to the emotion and desires of both girls and reach some sort of compromise. While neither girl listens to him, resulting in a sword fight to the death that ultimately saves his life, the violence and the fighting is never endorsed by Ben and he seems disappointed that he could not prevent the fight.

While the fight scene on the pirate ship is the most potent example of classed responses to conflict, placing the poor as violent and the upper class as seeking out discussion, it is certainly not the only one present within this film. In the last third of the film, Uma fails to get the wand and resorts to the crime of stealing Mal's spell book and using it to spell Ben into falling in love with her -- once again, choosing violent and criminal methods to resolve her problems, even though, at this point in the film, Ben had offered to bring her back to Auradon with them peacefully several times. Once Mal, who has been re-exposed to the "goodness" of Auradon, realizes what is going on with her spell book, she quickly swoops in and reminds Ben that she loves him, effectively breaking the spell he is under. When Mal is successful, Uma again chooses violent conflict resolution and jumps into the ocean so that she turns into a giant octopus like her mother, threatening to sink the ship holding all of the most important royals of Auradon. Mal, acting on her own impulse, turns into a dragon like her own mother, choosing to go down and fight Uma -- once again, reinforcing the idea that poor children have a penchant for solving their problems through physical fights.

While the girls are reduced to fighting, King Ben yet again holds different ideas about how to go about solving this particular conflict. Rather than assisting his girlfriend, Mal, in fighting Uma away from the ship, he jumps into the water and reasons with both girls. He says: "This fighting has got to stop. Nothing gets solved this way, we have to listen and respect each other. It won't be easy, but let's be brave enough to try it." The film then places Ben, and his non-violent conflict resolution, on a moral pedestal, seeing as it is this emotional plea that ultimately ends the conflict once and for all and sends Uma back to the Isle. Regardless, this film clearly promotes and reinforces the idea that

there are classed-responses to conflict, and those of the poor are just as violent as those of the royals are non-violent.

Zootopia

_____The sub-theme of poor people finding violent solutions to their problems is also strongly present within the film *Zootopia* (2019). In this film, society is divided between two types of animals; the predatory animals and the prey. The predators seem to benefit from the current system of government and resource distribution in place; they hold all of the positions of power and upper-class/white-collar jobs, while the prey hold secretary positions and working class positions. In order to seize that power back, however, the prey begin to poison other small prey animals in order to turn them rabid, and then they pin these criminal acts on the larger animals so that they lose power and get killed off as the victims of hate crimes. The mastermind behind this plan, Bellwether, knows that as long as the prey continue to be afraid of the predators, she can continue to blame all of her actions on the predators and eventually get them out of power, under the premise of being dangerous and mishandling the prey animals.

Evidently, this is a subject of much importance, particularly in such times of political strife and divide. Historically, both instances of great violence and destruction, as well as peace-demonstrations, have led to monumental change. It is not my intention to criticize or pass judgement on the various methods that have been used to elicit change; particularly seeing as I have not experienced the centuries of disenfranchisement, oppression, and silencing that marginalized groups have. All I mean to write is that it is only the prey animals -- the impoverished and disadvantaged animals -- who are ever shown to use violence. Even when the predatory animals come under attack, it is the prey who commits hate crimes towards them. The predators do not even respond hatefully to such crimes, rather keeping their mouths shut and just letting it happen. This drastic difference in behavior patterns clearly endorses the idea that poor people and communities

are more likely to behave in violent ways to solve problems that affluent and middle class individuals and communities will solve peacefully.

It is important to note, before moving on to the next theme, that the majority of the characters who demonstrated the most violent behavior were characters of color. For example, the grandmother in *Coco* is Mexican, Uma from *Descendants 2* is a young Black woman, and Rooster is a much darker color than Max in *Secret Life of Pets 2*. Such data may imply an element of racial profiling, in that perhaps films are more prone to display characters of color as being the violent poor. Characters who are white, such as Mal, Evie, Carlos, and Jay, are far more likely to be framed as the “deserving poor” and end up achieving upward mobility.

Sub-Theme #3: The Poor and Amorality

Lion King

_____ Within the deficit framework, one trait which is often cited as severely impairing the ability of poor individuals to choose non-violent conflict-resolution strategies is a deficit in morality (Payne, 1995). This sub-theme, though present within many of the films, is presented most efficiently within the *Lion King* (2019), wherein a clear connection is made between an alleged lack of moral compass in poor individuals and communities, and the development of deficient ways of thinking about one’s surroundings. Such lack of moral compass is evident within the film’s portrayal of Timon and Pumbaa, two working class and borderline impoverished animals who live on the outskirts of the Pride Lands. It can be seen in the exchange that the two animals have with Simba, the lion prince they have all but adopted, below:

Timon: “You see, in nature, there’s a delicate balance [...] I don’t know where you’re getting a circle from. It’s no circle -- in fact, it’s a meaningless line of indifference.”

Pumbaa: “And we’re all just running towards the end of the line, and then one day, we’ll reach the end and that will be it.”

Timon: “And you can really just do your own thing and fend for yourself, ‘cause your line doesn’t affect anyone else’s lines. You’re alive, and then you’re not.”

Simba: “Are you sure it’s not a circle? That it’s not connected?”

Pumbaa: “A circle would mean that we’re all this [makes a circle], and that would mean what I do affects him, affects that thing, affects that thing... which would make doing whatever we wanted not cool.”

Timon: “Let me simplify this for you. Life is meaningless, that’s why you just gotta look out for yourself.”

Timon and Pumbaa seem to be attempting to teach Simba that life is meaningless, to the point where they can do as they please, because their actions never impact anybody else’s well-being. Selfishness, particularly to the almost sociopathic extent to which they are endorsing it, has a high capacity to turn into criminal behavior, since the perpetrators believe that they do not have to worry about how their actions, words, or anything else they do impacts the people around them. Framing these two characters like so connects working and lower classes with such ideology, thus implicitly tying them to having no conscience and a high potential for violent and criminal behavior. The scene becomes particularly problematic when we look at the ways in which Mufasa, the late king of the Pride Lands, discussed the same topic with his son, Simba, earlier on in the film before his passing.

Mufasa: “Everything you see exists together in a delicate balance. As king, you need to understand that balance and respect all creatures, from the crawling ant to the leaping antelope.

Simba: “But Dad, don’t we eat the antelope?”

Mufasa: “Yes, Simba. But let me explain. When we die, our bodies become the grass, and the antelope eat the grass. So we are all connected in the great circle of life.

This latter exchange clearly shows a far more connected, philosophical, and comforting way to look at life, which does not emphasize fatalism or nihilism, but rather serves to teach a young cub the lesson that everybody is connected in life, so it is important to not be selfish. Teaching a child to be aware of the feelings and well-being of those around him or her is a sure way to prevent criminal behavior in the future, in conjunction with the belief that those who are loving and kind will not be criminals.

Theme #2: The Poor and Dysfunctional Families

There is certainly no shortage of stereotypes which frame poor families as inferior to those which are middle-class or affluent. As early as 1961, Oscar Lewis wrote that the poor lived in “common law unions [and] dysfunctional authoritarian families [that are] female-centered” (Lewis, 1961; Dworin & Bomer, 2008). Evidently, each of these factors is meant to set poor families apart from what might be perceived as the “norm” -- that is, certified marriages with functional democratic families often headed by the patriarchal figure. In 1995, Payne expanded upon Lewis’ ideas, writing that poor families and households are characterized by such traits as: owning one another as each other’s own property; having a female head who is chronically sexually unfaithful to her absent husband; and possessing an abundance of noise, violence, and nonverbal communication (Payne, 1995, pp. 23, 42, 51-52, 54, 59). She further highlights the allegedly poor parenting skills of the lower socioeconomic classes by citing frequent involvement in violent criminal behavior, drug and alcohol addiction, and shifting alliances between family members. Evidently, each of these traits constitutes a rather unstable household for a child who is growing up in a family that is not economically privileged.

Payne also gives us three case studies, which are meant to help readers visualize what a typical impoverished family might look like. The first introduces a single high school dropout mother of color whose husband is in prison for aggravated assault. In addition to perpetuating the idea that all impoverished males are violent, having a mother who is presumed to be unintelligent and a father in prison could clearly lead to a chaotic home life. Her second case study introduces Oprah, another woman of color, who willingly leaves her toddler under the incompetent care of her chronically unemployed uncle and her diseased grandmother. Evidently, such unsteady care and the absence of both a maternal and paternal figure may lead to an unstable upbringing for the child. And lastly, Payne writes about a young Hispanic woman who dropped out of public school after the sixth

grade, married at age sixteen, and currently raises five children on her own. Once again, the absence of a father as well as the presumed uneducated nature of the mother may be inferred to lead to chaotic family life.

Within this study, poor and working families were clearly portrayed as highly dysfunctional, particularly in comparison to middle and upper class ones. Throughout the thematic analysis, three sub-themes were identified: *(a) the poor and child abuse/neglect, (b) poor parents as bad role models, and (c) the poor and broken families.* Each of these sub-themes contributed to the overall depiction of poor families as highly disorganized, detrimental to the child, and inferior to other more “average” families.

Sub-Theme #1: The Poor and Child Abuse/Neglect

Descendants

Within the sampled movies, one method through which poor parents are shown to harm their children is by neglecting their emotional needs. Such behavior is particularly prevalent within *Descendants* (2015), wherein at one point or another, each child who comes from an impoverished background sings, speaks, or otherwise communicates that their parents do not love them, and never will. During the opening number “Rotten to the Core,” one of the children from the desolate Isle of the Lost explicitly gives voice to the sentiment that her mother does not love her. Although emotionless in her delivery, a common coping mechanism for children who deal with excessive stressors such as emotional abuse, Evie says: “So I’ve got some mischief in my blood. Can you blame me? I never got no love!” This statement is particularly impactful, because not only does Evie feel as though her mother does not love her, but she also attributes her mischievous tendencies to this lack of love. It is not too difficult to draw a false parallel from this statement between poverty and mischief, due to a lack of love or attention from one’s parents. It is not just Evie, however, who is negatively impacted by the actions of her mother in this film.

Another method of poor parents harming their children can be seen through the emotional manipulation that exists within the relationship that Carlos has with his mother, Cruella de Ville. From watching the film, viewers can clearly see that Cruella often uses fear-mongering techniques to terrify her son into remaining submissive to her every command. She predominantly achieves such manipulation through reinforcing the idea that there are things, mostly dogs, outside of the home and the Isle which he will require her protection from. In fact, when Carlos is offered the opportunity to travel to Auradon and attend school there, an opportunity that seems to be once in a lifetime for these children, his mother is the first to protest, reminding him that there are very scary things on Auradon that he cannot protect himself from. Although Carlos ultimately ends up traveling to Auradon, the extent to which his mother has manipulated him is very clear when he first interacts with a dog -- an event which sees him run away and scream: "This thing [the dog] is a killer! He's gonna chase me down and rip out my throat! This is a vicious, rapid pack animal!" The extent to which Cruella de Ville has manipulated her son to think about dogs as evil strongly suggests that she is a skilled manipulator, and has likely gotten to him in other ways besides convincing him to stay in the home so that she does not have to be alone with Maleficent, Jafar, and the Evil Queen.

Aside from explicit emotional neglect and manipulation that takes place within *Descendants* (2015), there is also fairly solid evidence that the children are accustomed to experiencing some extent of severe emotional abuse, or potentially even physical abuse when they do not do as their parents ask. The film strongly hints at such potential abuse during one particular scene, after Mal, Evie, Jay, and Carlos have just spoken to their parents during a highly disastrous "remedial goodness" class. As they leave, the children ponder what might become of them should they fail to obtain the magical wand they have been tasked with stealing. The exchange goes as follows:

Evie: "What do you think our parents are going to do if we don't pull this off?"

Mal: "I think they'll be proud of us for doing our best."

Carlos: “Really?”

Mal: “No. I think we’re definitely goners.”

The first half of this exchange reflects what a viewer may regard as “normal.” Most children, regardless of any demographic factors, worry about disappointing their parents or guardians through failing to perform a task that has been assigned to them. However, in the instance that they do not live up to that expectation, children may be scolded or their parents may express disappointment, but they do not usually fear for their lives in the instance of failure. At this point in the film, considering the amount of verbal manipulation, chastisement, and threats against life that the children have received, this worry seems to be valid. The idea that Mal, Evie, Jay, and Carlos fear for their lives should they not steal the wand only adds to the stereotype that poor parents are cruel, and may go so far as to end their children should they not complete their parents’ dirty work for them.

Descendants 2

Another film which clearly frames poor parents as neglecting their childrens’ emotional needs is *Descendants 2* (2017). Beginning in the opening number, each of the four main characters expresses that, despite living permanently on Auradon and being physically free from their parents, they still harbor a great deal of fear towards them. The song reads as follows, with each child basically voicing a different side-effect of being abused or otherwise harmed by a parental figure.

Mal: “Mother always knows best.”

Evie: “Show her, pass every test.”

Carlos: “Hear her voice in my head.”

Jay: “Evil is the only real way to live.”

Each of these statements connects strongly to the effects that child abuse can have on an individual. Mal’s assertion that her mother always knows best is indicative of a deep level of emotional manipulation, wherein she was tricked into believing that her mother never did anything

wrong -- despite the fact that her mother was clearly narcissistic and evil, as displayed throughout the first movie. Evie's deep-seated desire to show her mother that she is worth something, and pass every "test" that is thrown her way clearly stems from the fact that her mother has never expressed that she is proud of her, or that she is doing enough. Such evidence can be pulled, of course, from the first movie. Carlos's complaint that he still hears his mother's voice in his head clearly connects back to the ways in which his mother was overly critical of everything that he did after leaving Auradon. And Jay seems to be reflecting the way that they were all brain-washed into believing that evil is the only real way to live a life, and it is only through evil actions that they might make their parents proud. Again, these statements are particularly sad seeing as they do not have contact with their parents anymore, so they are very literally being haunted by the effects of the abuse delivered to them by their parents.

Furthermore, there exists another mother-daughter pair within this film that heavily hints at the emotional neglect that is allegedly common among impoverished children. Uma, the main antagonist of the film, lives on the Isle of the Lost with her mother, Ursula. While Ursula owns a diner, thus suggesting that perhaps Uma and Ursula live at a working class status, there are several other indicators (ie: dress, quotes) that despite the presence of work, they are still very poor. Regardless, one scene towards the middle of *Descendants 2* (2017) sees Uma talking to Ben, the King of Auradon, about her mother. While in conversation, Uma laughs at the suggestion that somebody else other than herself, in this case, her mother, is looking out for her well-being. She explains: "My mother doesn't care about me, not unless she needs someone for the night shift." Not only does this statement imply that her mother is exceedingly negligent towards her daughter's need for a paternal figure within her life, but it also adds to another existing stereotype that impoverished parents use their children predominantly for utilitarian purposes -- in this case, to staff the restaurant that she owns. Ben, for his part, seems truly disturbed by this statement, indicating that this has not

been his experience as a royal. Thus, in addition to the clear emotional neglect Uma experiences because of her mother, the film also perpetuates the idea that the upper-class family structure does not involve such emotional neglect.

Descendants 3

Yet a third film which suggests that impoverished parents often neglect or abuse their children is *Descendants 3* (2019). While this film generally does a better job of framing poverty, one place that it falls short is in the depiction of the relationship between Mal and her father, Hades. It is bad enough to hear children verbalize, and truly believe, that their parent does not love them. What is perhaps even more shocking to the audience, however, is any instance in which a parent explicitly says or does something that proves their children are not overexaggerating; their parents, in fact, truly do not care about their well-being. Such is the case in *Descendants 3* (2019), when Mal visits her father Hades in a desperate plea for him to help save her life with his magic. While she vents her frustration over a variety of things, such as that she is cursed, and that her father left when she was just a baby, leaving her alone with her abusive mother, Hades interrupts her and says: “Listen little girl, you’re talking to a god, and I don’t wanna hear the drama!” This instance of parental mishandling of their children is particularly shocking within the context of how young viewers might expect their own parents to react should they voice concerns or hurt over something. Not only does Hades invalidate and discredit his daughter’s feelings surrounding his leaving, but he also makes clear to her that he still does not want to hear her “drama,” that is, he still does not really want to be a part of her life.

A Note on Upper Class Parenting

Each of these examples becomes far more disturbing when placed beside depictions of affluent and middle-class families across the sample. Where impoverished parents are shown to not

love their children, affluent parents are portrayed as overflowing with love, empathy, and compassion for theirs. Continuing on in the same fictional universe, in *Descendants* (2015), the fairy godmother's daughter Jane ends up committing the heinous crime that the villain children were meant to, effectively setting Maleficent's plan for violent world domination into motion and nearly killing her friends and family. After a suspenseful fight between Maleficent and those who stand against her, the Fairy Godmother is seen dealing with the consequences. As she begins to discipline her daughter, she opens with: "Jane, I love you, but..." and then continues on to discipline her daughter in what we can assume is a severe, yet loving way. This is, of course, a stark contrast from the villain children fearing for their lives when they fail to commit an immoral crime and start to have doubts. In fact, the true form of discipline that is seen among the impoverished villain community is Maleficent getting angry at Mal, turning into a dragon, and trying to kill her and her friends.

Sub-Theme #2: Poor Parents as Bad Role Models

Aladdin

Another common way that poor parents were shown to have parenting skills that were not only inferior to those of the middle and upper-class, but also that were shown to be detrimental to their children, occurs in the context that they are immoral, and consequently pass such traits on to their children. This sentiment is perfectly captured in the movie *Aladdin* (2019), through a subtle yet exceedingly important line. During the number "One Step Ahead," one of the villagers in Agrabah remarks that Aladdin, a homeless young adult, has become the sole cause of increased crime rates within their country. She then presses on to say: "I'd blame parents, 'cept he hasn't got 'em." This line clearly implies that parents are the ones who teach their children such poor morals as deceit,

thievery, and other criminal behaviors; and thus should be more responsible in teaching good values and morals.

Descendants

Another example of impoverished parents passing on immoral values can be seen in *Descendants* (2015). There is a scene when Mal, the main character, finds herself heavily conflicted and in need of direction, which consequently sees her calling out to her mother. She cries: “look at you, look at me, I don’t know who to be, Mother. Is it [my identity] wrong, is it right, be a thief in the night? Mother! Tell me what to do.” In such instances of existential crises, one might expect a parent to appear and give true, honest direction to their children. However, rather than coming to her daughter’s aid and helping her work through her emotions, Mal’s mother uses her daughter’s moment of vulnerability to cement certain undesirable traits that simply make Mal even more confused. Throughout her spiel on how her daughter should aspire to behave, Maleficent encourages Mal to: put her heart aside in lieu of being evil; be mean; make mischief part of her daily routine; do the worst she can; try to be an absolute disgrace; not attend to the poor and the weak; be ruthless, rotten, and mean; be cruel, nasty, and brutal; be an evil queen with a sack of sins; be heartless and hard as stone; be finger licking evil to the bone; be spiteful, awful, and evil. Once again, this is a clear example which speaks for itself in its endorsement of the idea that poor parents -- mothers to their daughters in particular -- teach their children terrible life lessons.

Mal, of course, is not the only impoverished child who receives such warped life-lessons from her mother. In the same movie, Jay, the son of Jafar, is told at the beginning of the film that he needs to stay on the Isle so that he can help his father “fill the shelves.” Importantly, on the Isle of the Lost, Jafar runs a trinket shop and relies on -- and subsequently encourages -- his son to steal from the other impoverished families in order to keep his shop open. Once again, such encouragement of poor, and even criminal, behavior among these characters further serves to

promote the idea that poor parents have such low levels of competency in raising their children that they turn them into criminals; either willingly or unwillingly.

Zootopia

A less severe example of this sub-theme is seen in *Zootopia* (2016); less severe simply meaning that such immorality from the parents does not encourage criminal behavior, but certainly would not be seen as “good parenting.” The main character, Judy Hopps, comes from a working class family who struggles to keep their footing. Her parents, who might be best understood as well-meaning yet misguided, often encourage their daughter to give up on her dreams, even as she is in the midst of pursuing and achieving them. For example, a young Judy gives an extremely passionate and excited speech at the beginning about how she is going to be the first bunny cop in the history of the world. Rather than gently reminding her of structural/societal barriers that might get in her way, or encouraging her, Judy’s parents respond by saying: “Judy, you ever wonder how your mom and me got to be so darn happy? Well, we gave up on our dreams and we settled. Right Bon? See, that’s the beauty of complacency Judy.” This line is particularly shocking because we do not normally expect to hear parents encouraging their children to be “complacent,” or to give up on their dreams. In fact, throughout the film, Judy’s parents also supplement such lines as “if you don’t try anything new, you’ll never fail” and “it’s great to have dreams, just as long as you don’t believe them too much.” Such lines are almost mockeries of popular sayings that middle and upper-class parents are often captured saying to their children, such as “don’t give up on your dreams.”

A Note on the Upper-Class

While impoverished parents are shown to teach their children immoral values and a poor moral compass, affluent and middle-class parents are shown to do quite the opposite. In *Lion King* (2019), Mufasa, the king of the pridelands, is often shown to be teaching his son wisdom with which

to rule eventually. He is often cited as imparting such knowledge upon his son as: “while others search for what they can take, a true king searches for what he can give.” Through doing so, he teaches his son gratitude and the art of giving back to the community. When Simba asks why they need to respect the antelope, which they eat, Mufasa explains the circle of life; elaborating that even though they eat the antelope, when the lions die, they become the grass which is then eaten by the antelope. Thus, he teaches Simba that each animal has dignity and purpose, and should be treated with the utmost respect.

Sub-Theme #3: The Poor and Broken Families

A third, and final, way that poor parents are portrayed as being inferior to their affluent and middle-class counterparts is through the depiction of a non-traditional family structure. This extraordinarily broad term really encompasses any family that is not a two-parent household wherein the father plays the disciplinarian and the mother is the nurturer.

Descendants 3

One particularly strong example of depictions of an absentee father, who, when involved, is both physically and emotionally detached, is *Descendants 3* (2019). In *Descendants 3* (2019), viewers are introduced to Mal’s father, Hades, who left the home while Mal was still a toddler because he could not deal with the personality of her mother. Mal explains that he was never there for her and never even called the house to check up on his daughter. She says: “you were never there, guess you don’t have a phone, you never called to say I miss you!” and then continues on to call him a horrible father. And, as though it is not bad enough that Hades was not able to put up with her mother, even to just stay involved in her life, Hades asserts multiple times that he made her stronger by leaving, and mocking the fact that she has emotions; effectively suggesting that he too has trouble expressing emotion to his daughter. Each of the children in *Descendants*, in fact, has a single-parent household. Mal just so happens to be the only one out of everyone on the Isle who is shown to know who both

of her parents are, as well as have at least some semblance of a relationship with them. (concluding sentence on how this reinforces the idea that all poor families are not structured)

Frozen II & The Upper Class

Although impoverished families are rarely shown to have any structure at all, affluent families are portrayed as headed by two parents where the father is the disciplinarian, and the mother is the caregiver. In *Frozen II* (2019), Elsa and Anna's royal family is certainly shown to adhere to this structure. Although their parents are deceased by the time this movie rolls around, there are certainly plenty of flashbacks to their childhood; perhaps the most prevalent being the opening scene. Their mother is seen gathering them into bed and getting them comfortable, while their father attempts to tell them a bedtime story. When the girls do not listen, he severely yet kindly disciplines them before continuing on. After he is done speaking, he excuses himself from the room and their mother tucks them in, cuddles with them, and sings them a lullaby. Their mother is also seen comforting Elsa after she is upset by what happened to the spirits. Such structure and love is clearly not reflected in the impoverished communities which are examined above. This traditional structure is seen in the vast majority of upper and middle class families, including *Incredibles II*, the *Lion King*, and *Moana*.

Theme #3: The Poor and Unintelligence

The third theme pulled from this analysis was one which is so common that most literature does not even bother dedicating large sections to mentioning it explicitly; yet it is always present. In 1996, Ruby Payne wrote that, should an individual living in poverty ever receive a large portion of money unexpectedly, he or she would still remain in poverty, seeing as his or her "patterns of thought, social interaction, and cognitive strategies" would remain unchanged" (Payne, 1996, p. 3). This is a rather creative way of introducing this particular stereotype, suggesting that the poor have

poorer thinking patterns, social intelligence, and cognitive ability than those who are higher up on the socioeconomic ladder. Over the eighteen analyzed films, every single one of them had at least one portrayal of a poor or working class character who lacked either academic intelligence (ie: book smarts), social intelligence (ie: street smarts), or emotional intelligence -- in particularly poor cases, all three.

Academic Unintelligence

One form of unintelligence that is often presumed to belong to lower socioeconomic classes is academic unintelligence; that is, either not being aware of things that one might consider common knowledge, as is the case in a handful of the analyzed films, or not placing a high enough value on education and academics in general. When considering any of the following examples, it is of course important to keep in mind the structural barriers that might prevent lower class individuals from receiving the same quality education as those of us who are fortunate enough to be able to even afford watching these films.

The Lion King

In the *Lion King* (2019), secondary characters Pumbaa and Timon have no shortage of verbal exchanges that leave viewers smacking their foreheads, rolling their eyes, and harshly judging the intelligence -- or, in this case, lack thereof -- of both characters. In addition to constantly speaking over one another, rudely hushing Simba, and often taking credit for one another's ideas, which often simply involve one character coming into possession of some form of common knowledge rather than the acquisition of well thought out and reflective ideas, they also engage in ridiculous exchanges such as the following:

Pumbaa: Hey Timon? You ever look up there and wonder what those sparkly dots are?

Timon: Oh Pumbaa. I don't wonder, I know! They're fireflies -- fireflies that got stuck onto that big bluish black thing!

Pumbaa: Oh, I guess that makes sense. I always thought they were balls of gas, burning millions of miles away!

Timon: Oh Pumba, why is everything always gas with you?

This interaction shows a clear example of the exploitation of the supposed unintelligence of the poor simply for comedic value. While Pumbaa is clearly right, something which is made abundantly clear to viewers based on the assumption of pre-existing knowledge, as well as the delivery of these lines, he is made a mockery of by Timon. It almost seems as though both working-class characters mean to laugh in the face of the truth and disregard it for a poorly supported conspiracy theory. The unintelligence in this scene is further enhanced by the fact that both characters lack a basic understanding of the words “sky” and “stars” -- words which were taught to Simba, who is royalty, when he was just a cub.

Ralph Breaks the Internet

Yet another example of poor characters being portrayed as exceedingly academically unintelligent can be found in *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018), most clearly in a myriad of interactions between the two main characters, Ralph and Vanellope. Both of these characters are portrayed as lacking even the most basic educational skills, such as literacy and sequential thinking, as well as those which require a little more depth such as critical thinking. It is perhaps the demonstrations that neither character, both of whom are very clearly presented as working class, has basic thinking skills that are more harmful than anything else. There are two such examples which seemed fitting to include within this project.

Firstly, at the very beginning of the film, Ralph decides one night that he wants to sneak into another game called *Tron*. Vanellope is hesitant, and tells him that the game has a virus, so they should not enter in case they either get infected, or they get stuck. Ralph, however, remains convinced that the maintenance crew has certainly fixed the game by this point, and goes ahead, neglecting to read the giant neon sign that reads “danger.” Due to his inability to read the sign, as well as his lack of effort in trying, Ralph and Vanellope then get stuck in the glitching game, which

still very much has a virus, and have to wait until the next morning for somebody to come and rescue them. What is perhaps worst of all is that both are shown to be somewhat confused as to why they got stuck, despite their knowing that the game was broken. The second clear instance of academic unintelligence occurs when the arcade finally gets a WiFi transmitter. Not only can a single one of the working class characters not read this simple word, but they sound it out so ridiculously that they end up thinking that WiFi is some sort of wiffleball challenge.

Perhaps one may try to argue that these characters are illiterate because they are video game characters, and therefore they do not need to know how to read. However, it is the author's understanding that even illiterate individuals possess common sense. Furthermore, Ralph and Vanellope spend so much time in the arcade that words that indicate danger such as "danger," and in this movie, such as "WiFi," should have been learned, if only for the sake of survival. Furthermore, the fact that their illiteracy is used for comedic value when it is a real problem that plagues communities that are too impoverished to afford a basic education simply serves to cast a negative light upon impoverished communities and the intellect that they do or do not possess.

Beauty and the Beast (2017)

One particular brand of this intellectual deficit theory is that poor people are not as invested in their education as much as other socioeconomic classes are; that is, they do not value it in the same way. In fact, in an article debunking five common stereotypes held by mainstream society surrounding the poor and education, acclaimed Washington Post author Valerie Strauss (2013) wrote that the idea that poor parents do not value education, and consequently pass such negative attitudes on to their children, is one of the most common stereotypes that she encountered among her students, all of whom were seeking a postgraduate degree in education" (p. 2).

This stereotype also often riddles Ruby Payne's words. In "A Framework for Understanding Poverty," she writes that sometimes it can appear that impoverished families do, in fact, value

education; however, to them, it is not “vital” like it is for upper and middle-class families (Payne, 1996). One might infer, from the rest of her writings, that perhaps she means to assert that impoverished individuals may hold education as a high value, yet have certain other values which they hold in higher esteem; whereas for more privileged socioeconomic classes, education is the ultimate means through which all things are possible.

The idea that people who are poor do not value education to the same extent that those who are middle or upper class do, is extremely present within one film in particular: *Beauty and the Beast* (2017). The townsfolk have several different reactions to Belle reading, all exceedingly negative. Some seem to perceive her love for reading as simply being confusing. For example, while Belle is walking to the library in the morning, a couple of the women sing: “Look there she goes, that girl is so peculiar, I wonder if she’s feeling well? With a dreamy far-off look, and her nose stuck in a book, what a puzzle to the rest of us that Belle.” This confusion, and perceiving Belle as a puzzle because she is “complex” enough to know how to read, has extremely classist roots. Certainly, none of the upper class characters in this book -- or her father, who is middle class -- seems to think that her taste for reading is confusing.

Some of the townspeople, rather than seeing her as a puzzle, seem to scorn her for her hobby. For instance, when one of the men in the town sees her teaching another young girl to read, he angrily exclaims: “What are you doing, teaching another girl to read? Isn’t one enough?” It can be inferred, based on the context of the rest of the song, that he believes the other young girl has better activities to spend her time learning, such as making clothes, washing clothes, bartering prices of food and clothing, and other such activities that might be traditionally considered domestically female tasks. Again, this is a clear example of education taking the back-burner in poor and working class families -- in this case, to household chores. Or, when Gaston, a working class war veteran, confides in his wingman LeFou that he wishes to marry Belle, LeFou splutters: “But... she’s so well

read!” as though he wishes to insult her through saying such words. Furthermore, the women of the town further scorn her by not including her in their activities, instead gossiping behind her back. They say such things as: “behind that fair facade [her physical beauty], I’m afraid she’s rather odd; very different from the rest of us -- yes she’s nothing like the rest of us that Belle.”

Such strong reactions to Belle’s love for reading then beg the question: why do the townsfolk dislike reading? Perhaps one may infer, based on their low socioeconomic standings, the villagers may not know how to read. However, within the opening number, there is a brief scene that shows the young men of the town lining up outside of a schoolhouse, boasting their new school uniforms and bags. Thus, the men do know how to read, which again suggests that they simply value other things over education; in this case, fighting in wars and being aggressive. Additionally, the following interaction suggests another class-based reason as to why the villagers may not like to read in their spare time.

Villager: “Where are you off to?”

Belle: “To return this book to Pere Robert! It’s about two lovers in fair Verona--”

Villager: “Sounds boring.”

The perception of reading, something which is so heavily associated in our society with being academically-oriented and intelligent, as being boring implicitly assumes unintelligence on the part of the speaker, as it implies that he or she does not know how to interact with the text or find expanding one’s mind to be a fascinating subject. Evidently, then, we can see that how the characters react to Belle’s love for reading in this film are closely tied to the stereotype that poor and working class individuals do not value education as highly as they should, which causes them to be unintelligent.

When discussing any stereotype, it is important to consider what it neglects to mention; in this case, the structural barriers that may impede others’ perceptions of how much or how little poor

and working class families value education and other academic endeavors. In a severe critique of the aforementioned quote by Ruby Payne, declaring that poor parents never see education as the highest necessity, highly respected scholar Paul Gorski writes: “[Payne] never considers the alternative: that social, economic and political structures -- not [the poor’s] own behaviors and attitudes -- provide barriers to success in schools for poor children” (Valencia, 2010, p. 95). In fact, there exists much literature and research that supports Gorski’s notion that it is structural barriers above all else that restrict the ways in which poor and working class families are able to interact with the education system.

Strauss (2013) writes extensively on this subject, citing several research studies that have been completed as well as offering her own observations as an educator. She firstly acknowledges how parents, and other adult authority figures in a child’s life, are often seen as valuing education highly only when they have a high presence at the physical school-building. Evidently, arriving at a physical school requires access to such things as private transportation and the ability to easily take time off from work in order to attend after-school activities or parent-teacher conferences -- luxuries which are often not afforded to parents who work endlessly simply to provide the bare minimum for their children. Furthermore, based on her experiences working with lower-income parents, Strauss also writes that perhaps parents have a great deal of emotional trouble re-entering schools where they may have been traumatized or otherwise mistreated themselves (Strauss, 2013). Somebody who has not experienced these barriers before may not even consider them as potentially impeding a parent’s ability to look “involved” with his or her child’s education. Therefore, perhaps before assuming that a parent does not care about his or her child’s academic life, it may be beneficial to both parties (ie: the administration and the parents) to examine what structural barriers to appearing involved the parent may experience as a result of his or her socioeconomic class.

Strauss (2013) then offers a multitude of academic research studies which have been conducted, each concluding similarly: poor and working class parents value education, academia, and reading no less than parents of any other socioeconomic class. In fact, many of these studies seem to conclude the exact opposite: perhaps lower income parents are actually more frequently involved in igniting their childrens' passion for school than wealthy or middle-class parents; they simply are able to do so only within the home, as opposed to visibly. In 2000, Compton-Lilly found that low-income parents residing in urban settings had exceedingly high educational expectations for their children, especially when it came to literacy. Furthermore, the same study concluded that these parents also expected their childrens' teachers to have similarly high expectations. Such findings were replicated in an ethnographic study conducted in early 2010 by Guofang Li, who added that such high literacy expectations were not dependent upon the race or ethnicity of the family; all of them had high hopes and expectations. In 2004, Patricia Jennings found that the majority of single mothers heavily value education, and, as a result, relentlessly seek out the best opportunities for themselves, in order to inspire a love for learning and education in their children. Another study in 2004, conducted by Drummond and Stipek, examined no less than 234 low income families, and found that the adults who headed them worked without rest to support and foster their children's love for academics and school. Each of these studies truly helps us to see that this stereotype that poor families and parents do not value academics and reading as much as their upper and middle class counterparts is simply incorrect and highly invalid, despite its frequent presence in literature and film.

Social Intelligence

Social intelligence, commonly referred to as "street smarts" or "common sense," is a skill which is learned through the various successes or failures that one experiences during social interactions. It is composed of such elements as verbal fluency (ie: conversation skills), the comprehension of social norms and rules, proficient listening skills, and effective impression

management skills (Riggio, 2014). Across the analyzed movies, a large portion of poor and/or working class characters were portrayed as severely lacking such skills. Further, it is important to note that most of the time, when one sub-skill such as listening or conversation comprehension, is lacking, often the rest are as well thus indicating that the individual or character in question has poor social intelligence as a whole.

The Lion King (2019)

One example of poor social intelligence skills in the underclass can be seen in the *Lion King* (2019). Importantly, it has already been discussed how Timon and Pumbaa, in addition to lacking common academic knowledge, also do not possess basic social skills. When conversing, they often interrupt and speak over one another, disrupting the normal pattern of speech wherein one person speaks and the other listens. Furthermore, they often fail to listen to Simba when he attempts to communicate something serious to them, such as what his father once taught him about the stars. In fact, they seem to offend Simba, a member of royalty, very seriously on a handful of occasions, due to their lack of comprehension of social norms and their inability to listen, even when faced with great danger. However, there is another character of low socioeconomic class who is worth mentioning when analyzing the connection between this movie and poor people or animals not possessing any social skills: one of the hyenas, Ed.

Ed appears to struggle greatly with all four of the aforementioned skills, which are integral to the development of social intelligence (ie: conversation proficiency, good listening skills, adequate knowledge of social norms, and impression management). This much is evident in the following exchange that he has with one of the other hyenas, Banzai, who unfortunately is shown to have rather poor emotional intelligence skills -- though perhaps it would be most beneficial should this analysis focus solely on Ed.

Banzai: “Well look at that, we weren’t expecting guests today. Would you two cubs like to... stay for dinner?”

Ed: “Yeah! Stay for dinner! ‘Cause you look like a midnight snack!”

Banzai: “Can you just... give me a little bit of space?”

Ed: “I’m helping!”

Banzai: “We have talked about this before -- I come in alone. I’m the lead distraction so everyone can circle!”

Once again, while it is clear that Banzai struggles to regulate his emotions -- judging by the impatience with which he interacts with Ed -- it is important to look at the lack of social intelligence on the part of Ed. A common trend throughout the full movie is that each time Banzai says something, Ed simply repeats it in a louder and far more direct manner, often effectively ruining the suspenseful mood or daunting appearance that Banzai is trying to convey. More so, he often cuts Ed off when speaking, or accidentally communicates their plan of attack to the enemy, either by saying it himself, or causing Banzai to have to explain it to him in front of the prey they are hunting. In addition to not understanding basic patterns of speech, Ed seems to lack basic knowledge of social norms, since he sees himself as “helping” when, in fact, he is clearly invading Banzai’s personal and communicative space. Furthermore, judging by Banzai’s frustration and his exclamation that they had talked about the problem they were experiencing before, Ed is deficient in listening skills. And lastly, to round off his complete lack of social intelligence, Ed does not have any impression management skills -- that is, he does not seem to care about the first impression that he makes on people, either physically or in terms of how pleasant he is to be around. He is loud, brash, and makes no effort to appear as scary or threatening to the prey that he is supposed to be eating. His unintelligence also carries into his interactions with people who are clearly of higher socioeconomic class than him, such as Scar, further perpetuating the idea that he lacks basic social intelligence skills.

Aladdin

Another movie which promotes this very same stereotype that poor individuals lack adequate levels of social intelligence is *Aladdin* (2019). Aladdin's most "offending" trait is perhaps that he has extremely poor communication skills, which negatively impact his ability to properly converse with others, which causes the people with whom he is speaking to develop an exceedingly poor first impression of him. This particular pattern occurs several times throughout the movie; perhaps most notably when he first presents himself to Jasmine and the Sultan as a candidate for marrying the princess. When the Sultan finally speaks, expressing that it is nice to meet him, Aladdin replies: "Just as much a pleasure for me, your highness, sir... you look very -- serene." He follows this sentiment by accidentally curtsying instead of bowing. Already, Aladdin might be docked a few points for poor word choice (ie: serene instead of regal), stumbling over his words, and closing out with the wrong gesture which could possibly disrespect the Sultan. He then continues on to ruin any type of first impression that he may have been making on Jasmine and the Sultan by accidentally suggesting that Jasmine is for sale, even though it is entirely not what he meant to communicate. The interaction can be seen below:

Aladdin: "And, um, um, that! Over there! Hidden for suspense! It's, uh, very... expensive."

Jasmine: "And what do you hope to buy, with this... expensive?"

Aladdin: "You! No, no, no, no, a moment with you -- a moment. That's not..."

Jasmine: "Are you suggesting I am for sale?"

Aladdin: "Of course! -- Not! No, of course not! No!"

Were the film attempting to portray Aladdin having an abundance of social intelligence, he would be able to speak in full sentences without stopping and restarting as often as he does, and he would certainly know that it goes against every existing social norm to suggest to a woman and her father that she is for sale. Additionally, the choppy and ill-thought-out manner in which he communicates often creates the impression that he is not being sincere in what he is saying, even when he is. In this second case, the actual words which he is saying also create a poor impression of

him which he simply cannot seem to fix. When he tries to apologize, he begins to overthink everything that he is saying to the point where, in an apology for suggesting the princess is for sale, he ends up having to clarify that he does not have a twin and is not under mind control. In comparison to Jasmine, a member of the royal family who is extremely well articulated, Aladdin appears to be even more foolish and unintelligent.

Concluding Remarks on Social Intelligence

It is important, of course, to discuss the implications that these characters lacking social intelligence have on depictions of poor communities as a whole. While academic intelligence is thought to be highly personal and somewhat genetic, social intelligence is generally referred to as a skill that is entirely learned from surrounding individuals and communities (Riggio, 2014). Therefore, since Aladdin is homeless and Timon and Pumbaa are working class, it leads viewers to associate poor and working class communities in general with poor social intelligence; where else could the characters have learned such behaviors? Characters such as Jasmine and Simba, on the other hand, who are shown to be extremely articulate, well thought-out, and well spoken, then begin to form the connection in a viewer's mind between royalty and high social intelligence. Once again, because social intelligence is so highly associated with learning from interactions with the people in one's environment, it is particularly problematic that the majority of the poor and working class characters in these films are often portrayed as lacking the social intelligence that those from royal and middle-class backgrounds do have.

Emotional Unintelligence

A third type of unintelligence often attributed to poor individuals and communities is emotional unintelligence; which, at its very base, is the ability to comprehend and manage both one's own emotions, as well as those belonging to the people that make up one's surroundings. Emotional

intelligence is generally thought to be composed of emotional self-awareness, effective incorporation of said emotions into an individual's thought processes and communication skills, and the ability to regulate one's own emotions (Psychology Today, 2020). Based on the characterizations of poor characters as lacking both academic and social intelligence, it should not come as a surprise that the same is true for emotional intelligence. Importantly, the majority of poor and working class characters across all eighteen analyzed movies were depicted in one way or another as having great deficiencies in emotional intelligence in particular, perhaps suggesting that this is a particularly strong stereotype levelled against less economically privileged people.

Frozen II

_____The first example of impoverished characters having low emotional intelligence just so happens to also highlight the strong ties between emotional and social intelligence, or, in this case, lack thereof. To begin, Kristoff is exceedingly emotionally unintelligent, to the point where he often casts away the very responsibility of feeling his emotions by projecting them onto a reindeer, who he gives a voice to to reassure himself that he does not need to process whatever he is feeling. For example, when considering how to propose to his girlfriend, Kristoff asserts that he is not good at the emotional things like pulling out a ring and getting down on one knee, and imagines Sven to be comforting him by offering to take care of it for him. This seemingly calms him down, which upon further analysis, seems as though the only true way that he can process his emotions is to remove the responsibility of feeling them from himself, and place it on a reindeer. Thus, when considering the skills that indicate emotional intelligence, Kristoff clearly experiences a great amount of difficulty in processing and feeling his own emotions.

Most of Kristoff's problems, however, result from his inability to verbalize the feelings that he does not allow himself to feel, thus preventing him from communicating with Anna in the way that he needs to. Thus, because he does not possess adequate emotional intelligence, he is also

limited in his ability to be socially intelligent, since many of the skills required for the latter involve being able to process and deal with strong emotions. This particular trait of Kristoff's can be seen at multiple points throughout both *Frozen* and *Frozen II*, perhaps most potently during the two disastrous proposals that viewers have to cringe through before he finally gets a hold on himself and does it properly. His first proposal reads:

Kristoff: "Anna? Remember our first trip like this, when I said you'd have to be crazy to want to marry a man you just met?"

Anna: "What? Crazy? You think... I'm crazy?"

Kristoff: "I did -- you were ... not crazy. Clearly (nervous laughter). Just naive -- not naive, just, uh, new to love like I was. And when you're new, you're bound to get it wrong."

Anna: "So, you're saying I'm wrong for you?"

It appears as though Kristoff's inability to process his emotions towards Anna have impeded his ability to formulate a sentence that is well-thought out and considerate of the many ways that Anna might interpret what he is saying out loud. He also uses words that even very small children understand are not appropriate within the context of a proposal, such as "crazy" and "naive," as well as implying that everybody's first shot at love might go wrong, when Anna is his first shot at being in a relationship. Such aspects of his proposal heavily hint at a lack of emotional intelligence, which includes being mindful what emotions one's words may invoke in those with whom they are communicating. The other important aspect to consider about Kristoff is that, were he perhaps a middle or upper class character, he might be shown working at developing these skills throughout the movie. However, rather than improving his attempts, Kristoff's second proposal attempt goes even worse for both him and Anna, and is detailed below:

Kristoff: "You know, under different circumstances, this would be a, uh, pretty romantic place, don't you think?"

Anna: "Different circumstances? You mean, with someone else?"

Kristoff: "What? No, no! I'm just saying, just in case we don't make it out of here--"

Anna: "Wait, what? You don't think we're gonna make it out of here?"

Kristoff: “No. No! I mean, no, we will make it out of here. -- well, technically the odds are kind of complicated, but my point is, in case we die-”

Anna: “You think we’re gonna **die**?!”

Kristoff: “No! No, no, no -- I mean, we will die at some point, not in any recent time will we die. But, way far in the future, we will die!”

Once again, Kristoff struggles to convey what he wishes and talks around the point.

However, this scene is particularly indicative of poor emotional intelligence, considering the context in which he attempts to propose to her. At this point in the movie, Anna is extraordinarily anxious about her sister’s well-being, and is unsure that Elsa will even make it out of the forest alive due to her quest to figure out what spirit is calling out to her. Through including words such as “in case we don’t make it out of here” and “in the case we die” and “we will die at some point,” Kristoff inadvertently reminds Anna of the stress she is feeling about Elsa, thus causing her to react in the ways that she does. Furthermore, such statements indicate a complete lack of understanding on his part towards what Anna is feeling, which further suggests low emotional intelligence. Overall, Kristoff pushing all his emotions into his subconscious (exemplified by the reindeer, Sven) and consequent inability to communicate them or understand when other people have them only serves to further perpetuate the stereotype that poor and working class individuals have low emotional intelligence.

Ralph Breaks the Internet

A second example of low emotional intelligence in the lower socioeconomic classes can be found within *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018). Ralph, the main character, is a twenty-seven year old man who cannot effectively and healthily identify, communicate, or regulate any of the emotions that he feels; and, after watching the film, it is safe to say that he certainly feels a lot. Ralph, in fact, is so emotionally unintelligent that the entire plot of the movie depends on it. The biggest storyline has to do with his best friend Vanellope travelling to the Internet with him in order to get a missing piece to her game, which they locate in yet another game that exists only on the Internet as opposed

to the arcade where they live. After racing around in the new Internet game, Vanellope realizes that she likes the thrill and adventure of being in a game where she does not get bored and where there is a hint of adventure and danger. When Ralph learns of this, instead of processing what she is saying to him, he grows angry and sees her words as an insult to the strength of their friendship. He often responds to her desires by saying things such as “I thought we were closer than that,” rather than having a real conversation with her about why she feels as though she wants to stay on the Internet and calmly communicating how he feels it will impact their friendship.

When Ralph finally learns that Vanellope, afraid of his reaction, has arranged to stay on the Internet without telling him, he is shown to be extremely angry. Rather than taking the time to acknowledge his all-consuming anger and overwhelmingly impending sense of doom, processing those emotions and why he was feeling them, and having a civil conversation with Vanellope, Ralph acts on impulse. He purchases a virus from the black market in order to infect the Internet game that she wants to stay in, which he believes will lead her to the realization that the arcade is a much safer place, thus convincing her to return home. This malice and manipulation truly stem from not being able to rationally process emotion and regulate it. Rather than working in his favor, of course, when Vanellope realizes what Ralph did, she grows angry herself -- seeing as she almost died -- and their friendship is threatened for the first time throughout the whole film.

Not only does Ralph then fail to understand that what he did was wrong, but he also grows bitter when she angrily exclaims that “a friend would never do what you did!” After she yells at him that she feels betrayed and that they cannot be friends anymore because he put a virus into the game she wanted to join, he then shouts after her: “what did I do wrong?” indicating that he did not comprehend any of what she was saying. At this point, he fails so poorly at regulating his negative emotions that the very same virus that he put into the game then duplicates his feelings of jealousy and possessiveness and creates a “rage-monster,” born of Ralph’s emotional unintelligence. In the

end, he is able to reign in all of his anger for the sake of saving Vanellope's life, but it is clear that he does not have the emotional intelligence that would likely be portrayed in any character with a higher socioeconomic class.

Descendants 2

A third film that demonstrates the theme of the poor being socially unintelligent is *Descendants 2* (2019), particularly through its portrayal of Gil, the son of Gaston. Unlike Kristoff, who struggles to comprehend and communicate his own emotions, or Ralph who struggles to regulate his, Gil's biggest problem is understanding the general emotion of the people around him. Throughout the two movies he is present in (*Descendants* and *Descendants 2*), he continually displays the inability to properly respond to the general mood and emotion of whatever conversation is going on around him.

This is particularly evident during the second *Descendants* movie, wherein Gil ultimately gets himself kicked out of the grille he is hanging out at, due to his misunderstanding of the emotion being expressed by those around him. In this particular case, he is hanging out with Uma, daughter of Ursula, while she rages about the fact that Mal has betrayed the Isle by leaving them behind and becoming royal. While she verbalizes this anger, Gil sees fit to bring up what one can infer to have been a rather emotional point in Uma's past. He reminds her that: "[Mal] said you weren't big or bad enough to be in her gang!" While it is true that this would be another reason for Uma to be angry with Mal, it certainly does not fit the mood of the room. Gil does not seem to understand that this would be embarrassing for Uma to recount, and perhaps bring up past feelings of sorrow or loneliness. However, due to his inability to process that everybody is silent because they do not want him to continue, Gil presses on by saying: "Come on, you guys remember, she killed her Shrimpy, and the name just kind of... stuck?" Therefore, one can clearly see that Gil struggles to comprehend other people's emotions and it inhibits him from being able to make friends.

Theme #4: The Poor and Chaotic Living

The fourth theme, the poor and chaotic living, encompasses the sheer chaos with which impoverished communities, as well as the individuals who live within them, are framed in children's films -- particularly in comparison to their middle and upper-class counterparts. Across the eighteen analyzed movies, such chaos was identified in various forms, at both the micro (individual) and the macro (societal) level. For the purposes of this project, the umbrella term "chaotic living" entails: physical disorganization, disorganization in speaking patterns, and, heavily related to the latter of the two, ill-mannered characters. Importantly, this theme is of the utmost interest, seeing as it was strongly present within nearly every single movie.

Subtheme #1: The Poor and Disorganization

One factor which greatly contributes to chaotic living is disorganization; when communities, or the individuals who inhabit them, are greatly disorganized, this can consequently lead to a great deal of chaos for a myriad of reasons. Specific examples highlighting the disorganization displayed by impoverished individuals and communities across the eighteen analyzed films include the geographical layout of Agrabah (*Aladdin*, 2019), edgy music and fashion on the Isle of the Lost (*Descendants*, 2015; *Descendants*, 2019), disorganized speech pattern (*Beauty and the Beast*, 2017), and poor manners, which might also be regarded as a type of disorganized speech pattern, seeing as it greatly deviates from portrayals of the middle and upper class norms. Once again, each of these things greatly contributes to chaotic portrayals of impoverished life, which will be described in greater detail in this section.

Aladdin

One particularly strong example of disorganization leading to an extremely chaotic lifestyle

for a poor community is depicted in the film *Aladdin* (2019). The fictional land of Agrabah is clearly intended to be a heavily class-segregated land; while Jasmine, her father, and their advisors inhabit a lavishly built castle, the townsfolk outside of the gate certainly do not appear to be so lucky. The people of Agrabah are shown to predominantly inhabit the streets, working relentlessly to sell whatever goods are the focus of their stands. They work late into the night, yet are also shown to work while the sun is out, suggesting that they do not have the financial liberty of stopping work for even basic physiological necessities such as sleep. They are often seen dressed in rags, usually those which are dirty and tattered, even as they work their professional vendor stands. Additionally, they can sometimes be seen begging, both overtly and covertly, for food as they all seem to be on the verge of starvation. Lastly, they are often seen to be disrespected by the guards of the castle, who barks orders at them as though they are animals, and seem to derive a great deal of enjoyment from verbally and physically terrorizing them. Consequently, it can safely be inferred that the individuals who live on the streets of Agrabah are predominantly working-class or impoverished individuals, based entirely upon the work they are seen doing as well as their physical appearances.

Agrabah, which is meant to fall somewhere within the Middle East, is first introduced to viewers through the film's opening number, "Arabian Nights." As the camera pans from snapshot to snapshot, the narrator describes what the daily life of a towns person is like, using skewed language which hints at the broader disorganization among these individuals. Paired with the idea that the community is impoverished, this can lead viewers to reach the conclusion that the movie is, at least to some degree, asserting that poor communities are disorganized, and by virtue, chaotic. Although many of the lines in "Arabian Nights" do not appear to be exceedingly damaging on the surface, they certainly play into, perpetuate, and validate the stereotype that all poor societies are without common structure and/or organization.

Just four lines into the opening number, the narrator sings: “[Agrabah] where you wander among every culture and tongue, it’s chaotic, but hey it’s home.” It is worthwhile to point out the problematic nature of this statement, even when one places aside the fact that the narrator has explicitly called the impoverished community of Agrabah chaotic. It is both presumptuous and false to assume that all multicultural and multilingual communities are chaotic simply by nature of having several different cultures or tongues co-existing -- not to mention the racist and xenophobic undertones of associating multicultural and multilingual societies with impoverished ones. Regardless, the narrator then continues on to describe the “fabled bazaars,” the “cardamom cluttered stalls,” and the ways that the townspeople “haggle the price” of such necessities as food and clothing. Such biased language combined with the idea of the alleged chaos of having a multicultural and multilingual composition greatly contributes to the notion that this impoverished community is highly chaotic, predominantly by nature of being greatly disorganized.

Apparently, however, it is not enough for the narrator to imply that the townsfolk possess such allegedly negative traits. He instead continues on to separate himself, and viewers of the film, from such behaviors by describing how being in Agrabah feels for somebody who does not live there. To do so, he sings: “oh the music that plays as you move through a maze [...] you are caught in a dance, you are lost in the trance, of another Arabian night.” Such language, particularly likening the streets of Agrabah to a maze, as well as comparing the feeling of being on the streets to feeling lost in a trance, only further contributes to the idea that it is the individuals who cause the setting to feel chaotic for those who are not part of the community.

Descendants

In *Descendants* (2015), viewers are introduced to two entirely separate and distinct islands. The first, Auradon, is inhabited by beloved Disney princesses, princes, and their children; all of whom live under the peaceful and collective rule of a justice-oriented monarch, who rule alongside

the Fairy Godmother, who might be seen as a judicial branch of sorts. In addition to having what is perhaps the most democratic monarchy to have ever existed, the island of Auradon is clean, bright, and inhabited by characters who are polite, kind, well-disciplined, and clean. The children go about their days in a calm, peaceful, and studious manner, taking what little aggression and anger they have out at extracurricular activities only. Such behaviour in itself is clearly meant to exemplify the way that people “normally” behave, seeing as it is what we are taught to value at a young age.

The Disney villains and their children, on the other hand, reside on the Isle of the Lost; a dark and decrepit land filled with unlawful, deviant, and exceedingly loud individuals. In stark contrast to the royals and royal heirs residing in Auradon, the children on the Isle are rude, mean, undisciplined, and appear to be rough around the edges. Although schooling is mentioned by Maleficent (a grand total of once), we never see any of the villains’ children step foot in a school on the Isle -- and, judging by the behavior that is demonstrated, one can infer the Isle is not exactly the best setting for focusing on academics. Furthermore, these traits become far more pronounced when one looks at behavior and conduct norms on the Isle in comparison to Auradon. While such differences may seem subtle at first glance, it is important to remember that they are explicitly tied to pre-existing ideology which is heavily biased towards the alleged “affluent way of life” over that of impoverished communities. Clearly, such discrepancies demonstrate a drastic difference in the ways in which poor and affluent communities are framed -- one which places poverty as overwhelmingly inferior in structure.

Sub-Theme #2: The Poor and Chaotic Patterns of Speech

_____ Yet another strong example of an impoverished society whose deep disorganization causes a chaotic lifestyle is the fictional French provincial town in *Beauty and the Beast* (2017). As opposed to *Aladdin*, which takes a broader understanding of the term disorganization, *Beauty and the Beast* endorses the far more specific language deficit theory. Unfortunately, language deficit ideology has a

long and ugly history of associating poor language skills -- written, spoken, and comprehensive -- with impoverished communities. Evidently, one can see how such a breakdown in communication might lead to the very same chaotic living circumstances which are depicted in *Beauty and the Beast*.

In 1776, the Scottish philosopher George Cambell wrote: “the ideas which occupy [the minds of the poor] are few, [and] the portion of the language known to them must be scanty.” Nearly two centuries later, researchers Bereiter and Engelmann (1964) noted that poor children of color had severely underdeveloped language skills. By 1971, sociologist Basil Bernstein concluded that lower class children were limited in their educational ability due to inferior language skills. By 1995, research psychologists Hart and Risley wrote that, not only did poor children have roughly half the vocabulary of middle and upper class children, but that such a difference could best be attributed to the difference in culture and values between upper and middle class families, versus lower class families (Dudley-Marling, 2007). Even Ruby Payne herself (1996) writes that children from impoverished backgrounds have “limited vocabulary and reliance on nonverbal signs; circumlocution and indirection; more audience involvement, and a casual register that is not valued in school or work [settings]” (pp. 28-31). Clearly, there is no shortage of literature which exists promoting the very same ideas about poor communities and individuals having far less structured communication than their affluent and middle-class counterparts.

Judging by particular scenes from *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), this theme is also reflected within children’s films. Perhaps the strongest example can be seen within the opening number, “Belle,” wherein a particularly disorganized, clumsy, and chaotic interaction occurs between a handful of villagers. This exceedingly confusing exchange reads:

Villager #1: “Bonjour--”

Villager #2: “Pardon--”

Villager #3: “Good day!! --”

Villager #4: “Mas oui!” --

Villager #5: “You call this bacon--”
Villager #6: “What lovely flowers!” --
Villager #7: “Some cheese!” --
Villager #8: “Ten yards!” --
Villager #9: “One pound!” --
Villager #10: “Excuse me--”
Villager #11: “I’ll go get the knife!”
Villager #12: “Please let me through!”
Villager #13: “This bread--”
Villager #14: “Those fish--”
Villager #15: “It’s stale, they smell!”

Although these lyrics conveniently fit the rhythm of the song, they also conveniently fit the stereotype that impoverished individuals possess no true organization in terms of who is speaking, when they are speaking, or what is being spoken about. Even outside of this song, the villagers constantly casually cut one another off, and when they feel their voice is not being heard or they are not getting the proper amount of attention, they merely raise their voices rather than waiting for a turn to speak. Consequently, the streets host an overwhelming amount of noise and overall chaos; something which seems to go unnoticed by the characters, but is entirely evident to the viewer. Such a depiction of a society which is so clearly financially disadvantaged -- at least judging by their physical appearances, the jobs they appear to have, and the words which they speak -- only serves to further contribute to and endorse the idea that poor communities lack structured communication, and as a result, have the potential to descend into chaos.

Subtheme #3: The Poor and Excessive Noise

Of course, there are several different ways to portray a chaotic lifestyle within impoverished communities that do not necessarily involve disorganization. The Descendants franchise, for example, often achieves these drastically different portrayals between the lifestyle of the poor and the affluent through the means of their soundtrack. Music on the royal island of Auradon consists of traditional, upbeat pep band music, while that on the Isle is loud, alternative, and full of loud bass

and drum beats. Furthermore, when there is choreography involved, the children on Auradon dance in a manner that is reminiscent of the sort of dancing that a boy-band might promote, while those on the Isle display a lot of short and sharp movements, more similar to hip-hop dancing. Importantly, hip-hop is often regarded as an alternative form of dancing to such classical styles as ballet, ballroom dancing, and even basic lyrical dance. Furthermore, while the songs which are sung by Auradon characters have docile names such as “Did I Mention?” and “Be Our Guest,” those which are sung by villains and their children are entitled such things as “Evil Like Me” and “Rotten to the Core.” Obviously, the former song titles are far more subdued and peaceful than having an entire song about being rotten to the core, and trying to convince children to be evil like the Disney movies.

This particular theme with the soundtrack is present throughout the entire franchise. In *Descendants 3* (2019), the opening song on the Isle is titled “It’s Good to be Bad,” and the characters shout and engage in energetic choreography that seems almost violent. On Auradon, however, the opening number is a stripped down version of the love song “Did I Mention,” accompanied by only a slow dance and ending in a proposal. Again, the stark differences between the sound and movement from these two opening numbers really serve to highlight the chaos which is thought to belong only to impoverished communities, through means of the song titles, the sound, the noise level, the context of the song, and the choreography.

Sub-Theme #4: The Poor and Chaotic Appearance

Another way in which the film separates life on the Isle as more chaotic is through the physical appearance of the children who inhabit each respective island, perpetuating the idea that impoverished individuals look one way, and affluent individuals look more formal and worthy of respect. Importantly, it is one thing to dress impoverished characters in rags, or ripped and oversized

clothing; seeing as it is entirely possible that, in reality, these may be the only clothing items that people with little access to financial resources may be able to afford. However, such mindful ideas clearly are not present in the costuming of the characters in this particular movie. Each of the children from the Isle (ie: Mal, Evie, Jay, and Carlos) consistently dresses in dark, tight-fitting leather, while their affluent counter-parts appear in brightly colored or pastel silk and satin clothing. Perhaps even more interesting is the stark differences between the presentation of the characters' hair. On Auradon, each character has very basic, naturally colored hair; the girls wear theirs long and straight, the boys wear theirs short and well styled. This is not the case on the Isle. While the majority of the girls do have long(ish) hair, it is often dyed such unnatural colors as blue and purple, and they certainly do not wear their hair straight ever. Jay, the son of Jafar, wears his hair long and messy; a sure difference from the boys on Auradon.

Theme #5: Deficit Thinking/Bootstrap Narrative

The fifth, and final, theme depicts poor characters as fully responsible for their socioeconomic circumstances due to various personal and/or communal shortcomings, hinting at a strong presence of deficit ideology. Common areas of deficit among the characters within these films included laziness and complacency; traits which ultimately, in addition to being the reason for a character's poverty, also served to reinforce the idea that poor individuals do not try hard enough to achieve upward mobility. Importantly, every single one of the films showed a society wherein class mobility was possible; yet poor characters only achieved upward mobility when they adopted traits that might be regarded as more moral than before (ie: selfishness becomes selflessness).

A Review of Deficit Ideology

Deficit ideology holds that poor individuals are entirely responsible for their own impoverished living circumstances; that “poverty itself is a symptom of ethical, dispositional, and

even spiritual deficiencies in the individuals and communities experiencing poverty” (Gorski, 2008, p. 380). Already within the first four themes, many deficient behaviors and values have been examined among poor characters; for example, a scholar who endorses deficit ideology may report that Aladdin is poor because he has the character deficit of being a thief. According to deficit scholars, in order to achieve upward socioeconomic mobility, poor individuals and/or communities must “fix themselves” by means of developing better morals, values, and character traits. Most branches of deficit thinking, including the culture of poverty model, assert that the aforementioned development can be learned by observing and practicing the alleged middle-class lifestyle (Payne, 1996; Dudley-Marling, 2007; Gorski, 2008; 2016). In their study concerning class representation and portrayals of the highest grossing children’s movies of all time, Streib et al (2020) identified two frameworks for understanding poverty. One of which, the malevolent frame, “highlights hardships and unequal resources and validates them as the just deserts for people of unequal worth” (Streib et al., 2020, p. 4). Although Streib et al. (2020) made no mention of deficit ideology or the culture of poverty within their study, it is clear that the malevolent frame fits into that category, as it holds that poverty is just destination for people who lack the qualities that would make them worthy of achieving a higher socioeconomic class.

Aladdin

One example of a film with strong ties to deficit ideology is *Aladdin* (2019). Through the previously listed themes, viewers are already aware that Aladdin already engages in amoral behavior, such as stealing; he is an orphan, thus indicating a non-traditional family structure; and he lives in an extremely chaotic town. Each of these things, at one point or another, is used to justify his impoverished circumstances, already indicating the presence of deficit ideology. Its presence becomes even stronger when one looks at the broader class-system portrayed within this movie, and how Aladdin ultimately achieves upward mobility.

During the film's opening number, "Arabian Nights," the narrator informs viewers of the fluid class system (ie: mobility is possible) within the country of Agrabah. He says: "there's a road that may lead you to good or to greed through the power your wishing commands; let the darkness unfold, or find fortunes untold, well, your destiny lies in your hands." From this sentence, viewers immediately know that it is possible to achieve upward mobility, should one simply choose good over greed. Even before being introduced to any of the characters, viewers have already been invited to assume that poor characters are greedy, and have failed to lift themselves up into a different socioeconomic class; and rich characters have chosen the road to good and therefore been able to maintain or gain their upper-class status.

Furthermore, there are two characters whose stories reveal how deeply embedded deficit thinking is within this film. The first is the story of Hakim, the castle's head guard, whose story is revealed by Jasmine during a pivotal moment in the film. She tearfully pleads that he remains loyal to the royal family against the tyrannical rule of Jafar, saying: "Hakim! You were just a boy when your father came to work the grounds. But you have risen up to become our most trusted soldier. As a man, I know you to be both loyal and just." Not only does this sentence reaffirm the existence of a class system wherein mobility is possible, but it also implies that such upward mobility can easily be achieved through the possession and development of traits such as loyalty, justice, and hard-work. After all, Hakim developed these traits, and was able to rise above his father's station of a groundskeeper to become the most trusted royal advisor to the Sultan.

Aladdin, on the other hand, experiences much more difficulty in climbing the socioeconomic ladder; though, it is important to recognize that he ultimately ends up married to the next Sultan of Agrabah; a solid indicator of upward mobility. At the beginning of the film, Aladdin is homeless. Since the film revealed that each individual holds their destiny within their hands, it can be inferred that Aladdin does not possess the hard-work, loyalty, or justice that has allowed Hakim

socioeconomic upward mobility. Rather, Aladdin is displayed to be lazy. Despite the fact that he needs to steal everything to survive (and still manages to go hungry), he is never shown taking any proactive steps to combat his class conditions, such as seeking employment or attempting to sell something on the streets. Yet, when he meets Jasmine, he complains that: “[He and Abu] get by; every day, I think things will be different, but it never seems to change.” From a deficit perspective, the reason that nothing changes for him is that he behaves very passively towards poverty, doing nothing to get rid of negative traits such as the predisposition towards thievery and lying. Aladdin is only truly able to escape poverty once he stops lying to Jasmine, and the world, about who he truly is. Without his character-deficit, Aladdin then shows Jasmine, the princess, that she can trust him, and he is able to marry her and thus move upward.

The Grinch

A second example of a fluid class system with hints of deficit ideology can be seen within the *Grinch* (2019). Throughout this film, the Grinch is shown to have many unbecoming traits that prevent him from achieving upward mobility, and integrating with the Whos. He is mean, impatient, grumpy, pessimistic, selfish, and ultimately, a thief. Each of these traits, with the addition of a handful of others, contribute to the overall deficit he ultimately has within his heart. This sentiment can best be captured by the following quote from the film:

Narrator: “The Grinch hated Christmas, the whole Christmas season. Now please don’t ask why, no one quite knows the reason. It could be his head wasn’t screwed on just right. It could be his shoes were a little too tight. But I think the most likely reason of all may have been that his heart was two sizes too small.”

As the film progresses, viewers learn that the deficit within the Grinch’s heart, which impacts his ability to be happy and care about others, originates from his childhood, which he spent in an orphanage. Every Christmas, the Grinch watched as all the other Who-boys and Who-girls received presents from Santa and spent the day having fun with their families and friends. Yet, the Grinch

himself never received a single gift, and spent every holiday season alone. He therefore developed a great deal of bitterness, seeing as he felt as though he was invisible, and nobody would ever love him. Ultimately, after running away from society as a whole, the Grinch developed selfishness, as he was always alone, and pessimism, as he had never truly known what it was like to be happy. According to a deficit lens, it is these unfortunate traits that kept him from moving up in the class system, and consequently achieving happiness.

Ultimately, the Grinch is only able to achieve such upward mobility when he is exposed to the kindness and selflessness of Cindy-Lou-Who; a child living down in Whoville. Through Cindy-Lou, he learns to value self-reflection and accountability; therefore recognizing that it was his own selfishness and bitterness that prohibited him from returning to his home during Christmas celebrations. He also learns through Cindy-Lou-Who that it is not the material goods that the Whos truly care about during the Christmas season, as he had previously thought, but rather the joy, warmth, and happiness of spending a joyful day with their friends and family. Through a deficit lens, in light of the new information related to him by the middle-class, the Grinch is able to rid himself of his deficient traits (ie: selfishness), rejoin society, and allegedly achieve upward mobility. .

Incredibles 2

Although socioeconomic class is certainly not the central focus of this film, *Incredibles 2* (2019) offers a very subtle, yet very important, message about class mobility throughout. The film opens directly after the Parrs (the Incredibles) lost their home in their battle against Syndrome, thus forcing them to seek shelter in a motel for a short period of time while they figure out how they are going to obtain another living situation. Importantly, it is only because they belong to the upper-middle class that they can sustain funds to live in a motel for so long; were they any lower in the socioeconomic class system, they likely would have found themselves “on the streets,” as Mr. Incredible puts it later in the film. Regardless, directly after they lose their house in the battle, Mr.

and Mrs. Incredible can be heard discussing how they are going to move forward now that they have lost their house and all of their possessions, and neither one of them is employed. They quickly and simply reach the conclusion that “one of us has got to get a job.”

According to deficit-thinking, this behavior is right on point since it promotes the idea that individuals within the middle-class are hard working, disciplined, resilient, and intelligent enough to proactively combat their circumstances. Because the Incredibles are able to maintain their good work ethic and their values even in such a trying time, they are rewarded at the end of the film by moving up to a class position wherein both parents are employed in very high-paying jobs. Additionally, by the end of the movie, the family resides within a mansion, owns a very fancy sports car, and possesses several other markers of not only the middle-class, but potentially even the upper-class.

Descendants

Another clear example of deficit ideology can be seen in *Descendants* (2015). Throughout the film, it seems as though the only way for the children who live in poverty move up the socioeconomic ladder is by developing a sense of morality; that is, to replace all of the traits which caused them to regard themselves as “rotten to the core” and “evil” at the beginning of the film. In order to lift themselves from poverty and get off the Isle of the Lost, they must get rid of their scheming, their mischief, their love for causing trouble and being regarded as bad, and any other behaviors that prohibit them from acting in a moral, justice-oriented, cruelty-free manner. This can best be seen after the following statement ultimately allows Mal, the main impoverished character, to achieve upward mobility. She says:

Mal: “My heart is telling me that we are not our parents. I mean, stealing things doesn’t make [Jay] happy, tourney and victory pizza with the team makes you happy. And [Carlos], scratching Dude’s belly makes you happy. And Evie, you do not have to play dumb to get a guy, you are so smart. And I don’t want to take over the world with evil, it doesn’t make me happy. I wanna go to school, and be with Ben. Because Ben makes me really happy -- us being friends makes me really happy, not destroying things. I choose good, you guys.”

It is astoundingly clear through this speech that each deviant - and deficient -- trait of the main characters has been replaced by something that is far more acceptable. For Jay, the behaviors of stealing and selfishness have been replaced by the value of being on a team, and working with and valuing others to achieve a common goal. Carlos's deviant behaviors have been replaced by caring for another creature, his dog Dude. Evie's deviant behaviors - and she had plenty - have been replaced by valuing intelligence and inner beauty alongside her outer beauty. And perhaps Mal's are the clearest; her evil nature and plans for world domination have been replaced by the capacity to love and care about others. According to deficit thinking, all four characters can now achieve upward mobility, since they have the traits necessary to thrive there -- and, fittingly enough, they all do. In *Descendants 2* (2017), each can be seen filling their new class role. Mal is preparing for her own royal coronation, Evie is running a successful dress shop, and Jay and Carlos are seen to be well respected, and holding steady employment. Clearly with the development of their new traits, they have been able to obtain and hold onto higher class position

Another element that Streib et al (2020) identified within their study was the idea of poverty being used as a "just desert" for those who display immorality, selfishness, cruelty, or traits that were otherwise undesirable (Streib et al, 2020, p. 4). Evidently, this particular element of open-class frames runs rampant within the entire *Descendants* franchise, seeing as it is the villains of Disney who live on the impoverished island as a consequence for the actions that make them villains in the first place. This equates poverty with bringing justice to individuals who are evil and cruel, thus promoting a very warped idea of who comprises the underclasses of America.

Zootopia

Yet another film which continually endorses the deficit ideology is *Zootopia* (2018), particularly in the contrast between Judy Hopps and her family. The main character, Judy, is able to

achieve upward mobility due to her remarkable work-ethic, her uncanny intelligence, her resilience, her ability to take accountability, and a variety of other traits that are generally valued by most contemporary societies. Throughout the film, Judy is seen practicing, and consequently strengthening, these traits whenever she is given the opportunity. As a result, Judy is able to transcend the future that her parents and her several hundred siblings have as carrot farmers, to fill a higher regarded and higher paying job as a police officer.

Her parents, on the other hand, are unable to achieve this same upward mobility, as they possess none of the same traits that are listed above. In addition to being depicted as lazy and unintelligent, they are also extremely unsupportive and wary of Judy's dreams to become a police officer and leave their carrot farm. At one point, her parents can be heard rejoicing that she "is not a real cop" because she got placed on traffic duty, rather than out in the field. According to deficit ideology, each of these traits and behaviors certainly prevents Judy's parents from moving up in the class system -- not that they are ever shown to desire such mobility. In fact, often they are heard to be endorsing a benign frame of sorts, saying things such as "Judy, you ever wonder how your mom and me gotta be so darn happy? Well, we gave up on our dreams and settled." This sentiment implies that their life is not all that bad, and delegitimizes the struggles that working class individuals and communities have to deal with on a daily basis.

Beauty and the Beast

Another film that strongly presents a fully functioning open class system is *Beauty and the Beast* (2017). The main protagonist, Belle, achieves upward mobility as she moves from the middle-class up to royalty, through the means of marrying the king. Evidently, her class transformation can, at least to some degree, be attributed to the plentitude of enviable traits that she possesses such as kindness, intelligence, compassion, and patience. Furthermore, unlike any of the other villagers, Belle continually expresses that she wants more out of her life than to live in the

same conditions in which she was raised. This desire to escape can be seen in the “Belle Reprise,” when she sings: “I want so much more than this provincial life ... I want adventure in the great wide somewhere, I want it more than I can tell. But for once it might be grand, to have someone understand, I want so much more than they’ve got planned.” It is no coincidence that it is only Belle who has these traits and desires, and she is the only one who moves upwards in the class structure.

Belle’s reward for developing good traits and wanting a life outside of the town becomes particularly noticeable when her class mobility is compared to stagnant characters such as Gaston -- stagnant, meaning that he starts as a working class man and dies at the end as a working class man. One then may wonder why it is that Belle is able to achieve upward mobility and Gaston is not. Unlike Belle, Gaston is rude, brash, selfish, and exceedingly violent. When he is presented with an opportunity to develop or practice morality, he does not take them. Furthermore, he has no desire of ever moving past his current working class station in life; such is evident when he tells Belle: “This is our world... For simple folk like us, it doesn’t get any better.” From a deficit perspective, Gaston clearly lacks the mindset and the traits that are necessary to help lift him into the upper class. However, what is perhaps more alarming is that he does not seem to care; something that he shares in common with the other working class characters of the film, such as the servants at the castle (ie: the dishes and appliances).

The servants at the castle actively express that they do not want to achieve upward mobility, to a much greater extent than Gaston. At one point, Cogsworth, the clock, tells Belle: “Life is so unnerving for a servant who’s not serving; he’s not whole without a soul to wait upon -- ah, those good old days, when we were useful.” From a deficit perspective this statement is interesting for two very distinct reasons. Firstly, the servants see their only purpose in life as serving those around them, thus indicating that they do not wish to move up in class status because they are content where they are. Secondly, Cogsworth’s words touch upon the idea that the working class (and all classes lower)

need the influence of the upper-class to function. Without it, life can be “unnerving” because they lack the supposed organization, discipline, and other traits that are allegedly unique to the upper and middle classes.

When watching *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), it is not difficult to understand why the servants do not wish to achieve upward mobility. The master who they serve, the Beast, does not ever give them a reason to question anything about the quality of their lives. Although the Beast is rude, snide, and sometimes explosive, he is never too harsh on his servants. He lets them roam his castle all day, doing the very things that he tells them not to and plotting ways to get him out of a situation he sees no end to. Never once does he punish them, nor does he raise his voice at any of them without apologizing -- even when they allow Belle to grasp free reign of the castle against his direct orders. From watching the film, one would never learn of any legitimate barriers working class individuals face -- perhaps, even, it would seem that working class conditions are adequate and do not need to be changed. This phenomenon was also identified by Streib et al. (2020) who referred to it as the benign frame of poverty; or, the idea that working class conditions are not only adequate, but perhaps ideal for some. However, as the authors point out, “in reality, working class individuals often face the same structural barriers as individuals who live in poverty, making it very difficult for them to find a place within society where they can thrive and are granted the proper resources to do so” (Streib et al., 2020, p. 9). Importantly, the findings of Streib et al (2020) on the original *Beauty and the Beast* film (1991) were quite similar to that in this study, indicating that the attention paid to class frameworks has perhaps not changed much since then.

The Benign Framework

As was mentioned above, the benign framework was identified by Streib et al. (2020) in their analysis of depictions of inequality within the highestgrossing children’s films of all time. Within

their study, the authors explain that: “the benign meta-frame erases, downplays, or sanitizes poverty and class inequality, implying that poverty and inequality are not particularly problematic, as few people suffer from them” (Streib et al., 2020, p. 2). It is important to recognize that while each of the following films does depict the benign framework, there are also many deficit elements present. For example, complacency and ignorance could be regarded as poor individuals believing that they are living the good life; or could be perceived as character deficits. Thus, the overall theme of deficit ideology still reigns supreme over the majority of the films.

Ralph Breaks the Internet

One film that clearly portrays the benign framework of poverty is *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018). Throughout the film, the main character Ralph is portrayed as a happy, working-class man who does not wish to change a single aspect of his life; including his socioeconomic class status. On several occasions, he explicitly conveys that he feels as though he is living the best life there is. At one point, he tells her: “Think about it, you and I get to goof off all night long. Litwak [boss] shows up, we go to work, we put in our hours, and then the arcade closes and we get to do it all over again.” Once again, this depiction of what working class life is like is certainly a far stretch from reality. While it is a nice idea to have about working class individuals being able to “goof off” whenever they would like, much like poor individuals, they have countless responsibilities concerning how they are going to obtain enough money to support their families. Furthermore, working class individuals often work extraordinary taxing hours at several different jobs, making it very difficult to envision their place of work simply closing and enabling them to run off and enjoy their night (Strauss, 2010).

Jungle Book

Another film that emphasizes the benign framework of poverty is *Jungle Book* (2016). In his travels through the jungle, the main character Mowgli encounters a sloth bear, Baloo, who is regarded by those around him as lazy, shady, unlawful, and certainly unreliable. At one point in the film, Baloo can be heard teaching Mowgli a song called the “Bare Necessities,” an excerpt from which can be found below.

Baloo: “Look for the bare necessities, the simple bare necessities, forget about your worries and your strife. I mean the bare necessities, that’s why a bear can rest at ease, with just the bare necessities of life.

This song is particularly problematic because it seems to glorify, or even romanticize, the conditions of poverty, likening them to “simple living.” It seems almost as though the song means to reassure viewers, who are predominantly children, that there is nothing wrong with poverty; in fact, those who live in impoverished conditions face very few real difficulties and perhaps are even to relax in the absence of their “worries [and their] strife.” There is, of course, no mention of the legitimate struggles that individuals living in poverty face, such as the real threat of starvation, lack of access to clean water, the absence of shelter, chronic unemployment or unlivable wage, and other such things.

The other major problem with this song relates to deficit ideology, as it holds a lot of implications about the poor and laziness. At one point in the film, Baloo can be heard telling Mowgli: “If you act like that bee acts, you’re working too hard,” seemingly discouraging the young boy from developing any type of hard-working compass or self discipline. Rather, Baloo seems to want Mowgli to internalize the idea that he presents within “Bare Necessities” -- that “the bare necessities of life will come to you.” This in itself is a very privileged way to look at life, considering the severe obstacles that many people face in attempting to obtain and maintain the bare necessities of life; and they certainly never do so by simply waiting. Even so, from a deficit perspective, because Baloo is so lazy and unwilling to take any type of action to improve his circumstances, he remains on

the outskirts of the jungle without any true friends. Of course, there is great significance in the fact that laziness is Baloo's deficient trait, since it further serves to imply that poor individuals and communities can afford to be lazy; something which only adds to the idea that poor people do not actually face that many difficulties.

Lion King

Yet another film that endorses the benign frame of poverty is *Lion King* (2019) through its portrayals of two prominent supporting characters: Pumbaa and Timon. Similarly to Baloo, from *Jungle Book* (2016), Timon and Pumbaa seem to frame their living circumstances as simple living rather than poverty; and really, the film portrays little reason why they should not think in this way. One of the very first conversations that Pumbaa and Timon have with Simba is spent trying to hook him onto the distinct lifestyle that they practice, and the exchange goes as follows:

Timon: "We do whatever we want!"

Pumbaa: "Whenever we please!"

Timon: "I'm telling you, kid. This is the great life! No rules! No responsibilities!"

The benign framework of poverty reigns free in this movie, as it becomes clear that Pumbaa and Timon, similarly to Baloo and the servants in *Beauty and the Beast*, do not have to worry about the things that real people from the socioeconomic classes that they represent would. Timon and Pumbaa, as they proclaimed above, have no responsibilities, they do not have to work, they have ample access to plentiful food and clean water, they have shelter -- and, as they say, they can do whatever they want, whenever they want. This benign framework is only reinforced by the famous song "Hakuna Matata," which "means no worries for the rest of your days, it's [their] problem free philosophy." Once again, the film exploits the idea that poor individuals can simply forget about all of their worries and responsibilities in lieu of relaxing and living a simple lifestyle wherein there is no stress involved. The film seems to ignore the fact that it is a privilege to be able to not worry for the

rest of your life; people who actually live in poverty have endless anxieties concerning everything from how they are going to get food on the table to where they are going to sleep at night.

Future Discussion & Concluding Remarks

_____ Children's films are exceedingly important for a variety of reasons. Firstly, they are highly indicative of popular views within society, and consequently, the ways in which we socialize our children to think about different groups of people. Children's films have the ability to create and reinforce narratives about groups of people who young children may not encounter in their day to day life, including such topics as: what people within this group look like, why they identify with particular groups, what jobs they often occupy, how their families are structures and the efficacy of that structure, etc. Since children, as noted above, lack the ability to question the themes presented to them as simply being one portrayal out of many, it is particularly important to look at what ideals they may be internalizing about specific groups of people based on what is presented to them through seemingly harmless films. Such presentations, understandably, can have a drastic impact on how children perceive and interact with people who are different from them, regardless of what that difference is.

Considering the results of this study, it is clear that the narratives that are presented to children about poor and working class individuals and communities are exceedingly negative. Through film, children learn that poor and working class individuals are violent and unnecessarily aggressive; that they are unintelligent in both academic and social settings; and that their families are unstructured, dysfunctional, and disorganized. Furthermore, children learn that the aforementioned factors, among many other things, lead the poor and working classes to live chaotic lifestyles which pale in comparison to those led by the middle and upper classes. Finally, children learn through film that individuals who are poor or working class can achieve upward mobility by simply changing the

ways in which they behave and think; and subsequently, they learn that the poor are responsible both for getting themselves into and out of impoverished circumstances.

These portrayals and their corresponding frameworks matter because they have the potential to impact the way that large chunks of a particular generation perceive important social issues; in this case, poor and working class individuals and communities. When one learns something at a young age, it can be difficult to correct that perception, even in light of new information. Consequently, it is integral that children's films begin to take accountability and responsibility when it comes to presenting themes such as socioeconomic class to children. With time, hopefully the majority of children's films will begin to embrace and promote the idea that poverty is not an individual problem with minor individual solutions, but rather a structural and systemic issue that requires drastic social and structural change to society. Children's films must also begin to embrace the idea that people who live in working class and impoverished communities are extremely diverse, and do not have one singular race, ethnicity, religion, or gender. When children's films begin to accurately capture poverty, its causes, and some of its solutions, perhaps it will be able to facilitate easier conversations between children and parents about the very diverse body of individuals who unjustly live in poverty and require the same respect as any other human being.

References

- Auletta, K. (1982). *The Underclass*. NY, NY: Random House.
- Banfield, E. C. (1970). *The Unheavenly City: The Nature and the Future of Our Urban Crisis* Boston: Little, Brown, & Company.
- Barton, P.E. (2003). Parsing the Achievement Gap: Baselines for Tracking Progress. *Ets Policy Information Center Report*.
- Barton, P.E. (2004). Why Does the Gap Persist? *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, 6(3), 8-13
- Belk, R, W. (1987). Material values in the comics: A content analysis of comic books featuring themes of wealth. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14(1), 26-42.
- Bird, B. (Director). (2018). *Incredibles 2* [film]. Pixar Animation Studios; Walt Disney Pictures.
- Brantlinger, E. (2003). *Dividing Classes: How the Middle Class Negotiates and Rationalizes School Advantage*. NY: NY, Taylor & Francis Books, inc.
- Bomer, R., Dworin, J. E., May, L. & Semingson, P. (2008). Miseducating Teachers about the Poor: A Critical Analysis of Ruby Payne's Claims about Poverty. *Teachers College Record*, 110(12), 2497-2531.
- Boorish. 2020. In *Miriam-Webster.com*.
- Brute. 2020. In *Miriam-Webster.com*
- Buck, C. & Lee, J. (Directors). (2019). *Frozen II* [film]. Walt Disney Animation Studio.
- Carey, K. (2004). The Funding Gap: 2004: Many States still Shortchange Low-Income and Minority Students. *The Education Trust*, 1-17.
- Clements, R. & Musker, J. (Directors). (2016). *Moana* [film]. Walt Disney Animation Studios.
- Condon, B. (Director). (2017). *Beauty and the Beast* [film]. Walt Disney Pictures.
- Cooley, J. (Director). (2019). *Toy Story 4* [film]. Pixar Animation Studios; Walt Disney Pictures.
- Docter, P. & Del Carmen, R. (Directors). (2015) *Inside Out* [film]. Pixar Animation Studios; Walt Disney Pictures.
- Dudley-Marling, C. (2008). Return of the Deficit. *Journal of Educational Controversy*, 2(1), article 5.
- Dworin, J. E. & Bomer, M. (2008). What we all (supposedly) know about the poor: A critical discourse of Ruby Payne's "Framework." *English Education*, 40(2), 101-121.
- Favreau, J. (Director). (2016). *The Jungle Book* [film]. Walt Disney Studios.
- Favreau, J. (Director). (2019). *The Lion King* [film]. Walt Disney Studios.
- Giddens, A., Duneier, M., Appelbaum, R. P., Carr, D. Introduction to Sociology. Seagull, 11 ed. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc.
- Gladwin, T. (1967) *Poverty USA*. MA: Boston. Little, Brown, & Company.
- Gorski, P. C. (2005). Savage Unrealities: Uncovering Classism in Ruby Payne's "Framework."
- Gorski, P. C. (2008). Peddling Poverty for Profit: Elements of Oppression in Ruby Payne's Framework. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 41(1), 130-148.
- Gorski, P. C. (2016). Poverty and the Ideological Imperative: A Call to Unhook from Deficit and Grit Ideology and to Strive for Structural Ideology in Teacher Education. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 42(4), 378-386.
- Howard, B. & Moore, R. (Directors). (2016). *Zootopia* [film]. Walt Disney Animation Studios.
- Jones, S. (2008). Grass House: Representations and Reinventions of Social Class Through Children's

- Literature. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, 4(2), pp. 40-58.
- Karoly, L. A. (2001). Investing in the Future: Reducing Poverty through Human Capital Investment. *Published in: Understanding Poverty ed. Danziger & Haveman, R. H.* New York; Russell Sage Foundation, pp. 314-356.
- Kelly, J. & Darragh, J. (2011). Depictions and Gaps: Portrayal of US Poverty in Realistic Picture Books. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 50(4), pp. 263-282.
- Lamme, L., Fu, D., & Lowrey, R. M. (2010). Immigrants as Portrayed in Children's Picture Books. *The Social Studies*, 95(3), pp. 123-130.
- Levi, J. L. (2000). What do animals do all day? The division of labor, class bodies, and totemic thinking in the popular imagination. *Poetics*, 27(2), pp. 195-231.
- Lewis, O. (1961). *The Children of Sanchez*. New York: Randomhouse Inc.
- Moore, R. & Johnston, P. (Directors). (2018). *Ralph Breaks the Internet* [film]. Walt Disney Animation Studios.
- Mosier, S. & Cheney, Y. (Directors). (2018). *The Grinch* [film]. Illumination; Universal Studios.
- Moynihan, D. P. (1965). *The Moynihan Report: The Negro Family, the Case for National Action*. *Black Past*.
- National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. (2004). *Fifty Years after Brown v. Board of Education: A Two Tiered Education System*. Washington, DC.
- Ortega, K. (Director). (2015). *Descendants* [film]. Disney Channel.
- Ortega, K. (Director). (2017). *Descendants 2* [film]. Disney Channel.
- Ortega, K. (Director). (2019). *Descendants 3* [film]. Disney Channel.
- Payne, R. (1995). *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. Highlands, TX: Aha! Process, Inc.
- Payne, R. (2005). *Crossing the Tracks for Love: What to do if You and Your Partner Grew Up in Different Worlds*. Highlands, TX: Aha! Process, Inc.
- Pollock, K., Lopez, A. & Joshee, R. (2013). Disrupting Myths of Poverty in the Face of Resistance. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, 1(2), 11-19.
- Renaud, C. (Director) *The Secret Life of Pets 2* [film]. Universal Pictures.
- Ritchie, G. (Director). (2019). *Aladdin* [film]. Walt Disney Pictures.
- Rodman, H. (1977). The Culture of Poverty: the Rise and Fall of a Concept. *The Sociological Review*, 25(4), pp. 867-876.
- Stanton, A. (Director). (2016). *Finding Dory* [film]. Pixar Animation Studio; Walt Disney Pictures.
- Strauss, V. (2013). 5 Stereotypes about Poor Families and Education. *The Washington Post*.
- Streib, J., Ayala, M., & Wixted, C. (2016). Benign Inequality: Frames of Poverty and Social Class Inequality in Children's Movies. *Journal of Poverty*
- Swadener, B. B. & Lubbeck, S. (Eds.). *The Social Construction of Children and Families "at Risk" An Introduction of Children and Families "at Promise": Deconstructing the Discourse of Risk*. In *Children and Families "at Promise" : Deconstructing the Discourse of Risk*, pp. 1-42. SUNY Press.
- Unkrich, L., Molina, A. (Director & Co-Director). (2017). *Coco*. Pixar Animation Studio; Walt Disney Pictures.
- Valencia, R. R. (2010). Dismantling Contemporary Deficit Thinking (Educational Thought and

Practice). NY: NY & London, Routledge; Taylor & Francis Group.