

DATA COLLECTION ASSIGNMENT #1: BECOMING GENDERED The purpose of this assignment was to choose two or three children's stories and analyze the portraits of girls/women and boys/men in these stories to see if they convey stereotypical images. Chapter 3 of the Matlin textbook presents viable evidence through the research studies of the past twenty or so years, investigating how girls/women and boys/men are portrayed in these stories and what activities the characters are engaged in. The research seems to indicate that the main character of the story is usually male who is portrayed in a variety of situations and occupations, usually accomplishing a goal or helping others. The 1996 Ochman study measured self-esteem in young boys and girls to see the changed produced by having either a male or a female role model. The results of the study were that boys had an increase in self-esteem when the story they heard was about an achieving boy, whereas girls' self-esteem increased if the story was about an achieving girl. Moreover, it has been established that in the children's stories, there are more achieving boys than girls, which leads to higher self-esteem in boys and lower self-esteem in girls. The purpose of my analysis is to see whether or not these sweeping conclusions still hold true.

To complete this assignment, I went to the Minneapolis Public Library. I then asked the reference librarian in the children's section to help me choose seven to nine children's books representative of the ones the children are generally exposed to, i.e. the ones that they read or check out most often. With her help, I was able to obtain two fairy tale stories, one rhyme story, three recently published children's books, and several storybooks. The books I chose were the ones for children ages four to eight. From this selection, I chose three books to be examined in depth. The first story I chose was "The Persian Cinderella," which is a fairy tale written by Shirley Climo. I chose this book because it represents the fairy tales read to young children by the parents when the children cannot yet read and that are later read by the children themselves. The second one is a recently published book by Sandra Belton entitled "Beauty, Her Basket," which I chose as a representative sample for the currently released books that the children are exposed to. Last, but not least my third choice is Jane O'Connor's children storybook entitled "Dragon Breath," which I chose because it represents the storybooks being read by the majority of the young children.

I read these books several times. The first time I read them to familiarize myself with the story. The second time I looked for and wrote down some characteristics attributed by the book and its author to either gender. The third time I looked at the overall messages that the books seem to be sending. I looked for clues to the portrayal of girls/women and boys/men and the overall messages of the books that will be encountered by the children reading them. By stereotypical portrayals, I took our class discussions about stereotypes in United States and advertising messages as the basis for stereotyped images. In addition, I also tried to rewrite two of the stories and switch the gender of the main character. The stories I did that to were the Persian fairy tale and the adventure story about a dragon.

After carefully examining the evidence in the content, as well as the pictures of the book, I found some interesting portrayals of girls/women and boys/men. Some of the portrayals are quite stereotypical, while other are not as blatantly biased. Out of the

three books being discussed, one of the books had a main character of a girl; one of a boy, and the third had both boys and girls. However, the boys were more likely to be actively engaged in activities, while the girls were passively subjected to the events. Overall, the girls/women are portrayed as submissive, dependent, talkative, sociable, amiable, lonely, soft spoken/demure, and at times contriving and mean. On the other hand, boys/men were portrayed as independent, strong, reckless, brave, stern, competitive, smart/intelligent, and adventurous. The girls/women were more likely to be praised for beauty rather than other qualities, be restricted in their travels, like to dress up, do what they are told/need help solving their problems, hold back their true thoughts and feelings, garden, cook, care for the family and rear children. The boys/males were more likely to travel, encounter an adventure/solve problem independently, brag about their qualities, and do what they want. However, two of the stories I have chosen are not as stereotypical as they portray different cultures. One of them is the fairy tale of "The Persian Cinderella," which takes place in Persia and thus presents Persian lifestyle. The second story is "Beauty, Her Basket," which is about an African American family and allows young children a glimpse into that fascinating culture. However, the descriptions of the culture seem a bit stereotypical. For example, in "The Persian Cinderella," the female characters had to hide their faces in public and were not able to talk to the males face to face. In the "Beauty, Her Basket," basket weaving, fishing, and tending the crops is portrayed as stereotypically African American activities. However, in this story males and females seem to be equal, with both genders weaving baskets or fishing. Furthermore, I tried switching the main characters

in the Persian fairy tale by substituting a male instead of a female for the main character, which led to a most unusual and bizarre story line. When I tried to that with dragon story, I substituted a girl instead of a boy, which led to the plot that was slightly more believable than the fairy tale, but just as odd. After switching the gender of the characters, the fairy tale was not plausible at all (perhaps due to its setting), whereas the dragon story was still plausible, if barely. I

also analyzed the illustrations accompanying the text in the stories. It seems that the boys/men are portrayed in bold bright colors and in higher status body positions, whereas the girls/women are portrayed in softer pastel colors and in lower status body positions. The most noticeable example of these different gender illustrations is provided by the fairy tale "The Persian Cinderella," where the girls are portrayed reclining, sitting down, or kneeling with their arms close to their bodies or crossed in the front, and the artist clearly makes distinctions between the good characters and the bad characters with this portrayals of the former with admirable qualities (i.e. good looks, dress, facial and body symmetry), whereas the latter is portrayed as having the dreadful quality (i.e. mediocre to ugly looks, slightly obese body type, and lack of good dress sense). On the other hand, the only males in the story are the good character (i.e. the prince and Cinderella's father). The men are portrayed leaning, standing or sitting down with straight backs and their arms are usually spread wide/open.

The men are also more likely to be portrayed in active poses, while the women are more likely to be portrayed in passive poses, as evidenced by the illustrations in all three books that I have chosen.

By carefully reading and analyzing children's books, I have concluded that they convey stereotypical portrayals of girls/women and boys/men in a variety of genres. Children encounter these stereotyped images at a very young age, when the parents or caretakers start reading to the kids. Not only the content of the tales, but the pictures accompanying them teach young children about male and female genders by perpetuating the stereotypical images and behaviors expected of each gender. Unexpectedly, I found quite a few children's' books at the library addressing the different ethnic backgrounds, which certainly surprised me as I do not remember being exposed to a different culture, when I was that young. I specifically chose the two stories addressing the multicultural concerns (the one with the Persian characters and the one with African American characters), because they allow children to see a different culture and get a broader exposure to the world they will be living in. From rewriting the stories, I found that switching genders drastically changes and most often confuses the plot, making the story less plausible. The themes presented by children's books perpetuate the beliefs that boys are adventurous and should be brave and strong, whereas for females, the goal is to be beautiful and obedient and seek a romantic love relationship. The conclusion I have come to support the research on children's book presented in Chapter 3 of the Matlin textbook, because the children are influenced by reading books that show males and females in stereotypical activities and convey stereotyped images of girls/women and boys/men

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