

Televised Gender Roles in Children's Media: Covert Messages

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Encountering stereotypes promulgated by media representations is a daily occurrence. Information perpetuated in the media continually influences how people view the world. Female gender roles portrayed in television, for example, have altered from the 1950s stay-at-home mother portrayed by Barbara Billingsley in *Leave It To Beaver*, to postmodern portrayals of independent actress/mothers such as Jane Seymour. The messages that such diverse personifications suggest of motherhood are equally disparate. While television once perpetuated images of mothers as in the home caregivers, this domestic characterization has evolved into moms who now venture actively into the world.

Such influence is so prevalent that we tend to overlook its existence and impact. We recognize that such representations are unrealistic and one-dimensional, and we downplay their importance. When we consider stereotypical representations in children's media, such as those portrayed in the cartoons that toddlers watch or the comic strips that youngsters read, their significance is often thought to be innocuous.¹ In this paper, I will explore why investigation and recognition of stereotypes are important, describe female gender roles prevalent in

children's television, and discuss ways in which television viewing may be used for educational purposes.

Reality or Fantasy?

The seriousness of gender role stereotypes depends upon two factors: Whether children can distinguish between reality and fantasy in television, and whether the content of what they view affects their perception of gender. Ibrahim Hefzallah (1987), author of *Critical Viewing of Television: A Book For Parents and Teachers*, concluded that children do "confuse fantasy with real life situations [and, furthermore, that] adults who watch more television are likely to overestimate their chances of encountering violence and to overestimate the percentage of men employed in law enforcement and crime detection" (p. 68).

Given the real-life drama of many contemporary shows that have "moved sharply away from the obvious contrived situations common" to television in the 1980s, and the highly edited versions of shows presented in the 1990s, it is no wonder that children have problems perceiving reality (Hefzallah, 1987, pp. 60-61). The situation, according to Milton Ploghoft and James Anderson (1982), is further compounded for those children who "have no experience" to compare with "television information" (p. 61). The authors argue that it is imperative that children whose life experiences are limited are afforded media literacy skills as part of their educational curricula (Ploghoft & Anderson, 1982).

James Kaplan (1995) cites a study endorsed by the *American Academy of Pediatrics* in Chicago which states that children under the age of eight "cannot uniformly discriminate between real life and fantasy / entertainment" (p. 21). The research concludes that children learn how to resolve issues, such as the use of violence, through the actions of televised characters, especially if the personification is a "hero." Moreover, viewers regard messages that media sources promulgate as "representations of the world" (Hobbs, 1994, p. 143). Hobbs further suggests that "viewers and readers depend on them [media messages] for their understanding of culture." This is even more pronounced for a child whose "real-world experience" is limited (p. 134). Much research

¹This observation results from conversations with university colleagues, friends, and students participating in visual media studies curricula.

has concluded that people have difficulty, most notably preschool-age children, discerning between the reality presented on television and the reality of their daily lived experience. It also appears that the content of programming that viewers watch affects their construction of reality.

The second factor, whether television affects the perception of gender in young children, is an important issue. According to sociologist Patricia Lengermann (1985), socialization, or the process by which individuals internalize group attitudes such as the perception of gender roles, begins at birth. Lengermann's research suggests that social learning occurs informally in microsocial settings such as families and friendships, and formally in macrosocial settings such as schools and large organizations. Included within the macrosocial realm are mass media effects of which television is certainly a central component.

Indeed, most children in the United States begin to form their conception of the world with their first exposure to media which for many children occurs at birth. Not surprisingly, Milton Chen (1997), Director of the Stanford *K. Q. E. D. Center for Education and Lifelong Learning*, notes that the average American child watches about three and a half hours of television each day. In the average home with children, the television is on nearly eight and a half hours a day. Additionally, Chen observes that "watching television is the most common activity for kids between the end of the school day and dinner" (p. 82).

Further studies have shown positive relationships between increased viewing of television and more stereotyped beliefs about the sexes (McGhee & Frueh, 1980; Zuckerman, Singer, & Singer, 1980; & Morgan, 1982). In effect, since mass media affects socialization, children are not immune to the pervasive influence that television plays on their perception of gender. Moreover, since the general population has difficulty distinguishing between what is real from what is fabricated, it is especially crucial to monitor and critique children's programming. In the next section I present a critical examination of the portrayal of one female role model in children's programming.

Baby Bop

Few people would recognize Baby Bop, the child-like sidekick of Barney the Dinosaur, since the pudgy violet Tyrannosaurus Rex is

clearly the star of the show and source of a billion dollar corporation.² Of the three principal characters in this dinosaur troupe, two are male and one is female. The central figure is Barney—mature, kind, and lovable—while the supporting cast is composed of Baby Bop and her brother B. J. The only female role portrayed is an infant, that is a character that is childish and immature, and more often than not, demandingly infantile. The male role portrayed by Barney is lauded for his wisdom. Baby Bop is reprimanded for refusing to share her toys. When Barney wields the glittering Barney Bag of magic and surprises, Baby Bop toddles off for her nap carrying a faded yellow blanket. In one episode Baby Bop praises her brother B. J. for being the knight in shining armor who comes to her rescue! Clearly, the conventionalized male role, as rational protector, and female role, as a helpless victim, are reinforced in Barney during the 1990s.

To further explore the roles that females assume in children's television, I have examined a sampling of cable and public broadcasting programs that aired during the morning hours, 8:00 a.m. until 10:00 a.m., over a six-month period from September, 1995 to April, 1996. Based on the analyses, I will discuss three areas: (a) seven roles that are characteristic of female representation, (b) the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of female gender roles, and (c) a critical viewing guide for the evaluation of gender roles represented on children's television.

Female Roles in Children's Television

If "all television is educational," as Milton Chen observed, the question is: What are children learning? (1997, p. 82). Indeed, watching children's television with my four-year old has been as much of a learning experience for myself as it has for my son. For example, I have observed that most female roles are repetitious and can be characterized by seven stereotypic representations: the infant, the shrew, the eccentric, the maternal, the vamp, the frump, and the twin. I will discuss each, and provide examples of the character's behavior and dress, as well as the scenerios in which the characters appear.

²According to *Forbes* magazine, the Barney Corporation makes one billion in gross revenues annually as reported in *The Atlanta Journal* (Casey, 1995, p. A-11).

The Infant

Lamb Chop, like Baby Bop, is another female infant role. With her high pitched whine and little girl mannerisms, she epitomizes the female whose emotional growth is stunted. One wonders if she is incapable of growing up or if she simply refuses to mature. Although Lamb Chop is the star of the show, she often defers to the escapades of her more rambunctious brothers, Hush Puppy and Charliehorse. While she also displays empathy and kindness, which also represent stereotypic views of females, Lamb Chop is clearly a child who needs constant attention and reassurance.

The Shrew

Harkening back to the aggressive, overbearing antics exhibited by Miss Piggy of *The Muppets Show* and Lucy of *Charlie Brown* fame, one example of a contemporary cartoon shrew is named, ironically, Angelica, or little angel. A *Nichelodean* program, *Rugrats*, features the spoiled Angelica who constantly torments and teases her toddler cousins. She forces the four younger babies to eat dust balls from under the couch, orders them to chauffeur her around in her peddle car while feeding her the choicest chocolates, and humiliates anyone within screaming distance. The show infers that Angelica's outrageous behavior, insatiable demands, and overwhelming insecurity are the result of her executive mother who spends most of her time arguing on a cellular phone, and an ever indulgent father.

The Eccentric

When females receive star billing, they rarely assume sage-like centrality as Barney of *Barney and Friends*, Tommy of *Rugrats*, or Kermit the Frog of *The Muppets* do. For example, Miss Frizzle, the central character in *The Magic School Bus*, does not exhibit the wisdom of a Yoda. Miss Frizzle is a red-haired teaching whiz whose outrageous ideas never fail to entice her reluctant pupils to learn the rudiments of scientific curricula. At the same time, some of the children regard this charismatic instructor as abnormal, or "loopy." At the beginning of one episode, Arnold, one of her students, hopes that the upcoming field trip will be normal. The immediate response from the bus load of kids is feigned surprise. "With the Frizz," they scream in mock amazement.

Arnold groans while the next wild and crazy escapade lurches into high gear.

As with Miss Frizzle, when females such as Aggie of *Dudley the Dragon* are given star billing, they are often presented as bizarre and quirky. “High flying Aggie,” as Dudley nicknames her, calls herself a sailor of the sea and sky. She catapults into Dudley’s existence from an air balloon that descended unexpectedly at the opening of one sequence. Wearing a worn leather helmet and brown bomber jacket, Aggie proceeds to allow Dudley to skyrocket into the sky without knowledge of ballooning. Throughout the episode, we discover that she has also engaged in such diverse occupations as dentistry, acting, and directing. The plot closes with Aggie, clad in shower cap, forming the letters DUDLEY in a cheerleading attempt to entertain a misfortunate sky-bound Dudley. Even with all her diverse accomplishments, Aggie conveys eccentricity rather than Renaissance genius.

The Maternal

Another popular role that female characters assume is that of a mother. Some of the most widely cherished tales are those of Winnie the Pooh and his menagerie of friends. However, all of the lovable characters who star in a new Disney cartoon series, based on the time-honored story, are male—Piglet, Eeyore, Christopher Robin, Tigger, Rabbit, Roo, and Gopher. The only female is Roo’s mother. While she is usually referred to as Mama, occasionally, we hear her name, Kanga, whose name seems incomplete without her son, Roo. Although the role is positive in the sense that Kanga adores Roo and takes meticulous care of the youngster, it is the only female role in the program. One episode deals with the four—Pooh, Eeyore, Tigger, and Piglet—and their inability to get along with girls. Most of the episode is spent searching for a girl (inferring few, if any, exist in the Hundred-Acre Woods) with whom they can practice their underdeveloped social skills.

Maternal roles in children’s television are so numerous that most shows regularly portray at least one of the characters as a mother. For example, *Rugrats* features three mothers, *Muppet Babies* employs a nanny whose role is maternal, *Gumby*, of *Gumby*, is regularly attended by his mother, and *Busy Town* features an array of mothers. While the maternal role is not inherently negative, characterizing and emphasizing

females as mothers or caregivers limits the range of possible role models, thereby stereotyping females as solely service-oriented rather than active participants in everyday life. The Hundred-Acre Woods may be full of adventure, but no other female than the mother exists within its confines.

The Frump

Richard Scarry's *Busy Town* features two male personifications, Huckle Cat and Lowly Worm. Other characters who often figure in the plots are Sergeant Murphey, Mister Fixit, Mister Frumble, and Hilda Hippo. In this series, four of the five main characters are male with the fifth being an oversized female hippo, who has trouble keeping up with the physical acumen of her male cohorts. One story focused on Hilda's attempts to match-make two of her favorite friends. While the two do, in the end, become sweethearts, Hilda is dismayed because the outcome is not as romantic as she had anticipated. Her disappointment perpetuates the stereotype of women as hopeless romantics.

In another episode, Hilda is brought along on the cat family's vacation to babysit their two children at the beach. After several mishaps that demonstrate the glaring incompetence of Hilda, she becomes extremely distressed. In the end, she manages to save Huckle and Lowly who are swept out to sea which again places Hilda in the good graces of the family. All is well until in the last scene Huckle chuckles to Lowly that Hilda didn't *really* save them. In reality, Huckle the cat informs Lowly the worm that he had only let Hilda think that she was the heroine of the day to assuage her guilt over ruining the vacation with her constant bungling. The cat's family may be deceived, but the viewing children know that Hilda is a frump.

The Vamp

With scalloped sea shells that barely cover her adolescent bosom and a V-shaped mermaid fin that cuts well below her navel, Ariel, the little mermaid, is clearly the hottest sea creature to breaststroke into Saturday morning television. In her many escapades with Flounder the fish and Sebastian the crab, Ariel consistently demonstrates that she masterminds most of their schemes. While her intelligence and wisdom are unique to female television characterizations, her scholarly virtues

are overshadowed by the suggestive allure of her sensual costuming. The young girls who view *The Little Mermaid* may soon feel the pressure to conform to an idealized version of beauty. Ariel, a positive model of intelligence and self-assertion, also represents the “perfect” skinned, slender ideal. If a girl chooses to emulate Ariel, will she have to conform to this fabricated ideal of beauty?

The Twin

Two popular shows, *Rugrats* and *Muppet Babies*, feature sets of twins. Although Phil and Lil figure in most plots in *Rugrats*, Lil represents one of only three central roles reserved for females in the show. The other main female characters are Tommy’s mother Didi and Angelica. Similarly, in the *Muppet Babies*, Skeeter and Skooter are another set of male and female twins, with Skeeter, Miss Piggy, and the nanny comprising the three female roles on the show. That the three main female roles in both shows are represented by a twin, a shrew, and a maternal figure is disturbing. Caregiving, harassment, and functioning in group structures are the principal roles represented in these highly regarded children’s telecasts. These roles clearly limit the range of female models. Moreover, some of these representations are negative, and perpetuate negative gender stereotypes.

Misrepresentation and Underrepresentation

The foregoing representation of female stereotypes in children’s television, while seemingly innocuous, is problematic for a number of reasons. First, of the seven stereotypic female roles presented in the media, three (i.e., the infant, shrew, and frump) are inherently negative portrayals. When coupled with negative connotations, stereotypes are indicative of what Alice Walker refers to as “prisons of images” (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 198).

Not only are the characterizations oppressive and less than desirable, they suggest that human nature is a static, one-dimensional entity. Character development is rare in children’s television, and roles are simplistic and easily understood. Nuance, contradiction, and complexity are lost in the repetitious scenerios of daytime programming.

The second area that I find problematic in children's television is the underrepresentation of females as both protagonists and participants. To ascertain the number of female roles, I surveyed 14 shows on three channels (i.e., *PBS*, *Disney*, and *Nickelodean*) from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. Of the observed shows, there were 84 male and 25 female characters represented. (See Table 1.) If one surveys the 1997 television line-up on individual channels such as *Nickelodean* and the *Disney Channel*, the percentages are similar. Of the 21 child-oriented *Nickelodean* broadcasts between 6:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., 16 of the shows feature male lead characters. Disney telecasts 16 shows from 6:00 a. m. to 3:00 p. m. that target pre-school and young children. Only one show, *The Little Mermaid*, features a female lead.

Table 1

**1996 Sampling of Gender Representation
Broadcasted on Three Television Channels
Designed for Children's Viewing**

Time	PBS	DISNEY	NICKELODEAN
8:00 a. m.	BARNY 2 males & 1 female: Barney, Baby Bop	POOHIES female: Winnie, Tigger, Eeyore, Rabbit, Piglet, Christopher Robin, Kanga	MAIN CHAOS General Population Buster, Babs, Elmo
8:30 a. m.	PUZZLE PLACE: 2 males & 4 females: Ben, Leon, Skye, Kiki, Julie, Iodi	CARE BEARS: 10 males & 2 females: Braveheart, Bedtime, Champ, Rainbow, Wish, Stars, Birthday, Adventure, Grumpy, Heart	GUMBY: 6 males & 3 females: Gumby, Puckle, Pook, Goo, Mother, Father, the Blockheads, Minga
9:00 a. m.	SESAME STREET PUPPIES: Big Bird, Oscar, Snuffy, Bert, Elmo, Grover, Herry Monster, Gookie, Monster, Betty Lou, Flame Bird	GUMMY BEARS: 10 males & 2 females: Gunderson, a complex array of characters Crawley, Candy, Sunny (Saenz, 1992, p. 37). Since television of society, all stereotypical roles should cease, especially, in children's programming.	RUGRATS: what children view Chuckle, Grandma Howard, Charles, Lil, Didi, Charlotte, Angelica
9:30 a. m.	SESAME STREET: (continued)	POOH CORNER: 6 males & 1 female: Winnie, Tigger, Piglet, Eeyore, Rabbit, Christopher Robin, Kanga	BUSY TOWN: 5 males & 1 female: Lowly, Mister Fixit, Mister Frumble, Sergeant Murphy, Huckle, Tidda Hippo
Visual Literacy through Critical Viewing			
10:00 a. m.	SHINING TIME STRATO (1990) 8 males & 2 females: Thomas, Edward, Henry, Gordon, Bertie, Sir Topham Hatt, Toby, Annie, Clarabel	DUMBO'S CIRCUS Bessie, O. T. Dumbo, Fairdunum, Sebastian, Zallah (1987) as the distinguishing between reality	MUPPET BABIES: names of common things Rital, Scooter, Skeeter, Fozzie, Nanny, Miss Piggy

and fantasy, the construction of informed judgments and thoughtful evaluation of programs, and the intelligent use of leisure time in which television viewing plays an important role" (p. 15). Hefzallah continues that "critical viewing is an outcome of planned activities in which the medium of television and what it offers and thinking about one's relationship with television are underlined" (p. 15). "It is a skill," Hefzallah concludes, "that can and should be taught" (p. 15). Moreover, the development of such skills can be applied to the critical examination of gender roles.

To address the ways in which critical viewing can be applied to the understanding of gender representations, I developed a critical viewing guide composed of questions and a worksheet that can be used formally in classrooms or informally within family settings. The suggested questions that follow arose from discussions with my son, as we attempted to understand the programs' content. The questions target two groups: pre-schoolers and elementary age children and can be adapted according to the individuality of the child.

Questions for Viewing Children's Television: Pre-school Age

After selecting and viewing a favorite program, discuss which characters are male and female in the show.³ Next, examine what happened in the episode. Discuss how the characters felt about their situation and ask what might happen if a character continues to think or act a certain way. Ask if the child agrees with how this character responds. Ask if the character is happy, sad, angry, afraid, or mad, and why. Finally, ask gender-specific questions about favorite characters and episodes that are viewed, such as: Can a girl dog direct traffic? Can boys take good care of babies? Can girls work computers?

Questions for Viewing Children's Television: Elementary School Age Children

Older children can address more complex issues such as character development, plot analysis, and program format. Observe an array of programs and discuss the number of female and male roles. Do these numbers change from episode to episode, from week to week, or from show to show? Ask students to think about the representation of males

and females and their behavior, occupations, attitudes, and actions. Provide a list of adjectives such as aggressive, romantic, and friendly, and have the children decide which words describe certain characters. Ask the children to summarize how each gender is represented and if they think that this is accurate. Compare what they view concerning gender roles on television with their own family. In addition, compare what they view on television with the content of the movies or videos that they watch and the books that they read.

Finally, consider the plots presented. Who initiates the action? Are there subplots? Who is typically involved in the main action and the subplots? What is the theme of the episode? Is there a balance between story line and characters or does one dominate the other? Exploring character, plot, and story development can provide valuable information on how gender is represented in the daily fare of television, and can teach children to question, analyze, and evaluate what they view in formal and informal situations.

In order to teach television viewing skills as part of an art education curricula, I have developed the following activity guide. After viewing portions of broadcasts that are either teacher or student selected, teachers ask students to complete the activity sheet which can then be used to conduct subsequent discussion. (See Table 2.)

The implications of watching television characterizations that stereotype female gender roles as inherently negative and peripheral compels me, as a parent, to monitor my son's viewing with dialogue that questions the validity of what is portrayed. As an educator, I feel equally responsible to provide opportunities for my students to analyze and evaluate the visual culture that pervades their daily lives through pedagogy that integrates critical viewing exercises into the traditional art education curricula.

³By age three, children know their own gender, and by age four or five, they learn to label the gender of others correctly (See Kohlberg, 1966, p. 104).

The Good News—The Production of *Puzzle Place*

While the roles assigned **Table 2** characters in children's media are predominantly stereotypical and secondary, there are signs that

Gender Roles: Critical Viewing Guide for Television

characters, the plots focus on issues of diversity, the appreciation of difference, and the importance of respect and understanding. Monitoring the contents of shows that children watch and choosing programming that reflects the personal values of individual families is paramount to critical viewing.

1. Choose a character on one of your favorite shows. Check the following adjective(s) that best describe that character.

While viewing television is usually for entertainment purposes, responsible adults who participate in the activity with children under their care can make the experience educational. According to Carmen Luke (1994), critical cultural literacy challenges:

- ___ pleasant ___ kind ___ witty/attitud
- ___ loud ___ friendly ___ cool
- ___ fearful ___ aggressive ___ relaxed
- ___ funny ___ romantic ___ happy
- ___ attractive ___ sad ___ nice

how representations of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation and culture disempower some groups while privileging others. It gives students analytic tools with which to read and remake maps of meaning—maps which delineate how

2. Describe how the character dresses. _____
 people are taught to view themselves and their relationship to others within the dynamics of everyday life in local and larger societal context (p. 31).

3. Describe how the character acts. What does he or she say and do?

Despite the evils commonly ascribed to viewing television, experiences are not intrinsically negative. Rather than isolate children from a pervasive influence in our society and from one to which it is

4. If you chose a female character, is she like girls that you know? _____
 If you chose a male character, is he like boys that you know? _____

critical thinking, and when included in art education curricula has the potential to make pedagogy relevant and engaging. Moreover, if as Paul Duncum (1997) suggests, the future responsibility of art educators

5. Do you think that the selected character is the way boys or girls really are? _____
 will be to "address the proliferation of mass media images and their multiple readings by our multifaceted selves," the contents of this paper represent first steps towards art instruction for "new times" (p. 77).

6. Does this character remind you of anyone else that you have seen on television, in the movies, or in a book that you've read? _____ Why?
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