Traditional or Androgynous: An Analysis to Determine
Gender Role Orientation of Basal Readers
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Abstract
Children's ideas about gender roles come to them from a variety of sources including
parents, friends, television, and school. Within the school setting, children are exposed to
reading materials which contribute to their knowledge of, and attitudes about, gender. In
elementary school, children receive reading instruction primarily through the use of basal
readers. Through their portrayal of male and female characters, these readers are one
means of socializing children into gender roles. Because cognitively developing children
assimilate information from the environmental influences around them, the overall
message received from the basal readers they use in school helps them form ideas about
gender role orientation.

A sample of sixteen basal readers from six publishers was analyzed to determine whether
the readers could be classified as androgynous or traditional in gender role orientation. A
method of measurement based on the traits from the Bem Sex Role Inventory was used in
the content analysis of the readers. Gender role orientation of the readers from five of the
publishers was found to be masculine for male characters and androgynous for female
characters. Male characters outnumbered female characters by a 3 to 2 ratio for all
publishers, biographies of males outnumbered those of females by slightly more than a 2
to 1 ratio for all publishers, and illustrations of males outnumbered those of females by a
slightly less than 2 to 1 ratio for all publishers.

Results of this study indicate that while female characters in basal readers possess a
balance of masculine and feminine traits and are classified as androgynous, male
characters possess primarily masculine traits and almost exclusively engage in traditional
masculine behaviors. Teachers seeking to use basal readers which have androgynous
characters will find that androgyne is a viable gender role orientation for female
characters, but not for males.

Background Information
Much has been written about the positive aspects of having an androgynous gender role
orientation (Bauer, 1993; Cramer & Skidd, 1992; Lundy & Rosenberg, 1987; Burchardt
& Serbin, 1982; Bem, 1981). It has been variously suggested that androgyne is associated
with high levels of identity achievement (Orlofsky, 1977), high levels of self-esteem
(Baldwin, Critelli, Stevens, & Russell, 1986), and high levels of psychological health and
well-being (Brems, 1990). There is much to suggest that children would be well served to
develop into adults having a balance of instrumental and expressive traits. These
instrumental (traditionally masculine) and expressive (traditionally feminine) traits are modeled for children and reinforced through several environmental influences - parents, the media, peers, and the school setting. Within the school setting, children use basal readers that frequently reinforce gender biases which are also prevalent in the culture. Previous studies have found that elementary basal readers contain more male characters than female characters and focus more on male experiences than female experiences (Purcell & Stewart, 1990; Grauerholz & Pescosolido, 1989; St. Peter, 1979). The argument has been made by publishers that boys prefer to read stories focusing on male characters while girls will "read anything" (Rudman, 1984).

In recent years there have been some efforts on the part of publishers to publish reading materials which are gender fair, and because characters who exhibit a balance of masculine and feminine traits encourage students to have a more egalitarian attitude toward both genders, a content analysis of third grade basal readers was conducted in order to determine the gender role orientation of the basal readers. Research questions focused on whether the basal readers could be classified as traditional in gender role orientation or androgynous.

**Method**

The unit of analysis for this study was third grade basal readers. Sixteen readers from six publishers were obtained from two sources - the curriculum center of the Summit County Board of Education and the reading center at the University of Akron in Akron, Ohio. All books analyzed were published since 1993 and are listed in Figure 1. A master list of behaviors was compiled from all sixteen books, which included 142 stories containing 567 characters who exhibited 5,147 behaviors. Table 1 shows the list of publishers with corresponding numbers of stories, characters, and behaviors.

The master list of behaviors was rated by three individuals using the masculine and feminine traits on the Bem Sex Role Inventory (hereafter referred to as BSRI), which was developed in the early 1970s as a means of measuring individual differences in masculinity and femininity (Bem, 1974). The numbered list of traits is shown in Figure 2. Raters would read a behavior on the master list (i.e., Dr. DeSoto bravely entered the fox's mouth), and rate it as corresponding to one of the traits on the list. If a behavior did not seem to correspond with one of the traits, that behavior was rated with a zero. After all rating was completed, raters were in agreement on all but seven behaviors. These seven behaviors were then discarded.
When all traits for the characters in the books had been counted, calculations were made to determine whether the books had a traditional or androgynous gender role orientation. Procedures used for this were as follows:

1. All masculine traits for male characters in a book were counted.
2. All feminine traits for male characters in a book were counted.
3. All masculine traits for female characters in a book were counted.
4. All feminine traits for female characters in a book were counted.
5. Masculine traits for male characters were divided by the number of male characters to get a masculine score for males in a book.
6. Feminine traits for male characters were divided by the number of male characters to get a feminine score for males in a book.
7. Masculine traits for female characters were divided by the number of female characters to get a masculine score for females in a book.
8. Feminine traits for female characters were divided by the number of female characters to get a feminine score for females in a book.

Each book had four scores - male masculine (MM), male feminine (MF), female masculine (FM), and female feminine (FF).

To determine whether a book was traditional or androgynous in gender role orientation, the following criteria, adapted from the BSRI's original procedures, were used:

1. If MM score was greater than MF score, then the book was determined to be traditional in orientation for males; if FM score was greater than or equal to FF score, then the book was determined to be androgynous in orientation for females.
2. If MM score was less than or equal to MF score then the book was determined to be androgynous for males; if FM score was less than FF score, then the book was determined to be traditional in orientation for females.
3. If MM score was greater than MF score and FM score was less than FF score, then the book was determined to be traditional in orientation for males and females.
4. If MM score was less than or equal to MF score and FM score was greater than or equal to FF score, then the book was determined to be androgynous in orientation for males and females.
**Results**

Combined scores for all publishers in the study indicated that male characters in the basal readers were classified as predominately masculine. In Table 2, the mean score for male masculine traits is shown to be 100.56, while the mean score for male feminine traits is 46.37. That the mean score for male masculine traits was more than twice the mean score for male feminine traits seems to indicate that masculine traits are seen as much more desirable than feminine traits for male characters in these books. On the other hand, the mean scores for female masculine and female feminine traits were much more closely aligned, 55.37 and 43.50, respectively. This indicates that female characters were written to exhibit a more balanced group of traits than male characters. Table 3 illustrates this point in statistical terms using a chi-square analysis.

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Insert Table 2 here

Insert Table 3 here
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In Table 4 the breakdown of male masculine, male feminine, female masculine, and female feminine traits is shown, as counted for each publisher. This study found that male characters for all six publishers were classified as predominately masculine, while female characters for five of the publishers were classified as androgynous and for one publisher as traditional.

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Insert Table 4 here
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When looking at the readers individually, male characters were again classified as predominately masculine in all cases. This is detailed in Table 5. Numbers of masculine traits are greater than numbers of feminine traits for male characters in every reader, with some readers having very high ratios of male masculine traits to male feminine traits. For example, Book 1 of the Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich series, Books 1 and 2 of the Open Court series, and Book 1 of the Scott Foresman series all had a slightly less than 2 to 1 ratio of male masculine to male feminine traits. Having more than a 2 to 1 ratio of male masculine to male feminine traits were Book 1 of the D.C. Heath series, Book 2 of the Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich series, Book 1 of the Macmillan/McGraw-Hill series, Books 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 of the Scott Foresman series, and all three books in the Silver, Burdett, Ginn series. Only Book 2 of the Macmillan/McGraw-Hill series and Book 3 of the Scott Foresman series had fairly equal ratios of male masculine to male feminine traits. In fact, Book 1 of the Macmillan/McGraw-Hill series, Books 4 and 6 of the Scott Foresman series, and Books 2 and 3 of the Silver, Burdett, Ginn series had approximately a 3 to 1 ratio of male masculine to male feminine traits.

Female characters in 13 of the 16 readers were found to have greater numbers of masculine traits than feminine traits. In only three of the books were feminine traits
exhibited in greater numbers than masculine traits for female characters. In those three cases, however, the numbers of masculine and feminine traits were pretty evenly divided. For example, in the Scott Foresman series, one book was found to have female characters who exhibited 30 masculine traits and 34 feminine traits. Table 4 shows the number of masculine and feminine traits exhibited by characters for each of the 16 basal readers.

By using the calculations discussed earlier, a determination was made as to whether or not the readers from each publisher were classified as traditional or androgynous. There were four possible gender role orientation outcomes for the basal readers:

1. Traditional for males, androgynous for females.
2. Androgynous for males, traditional for females.
3. Traditional for both males and females.
4. Androgynous for both males and females.

Only Open Court had scores that classified their readers as being traditional in gender role orientation for both males and females. Because male characters for all publishers were classified as predominately masculine, and female characters for five of the publishers were classified as androgynous, five of the publishers, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, D. C. Heath, Macmillan/McGraw-Hill, Scott Foresman, and Silver, Burdett, Ginn, were classified as traditional for males and androgynous for females. No readers were classified as androgynous for males and traditional for females or androgynous for both males and females.

**Discussion**
This analysis of third grade basal readers indicated that male characters are portrayed as highly masculine, and exhibit few feminine traits. Conversely, female characters are shown exhibiting a wider range of traits, both masculine and feminine, and could be said to be more balanced as characters. It would appear that in the publishing world, a decision has been made that male characters in children's readers are only appealing when they exhibit traditional masculine behaviors. Whether the decision is conscious or unconscious, it is being made with regularity by all the publishers in this study. Even though society pays lip service to wanting males to engage in a variety of behaviors, in actuality, the expectation is that only strict masculine behaviors and traits are acceptable. Males exhibiting traits such as sympathy or gentleness were rarely found in the basal readers analyzed in this study. The inference from this is that these types of characteristics are not seen as salient or necessary for males to have.
Findings also indicate that traditional feminine traits are not seen as attractive for either the male or female characters in these books. In the vast majority of readers, neither males nor females exhibited primarily feminine traits. This finding is in agreement with research that suggests that as children move through childhood and into adolescence, traditional feminine traits are not seen as attractive for either gender (Cramer & Skidd, 1992). Girls have also been found to feel that the traditional feminine role is a demeaning one (Grant & Sleeter, 1988). This attitude on the part of young females may mirror that of the decision makers in the publishing world regarding the traits seen as attractive for characters in the readers that elementary school students use. Because traditional feminine traits have often been found to be less attractive than masculine traits (Safir, Hertz-Lazarowitz, BenTsvi-Mayer, & Kupermintz, 1992), it is not surprising that publishers have addressed this situation by portraying female characters in their readers as having a fairly equal mix of masculine and feminine traits, rather than showing them as traditionally feminine.

Research has shown that an androgynous gender role orientation is a factor in the self esteem and achievement of children and adolescents (Alpert-Gillis & Connell, 1989; Sedney, 1987; Bem, 1981). Because of this, it would seem natural to encourage children to develop a variety of traits, both instrumental and expressive. However, both in the "real life" of boys and girls and the "book life" of the male and female characters they read about, only females are allowed to develop and show a variety of traits. While this is progress, it would be more encouraging if even one of the publishers had portrayed male characters with a more balanced set of characteristics.

It appears that publishers have made some strides in their portrayal of female characters in basal readers, and this is a positive step for young students in that they can come to see the female characters in their readers in more varied, active roles rather than simply as passive beings waiting to be rescued by the more powerful, adventurous male characters. Because these cognitively-developing students are assimilating environmental information around them all the time, they will be able to read about girls and women who possess a balance of traits and engage in a variety of behaviors and make this information a part of themselves. This is a positive thing.

These strides, however, must be tempered with the knowledge that while females are being treated in a balanced way within the readers, male characters are being portrayed in the same way they were 20 years ago, with little in the way of any variety in behaviors. In 1972, male characters in children's readers were shown as extremely masculine - athletic, aggressive, rescuing the girl (Women on Words and Images, 1972). In 1977, same story - taking charge, leading others, never squirting a tear (Weitzman, 1977). In 1989, things had not changed much for the boys - still the rescuers, still the in-charge guys, still the leaders of the pack (Purcell & Stewart, 1990). While there is much that is positive about many of the traditional masculine behaviors and traits, boy students are being done a disservice when, in their reading, they rarely come across a male character who exhibits traits such as sensitivity or empathy.
Students are socialized in many ways. Parents, friends, the media, and school all play a part in introducing students to, and reinforcing for them, ideas about gender roles. Basal readers are but one part of a student's school life. By publishing readers which are fair to both boys and girls, one small step could be taken toward making the world a little bit better and making students' experience in school a positive one. Every child deserves to feel that he or she is a force in the universe. The use of reading materials which emphasize fairness and diversity can change that one step into a giant leap toward helping children experience that feeling.

Figure 1
Book List

Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc. (1993)
Book 1 - Like a Thousand Diamonds
Book 2 - A Most Unusual Sight

D. C. Heath and Company (1993)
Book 1 - A Soft Pillow for an Armadillo

Book 1 - Catch a Sunflake
Book 2 - Sing It to the Sea

Open Court Publishing Company (1995)
Book 1 - Collections for Young Scholars I
Book 2 - Collections for Young Scholars II

Scott Foresman and Company (1995)
Book 1 - Pig Tales - Stories that Twist
Book 2 - If You Meet a Dragon - and Smaller Challenges
Book 3 - How Many Toes Does a Fish Have? - Looking Beneath the Surface
Book 4 - Now I Get It - Understandings and Misunderstandings
Book 5 - Dinner with Aliens - and Other Unexpected Situations
Book 6 - In Your Wildest Dreams - Imagination at Work

Silver, Burdett, Ginn (1993)
Book 1 - Castles of Sand
Book 2 - Leaving Footprints
Book 3 - On the Horizon

Figure 2
List of Masculine and Feminine Traits

**Feminine Traits:**
1. Yielding
2. Shy
3. Flatterable
4. Sympathetic
5. Soothes hurts
6. Warm
7. Gullible
8. Gentle
9. Doesn't use harsh language
10. Understanding

**Masculine Traits:**
21. Independent
22. Self-reliant
23. Assertive
24. Forceful
25. Leadership
26. Decisive
27. Dominant
28. Aggressive
29. Individualistic
30. Ambitious

Table 1
Number of Stories, Characters and Behaviors Analyzed, by Publisher

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publisher</th>
<th>Number of Stories</th>
<th>Number of Characters</th>
<th>Number of Behaviors Rated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.C. Heath</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>591</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macmillan/ McGraw-Hill</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Court</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott Foresman</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>1,233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver, Burdett, Ginn</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>5,147</td>
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Table 2
Mean Scores for Masculine and Feminine Traits

<table>
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<th>Gender</th>
<th>Mean Score for Masculine Traits</th>
<th>Mean Score for Feminine Traits</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>100.56</td>
<td>46.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>55.37</td>
<td>43.50</td>
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Table 3
Masculine/Feminine Traits by Gender of Character
For All Publishers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Gender Traits</th>
<th>MM</th>
<th>MF</th>
<th>Female Traits</th>
<th>FF</th>
<th>CHISQ</th>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Masculine</td>
<td>1609</td>
<td>742</td>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>2351</td>
<td>63.02**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>FM</td>
<td>886</td>
<td>696</td>
<td>FF</td>
<td>1582</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2495</td>
<td>1438</td>
<td></td>
<td>3933</td>
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Chisq = 63.02** df=1

Table 4
Number of Masculine and Feminine Traits, by Publisher

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<tr>
<th>Publisher</th>
<th>Male Masculine Traits</th>
<th>Male Feminine Traits</th>
<th>Female Masculine Traits</th>
<th>Female Feminine Traits</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>190</td>
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<td>D.C. Heath</td>
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<td>75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Macmillan/McGraw-Hill</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>79</td>
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<tr>
<td>Open Court</td>
<td>301</td>
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<td>150</td>
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Table 5
Number of Masculine and Feminine Traits, by Basal Reader

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Female Traits</th>
<th>Male Traits</th>
<th>Female Traits</th>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>93</td>
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<td>77</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macmillan/ McGraw-Hill</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Book 1</td>
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<td>Book 2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Book 2</td>
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<td>Silver, Burdett, Ginn</td>
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<td>Book 3</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>41</td>
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References


St. Peter, S. (1979). Jack went up the hill... but where was Jill? Psychology of Women Quarterly, 4, 256-260.

