

# Sex-role Stereotyping in the Infant Learners' Picture Book

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**ABSTRACT** This instrumental case study analysed gender-stereotyping of occupations in a pre-school book. The pictures sample (n=37) were from a book for the age group 5 to 7 years that was selected for its widespread use by a department of education. The pictures were analysed for several aspects of gender stereotyping, including occupational variations of the pictures and gender representation in each occupation. Data were analysed thematically. The picture book presented with males as active and directing events mostly outdoors. Females were portrayed performing mainly child and family care responsibilities.

## INTRODUCTION

Gender stereotypes are part of any given culture. In all, gender stereotypes are simplistic generalisations about the gender attributes, differences, and roles of individuals and/or groups (Brink and Nel 2015; Bookstove 2007; Paul 2014). The stereotypes can be positive or negative, but they rarely communicate accurate information about others. Stereotyping affects life experiences of women and men and is related to education, work, relationships, social standing, wellbeing and health (AlHayek 2015; Popay et al. 1998). Children in their education are constantly developing and absorbing messages that society throws at them to better understand the world in which they are a part of. They constantly interpret the social messages they receive and try to mold themselves to fit into that norm.

Books are often the most frequent interaction that young children have with others. According to Turner-Bowker (1996) and Simpson (2015), language is often utilised as a media tool to maintain the gender status of individuals in our society. Therefore, the language in books can be used to encourage or eliminate stereotypes. Consistent with the above, Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001) and Nair (2009) opine that children's literature serves as a powerful medium through which children construct messages about their roles in society. According to Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001: 810), 'children identify themselves with the characters in the books and learn about gender-appropriate behaviour'. The picture books help children to find support for the process of defining themselves as individuals and understanding their developing roles within their families and communities.

## Gender Roles in Children's Picture Books

The most common gender messages that children's books give are the emphasis of traditional roles of men and women. Girls are always shown as passive and boys are always shown as being active. There is no question that the frequency of female characters has increased from the past. However, the roles that these female characters play remain very traditional (Al-Hayek 2015; Bookstove 2007; Brink and Nel 2015). Although previous researches acknowledge a decrease in the substantial stereotyping of female and male characters in picture books, many gender differences in activities and occupations are still apparent (Crabb and Bielawski 1994; Gooden and Gooden 2001; Rajeshwari 2015). The researches demonstrated that children's literature is replete with gender stereotypical messages about domains such as occupation, chores, and power (Crabb and Bielawski 1994; Rajeshwari 2015; Turner-Bowker 1996).

Women and children have been portrayed in a narrow and biased way for many years (Al-Hayek 2015; Anderson and Hamilton 2005; Brink and Nel 2015; Gooden and Gooden 2001; Paul 2014). Girls are denoted as inexperienced and dependant, while boys are generally described as versatile and adept (Marshall 1988). Boys tend to be portrayed as active leaders and girls as passive followers (Al-Hayek 2015; Anderson and Hamilton 2005). Furthermore, Anderson and Hamilton noted that in picture books, men often exhibit career skills and women perform traditional tasks in the home (Gasser and Shaffer 2015). Although home making is itself a career (Hoole 2005), it tends to be lowly regarded and stereotyped as for girls or women.

### **Aim of the Study**

This study analysed gender-stereotyping of occupations in a preschool picture book. Specific questions that guided the conduct of the study were: i). what occupations are portrayed in the pictures? ii). How do the pictures portray gender stereotypes in occupations?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design and Document Sampling**

An instrumental documental case study was conducted. An instrumental case study is when the researcher uses one case to gain insights into a particular phenomenon (Dehmer 2015; Stake 2003). The researcher selects a small sample in order to examine a certain pattern of behavior (Stake 1995). In the present study, the instrumental case study was used to analyse gender-stereotyping of occupations in pictures. The instrumental case study allows for in-depth study of complex social phenomenon in real-life settings (Dehmer 2015; Yin 2003). Applied to document analysis, it provides for a holistic and in-depth construction of core meaning represented in the textual features.

### **Document**

The study used a picture book for infant learners in Zimbabwe. The picture book by Benoy and Burmister (2011) is one of the books recommended by the Ministry of Education Sport and Culture for use by all primary schools in Zimbabwe. Pictures in the books were scored on the aspects and contrasting by gender. In general documents are any preserved recording of a person's thoughts, actions or creations (Potter 1996). In the present study, the pictures were a creation of the author of the book to depict various occupations. Documents may be examined to investigate patterns and trends. The examination of documents may also provide confirmatory evidence of the information obtained from interviews and observations (Kuhn et al. 2015; Denzin and Lincoln 1998).

### **Data Collection**

In the examination of pictures, a popular picture book was obtained from a nearby preschool

centre. The book had pictures of people at work depicting different occupations. All pictures were interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning (Administration Methods 2010) around gender stereotypes in occupations. The pictures were coded into specific occupations. The procedure incorporated gender coding of the identified occupations. To ensure validity of the coding of occupations, for the results of the present qualitative research to be believed, three types of validity were met (Maxwell 1992). 1). Descriptive validity: a list of occupations was used to classify the pictures of people at work. This was done to ensure the accuracy of occupations reported by study. 2). interpretive validity: three career counsellors were asked to verify the accuracy of the coding of occupations as depicted in the pictures. 3). Theoretical Validity: Comparison of the data and theoretical propositions was done to verify their congruence.

### **Data Analysis**

Classical content analysis was used to analyse data (Titscher et al. 2000). It consists of counting the numbers of occurrences per category (assuming there is a relationship between frequency of content and meaning Data relating to the individual component pictures were analyzed first, before making comparisons across pictures. Variations within each picture and, where relevant, the relationship between different careers and responsibilities were considered. Gender frequencies and corresponding percentages for each role and responsibility and career were computed. Data collection and analysis were developed together in an iterative process (Hartley 2004).

## **RESULTS**

Tables 1 and 2 show gender aggregation in picture characters in a children's book as they depicted career or occupational oriented activities.

Table 1 shows that males were represented in 18 of the 25 occupations depicted in the pictures. The most common masculine-stereotyped careers were shopkeeper (10.8%), baker (5.41%) and medical doctor (5.41%). Women were represented in only 7 of the 25 identified occupations. The seven careers were predominantly the traditionally feminine-stereotyped ones. The most common feminine-stereotyped and less

**Table 1: Career and gender aggregation**

| <i>Career</i>           | <i>Male</i> | <i>Female</i> | <i>Total</i> | <i>Percentage (%)</i> |
|-------------------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Shop keeper             | 4           | 0             | 4            | 10.8                  |
| Police officer          | 4           | 0             | 4            | 10.8                  |
| Baker                   | 2           | 0             | 2            | 5.41                  |
| Tailor                  | 0           | 2             | 2            | 5.41                  |
| Vegetable vender        | 0           | 2             | 2            | 5.41                  |
| Community health worker | 0           | 2             | 2            | 5.41                  |
| Miller                  | 1           | 0             | 1            | 2.70                  |
| Medical doctor          | 2           | 0             | 2            | 5.41                  |
| Soccer coach            | 1           | 0             | 1            | 2.70                  |
| Station master          | 1           | 0             | 1            | 2.70                  |
| Pilot                   | 1           | 0             | 1            | 2.70                  |
| Banker                  | 1           | 0             | 1            | 2.70                  |
| Butcher                 | 1           | 0             | 1            | 2.70                  |
| Iron smith              | 1           | 0             | 1            | 2.70                  |
| Truck driver            | 1           | 0             | 1            | 2.70                  |
| Fisherman               | 1           | 0             | 1            | 2.70                  |
| Secretary               | 0           | 1             | 1            | 2.70                  |
| Nurse                   | 0           | 1             | 1            | 2.70                  |
| Teacher                 | 1           | 1             | 2            | 5.41                  |
| Netball coach           | 0           | 1             | 1            | 2.70                  |
| Welfare officer         | 1           | 0             | 1            | 2.70                  |
| Farmer                  | 1           | 0             | 1            | 2.70                  |
| Soldier                 | 1           | 0             | 1            | 2.70                  |
| Builder                 | 1           | 0             | 1            | 2.70                  |
| Pastor                  | 1           | 0             | 1            | 2.70                  |

prestigious careers depicted in the pictures were tailor (5.41%), vegetable vendor (5.41%) and community health worker (5.41%).

Table 2 shows that the pictures man performing outdoor activities (3), while the woman was undertaking child and family care duties (4). The outdoor activities for man were gardening, planting seeds and milking a cow. The child and family care duties performed by women include taking care of children, cooking, feeding chickens and fetching firewood.

**Table 2: Gender role and responsibilities**

| <i>Role and responsibility</i> | <i>Gender</i> | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percentage (%)</i> |
|--------------------------------|---------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Taking care of children        | Woman         | 2                | 25                    |
| Gardening                      | Man           | 1                | 12.5                  |
| Planting seeds                 | Man           | 1                | 12.5                  |
| Milking a cow                  | Man           | 1                | 12.5                  |
| Cooking                        | Woman         | 1                | 12.5                  |
| Feeding chickens               | Woman         | 1                | 12.5                  |
| Fetching firewood              | Woman         | 1                | 12.5                  |

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study suggest substantial gender disparities in picture repre-

sentation in favour of males in occupation oriented activities. The finding supports previous studies that suggested that sexism permeates children's picture books (AlHayek 2015; Anderson and Hamilton 2005; Marshall 1988; Nair 2009; Newman 1995; Rajeshwari 2015; Simpson 2015). The study did not examine the picture content distribution of main, supporting and minor characters along gendered lines, although this would be informative.

Male characters were most often portrayed in adventurous pursuits and outdoor activities requiring independence and strength, while female characters are seen in indoor activities and portrayed as passive and dependent). This finding is consistent with previous studies (Anderson and Hamilton 2005; Bookstove 2007; Brink and Nel 2015; Gasser and Shaffer 2015; Gooden and Gooden 2001; Paul 2014; Rajeshwari 2015; Simpson 2015).

It is quite surprising that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, learning institutions such as schools still reinforce gender disparities in careers instead of helping children deconstruct gender stereotypes. Thus, the schools are challenging the status quo by presenting a subversive perspective that has the potential to reverse current efforts by the government to shape a more equitable future. It is clear that there are inherent systemic hurdles for girls in schools, which constrain their career choices.

## CONCLUSION

The picture characters reinforce gender stereotypes in careers. The book pictures characterise males as active and holding positions of power; while their female counterparts are portrayed as passive and in positions of less power. The gender stereotypes could preset children's choice of career types as they transition to adulthood.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture and schools prescribe and use respectively picture books that do not convey gender stereotyped career information. Authors of books and publishing houses should ascertain that the pictures are not gender biased before publication. Future research should be conducted with more picture books to obtain results that are more generalisable.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are numerous limitations to the present study. The study narrowed the sample to one picture book for infants. Focus was limited to gender representation, roles and responsibilities and careers as depicted by the pictures. The aim was to make an in-depth analysis of the picture characters without the intention to generalise the findings.

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