

Fairy Tale Princes Turn into Beasts

A childhood spent believing beautiful princesses marry charming princes and live happily ever after could well end in a very unhappy adulthood, according to British research that has concluded that girls who over-identify with fairy tales are more likely to fall victim to abusive relationships.

Titled 'The Tales We Tell Our Children' - or over-conditioning of girls to expect partners to change - the study is the work of a psychotherapy research student at the University of Derby in central England. It will be presented at the International Congress of Cognitive Therapy in Gothenburg, Sweden, in June.

Research student Susan Darker-Smith found female victims of domestic violence often identified with passive, female role models they had encountered in fairy tales as children and believed that if their love was strong enough they could change their partner's behavior.

Transformational themes, such as in 'The Beauty and the Beast' - the story of a beautiful woman who falls in love with an ugly monster, who becomes a handsome prince as soon as she promises to marry him - had a particular resonance. Interviewees made statements like: "I know I could change him back into the prince I fell in love with if only I could love him enough."

"This over-identification with transformational themes, whereby the woman in the story is responsible for the salvation of the beast ... may be the reason why women remain locked in domestic abuse situations, feeling powerless to leave, due to feelings of guilt that they have not been able to love enough to change their partner back into a prince," commented Darker-Smith.

The impact of fairy tales, often read by parents to children, is likely to be particularly profound; and overly romantic adult literature, such as the works of novelist Barbara Cartland, is unlikely to have so formative an impact, Darker-Smith said.

"It seems to me that as adults, we are able to make inferences about the reality of roles and differentiate between submissive story-book roles and real-life roles," she said. "However, small children ... may interpret the story-book submissive roles as a template of how society expects them to develop."

Darker-Smith was inspired to begin her research after speaking with domestic violence survivors in therapy who voluntarily identified with role models portrayed in fairy tales, which they said had been their favorite stories as children. Apart from 'Beauty and the Beast', other favorites were 'The Princess and the Frog', in which the frog turns into a prince when the princess kisses him, and 'Cinderella', the story of the gentle Cinderella, cruelly used by her stepmother and step-sisters until her fairy godmother whisks her away to a ball and she meets her handsome prince.

"This led me to ponder on the implications of whether fairy stories do in fact have an impact on the way we develop," said Darker-Smith. "It stands to reason that if cultural norms, family and our environment all play a part in our personal development, so too would the role models we are brought up with, whether they be Britney Spears or Cinderella."

She went on to interview a total of 67 female abuse survivors and obtained striking results.

As many as 61 out of 67 female domestic abuse survivors said they believed they could "change their partner through compassion, love and understanding", while the remaining six stated that their partner could change, but it was up to them to do so.

By contrast, 48 male abuse survivors out of 52 stated they did not believe they could change their partner and that they would leave a relationship rather than try to change someone.

Variables existed in that a higher proportion of the female than of the male domestic abuse survivors had been abused by partners, as opposed to by anyone else. Darker-Smith said the reason for this was that women were more likely than men to seek help and therefore more approachable for research purposes.

Lending weight to her findings, a control group of 30 women and 12 men with no domestic abuse experience indicated similar attitudes to those of the 48 male abuse survivors. Also by contrast with the female abuse victims and their identification with submissive heroines, women in the control group tended to prefer stories which depict girls in stronger roles, such as British writer Enid Blyton's 'The Famous Five' series.

The age of those interviewed by Darker-Smith ranged from 16 to 52 and she believes future generations could be different. Perhaps roles could even be reversed.

"I think that there are stronger female roles now being portrayed on television," said Darker-Smith. "What the effect of stronger role models will have on women is something which will be very interesting to study in the future," she continued. She added that the possibility of strong female roles to the detriment of some male roles could also be the subject of future research - perhaps by Darker-Smith, who hopes to continue her psychotherapy studies.

She has the backing of more senior academics at the University of Derby. "We learn about ourselves and how we relate to others through stories in childhood," said Margaret Smith, who runs the Prevention of Domestic Abuse Centre at the university. "If we hold these beliefs deeply enough, and have submissive personalities as adults, it can be difficult to break away from destructive relationships."

Describing herself as an equalist, rather than a feminist, Darker-Smith stressed the importance of appropriate role models for both boys and girls. "It is, I would propose, extremely important to ensure that children of both genders have the opportunity of a wide range of role models with which to identify, instead of only submissive females and hero-worshipped males," she said.

– **Barbara Lewis**
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