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Policing as Reflected in Disney's Film *Zootopia*: Research Meets Motion Picture

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Abstract

Fictional media offers a conduit by which criminal justice actors, organizations, and institutions are presented, interpreted, and contested. As part of this article, I explore the depiction of policing themes in Disney's 2016 film *Zootopia*, an animated movie that showcases the work of Officer Judy Hopps from the Zootopia Police Department. Specifically, I discuss the film's representation of research regarding police appearance, police stereotypes, police representation, and police recruiting. By identifying parallels between policing as depicted in *Zootopia* and policing as reflected in research, I interrogate the intersections between the performance of police in media and the work of police in reality. I conclude by highlighting the potential implications of fictional police representation for young audiences and their perceptions of, and future engagement with, police.

Keywords: crime fiction, Disney, gender, media, policing, stereotypes, *Zootopia*

Introduction

Police are highly visible figures in mainstream media. A keyword search of the Internet Movie Database for the term, “police,” reveals more than 18,000 titles. A narrower search for the term, “police officer,” finds approximately 11,000 titles. These titles are diverse and represent all genres, including action films, adventure films, comedy films, and animated films. The combined box office earnings of these titles exceeds billions of dollars and their recognition span some of the most prestigious award categories.

The public's interest in police work, as depicted by both fictional and non-fictional policing media (hereinafter referred to as “policing media”), dates back decades and includes written works, digital productions, television series, documentary films, and blockbuster movies, of the animated and non-animated varieties. For many, policing media offers an engaging form of entertainment, and, at times, even satirical insight into the arguably difficult and contentious occupation. But from a more scholarly perspective, these forms of media, often termed “cop shows” (Maurantonio, 2012), also provide important insight into the ways in which society comes to understand the nature of police work, the people who work in the institution, and the implications of their work for society. Although accurate descriptions of the institution exhibit the potential to help foster understanding and informed dialogue about policing, these kinds of descriptions are arguably rare. Much more common in policing media are fabricated depictions, particularly glamorized and sensationalized depictions, which make police work look “‘exciting’ and ‘sexy’” (Maurantonio, 2012, p. 12) and contribute to public misunderstandings about the reality of policing (Huey, 2010; Huey & Broll, 2015; McVey, 2022; O’Sullivan, 2005; Reiner, 2008; Stephenson, 2022).

Previous research has taken aim at documenting depictions of police in media. A large body of this work has focused on the unrealistic presentation of the police's ability to solve crime, namely through technology and/or forensic processing, or what has been termed the “CSI effect” (Huey, 2010). Other bodies of work have explored depictions of gender and stereotypes in policing media (DeTardo-Bora, 2009; Wilson & Blackburn, 2014) as well as the broader themes and messaging highlighted in such media, like the police as “heroic crime fighters in a Manichean battle against evil” (McVey, 2022, p. 377). As part of this latter focus, scholars have assessed how policing media can be used to address and combat public narratives about policing, including by co-constructing films with the help of policing officials to bolster perceived realism and legitimacy (Maurantonio, 2012; McVey, 2022). These explorations have provided a backstage pass to understanding policing through the lens of the filmmaker.

In terms of composition, much previous research in this domain has focused on policing depictions among non-animated films, particularly films directed toward more mature audiences. Much of this research has also focused on traditional film styles (i.e., filmed in the third person with an established storyline), although increasing attention has been paid to pseudo-documentary style films or more “authentic” policing shows, like *COPS* and *Live PD*. For example, McVey (2022) recently analyzed the content of the 2012 film *End of Watch*. This film shadowed the work of two police officers as they patrolled an allegedly violent precinct of Los Angeles, California. Despite its touted realism and alleged raw presentation of policing, McVey (2022) argued that the film “served as a source of rhetorical invention for pro-police publics” (p. 375) and that it used “surveillant narration to humanize police and dehumanize the subjects of police violence” (p. 375).

Several theories have sought to explore how and why media depictions might impact viewers' perceptions and attitudes, including as they relate to the criminal justice system and broader social phenomena, like race, gender, and class. Most notable among these theories is Gerbner's cultivation theory, which has been the subject of much empirical attention (Gerbner, 1998; also see Morgan et al., 2014; Romer et al., 2014; Shrum, 2017). Rooted in the observation that “industrialized mass-media storytelling...had become the dominant entertainment medium in American culture” (Romer et al., 2014, p. 115), cultivation theory argues that mass communication, like television, functions to reinforce and perpetuate dominant power structures in society. It suggests that the cumulative, long-term exposure to, and engagement with, the messaging embedded within mainstream television can influence the views of the watching public, such that people's views about

reality are more likely to reflect what they see on television as they watch more television. This theory is particularly relevant to criminal justice topics, including policing and crime, given the prevalence of these themes in media. For example, it can manifest in the form of the “mean world syndrome,” whereby heavy television watchers adopt a fearful attitude of the world which leads them to question their safety and trust in others.

Although the interest of the current work is a single film, *Zootopia*, such film is embedded within the aforementioned gamut of criminal justice-related media. The film also engages with the broader messaging present in such media. Lastly, it is available on streaming platforms that are increasingly being adopted in lieu of standard cable subscriptions and aired on market television channels, all of which make it relevant to this broader discussion. As argued by O’Sullivan (2005), “even if not providing an accurate literal depiction of policing realities at any given time, [media] portrayals may reflect dominant ideas about policing and, indirectly, chart the changing standing of the police in society” (p. 504).

Overview of the Present Article

Existing research has been instrumental for bolstering the scholarly understanding of media as it applies to policing and related social phenomena. Nonetheless, such research has focused largely on a few subsets of policing media and predominately one group of viewers. Little work has empirically explored depictions of policing among animated films, particularly those targeted toward young audiences. Thus less remains known about how policing is depicted in these specific types of films and their potential implications for young audiences and their perceptions of, and future engagement with, police. Helping to fill this gap is important for at least three reasons. First, and most generally, young audiences are the recipients of significant media attention. As Gerbner (1998) argued,

For the first time in human history, children are born into homes where mass-produced stories can reach them on the average of more than 7 hours a day. Most waking hours, and often dreams, are filled with these stories. The stories do not come from their families, schools, churches, neighborhoods, and often not even from their native countries, or, in fact, from anyone with anything relevant to tell. They come from a small group of distant conglomerates [media] with something to sell. (p. 176)

Second, although young, this audience can still develop attitudes about police and interact with police officers (Durkin & Jeffery, 2000; Fine et al., 2019), especially given that policing films are embedded within broader institutional depictions of the criminal justice system as reflected in other forms of media. Third, young viewers exhibit the potential to develop an interest in (or distaste for) policing careers, which could one day manifest in a job application. For example, Todak (2017) observed that one-third of her sample of adults with an interest in a policing career dreamed of becoming a police officer since childhood. From this perspective, policing media could impact young viewers’ attitudes, interactions, and career trajectories.

In order to explore the depiction of policing in a youth-oriented, animated film, I examine the content of Disney’s 2016 film *Zootopia* (Spencer et al., 2016). My case study approach is inherently subjective. Given the length of the film and the sheer volume of information that could be unpacked from within it, including as it relates to different characters, I identified what I perceived to be particularly salient themes and discuss their relevance to research regarding contemporary policing. I identified these themes, which include police appearance, police stereotypes, police representation and police recruiting, after scrupulously examining the content of the film over the course of several viewings. As I revisit towards the closure of this article, I recognize that this approach exhibits potential limitations, including differences in perceived salience of themes across viewers. With that being said, I articulate the connections that I identified as appropriate throughout the article and encourage future researchers to build upon this work to explore fictional depictions of policing in other productions and communication mediums. I also note that much of my analysis relates to the main

character in the film: Officer Judy Hopps. This focus on Officer Hopps was deliberate given her visibility in the film, her implications for the plot of the film, and her relevance to the themes of research that I discuss in the article.

I begin this article by first providing a summary of the film and its plot. I then proceed to discuss some of the themes salient in the film as introduced above via several subsections. As part of each subsection, I review related literatures for each theme and then demonstrate how that theme is implicated/depicted in the film. By pairing observations in this linked capacity, I interrogate the intersections between research and practice as relevant to the film. I conclude by highlighting the potential implications of my observations.

Summary of *Zootopia*

Set in the bustling metropolis of Zootopia, the anthropomorphic film *Zootopia*¹ follows the adventures of Officer Judy Hopps from the Zootopia Police Department (ZPD). Long interested in a policing career, Officer Hopps was the first rabbit officer to be hired by the ZPD as part of their Mammal Inclusion Initiative. Following completion of her training, in which she was named valedictorian of her class, Officer Hopps was assigned to Zootopia's City Center. Upon arrival at the police station, Officer Hopps was met with surprise by fellow officers and then tasked by Chief Bogo (cape buffalo) to complete parking duties. In pursuit of such duties, Officer Hopps encountered Nick Wilde (fox), who she first questioned for tax evasion, but then partnered with to investigate a report of a missing otter, Emmitt Otterton. As part of her investigation, Officer Hopps and Mr. Wilde traversed several districts within Zootopia and spoke to many different witnesses before finally locating Mr. Otterton (as well as the other missing mammals) detained in a facility run by Mayor Lionheart (lion).

Following her discovery of the missing mammals, Officer Hopps was celebrated by city officials and named spokesperson for the ZPD. However, this role generated much contention for Officer Hopps after she made a controversial claim about predators' "vile nature" during her first press briefing, which pushed Zootopia into a state of unrest. After returning home to Bunny Burrow for a brief visit, Officer Hopps returned to the city, completed her investigation, and concluded that Assistant Mayor Bellwether (sheep) had been making the missing mammals, whom were of the predator family, "go savage" in hopes of generating conflict within the city to then secure her political position. The film concluded with the arrest of Assistant Mayor Bellwether and the appointment of Mr. Wilde to the ZPD.

Policing Themes in *Zootopia*

Police Appearance

As symbols of legitimacy and signals of intent, police uniforms and accoutrements can exhibit important symbolic and functional implications for police. As argued by Simpson (2017), uniforms help to "usher police officers (by definition) into legitimate police officers (in practice)" (p. 411). Uniforms and accoutrements can also impact both citizens' perceptions of officers and officers' perceptions of each other along various dimensions, including aggressiveness, approachability, friendliness, respectfulness, and so on.

For example, from a public perspective, research has found that children are more likely to perceive civilians wearing police uniforms to be police officers than genuine officers not wearing their uniforms (Durkin & Jeffery, 2000). Research has also found that citizens, including adults (Simpson, 2017), youth (Singer & Singer, 1985) and those incarcerated (Thielgen et al., 2020), rate officers differently when they are wearing a police uniform versus civilian clothing. From a sworn perspective, research has observed that officers perceive their own colleagues differently depending upon attire as well (Simpson & Sargeant, 2022).

¹ Italics are used to distinguish between the film title and city: whereas *Zootopia* refers to the title, Zootopia refers to the city.

Accoutrements, which are worn in combination with the uniform, can further impact perceptions of officers. For example, high-visibility vests have been observed to elicit positive perceptions among the public (Simpson, 2020), but negative perceptions among officers (Simpson & Sargeant, 2022). External load-bearing vests, which are more militaristic in appearance, have been found to elicit more mixed perceptual effects (O'Neill et al., 2018; Simpson, 2020). Similar to sunglasses, which have been found to elicit negative perceptual effects among both citizens and officers (Boyanowsky & Griffiths, 1982; Simpson, 2020; Simpson & Sargeant, 2022), black gloves and longstick batons have been found to elicit negative perceptual effects among citizens (Simpson, 2020). Headwear, on the other hand, has been found to elicit few perceptual effects (Johnson et al., 2015; Simpson, 2020; Simpson & Sargeant, 2022). Lastly, like uniforms and accoutrements, police vehicles can impact public perceptions of police: citizens perceive officers more favorably when they are occupying a marked police vehicle than a non-marked police vehicle (Simpson, 2019).

Given that appearance is embedded within nearly all physical observations of police, these kinds of aesthetic variables exhibit much relevance for policing, particularly from a public perspective (Simpson, 2020). Most public-police interactions with police are informal and unceremonious. In many instances, including those that do not result in formal conversation, interactions involve nothing more than simply seeing a police officer. For such reason, citizens generally have little information to use to evaluate police in these instances with the exception of their appearance, which makes such appearance an integral part of the perception equation.

Relevance to Zootopia

"Look, you gave her a clown vest and a three-wheeled joke-mobile and two days to solve a case you guys haven't cracked in two weeks?"²

The relevance of officer appearance surfaced at multiple points in *Zootopia*. Indeed, much of the debate about Officer Hopps' legitimacy as a police officer, which was central to the plot of the film, regarded her appearance. Unlike her colleagues, Officer Hopps was dressed in a high-visibility vest for much of the early portion of the film, even when not actively engaged in her assigned parking duties. This led many characters to question her role as a police officer. In numerous instances, citizens made the judgment that because of her appearance, Officer Hopps was not a "real cop" but rather a "meter maid." Moreover, in many such instances, these remarks were made by persons who had not otherwise had any ceremonious contact with Officer Hopps, like pedestrians on the street. Officer Hopps' very own family also raised similar assumptions based on her appearance during their video call, which I revisit below.

References to Officer Hopps' high-visibility vest were also made more explicit at other points in the film. For example, Mr. Wilde described Officer Hopps' high-visibility vest as a "clown vest." It was not until after Officer Hopps engaged in her first foot pursuit that she removed (and was then presented without) such vest. And, it is worth noting here that even without this vest, some characters in the film still questioned Officer Hopps' legitimacy while she was dressed in full police uniform, including Mr. Big (rat) who referred to Officer Hopps as a performer and her uniform as a "costume."

A similar rhetoric regarding appearance also surfaced in the context of police vehicles. Near the beginning of the film, Officer Hopps was shown driving a "three-wheeled" police vehicle. This vehicle was clearly distinct from her colleagues' police vehicles, which were much more traditional in appearance (i.e., black and white sedans with four wheels), as noted by Mr. Wilde in his questioning of Officer Hopps' competency. However, once her legitimacy as a police officer was established at the end of the film (when she was paired with then newly hired Officer Wilde), Officer Hopps was shown driving a standard black and white marked sedan. Not only do these differences in vehicle style underscore the relevance of vehicle aesthetics for

² Unless otherwise specified, quotations refer to direct quotes from characters in the film.

perceptions of officers, but they also speak to how vehicles can be used as proxies for different policing philosophies and activities.

Police Stereotypes

Stereotypes are highly relevant to policing. Stereotypes about the nature of the job, the people who conduct the job, and the culture of the job permeate and drive much rhetoric about policing. One salient set of stereotypes that both regard policing and exhibit important implications for policing issues regard gender.

Policing has been male-dominated since its inception (e.g., for a review, see Worden, 1993). Although there are now more women working in policing than before, women still only comprise a small proportion of police officers in most places (Conor et al., 2019; Cordner & Cordner, 2011; Hargreaves et al., 2018). Moreover, women still remain underrepresented among many roles within policing (Guajardo, 2016; Todak et al., 2022). The question of why this gender disparity exists rests outside the scope of this article, but the observation that stereotypes may in part contribute to the lack of gender parity within policing warrants discussion.

As described by Simpson and Croft (2021), “stereotypes of, and expectations for, police officers typically run parallel to the stereotypes ascribed to men and masculinity and counter to the stereotypes ascribed to women and femininity” (p. 408). Within the police institution, masculinity is generally valued over femininity: whereas femininity can be seen as incongruent with being a police officer, masculinity is a highly valued characteristic among police (Archbold et al., 2010; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 1983; Lyness & Heilman, 2006; Somvadee & Morash, 2008). Such preference for masculinity manifests in many different forms. From the culture of policing to the fitness standards for police to the grooming requirements of officers, cues of traditional masculinity are encouraged, rewarded, and reinforced among contemporary policing (Simpson & Croft, 2021).

Related stereotypes regarding perceived traits of officers exist as well. For example, officers are generally stereotyped as being physically aggressive (Griffin & Bernard, 2003; Hewstone et al., 1992; Oulmokhtar et al., 2011; Simpson & Croft, 2021). With that being said, aggression is a trait that is prescribed for men but proscribed for women (Archer, 2004; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Aggression is also often linked to other traits, including size and strength, both of which relate to stereotypes about masculinity. Stereotypes regarding aggression can therefore create a complex dynamic for women working within this historically male-dominated profession. Consistent with this dynamic, past research has observed that female applicants experience higher failure rates for physical testing than their male counterparts (Birzer & Craig, 1996) and do more to prepare for a job in policing (Todak, 2017). Once on the job, however, past research has found that female officers engage in less force than their male counterparts (Schuck & Rabe-Hemp, 2005). In light of these complexities, many police and government agencies have sought to increase the representation of women in policing.

Relevance to Zootopia

“What crazy world are you living in where you think a bunny could be a cop?”

The storyline of *Zootopia*, and much of the novelty of the film itself, hinges upon stereotypes. As a below-average height female rabbit, Officer Hopps defied all traditional stereotypes in her pursuit of a policing career. As early as the opening scene of the film, when Officer Hopps was met with surprise after exclaiming her aspirations to pursue a policing career, stereotypes rooted themselves firmly in the film's plot, emerging at various points throughout the film and by various characters in the film.

For example, fears about Officer Hopps' ability to both do the job and remain safe on the job were echoed by her family as well as colleagues. In the context of the former, Officer Hopps' parents' repeated

concerns about her safety reaffirmed the alleged stereotype that policing is “dangerous” for women. Indeed, before departing home to commence her policing career, Officer Hopps’ parents expressed their concerns about her working in such a high-risk occupation and provided her with additional weaponry that they felt would be necessary to help protect her. Officer Hopps’ parents also expressed an apparent sense of relief once she was on the job when they mistook her to be a “meter maid,” which they proclaimed was “the safest job on the force:” a subtle, but equally meaningful, manifestation of stereotypes in the film.

In the context of the latter, Officer Hopps’ colleagues casted continuous doubt on her abilities as a police officer. While enrolled in the training academy, Officer Hopps was the subject of much scrutiny. Not only was she presented as visibly struggling in the beginning scenes, but her struggles were used to justify her instructor’s beliefs about her alleged incompetence. At one point during training, her instructor told her to “just quit and go home fuzzy bunny,” a reference to her alleged inadequacy. Despite eventually succeeding in the academy, and even being named valedictorian of her class, Chief Bogo still doubted Officer Hopps’ abilities by assigning her to parking duties. This assignment came at the initial expense of a missing person assignment, which Officer Hopps wished to pursue but was not given. As Chief Bogo argued, it was not that he did not know that Officer Hopps was the valedictorian of her class, he just “did not care.”

Stereotypes regarding policing also emerged in more abstract forms within the film. For example, many of the ZPD officers presented during the film were members of the predator family (e.g., polar bear, lion, tiger, wolf, cheetah). Many officers, including the few herbivores, were also presented on-screen as much larger in physical size than Officer Hopps. These depictions arguably perpetuated the longstanding, problematic illusion that “real cops” are “big” and “strong,” as often stereotypically depicted. Distinctions about size, strength, and even sexuality were also made explicit in many of the characters’ comments during the film, including when Chief Bogo told Officer Hopps to “shut [her] tiny mouth,” when Mr. Wilde referred to Officer Hopps as “a cute little bunny” and “Officer Fluff,” and when Officer Clawhauser (cheetah) proclaimed, “they really did hire a bunny...you’re even cuter than I thought you would be” and described her as a “poor little bunny [that was] going to get eaten alive.” Officer Hopps’ larger and often predator colleagues were also assigned more traditional policing duties and afforded unquestioned legitimacy throughout the film, further perpetuating problematic stereotypes about policing, including about who are and should be police officers as well as the purported competence of such officers.

It is important to mention here, again, that it was Officer Hopps who eventually solved the missing mammal cases. This arguably put a positive twist on the presentation of stereotypes in the film insofar that Officer Hopps produced the most important outcome of the film. Nonetheless, the fact that Officer Hopps had to overcome so many obstacles in order to receive her recognition and status as a legitimate police officer also reaffirmed another issue in policing: that women must overcome hurdles to gain the same status and positions that their male colleagues may be afforded without question.

Police Representation

Questions regarding the diversity of police, both in terms of current membership and future membership, are salient among contemporary policing discourse. Many such questions originate in the concerning stagnancy of the composition of police personnel. Women still represent less than 15% of all police officers in the United States (U.S. Department of Justice, 2018), 22% of officers in Canada (Conor et al., 2019), and 30% of officers in the United Kingdom (Hargreaves et al., 2018). Assessing the lack of diversity among police and, particularly, strategies for enhancing the diversity of police personnel have formed the subject of much scholarly attention (as described in more detail below; Linos, 2018; Linos et al., 2017; Martin, 1991).

Issues of representation, however, are not limited solely to personnel characteristics. Such issues also extend to role composition as well. Not only are there fewer women working in policing, but female officers have historically been assigned to different roles than their male colleagues within police organizations. For example, female officers have traditionally been more likely to be assigned to roles with lesser risk, at least in

part because of problematic stereotypes about their perceived attributes (Worden, 1993). Female officers also continue to remain underrepresented in speciality units (Todak et al., 2022) and leadership positions (Guajardo, 2016). Finally, and particularly relevant to *Zootopia*, female officers remain underrepresented in the spokesperson role (Simpson & Wetherell, 2020; Surette & Richard, 1995). This role is particularly relevant to representation given its highly public nature: as the face of their police agencies, spokespersons disseminate public information and manage press relations, including by participating in highly watched and potentially contentious media engagements.

Relevance to Zootopia

“Our city is 90% prey, Judy, and right now, they’re just really scared. You’re a hero to them. They trust you. And so that’s why Chief Bogo and I want you to be the public face of the ZPD.”

Similar to stereotypes, issues of representation exist at the core of *Zootopia*'s plot. As a metropolis, Zootopia is home to both predators and prey, the latter of which were led to problematically fear the former via the film's plot about predators' alleged “vile nature.” Indeed, the social conflict between these two groups emerged as particularly salient towards the end of the film when protests erupted about the “harm” being induced by predators. As a police department, the ZPD was also depicted as a predator- and male-dominated agency. As only one of two female officers³ and one of only a few non-predator officers featured in the film, Officer Hopps was uniquely positioned within the ZPD. Officer Hopps outwardly recognized her unique status within the ZPD at numerous points in the film, including when she exclaimed that she was not just “some token bunny.” From a community perspective, it would appear that Zootopia reflected the social divide that exists among some groups in contemporary society. From a personnel perspective, it would appear that the ZPD reflected the gender imbalance that is plaguing many police agencies.

Issues of representation in the film, though, did not stop at demographic characteristics. Transitioning to role discussions, Officer Hopps was also assigned distinct jobs within the ZPD, like parking duties, which further reaffirmed her alleged difference within the agency. While her fellow officers were tasked with the more difficult and dangerous responsibilities, she was assigned what may be considered “lesser” police work and disciplined for engaging in what some may term stereotypical police work, like a foot pursuit of a theft suspect. Officer Hopps was also questioned for her ambition by senior staff within the ZPD, even being silenced by Chief Bogo on one occasion when he scolded her for “insubordination.”

Later in the film, and after locating the missing mammals, Officer Hopps was appointed to the role of spokesperson for the ZPD. Celebrated by Assistant Mayor Bellwether, who was also a member of the prey family, Officer Hopps was believed to be best fit to help quell growing concerns among the community and best represent the demographics of Zootopia. Officer Hopps was immediately met with contention, though, after making a claim about the biological nature of the missing mammals who had allegedly reverted back to “their primitive, savage ways” during a press conference, which caused her to question her role as a police officer altogether. Rather than extinguishing the fire which spokespersons are traditionally tasked with doing, Officer Hopps' arguably ignited the fire and sparked chaos throughout the city via her comments. As she later proclaimed, “I came here [to Zootopia] to make the world a better place, but I think I broke it...a good cop is supposed to serve and protect, help the city, not tear it apart. I don't deserve this badge.” As part of that same departmental shakeup which made Officer Hopps the face of the ZPD, Officer Clawhauser was also removed from his public-facing role at the front counter to help enhance departmental image. As Officer Clawhauser noted, “they thought it would be better if a predator, such as myself, wasn't the first face that you see when you walk into the ZPD.”

³ The other female officer, Officer Francine Pennington (elephant), was only presented for a very short amount of time in the film.

Police Recruiting

Recruitment is a central part of any organization, including police agencies. As part of the recruitment process, police must attract, hire, train, and then retain officers. This process has been met with scrutiny and concern in America in recent years, in part because of the recruitment crisis plaguing policing. Nationwide, police continue to cite their struggles of attracting applicants to their agencies, with applicant numbers plummeting in cities across the country (Brumbaugh, 2021; Jackman, 2018; Weichselbaum, 2019). Although research has yet to fully unearth what is contributing to these drops in numbers, it has documented much about the kinds of people who traditionally have applied for policing jobs and their motivations for pursuing such jobs.

Police agencies have historically drawn upon applicants from specific groups with pre-existing interests in policing careers, including the military, other law enforcement personnel, and university students, particularly from criminal justice backgrounds (Clinkinbeard et al., 2020; Courtright & Mackey, 2004; Morrow et al., 2020; Stringer & Murphy, 2020; Todak, 2017). Such applicants, however, have exhibited much stagnancy in their characteristics. For example, most applicants are White men: police agencies have long struggled with their recruitment of females (Cordner & Cordner, 2011) and applicants from racialized groups (Rowe & Ross, 2015). Most applicants also cite similar motivations for pursuing policing careers, including excitement, job security, the ability to fight crime, the prestige of the profession, and the opportunity to help others (Foley et al., 2008; Lester, 1983; Todak, 2017). For example, Todak (2017) found that most applicants in her sample cited “helping people” (p. 256) as their primary motivation for pursuing a policing career. As noted earlier, Todak (2017) also found that many applicants dreamed of becoming a police officer since their childhood and/or teenage years.

Some research has interrogated this stagnancy in applicant characteristics and its correlates. Much of the research in this domain has focused on the marketing of policing careers and/or the application process and its disparate outcomes for some applicant groups. For example, in the context of marketing, Linos (2018) found that emphasizing messaging about the personal benefits of a policing career was especially effective for attracting female and racialized applicants, and Coutts et al. (2004) observed that applicants exhibited a greater interest in a policing career once they were informed of the (then) emerging nature of community policing. In terms of more explicit recruitment efforts, Martin (1991) observed that court-ordered and affirmative action policies significantly impacted the hiring of female officers.

In the context of the application process, Birzer and Craig (1996) found that female applicants experienced higher failure rates for physical testing than male applicants, and Kringen and Kringen (2015) reported that Black applicants experienced higher disqualification rates during the application process than White applicants. Finally, Linos et al. (2017) observed that softening the e-mail wording about required testing increased racialized applicants' probability of passing such testing by 50%. These studies have all provided insight into why some applicant groups have been constrained in their pursuit of policing careers and proposed potential initiatives that could be used to address such constraints.

Relevance to Zootopia

“I can make the world a better place. I'm going to be a police officer!”

As suggested throughout the above subsections, Officer Hopps defied all stereotypes and expectations in her pursuit of a policing career. Hired as part of Zootopia's Mammal Inclusion Initiative, an affirmative action program intended to diversify the ZPD, Officer Hopps was the first rabbit officer in the ZPD. Officer Hopps was also presented to be the physically smallest of officers in the ZPD. Despite her eventual success, Officer Hopps was doubted in her policing pursuits by even those closest to her, like her parents, who informed a then young Officer Hopps that “it's going to be difficult, impossible even, for you to become a police officer.”

Similar to many applicants, Officer Hopps expressed her interest in becoming a police officer at a young age. Moreover, and also like many applicants, Officer Hopps cited her desire to help others as her primary motivation to pursue a policing career. This particular desire was central to her character and the film's broader plot. For example, Officer Hopps introduced herself during the film as, "Officer Hopps, you ready to make the world a better place?" She also responded to Mr. Wilde's comment about saving his life with the affirmatory response, "that's what we do here at the ZPD." When reflecting on the challenges of her career, she reiterated that her initial intention for joining the ZPD was to help make the world a better place. Nonetheless, it is important to note that during various segments of the film, Officer Hopps also expressed other related interests, including investigating and solving crime.

Lastly, the film highlighted some broader themes in police recruiting narratives. For example, it underscored what is often considered to be "pro-police" messaging about the role of police as "serving and protecting." By hiring Officer Hopps and then eventually Officer Wilde, an otherwise "sly fox" who Chief Bogo suggested he was "not going to believe," the film also reaffirmed the possibility of policing as a career for anyone, which has become increasingly relevant in light of the recruitment challenges facing policing. The messaging of the film thus spoke not just to individual stereotypes and themes about policing, but also how such stereotypes and themes may implicate in future recruitment.

Discussion

Public fascination with policing has contributed to a "police fetishism" (Reiner, 2008, p. 331) among modern media. The excitement and zeal of policing continues to make its way into media, which in turn continues to captivate audiences worldwide. Disney's film *Zootopia* is no exception. The animated, anthropomorphic film, which grossed more than one billion dollars worldwide, follows the adventures of Officer Hopps: the first rabbit officer to be hired by the ZPD who solved the high-profile case of the missing mammals.

At a superficial level, the film provides a rich form of entertainment. From a research perspective, though, the film provides an example of how policing can manifest in fictional form. As articulated throughout this article, policing media can house research findings in some of the most interesting, provocative, and consequential ways. From the expressed shock about Officer Hopps' early interest in a policing career, to the constant questioning of her legitimacy once hired, to the repeated emphasis of her small stature and alleged incompetency, to her "token" status as a rabbit officer, the content of the film reflects many themes documented in recent research regarding policing. Indeed, the film highlighted many intersections between the performance of police in media and the work of police in reality, specifically as it regards police appearance, police stereotypes, police representation, and police recruiting.

For some, the depiction of policing as presented in the film is likely concerning. A story of harassment, discrimination, and unparalleled mistreatment of an officer based almost entirely on problematic beliefs about their physicality. Yet, for others, its depiction could be perceived as encouraging. The fact that even a "bunny" can become a police officer infers that policing is theoretically a possibility for all. But, through this kind of conflicting rhetoric, the storyline arguably solidifies an even more important and well-recognized finding among policing and gender-based literatures: that unquestioned legitimacy is not a benefit for all. In order to obtain her status as a competent and legitimate police officer, Officer Hopps had to first overcome many hurdles and barriers that her colleagues did not appear to have to overcome. The film centered around her experiences of having to "prove herself," which were both unique and central to her and her identity. This kind of presentation made the film's narrative highly relevant for many discussions about contemporary policing. It also mirrored many themes in related policing films, though the explicit integration of failure followed by such tremendous (albeit highly questioned) success made it in some ways unique.

As outlined earlier, cultivation theory posits that mass communication, like television, functions to reinforce and perpetuate dominant power structures in society. The relevance of criminal justice and related

topics, specifically as they relate to policing, are evident in *Zootopia* when interpreted through the lens of this theory. Such relevance also emerges when this film is compared to other films, like *End of Watch*, as introduced earlier, as well as television series, including those targeted toward similar audiences as *Zootopia*. For example, critics have raised concerns about *Paw Patrol*, an animated television series featuring a police dog and his colleagues, which has been argued to promote themes of a “misogynistic, conservative authoritarian fantasy” (Walt D, 2018). Similar concerns have been brought forth about the depiction of policing in children’s books as well (Sawchuk, 2018). These critiques align with much of the public narrative currently surrounding police and the associated defund movement.

The messaging communicated by these productions could implicate in people’s views about policing and the criminal justice system as well as their behavioral decisions that relate to such views. For example, Pollock et al. (2022) observed that the consumption of crime media impacted whether participants exhibited an interest in a policing career, and Barthe et al. (2013) found that exposure to crime-related television shows affected participants’ selection of college majors and occupational aspirations. Given that interests in policing careers can begin at such a young age (Todak, 2017), the relevance of policing media for young audiences again emerges as salient. With police agencies experiencing recruiting challenges and increased turnover of current staff, recruitment will be a pressing topic for police for many years to come.

Before concluding, it is important to recognize the potential limitations of this work. First, and most notably, I only analyzed a single film and thus the contents of this article may not extrapolate to all films, including other animated films. Similar to other case study approaches, the intent of this work was not to generalize, but rather to provide insight into how policing is depicted in this specific film. Second, the themes that I discussed may not be exhaustive. My emphasis was more on specific characters, particularly Officer Hopps, rather than broader societal and institutional narratives (e.g., the conflict between good and evil, the debate between nature and nurture, the symbolism of police as defenders/crime-fighters, the investigational practices of police), which could also present empirical interest. The salience of these themes may also be subjective, insofar that not all viewers may perceive them to be equally salient. Finally, there could be alternative interpretations for certain depictions in the film that I could not account for without greater context from the film’s production team. For example, some could argue that Officer Hopps’ treatment was a result of her junior status in the ZPD as opposed to her personal characteristics. However, given that such plausibility was not explicitly addressed in the film, and especially not to the same degree as Officer Hopps’ personal characteristics, it would appear that stereotypes about her were most salient to the film’s narrative.

Conclusion

Fictional media offers a conduit by which criminal justice actors, organizations, and institutions are presented, interpreted, and contested. From this perspective, it would appear as if *Zootopia*’s depiction of policing reflects much of the research that has unearthed fractures among the profession. If the audience of this film uses the ideas presented in the film to inform their beliefs about police, then such film could exhibit important implications for policing. For some viewers, the film could ignite a desire to combat stereotypes and pursue a policing career, as did Officer Hopps and then eventually Officer Wilde. For others, however, it may suppress interest in policing. Such suppression could contribute to both continued problems for police culture as well as challenges for police recruitment, particularly as they relate to diversity. Given that young audiences, which are the target of this film, can still develop attitudes about police, interact with police officers, and pursue careers in policing, these implications warrant continued attention.

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