Which Princess Are You? Language and Gender in Children’s Books

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Abstract
Results of a 2012 survey of U.S. parents revealed that reading books with their children was the predominant form of parent-child co-media use (Connell et al. 2015). Yet, little research has been done on the actual interactions that occur in this specific context. My analysis pays special attention to the gendered aspects of language in regards to children's reading habits and the ways parents communicate with their children. I am concerned primarily with how female and male children are spoken to differently, both by parents and the messages from the books they chose. This research provides a nuanced examination of how messages received by children from parents and books can impact children's interests and their ideas regarding gender.

Method
• 3-month non-participant observation of parents and children at the Champaign Public Library (60-90 mins per observations)
• Semi-structured interviews with parents and children (age 4-5) and observations of children’s bedrooms/playrooms
• Coding: Descriptive, in vivo, values coding (Saldana, 2009)

Findings
Emergent themes:
• Impacts of brands on parent/child book selection
• Parent reactions to licensed characters and possible impacts on promoting gender stereotypes
• Avoidance of certain characters

Quotes:
• “...we try to get books that are, um, about girl – female empowerment.”
• “Um, jewelry is fairly common in a lot of the girl’s books. So for example this comes with a sparkly bracelet.”
• “I’ve been trying to resist buying too much of like the branded stuff ... I don’t want it to become that where everything must be like [branded] ... it drives me crazy…”

Background
• Media co-use: parent-child use of certain medias, books (Connell et al. 2015)
• Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, Gender talk used while reading (Endendijk et al. 2014)
• Brand impacts on children’s media (Hade, 2011)

Conclusions
• Research aimed at role brands played in children’s book choice
• More research needed to determine parent-child interactions involving gendered language
• Could reveal impacts on self-esteem or perceptions of others

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