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# SEX ROLE SOCIALIZATION IN PICTURE BOOKS: AN UPDATE<sup>1</sup>

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In a content analysis of children's picture books, Weitzman et al. (1972) found females depicted far less often than males, and those females who were included tended to play traditional, stereotyped roles. The present study updates this research. Findings indicate that, while the ratio of females to males is now closer to parity, storybook characters continue to walk the well-worn paths of tradition.

The current study updates previous research on the way gender is presented in picture books to preschool-age children by replicating and extending the classic study by Weitzman et al. (1972), "Sex-Role Socialization in Picture Books for Preschool Children." This study found that books for preschoolers, even award winners, characterized males and females in a traditional stereotyped manner. The investigators found, for example, that males were depicted far more often than females, and in close to one-third of the books they examined there were no women at all. Furthermore, when they were shown, female characters tended to be presented as insignificant or inconspicuous, passive, immobile, and indoors. Whether human, duck, or frog, females participated in the traditionally "feminine" roles of pleasing and serving males. Males, on the other hand, were more often presented in adventuresome and exciting roles, outdoors, and engaging in camaraderie with others.

Based upon the findings from Weitzman et al., and similar studies which followed (cf. Stewig and Higgs, 1973; Bereaud, 1975; St. Peter, 1979), efforts arose to promote change. Groups have compiled lists of books believed to present more positive images of females, such as *An Annotated Bibliography*

<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this report was presented at the 1986 meetings of the Southwestern Social Science Association. The authors would like to express their appreciation to Glenn Deane for his help with the statistical analysis and to Helen Moore for her invaluable suggestions.

of *Nonsexist Picture Books for Children* (Women's Action Alliance, 1973) and *Little Miss Muffet Fights Back* (Feminists on Children's Media, 1974). Publishing companies were formed to print nonsexist or alternative books, e.g., Feminist Press and Lollypop Power. California banned textbooks with "descriptions, depictions, labels, or retorts which tend to demean, stereotype, or be patronizing toward females." Perhaps the most pervasive efforts have been the attempts to sensitize parents and teachers to the sexually biased and stereotyped content of the books being read by and to the nation's children. *Women on Words and Images* (1972) concluded their recommendations with the following:

Much can be done by small determined groups of like-minded people. Let's do it. We will know that we have succeeded when Dick can speak of his feelings of tenderness without embarrassment and Jane can reveal her career ambitions without shame or guilt. (P. 39)

The present research addresses the question of how effective such efforts have been since the pioneering study by Weitzman et al. fifteen years ago. Have females become visible, significant, independent? Does Jane unabashedly aspire to a career? Does Dick now speak of his tender feelings without embarrassment?

### Sample and Methods

The primary focus of Weitzman et al. was upon the winners and runners-up (honor books) of the prestigious Caldecott Award, especially the 18 selected during the five years immediately preceding the research, 1967-71. The Caldecott awards are given annually by the Children's Service Committee of the American Library Association for the book with the best illustrations. The winners may display a gold seal on the cover while the honor books show a seal of silver. Libraries often place them in a special section, hand out free brochures listing them, and, at the very least, make sure they have them in their collections. Many thousands are purchased by schools, daycare centers, and parents. And, as stated by Weitzman et al. (1972), "others in the industry look to the winners for guidance in what to publish" (p. 1127). Consequently, the Caldecott award winners, although not a representative sample, appear to constitute a good selection of the *most influential* children's picture books. The current investigation examines the 53 Caldecott winners and runners-up for the years since the original study, with particular attention to the 24 Caldecotts of the 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>A study of 19 of the 29 Caldecott winners and honor books for the years between 1972 and 1979 was done by Kolbe and LaVoie (1981). However, these investigators provide no explanation of why they did not include the other 10 books. Most of their findings are presented using different units of analysis from those used in Weitzman et al. (1972). Data presented for the current study are from an entirely new analysis.

Davis (1984) has correctly criticized Weitzman et al. for failure to consistently specify their units of analysis, generalizing without the support of tests for statistical significance, and not providing operational definitions for many of their measures or any indication of coder reliability. These issues were dealt with in the current study as follows.

The units of analysis are indicated in the discussion below. However, it should be mentioned here that the most crucial unit of all, a character's gender, was not always easy to determine by simply looking at an illustration. Thus, in some cases, it was necessary to use the text to supplement the information available in the illustrations. Following this procedure, there was unanimity on gender assignment among the four judges.

Tests for statistically significant differences are used throughout the current study. Given the small sample size, Fisher's exact test was used to determine significance for most of the comparisons. Since this is an exact test, comparisons yielding a probability of less than .10 are referred to as significant. However, all levels less than .10 are reported to facilitate any other choice of alpha.

To help rectify the measurement problem, Davis (1984) refined a set of variables that deal with various aspects of potentially gender-related behavior. These variables are used in the present study.<sup>3</sup> However, whereas Davis (1984) coded every illustration and text message for the presence of each variable, designations were made in the current study only once for any given character and only if at least three of four evaluators determined the trait to be clearly a salient attribute. To facilitate more direct comparison with Weitzman et al., several additional measurements were made. All of the characteristics are listed in Table 2. For each variable, assessments were made for a book's central character and the most important character of the opposite sex, whenever such characters were present. Overall, intercoder reliability is 82 percent. No characteristic was included without a minimum of 75 percent agreement among the judges.

### A Question of Visibility

Weitzman and her colleagues reported that women are invisible in children's books, i.e., they are underrepresented in pictures, titles, stories, and characters. This was demonstrated through such means as counting the number of pictures of males and females, counting books in which no females appear, and noting books which have females as central characters.

Table 1 provides measures of male and female visibility for the time periods covered by the two studies.

<sup>3</sup>With the exception of deleting a "passively active" category and substituting "passive," the categories and definitions are taken directly from Davis (1984).

TABLE 1  
Comparisons of Gender Visibility

	1967-71 <sup>a</sup>	1972-79	1980-85	<i>p</i> <sup>b</sup>
<i>Human single-gender illustrations</i>				
Total number	188	339	178	
Percent female	11.7	31.6	37.1	.001
Male/female ratio	7.5	2.2	1.7	
<i>Humans illustrated</i>				
Total number	685	1,315	1,041	
Percent female	19.1	32.9	42.2	.001
Male/female ratio	4.2	2.0	1.4	
<i>Nonhuman single-gender illustrations</i>				
Total number	96	39	59	
Percent female	1.0	30.8	15.3	.001
Male/female ratio	95.0	2.3	5.6	
<i>Nonhumans illustrated</i>				
Total number	196	156	168	
Percent female	7.1	23.7	28.6	.001
Male/female ratio	13.0	3.2	2.5	
<i>Books</i>				
Total number	18	29	24	
Percent with no female characters	33.3	27.6	12.5	NS
Percent with female central characters	11.1	24.1	33.3	.094

<sup>a</sup> From Weitzman et al. (1972). Computations for the total numbers of human and nonhuman characters were done by the authors of the present study.

<sup>b</sup> The *p* refers to statistical probabilities using a one-tailed test, determined through the significance of difference between proportions or Fisher's exact test where *N* is small,  $Np + 9p < 9$ . The significance of difference test is between proportions from Weitzman et al. and the books from 1980-85.

Following the procedure used by Weitzman et al., human single-gender illustrations are those containing only males or only females. As can be seen, whereas those showing only females made up 11.7 percent of the total among the 1967-71 Caldecotts, the percentage increased to 31.6 in the following years from 1972 through 1979 and 37.1 percent in the 1980s. The difference of 25.4 percent between the percent female in the original study and in the first half of the 1980s is statistically significant and in an equalitarian direction.

In addition to using each picture as a unit (all male, all female, both), we examined the total number of times human males and females were depicted. Using this procedure, we counted 685 humans, of which 19.1 percent are female in the books originally studied by Weitzman et al. For the intervening years, 1972-79, we found a shift toward parity with 32.9 percent female. The numbers for 1980-85 are yet closer to equality with 42.2 percent of the human

characters being female. The difference of 23.1 percent between the original study and the books of the 1980s is statistically significant.

Doubtlessly the finding of only 1.0 percent female among single-gender illustrations (95:1 male/female ratio) reported by Weitzman et al. (1972) for nonhuman animals was an exceptional deviation from the norm even fifteen to twenty years ago. The nonhuman counts are based on fewer books and fewer illustrations, and thus smaller numbers. There are five books with nonhuman characters in the set examined in the first study, four in the following years up to 1980, and six among the books of the 1980s. Nevertheless, the figures do show a significant proportional increase in females depicted in single-gender illustrations and in the total counts of all anthropomorphized nonhumans.

Weitzman et al. (1972) stated that in approximately one-third of the 1967–71 Caldecott books there are no women at all. Although not a statistically significant change, the more recent winners suggest a movement toward equality as the percentage declined to 27.6 percent with no females in the books from 1972–79 and 12.5 percent for the 1980s.

The central character's gender is an especially important factor in visibility since by definition the story revolves around this individual. In the books from 1967–71, only 2 of 18 have females in a central role. Seven of the 29 winners and honor books (24.1 percent) during the rest of the 1970s have female main characters. The Caldecott books for 1980 through 1985 include 8 with females as central characters (one-third), 13 have males in a central role, 1 could not be identified, and in 2 the central figure has no gender. Thus, there has been a shift toward parity between the time period examined by Weitzman et al. and the most recent set of award winners.

### Location: Indoors/Outdoors

Weitzman et al. (1972) commented, "While boys play in the real world outdoors, girls sit and watch them—cut off from that world by the window, porch, or fence around their homes" (p. 1133). The original study found 36.6 percent of girls indoors compared to 31.4 percent of the boys. For the Caldecotts of the 1980s, we found 31 of 141 boys (22.0 percent) and 65 of 204 girls (31.9 percent) shown indoors. Though a majority of both genders are shown outdoors, boys are nonetheless significantly less likely to be depicted indoors ( $p < .03$ ). This, of course, is consistent with the traditional notion that a girl should be passive and immobile, that her place is with her mother in the home.

Adult females have a larger percentage pictured indoors in the books examined by Weitzman et al., 40 percent of the females compared to 31 percent of the adult males. Current study data show 21.8 percent (124 of 568) of

the males and 26.0 percent (74 of 285) of females indoors ( $p < .09$ ). Thus, there is the suggestion that adult females continue to have a higher percentage shown indoors, but both groups have tended to move outside with females making the greater change.

### Role Models

While visibility and location are important, the way gender is represented may be even more so. And, as mentioned, all of the early studies found evidence of stereotyped attitudes and behavior being portrayed by story-book characters. Children in the books provide messages about how young people should or should not think and behave as children while the adults may serve as role models for the future, shaping aspirations and goals through anticipatory socialization.

As can be seen from the data presented in Table 2, no behavioral profile stands out for the females. Nearly half are judged to be active and around

**TABLE 2**  
Behavior of Central Characters and Most Important Characters  
of the Opposite Sex, 1980-85

	Female (N = 17)	Male (N = 18)	Probability <sup>a</sup>
Dependent	5	1	.08
Independent	4	12	.02
Cooperative	5	3	NS
Competitive	0	5	.03
Directive	2	4	NS
Submissive	5	0	.02
Persistent	5	12	.02
Explorative	2	6	NS
Creative	1	6	.05
Imitative	0	1	NS
Nurturant	6	2	.10
Aggressive	1	4	NS
Emotional	3	3	NS
Active	8	16	.01
Passive	6	1	.04
Rescue	3	3	NS
Service	7	1	.02
Camaraderie with same-sex peers	0	0	NS
Traditional role	17	17	NS
Nontraditional role	0	1	NS

<sup>a</sup> Statistical probabilities based on a one-tailed test, determined using Fisher's exact test. NS refers to  $p$  not significant,  $p > .10$ .

one-third are nurturant, passive, and perform services for others, but, apart from this, they do not seem to have much character, one way or the other. A large majority of the males are independent, persistent, and active and one-third are explorative and creative as well.

Considering male/female differences, it can be seen that females are more often shown as dependent, submissive, nurturant, and passive and more likely to serve others whereas males are more likely to be independent, competitive, persistent, creative, and active. All differences are in the predicted direction of conforming to traditional stereotypes of males and females in American culture.

Only one character is judged to play a nontraditional gender role and even this departure from the conventional is a modest one—a father puts his daughter to bed (Bang, 1983). More typical of most of those in centrally located roles are a farmer and his wife (Hall, 1979), sailor and his wife (Sendak, 1981), knight and princess (Hodges, 1984), male thief and female shopper (Bang, 1980), and an inventor-pilot and his wife (Provinsen and Provinsen, 1983). The farmer takes the family's produce to market. His wife remains at home with the children. The sailor sends a message across the sea telling his "foolish" daughter how to save her little sister while his wife sits in the arbor and doesn't even offer advice. The knight rides a horse and carries a lance, sword, and shield. The princess follows riding a little white donkey and leading a white lamb. A male thief chases a frightened woman shopper for her strawberries. The inventor develops and constructs an airplane and flies it across the English Channel. His wife and family are proud of him. She takes care of the children and cheers him on. The one story about nonhuman adults that deviates somewhat from the traditional is a native American legend retold by Steptoe (1984). The central character is a male mouse, but his success in reaching the far-off land is made possible by a female magic frog.

## Conclusions

Weitzman et al. (1972:1146) found the girls and women portrayed in the Caldecott books from 1967 to 1971 to be nearly invisible and, when they did appear, "a dull and stereotyped lot." Almost without exception, the books presented characters and stories reinforcing traditional gender roles.

From the findings in the present study it seems fair to say that females are no longer invisible. Males continue to hold something of a visibility edge, but, especially among humans, the male-to-female ratios, both by a count of individual pictures and the total number of characters depicted, have moved closer to parity. Males and females are about equally likely to be included in a book, and about one-third of central characters are

females in the recent books. Individual books vary considerably, but a child exposed to all of the Caldecott winners and honor books over the past six years will encounter nearly as many females as males, certainly many more than in the past.

Although a male/female difference remains, females appear to have begun to move outside the home, but not into the labor market. With respect to role portrayal and characterization, females do not appear to be so much stereotyped as simply colorless. No behavior was shared by a majority of the females, while nearly all males were portrayed as independent, persistent, and active. Furthermore, differences in the way males and females are presented is entirely consistent with traditional culture. In our view, however, the most telling finding is the near unanimity in conformity to traditional gender roles. Not only does Jane express no career goals, but there is no adult female model to provide any ambition. One woman in the entire 1980s collection of 24 books has an occupation outside the home, and she works as a waitress at the Blue Tile Diner (Williams, 1982). How can we expect Dick to express tender emotions without shame when only two adult males in this collection of books have anything resembling tender emotions and one of them is a mouse? SSQ

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