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ABSTRACT

A study examined gender attitudes toward reading in students enrolled in the six sections of the Developmental Reading program at Kean College of New Jersey in the spring of 1996. The Mazurkiewicz Masculine-Feminine Attitude Survey (1960) was used with a forced choice of "mostly masculine" or "mostly feminine." Surveys of 26 male and 33 female students' opinions formed the basis of the study. Results indicated that 87% of both male and female students responded that reading was a mostly feminine activity, with 69% of the males and 97% of the females choosing this response. Findings revealed that the percentage of males in this study who perceived reading as a mostly feminine activity is lower than that of the 1960 Mazurkiewicz study, where nearly 81% of sons and 72% of their fathers viewed reading as such. (Contains 1 table of data; 21 references and related literature are appended.) (CR)

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SEXISM ATTITUDES TOWARDS READING
IN THE
ADULT LEARNER POPULATION

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ABSTRACT

This was a study of fifty-nine male and female College students enrolled in the Developmental Reading Program at Kean College of NJ, Spring, 1996. A survey was taken to determine whether these students perceived reading as a masculine or feminine activity. Analysis of the data obtained indicates that both males and females alike perceived reading as a mostly feminine activity.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to my dear family.

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INTRODUCTION:

Ever since Dr. Albert J. Mazurkiewicz published his study on socio-cultural influences on a person's attitude towards reading in 1960, there has been a hubbub of interest and activity in this field. John Downing (1973), in his cross-cultural investigation of the teaching of reading in fourteen countries, found that the United States places more emphasis on reading instruction than does any of the other countries in the survey. The United States research literature almost unanimously agrees that boys find it more difficult to learn to read than do girls (Downing and Thomson, 1977).

However, the universality of female superiority in reading achievement in all cultures and languages has been increasingly questioned by follow-up research. No significant difference between the sexes was shown by Morris (1966) in his survey in England. Preston (1962) found that German boys had superior reading achievement. Higher literacy rates for males were reported by Ooman (1973) in India. It can hardly be said that the difference is a biological one, attributing physiological and maturational differences as the element causing the discrepancy.

In 1973, Dwyer published a comprehensive review of theories of sex differences in reading achievement.

Four types of explanations were found to be applicable as causes of difficulty between boys and girls in reading abilities. Logically and empirically, she concluded "cultural expectations for the male sex role" as the most appropriate. Studies followed and resulted in consistent research support.

Even as children progress through elementary school, high school, university, and into adulthood, evidence seems to support the theory that cultural expectations involve the perception of reading as being more suited for females than for males. This is generally shown to be true among randomly chosen adults, university students, and young children in a North American community. Only at the first grade level was there a lack of significant differentiation in this study (Downing and Thomson, 1977).

Not only do we see gender having an effect on the attitudes of children and adults as readers, achievement and failure in reading have also been found to be gender-linked (Osmont, 1987). How is it that girls are able to achieve success even while reading books often aimed at boys, while these same books are of little support for the boys as readers? Osmont points out that even at an early age children learn about their gender roles through what they see in the adult readers around them.

Do boys and girls, men and women, view reading today as mostly masculine or mostly feminine? If so, is there any hope in bridging this gap between the sexes in their attitudes toward reading? Are school curriculums at fault? Are different materials in the classroom necessary to facilitate appeal to all children? Do boys need to experience a more male-oriented exposure to reading beginning at a very early age? Will boys always underachieve in reading? These are some of the issues that confront us today. Can we remedy them?

HYPOTHESIS:

No significant difference will occur between male and female college student participants' perception of reading as a masculine or feminine activity.

PROCEDURES:

The Mazurkiewicz Masculine-Feminine Attitude Survey (1960) was used in its original form, with a forced choice of "mostly masculine" or "mostly feminine" as the two responses. This author felt that the forced choice would hopefully reveal the subjects' true attitude. However, many surveys returned indicated the M/F as the third choice which was not an option here.

The Mazurkiewicz Masculine-Feminine Attitude Survey (1960) was distributed to students enrolled in the six sections of the Developmental Reading Program at Kean College of New Jersey.

A total of eighty-four surveys were correctly completed. The surveys collected were reviewed, tabulated and evaluated without bias by the author of the study.

A comparison was made of the results of this study with the results of earlier studies on the reading attitudes of young and adult learners by Mazurkiewicz (1960) and others.

RESULTS:

In sum, eighty-four surveys were completed by all six classes. Thirty-one male students, forty-nine female students, and four individuals who did not indicate their sex participated. However, only fifty-nine of the surveys were usable. The others were rendered invalid because the M/F selection was used or no sex was listed in the information portion of the survey. In actuality, twenty-six male students and thirty-three female students' opinions formed the basis of this study. As can be seen in Table I, the majority, 84.7% of both female and male students, responded that reading was a mostly feminine activity,

TABLE I

Numbers and percentages of all male and female students in the survey who perceived reading as a mostly masculine or mostly feminine activity

	<u>Mostly Masculine</u>		<u>Mostly Feminine</u>	
	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Males (26)	8	30.8	18	69.2
Females (33)	1	3.	32	97.
TOTAL (59)	9	15.3	50	84.7

69.2% of the males choosing this response and 97% of the females. A chi square of 8.23 was computed and shows that there was a significant difference between the gender's responses and that it was significant below the .01 level of confidence.

When comparing the results of this study with those of the Mazurkiewicz (1960) study, not much of a difference is found. In his study of eleventh grade males and their fathers, nearly eighty-one percent of the sons viewed reading as a mostly feminine activity, with seventy-two percent of the boys' fathers maintaining the same view. In this study, the 69.2 percent in the male attitude is lower than in the Mazurkiewicz study.

CONCLUSIONS:

In the thirty-seven years since the initial Mazurkiewicz study was published, the attitude that reading is

perceived as a mostly feminine activity, by male and female college students alike, essentially remains the same and thus the hypothesis of the study was accepted. While it would appear that this attitude is likely to persist in the American population, it does not mean that we have to take a back seat and bide our time while male students lag behind females in their reading abilities. In spite of this existence in attitude of reading as a mostly feminine activity, young males must be inculcated at an early age with a positive attitude towards reading. Boys seem to need this boost in the early years to counteract the changing male attitude as they mature.

SEXISH ATTITUDES TOWARDS READING
IN THE ADULT LEARNER POPULATION:
RELATED LITERATURE

Differences have been found in children's attitudes toward reading based upon their perceptions of the appropriateness of reading. Mazurkiewicz (1960) hypothesized that males viewed reading as a predominately female activity. He devised a survey listing forty-one activities for the participants to classify as mostly masculine or mostly feminine activities. Lehigh University faculty and developmental reading class students were the subjects used to test the survey and his initial hypothesis. Mazurkiewicz found that as boys moved through school, reading was increasingly viewed as a feminine activity and that reading achievement scores were higher for boys who considered reading to be a masculine activity.

A recent study in which a random sample of 216 children ages 6-7+, 189 8-9+, and 206 10-11+, within six primary schools in the United Kingdom were chosen and a short questionnaire administered (Davies and Brember, 1993), focused on whether there were any significant differences between the attitudes of boys and girls to reading to significant adults or themselves and whether the sample's home reading preferences were gender related.

The significant differences between the sexes are in Year 2 (1%) and Year 4 (5%), where more girls than

expected felt happy or very happy about reading to the teacher and more boys than expected felt unhappy or very unhappy about reading to the teacher. (Choices were very happy, happy, neutral, unhappy, very unhappy.)

What merits more consideration is that a sex difference is revealed within the younger age groups which should give teachers some food-for-thought. The boys' attitude could be related to their reading ability (Groff, 1962; Rye, 1983). Another possible reason for the differences may lie in differential treatment based on gender by the teacher of the oral reading sessions. Encouraging the boys to be as enthusiastic as the girls in reading to the teacher might involve positive discrimination for them by giving them quieter and more favorable settings for longer oral reading sessions. Also, children feel less happy as they get older, with the girls generally feeling more positive than the boys at the same age.

On the whole the children feel far more positive about reading at home than at school. In fact this is the only one of the four attitude questions where the older children feel more positive than the younger children. Given that parental help and reading to oneself can be a great boost to early reading attainment, there is a need to try to improve boys' perceptions of reading at home.

The statistics also show that the main source of children's reading material is overwhelmingly identified as from their own bookshelves and there were no significant differences between the responses of the boys and girls. The biggest difference between the obtained and expected statistics is that more girls than expected chose stories and more boys than expected chose comics.

Ley, Schaer, and Dismukes (1994) conducted a longitudinal study of the reading attitudes of middle school students over a three-year period. Secondary to the main purpose was to investigate the reading behaviors that those same students reported over the same period. Ethnic and gender variables for attitude and behavior were also investigated. Results indicated that there was a statistically significant relationship between the reading attitudes and the reading behaviors reported by middle school students.

However, unlike many earlier researchers, this study did not reveal that the reading attitudes of female students were significantly more positive than those of male students. It was also found that females did not report a level of voluntary reading significantly higher than that of the males.

Using the Activity-Object Opinion Survey (AOOS) (Downing and Thomson, 1977), Shapiro (1990) conducted a study on sex-role appropriateness of reading and reading

instruction to students involved in basal reading instruction versus the whole language approach. The basis of this study rests on two premises. First, if children enter school with the view that reading is an appropriate sex-role activity, when do these perceptions begin to change? Second, if this shift in perception occurs during the early primary grades, is reading instruction the "cause" of the development of the view of sex-role inappropriateness?

In study 1, reading instruction centered on a basal reading series. Instructional activities included Directed Reading Activities plus seatwork which focused on various reading skills. (Independent writing was rarely seen in grade one or two.) Study 2 students were similar in socio-economic background, however the reading program was very different. Children in grade one were encouraged to write from the first day of school. Writing, both thematic and personal, was a focus of each school day. A literature program was also present with children reading self-selected materials.

Many conversations with the children during the first year of Study 1 were initiated by Shapiro. These revealed that at the end of kindergarden and early in grade one, most children were very enthusiastic about reading. As was soon corroborated by the data, this enthusiasm seemed to be on the wane by the end of grade

one. Children began to comment on the nature of their reading instruction, indicating frustration with the nature of this type of reading and a growing boredom with the content of what they were reading. This was especially true of the boys. Kelly (1986) also concluded that during second grade, students' views on reading changed from sex neutral to more feminine than masculine and that the content or genre of the reading material influenced this perception.

In Study 2, no significant differences were found for "Reading" with both boys and girls viewing this activity as appropriate for their sex in both grades one and two. As children moved from grade one to grade two, an increased number of boys began to view books as inappropriate for themselves while girls grew in their view of sex-role appropriateness. It should be noted that while there was a downward trend in the boys' view, the overall view was still on the positive side. Girls saw books as appropriate for their sex and more whole-language instruction children held this view than those receiving basal reader instruction. For the activities of reading and writing, whole-language boys continued to maintain a sex-role appropriate view. Boys seem to need and like this higher activity level.

These results do suggest that the method of instruction may have a significant effect on boys' view

of the sex-role appropriateness of reading and writing within the social context of reading activities and the effects of instruction on children's conception of reading.

An adaption of Downing's Activity-Object Opinion Survey (1977) was used in a study by Collis and Ollila (1990) to examine systematically the gender typing associated with reading, writing and computer use for children in grade one. Like many studies before this one, results indicate that young children do not perceive reading as a feminine activity. No consistent gender association with writing was evident in the results. In contrast, computer was seen as a masculine activity, more strongly by young boys than by young girls.

In a study by Dwyer and Reed (1989) the effects of sustained silent reading on either achievement or attitude toward reading were examined. The subjects were fourth and fifth graders from one school in a lower middle class section of a mid-sized city in the southeast United States. The Rhody Secondary Reading Attitude Assessment (Tullock-Rhody & Alexander, 1980) was used to measure attitudes toward reading at the outset and the end of the experiment. Application of the Sustained Silent Reading Program appeared to have no positive effects relative to either boys or girls. Enough evidence exists to indicate that boys in this study have

substantially poorer attitudes towards reading than do girls.

In the Winchock study (1995), the Mazurkiewicz Masculine-Feminine Attitudes Survey (1960) was distributed to students in various basic skills reading classes at North Plainfield High School (grades 9-12), North Plainfield Adult High School, and Raritan Valley Community College, all in Somerset County, New Jersey. Ninety-one surveys were completed and tabulated to reveal that both male and female students responded that reading was a mostly feminine activity: 91.1% of the males choosing this response and 93.5% of the females. This survey also asked participants to classify writing as either a mostly masculine or mostly feminine activity. Again, the results showed that the majority 75.6%, both males and females surveyed, believe that writing is a mostly feminine activity.

In May, 1993, 1,060 people in England and Wales were surveyed in the use of basic skills in everyday life. Data was obtained by using a Gallup poll and published in March, 1994. In general more men in the group interviewed had undertaken the activities involving reading in the last seven days prior to the survey than women (43%-39%). Slightly more women had undertaken activities involving writing and math than the men in the group, although the differences are not statistically

significant. Nineteen percent more women read through a short recipe or similar set of instructions (63%-44%). Eleven percent more had read a short note or letter (57%-46%) and fourteen percent more had read signs, detailed warnings, food packaging and preparation (74%-60%).

Twenty-two percent more men referred to detailed operating manuals (48%-19%). Fifteen percent more had looked up or extracted information from a book or articles from newspapers or magazines (75%-60%). Fourteen percent more had used a plan or map of a building (28%-14%). It would seem from these statistics that each gender was performing tasks on a daily basis that were appropriate for his/her sex roles: men probably perform these kinds of activities at the workplace; women, if they are at home, would more likely read a recipe or write a note.

No statistically significant difference existed in any age category between men and women when asked the question "Do you ever avoid activities in your daily life which involve reading, writing or numerical calculation because you find some activity difficult or lack confidence in your skill?"

In an important nationwide study by Sharon (1974) of approximately five hundred adults, reading habits were examined in the context of several variables. A clear progression of educational level with number of minutes

read per day was found. Males tended to read somewhat more than females (113 to 101 minutes).

Guthrie and Seifert (1983) interviewed 109 employed residents of a six thousand member community and found higher occupational status and educational level to be related to the amount of reading done. Readers with less than a high school education read 1.7 hours/day; readers with education at or above high school level read 3.7 hours/day. However, they found women (all educational levels) to be reading considerably more than men (3.1 hours to 1.9).

The Survey of Elderly Reading Attitudes was administered to senior citizens by Scales and Biggs (1987). Most felt they had time to read, more married than singles reported buying magazines and daily newspapers, and more females than males reported reading advertisements without difficulty.

After reviewing the research on this subject, it can clearly be seen that reading perceived as a feminine activity is definitely a North American phenomenon. It is a fact that seems built-in to our "cultural expectations of the male sex role." Boys may definitely fare better with a particular type of reading curriculum. They probably do need to experience a more male-orientated exposure to reading beginning at a very young age. One fact seems clear and that is that reading

activity in the home seems to have significant positive influences on children's reading achievements and their attitudes toward reading.

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