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Gender Role Portrayals in Preschool Picture Books

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Children's preschool books are important sources of gender role socialization, teaching children traditional gender-stereotyped expectations and behavior. Past studies on award-winning preschool books have noted much gender stereotyping but gradually increasing visibility of female characters. This research updated the past studies and expected to find decreasing gender stereotyping. Results showed that human female characters have become increasingly visible, with close to equal numerical representation, and a wider variety of attributes and activities. Though significant male–female differences in depiction of gender-stereotypic traits have diminished, subtle traditional expectations are still present in many of these books.

Socialization into expected gender roles is one of the most important lessons that young children learn. In addition to parents' and teachers' intentional efforts to shape gender roles, they are also learned from the mass media (television, radio, books, magazines, and newspapers), to which children are exposed every day. For preschool-age children, an important source of such information is the picture books written specifically for their age group. These are often read and reread to them in their impressionable early years.

Children's books provide their audience with cues about life—in particular, about what goals and social norms are available and appropriate for members of their sex. Social learning theories and research findings both emphasize that children learn to believe and do what they see and hear. The learned bases for gender differences are well-established in the first few years of life (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Richardson, 1988). There are ample research precedents for using children's books as

indicators of dominant societal values (e.g., McClelland, 1961). If children's literature displays stereotyped gender roles, it will present restricted role models for children and help to shape their behavior in stereotyped directions.

In recent decades there have been strong claims that children's literature is highly gender stereotyped. Several studies have demonstrated such gender-role stereotyping (e.g., Women on Words and Images, 1975). In one classic study, Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, and Ross (1972) studied sexist messages in books which won the prestigious Caldecott Medal. This medal is awarded annually by the American Library Association to several illustrated children's books which are judged as being the most outstanding of their genre for that year. As award winners, these volumes immediately achieve high visibility to librarians and discriminating purchasers, and set much higher sales records than other children's books (as much as 60,000, according to Weitzman et al., 1972). Thus they present a model of preschool literature to which writers and publishers aspire, and they become some of the most widely read and influential children's books that are published each year.

A striking finding of Weitzman et al.'s (1972) study was that girls and women were nearly invisible in these books' titles, central characters, and illustrations. For example, in their sample of award-winning illustrated books published from 1967 to 1971, the pictures showed 261 male characters (92%) compared to 23 females (8%). The girls who were depicted were generally inconspicuous and passive in their activities; their roles were usually watching, helping, and waiting. In contrast, boys were often shown as involved in adventures, exciting activities, and camaraderie. The characteristics of adult role models in the stories were similarly differentiated. Adult females were generally passive, stayed indoors, and performed service functions, while the men were busy building, ruling, fighting, and having adventures with their children. Despite the fact that 40% of U.S. women were in the labor force at the time of the study (U.S. Department of Labor, 1969), not one female character in the entire sample of books was described as working outside of the home.

The Weitzman et al. (1972) study received widespread attention, and similar findings were reported by other researchers (e.g., St. Peter, 1979; Stockard & Johnson, 1980). Consequently, efforts arose among some authors and publishers of children's literature to present a more positive image of females. Concerned groups compiled lists of nonsexist children's books (e.g., Women's Action Alliance, 1973), and newly formed publishing companies such as Feminist Press began to specialize in printing less-stereotyped literature for children. A list of such egalitarian volumes

contains titles such as *Girls Can Be Anything, Jennifer Takes Over,* and *Mommies at Work* (see Pitcher, Feinberg, & Alexander, 1984).

Subsequently, Williams, Vernon, Williams, and Malecha (1987) replicated the Weitzman et al. study, focusing on the Caldecott Medal winners of the 1970s and early 1980s. Compared with the earlier data, they found that girls and women had begun to achieve more visibility by 1980–1985, with females accounting for 37% of the pictured human characters. The traits of the female characters were also more varied than those found in the earlier study, but no dominant behavioral profile was found for girl characters, whereas boys were typically depicted as independent, persistent, and active. Only one of the adult characters was portrayed in a non-gender-stereotyped role, and though women were now depicted in activities outside the home, they were not shown as employed. The authors concluded that "not only does Jane express no career goals, but there is no adult female model to provide any ambition" (p. 155). Other studies of preschool children's literature have similarly found substantial gender-role stereotyping (Kolbe & LaVoie, 1981), but with a gradual increase in egalitarian depictions (Dougherty & Engel, 1987; Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993).

The present study analyzed the Caldecott Medal winners for 1986–1991—22 illustrated books which were primarily aimed at 3–5-year-olds. The content analysis methods described by Williams et al. (1987) were used, and some dimensions of coding were amplified for greater precision. We expected that the gender stereotypes would continue to decrease, and that females would be still more visible than in prior studies.

METHOD

Books

The 22 Caldecott award and honor books for 1986 through 1991 can be briefly described and classified as follows. Three were retellings of familiar stories (*Rumpelstiltskin, Goldilocks and the Three Bears,* and *Puss in Boots*), while several others were adaptations of less-familiar folk tales from other lands. Overlapping the latter group, there were eight volumes that had a cross-cultural theme, touching on life in different nations, racial groups, or religions (*The Village of Round and Square Houses, Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters, The Boy of the Three Year Nap, Mirandy and Brother Wind, Lon Po Po, Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins, The Talking Eggs,* and *"More More More" Said The Baby*). Several of these books had adventure themes. Three others might best be described as original adventure stories (*The Polar Express, Owl Moon,* and *Free Fall*). Two other volumes seemed more fantasy than adventure (*Hey Al,* and *King Bidgood's in the Bathtub*), as did several of the folk

tales. For instance, these books featured talking eggs, people turning into birds or snakes, and a girl tricking the wind. Several books focused on fairly mundane family activities (*The Relatives Came, Song and Dance Man, Owl Moon,* and *"More More More" Said the Baby*), while one was an autobiography (*Bill Peet*). Finally, one book was a puzzle that interwove four separate stories in a complicated way (*Black and White*), and two had no characters or plots because they were designed to teach children letters or animal names (*Alphabatics,* and *Color Zoo*).

Procedures

A content analysis was performed on these books. The methods of coding, tabulation, and analysis followed those described by Williams et al. (1987) as closely as could be determined from their article, except in the instances noted below where procedures were amplified to obtain greater precision and reliability.

First, the sex of the author and illustrator of each book was noted. Next, a tally was made of each illustration throughout the book, including the covers, counting each illustration separately whether it occupied one or two pages or only part of a page. These illustrations were classified as containing only female characters, only male characters, or both sexes. Here, a minor methodological amplification was that characters were not considered if they were tiny figures in the background or if their sex was not determinable from either the picture or the text. The number of characters in each illustration was then counted separately by sex, and characters were also coded as human or personified nonhuman. The personified nonhuman category was included in past studies because many of the characters in children's books are animals engaged in human-like activities, which may also serve as role models for children (e.g., the three little pigs). Human characters in each picture were also coded for their location (indoors, outdoors, or unclear), but the location of nonhuman characters was not coded since most animals are generally found outdoors.

Adding a dimension that the Williams et al. (1987) study lacked, human adults were also distinguished from children, in order to investigate any differences between adult and child characters' behavior and attributes. The counts of adults versus children, the sex and number of characters in illustrations, and the number of illustrations were objective, except for deciding which characters were so small as to be considered background. Two raters made each count, and a third rater resolved any differences between them.

Again following past research procedures, the main character and the main opposite-sex character of each book were determined and rated on their salient attributes, using the same specific trait definitions as Will-

iams et al. (1987), who adapted them slightly from ones proposed by Davis (1984). These traits are listed in the results.

One amplification in our study was a more precise definition of what constituted a salient attribute: We defined it as a trait that was shown or mentioned clearly in the book. In order to be considered salient, the characteristic had to be displayed more than once by the character (e.g., cooperation) or to be shown in a key part of the plot (e.g., rescuing someone). As with Williams et al., the salient attributes were rated dichotomously as present or absent. Two opposite traits (e.g., dependent and independent) could both be rated as present for a given character. In cases where the above definition still left doubt about the salience of a trait, we instructed raters to code it as present.

The trait ratings were made by four graduate students in psychology, after extensive training, practice with, and discussion of the rating system. Initial practice was done with non-Caldecott books until the rating criteria were clear. Each of the 1986–1991 Caldecott books was then coded on two separate occasions about two weeks apart, and results for the two occasions were combined in order to increase the reliability of the findings. Similar to Williams et al.'s (1987) procedures, to gain greater stability of scoring, traits were counted as salient only if three of the four raters agreed on them at either of the two rating occasions.

Reliability

Computation of alpha coefficients across all books and all traits for the two rated characters in each book showed that all four raters contributed to the internal consistency of the ratings (overall $\alpha = .78$). Interrater agreement across all books and traits was similar to that of Williams et al. (1987), averaging 80% for female characters and 77% for male characters.

Some traits were distinctly harder to agree on: especially displaying a traditional gender role (mean = 53% agreement), being dependent (54%), emotional (62%), independent (71%), passive (72%), cooperative (74%), persistent (76%), nurturant (77%), active (78%), and explorative (79%). By contrast, agreement was over 90% for displaying a nontraditional gender role, being employed, rescuing others, being aggressive, and being competitive. The most difficult traits to agree upon were those, like dependent and emotional, which have less clear behavioral indicators, and displaying a traditional gender role, which is in a sense a cognitive summation of many other traits (and involves the rater's subjective assessment of societal expectations). Like Williams et al. (1987), because of the small number of characters of each gender being rated, we report any gender differences that exceeded the .10 level of significance.

RESULTS

Of the 22 Caldecott winners published in 1986–1991, the authors' sex was approximately even, 10 females and 12 males, but the illustrators were predominately males, 17 to 5. Since the illustrations closely followed the written story, this disproportion in artists should not have caused a gender imbalance in the pictures. Of the book titles, only half gave any indication of the gender of characters, but these were male-dominated; 7 included male names or terms such as brother or king, while only 3 were clearly female such as daughter (see the book titles in the method section). Two books could not be rated further because they were ABC-type books which had no story and thus no human or animal characters. Of the remaining 20, females appeared in all but one, and the gender of the character judged to be most central was divided almost evenly, 9 females and 10 males, with one book having no central character. Thus there were only slight indications of any gender bias in these aspects. In contrast, in the 1960s and 1970s data, chi-square tests showed significant departures from gender equality in the percentage of female main characters and significantly greater numbers of books without a female character.

Visibility

Female invisibility in the Williams et al. (1987) study was most pronounced in the books' illustrations. Table 1 summarizes data from two past studies and adds data from the current analysis, showing trends in a number of measures of gender visibility over four time periods. In counting illustrations for the 1986–1991 period, one book, *Bill Peet*, the autobiography of a cartoonist, was eliminated as an outlier because it was about five times as long as the other books and contained about one-third of the total number of illustrations (many of them small drawings of mythical animals).

In the remaining 19 volumes' illustrations containing people, 72% included females and 79% included males, only a slight disparity. When illustrations that contained only a single gender were counted, 43% of these pictures were all-female compared to 57% all-male (see Table 1). This proportion of females was nonsignificantly different from gender equality (50%) by a chi-square test, and it was higher than any of the previous time periods. The differences among the four time periods were highly significant ($\chi^2 = 46.17$, df = 3, p < .001), displaying a strong trend from gender inequality to equality.

A similar pattern was found in counting the number of human characters depicted in the illustrations. Of these, 44% were female and 56% male, a proportion significantly different from equality due to the

chi $\mathcal{L}$ sup x^2

TABLE 1   Visibility and Location of Females in Preschool Picture Books, 1967–1991

Category	1967–1971[a]	1972–1979[b]	1980–1985[b]	1986–1991
Human single-gender illustrations				
Total number	188	339	178	141
% female	11.7	31.6	37.1	43.3
Human characters illustrated				
Total number	685	1315	1084	1189
% female	19.1	32.9	42.2	43.7
Personified nonhuman single-gender illustrations				
Total number	96	39	59	37
% female	1.0	30.8	15.3	2.7
Personified nonhuman characters illustrated				
Total number	196	156	168	106
% female	7.1	23.7	28.6	16.0
Location of humans (% indoors)				
Girls	36.6	—	31.9	50.3
Boys	31.4	—	22.0	69.2
Women	40	—	26.0	41.2
Men	31	—	21.8	39.0
Books				
Total number	18	29	24	22(19)[c]
% with female central character	11.1	27.6	33.3	47.4
% with no female character	33.3	27.6	12.5	5.0

[a] *From Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, & Ross (1972) and Williams, Vernon, Williams, & Malecha (1987).*

[b] *From Williams et al. (1987).*

[c] *Only 20 of the 22 books had characters, and in one book with multiple characters no single one was central.*

large N ($\chi^2 = 18.67$, df = 1, p < .001). However, like the human single-gender illustrations, the number of human characters showed a significant trend toward greater gender equality over the four time periods ($\chi^2 = 138.55$, df = 3, p < .001), with the proportion of females in the last two time periods being significantly higher than in the 1960s and 1970s.

The findings were markedly different for the pictures of personified animals found in eight books (*Puss in Boots, Goldilocks, Hershel and the*

Hanukkah Goblins, Lon Po Po, Hey Al, Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters, Mirandy and Brother Wind, and *The Talking Eggs*). Only 51% of these illustrations contained females while 99% contained males, and of the single-gender animal illustrations, only 3% were female compared to 97% male. A similar predominance of male personified animal characters was also found in the illustrations of all previous time periods (all periods were significantly different from equality by chi-square). The imbalance in the latest period was more extreme than any found since 1967–1971, and there was no time trend toward equality. Similar patterns were found in counting the nonhuman personified characters: Only 16% of those with identifiable gender were female and 84% were male. This was a significantly lower female proportion than in the previous period. However, every time period showed a significant gender imbalance, and there was no time trend toward greater gender equality.

Indoor–Outdoor Locations

The locations where characters were depicted were 50% indoors for girls, whereas surprisingly, boys were shown indoors 69% of the time ($\chi^2 = 12.01$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). The locations for adult women versus men were very similar to each other, with 41% and 39% respectively being portrayed indoors (see Table 1). Thus, this index of traditional gender activities for boys and girls has reversed in the most recent group of books, and it has moved toward indoor locations for all four age and gender groups.

Behavioral Characteristics

The personal traits or characteristics that were depicted in the stories are probably even more indicative of gender stereotypes than the characters' visibility and location, though they involve more subjective judgments. In each story, the most important character of each sex was rated on the same 20 characteristics used by Williams et al. (1987) plus their status as employed or not. Table 2 shows the findings for the 1986–1991 volumes, compared with Williams et al.'s data for the 1980–1985 volumes. In a typical story, only about 4 or 5 of these traits were judged to be salient for each character, based on agreement by 3 out of 4 raters. One difference between the studies was that Williams et al.'s raters judged every character as having a clearly traditional gender role (34 characters) or a clearly nontraditional gender role (1 character). Our raters only viewed 7 characters as displaying a clearly traditional gender role and none as being clearly nontraditional, considering the others as intermediate or too ambiguous to classify in either category.

In the 1986–1991 volumes, we found an almost equal total number of salient traits for female characters as for male characters. In contrast,

TABLE 2   Salient Traits of Main Character and Main Opposite-Sex Character, 1980–1985 and 1986–1991

Trait	1980–1985[a]			1986–1991		
	No. of Females (N = 17)	No. of Males (N = 18)	Sig. p	No. of Females (N = 16)	No. of Males (N = 18)	Sig. p
Dependent	5	1	< .08	10	5	< .03
Independent	4	12	< .02	4	9	< .08
Cooperative	5	3		5	4	
Competitive	0	5	< .03	1	1	
Directive	2	4		2	6	
Submissive	5	0	< .02	6	1	< .03
Persistent	5	12	< .02	3	6	
Explorative	2	6		5	4	
Creative	1	6	< .05	3	10	< .02
Imitative	0	1		2	0	
Nurturant	6	2	< .10	5	3	
Aggressive	1	4		2	1	
Emotional	3	3		3	7	
Active	8	16	< .01	9	10	
Passive	6	1	< .04	4	3	
Rescues others	3	3		1	2	
Service to others	7	1	< .02	4	1	
Camaraderie with same- sex peers	0	0		2	2	
Traditional gender role	17	17		5	2	
Nontraditional gender role	0	1		0	0	
Employed	1	3		1	3	
Total Traits	81	101		77	80	

Note: p values are 1-tailed.
[a] From Williams, Vernon, Williams, & Malecha (1987).

Williams et al. (1987) found more salient traits for males in 1980–1985 and concluded that this indicated a clearer behavioral profile for males than for female characters. The latest volumes did display tendencies in the gender-stereotypic direction, with 14 of the 19 traits being rated as salient more often in the gender-typical direction. However, only four traits showed significant differences between males and females, compared with ten in Williams et al.'s study (p < .10, one-tailed, by Fisher's exact test—this significance level was used because of the small number of volumes involved, just as it was by Williams et al.). In our study, female characters were found to be dependent and submissive more often than males, and male characters were independent and creative more often than females (all in the gender-typical direction). These four traits were also found to be significant in the same direction by Williams et al. for the 1980–1985 books. Thus it appears that gender-stereotypic behavioral patterns have faded in the most recent set of Caldecott Award books, but have not disappeared completely.

DISCUSSION

The overall results of this content analysis show some persisting gender differences, but a continuing trend toward more equitable gender representation in these award-winning preschool picture books. Compared with the earlier studies which analyzed Caldecott winners for 1967–1971, 1972–1979, and 1980–1985, the present study revealed an increase in the percentage of books having female central characters and in depiction of female humans in the illustrations. However, both of these figures are still a bit shy of full equality with males. Since preschool girls exposed to these books may view their women and girl characters as models of possible and desirable gender role behavior, the increase in the representation of females is a welcome finding and makes it seem unlikely that "the little girl reading these books might be deprived of her ego and her sense of self," as feared by Weitzman et al. (1972, p. 1130).

However, one area where a large disparity in gender representation continues to occur is in personified animal characters. There was a huge imbalance in visibility, with male personified animals being over five times as frequent as females. Exactly what this marked discrepancy signifies is unclear, but if, as is sometimes proposed, children enjoy and identify with storybook personified animals even more than with human characters, the effect of this gender disparity on children's attitudes toward gender roles may be important.

The analysis of behavioral traits displayed by these books' major characters suggests that depiction of stereotypic female–male traits has decreased in comparison to those in prior award-winning books. The

present study found only four attributes that showed significant male–female differences—dependent and submissive, independent and creative (all in the gender-typical direction). This was considerably less than the number of significant gender differences in the Williams et al. (1987) study of 1980–1985 Caldecott winners, though there were smaller differences in the gender-typical direction on 10 of 17 other traits in the present study.

In comparison to Weitzman et al.'s conclusion that depictions of most female characters were colorless, with a limited and subdued behavioral profile, our findings show that female characters are now being portrayed as fuller individuals with a greater number and variety of attributes. However, it should be noted that some of the apparent fading of gender-stereotypic portrayals in these award-winning books may be the result of shifts over time in the evaluative criteria for gender-typical behavior that were used by raters in different decades. For instance, it seems to have become less clear over the past 25 years just what constitutes "traditional gender role behavior."

The present findings are encouraging in that they offer young girls a wider range of acceptable gender roles to model and a greater variety of behavioral traits and activities that they can view as appropriate for them to adopt. For instance, in this group of books, slightly more females than males were depicted as explorative, and large numbers of female characters were shown as active. Similarly, young boys were offered a more varied set of potential identification models, for male characters were fairly often depicted as dependent, cooperative, or emotional—all female-typed traits that were relatively rare in Weitzman et al.'s (1972) analysis of earlier award-winning books.

However, one restriction of the present role models that is rather similar to previous findings is the small number of adults who were shown as employed—only one woman, a seamstress, and three men, a janitor, a merchant's assistant, and a cartoonist. Despite the broadening of acceptable behavioral traits described above, none of the rated characters were judged to be plainly nontraditional in their overall roles. This finding probably indicates a widening of the characteristics included in "traditional" gender roles and a concomitant decrease in the likelihood of labeling many behaviors as indicating a clearly "nontraditional" gender role (e.g., an employed woman would no longer be considered nontraditional).

In addition to their reflection of gender roles, one concept that many of these books clearly aimed to transmit was greater understanding and acceptance of other cultural patterns. Eight of the books gave sympathetic portrayals of life and/or beliefs in other nations, racial groups, or reli-

gions. The only other frequent theme was a focus on family relationships, which were portrayed (generally in a fairly positive light) in half of the books.

One qualification of our findings is that the a priori categorization scheme for characters' behavior did not consider underlying themes or morals in the books. These themes often highlighted implicit norms and values that might constrict the possible roles of both genders, and more of these themes seemed consistent with traditional gender roles than with nontraditional ones. For instance, in both *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* and *The Talking Eggs*, the good and dutiful sister rather than the peevish and disobedient one gets the handsome prince or the valuable jewels. In *The Village of Round and Square Houses*, the separation of women and men in their daily activities is explained and defended. In *King Bidgood's in the Bathtub*, the king gets his way, no matter how silly his wishes. In *Puss in Boots*, Puss's Machiavellian schemes allow his idle master to appear rich and to marry the beautiful but passive princess. Similar manipulative trickery by both *The Boy of the Three Year Nap* and his mother allow the lazy boy to get a job and to wed his boss's daughter.

In contrast, nontraditional gender themes were present in *Mirandy and Brother Wind*, where an adventurous girl tricks the wind and wins the cakewalk contest, and in *Lon Po Po*, where brave and clever girls defeat a predatory wolf. Several of the family-oriented stories also depicted less gender-stereotyped relationships, notably *Owl Moon*, *"More More More,"* and *The Relatives Came*.

The clear trend over time toward more gender equality and a broader repertoire of possible roles for girls and women must have registered on many children (and parents) exposed to these volumes, and it is probably indicative of a similar loosening of gender role constraints in societal expectations generally. Awareness of such increasing role flexibility should be an important influence in the socialization of today's children. However, there is still a distance to go before gender equality is reached and stereotyped gender themes are completely displaced by broader themes of unrestricted human potential.

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The portrayal of parents in media sometimes depicts gender stereotypes in society, often highlighting the "traditional American family" as opposed to nonconventional configurations. Social Scientists have found that home, family, and romance are three of the most important components of the way characters are presented. Moreover, these qualities are often presented in a stereotypical and traditional fashion. In the 1950s the meaning of the word parent coincided with the nuclear family structure picture books affect the development of gender identity in young children, how children's books in the last decade have portrayed gender, and how researchers evaluate picture books for misrepresentations of gender. A review of the research indicated that gender development is a critical part of the earliest and most important learning experiences of a young child. Â Books play an ever-increasing influence on gender development hennuqe of more young children enrolling in preschool settings. The trend of more working mothers accounts for this increase. Based on 1990 data the Census Bureau reported that 59.2% of all young children are enrolled in nursery schools (Robinson & Lyon, 1994).