

The Portrayal of Female's Images in Children's Literature:

An analysis of the prevalence of gender behavior patterns from 2000 to 2010

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“Picture books play an important role in early sex role socialization because they are a vehicle for the presentation of societal values to the young child. Through books, children learn about the world outside their immediate environment. They learn about what boys and girls do, say and feel. They learn about what is wrong, and they learn what is expected of children their age. In addition books provide children with role models – images of what they can and should be when they grow up” (Weitzman, 1972, p. 1126).

Rationale

Despite the increased range of career opportunities and lifestyles available to both sexes today, gender role stereotypes are still present and still produce negative connotations and consequences, especially for women. Gender roles are the behaviors that society teaches are “correct” for boys and girls, and gender stereotypes are often the basis for gender roles (Gooden & Gooden, 2001). Gender stereotypes can thus be defined as “assumptions made about the characteristics of each gender, such as physical appearance, physical abilities, attitudes, interests, or occupations” (Gooden & Gooden, 2001, p. 90). These gender role stereotypes are inflicted on children at a very young age via socialization, through a variety of agents, such as parents, teachers and the media. Socialization is a process that begins as early as three years of age when children can correctly associate sex-typed objects, such as articles of clothing, with the appropriate

sex, and therefore begin forming gender stereotypes. In addition, there is evidence that five-year-old children prefer same sex objects to opposite sex objects, and that children of this age have an appreciable degree of knowledge of adult sex stereotypes that only increases through the second-grade level (McDonald, 1988).

As noted, in addition to parents, teachers and siblings, media sources play a part in socialization, and therefore, influencing young children's gender perceptions. According to McDonald (1988), toy advertisements have been known to reinforce conventional sex role definitions and future expectations for young children, such as job aspirations, have been influenced by such media sources as television shows, movies and books. The influence and effects of such media have been studied by various researchers, such as L. Berg-Cross and G. Berg-Cross (1978), who concluded from their study on the effects of listening to stories on children's attitudes that the use of non-sexist literature caused a measurable positive change in the attitudes of young children. On the other hand, exposure to sex-stereotyped books contributed to an increase in sex-typed play behavior (Ashton, 1983). Therefore, as young children are developing their gender identity, they are learning or adding to preconceived notions about their specific gender through media portrayals (LaDow, 1976).

In studying the representation of males and females throughout various media, special emphasis needs to be put on visual images as nonverbal symbols. "As a socializing agent, the visual imagery provided by the media can have a powerful impact on our attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors, since it can contribute meanings and associations entirely apart and of much greater significance (Kang, 1997, p. 980)." Images are symbols that can convey meaning as efficiently as verbal symbols.

Consequently, the medium of children's books serves as a socializing tool to transmit values from one generation to the next, and in turn, is a strong purveyor of gender role stereotypes. As noted by Arbuthnot (1984), books are often the primary source for the presentation of societal values to the young. And, research has affirmed that gender stereotyping in children's books has detrimental effects on children's perception of gender roles, and children's identity and self-esteem could be affected by negative portrayals of their gender (Gooden and Gooden, 2001).

For this reason, the present study will examine the portrayal of female images in children's picture books, with specific emphasis on prevalent gender behaviors presented, in hopes of answering the question: What messages about females have been given to society through children's literature?

Literature Review

Various media have been accused of stereotyping images of females and have been the center of many studies; however, most of the studies relating to portrayals of women in relation to gender behavior patterns have focused on the medium of advertising, and a majority of the studies that have analyzed gender stereotypes within children's literature have focused on character prevalence in titles, pictures and central roles, and on gender differences in the types of roles and activities associated with the characters.

Representation of Females in Children's Literature

Although more recent results of studies have revealed that gender differences in children's literature have decreased considerably toward more sexual equality, with female representation as main characters becoming proportionate to that of male

characters (Kinman and Henderson, 1996), there has still been much research in the past showcasing that this has been an issue for years and more needs to be done.

In a hallmark study conducted by Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada and Ross in 1972, the researchers examined prize-winning picture books. They found that females were largely underrepresented in the titles, central roles, and illustrations. When females did appear in the books, their characterization reinforced traditional sex-role stereotypes, such as passivity and occupational limitations.

Since the Weitzman et al. study, the issue of stereotyping in children's literature has been studied from a variety of different angles. As noted, the most popular way to address the issue has been to examine character prevalence and character roles and activities.

Ladow (1979) analyzed several items based on a modification of the Weitzman et al. study and drew the same conclusions as Weitzman et al., except that males and male animals appeared in the illustrations four times more than the females and female animals.

In 1981, Kolbe and LaVoie looked at changes in sex-role stereotyping since the Weitzman et al. study. The study examined the presence of sexism in terms of ratio of female to male illustrations and characters in the book, as well as sex of the main character and sex-role portrayal. The authors concluded that while the ratio of female to male character had improved since 1972, role portrayal had not changed.

Through content analysis, McDonald (1988) found significant differences in the representation of male and female characters in a sample of children's picture books published between 1976 and 1987. The analysis was divided into six categories, in which

parental support, helping behavior, stereotypical behavior roles, play behavior, character status, and illustrations were analyzed. The results indicated that although female characters were close to half of all characters presented, they were still underrepresented, especially as central characters, and were given a smaller variety of roles than were male characters.

In "An 80s look for sex equality in Caldecott winners and Honor Books," Dougherty and Engels (1987) analyzed Caldecott winners and Honor Books of the 1980s and compared their findings with those from earlier studies. The study specifically looked at whether the issue of male dominance in children's literature has diminished throughout the 1980s and whether the books studied reflected changes in the traditional sex roles and characteristics typically assigned to each gender. Results indicated that there was a change toward sex equality in a number of characters and that girls and boys were presented in nontraditional roles and with nontraditional characteristics.

Angela and Mark Gooden (2001) analyzed 81 Notable Books for Children from 1995 to 1999 for gender of main character, illustrations and title. The authors concluded that steps toward equity had advanced based on the increase in females represented as main characters; however, gender stereotypes were still significant in children's picture books. As hypothesized, female representation as the main character equally paralleled that of males, but males appeared alone more often than females in the illustrations. And, although there was an emergence of nontraditional characteristics and nontraditional roles portrayed by females and males, males still dominated the children's literature reviewed.

In 2003, Clark, Guilmain, Saucier and Tavarez took a look back at progressive change in the depiction of gender in award-winning picture books for children. The

authors concluded that books from the late 1940s and late 1960s had fewer visible female characters than those from the late 1930s and late 1950s, but that characters in the 1940s and 1960s were less gender stereotyped than the characters from the 1930s and 1950s. The results were interpreted as having a direct correlation with the level of conflict over gender roles during each time period.

More recently, in 2006, Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus and Young conducted a twenty-first century update on gender stereotyping and underrepresentation of female characters in 200 popular children's books. The results showed that female characters are still underrepresented in children's picture books. There were nearly twice as many male than female main characters; male characters appeared more often in illustrations; female characters were showcased nurturing and indoors more than male characters; and occupations were gender stereotyped.

Beyond character prevalence and character roles and activities, there have been some researchers who have taken different approaches to analyzing gender stereotypes within children's literature.

Sex bias in the helping behavior presented in children's picture books was analyzed by Barnett (1986) in "Sex Bias in the Helping Behavior Presented in Children's Picture Books." It was concluded that male characters were found to be represented more frequently than females both as child helpers and as the recipients of help.

Arthur and White (1996) researched children's assignment of gender to gender-neutral animal characters. The study revisited the same gender-neutral characters used by DeLoache, Cassidy and Carpenter (1987), which concluded that mothers' descriptions of gender-neutral characters were influenced by subtle gender stereotypes. The Arthur and

White study indicated that the youngest children most often assigned their own gender to the characters; however, the children in the older groups were influenced by stereotypes. For example, solitary and noninteracting characters were less likely to receive female gender labels than were bears involved in adult-child interactions.

In 1999, Tepper and Cassidy examined a different potential area of gender stereotyping, gender differences in emotional language in children's picture books. It was hypothesized that there would be a relationship between gender and the amount of emotional words associated with each characters, and that male characters would more often be associated with emotional words considered appropriate for males, while female characters would more often be associated with emotional words considered appropriate for females. The analysis of character prevalence indicated that males had a higher representation in titles, pictures and central roles. However, contrary to the hypotheses, males and females were associated with equal amounts of emotional language, and no differences were found in the types of emotional words associated with males and females.

Whereas previous studies looked at the narrowly defined roles of female characters, Anderson and Hamilton (2005) focused on the representation of mothers and fathers, and examined whether men were stereotyped as relatively absent or inept partners. The results of the content analysis indicated that fathers were largely underrepresented and, when they did appear, they were withdrawn and ineffectual fathers.

Prevalence of Gender Behavior Patterns in Advertising

According to Anderson, Broaddus, Hamilton and Young (2006), although gender representation in children's literature seems to be improving, "we should be aware that there may be more subtle ways in which the sexes are portrayed stereotypically. Perhaps authors consciously or unconsciously resort to subtle sexism because blatant sexism no longer passes unnoticed" (p.764). In 1976, Erving Goffman found subtle visual sexism in his examination of gender bias in advertising through such cues as relative size (women shown smaller or lower, relative to men), feminine touch (women constantly touching themselves), function ranking (occupational), ritualization of subordination (proclivity for lying down at inappropriate times, etc.) and licensed withdrawal (women never quite a part of the scene, possibly via far-off gazes). In his book, Goffman concluded that women were weakened by advertising portrayals via these five categories.

These same categories for decoding behavior were utilized in Kang's 1997 study, "The Portrayal of Women's Images in Magazine Advertisements: Goffman's Gender Analysis Revisited," along with two new categories: body display and independence/self-assertiveness. Although it was hypothesized by Kang that portrayals of women in magazine advertisements would change greatly from 1979 to 1991 due to the fact that during this timeframe women had changed, the results indicated that, overall, the extent of sexism in magazine ads remained approximately the same.

These subtle forms of sexism presented by Goffman and reevaluated by Kang have yet to be formally explored in children's picture books. For this reason, the purpose of this study will be to fill the gap that subsists in the existing research between studies

on the portrayal of females in relation to gender behavior patterns in advertising and the representation of females in children's literature.

Research Questions

It is the objective of this study to analyze the specific behaviors mentioned above and to determine what gender behavior patterns have been most prevalent in children's picture books between 2000 and 2010. Therefore, for this study, the researcher will analyze the gender behaviors portrayed in children's literature, utilizing Goffman's model of decoding behavior, in order to observe changes throughout the most recent decade. In 2009, women were on the verge of outnumbering men in the workplace for the first time; a historic reversal caused by long-term changes in women's roles and massive job losses for men during the recession. "Women held 49.83% of the nation's 132 million jobs in June and they're gaining the vast majority of jobs in the few sectors of the economy that are growing, according to the most recent numbers available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics" (Cauchon, 2009). If the roles of women have changed enough to alter societies perception, then it would seem that portrayals of women in media, including children's literature would reflect the new social status and new image of American women.

Therefore, based on the results of Goffman's (1976) and Kang's (1997) studies on the portrayal of women's images in magazine advertisements, a review of the past literature regarding the representation and portrayal of females in children's picture books, and the ever-changing roles and images of the American female, the following research questions have been proposed for this study:

RQ1: What messages about women have been given to society through children's literature in the past decade?

RQ2: Have these messages changed from 2000 to 2010?

Methodology

Sampling

Following several of the previous studies on stereotyping in children's books, the sample will include Caldecott Medal winner books between 2000 and 2010. Additionally, in order to draw from a large and representative sample of the books that are currently being read to children, the selection criteria will include non-Caldecott-winning best-selling children's picture books from 2000 to 2010, as determined by *New York Times*.

Definitions

In his book, Goffman (1978) concluded that women were weakened by advertising portrayals via five categories, defined as relative size, feminine touch, function ranking, ritualization of subordination and licensed withdrawal.

For these five categories, the following definitions from Goffman's *Gender Advertisements* will be utilized for this study:

1. Relative Size – One way in which social weight (e.g., power, authority, rank) is echoed expressively in social situations is through relative size, especially height. The male's usual superiority of status over the female will be expressive in his greater girth and height. It is assumed that differences in size will correlate with differences in social weight.
2. Feminine Touch – Women, more than men, are pictured using their fingers and hands to trace the outlines of an object or to cradle it or to caress its

surface. This ritualistic touching is to be distinguished from the utilitarian kind that grasps, manipulates or holds.

3. Function Ranking – When a man and a woman collaborate face-to-face in an undertaking, the man is likely to perform the executive role. This hierarchy of functions is pictured either within an occupational frame or outside of occupational specializations.

4. Ritualization of Subordination – A classic stereotype of deference is that of lowering oneself physically in some form or other of prostration.

Correspondingly, holding the body erect and the head high is stereotypically a mark of superiority and disdain. The configurations of canting postures can be read as an acceptance of subordination, an expression of ingratiating, submissiveness and appeasement.

5. Licensed Withdrawal – Women more than men are pictured engaged in involvements that remove them psychologically from the social situation at large, leaving them disoriented in it and to it, and dependent on the protectiveness of others who are present. Turning one's gaze away from another's can be seen as having the consequence of withdrawing from the current thrust of communication.

For the purpose of this study, gender roles are defined as a set of social and behavioral norms that, within a specific culture, are widely considered to be socially appropriate for individuals of a specific gender. And, gender stereotypes, as discussed earlier, are assumptions made about the characteristics of each gender.

Measurement of Variables

Five forms of gender displays will be measured: relative size, feminine touch, function ranking, ritualization of subordination and licensed withdrawal. The dependent variable will be the frequency of gender displays in the children's picture books, and the independent variable will be time.

As with Kang's study, a content analysis will be performed. For each coding category, different scores will be assigned: the score of one if it is a stereotypical behavior and the score of zero if it is a nonstereotypical behavior. By adding up the scores, the overall "stereotyping score" for each book will be measured. Therefore, a higher score indicates more stereotyping, and a lower score indicates less stereotyping. The mean stereotyping scores for each year will then be compared in order to determine an overall "stereotyping score" for each year.

The coding will be based on the following criteria for each category:

1. Relative Size – Male taller; the height of male and female models are compared (Male taller =1, Male not taller = 0).
2. Feminine Touch – Cradling and/or caressing object, touching self; the women is pictured in the illustration using her fingers and hands to trace the outline of an object, to cradle it or to caress its surface (Yes = 1, No = 0).
3. Function Ranking – Male as the instructor, female serving other person, male in superior role; the man is instructing the women in the illustration (Yes = 1, No = 0).
4. Ritualization of Subordination – Female lowering, lying/sitting on sofa (Yes =1, No = 0).

5. Licensed Withdrawal – Expansive smile, covering mouth/face with hand, head/eye gaze aversion, phone conversation, withdrawing gaze, body display; the female is withdrawn or removed (mentally and/or physically) from a particular situation (Yes = 1, No = 0).

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