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GENDER IN PICTUREBOOKS

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The scholarly study of gender in picturebooks did not begin with literary critics. In fact, most formalist studies of picturebooks that teach literary critics how to read the complex interactions between words and images in picturebooks, including those by William Moebius (1986), David Lewis (2001), and Clare Painter, J.R. Martin, and Len Unsworth (2013), among others, give almost no attention to the portrayals of gender. While Perry Nodelman (1988) devotes a few pages to the differential postures of the naked child in light of artistic conventions of the female and male nude (121–124), and Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott (2001) make some interesting claims that I will discuss in what follows, most of the early studies of gender in picturebooks have been undertaken by feminist sociologists working to understand the persistence of sex-role stereotypes. This makes sense, given that gender criticism belongs more in cultural studies than formalist methodologies. However, by invoking the insights of cognitive psychologists that “perception occurs in the brain rather than in the eye” (Nodelman 1988: 8) and reminding us that we have “to learn to see” images in picturebooks (Williams 1961: 18), even theorists interested primarily in form have implicitly suggested the need for an interdisciplinary understanding that focuses on the way brains process texts within a cultural context— that is, a cognitive cultural studies that views mental activity not as rational brains processing information in autonomous, detached isolation, but as minds and bodies responding to cultural artifacts in active, reactive, and interactive ways.

Cognitive literary criticism is multifaceted, attending to all of the processes through which we construct and manipulate mental models while reading, and how style, character, and themes evoke emotional responses, among other things. Many of its areas of inquiry offer productive insights that map readily onto formalist studies of picturebooks, as well as onto newer approaches afforded through multimodal discourse analysis. However, given that my topic is limited to the depiction of gender in picturebooks, I will focus on the concept of schemes and scripts, which offers us a way to understand how texts participate in conveying and challenging prevalent social ideologies, as well as a way to consider why changing the way children understand gender might be so difficult.

To begin, then, we need some definitions. A cognitive schema is an associative cluster of ideas and knowledge about objects or situations that we acquire and develop through repeated experience, and then use to incorporate, organize, and understand new instances that are related in some way to a particular schema. Script is a term that describes a sequence of actions that we expect to happen based on the schema that has been evoked (Schank and Abelson 1977). So, for instance, when Western readers hear the word “once upon a time,” a fairy tale schema is evoked that will probably involve a quasi-mediaeval setting and certain character types, with an ensuing script that
follows a sequence of stages, the introduction of trouble or a problem, heroic action, and a resolution, that involves a marriage and some sort of boon for the heroes and punishment for the villians. While Schank (1999:89) contends that we do not tell stories about scripts, but rather about scenarios where expected scripts are disrupted or violated, I would argue that children's picturebooks are one of the many cultural vehicles that instantiate schemas and scripts in their readers by setting expectations for the way literary texts represent objects, relationships, and patterns in the world.

However, Schank's observation reminds us that schemas and scripts ultimately exist in minds, in texts; that is, they are something we bring to our understanding of stories, and what we find there is conditioned by them in important ways. While Schank and Abelson (1977) proved that invoking the proper schema at the outset of a reading could improve recall and comprehension of stories, cognitive theorists have also determined that schemas can be so strong that they lead to false beliefs about situations, as study participants see what they expect to see, rather than what is really there (Breuer and Tregenza 1981). This becomes especially problematic when we realize that stereotypes are a type of schema. Several studies have shown that people process information that accords with their stereotypes more quickly, and remember it better, than information that disrupts existing schema (Fugenberg and Bodenhausen 2004; Johnson and Macrae 1994; O'Sullivan and Durro 1984). More important for consideration with visual media such as picturebooks is the fact that people base visual images within existing schemas, including stereotypes, more quickly than associated verbal text (Lieberman, Hariri and Bookheimer 2010); this finding may indicate that images are more powerful than words, or at least more automatic, in invoking schemas and setting expectations for scripts.

The transmission of gender scripts and schemas through picturebooks

The concern with the automatic recognition of the fairy tale schema and script in terms of gender is well-known; the cast of characters I invoked earlier will almost always be further specified with a passive young female valued for her physical beauty, an evil and ugly older female, and an active, skilled male. The question for feminist theorists is how children acquire such uneven binary gender schemas and scripts, and whether and how they might be changed. It should come as no surprise, then, that serious consideration of the representation of gender in picturebooks began with the work of feminist sociologists during the heyday of second-wave feminism. Linguist Mary Ritchie Key published a provocatively titled piece in 1971, "The Role of Male and Female in Children's Books: Defining All Doubt," wherein she reported that in children's books through the 1960s, male characters were more often featured in active roles that included cleverness, adventure, and earning money, while females were portrayed as victims, onlookers, or caught in situations where they were unable to achieve their goals without help. John Stephens (1996) notes similar characteristics in bit lists of schema clusters for masculinity and femininity; he adds such qualities as transgressive, independent, and analytical on the side of masculinity, and obedient, self-effacing, and emotional as characteristics invoked through a schema for femininity.

More often cited in the education and social science literature is "the Weitzman study," Sex Role Socialization in Picture Books for Preschool Children (Weitzman, Effler, Heskida, and Ross 1977); in fact, many of the studies since that article appeared include "an update" or "a change" in their subheadings as an implicit nod to its landmark status (see Collins et al. 1984; Williams et al. 1987; Kortenhuis and Demeester 1993). Rather than focus on the picturebook as an astatic form, Weitzman and her colleagues saw it in the ways that many literary critics see it today, as a purveyor of ideology to a particularly impressionable population:

Picture books play an important role in early sex-role socialization because they are a vehicle for the presentation of societal values to the young child. Through books, children learn about the world outside of their immediate environment; they learn about what other boys and girls do, say, and feel; they learn what is right and wrong; and they learn what is expected of children their age. In addition, books provide children role models — images of what they can and should be like when they grow up.

1972: 1126

This might be read as a statement of faith regarding the power of literature in young children's lives to help them sort the enormous amount of social information they receive daily into usable schemas and scripts. While Weitzman et al. acknowledge that the link between literary representations and social norms may not be as direct as they assert, and that in fact literature may represent alternative values, they still believe that picturebooks communicate images that not only reflect existing conditions, but also have the potential to produce effects on individual identities and expectations.

Their study of Caldecott winners from the '40s, '50s, and '60s revealed that images of males were overwhelmingly more prevalent than images of females; in fact, in one five-year sample of winners and honor books, boys were pictured over ten times more frequently than girls. But like Key, they also noted a difference in the activities and attributes of female characters and the aspirations they were encouraged to have. In general, they found that "the girls and women depicted in these books are a dull and stereotyped lot" whose "future occupational world is presented as consisting primarily of glamour and service" (1146). Consider, then, the schemas shared by the researchers themselves that underwrite this conclusion: they view careers in glamour and service as limiting and devalued activities, unworthy of aspiration by anyone, and most especially by girls.

The most inclusive (though narrowly quantitative) study of representations of gender in picturebooks to date surveyed an impressive 5,618 picturebooks published throughout the twentieth century (McCabe, Forchich, Gruberholt, Poscowoldo and Toepe 2011), finding that males were represented twice as frequently as females in titles, and 1.5 times as often as female characters. Gender differences in degree of parity were achieved during social activity periods such as 1900-1929 and 1970-2000, while disparities were greatest during the gender traditionalism of 1930-1969. They also found that the boy/girl ratio of central child characters was more equitable when the characters were human rather than animals.

The sheer number of the books surveyed in this study argues for its validity, but I decided to put it to an informal test to see how we were faring in the twenty-first century which is, arguably, seeing another wave of feminist activism. My wholly unscientific study was conducted at a local bookstore that featured an entire wall of picturebooks faced out on display. In each of the three separate bays, there were approximately 20-28 books. In the first bay, I was encouraged to see the Aim Jazz (Herich and Jennings 2014), a picturebook biography of a transgender child, as well as two books about nontraditional families. But of the remaining twenty-five books in that section, nine had human boys as protagonist, while only three featured girls. Seven showed ambiguously gendered animals, but upon reading, I discovered that only one was female. The other two boys delivered similarly disparate results, with human boys represented twice as often as human girls, and male animal characters outnumbering females by even greater ratios. While John Stephens asserts that "processes whereby the cognitive instruments of schema and script are textually modified have played a central function in positive representations of cultural diversity" (2011: 12), it is arguable that we have a long way to go in this regard.

While close readings of particular books certainly reveal challenges to certain attributes in a schema cluster, in order for gender schemas and scripts to be challenged or disrupted on a societal level, sufficient numbers of stories with girl protagonists are required to normalize a broad range of female experience, and they must be widely read. As we noted earlier, these schemas exist in minds; and are not; they are not only represented in texts that children engage with; but also in books that seek to disrupt existing schemas are likely to be dismissed as irrelevant data points, or played up as sites of humor, in films, for instance, Naughty Night (2015) by Nathan Lane and Devon Elliott. This book challenges the prevalent picturebook animal schema by presenting its main character, a dog, as a girl.
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It violates the girl schema by having the very active Mabel behave in outrageous ways, including clear ing a fancy party by loudly passing gas. It also violates the “bad behavior leads to punishment” script when Mabel receives no rebukes for her behavior, and instead is welcomed into her human parents’ bed after the party. However, it still evokes certain visual stereotypes with regard to gender: as Mabel wears a bathing suit in the pool, spa attire with cucumbers on her eyes while relaxing, and a pink taffy, necklace, and high heels to the party, Stephens suggests that the reason picturebooks can function as something of a bellwether for cultural shifts in attitude is because “such renditions are an expression within story worlds of wider transformations of social masculinities” (1996: 12). If this is true, and I am not convinced that it is, the schemas we hold for gender are not necessarily seeing such wider transformations of social masculinities, for reason I will elaborate in what follows.

The development and persistence of gender schemas

I suggest that greater parity in representations of boys and girls is needed to normalize female experience because that is what the ubiquity of books about boys has done for our understanding of childhood gender; it has made boys, and the schemas that attach to their behavior, the norm. Formal and informal studies have shown that when an animal character is ungendered in a picturebook, most parents and children gender it male in their reading (Arthur and White 1996). Nikolajeva and Scott (2001) suggest that the likely reason that most of the books in their formalist study feature boy protagonists and that “in those that have girl, the protagonist’s gender is in many cases not essential” is because picturebooks usually address the reader at an age when gender identity is not relevant yet. Maurice Sendak’s Max, Babro Lindgren and Eva Eriksson’s Sam and The Wild Baby are not really boys, while John Burningham’s Shirley or Tove Jansson’s Susanne are not really girls—rather, they are merely children, genderless and often ageless.

Such a claim is problematic given what cognitive theorists tell us about the development of gender identity. Since 1966, developmental psychologists have been testing Lawrence Kohlberg’s strong cogni tive claim that children develop a sense of gender identity—that is, the ability to label themselves and others—by around three years of age, and achieve gender constancy by age seven, with an awareness of gender stereotypes quickly following. What newer research indicates, however, is that gender constancy emerges as early as five and a half years of age, and, that, in contradiction with Kohlberg’s claims, children’s awareness of social gender stereotypes is well in hand before they have achieved gender constancy (Coddington and Wiebers 2002). Certainly, then, the specific gender portrayals in children’s picturebooks do matter insofar as they are informing very young children’s gender schemas and social scripts. Moreover, Nikolajeva and Scott note being able to find only one exceptional picturebook where a “very male-oriented story is subverted by its illustrations” (2001: 118). Combined with the research cited earlier that indicates the power of pictures to more readily invoke schema associations, this suggestion that gender schemas are typically preserved and reinforce, at both the verbal and visual levels may account for the earlier acquisition of gender stereotypes (Turner-Bowker 1996; Hamilton et al. 2006).

In fact, very young children are “gender detectives” (Martin and Ruble 2004: 67), actively seeking clues from their culture as to how gender is performed and valued. Cognitive theorist have argued that a child’s early intellectual achievements involve sorting things into categories that depend initially on a single trait and that these traits are emotionally linked to the object’s relation to the self. Anatomical sex differentiation is a category distinction that is thus rendered ‘important’ to children’s self-concept through their interactions with others, who inform them repeatedly of their gender and instruct them in the use of pronouns and socially normative behaviors. What is initially a

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self-affirmed categorial distinction of boy/girl develops into a cognitive schema that accretes models of appearance, emotion, and behavior into a developing understanding of their own and others’ gender identities.

Not all categories develop into cognitive schemas, however. We do not, for instance, sort people into left-handed and right-handed and develop expectations for appearance based on that physical distinction (Fine 2010: 210). Psychologist Sandra Lipsitz Bem (1980), who developed the idea of gender schema theory, argues that social categories develop into cognitive schemas when

(a) the social context makes it the nucleus of a large associative network, that is, if the ideology and/or the practices of the culture construct an association between that category and a wide range of other attributes, behaviors, concepts, and categories; and (b) the social context assigns the category broad functional significance, that is if a broad array of social institutions, norms, and taboos distinguishes between persons, behaviors, and attributes on the basis of this category.

Bem’s point is that while sorting things into categories is an inescapable cognitive process, schema formation depends on the social and cultural context; despite the claim of Nikolajeva and Scott, gender differentiation is nearly always salient in picturebooks. Girls and boys are visually coded by the color of their clothing, and the presence or absence of features such as jewelry or prominent eyelashes, which female animals have and male animals, apparently, do not. They are also coded by their size, with males almost always being larger than females. Charlie is older, taller, and wiser than Leo in Laura Child’s sibling series (Child 2000–ongoing), and Gerald the male Elephant is larger and taller than pink, female Piggie in Mo Willems’s early reader series. The silent Sally is shorter and (thus presumably younger) than her unamed brother in Dr. Seuss’s The Cat in the Hat (1957). What these brief descriptions indicate is that multiple codes are in play that invoke and reinforce our gender schemas; we expect boys to be bigger, for instance, and we expect girls to be quieter. Bem’s hope as a feminist is that this schematic division is contingent and thus open to intervention. If children could be enabled to learn about sex differences without the associated cultural norms and signifiers, such as “division of labor, […] personality attributes […] or even the angularity or roundness of an abstract shape” (603), that accrete to those differences, then perhaps our schemas would be more accommodating of variations within and between genders. And in fact, the books mentioned do in some measure challenge signifiers traditionally associated with gender—Piggie is the braver of the pair and more apt to solve problems, for instance, and Gerald is in fact quite round and emotionally dependent on Piggie. Still, the male character has a proper name, while the female does not.

However, the problem with sex-associated traits is that they are more often presented as natural, inevitable, and ideal traits that have no inherent connection to gender distinction, which is what seems to underlie (and give the lie to) Nikolajeva and Scott’s assertion of gender neutrality. Max’s aggressive behavior and his coronation as King in Where the Wild Things Are (1963) is part of a masculinity schema, as Nodelman (2002: 4) points out, such that when he and his students transformed Max into Maxine, they found that they responded differently to her behavior; the behavior that in Max was naughty and annoying, albeit normal for a boy, was considered brave and worthy of emulation when performed by Maxine. The “jeer pressure” (Fine 2010: 218) that Morris Micklewhite is subjected to when he appears “in drag” in Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress (2014) reminds us that gender schemas are neither neutral nor easy to change, but that within them gender is a socially policed, performative act. As Judith Butler (1993) describes it:

To claim that all gender is like drag, or is drag, is to suggest that “imitation” is at the heart of the institutional project and its gender binarisms, that drag is not a secondary imitation that
presupposes a prior and original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is a constraining and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations.

These idealizations are realized in and through cognitive schemas and scripts. While both argue that anatomy and reproductive capabilities should be the only things that differentiate gender, Butler goes even further to suggest that even these two attributes are the result of a series of socially negotiated performances. Picturebooks like Leslie Newman’s *Heather Has Two Mommies* (1989), with its discussion of artificial insemination, *And Tango Makes Three* (2005) by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, and *I Am Jazz* (2014) by Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings do not violate schema for laughs, and thus deconstruct naturalized connections between gender, reproduction, and anatomy, revealing ways that they could be performed differently: in so doing, these books function to disrupt the reproduction and gender constancy schemas that readers bring to them. Peter Stockwell (2002) suggests that schema disruption occurs when “conceptual deviance offers a potential challenge” (88) to existing knowledge. Schema disruption requires a response; a reader must refresh or completely restructure his or her schema, or enlarge it to accommodate the new information. At their best, this is what stories can do: present conceptual information that forces readers to confront and reconsider their expectations, with the result of modifying schema and scripts that have limiting social and intellectual effects.

In their different ways, both Ben and Butler argue that the host of associations that make the binary gender schema salient and functional are the result of social forms processed through cognitive structures, and in this they differ from both social constructivists and biological essentialists. Social construction theory posits that children as passive recipients of whatever messages their culture feeds them engage, picturebooks and other artifacts of children’s culture matter enormously in the construction of gender identity, and can, over time, change our attitudes about gender.

Biological essentialists, which include a new crop of neuroscientists, argue that “infants have, quite literally, made up their minds [about gender] in the womb, safe from the rigors of the social engineers who impatiently await them” (Moir and Jessel 1989: 20; in this view, gender is always already salient in terms of what children are naturally drawn to, so that picturebook representation only matter insofar as they affirm and reinforce what is considered socially good about each gender’s inherent proclivities, which amount to relationships and empathy for girls and system-building and physical activity for boys (see Fine, 2010, introduction). Picturebooks like *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (2014), *Jacobs’s New Dress* (2014) by Sarah and Ian Hoffman, and *My Pretty Boy* (2010) by Cheryl Kildavis, which feature boys who want to wear dresses, focus on a re-evaluation of the boy schema. The gender-normed secondary characters in these texts visually and verbally espouse the majority view of how boys and girls should dress. The characters of *Morris*, *Jacobs*, and *Dyson*, respectively and the fact that these books even exist, may suggest a shift in social mentalities, as Stephens proposes, but at the very least they chal-

These steps offer a way for social learning to intervene in a cognitive schema. By positioning their characters in elementary school, picturebooks can showcase both rigid views and more expansive ones, thus helping readers right at the zone of proximal development, that is, the point between what they can understand on their own and what they can come to understand with the help of these stories. When Becky tells Morris that boys do not wear dresses, Morris responds with “This boy does” (Baldacchino 2014: n. pag.), indicating not that he has completely undermined the binary gender schema, but that he has undergone what is known as schema accretion with regard to boys’ dress options, “where new facts are added to an existing schema, enlarging its scope and explanatory power” (Stockwell 2002: 79); the hope is that readers will do likewise with their own gender schema.

Gender schema disruption and accretion is nothing new for women, who have been actively seeking to dispel limiting stereotypes throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But while there is a long tradition in children’s literature of girls transgressing gender norms by behaving as tomboys (Abate 2008), there is no similar tradition for boys behaving in ways that have traditionally been coded feminine. In fact, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1991) has coined the term “effemrophobia” (20) to highlight the fact that when boys behave in ways culturally construed as feminine, they are considered pathological, whereas girls engaging in activities generally associated with masculinity are often celebrated. With the exception of such stunts as Munro Leaf’s *The Story of Ferdinand* (1936), which features a young male bull actively resisting the aggression and violence expected of his gender, and Charlotte Zolotow’s *William’s Doll* (1972), which tells the story of a boy who wants a doll to nurture and care for, most picturebooks invoke gender schema not only through modes of appearance, but also through modes of behavior and activity. Even Morris Micklewhite does not challenge the boy schema articulated by Stephens (1996) when it comes to his behavior; his desire to wear a dress is not because he is focused on building relationships through empathy and identification with the girls in his class, nor does he demonstrate care, a desire to please others, or an ability to share. Rather, he behaves like a competitive, independent, ripurous, active person, who also wants to wear a dress. Most of the images show him alone and physically separate from his peers, which may serve to highlight the fact that he is a bullied and lonely victim, if not for the picture where he sits triumphant atop an elephant in a world that he has imagined for himself; his ideal imaginary world, like Marx’s, only includes creatures over which he is sovereign. By contrast, Jazz clearly empha-

References
