

The Gendered Portrayal of Inanimate Characters in Children's Books

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The authors examine picturebooks for young children to determine whether traditional gender-role stereotypes are perpetuated in books that feature anthropomorphized inanimate characters.

THE ISSUES ASSOCIATED with gendered characters in children's books first gained attention in the 1970s. From their examination of award-winning children's books in the United States, Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, and Ross (1972) found that male characters were not only disproportionately represented in the books but were shown engaging in more exciting, adventurous activities than female characters. Since this seminal research, multiple studies have been conducted on gender stereotypes in children's books, and these studies have yielded similar findings regarding the portrayal of male and female characters. In a review of 200 children's books published since 2001, it was found that, compared to males, females were more likely to be shown indoors, portrayed as nurturing, and employed in traditional female occupations (Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus, & Young, 2006). This situation is problematic given that children learn about the world through children's literature; when children's books reinforce gender divisions in society, children come to see these divisions as normal (Crisp & Hiller, 2011; Kortenhuis & Demarest, 1993; McCabe et al., 2011; Tepper & Cassidy, 1999). Bian, Leslie, and Cimpian (2017) point out that when girls internalize gender stereotypes, it may discourage them from pursuing certain careers based on the belief that such careers are the province of males.

Although there have been numerous studies on stereotypical gender portrayals of male and female characters in children's books, the extant research has focused almost exclusively on human and animal characters (e.g., Clark, Guilmain, Saucier, & Tavaréz, 2003; Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; Hamilton et al., 2006; Weitzman et al., 1972; Williams et al., 1987). Our study extends this research base by examining gender-role portrayals of main characters that are anthropomorphized inanimate objects, such as trucks and bulldozers, as well as nature-based entities, such as trees and clouds. For convenience, we refer to nonhuman and nonanimal characters as "inanimate" for the remainder of this article. The research questions we sought to answer in this study were as follows: (1) Do gendered inanimate characters in children's books perpetuate stereotypical gender roles? (2) How are inanimate objects portrayed when they are male characters? (3) How are inanimate objects portrayed when they are female characters? (4) Are there differences in the representation of male and female inanimate characters compared to male and female human and animal characters?

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popular culture, such as theme park rides, video games, and toys. Books featuring anthropomorphized inanimate characters that children recognize through television shows and films, such as *Thomas and Friends* (PBS Kids) and *Cars* (Disney Pixar), are often highly desired by children. Caregivers and teachers are likely to select these books based on children's interests without considering underlying messages. Alternately, they may choose picturebooks with nonhuman characters specifically to avoid exposing children to typical gender-role character portrayals. It is therefore important to examine whether gender stereotypes are, in fact, perpetuated through children's books that feature inanimate characters or whether such books are able to transcend traditional gender-role portrayals.

Background

The rise of the women's rights movement in the 1970s led researchers to examine how gender stereotypes in society were perpetuated through the education system (e.g., Sharpe, 1976). The transmission of gender stereotypes in children's literature thus became an important area of study. Content analyses of books based on numbers of male and female characters and differences in the way these characters were portrayed became a popular way for researchers to determine gender inequalities in children's literature (Marshall, 2004). These content analyses were based on the conceptualization of gender as a dichotomy in which individuals fall into one of two mutually exclusive categories: male or female (Marshall, 2004). Researchers noted differences in the way male and female characters were portrayed based on descriptive language used for characters, the activities characters were shown engaging in, and the characters' occupations (e.g., Kolbe & LaVoie, 1981; Tognoli, Pullen, & Lieber, 1994; Williams et al., 1987).

The aim of our analysis of picturebooks featuring main characters that were anthropomorphized inanimate objects was to extend the previous research on male and female human and animal characters by reviewing books with gendered inanimate objects. In order to determine the gender of the character, we identified the pronoun

the author used to refer to the character. Therefore, we adhered to the binary gender divisions established by the authors. We did not include books in which a gender was not assigned to characters, such as *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* (Martin & Archambault, 2012) and *The Day the Crayons Quit* (Daywalt & Jeffers, 2013). The only book we encountered in which the character's sex was indicated but the character was not referred to by a male or female pronoun was the Gingerbread Man in *The Gingerbread Man Loose at the Zoo* (Murray & Lowery, 2016). We did not include this book in our selection as it was not known how the author intended the character to identify with regard to gender.

We used previous research on differences in the way male and female characters were depicted as a framework for our analysis. Previous researchers of gender stereotypes in picturebooks noted that female characters were often portrayed as mothers and their occupations were limited to traditional female occupations, such as teachers, childcare providers, and cashiers. Male characters, on the other hand, held occupations that the authors characterized as being more prestigious, such as doctors and pharmacists (Brugeilles, Cromer, Cromer, & Andreyev, 2002). Brugeilles et al. (2002) examined traits attributed to male and female characters in 537 French picturebooks and found that two common stereotypes were reproduced regarding girls as having a "sweet tooth" and as being sensitive. In terms of activities in which characters were shown participating, the researchers relied on research on the distribution of domestic labor between spouses in France and compared activities characters performed in books to those performed by people in French society. They found that activities characters performed in the books corresponded to gender divisions of labor in society.

Recently in the United States, as reported by Catalyst (2017), the top five male-dominated occupations involved employment as construction workers, heavy vehicle equipment repairers, bus and truck mechanics, and crane operators. The top female-dominated occupations included child care workers, preschool and kindergarten teachers, and administrative assistants. We used these known associations between occupations/activities and gender distribution, as well as long-standing stereotypical gender depictions in popular culture, as a framework within which to analyze the books in our sample. In recognizing that in reality, gender is more fluid than the binary depiction portrayed in children's books, we attempted to identify deviations from stereotypical portrayals so as to avoid imposing traditional male-female distinctions onto the characters.

Dominant versions of masculinity and femininity are reproduced not only through children's books but in practices within schools themselves. Thorne (1993) observed the influence of gender divisions in elementary schools and noted that children who broke stereotypes were referred

to as “tomboys” or as “girly,” which were precursors to harsher homophobic insults that emerged in later grades. Blaise (2005) clarified how hegemonic masculinity is a social construction “based on the idea of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’” (p. 22) that is promoted as the most desirable way to be a boy. Although children’s attitudes are shaped by a variety of influences in society, children’s literature exerts a particularly powerful influence on children’s ideas of appropriate gender-role behavior. Marshall (2004) explained, “Literature for children has a particular history invested in disciplining young readers into normative heterosexual femininity and masculinity” (p. 261).

These perspectives provide a context for our study, which is based on an analysis of children’s books in which gender is presented as a binary variable upheld by stereotypical conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Davies (2003) proposed that teachers should challenge the binaries related to gender by analyzing the discourses that constitute gender. In order to promote gender equity, she recommended offering students opportunities for gender expression that fall outside dominant understandings of masculinity and femininity. The aim of our study was to determine if picturebooks for young children that feature nonhuman and nonanimal characters provide children with an alternative to the stereotypical depictions of male and female characters that have been customary in children’s books.

Literature Review

As a follow-up to Weitzman et al.’s (1972) seminal research, Kolbe and La Voie (1981) reviewed Caldecott Medal winners and Honor selections and found that even though the number of female characters had increased over time, male and female gender-role portrayals remained unchanged. Williams et al. (1987) noted that even though female characters were shown outside the home more often, they were still not shown employed in jobs outside of the home. Studies of picturebooks published in the late 1990s also reported little departure from traditional gender portrayals (Gooden & Gooden, 2001). Tognoli et al. (1994) stated that even when girls were depicted outdoors, they participated in stereotypical girls’ games such as hopscotch.

Although several studies conducted between the 1980s and 2000s found that the representation of female characters had increased over time (Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Kolbe & La Voie, 1981; Oskamp, Kaufman, & Wolterbeek, 1996), Hamilton et al. (2006) found from their review of 200 children’s books published between 1999 and 2001 that there were nearly twice as many male as female main characters. In another comprehensive review of children’s books published throughout the 20th century, it was found that gender representations were particularly unequal when main characters were animals (Grauerholz &

Pescosolido, 1989), a finding that was mirrored two decades later (McCabe et al., 2011).

These studies of children’s books indicate that female characters were frequently shown as passive, nurturing, and dependent on others (Brugeilles et al., 2002; Kolbe & La Voie, 1981; Williams et al., 1987). They were also generally shown participating in indoor activities (Brugeilles et al., 2002; Kolbe & La Voie, 1981; Tognoli et al., 1994); when they were shown employed outside the home, their jobs typically involved taking care of others (Brugeilles et al., 2002; Hamilton et al., 2006).

Receiving messages about appropriate gender-role behavior through children’s literature has serious implications for children’s understandings of their abilities, aptitudes, and status in society. A study in which children were presented with examples of novel jobs performed by either male or female workers revealed that children rated jobs with male workers as having higher status than the identical jobs with female workers (Liben, Bigler, & Krogh, 2001). Diekman and Murnen (2004) pointed out that when male characters in children’s books were portrayed as having higher status than female characters, it contributed to the perception of women as being inferior or incompetent.

Gendered Character Portrayals in Children’s Books

There are several ways that stereotypical gender roles are perpetuated through children’s books. The covers, illustrations, and words used to describe characters all send messages about male and female traits and behaviors. The cover of the book usually provides an illustration that captures the essence of the main character. Research has indicated that male characters dominate the covers of children’s books, both in titles and illustrations (Brugeilles et al., 2002; Tepper & Cassidy, 1999). This situation not only conveys messages about the importance of males but provides children with fewer opportunities to be exposed to female main characters.

Another way that gender roles are represented in children’s books is through illustrations. The way the character is portrayed in an illustration conveys the gender of the character even if the gender is not explicitly stated in words (Crisp & Hiller, 2011). In addition to the colors used and clothing worn, the gender of the character can usually be determined by the activity in which the character is engaging. For example, female characters are more likely to be shown in nurturing jobs and doing domestic chores (Brugeilles et al., 2002; Hamilton et al., 2006). Male characters, on the other hand, are more likely to be shown fixing things and engaging in outdoor exploration and adventures (Crisp & Hiller, 2011; Hamilton et al., 2006).

An examination of the words used to describe characters reveals that there are also differences in the ways male and female characters are described. Turner-Bowker

(1996) found that words such as “proud,” “big,” “great,” “fierce,” and “furious” were commonly used to describe male characters in children’s books. Other researchers have noted that female characters are often described as “weak,” “frightened,” “sweet,” and “beautiful” (Brugeilles et al., 2002; Tepper & Cassidy, 1999). In addition, it has been found that not only do male characters solve problems independently, but they often play heroic roles in solving other people’s problems. When female characters have problems, they frequently rely upon males to come up with solutions (Crisp & Hiller, 2011).

Despite extensive research on this topic, there is still one aspect about which very little is known. Previous research has focused on human and animal characters but has not addressed the gendered portrayal of nonhuman and nonanimal characters. We therefore examined books in which the main characters were anthropomorphized inanimate objects to see if the genders ascribed to these characters embodied traditional gender-role stereotypes. In the following section, we describe how we located and evaluated books for this analysis.

Methodology

In order to find children’s picturebooks with anthropomorphized inanimate main characters that were readily available to children, we conducted a hand search of all children’s books shelved in three public libraries, one college library, and a Barnes and Noble bookstore, which amounted to approximately 20,000 books. We used both public libraries in the rural county in which our college is located and the main library branch of a neighboring county with 13 different public libraries. The local libraries in this southern rural location may not be representative of public libraries across the United States. To provide a broader perspective of the types of books to which young children are exposed, we also conducted an online search of children’s books on Amazon, the world’s largest online retailer.

When conducting the hand search, we reviewed books shelved in the children’s picturebook section of the libraries and bookstore, most of which would usually be read to children up to second grade. We read the titles of books on the spine and removed books from the shelves to see if the characters were anthropomorphized. If the illustration of the character on the cover was an inanimate object, we reviewed the story; in cases where an inanimate object was featured in the book but was not the main character, we did not include it in our analysis. We also did not include early readers that did not have a story line (e.g., books focused on pre-academic skills such as the alphabet or colors).

For the Amazon search, we went through all featured children’s books in the 3 to 5 age range. We included all books that came up when searching within “children’s books” without filtering or sorting results further. We

visually scanned the covers of books, and when the character was an inanimate object, we read the description of the book and used the “Look Inside” feature to see the illustrations and text. In cases where more information was needed, we watched YouTube videos of the story being read. Sometimes we needed to locate the book in a library so that we could physically review it.

Some of the books we found were part of a series. *Thomas and Friends*, for example, has been in production since 1946 and there are 42 books in the series (Swinford, 2013). However, when searching for books in the libraries and bookstore, we only included books that were currently shelved and available for us to review. An exception to this was with the Disney Pixar *Cars* books. Since several different books were named *Cars 3* without an additional title, we only included one book named *Cars 3* in our selection.

Through these methods, we were able to identify 103 books, published from the 1930s to 2017, for review. We did not limit the books by year because the books published in the 1930s and 1940s—*The Little Engine That Could* (Piper, 1930), *Choo Choo* (Burton, 1937), *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* (Burton, 1939), *The Little House* (Burton, 1942), and *Katy and the Big Snow* (Burton, 1943)—were held in the public libraries we visited, and our aim was to incorporate all books in our analysis that were currently accessible and likely to be read by young children. In fact, with the exception of *Choo Choo* (which was held in four different libraries), all of these books were held in seven or more public libraries in the two counties in which we conducted our library hand search, and three of the books were also available in the Barnes and Noble we visited.

After identifying books as appropriate for our study, we created a chart with an image of each book cover and logged the following information: title and publication date, author and illustrator, gender of the main character, and a brief summary of the story. We then separated the books by the gender of the main character and sorted them based on the character form, for example, cars and trucks, robots, food, and nature-based entities. (See Table 1 for all categories.)

We reviewed the books based on a variety of characteristics to identify differences in the way male and female characters were portrayed. First, we analyzed the covers by looking at the colors used, the words in the title, the expressions on characters’ faces, and the overall appearance of the character. In coding facial expressions and the overall appearance of characters, we wrote general descriptions of expressions, emotions, and personality traits conveyed by the characters. To counteract any potential bias in our interpretations, we showed a sample of representative images of characters on the covers ($n = 18$) to early childhood education teacher candidates, without telling them the gender ascribed to the characters,

and asked them what terms the images conveyed. Based on the covers with male characters, the teacher candidates generated a list of 24 different terms, including “fast,” “authority,” “supersized,” and “outside.” They contributed 53 different terms to describe female characters, including

“lonely,” “cold,” “depressed,” “innocence,” and “playful.” There were no terms that were used to describe both male and female characters. We incorporated this feedback into our analysis of the way characters were depicted through illustrations on the covers.

TABLE 1
Books by character type and gender (N = 103)

Cars & Trucks (M=18; F=0)	Construction Equipment/Machinery (M=13; F=1; Both=3)	Representations of Living Things (M=6; F=0; Both=0)
<i>Axel the Truck</i> <i>Cars 3</i> <i>Deputy Mater Saves the Day</i> <i>Dumpy the Dump Truck</i> <i>Firefighters!</i> <i>Goodnight, Lightning</i> <i>I'm a Truck</i> <i>I'm Brave!</i> <i>Little Blue Truck's Christmas</i> <i>Little Blue Truck Leads the Way</i> <i>The Little Taxi</i> <i>Look out for Mater</i> <i>Maxi the Little Taxi</i> <i>Mighty Monster Machines</i> <i>Mighty Truck: Muddymania</i> <i>New Truck on the Block</i> <i>Supertruck</i> <i>The Too Little Fire Engine</i>	<i>Bulldozer Helps Out</i> <i>Digger Dozer Dumper</i> <i>Dinotrux: Team Dinotrux!</i> <i>Go! Go! Go! Stop!</i> <i>Goodnight, Goodnight, Construction Site</i> <i>Goodnight, Johnny Tractor</i> <i>I'm a Bulldozer</i> <i>I'm Cool!</i> <i>Katy and the Big Snow</i> <i>Little Excavator</i> <i>The Little Snowplow</i> <i>Mighty Dads</i> <i>Mighty, Mighty Construction Site</i> <i>Otis</i> <i>Otis and the Scarecrow</i> <i>Tractor Trouble</i> <i>Where Do Diggers Sleep at Night?</i>	<i>Corduroy</i> <i>The Little Scarecrow Boy</i> <i>A Pocket for Corduroy</i> <i>Sneezy the Snowman</i> <i>Snowmen at Night</i> <i>Snowmen at Work</i>
		Nature-Based Entities (F=5; M=4; Both=0)
		<i>Cloud Boy</i> <i>Clouette</i> <i>The Giving Tree</i> <i>Little Rose of Sharon</i> <i>Little Tree</i> <i>The Mighty Hugo Comes to Town</i> <i>The Moon Was at a Fiesta</i> <i>Olga the Cloud</i> <i>Stick and Stone</i>
Planes, Trains, & Boats (M=12; F=3; Both=1)	Food (M=10; F=3; Both=5)	Robots (M=4; F=0; Both=1)
<i>The Caboose Who Got Loose</i> <i>Choo Choo</i> <i>Edward's Exploit and Other Stories</i> <i>Hooray for Thomas</i> <i>James & the Red Balloon</i> <i>James Goes Buzz Buzz</i> <i>Jay Jay Earns His Wings</i> <i>Planes</i> <i>The Little Engine That Could</i> <i>The Little Red Caboose</i> <i>Little Toot</i> <i>Little Tug</i> <i>Scuffy the Tugboat</i> <i>Thomas & Friends Story Time Collection</i> <i>Thomas the Tank Engine Stories</i> <i>Tootle</i>	<i>Carrot and Pea: An Unlikely Friendship</i> <i>The Case of the Stinky Stench</i> <i>Everyone Loves Bacon</i> <i>Giant Meatball</i> <i>Ginger Bear</i> <i>The Gingerbread Boy</i> <i>The Gingerbread Man</i> <i>The Gingerbread Man Loose in the School</i> <i>Happy Birthday, Cupcake!</i> <i>Ice Boy</i> <i>Lady Pancake & Sir French Toast</i> <i>The Library Gingerbread Man</i> <i>Milk Goes to School</i> <i>The Nuts Keep Rolling!</i> <i>The Nuts: Sing and Dance in Your Polka-Dot Pants</i> <i>Peanut Butter & Cupcake!</i> <i>The Runaway Tortilla</i> <i>Tough Cookie</i>	<i>Boy and Bot</i> <i>Power Down, Little Robot</i> <i>Raybot</i> <i>Robo-Sauce</i> <i>When Edgar Met Cecil</i>
		Mummies & Ghosts (M=3; F=0)
		<i>Ghosts</i> <i>Operation Ghost</i> <i>Where's My Mummy?</i>
		Pencils & Crayons (M=2; F=1)
		<i>Little Red Writing</i> <i>The Pencil</i> <i>Red: A Crayon's Story</i>
	Numbers (M=2; F=2)	Other (M=2; F=1)
	<i>One</i> <i>Two</i> <i>Zero</i> <i>7 Ate 9</i>	<i>Exclamation Mark</i> <i>The Little House</i> <i>Triangle</i>

We then looked inside the books and took notes on the gender of the character(s) (e.g., “The crane, truck, cement mixer, dump truck, and bulldozer are referred to as male”), how the main character was portrayed (e.g., “The Meatball is a jokester and creates a mess in the town”), and a few sentences about the story line (e.g., “The little red fire engine wants a big job, but he’s too little. However, after he manages to put out small sparks and tiny flames, he realizes the advantages of being little”). We also created a chart with terms that previous researchers had reported were associated with male characters (e.g., “strong,” “heroic,” and “persistent”) and female characters (e.g., “emotional,” “sacrificing,” and “helpless”). We then wrote quotes from the books as examples of the characteristics. For example, under “persistent,” we wrote, “Raybot never gives up hope,” and under “sacrificing,” we wrote, “As the boy grew older he began to want more from the tree, and the tree gave and gave and gave.” After we examined all of the books, we compared the portrayal of male main characters to female main characters across the different dimensions. We created the charts in Web-based documents to which we both could contribute simultaneously. In some cases, one researcher reviewed a book and added information, and then both researchers reviewed the information together to reach consensus over the descriptions. In other cases, the researchers reviewed the books and completed the charts together.

Results

In the following section, we describe the ways male and female characters were represented on the covers of books and depicted in the text and illustrations.

Covers of Books

Of the 103 books in our sample, 76 (74%) depicted only male characters on the cover. The three largest categories of male characters included different modes of transportation and machine-operated equipment (a total of 43 books). Eighteen books (17%) featured cars and trucks on the cover, 13 books (13%) featured construction equipment, and 12 books (12%) featured a plane, train, or boat. By comparison, only 16 of the 103 books (16%) had a single female character on the cover. Five of the books with female characters on the covers featured nature-based entities (e.g., clouds, plants). Eleven books (11%) featured both a male and female character on the cover, and the largest category for these characters was food items ($n = 5$).

COLORS. The colors used on covers can indicate the gender of the featured characters and subtly perpetuate gender stereotypes. For example, blue is traditionally associated with boys and red may be used to signify speed and danger, representing risk-taking behaviors associated with masculinity. On

the covers showing male engine-operated objects, such as planes, trains, trucks, and construction equipment, 17 (40%) of the characters were red. In addition, blue was a prominent color on 42 (41%) of the covers of books with male main characters. Of all the books featuring male characters on the covers, only two characters (a meatball and a ghost) were pink, a color traditionally associated with girls. Although 7 of the 16 books (44%) with female main characters had blue covers, in the majority of cases, the blue represented the sky, which was a necessary background given that most of these characters were nature-based entities.

TITLES. Most book titles contained the name of the main character and reflected the character’s dominant attributes. Nine of the titles of books with male main characters (12%) included words that indicated strength and power, such as *I’m Brave!* (McMullen & McMullen, 2014a), *Supertruck* (Savage, 2015), and *Mighty Monster Machines* (Golden Books, 2015). Terms such as “brave,” “tough,” and “mighty” presented the characters as capable and fearless, and phrases such as “Saves the Day” and “Leads the Way” in titles conveyed the message that these male characters were indispensable and heroic.

By comparison, four (25%) of the titles of books featuring female main characters contained the word “little” in reference to the character. Although 10 books with male main characters contained the word “little” in the title, these titles composed only 13% of books with male main characters compared to one-quarter of books with female main characters. The word “little” is associated with children and therefore indicates submissiveness or lack of power. It is therefore significant that female characters were much more likely than male characters to be depicted in this way, and no terms that indicated strength or power were used in titles to describe female characters.

CHARACTERS. When compared to the images of male characters on covers, the images of female characters appeared more passive and lonely. Cloulette (Lichtenheld, 2011) was a tiny cloud on her own with two big clouds hovering above her. The Little Rose of Sharon (Gurley & Jonke, 1998) was also alone, facing downward in a way that projected sadness. Similarly, the Giving Tree (Silverstein, 2014) was alone and bent over, the only movement being an apple falling into a boy’s arms. Although the Giving Tree and the Little House were incapable of movement by virtue of their character forms (a tree and a house), even Katy (Burton, 1943), who was a female tractor and snowplow, was presented as completely stationary.

While 22 of the 76 (29%) male characters were shown in motion, only 3 of the 16 (19%) female characters were shown in motion: two trains and a cupcake on a swing. The

image of Cupcake in *Happy Birthday, Cupcake!* (Border, 2015) was the most overtly feminine of all the female characters featured on covers. Her faceless head was represented by pink frosting and she was wearing an elaborate pink party hat decorated with tinsel and rhinestones. In spite of the absence of a face, Cupcake was the only female character shown on a cover who appeared to be having fun.

Overall, only 9 of the 16 (56%) female characters on covers were shown with a face, compared to 73 of the 76 (96%) male characters. However, even with the presence of a face, there was only one female character who had a visible expression (a disgruntled-looking tortilla). The mouths of five of the female characters with faces were represented by a single line. The mouth of Katy the snowplow was the plow blade, and the Caboose in *The Caboose Who Got Loose* (Peet, 1980) only had eyes, and no mouth. In other words, there were 8 (50%) female main characters that did not have a mouth, and, overall, 15 of the 16 female characters had no discernable expression. By contrast, many of the male characters were shown with large “toothy” smiles and wide-open eyes, indicating clear expressions of excitement.

Male characters were often depicted as hypermasculine. When the main character is a “Mighty Monster Machine,” it lends itself to a more exaggerated form of masculinity than is conceivable when the male character is a boy or an animal.

Text and Illustrations

Through reading the stories, we noticed profound differences in the story lines involving male and female inanimate main characters. The words used to describe characters and the ways in which they were depicted in illustrations reinforced traditional stereotypes about male and female attributes. We discuss these stereotypes in the following section.

MALE STEREOTYPES. There were several instances of words with double meanings being used to reinforce the idea of females as unequal to males. In *Peanut Butter and Cupcake* (Border, 2014), Peanut Butter saw Cupcake sitting by herself and thought she looked “sweet.” This is a play on words, as cupcakes are sweet when eaten and the term is also used to describe people, particularly children. When used by men to refer to women, it has condescending undertones, as the term is rarely used by men to describe other men or to refer

to people considered equals. In this case, the male character, Peanut Butter, was attracted to the female character, Cupcake, based on her sweet appearance, sending the message to girls that they should aspire to be sweet to attract male attention. In *I’m Cool!* (McMullen & McMullen, 2014b), Zamboni came across as overconfident, stating, “Shazamboni, baby. That’s right” (n.p.). The term “baby” is typically used by men when talking to women in flirtatious contexts, and the use of this term indicates that Zamboni saw himself as an object of desire. Tough Cookie is also a cocky, macho male character who recalled, “I’m knocking back a cup of java when this classy blond rolls up” (n.p.). The illustrations show Pecan Sandy with long blonde hair and big blue eyes, and it is clear when Tough Cookie described her as “easy on the eyes” (n.p.) that his attraction to her was based on her physical appearance. In these books, the male characters were clearly portrayed as heterosexual, thereby reinforcing heteronormativity—the idea that heterosexuality is the only sexual orientation. In addition, young girls receive messages about how they are perceived by males and the importance of maintaining a particular physical appearance to be desirable to males.

In addition to being presented as heterosexual, male characters were often depicted as hypermasculine. When the main character is a “Mighty Monster Machine,” it lends itself to a more exaggerated form of masculinity than is conceivable when the male character is a boy or an animal. In the illustrations, inanimate male characters were often shown as large and imposing, and in the stories, they completed feats typically associated with superheroes. The blurb on the back of *Supertruck* even described him as such: “When the city is hit by a colossal snowstorm, only one superhero can save the day” (n.p.). In addition to solving problems for others, male characters were shown as confident in their abilities. For example, when the announcer at the hockey game in *I’m Cool!* questioned whether Zamboni would be able to fix the ice, Zamboni responded with, “Chill, Big Talker. I’ve got what it takes to do the job” (n.p.).

Overall, we found that over half (52%) of male characters were given qualities typically associated with masculinity. Physically, male characters were frequently portrayed as big and strong, and personality-wise, they were portrayed as brave, capable leaders who completed heroic feats. In line with these traits, many male characters were self-assured and overconfident.

FEMALE STEREOTYPES. The 16 books featuring female main characters represented the characters in a variety of ways. Six (38%) of the books included characters who defied traditional female stereotypes; they were shown to be confident, heroic, and craving adventure. However, in the remaining 10 books (63%), stereotypes of females as being insecure and emotional were shown.

For example, Zero (Otoshi, 2010) was a female character in a book series of anthropomorphized numbers. The story about Zero was filled with double meanings that portrayed her in a negative light. For example, Zero felt empty inside and only felt complete when she had another number by her side. The illustrations showed her looking admiringly at other numbers, pondering how they had value and she did not. Two (Otoshi, 2014), the female main character in the third book in the series, was not only insecure but jealous; she felt so left out because One and Three were bonding over being “odd” that “her heart felt sick and she began to crack” (n.p.). Another female character, the moon in *The Moon Was at a Fiesta* (Gollubi & Martinez, 1997), was also described as being jealous, a trait commonly associated with women.

Unlike male characters, who were depicted as level-headed and unemotional, female characters were portrayed as emotionally fragile, even unstable. Milk in *Milk Goes to School* (Border, 2016) “yelled and stomped her feet” (n.p.) because her paper got wet. When Cupcake could not find a birthday party idea that would satisfy all of her friends, she was ready to “crumble” (note again the double meaning that demeans females). Similarly, Two had to “pull herself together” when she felt herself “beginning to crack” (n.p.).

In addition to feeling left out, female characters were rejected by others. Olga the Cloud (Costa, 2014) faced rejection from an assortment of characters who did not want her to rain on them. Even though the sunflowers were thirsty, they sent her away, disparaging her because she was “too small to give every one of [them] a drink” (n.p.). Likewise, the Little House was abandoned when the countryside became industrialized. Eventually, “no one noticed the Little House anymore, and they hurried by without a glance” (n.p.). By contrast, male characters were not rejected; rather, they were shown as leaders and unifiers who brought others together.

Another trait typically associated with females is being self-sacrificing (Keyser & Pfeiffer, 2001). In *The Giving Tree*, the female tree gave everything she had to a boy who wanted more and more from her until she was nothing more than a stump. When the boy returned as an old man in need of a quiet place to sit and rest, she let him sit on her stump, “and the tree was happy” (n.p.). In other words, she gained satisfaction from giving herself to someone else, despite her own loss. Similarly, *The Little Rose of Sharon* featured a self-sacrificing plant who shed her petals to keep a dove’s egg warm.

Two Main Characters: Male and Female

There were 11 books in which there were both male and female main characters. The most obvious difference in the way male and female characters were depicted when they

appeared in the same story was in their physical appearance. For example, in *Thomas and Friends Story Time Collection* (Awdry, 2014), which featured all male characters except for one female engine named Lady, the male characters were red, blue, and green, whereas Lady was gleaming pink and purple with gold accents. Similarly, in *Power Down, Little Robot* (Staniszewski, 2015), the male robot was solid red, but his mother was wearing a pink dress, a gold necklace, and lipstick. In *Goodnight, Johnny Tractor* (Running Press, 2008), the only characteristics that distinguished the female from the male character were the female character’s comparatively small size and long eyelashes.

Breaking Stereotypes

Although most books reinforced stereotypical gender roles, there were several books in the categories of “representations of living things,” “robots,” and “mummies and ghosts” where the gender of the character would not have been obvious had the author not used a particular pronoun to refer to the character. In these books, the male characters did not evidence stereotypical male behaviors (e.g., *Corduroy* [Freeman, 1968], *When Edgar Met Cecil* [Luthardt, 2013], and *Operation Ghost* [Duquenois, 1999]). However, there was only one book—*The Little Tree* (Long, 2015)—in which the male character was depicted more like other female than male characters. In addition to being the only male plant, the Little Tree was small and provided a home to woodland creatures, showing him to be nurturing, a characteristic commonly associated with women (Brugilles et al., 2002).

There were four books with female main characters that broke traditional female stereotypes. The daring red pencil in *Little Red Writing* (Holub & Sweet, 2016) wanted to go on an exciting adventure in which she could fight evil. She was portrayed as brave and heroic, with a male character proclaiming, “Good thing that brave little pencil came along to save the day” (n.p.). Another female character who broke stereotypes was Scissors in *The Legend of Rock, Paper, Scissors* (Daywalt & Rex, 2017). Although she was cocky, which was a more negative trait associated with male characters, she was quick, confident, and competitive.

Ironically, two of the four books featuring female characters that broke traditional gender stereotypes were the oldest books in our sample—*The Little Engine That Could* (Piper, 1930) and *Katy and the Big Snow* (Burton, 1943). The Little Engine was a blue engine who saved the day when she helped pull a train filled with children’s toys across a mountain. Katy was a red tractor and snowplow who “was very big and very strong” (n.p.). She tirelessly rescued a variety of city workers and saved the town from devastation when it was hit by a snowstorm. The character form in these books contributed to the breaking of gender

stereotypes. Being engine-operated machines—particularly ones associated with masculinity—predisposed the characters to independent personalities. However, the stories themselves were realistic and did not depend on the anthropomorphization of the characters; even if a person had been operating the train and snowplow, the story would have remained relatively unchanged.

In recent years, characters have become more fantasy-based, such as the anthropomorphized, bow-adorned carton of strawberry milk in *Milk Goes to School*. Given the unrealistic nature of the character form itself, there is more leeway for authors to present far-fetched, comical scenarios, such as “baby chicken nuggets hatching” (Border, 2016, n.p.). When caricatures are pushed to the limits (e.g., milk that is “spoiled” and trucks that are superheroes), all aspects of the story are subject to exaggeration, including gender stereotypes.

We found an even larger discrepancy between representations of male and female characters than had been identified in previous research. Of the 103 books in our sample, 76 had main characters that were male, and only 16 had main characters that were female.

Gender Stereotypes by Character Form

Of the 11 different character forms represented by male characters (see Table 1), the most common was “cars and trucks,” which formed 24% of all books with male main characters. By comparison, there were no books in which female characters were cars or trucks. In American literature, cars and trucks have often been used as material referents for hegemonic masculinity (Cooper, 2016). Unsurprisingly, then, anthropomorphized cars and trucks were portrayed in the most stereotypical ways of all the male character forms, with the majority being big, fast, brave, adventurous, and heroic. In other words, both the vehicle as a symbol of masculinity and the attributes ascribed to the characters embodied ideals of masculine power and performance. The next most popular category for male characters was construction equipment and machinery, which formed 17% of the books with male main characters. Although the way these characters were portrayed varied, the most common characteristic was that they were hardworking. *Katy and the Big Snow* was the only book that featured a female piece of construction

equipment. As previously mentioned, she embodied many of the traits ascribed to male characters in other books. There were three books that featured main characters that were both male and female pieces of construction equipment. When they appeared together in books, these male and female characters shared similar characteristics.

The next most popular category for male characters was “planes, trains, and boats,” which formed 16% of all books with male main characters. These books presented male characters in a variety of ways and included characters that were little, such as the “Little Red Caboose,” “Little Toot,” and “Little Tug.” In books where the female main character was an object associated with masculinity, such as a train, the female characters took on traditionally male characteristics. The Little Engine was a blue female train who demonstrated determination and heroism, and the female train in *Choo Choo* had an independent spirit and a sense of adventure. Similarly, when a nature-based entity such as the Little Tree was a male character, it was portrayed in the same way as female characters in other books. The Little Tree was one of only three male characters that did not have a face.

“Food” was the fourth largest category for male characters ($n = 10$), but there was little consistency in how these characters were presented. Of the 14 characters in the categories of “representations of living things” (a teddy bear, a scarecrow, and snowmen), “robots,” and “mummies and ghosts,” only one was female (the mother of a male robot, the other main character). However, male characters in these three categories did not embody overt male stereotypes, as evidenced in the other character forms.

Conclusions

Findings from our analysis of children’s books featuring gendered inanimate objects and nature-based entities mirrored previous findings that male characters were represented more than female characters in children’s books (Crisp & Hiller, 2011; Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; Hamilton et al., 2006; McCabe et al., 2011; Weitzman et al., 1972). However, we found an even larger discrepancy between representations of male and female characters than had been identified in previous research. Of the 103 books in our sample, 76 had main characters that were male, and only 16 had main characters that were female. In other words, there were 4.75 times as many books featuring male main characters as female main characters.

The most obvious difference in the way inanimate male and female objects were gendered was in the character form itself. Forty-three of the 76 male characters (57%) were objects typically associated with masculinity: cars, trucks, trains, planes, and construction equipment. These items are marketed as boys’ toys, and in adulthood, they represent forms of transportation associated with male professions.

Speaking to this point, a transport secretary in the United Kingdom, where only 4% of train drivers are women, called for more female engines in *Thomas the Tank Engine* to encourage girls to become train drivers (Swinford, 2013).

We also found that the anthropomorphized inanimate male and female characters in children's books were given character traits very similar to human and animal male and female characters. For example, previous research found that male characters were presented as more active and adventurous than female characters (Brugeilles et al., 2002; Crisp & Hiller, 2011; Weitzman et al., 1972; Williams et al., 1987), which mirrored our findings. In addition, Turner-Bowker (1996) reported that words commonly used to describe male characters in children's books included "big," "great," "furious," and "fierce." These words were identical to, or synonymous with, words used to describe the anthropomorphized inanimate male characters in our books.

Brugeilles et al. (2002) also noted that most heroes in children's books were male, which corresponded with our findings. We found that even when male characters were described as "little," a characteristic frequently ascribed to female characters, they were still heroic, as exemplified by Little Toot, who "single-handedly rescues an ocean liner during a storm" (n.p.). We also found that male characters were frequently shown as capable leaders on whom others relied. None of the female characters in our books were presented as having leadership qualities. To the contrary, they were more often shown as not having any influence over others or as being taken advantage of by others. Although Katy and the Little Engine were female characters who shared traits typically ascribed to male characters, such as being independent, hardworking, and heroic, neither of them was portrayed as a leader.

We also found that male characters were admired for their accomplishments, with the announcer in *Im Cool*, for example, shouting, "Super job, Zamboni Machine!" and the "crumbs" at the bottom of the cookie jar expressing gratitude for Tough Cookie's help by declaring, "We owe you big time" (n.p.). In contrast, female characters were more often shown as unappreciated and rejected. In addition, male characters were generally presented as likeable, whereas female characters (particularly female food items) were often presented as unlikeable.

Despite the similarities between the gendered portrayal of human, animal, and inanimate characters in children's literature, we did identify some differences in the way male and female characters were portrayed when they were inanimate objects and nature-based entities compared to when they were humans or animals. For example, previous researchers indicated that male characters were more likely to be shown in outdoor activities and females were more likely to be situated indoors (Brugeilles

et al., 2002; Crisp & Hiller, 2011; Hamilton et al., 2006; Kolbe & La Voie, 1981; Tognoli et al., 1994; Weitzman et al., 1972). This situation did not hold true for characters in our books. Nature-based entities were the most popular character form for female characters, and being a tree, moon, or cloud necessitated their location outdoors. Even the female characters that were items typically found indoors, such as a cupcake, tortilla, and carton of milk, were shown outdoors.

In addition, we found that the use of inanimate objects as main characters provided avenues for depictions of gender and sexuality not typical of human or animal characters in children's books. For example, the images and descriptions of cars and trucks as large and powerful bestowed on these characters a hypermasculinity akin to that of comic book superheroes. Further, authors seemed to be able to sexualize anthropomorphized characters in ways that would be inappropriate for human and animal characters.

Another significant finding from our review of books was that female characters were more often shown without faces than male characters (44% versus 4%, respectively), a situation that would not be as likely to occur with human and animal characters. The lack of a face served to depersonalize female characters, which could make it difficult for young readers to relate to or empathize with them. Being faceless also strips the characters of individuality. When someone is not an individual, it means that person or character is interchangeable and replaceable and of no intrinsic value. Research on the portrayal of women in advertising indicates that women are often shown without a face and are objectified through other body parts (Kilbourne, 2012). The objectification of women reduces them to "things" without thoughts, opinions, or feelings. Unlike a person, a thing "may be treated as something whose experiences and feelings need not be taken into account" (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 260). When female characters are not given a face, they are prevented from expressing feelings, which reinforces the idea that their feelings are not important. Likewise, the absence of a mouth (which occurred even when female characters had eyes) conveys messages about the unimportance of women's voices.

Throughout the process of analyzing books featuring anthropomorphized inanimate objects, we did identify a few books with characters and story lines that defied traditional gender-role stereotypes. For example, in *Little Red Writing*, the female character is independent and brave and craves adventure, and the male character in *When Edgar Met Cecil* (Luthardt, 2013) is helpful and caring. However, most of the books we reviewed exposed children to ideals of males as tough and heroic and as being able to solve other people's problems. A positive repercussion for boys who read these books is that the male models are charismatic and teach boys the value of being likeable and

trustworthy and having leadership qualities. However, there is also the possibility that in admiring heroic characters, young boys will try to emulate their hypermasculine traits. Hypermasculinity entails being drawn to danger and suppressing “feminine” emotions such as sensitivity and empathy (Vokey, Tefft, & Tysiaczny, 2013).

Exposing children to stereotypical gender roles in children’s books presents students with ideals of socially desirable behavior, which shape expectations for both themselves and others. When girls read books in which female characters lack leadership qualities, are not likeable, and are rejected by others, they are being denied positive models to emulate. Teachers and caregivers should therefore make a conscious effort to expose children to books that present positive and realistic depictions of male and female charac-

ters. Children need to see a variety of characters with a range of personality traits and behaviors in order to minimize the likelihood that they will develop the belief that there is only one prescribed way to identify as male or female. ■

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