

5-2019

# Gender in Children's Picture Books: A 21st Century Update

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Gender in Children's Picture Books: A 21st Century Update  
Marisa Trevino

A DEPARTMENT HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE  
DEPARTMENT OF \_\_\_\_\_ Sociology and Anthropology \_\_\_\_\_ AT TRINITY  
UNIVERSITY  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATION WITH  
DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

DATE \_\_\_\_\_ 4/22/19 \_\_\_\_\_

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# **Gender in Children's Picture Books: A 21st Century Update**

Marisa Trevino  
Trinity University- Senior Thesis

## Abstract

Prior research on representations of gender and gender roles in twentieth century award winning children's picture books has found notable disparities in representation of male and female characters as well as in the number of roles and behaviors that were prescribed to characters. My research seeks to build on prior literature by providing a twenty first century update. I explore a sample of 100 children's picture books and analyze the following: numerical representation of gender, number of speaking lines given to characters, number of pages characters were shown on and lastly, the number of behaviors that were prescribed to characters. I find that representation of male and female characters as a whole has changed little since prior research was done however, representation in number of pages shown on and speaking lines given has become more even as male and female characters had very similar averages for both. Additionally, most behaviors prescribed to male and female characters remain consistent by gender, meaning that male characters were given stereotypical male traits while female characters were given more stereotypical female traits. Complexity in behaviors is also discussed as male characters were provided opportunities to show a more complex set of behaviors. Though representation in books has change in some aspects there is work still to be done as books are powerful in shaping what children think about what gender is and what it means.

At the institutional level, education serves as a socializing agent for young children. Schools teach students how to behave, how to interact and essentially what to think. What is commonly overlooked or taken for granted in school socialization is the role teaching materials play in socializing children. Children's books, whether read aloud or in elementary school libraries for students to pick up at their own leisure, contribute to how they understand the world around them. Of particular importance to my research, is the way picture books contribute to how children understand and make sense of gender. I address the question of how gender is represented in picture books published in the twenty first century. I focus my work around this issue through three research questions. I ask what representation looks like between male and

female characters in the number and percentage of speaking lines they have and the number and percentage of pages on which they are shown. Secondly, I ask what proportion of male and female characters are represented in “doing” dominance and “doing” deference. Lastly, I ask whether male and female characters are given the same amount of complexity in behaviors. I analyze these questions by conducting a content analysis of my 100 book sample. I then use descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations and frequency tables in order to interpret the data. In this analysis I hope to gain insight into whether or not representations of gender in books have changed since prior research on this topic was conducted.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Cultural beliefs about gender, otherwise known as "gender beliefs" are schemas that influence how we interpret and make sense of the world around us (Correll, 2001). Gender beliefs tend to represent what we think "most people" accept as true about the categories of "men" and "women" (Correll, 2001). Institutions such as schools and families, along with cultural texts (Smith, 1990) reproduce and reaffirm ideas about gender that are typically hegemonic and heteronormative. Correll (2001, p. 1697) importantly notes that "children learn and internalize gender beliefs and that this internalization affects behavior." For example, children learn the expectations of one's gender and will then act accordingly during play. It is thus of great importance to explore the ways in which children gain these gender beliefs.

One way in which gender beliefs are developed is through forms of children's media such as television shows (Banet-Weisner, 2004; Behm-Morawitz and Mastro, 2008) textbooks (Evans and Davies, 2000) and picture books (Grauerholz and Pescosolido, 1989; Gooden and Gooden, 2001; Hamilton et al., 2006; Weitzman et al., 1974). Schudson (1989) argues that cultural symbols or objects appear among various forms of media. These symbols and objects not only

reflect dominant cultural beliefs and ideologies but also have the ability to successfully influence or manipulate people. Consequently, the more widely a cultural object or symbol is exhibited, the more opportunity there is for it to exercise influence. For this reason, Schudson (1989) contends that books and textbooks are a highly important device for the dissemination of cultural symbols. First and foremost, books/textbooks are both easily retrievable, they are accessed with ease by students, parents and teachers (Schudson, 1989). Moreover, they occupy a special status in schools as they are used for a variety of different lessons. According to Seplocha and Strasser (2007), children's picture books capture attention, accommodate differences, provoke conversation, and also entertain. While Seplocha and Strasser (2007) reaffirm that books can act as a means to motivate and encourage student writers, they are also employed/used across all subjects due to their engaging nature. For this reason, children's picture books should be of much importance to researchers as they are used so often both in the classroom and at home.

Prior research has been concerned with the disparities in gender representation across children's television as well as textbooks and picture books. Furnham (1997) analyzed the representation of gender in children's television advertisements throughout the summer of 1993 and found that males were more likely to be represented as playing central/authoritative roles compared to females. This disparity was later revisited by Banet-Weisner (2004), who looked specifically at the representation among Nickelodeon television shows. While these findings indicated that representation of girls was more diverse in comparison to research from children's books, they still lacked the recognition of many women's issues such as sexual harassment, equal work for equal pay, and legal policies on rape and abuse (Banet-Weisner, 2004). Similar results were found in research focused on picture textbooks and picture books. In textbooks, Evans and Davies (2000) found that males were afforded much more representation compared to females.

Males were also portrayed in stereotypical “masculine” ways, such as by being very aggressive, authoritative and competitive.

Weitzman et al. (1972) pioneered research on the representation of males and females in children’s picture books. They first found that the ratio of male to female titles (titles that included a male or female name) of Caldecott winning books beginning in 1938 and ending in 1971 was a resounding eight to three. Following a similar trend, the gender of characters (including both animals and humans) came out to a ratio of ninety five to one in favor of males. Additionally, they found that the roles in books were very sexist and limiting; women were presented as passive whereas males were represented as active. Most often, women in books were portrayed as a mother or wife and if not those, then either as a fairy, maiden, or godmother (Weitzman et al., 1972). They came to the conclusion that women overall were relatively invisible in books; if they were shown at all it was a rarity. The disparities in representation found from Weitzman’s study exemplify the symbolic annihilation or omission and trivialization of certain groups that are not socially valued discussed by Tuchman (1972), many years earlier. In this case, the omission of women and girls suggests to children that those female characters are less important. Although this research has been updated throughout the years, (Grauerholz and Pescosolido, 1989; Gooden and Gooden, 2001; Hamilton et al., 2006) findings have remained relatively consistent across all studies. Gooden and Gooden (2001) reexamined gender roles that were presented in books from 1995 to 1999 and found yet again that males had twice the number of roles that women did. While they noted that roles were less stereotypical, women were still presented in a weak or passive manner, whereas men were presented as strong and independent, leading figures (Gooden and Gooden, 2001). Five years later, a study of 200 top selling children’s books published between 1995-2001 was completed and found that the girls in

books were disproportionately portrayed as needing the assistance of a male figure (Hamilton et al., 2006). When a book portrayed a girl as the main character, there was a tendency to have her reliant on a secondary male character. Additionally, most of the girls in these books were still portrayed as being weak or submissive compared to the male characters who were independent and entitled or in control (Hamilton et al., 2006). As the findings suggest, these sexist patterns have persisted over multiple decades. Most recently, in 2011, McCabe et al. attempted to build on the Weitzman study as well as others with a much larger sample. They sampled over 5,000 books published throughout the twentieth century and found that patterns of gender representation had not changed. A total of 1,857 books had titles that included the name of male characters, whereas only 966 had titles that included the name of female characters (McCabe et al., 2011).

The disparities found in both gender representation and gender roles are suggestive of the patriarchal society in which we live that affords men privilege and representation over women. Masculinity has been defined in opposition to femininity and has also afforded men with a hegemonic standard for masculinity which is used to assert dominance over women (Connell, 1987). Children are thus being taught that women and men are not equal, but rather that men are more important and hold greater value in society. While men are viewed as the “default” type of human being, females remain as the “other” or the “second sex” (De Beauvoir, 1952). Additionally, children are being taught that there are specific ways to “do” gender (West and Zimmerman, 1977). Goffman (1976, p. 75) explains that femininity and masculinity are regarded as “prototypes of essential expression- something that can be conveyed fleetingly in any social situation yet something that strikes at the most basic characterization of the individual.” These expressions are essentially behaviors or displays of gender that not only reveal the fundamental

dimensions of the female and male, but also establish deference or dominance in relation to those with whom we interact. West and Zimmerman (1977, p. 137) build upon this point by explaining that “doing” gender is the “creating [or construction of] differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological.” Several examples of these constructed differences include the segregation of public bathrooms, organized sports, the type of labor one engages in and the way in which one presents themselves in appearance. Careers, clothing, hairstyles and interests are all aspects of children’s books that are based on gender and serve as a means to legitimate the gendered organization of life. While portrayals of males “do” dominance such as by being a brave leader or rescuing others from a dangerous situation, females are portrayed as “doing” deference through being confined to housework or playing with dolls. What are supposed to be natural portrayals of males and females actually reproduce and reinforce a hierarchical, heteronormative structure of gender. This becomes increasingly problematic for young children as our society begins to understand and recognize or accept non-binary gender and sexuality.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) build on the discussion of masculinity and “doing” maleness by arguing that there is great complexity in the construction of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinities are not necessarily static, but rather are subject to change and adjustments in order to fit the new standard of hegemony are likely to occur. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) importantly note that children and adults both have the ability to deconstruct gender binaries and criticize hegemonic masculinity. They explain that there is layering and potential internal contradiction within all practices of masculinity. Such practices cannot be read simply as expressing a unitary masculinity, but rather could be the result of calculations about the costs and benefits of various gender strategies. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) also explain the

problematic nature of only looking at women and femininity as a means to define masculinity. They argue that in order to gain a more holistic view of gender hierarchies it is necessary to look at the practices of women and how they interplay with practices of masculinity. With this argument in mind it is thus of importance to not only pay special attention to the practices in which male characters use to assert their masculinity or maleness but also to the practices that female characters use to assert their femininity. My third hypothesis regarding the complexity of characters stems from the arguments made by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005).

Prior research on picture books has been limited to publications from the twentieth century and has also failed to focus on a sample of books that is most representative of an average public school library, an area where books are most likely to be retrievable for children (Schudson, 1989). For this reason, I examine publications from the twenty first century and from a public school inventory of library books. I first hypothesize that male characters will be represented more than female characters and will be shown on a greater proportion of pages and will be provided with a greater proportion of speaking lines (Grauerholz and Pescosolido, 1989; Gooden and Gooden, 2001; Weitzman et al., 1972). Secondly, I hypothesize that male characters will be seen with more of the stereotypical male active, aggressive/assertive and bravery/leadership type behaviors while female characters will take on more stereotypical female active, nurturing and dependent/submissive behaviors (Gooden and Gooden, 2001; Hamilton et al., 2006; Weitzman et al., 2001; West and Zimmerman, 1977). Lastly, I hypothesize that male characters will be shown in more complex ways compared to female characters (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). My analysis will contribute to a wider discussion of the extent to which we as a society socialize children to gender through picture books.

## **Methodology**

In collecting my data, I randomly sampled both schools and books. I did this in order to eliminate sampling bias and ensure that my sample would be representative of an average public school library. From the 32 elementary schools in San Antonio Independent School District, I randomly selected three. Due to a high amount of overlap and large quantity of books that fit my criteria listed below, I believe that choosing three schools still provides a sample that is representative of the district as a whole. Many of the books in my sample (over half) were shown in each school's complete library catalog on SAISD's Textbook and Library Media Services website and were shown as being available at a majority of the elementary schools.

### ***Sample Criteria***

In each search on the SAISD website, I filtered by publication date from 2000-2017. I did not include 2018 as the year had not yet ended when the data were collected. I then filtered books by K-3 interest level and 1.5-3.0 reading level. These filters allowed me to limit my sample to picture books that were directed more towards young children between the ages of 4 and 8. I chose this age group as these ages are the most likely to have read alouds in class, take weekly or bi-weekly visits to the library, and have explicit self-selected reading time. Additionally, I excluded nonfiction and counting focused books as they did not offer many depictions of gendered characters. Across all three libraries, I found a total of 1,261 books that were published between 2000-2017, had a K-3 interest level and reading level of 1.5-3.0. Most books contained characters that were either animals or humans, others included monsters and aliens. From this list of 1,261, I chose every 12th book until I reached 100 books total that would be used for analysis.

### ***Content Analysis***

I then began to conduct my content analysis. Content analysis, according to Messinger (2012), is the study of social artifacts. These data from social artifacts such as books, movies or other human creations are then *coded*, a process that involves counting the frequency of and/or comparing the co-occurrence of categories (Messinger, 2012).

In my analysis, I first coded for the number of pages characters appeared on, the number of speaking lines characters had and lastly, their behaviors. In order to accomplish this, I created a coding guide to follow. My guide was influenced by previous research (Clark et al., 1993) as well as by several dimensions that I sought to add in my research. First and foremost, I coded only for central or prominent characters in each book. In order to determine whether or not a character was central to the story I asked the following questions: Does the character speak multiple times in the story? Is the character involved with the plot? Does the character appear a consistent amount throughout the story or make significant contributions to the story? These questions helped me focus in on characters that were most important. I then coded for the character's gender (male, female, neutral). I exclude characters with a neutral gender. Characters with an indeterminate gender would certainly provide interesting data and would likely provide strong implications for what default characteristics are given to characters without a clear gender. However, I only came across eight characters whose gender was unidentifiable, a sample size too small to make any substantial conclusions. I followed coding by gender by then calculating the number of pages the character appeared on in relation to total number of pages per book. These calculations would help demonstrate the disparity in gender representation across all 100 books.

### ***Character Behavior Codes***

After coding for the above measures, I began to code the prominent characters' actions/behaviors. In total, I had 6 behavior codes (see appendix for guide)- stereotypically

female active, stereotypically male active, aggressive/assertive, nurturing, bravery/leadership and dependent/submissive. My behavior codes were primarily influenced by the coding guide Clark et al. (1993) used in their research. Stereotypically female active behavior refers to dancing, skipping, knitting/crafting, cleaning, cooking for the family and taking care of children. Stereotypically male active behavior refers to playing outside or in mud, building, hammering and driving big machinery as well as performing fatherly duties such as teaching life lessons and disciplining children. Assertive/aggressive behavior is the pushing and shoving by a character as well as fighting and throwing temper tantrums in which items are thrown or smashed. Nurturing behavior refers to showing parental qualities such as comforting and cuddling, playing “house” or doing things out of love for another character. Bravery/leadership behavior is the rescuing or saving another of another character or leading one/many characters in various activities throughout the story. Lastly, dependent/submissive behavior refers to a character appearing to be nervous, timid or yielding to the direction of others.

Once I collected the data, I used SPSS statistical software to calculate the number of male and female characters. I then calculated the mean, median, and standard deviation for the number of speaking lines per book and pages per book shown by gender. Additionally, at the book level, I calculated the average percent of pages characters were shown on and the average percent of speaking lines characters were given. Next, I created cross-tabulations to find the percent of each behavior seen in both male and female characters in order to understand patterns or disparities. From the cross-tabulations of each behavior, I used a difference in proportions test to find out whether or not the observed differences were statistically significant. Lastly, I used frequency tables to find the number of male traits female characters had and the number of

female traits male characters had. These tables addressed my third research question that focused on the complexity of behaviors afforded to characters based on gender.

## **Findings**

### ***Hypothesis 1***

I first hypothesized that male characters will be represented more than female characters and will be shown on more pages and will be provided with more speaking lines (Grauerholz and Pescosolido, 1989; Gooden and Gooden, 2001; Weitzman et al., 1972). Table 1 shows basic descriptive statistics relevant to my first research question regarding representation of characters by gender, the number of pages they were shown on, and the number of speaking lines they had. Consistent with my hypothesis, male characters are more represented than female characters on all three of the above measures. Table 1 shows that there were more male characters (113, 56.2%) than female characters (80, 39.8%) and a difference in proportions test reveals that this finding is statistically significant ( $p = .025$ ). The remaining 3.9 percent of characters had an unidentifiable gender and will be excluded throughout my analysis. While these gender neutral characters and their behaviors are of sociological interest, I focus my analysis solely on differences between male and female characters for the purpose of addressing my research questions. Table 1 displays the mean, median, and standard deviation of pages characters were shown on and the number of speaking lines characters had. The mean number of pages shown for male characters was 15.4 (SD = 7.694) and was 14.36 (SD= 8.408) for female characters. Male characters were slightly overrepresented and female characters were underrepresented when compared to the mean for all characters (14.98, SD= 7.85). While male characters were shown on 1.05 more pages, consistent with my hypothesis, a difference in means test ( $p= .370$ )

reveals that this difference was not statistically significant at the .05 level. This finding is also consistent when looking at the mean percent of pages characters were shown on per book. Male characters (46.5%) were seen on about 4 percent more pages per book compared to female characters (42.3%). A difference in means test ( $p = .0004$ ) at the 0.5 level reveals that this difference is statistically significant. When analyzing the number of speaking lines given to characters a similar pattern occurs. The mean number of speaking lines for male characters was 10.14 (SD= 8.34) and was 9.88 (SD= 8.07) for female characters. Again, male characters were slightly overrepresented and female characters were underrepresented when compared to the mean for all characters (9.94, SD= 8.13). Similar to my finding on pages shown, a difference in means test ( $p=.832$ ) reveals that the difference is not statistically significant. This finding is also consistent when looking at the average percent of speaking lines characters were given per book. Male characters (48.2%) were given about 8 percent more speaking lines per book compared to female characters (40.8%). However, a difference in means test ( $p = .1029$ ) reveals that this finding is not statistically significant. This data suggests that although there are differences in overall representation between male and female characters, the large disparities that were seen in previous studies (Weitzman et al. 1972; Gooden and Gooden 2001) have decreased substantially.

### ***Hypothesis 2***

I hypothesized that male characters will be seen with more of the stereotypical male active, aggressive/assertive and bravery/leadership type behaviors while female characters will take on more stereotypical female active, nurturing and dependent/submissive behaviors (Gooden and Gooden, 2001; Hamilton et al., 2006; Weitzman et al., 2001; West and Zimmerman, 1977). Figures 1 through 6 display my findings for the percentage of male and female characters that display each behavior code. Figures 1-3 focus on what I categorize as the

three “female attributes”. The first is stereotypically female active behavior such as dancing, crafting, cleaning, cooking for the family and taking care of children. The second is dependent/submissive behavior, which includes a character appearing to be nervous, timid, or yielding to the direction of others. The third is nurturing behavior, this includes showing parental qualities such as comforting and cuddling, playing “house,” or doing things out of love for another character. Figures 3-6 focus on what I categorize as the three “male attributes.” The first is stereotypically male active behavior such as running/jumping, playing in mud, or interacting with stereotypical boy toys such trucks, trains and superheroes. This behavior also includes building, hammering, and driving big machinery, as well as performing fatherly duties such as teaching life lessons and disciplining children. The second is bravery/leadership which includes rescuing or saving another character from any harmful/dangerous situation. The third is assertive/aggressive behavior, which includes characters fighting, pushing, or shoving other characters, as well as throwing temper tantrums and using aggressive words.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of characters by gender who were seen with “stereotypically female active” behaviors. Female characters (80%) were nearly four times more likely than male characters (22%) to exhibit stereotypically female active behavior. Similar to prior research from Weitzman et al. (1972) and Gooden and Gooden (2001), female characters were notably overrepresented in performing these activities. A difference in proportions test ( $z = 7.964, p < .0001$ ) reveals that this finding is statistically significant. The figure also displays the 95% confidence interval for each estimate. Figure 2 looks at the percentage of characters who display dependent/submissive behavior. This code focuses on behaviors that are suggestive of a character being passive and yielding to the direction of others. Prior research (Gooden and Gooden, 2001; Hamilton et al, 2006; Weitzman et al., 1972) found that most often female

characters were overrepresented in being presented as submissive/weak compared to dominant male characters. My analysis of the data shows a surprising finding: male characters (34.5%) were almost two times as likely than female characters (18.7%) to display this behavior. This finding represents a departure from prior research; later in my discussion I will provide an in-depth exploration for why we see a higher percentage of male characters having this behavior based on story narrative. A difference in proportions test ( $z = -2.4561$ ,  $p = .0139$ ) reveals that this finding too, is statistically significant. 95% confidence intervals highlight the precision of these estimates. Figure 3 shows the percentage of characters who display nurturing behavior. Similar to the dependent/submissive behavior code, prior research has found that female characters have been overrepresented as full-time mothers who are only seen comforting, cuddling or doing things out of love for those in their family. My analysis of the data shows that female characters (41.2%) were over two times as likely to be seen performing nurturing behavior compared to male characters (16.8%). This finding matches that of prior research and a difference in proportions test ( $z = 3.8833$ ,  $p = .0001$ ) reveals that this finding is statistically significant. Confidence intervals for the estimate for females are larger ( $\pm 10.78$  percentage points), meaning these estimates are less precise than my above findings for female attributes.

Figure 4 shows the percentage of characters by gender who are seen with “stereotypically male active” behaviors. These activities were seen in over twice as many male characters (77.8%) than female characters (28.2%). A difference in proportions test ( $z = -6.7679$ ,  $p < .0001$ ) reveals that this disparity is statistically significant. Though male characters were overrepresented in performing these activities, there was a higher percentage of female characters who had “stereotypically male active” behaviors than there were male characters who had “stereotypically female active” behaviors. This finding is to be addressed later on when I

discuss complexity in behaviors among characters. Figure 5 focuses on the percentage of characters who display leadership/bravery behavior. Activities that define this behavior include rescuing or “saving” another character from any situation or leading one/many characters in various activities throughout the story. This behavior code stems from prior research (Gooden and Gooden, 2001; Hamilton et al., 2006) that saw an overwhelming proportion of male characters “saving” or helping the “damsel in distress”. In analyzing the data, I found that female characters (15%) were less than half as likely as male characters (40%) to exhibit bravery/leadership behavior. A difference in proportions test ( $z = -3.883$ ,  $p = .00048$ ) reveals that this finding is statistically significant. Figure 6 displays the percentage of characters who are seen with assertive/aggressive behavior. Evans and Davies (2000) analyzed representations of gender in textbooks and found that males were often portrayed in hyper masculine ways, such as through performing aggressive acts. These acts include stomping, pushing/shoving, kicking, throwing, or smashing objects and fighting with other characters as a means to resolving an issue. In analyzing the data I found that 15 percent of female characters and 24 percent of male characters were seen showing this behavior. Compared to all other behavior codes, this one had the lowest proportion of characters combined who did show some sort of aggression or assertiveness. A differences in proportions test ( $p = 1.7658$ ) reveals that this difference is not statistically significant. Thus, the null hypothesis of no difference in aggression between male and female characters cannot be rejected.

### ***Hypothesis 3***

I hypothesized that male characters will be shown in more complex ways compared to female characters (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Table 2 is a frequency table that addresses complexity in behaviors among male and female characters. Connell and

Messerschmidt (2005) argue that there is much complexity to masculinity- there is layering and potential internal contradiction within all practices that construct masculinities. In this table, I first look at the frequency in which male characters have zero, one, or two “female” traits as well as compare the data to number of “male” traits seen. This focus and comparison measures the amount of complexity a character has; like Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) explain, there are layers and contradictions that construct masculinity. Collecting this data not only aids my understanding of how complex male characters are but also allows me to look at the complexity in which female characters are given. For clarity in my analysis, I exclude both “three traits” categories as they represent only a very small proportion of my sample. In analyzing the data, I found that 59.3 percent of male characters have anywhere between one to three female traits, though it was more common that male characters had just one female trait (45.1%). I also noticed that 40.7 percent of male characters were seen with zero female traits. When comparing this to male attributes or traits, I found that 88.5 percent of male characters had anywhere between one to three male traits. In Table 2 I also look at complexity among female characters. I found that a higher percentage of female characters were seen without any male traits (52.5%) compared to male characters without any female traits (40.7%), however this finding was not statistically significant at the .05 level. I also found that 47.6 percent of female characters were seen with anywhere between one to three male traits, though like male characters, it was more common for female characters to display only one male trait (37.5%). When comparing this to female attributes or traits, I found that 90.1 percent of female characters were seen with anywhere between one to three female traits. This finding shows that male characters were provided with more opportunities than female characters to be complex in their behaviors or to display opposite gender traits and confirms Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) argument that there is great

complexity to masculinity. In the next section, I provide narratives from several books to explain this complexity found in male characters.

## **Discussion**

### ***Hypothesis 1***

My first hypothesis that male characters would be represented more than female characters was confirmed by data in Table 1. 56.2 percent of characters were male and 39.2 percent were female. This finding is consistent with findings from prior research in other forms of media such as by Furnham (1997), who found that television advertisements included 52 percent male actors and 40 percent female actors. Similarly, Evans and Davies (2000) found that, when looking at characters in elementary school textbooks, 54 percent were male and 46 percent were female. McCabe et al. (2011) looked at twentieth century picture books and found that, of all central characters, the mean for males was 56.9 percent and 30.8 percent for females. My data comes years later yet these percentages and means are still almost exactly the same, suggesting that very little change has been made in terms of numerical representation of male and female characters.

Weitzman et al. (1972) were the first to analyze gender representation in children's books. In their sample 51% of characters were female, which is about ten percentage points more than what I found in my sample. However, Weitzman et al (1972) found that though 51% of characters were female, the ratio of pictures of male/female characters was 11:1, meaning that female characters were vastly underrepresented visually. Additionally, Gooden and Gooden (2001) found female characters (animals and humans) made up only 24 percent of all illustrations while male characters (animals and humans) made up 31 percent of illustrations. In

Table 1 my findings suggest that though there were fewer female characters, both male and females were shown on almost the same number of pages. Males were shown on a mean of 15.4 pages while females were shown on a mean of 14.3 pages; the overall mean for all characters was 14.9 pages. Additionally, the difference in average percent of pages shown per book only differed by 4.2 percentage points. Table 1 also addresses a measure that previous studies did not look at-- the number of speaking lines characters had. Again, though there were fewer female characters, both male and females had almost the same number of speaking lines. Males had a mean of 10.1 speaking lines, females had a mean of 9.8, and the overall mean was 9.9. Males also held a higher mean percent of speaking lines per book, though the difference was only by 7.4 percentage points. In both number of pages shown and number of speaking lines, female characters had a slightly lower mean and average per book compared to the overall mean or percentage. This finding suggests that while numbers of male and female characters has shifted very little, female characters and male characters are being given almost equal representation in terms of pictures/illustrations (pages shown) and speaking lines.

Analysis of my findings offer two conclusions- there is change still to be made towards equality in representation of male and female characters. The disparities that were seen in prior research are still here and need to be addressed. However, my findings also suggest that despite the disparities in number of male and female characters, considerable changes have occurred to ensure that female characters are seen on almost the same number of pages and have almost the same number of speaking lines.

## ***Hypothesis 2***

My second hypothesis that male characters would be seen with more stereotypically male active, aggressive/assertive and bravery/leadership type behaviors while female characters would be seen with more stereotypically female active, nurturing and dependent/submissive behaviors was mostly confirmed in Figures 1-6. Prior research (Gooden and Gooden, 2001; Hamilton et al., 2006; Weitzman et al., 1972) found that female characters were most often portrayed in “traditional” women’s roles (mother, housekeeper, grandmother) and were given dependent/submissive and nurturing behaviors in comparison to strong, independent male characters. Figures 1 and 3 confirm these previous findings; female characters were overrepresented in “stereotypically female active” behavior by 57.3 percentage points and by 24.4 percentage points in nurturing behavior. The most common “stereotypically female active” behaviors were crafting, dancing/spinning around or cooking and cleaning. Several books such as *Fancy Nancy and The Posh Puppy* and *Olivia the Spy* display female characters who are over the top “girly”. Characters like Nancy and Olivia were seen dancing around, only interested in crafting and glitter and activities like ballet. In many other books female characters were seen as mothers or grandmothers who nurtured and took care of their own children or other characters’ children. Of 80 female characters, 24 had names of “Mama”, “Mother”, “Grandma/Grandmother”, or some variation of those. These names not only suggest their role as nurturing caretakers but also emphasize that being their sole identity. These findings confirm the theory by West and Zimmerman (1976) that gender is something we “do” or perform. Careers, clothing, interests, and hobbies are all gendered and tell children how to best “do” being female or male. The female characters in my data mostly “do” femininity in gender normative ways, thus suggesting to children that girls are to do “girly” things such as dancing, crafting, or caretaking. Interestingly, an aspect of West and Zimmerman’s (1976) theory and previous

findings (Gooden and Gooden 2001; Hamilton et al. 2006; Weitzman et al.,1972) regarding women being deferent, dependent or submissive to their male counterparts or men in general was not supported in my data. Almost twice as many male characters (34.5%) were seen being dependent/submissive compared to female characters (18.8%). While this finding differs from prior research, I suggest that this is due to a vast majority of the male characters who were dependent/submissive taking on a “gentle giant” persona. Books such as *Bear Feels Scared*, *Turkey Trouble*, *Big Kicks*, and *Poppleton Has Fun* contain male characters who are large and would typically be perceived as a threat, yet are very much deferent and submissive to other characters. In each of these narratives the characters depend on others to accomplish a task or to learn a lesson. This finding suggests that progress has been made since prior research in that female characters are no longer being overrepresented as dependent on men or having passive personalities. Additionally, progress has been made in that male characters are now being shown with some dependent or submissive behaviors.

Prior research (Gooden and Gooden, 2001) found that male characters were more likely to be represented as helping or saving female characters from trouble. Additionally, Evans and Davies (2000) found that male characters were more likely to be portrayed as assertive or aggressive with other characters. In more recent research however, Hamilton et al. (2006) found that male and female characters were equally as likely to be involved with “rescue” behaviors and assertive/aggressive behaviors though male characters were still more likely to be seen as active and outdoors. Figure 4 shows that male characters were overrepresented in “stereotypically male active” behavior by 49.1 percentage points. The most common “stereotypically male active” behaviors were playing/running in mud or dirt, playing with trucks, building/hammering, and playing male sports such as baseball or football. These findings,

similar to that of female characters, confirm West and Zimmerman's (1972) theory regarding "doing" gender and suggest to children these are the ways in which boys should act and play. Figure 5 shows different results than those of Hamilton et al. (2006); male characters were overrepresented in bravery/leadership behavior by 23.9 percentage points. This suggests that although male characters are still being represented as heroes or people who come to "save the day," more male characters did not show this behavior (61%) than did (38%). Therefore I argue progress has been made in reducing this stereotypical representation for male characters. Figure 6 offers the lowest proportion of total characters who display a behavior. Only 23 percent of male characters and 15 percent of female characters were seen with assertive/aggressive behaviors. Additionally, out of all six figures, Figure 6 is the only one that does not show a statistically significant difference. For both males and females, this behavior was seen mostly through the throwing of temper tantrums (screaming, yelling, throwing objects). The findings from these six figures are important as they tell us what sorts of behaviors are ascribed to each gender. Though some behaviors such as dependent/submissive and assertive/aggressive were unexpected, all others fell in line with my hypothesis that male and female characters would still be portrayed in stereotypical, highly gendered ways.

### *Hypothesis 3*

Hypothesis 3 addresses the complexity that male and female characters are given. I hypothesized that male characters would be given more complexity when compared to female characters. I found that male characters (59.3%) were slightly more likely to have 1-3 "female" traits than were female characters (52.5%) to have 1-3 "male" traits. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) help to contextualize this finding. They argue that there is great complexity to

masculinity- there is layering and potential internal contradiction within all practices that construct masculinities. Such practices cannot be read simply as expressing a unitary masculinity, but rather could be the result of calculations about the costs and benefits of various gender strategies. Though it is difficult to assess the internal calculation of characters in books, I argue that in some narratives, male characters were provided specific gender strategies in order to best portray a certain storyline or theme. For example, as I mentioned above, many male characters were given dependent/submissive behaviors as a way to portray a narrative of learning a moral lesson, learning to be brave, or learning to rely on others for help. In the book *Bear Feels Scared*, Bear gets lost, continues to feel scared throughout his time in the woods yet awaits help from his friends who eventually rescue him. Though Bear is massive in size and typically we wouldn't read bears as being timid or scared, Bear maintains a dependent/submissive nature which aids the construction of themes in the book such as helping friends and being brave. On the other hand, some male characters were provided gender strategies that more aligned with being "stereotypically male". For example, in the books *Detective Blue* and *The Princess and the Warrior*, central male characters were seen with bravery/leadership behaviors that involved "saving the day", whether it was saving the missing Miss Muffet or a princess from a mysterious slumber. Male characters as a whole were seen in a variety of behaviors, suggesting, like Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argued, that masculinity is not uniform but rather highly complex. This discussion is not to dismiss complexity in female characters; there were portrayals of female characters that displayed the same level of complexity as male characters, although it was not as frequent. One strong example of this was in *Earth Day All Day*, in which a young girl named Trina was very much involved with protecting the environment, not just through feminine actions such as planting flowers. Trina was seen getting dirty outdoors, digging with the boys,

and engaging in activities to raise awareness about Earth Day. Though she had some feminine qualities, she was seen in more masculine ways as well. These findings are suggestive of change still needing to occur; while male characters have been afforded greater complexity and are no longer being portrayed only in stereotypically masculine ways, female characters need greater complexity as well.

### **Conclusion**

Findings from analysis of this data highlight several conclusions. First, representation of male and female characters as a whole has changed little since prior research was conducted in previous eras. On the other hand, in all books representation in number of pages shown on and speaking lines given has made progress towards equality as male and female characters had very similar means for both. Secondly, most behaviors ascribed to male and female characters remain consistent by gender, meaning that male characters were given more of the “male” traits (“stereotypically” male active, bravery/leadership, assertive/aggressive) while female characters were given more of the “female” traits (“stereotypically” female active, nurturing). Change, however, has occurred in the trait “dependent/submissive”. Lastly, male characters were provided greater complexity in behaviors, meaning that it was more likely they would be seen with some female traits compared to female characters, who were seen with some complexity, but still less than that of their male counterparts.

Overall, my findings contribute to understanding of what the representation of gender looks like in twenty first century children’s picture books. More equal representation has been achieved, but not to the degree that I believe to be possible. While I understand that popular narratives such as men rescuing women from potential harm or women being caring mothers will

remain in media such as books and television, I believe that authors and illustrators have an ability and responsibility to better represent female and male characters in non-stereotypical gendered ways. As I have mentioned, books are powerful resources that transmit beliefs about class, race, education, family and, importantly to this study, gender. As we in the United States continue to press against boundaries set for expectations of gender it is of immense importance that books represent that and encourage children to understand gender in a way that is not limiting or stereotypical. Books have the power to better equip our children with knowledge about what gender is and what it means.

### **Limitations/Further Recommendations**

The largest limitation of this study was its sample size. While previous studies looked at much larger samples of books, I was limited in what I could do during only one school year and being one person. I feel as though I would have been able to better assess whether or not some of the statistically insignificant results were actually evidence of an underlying population trend if I had a larger sample of books as well as characters. I also had a limited geographic region to choose my sample from, as I did not have the resources to go outside the city of San Antonio, Texas. However, I do believe that San Antonio's libraries are systematically similar to other cities' libraries and are likely to be representative of a larger region beyond just San Antonio. Additionally, a limitation of this study was not looking at roles of characters specifically. I would have liked to look at the roles/careers of characters in order to better respond to prior research. Much of the earlier research conducted looked at the kinds of careers characters had and found that most often, active careers were given to male characters while female characters were confined to only being maids or mothers. This was not something I included that in my coding

guide but could be used for research moving forward. I also believe a limitation of this study to be the lack of emphasis on complexity of characters. My hypothesis on complexity came from theories by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and I believe that future research could focus solely on complexity in order to add to their discussion. This study could be improved upon in the future by having a greater sample size and perhaps choosing libraries from different regions across the United States. I also believe that it would be useful and meaningful for discussion to cross this research on gender with race. While doing so would make the sample different, as books about animals could not included, I believe that strong conclusions could be made about the way in which gender and race interact with one another.

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## Appendix (Coding Guide)

### **Descriptives:**

Title- title of book

Character (centrality of characters)- Follow question steps below:

- Does the character speak multiple times throughout the story?
  - If yes, the character is considered central and should be included.
  - If no, see next question.
- Is the character central to the plot?
  - If yes, the character is considered central and should be included.
  - If no, see next question.
- Does the character appear a consistent amount throughout story or make significant contributions to the story?
  - If yes, the character is considered central and should be included.
  - If a character does not meet any of the above questions they should not be included as they are not central.

Gender- gender of character, if the gender is unidentifiable then write “n” for neutral.

Total pages- total number of pages in book.

Pages shown- number of pages that a character is shown on.

Speaking lines- number of lines that a character speaks.

**Behaviors: (if a character fulfills the behavior put a “1” for yes, if they do not put a “0” for no)**

Active SM (Stereotypically male)- character appears to be engaging in active behavior that would be considered stereotypically male. Examples are:

- Running, jumping, playing in mud/dirt, interacting with stereotypical male toys such as trucks, trains, superheroes, etc.
- Character could be building, working, hammering/pulling, driving big trucks/construction machinery
- Character appears to be involved with male connoted sports or activities
- Character performs parenting skills that are “stereotypically” father-like. Provides life lessons/guidance, disciplines, plays with kids in active ways

Active SF (Stereotypically female)- character appears to be engaging in active behavior that would be considered stereotypically female. Examples are:

- Dancing, knitting/crafting, skipping/hopping, interacting with stereotypical female toys such as dolls, stuffed animals, dress up clothes, etc.
- Character could be helping with tasks in the home (cooking, cleaning, etc)
- Appears to be involved with female connoted sports or activities

- Character performs parenting skills that “stereotypically” mother-like. Helps kids with going to bed, feeding them meals, helping them with homework or comforting them in any way.

Aggressive/Assertive- character appears to be engaging in behavior that could be perceived as aggressive, angry or assertive. Examples are:

- stomping, pushing/shoving, yelling, screaming, kicking, scolding, fighting in relation to another character
- character may smash/throw objects
- Illustrations of anger/red face may help in identifying this behavior.

Nurture- character appears to give physical or emotional aid, support or comfort to another. Examples are:

- Showing parental qualities such as comforting, cuddling, coddling
- Character could be playing with dolls, playing “house”, playing with a sibling in a caring manner
- Doing things out of love for another character

Leadership/Bravery- character engages in behavior that exhibits leadership skills or bravery in difficult situations. Examples are:

- Rescuing, “saving” or helping another character from any situation
- Situation could (although not required) involve physical danger or emotional distress
- Character could be leading one/many character(s) in activities throughout the story

Dependent/Submissive- character appears to seek or rely on others for help, protection or reassurance.

- Character appears to be nervous, timid, following rather leading
- Character could yield to the direction of others, defer to others

**Setting: (if a character is in the setting put a “1” for yes, if they do not put a “0” for no)**

In- inside

Out- outside

\*If setting looks to be neutral or unidentifiable do not count it.

**Table 1**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>All Characters</b>
Number of Characters	113	80	201
Percent of Characters	56.22%	39.8%	100%
Mean Pages Shown	15.41	14.36	14.98
Avg. Percent Pages Shown	46.5%	42.3%	45.6%
Median Pages Shown	14.00	13.00	14.00
SD Pages Shown	7.694	8.408	7.85
Mean Speaking Lines	10.14	9.88	9.94
Avg. Percent Speaking Lines	48.2%	40.8%	44.7%
Median Speaking Lines	9.00	8.50	9.00
SD Speaking Lines	8.34	8.07	8.13

Gender could not be determined for 8 characters, 3.88%

Difference in Proportions (Characters):  $p = .0251^*$

Difference in Means (Pages Shown):  $p = .370$

Difference in Means (Speaking Lines):  $p = .832$

Difference in Means (Avg. Percent Pages Shown):  $p = .0004^{**}$

Difference in Means (Avg. Percent Speaking Lines):  $p = .1029$

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$



**Table 2**

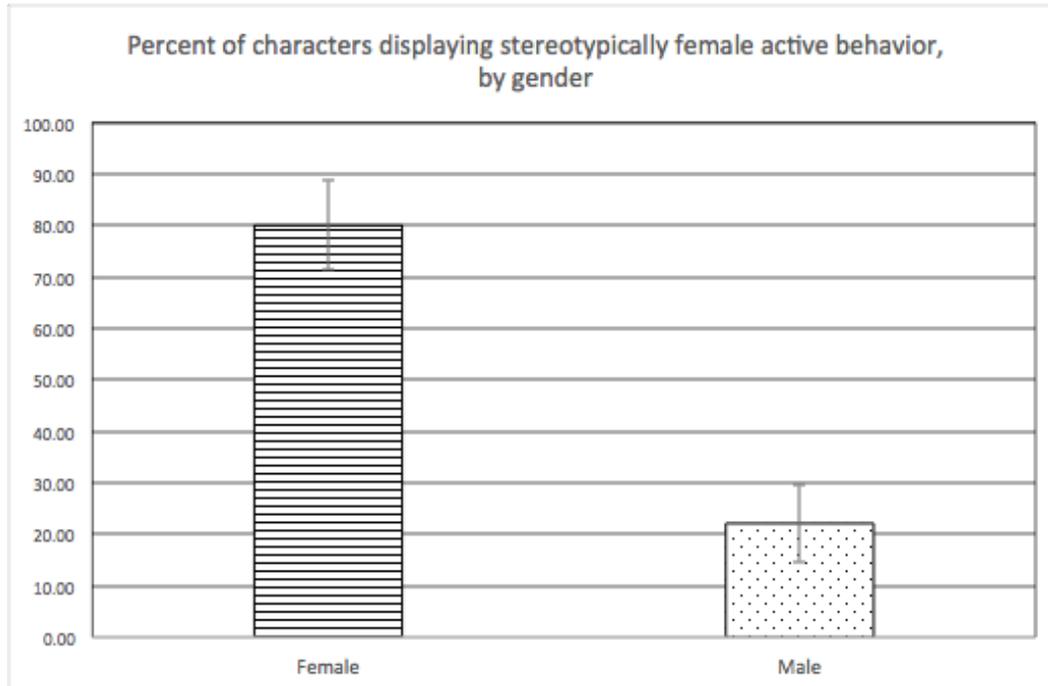
	<b>Number of male attributes</b>	<b>Number of female attributes</b>
<b>Female characters (n = 80)</b>	No opposite traits.... 52.5%	No traits.... 10%
	One opposite trait.... 37.5%	One trait.... 41.3%
	Two opposite traits.... 8.8%	Two traits.... 47.5%
	Three opposite traits.... 1.3%	Three traits.... 1.3%
<b>Male characters (n= 113)</b>	No traits.... 11.5%	No opposite traits.... 40.7%
	One trait.... 42.5%	One opposite trait.... 45.1%
	Two traits.... 39.8%	Two opposite traits.... 14.2%
	Three traits.... 6.2%	Three opposite traits.... 0%
<b>N = 193</b>		

Difference in proportions for “No opposite traits” in female and male characters:  $Z= 1.621$ ,  $p = .105$

Difference in proportions for “Any opposite traits” in female and male characters:  $Z= -1.06$ ,  $p < .107$



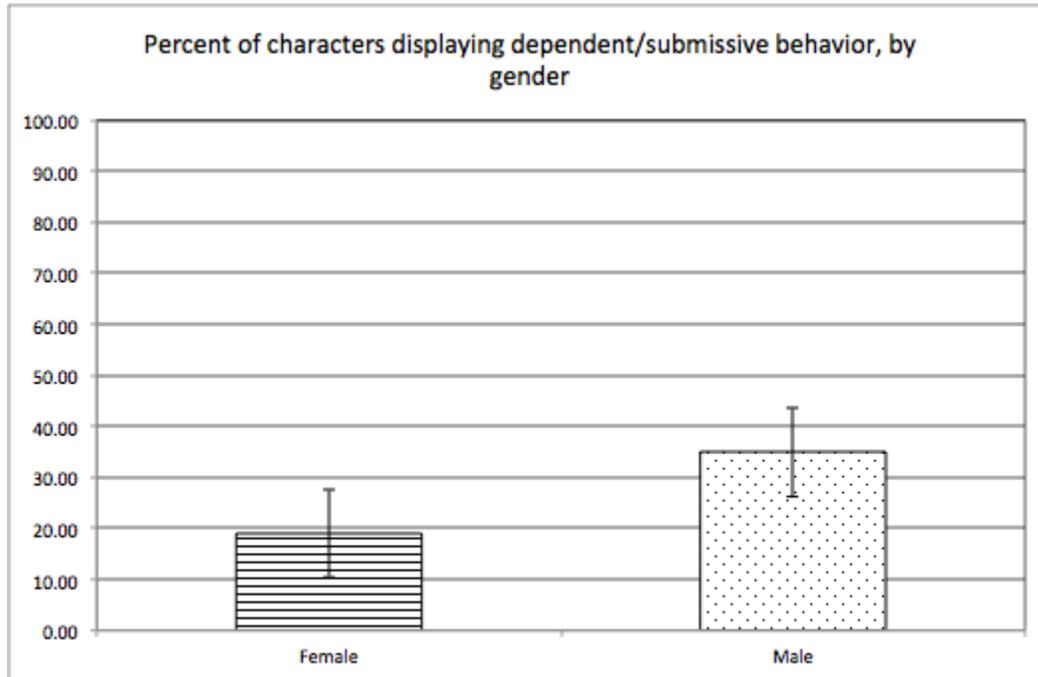
**Figure 1**



**N = 193 (80 female and 113 male), Bars represent the 95% confidence intervals for each estimate**

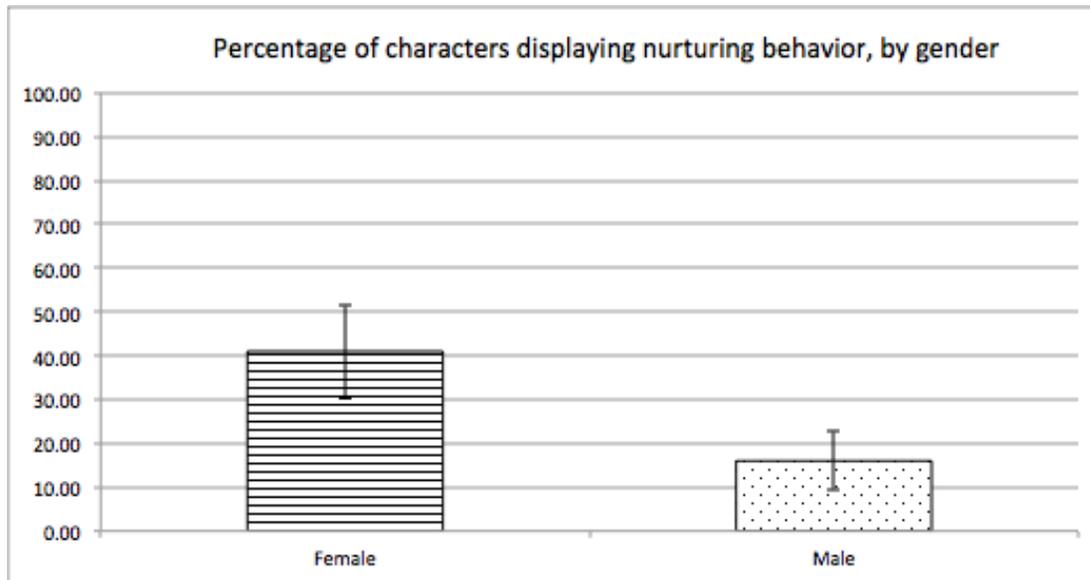


**Figure 2**



**N = 193 (80 female and 113 male), Bars represent the 95% confidence intervals for each estimate**

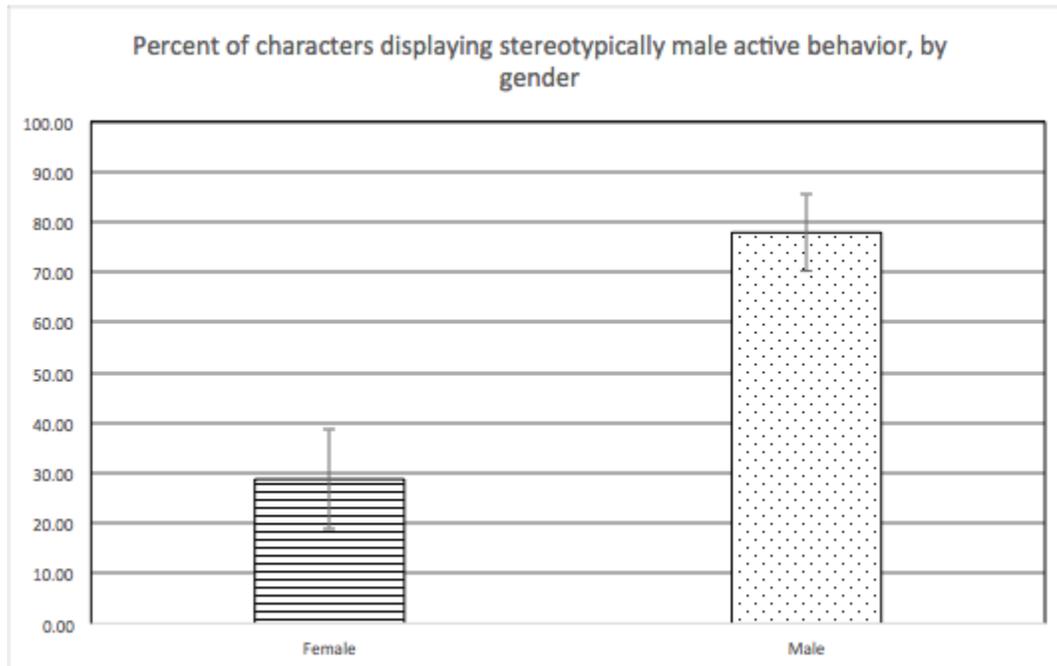
**Figure 3**



**N = 193 (80 female and 113 male), Bars represent the 95% confidence intervals for each estimate**



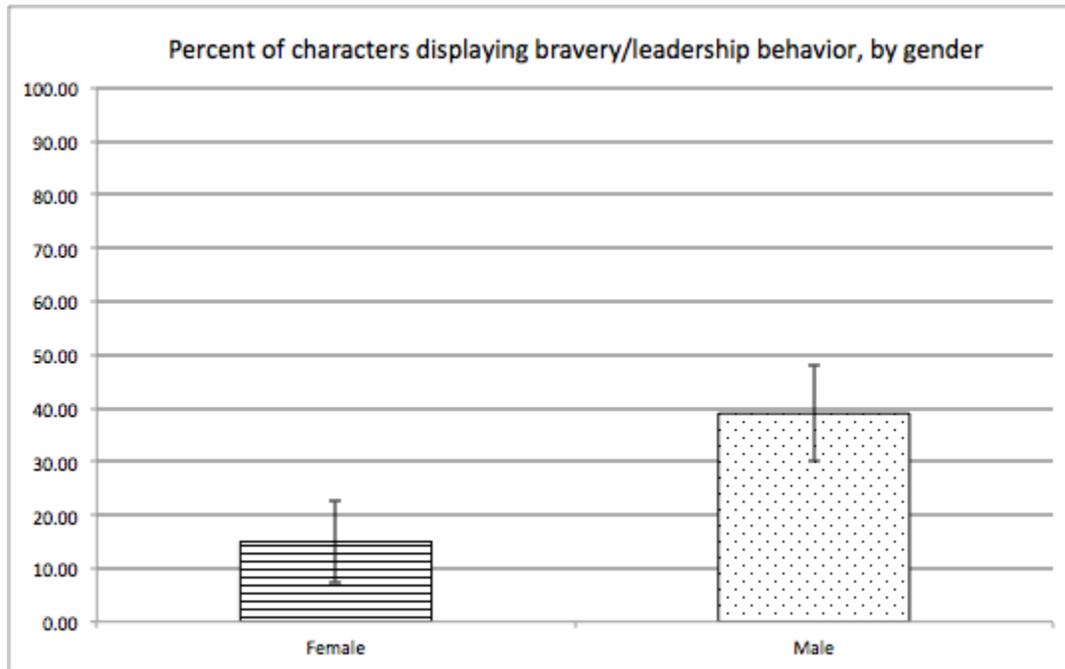
**Figure 4**



**N = 193 (80 female and 113 male), Bars represent the 95% confidence intervals for each estimate**



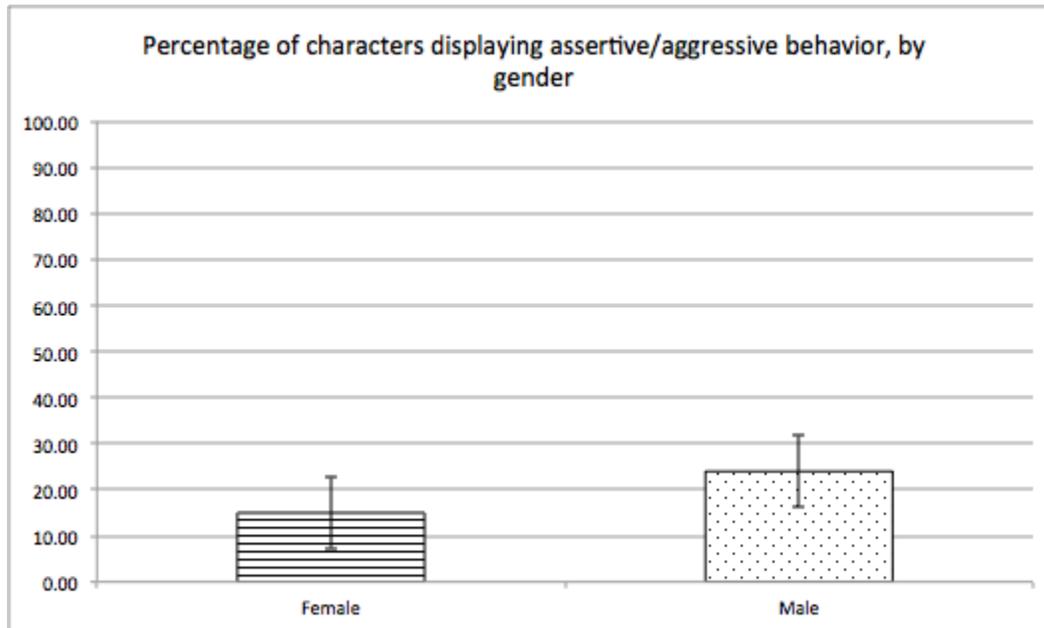
**Figure 5**



**N = 193 (80 female and 113 male), Bars represent the 95% confidence intervals for each estimate**



**Figure 6**



**N = 193 (80 female and 113 male), Bars represent the 95% confidence intervals for each estimate**