ABSTRACT
        A study investigated the impact of popular culture on
young children's conception of gender, as revealed through the
stories they write and tell. The research was conducted at Grosse Ile
High School on the remote Magdalen Islands in the Gulf of Saint
Lawrence, Quebec, Canada, from 1991-1994 with 46 students ages 6-7
years old. The concept of the child as expert informant to promote
understanding of how children learn through stories was the guiding
principle of the study. Results showed that while girls narrated a
social orientation of the world, centered on relationship, boys
narrated a world of action. While girls articulated a domestic world
in which all ends well, boys narrated a public world of good guy/bad
buy encounters wherein the superhero model handles resolution. While
girls appear to recount lived experience as it actually happened,
boys embellish real-life experience with fantasy elements. Finally,
while social interaction and cooperation take priority in feminine
childhood culture, power struggle, rules, and the importance of
winning take priority in male childhood culture. Evidence suggests
that popular culture has a stronger influence on boys than on girls.
In assessing the influence of popular culture, research discussion
examines these results in light of the influences of electronic
media, children's toys (which polarize gender stereotypes), and
transmedia intertextuality. (Contains 14 references.) (TB)

Presented At:

The American Popular Culture Association Conference
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
April 14,1995

POPULAR CULTURE IMAGES OF GENDER AS REFLECTED THROUGH YOUNG CHILDREN'S STORY

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POPULAR CULTURE IMAGES OF GENDER AS REFLECTED THROUGH YOUNG CHILDREN'S STORY

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an investigation of the impact of popular culture on young childrens' conception of gender, as revealed through the stories they write and tell. In this document popular culture refers to the commercialized supersystem that targets children: the toy world, books and magazines, television, videos and music - including the implicit messages and attitudes.

As Steedman explains,

> Because ... children's stories deal in the main
> part with the normative conflicts that are part
> and parcel of socialization within this culture,
> they are also primitive statements of the
> prevailing mythologies of this culture.
> (Steedman, 1982, 15)

Concepts of gender are present within the normative conflicts that children experience. Increasingly, research is bringing to our attention the significant role that gender plays. Between the ages of four and eight children are preoccupied with confirming developing gender identity. Why is it so crucial to children that they get their own and other's gender right and that they are perceived as having got it right? Indeed, observations about sex difference render credence to the conclusion reached by McClelland (cited in Gilligan, 1982, 14), that "sex role turns out to be one of the most important determinants of human behavior". In story,

six- and seven- year olds already demonstrate an understanding of
gender relationships. And their narratives indicate that popular
culture is influential in children's conceptualization of gender.

The first part of this presentation examines the findings of
my research study conducted over a period of three years. The
second part presents research data that raises questions about the
influence of popular culture on childrens' conceptions of gender.
The conclusion is a succinct summary of the apparent gender impact
of popular culture images on children's narrative.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

This research study was conducted at Grosse Ile High School
on the remote Magdalen Islands in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence,
Quebec, Canada from 1991-1994. Forty-six students were involved.
The concept of child as expert informant to promote understanding
of how children learn through story was the guiding principle of
the study.

Six- and seven- year-olds narrate a gendered perception of
the world.   Throughout this study, girls narrated a social
orientation of the world, centred on relationships.   Boys
narrated a world of action.   Girls articulate a domestic world in
which all ends well, with family and friends in protagonist role.
Boys narrate a public world of good guy/bad guy encounters wherein
the superhero model handles resolution.   Whereas girls narrate
personal responsibility to make the world a better place in which

to live, boys narrate a sense of social justice mediated through a superhero. Aggressive superheroes are regularly featured in boys' narratives. Violence is a frequent companion to action. In contradiction, violence is rarely present in feminine narrative. Girls avoid direct confrontation; they are concerned that all turn out well in the end.

Generally, girls appear to recount lived experience as it actually happened. Boys often embellish real-life experience with fantasy elements. And boys demonstrate great concern with presenting an image of power, concern which is also reflected in portrayal of character and assigning themselves role in story. Whereas girls appear to derive satisfaction from their role normally played in life, boys often assume hero position. Girls' story, more fixed in reality is often a personal response to real-life situations. Boys' story incorporates more fictional elements, often imitative of media drama.

Social interaction, play with playmates, is repeatedly articulated as priority in feminine childhood culture. Boys do not narrate just play. Power struggles, rules and the importance of winning is the dimension of play that boys articulate.

Data from the study reveals that literature makes a more prominent appearance in girls' narrative. Girls chose topics drawn from literature approximately twice as often as did boys. And the influence of literature was more discreet in boys'

narrative. Generally boys preferred to simply borrow story elements, rather than the whole story line, and demonstrate great talent in situating them in original context. Both intertextuality and fantasy featured more frequently in boys' than in girls' narrative.

Evidence from children's writing would make one think that separate channels exist for diffusing popular culture to children, one for boys, another for girls. I make this statement in light of the distinctive gender differences apparent in the manner in which popular culture manifests itself through story. Perception of role, as articulated by children, illustrates gender stereotyping. Different images are projected: boy in dominent superhero role in control, girl in nurturant role preoccupied with welfare of others.

In assessing the influence of popular culture on children's narrative, evidence would suggest that the impact is far greater on boys. This tendency is true, at least on the surface, particularly in the episodic, visual style simulation of action, reminiscent of media drama, that characterizes boy's story. But what is the real significance, for children, of the gender role stereotyping transmitted within popular culture? I wonder ... could popular culture be operating at a more subliminal, but equally influential level, in feminine childhood culture?

POPULAR CULTURE AND CHILDRENS' CONCEPTIONS OF GENDER

Girls and boys appear to "read" and write text very differently. In this section I would like to demonstrate the apparent impact of our commercialized supersystem on children's perception of role and the questions it raises about the significance of gender and culture in children's lives. First we will look at statistics concerning the influence of electronic media on childrens' narrative. A second section raises questions about gender stereotyping through polarization of childrens' toys. A third part explores the notion of transmedia intertextuality and its influence on how children learn to read text.

Influence of Media Literacy

Researchers have demonstrated the significant impact of media literacy on children's perceptions of gender role. In 1993 Bailey conducted research on children's conceptions of gender in the grade one classroom. She claims that the children in her study,

> recognized that the powerful ... Ninja Turtle
> superheroes are represented only as males, while the
> weak, powerless victims to be saved are represented
> either as females or small children. (Bailey, 1993,84)

My informants demonstrated a similar conception; unequal distribution of power as portrayed through stereotypical gender role is recognized at this very young age.

Seiter (1993) had previously presented an analysis of media that targets young children. She claims that "television producers, like most childrens' authors, cartoonists, and moviemakers, have favored male characters in action-packed adventures for boys" (Seiter,1993,145). She also evaluates that animated films targetting girls tell moral tales about personal relationships. In fact, evidence from my research data reveals that in their stories, girls and boys duplicate those themes. Perception of male in dominant role is manifested through narratives written by both girls and boys. To what extent has this predominance of male characters in electronic media contributed to girls' and boys' perception of role in real life?

Influence of Television

Concerning the influence of television, statistics indicate that children ages six to eleven are occupied with TV viewing during twenty-three hours, thirty-nine minutes a week (Miedzian,1991,211). In evaluating its impact, Miedzian cites television as a "major if not the major component of American popular culture" (Miedzian,1991,211). Indeed, the community of Grosse Ile is a world of parabolic antennae, what the locals call "dishes". Evidence from children's story would sugest that television plays a prominent role in literacy in the community. The impact of television is evident in a six year old's version of The Three Bears which depicts the bear's house with a huge antenna on the roof connecting to a near-by electricity pole. His story: "Baby bear is hiding under the coach so that he can watch tv."

More specifically concerning gender stereotyping, an excerpt from

a story written by the same child, one year later, gives an

account of three friends trip to Florida. He wrote,

> We never came back because we had beautiful girl
> friends. Bill's was Nathalie. John's was Beauty. Mine
> was Hot Stuff. We all had our own room. With a big
> screen TV and a king size bed. We have guards to keep
> all of the people out of our rooms. (95-03-23)

Role has been assigned, has it not?

And researchers calculate that, by the time a child is

eighteen, she or he will have viewed approximately 26 000 murders

on the screen. Is it the violence impact of the screen that finds

expression particularly in boy's stories?   Boys do narrate a

world of action.   Their focus is not just on action but on

aggressive action.   "When the clock strikes one the whole world

will die!" the beginning of one boy's story suggests the extent to

which violence pervades male narrative.   Boys are incredibly

influenced by the superheroes of television and video games.

Often, they write about violent characters: Superman, Superguy,

Terminator, Rambo, RobotCop, Ninja Turtles and Startrek characters

with their phasers.

Not so for girls. Paley's research in 1981 had noted that

girls do not initiate superhero stories.   According to her, "boys

exult in superhuman strength, girls seek gentle relationships"

(Paley,1981,203). My informants confirmed this observation.

Throughout this research project, conducted during a period

extending over three school years, just one girl demonstrated
interest in these violent protagonists.

Glorification of superheroes permeated boys' story almost
daily. The following story provides one example:

> 1000 years ago people were prisoners. They worked for
> the Ninjas. There was a hero that was never .. beaten.
> And his name is the Black Manta. He is the (most?)
> powerful Ninja in the world. He teaches little
> children. He can kill Ninjas, 8 feet tall giants, and a
> shark... (93-04-22)

Indeed, six- and seven-year-old boys narrate a continual
aggressive struggle. They express a value system that stresses
strength and power. In story they simulate aggression with
action words reminiscent of electronic super models.

Davies (1989) claims that boys' identification with power is
embedded in the narrative structures available to children. I've
observed that in story, not only do boys simulate action with
words but they physically "act out" the story itself as it is
being recounted. For example, one boy shared this story:

> Me and A... were playing. Then we saw bad guys. We
> went downstairs. The bad guys kicked us in the guts.
> They gave us a knuckle sandwich. That made us mad. (94-
> 05-31)

What I found quite astonishing was that all the other boys
immediately dropped to their knees and simulated the actions of
the kick and the knuckle sandwich. Not one girl did. In fact,
male informants in my study consistently simulated the physical
action of narrative in the classroom.

Girls do narrate life in a manner very different to the masculine style. The aggressive superhero cedes place to the gentle, cuddly, helpful model protagonist in a domestic scenario. Girls narrate less aggressive persona in role: Barbies, Care Bears, Trolls, gentle characters from TV programs and movies. Girls' express desire for a non-violent environment in which direct confrontation is avoided.

Even when boys write about less aggressive characters, the Care Bears for example, there is still an overriding element of aggression. Consider this story by a six-year-old boy beginning grade 1:

> The bad guy wants to put acid on the Care Bear. But the Care Bear's magic heart makes the bad guy shrink. (91-11-08)

Contrast with a Care Bear story by a girl the same age:

> The Care Bears came to my house. My brother and my cousin ...made a mess. My Mother and Father was by Grams. The Care Bears cleaned it up. Then they went home. (91-11-07)

What accounts for this seemingly contrastive view, the violence versus the need to "clean up" the world? Girls' story in my study, with the exception of one story, did not articulate aggressive action.

Influence of Video Games

Charges of gender socialization have been laid against video games as social and cultural "texts". Note that ninety per cent of video game players are boys (Miedzian,1991,263). Careful examination of their content, from a gender perspective, suggests how both males and females are socialized into assuming their respective gender roles. Females are usually cast as "damsels in distress". Statistics by Provenzo indicate that six out of ten of Nintendo's most popular games portray female as victim (1991,96), acted upon, rather than initiator of action. Are girls socialized to be dependent, boys conditioned to assume dominant gender roles? In story, girls resolve emergency situations by referring to an outside resource, the police or another male, such as the father or the uncle for example. The difficulty that girls experience in casting themselves in the role of agent is revealed in their narratives.

I find significant that throughout this whole research project, I saw only six stories with a heroine. In one episode in the Ninja Turtle saga, a little girl, Rainbow Brite, came to the rescue of Leonardo, a Ninja hero (91-10-15). Significantly, this story was sparked by a film the male author had seen. I question the roots of assigning sex role and the extent of sex-role conditioning through popular culture media images.

I wonder about a correlation between the fact that children rarely narrated girls in heroine role in my study and the role

generally assigned to females in literature. I raise this
question because after hearing a story written from a feminist
stance entitled "Princess Smartypants", one seven year old wrote
her own versions of Princess Smartypants casting her in heroine
role every day this year from January 23 to April 4, 1994. One of
her stories reads,

> Princess Smarty Pants
> Princess Smarty Pants put smartys in her pants, so that
> every prince would not mary Princess smarty pants. So
> one day a Prince came by and said, "Princess smarty
> pants would you mary me." Princess smarty pants said,
> 'I can't." "Why." said Prince. "Because I am on a
> diate," "Well" said Prince, "I am on a diate too." So
> Princess smarty pants came down and kissed the Prince
> and... he truned into a huge PIG! Everywhere the huge
> PIG went, he was always tired. (95-01-23)

If more stories cast females in the role of agent, would gender
roles perhaps be perceived by children with a more equitable
distribution of Power? When I examine the research data, I ponder
exactly what factors account for the gender difference manifested
in children's story. Could the commercialized polarization of
children's toys be influential ?

Polarization of Childrens' Toys

For a child, a game is serious business indeed. According to
Bettelheim, play and games provide a child with:

> a chance to work through unresolved problems of the
> past, to deal with pressures of the moment, and to
> experiment with various roles and forms of social
> interaction in order to determine their suitability
> for himself. (Bettelheim,1987,38)

Within this context, the type of "playing field" with its toy
paraphernalia appears to play a role in the behavior adopted by

young children as they develop a sense of self.

The commercialization of childrens' toys has been accused of polarization along lines of gender stereotyping. A Canadian newspaper, The Globe and Mail, Nov. 16, 1991 stated that strong indications exist to illustrate that "toys play up differences between boys and girls." Barbies for girls, Bazookas for boys.

In fact, according to The Gazette of Dec.1,1991, a Barbie is sold every two seconds. And what young boy does not have his toy box full of Transformers, Ninja Turtles, and war games? Miedzian (1991) cites several studies that support the view that violent toys encourage violent behavior. The Barbie world for girls and the military arsenal for boys, with concomitant repercussions, is justified by toy manufacturers as a "mirror" of social trends. But does this polarization of girl/boy toys reinforce socially appropriate behavior along gender lines? And what role might a transmedia connection play?

Transmedia Intertextuality

In fact, childrens' narrative does reflect an influence of intertextuality between television, videos and commerial toys. The combined marketing of movie, video and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle toys provides one popular example of such transmedia intertextuality. Fiske's theory of intertextuality (1987, 108) proposes that "any one text is necessarily read in relationship to others and that a range of textual knowledge is brought to bear

upon it". The pervasive commercial intertextuality of the 1980s and 1990s, with the marketing of movies, videos and toys (and not necessarily in that order) has made a significant impact on how children in this study have narrated perception of the world.

Kinder (1991) evaluates that it is on young children that commercial television probably has the greatest impact. The generation of new combinations through intertextuality is well illustrated in the research data from my study. Intertextuality is especially evident in a young boy's story entitled *Secret of the Ooz* in which the seven year old has drawn from literature and from electronic media narrative to cast himself in the limelight. His action thriller, entitled *Secret of the Ooz*, has combined elements from the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles series and the television program, *Hulk*, with a setting drawn from the poem, "*In a Dark, Dark, Room*". This is his story:

> Secret of the Ooz
> In a dark, dark, city there was a dark, dark sewer
> and in that dark, dark sewer there was a dark,dark, room
> and in that dark, dark room there was a dark, dark
> cupboard
> and in that there was a dark, dark shelf
> and on that dark,dark shelf there was a dark box
> and in that dark box was yucky, yucky stuff
> it was slime
> no, it is Ooz
> ya ooz
>
> "I will take this box home, put it [the slime/]on me. I
> wonder what will happen. Maybe now, UH OH NO I am a
> monster. roar, roar ROAR ROAR"
>
> "There's a monster. Help run for your lives," said
> everyone. The monster was very hungry. He ate ten
> people in one bite. So everybody got eaten by the
> monster. The monster knocked down the buildings and

telephone poles. But one thing happened. The monster
was turning back to a boy. And then he wanted to know
what happened. (93-01-10,11)

During this study, I have observed that intertextuality,

particularly transmedia intertextuality, is especially evident in

boys' texts.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, what is the role popular culture plays in

gender stereotyping? True, today's child is born to a world of

technology. In fact, electronic, visual media appears highly

influential in fashioning a model of comportment for young

children, without their even being aware of the degree to which

culture is shaping their identity.

How they learn to narrate life appears to hinge on how

children learn to read the narratives that are available within a

specific culture. Concepts of gender are embedded in the

narrative structures of electronic media, books and play as well

as in our discursive practices. Evidence from research data

suggests that gender makes a significant impact on how girls and

boys learn to read those narratives.

In my study children demonstrated a gendered view of the

world. Girls narrated a social, domestic world of relationship

and play centred on family and friends. Boys narrated a public

world focussed on a superhero engaged in active adventure, often

violent. I raise the question: to what extent do media images of

gender influence children's perception of reality and

determination of desirable behavior?

Yet, in literacy learning, despite the negative effects usually attributed to childrens' television viewing (the violence, the gender-role stereotyping), media intertextuality is seen to have its merits as well. Kinder claims that, through electronic media, children "gain an entrance into a system of reading narratives" (1991,41). Then perhaps an alternative to " saving the children from the media" (Buckingham,1993), is to investigate what children know about media and how they learn from media. Educational programs that teach children how to read media images interactively and to help them demystify the "ideological injections" of media texts appear important for today's child. I feel that the time has come to take a close look at media literacy in order to elaborate a new pedagogy, one focussed on fusing both the academic knowledge and the popular knowledge of girls and boys acquired through living in the real world.

And finally, because social notions of gender do have such an influence on the daily lives of children and consequently, the individuals they become, we must strive to assure that gender distinction no longer signify gender limitation for either sex.

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