THE JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

Insight Series

How does character development shape gender?

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'The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities'
-Aristotle (quoted in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*)

Stories are pathways into human experience. For young children, the subjects of this paper, stories present one of the primary ways to learn about life, to feel empathy with other people, and to develop identity. They nurture the imagination, raise aspirations; they open up thousands of possibilities. When children read stories, or watch them in films and tv shows on screen, they are doing more than acquiring or learning new information, or simply being entertained. They are exploring characters, deciding whom they identify with, and making judgement calls about how actions and attitudes affect the fate of the characters on the page. The impressions gained through stories don't end at the close of the book, or the roll of the credits, but are breathed into life as children internalise what they've seen or read, using it to guide their own behaviours, and shape their self-image, their character. Hampered by being small and dependent in real life, stories allow children to live a thousand other lives of adventure and delight, heart break and loss, challenge and vindication. Stories prepare children for what is to come in their own lives.

This paper is about how the gender norms and stereotypes in stories mediate the wider character development of the children who read them and in turn how gender norms and stereotypes in real life prime boys and girls to identify with certain characters in the stories they read. It looks at some of the implications of this, both in how it shapes children's interests and aspirations, and how this in turn influences the content commissioned and promoted by the industries that produce stories for children – namely in publishing and film production. It is primarily concerned with the *moral* dimensions of these phenomena.

A number of activities were conducted to inform this paper:
- Primary research into gender stereotypes and moral character with 12 Year 2 students at Queensbridge Primary School in London
- Participation at the academic conference *Can Virtue Be Measured?* from the Jubilee Centre for Character & Values with specific attention to key notes and seminars covering social psychological theories of character development
- Interviews with children's book publishers, writers, editors, and illustrators at Walker Books and Random House
- A secondary analysis of gender representations in contemporary mainstream film and tv
- Review of selected texts relating to moral and gender identity formation in early childhood
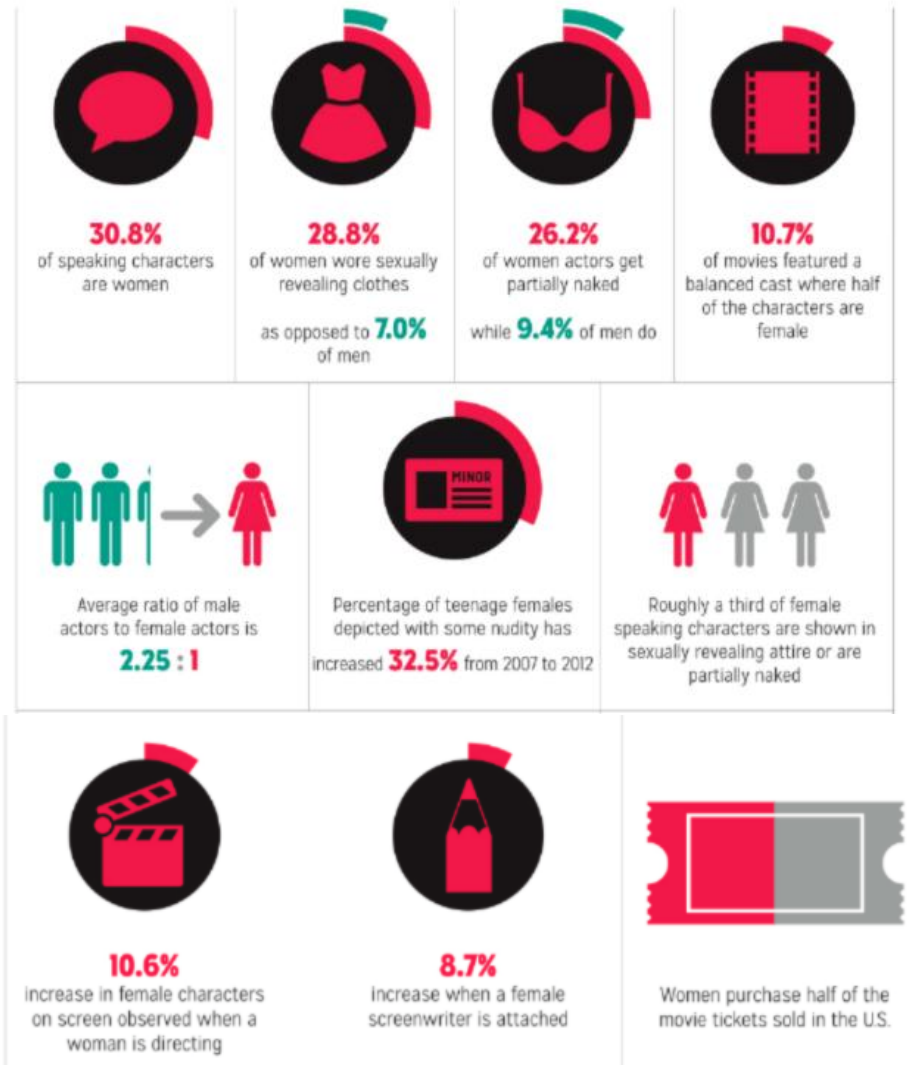
The gender gap in the media
There is a pervasive and persistent gender gap in the media. Women are heavily underrepresented both on screen, and behind the screen. This year, the New York Film Academy ran an analysis of the data on the top 500 films between 2007-11. Although men and women are equally represented in the audience and through ticket sales, women are less than a third of speaking characters in the films they watch, and only one in ten films have gender balanced casts where woman and men had an equal number of roles. On top of that, the limited types of roles available to female actors to play means that even in the screen time they do get, their roles often serve to reinforce rather than challenge gender stereotypes that are disempowering to

women and that conceptualise women and girls as 'other', the object rather than the subject, the passive rather than the active, the supporting role rather than the lead.

HOW WOMEN ARE PORTRAYED
═══ ON SCREEN IN THE TOP 500 FILMS ═══
2007-2012

30.8%
of speaking characters are women

28.8%
of women wore sexually revealing clothes

as opposed to **7.0%** of men

26.2%
of women actors get partially naked

while **9.4%** of men do

10.7%
of movies featured a balanced cast where half of the characters are female

Average ratio of male actors to female actors is
2.25 : 1

Percentage of teenage females depicted with some nudity has
increased **32.5%** from 2007 to 2012

Roughly a third of female speaking characters are shown in sexually revealing attire or are partially naked

10.6%
increase in female characters on screen observed when a woman is directing

8.7%
increase when a female screenwriter is attached

Women purchase half of the movie tickets sold in the U.S.

Between 2006 and 2011, the Geena Davis Institute on gender in the media conducted a study into gender representation specifically in family films and children's shows of 11,927 speaking characters. They looked at the 129 top-grossing family films, 275 prime-time programmes (including ABC, NBC, Fox, Cartoon Network, Disney, Nickelodeon), and 36 children's TV shows across key networks (Disney, Nickelodeon, PBS).

In family films they find an almost 3 to 1 ratio of male to female characters. They also find only a quarter of narrators are female. Again, a mere tenth of films had a gender-balanced cast.

Prevalence of Female Characters Across Media

Prevalence Indicator	Family Films	Prime-Time Programs	Children's Shows
% of female characters	28.3%	38.9%	30.8%
Ratio of male to female characters	2.53 to 1	1.57 to 1	2.25 to 1
% of stories w/female narrator	26.5%	44.2%	20%
% of stories w/gender-balanced casts	11%	22%	19%
Total # of speaking characters	5,839	5,520	568

In all of their assessments, they find a striking disparity in the presentation of male and female characters: not only in the proportion of male versus female characters in programmes and films, nor how primary their roles are (how frequently they speak, how integral they are to the story or plot), but also, crucially, in their appearance, character and personal attributes.

Starting with appearance, female characters are more often portrayed with exposed skin, with thinner bodies, 'sexy' attire, and their physical attractiveness is referred to more often.

Appearance Indicators by Gender within Media

Appearance Indicator	Family Films		Prime-Time Programs		Children's Shows	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
% wearing sexy attire	8%	28.3%	8.4%	36.2%	10.1%	18%
% w/exposed skin	8.5%	26.6%	11%	34.6%	12.4%	17.2%
% referenced attractive	4.3%	14.9%	3.5%	11.6%	1.8%	5.6%
% w/thin bodies	10.7%	34.3%	13.6%	37.5%	18.7%	37.4%

They also explore motivations amongst female characters – the things that guide their behaviours and actions – and find that romance and romantic interest is the primary motivation of female characters: '*adornment, enticement, or with an inclination to romance [is the] main motivator of female characters'*. In a more in depth character analysis of children's films with female leads, they found that even with regard to the drive towards romantic love, few female characters attempt to fulfil their aspiration through action – initiating plans or setting events in motion in order to achieve that goal. The majority are more passive, or 'daydreamers' with an idea of romantic love in mind but little intention or resolve to realise their desires.

What are the 'headline' gender messages coming from family films and tv? Something like this:

Girls:
- Are a minority
- Are primarily concerned with finding romantic love
- Are often passive, and look to others to fulfil their wishes
- Are 'saved' by male heroism
- Are rewarded and do well when they're pretty
- Are 'fixed'

Boys:
- Are the majority
- Have a range of ambitions and aspirations
- Are primarily active in taking on challenges and achieving goals

- Are the protectors of the 'weaker sex'
- Are rewarded and do well when they face challenges
- Are fixers

The study concludes that addressing and broadening out female character-development could provide the solution to female under-representation. It calls for *"the creation of diverse, complicated females who initiate and/or actively participate in their destinies"*. The institute's recommendations are predicated on the idea that children internalise gendered representations that they see around them and illustrated to them, and that this in part shapes their identities.

The formation of gendered identities
Gender is typically seen as the basis of social identity, with most societies having a fairly clear assignment of gender attributes for each of the sexes. Developmental accounts of gender from psychology suggest it is formed in the early years through processes of grasping the concept of gender binary, learning about roles and stereotypes, identifying with parents, and forming preferences. By around age five or six, gender roles are fairly consolidated and at their most rigid. Language and linguistics, mass media, and roles of parents and siblings at home are all key sources of information about gender that young children soak up, and in term internalise, model, and integrate into their own identities.

Social cognitive theory suggests that positive and negative reinforcements delivered to media characters can function as cues and incentives for viewers. For example, a female character who is rewarded for her beauty with romantic love, sends a signal to viewers that beauty is a particularly positive attribute – over and above others – of being female. When this message is replicated through many female characters, time and time again across many forms of media, it starts to signify that beauty or attractiveness is somehow an essential part of being female.

But are there other character traits beyond the physical that are also associated or essentialised to being female/male? And do these associations go beyond the physical to the *moral?*

Fairy tales, identity, and the development of moral character

> *'If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales'.* – Einstein

The fairy tale presents a useful channel through which to explore these questions. Fairy tales are classic material for children's education and entertainment. In large part, the intelligence that fairy tales imbue is a moral awareness rather than the acquisition of knowledge or facts. They grapple with good and evil, courage in the face of adversity, and the rewards that come from being true, honest, loyal, and kind (as well as the punishment that comes from failing to…)

In psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim's book on fairy tales *The Uses of Enchantment*, he writes extensively on how children's identification with the 'hero' of the story helps incentivise them towards moral behaviour.[1]

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[1] I am assuming that representations of gender in other forms of media – in this case fairy stories and literature, but also advertising, music and music videos, and so on – shape children's identity is a similar way

"It is not the fact that virtue wins out at the end which promotes morality, but that the hero is most attractive to the child, who identifies with the hero in all his struggles. Because of this identification the child imagines that he suffers with the hero his trials and tribulations, and triumphs with him as virtue is victorious. The child makes such identifications all on his own, and the inner and outer struggles of the hero imprint morality on him."

Importantly, Bettelheim asserts that the child's identification with the 'hero' of a fairy tale is initially motivated by what happens to that character – namely that he wins, is victorious, or achieves the best outcomes – and only latterly with the virtue or morality of the character.

"The child identifies with the good hero not because of his goodness, but because the hero's condition makes a deep, positive appeal to him. The question is not 'do I want to be good?' but 'Who do I want to be like?' The child decides this on the basis of projecting himself wholeheartedly into one character."

Bettelheim's asserts that there is a relationship between non-moral identity, and moral character: that identity is a key part of one's motivation towards moral behaviours. And he asserts that situations – *'the hero's condition'* – are highly influential in who the child identifies with. In this case, the child wants to identify with the hero who struggles, but then overcomes and is victorious.

Unsurprisingly, Bettelheim's analysis is written from the point of view of a little boy, rather than a little girl. But had he given equal consideration to his female counterpart, what sort of character might he have chosen for her to identify with? Returning to the Geena Davis findings above, romance is still today cited as the primary aspiration for female characters, with the acquisition of romantic love being the signal of 'success' or 'victory'. Moreover, many female characters are achieving such success not through actively pursuing it, but through possessing patience and passivity, and hope (as well as through displaying the right physical attributes). Here is the beginning of a relationship between non-moral *gender identity* (relating to the aspiration of romantic love) and the expression of *moral*-type character traits like patience, hope, even loyalty.

In identifying with a character in a fairy tale, children seem influenced by multiple channels: the situation the character finds themselves in, the non-moral characteristics they identify with, and finally the moral virtue of the character.

How does this translate into action? In real life too, moral behaviours are highly shaped by environmental factors.

The role of stereotype, schema and environments on shaping moral mindsets

"For some time those who study human social behaviour have understood our minds as collections of stereotypes, and schemas, scripts, beliefs and attitudes, lying dormant in wait for the appropriate environmental stimuli to trigger them into action. This means that much of what we think, do and feel can be influenced by subtle cues and surroundings... Supporting moral development and behaviour...is not just a question of instilling appropriate feelings and knowledge inside the head, but also creating outside the head the kind of environment that will best draw out the right moral mindset and motivations..."
-Cordelia Fine, neuroscientist and author of Delusions of Gender

In the first half of the 20th century, experimental psychologists studying character, or 'personality psychology' as it was then primarily referred to, found that moral decision making was much less consistent and predictable than many has assumed. In what seems to be a 'watershed' moment in the shift from trait-based to a situationist view of character, a key academic study by Hugh Hartshore – Studies in the Nature of Character - found a surprisingly low correlation between cheating behaviours of children aged 10-12 on two different sorts of tests – an academic test and a social game (pin the tale on the donkey, to be precise). The low correlation (around .20) showed that a child's honesty in one situation was not very predicative of their honesty in another situation. This led many to conclude that there was no such thing as stable moral behaviours, in other words: 'character' did not exist.

Coming forward to the mid 20th century, studies in the field of social psychology built upon this research, showing how 'situational' and 'social' factors and forces affected morality and moral choices. For example, in the 60's the famous social psychologist Stanley Milgram showed how people willingly acted against their personal conscience in order to follow the instructions set by a perceived 'authority' figure.[2] Other studies have shown how the demands of a situation – how rushed you are, for example – shaped one's willingness to help someone in need (Darley & Batson). Today, there is a fully developed research literature showing the impact of a multitude of environmental factors – from the lighting and temperature in a room affecting levels of pro-social behaviour, to how the 'elicitation of disgust' changes moral reasoning.[3] It seems that environment has an overwhelming affect on our behaviour, above and beyond the strength of our personal character.

But more recently still, renewed research into personality psychology has somewhat turned back the tide on this notion. These studies suggest that moral behaviour is shaped and guided by longstanding and integral personality characteristics of individuals, and that these characteristics display themselves with relative consistency across different situations and in different environments.[4] These studies draw on a number of different justifications: firstly, refuting the strength of the claims of the situationist critique, but perhaps more importantly drawing on other evidence of clear differences in people's 'moral schemas'. In other words, people have consistently different levels of awareness of morally relevant information when it is presented to them.[5] People also have different tendencies to seek out moral relevance in their experience, and differ on how core they see moral considerations to their identity.[6] There is also a growing research base connecting the Big 5 personality traits to moral behaviours, for examples 'agreeableness' and measures of 'moral exemplars', and 'conscientiousness' and helping behaviours.[7]

What can be learned from these findings? It seems that whilst it's true that environment holds a great influence over our behaviours, we never the less showcase habitual or 'characteristic' responses that differentiate us from our peers, and build some fuzzy outline of a moral identity – even if very vague. A generous person will tend to give more than a selfish person - even when put in a situation where selfish or untrusting behaviour is being encouraged. We do have character as

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[2] Although recent work discrediting his methodology only serves to further confuse debates within social psychology: http://www.npr.org/2013/08/28/209559002/taking-a-closer-look-at-milgrams-shocking-obedience-study

[3] See bibliography for details: Chiou & Chang, 2013; Williams & Bargh, 2008; Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008

[4] See bibliography for details: Hill & Roberts, 2010; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009

[5] See bibliography for details: moral chronicity: Narvaez, Lapsley, Hagele, & Lasky, 2006

[6] See bibliography for details: moral attentiveness: Reynolds, 2008

[7] See bibliography for details: Ross, Rausch, & Canada, 2003; King, George, & Hebl, 2005

individuals, but there is also a 'character' to our surroundings and environment, which holds an enormous influence on our resulting behaviours and actions.

Insights from the related fields of psychology of judgement and behavioural economics have much to offer to this debate. In his studies of our brain's two modes of thought (System 1 and System 2), Nobel Prize winner Professor Daniel Kahneman unveils the remarkable influence that 'cues', 'heuristics', and 'norms' have on our performance, attitudes, behaviour, and identity. System 2 is our slow, deliberate, and slightly reluctant 'conscious' brain, the one we primarily self-identify with. It is good at cognitive and focused decision making, but it tired easily and often gives over decision making to System 1. System 1 could be understood most simply as our 'intuition' – it is fast, associative and impressionistic, constantly whirring away in the background. It guides behaviour in the immediate moment based on the general lessons and guidance that it recalls from the aggregation of your past experience. It is not intentional or conscious at all, but it is just as much part of one's 'identity', and most of the time it is pretty accurate.

The dominance that System I has over our decision making underlines the supreme importance and influence that stereotypes have on how we form impressions of ourselves and others.

Some empirical evidence of the gendered aspects of moral character
The 'School Virtue Measure' developed by the University of Birmingham's Jubilee Centre for Character shows that boys and girls at least think of their characters differently, whether or not that is displayed in their behaviour. In a self-report assessment at a British comprehensive secondary school, boys reported that they are 'braver' than girls, and girls reported that they showed more 'love, creativity, fairness, and gratefulness'. The results are not surprising given the relationship between gender identity and character development as discussed above.

A small study of gender and character has been undertaken for this paper at a London based primary school with 12 year 2 students (age 6-7). Six girls and six boys were chosen of mixed ability, and socio-economic background from a class of 25+ students.

To begin, we introduced a number of character virtues to the students, based on the list developed by the Jubilee Centre but altered according to familiarity and comprehension levels of the students. Words were introduced and discussed with the students to check for understanding:

Jubilee Character Trait	Adapted terminology
Courageous	Brave
Compassionate	Understanding
Team player	Good team member
Honest	Honest
Fair	Shares
Determined	Determined
Curious	Curious
Grateful	Thankful
Disciplined	Hard working
Creative	Creative

Then, students were split into two groups of six, each with three girls and three boys: Group I and Group II. Each group was given a worksheet with a character and a list of ten spaces. To begin, Group I was given a 'girl' character, and Group II was given a 'boy' character, and then the activity was repeated with Group I given the 'boy' character, and Group II given the 'girl' character. During the exercise, we reduced the number of spaces from 10 to 5 in order to accommodate time restrictions and the attention spans of the children.

This girl is called:	1.
	2.
	3.
	4.
	5.
	6.
	7.
	8.
	9.
	10.

This boy is called:	1.
	2.
	3.
	4.
	5.
	6.
	7.
	8.
	9.
	10.
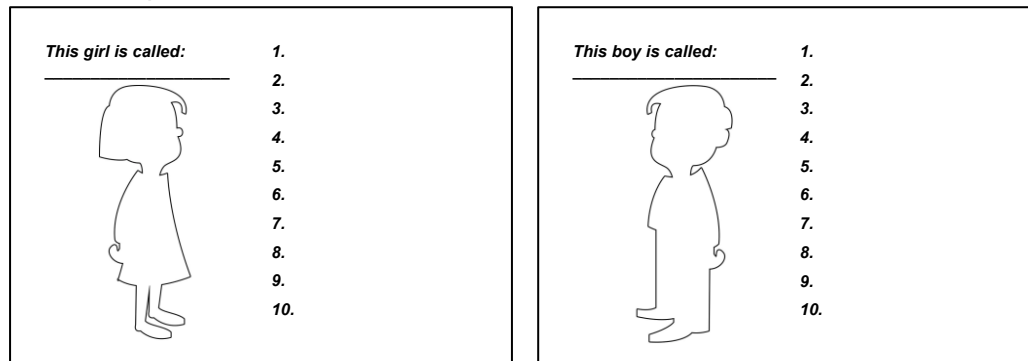
The task for the child was to '*Create their own character. Look at the picture. Think about what kind of person you think they are, and what they are like? Choose the character traits that you think describe your character best'.* Instructions and worksheets were deliberately designed as far as possible to not 'prime' the students. For example, students were not asked to *'choose the character traits that describe a girl/a boy'.* They were not asked '*When thinking of your character, think about what a girl/a boy is like'.*

Additional character traits were included in the list to give more colour and depth to the activity and to help the students imagine the character they were designing:

Character traits
Funny
Angry
Silly
Quiet
Loud
Clever
Strong
Thoughtful

Conducting the activity

Students understood the words with almost no exceptions and levels of comprehension were high. Students were also excited about the activity when it was explained to them.

Interestingly, in Group 1, when we introduced the first work sheet and explained that first we would be creating a 'girl character', the announcement was met with considerable negativity. Boys in the group seemed both surprised and disappointed – perhaps expecting that the character would have been gender neutral, or male? Of the girls, two were fairly quiet in their response, with one girl being vocally disappointed:

"I don't like girls, I want to make a boy character because I'm a tomboy."

In a later discussion during the second activity for Group 1, a girl and boy talked with each other about the character trait of 'bravery':

"Boys are always brave" – boy

"I don't know any *brave boys"* - girl in response

"…well me neither. But that's because they haven't grown up yet; when they grow up they're always brave" - boy in response to girl

In the case of the conversation above, the two children displayed an awareness of a gender stereotype, (that boys are brave), a challenge to that stereotype (not knowing any brave boys), and an acceptance of that challenge (well me neither). Ultimately, though, confounded by the contradiction between the stereotype of male bravery and his lived experience of boys lacking bravery, he resolves the issue by connecting bravery to a developmental trajectory for boys – when they grow up they become brave. It is striking how the belief or stereotype of male bravery had shaped this little boys understanding of how boys would grow up.

Whilst Group 2 was less gendered in their responses, overall we were left with the impression that the students preferred to create 'boy' characters over 'girl' characters. It felt like whilst everyone could easily identify with the boy character, it was more difficult for boys to engage with the idea of creating a girl character, and that even some girls wanted to distance themselves from the 'idea of a girl' (by denigrating girls, in the way that the self-identified 'tom boy' did, at such a young age we are left wondering if this is an act of conformity or a genuinely held belief?). The students confounded reaction to making a 'girl' character alerts us to the power of the 'norm' over young minds (the vast majority of lead characters or heroes that these children will have been exposed to will be have been male). What a surprise then to be presented with a female. It also highlights the challenge that exists to counter those norms: to engender interest and engagement from young readers in stories that counter that 'norm'; stories that are about female characters, or where female characters 'fix' rather than 'are fixed' from young readers.

That said, when we analysed the character traits that were then chosen by students for their characters, we found no strong gender associations. Their actual choices did not reflect the stereotypes and preferences that they displayed in their reaction to the activity and their conversations with each other during the activity. The table below shows the number of times that a character trait was selected by the students, and is organised in columns, the first three referring to words chosen for boy characters by the students (broken down into girl students, boy students, and total), and the final columns for girl characters broken down in the same way:

CHARACTER/CHILD	BOY/BOY	BOY/GIRL	TOTAL BOY CHARACTER	GIRL/BOY	GIRL/GIRL	TOTAL GIRL CHARACTER
BRAVE	3	1	4	2	2	4
UNDERSTANDING			0			0
GOOD TEAM MEMBER	2		2	2	1	3
HONEST	3	3	6	2	2	4
DETERMINED	1		1	2	2	4
CURIOUS	2	2	4	1	1	2
THANKFUL	3		3		1	1
DOES WHAT THEY'RE TOLD	1	1	2	1	3	4
CREATIVE		3	3	2	2	4
FUNNY	3	1	4	4	6	10
ANGRY	1	3	4	2		2
SILLY		3	3	3	2	5
QUIET		2	2	1	1	2
LOUD	2	3	5	4	3	7
CLEVER	4	2	6	3	3	6
STRONG	1	4	5		1	1
THOUGHTFUL	1	1	2			0
SHARES	2	2	4	1		1

In their position as 'creators' of characters, the students seemed to be mediating their own understanding and acceptance of gender norms and stereotypes, rather making selections based on the words that were important, meaningful, and delightful to them.

This boy is called:

1. SILLY
2. LOUD
3. ANGRY
4. CURIOUS
5. CLEVER
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.
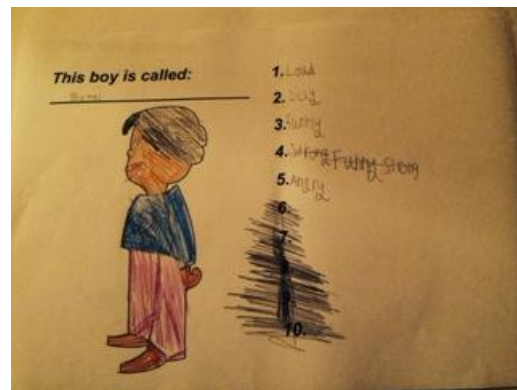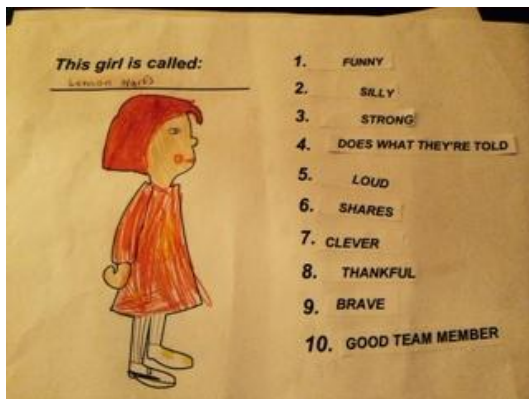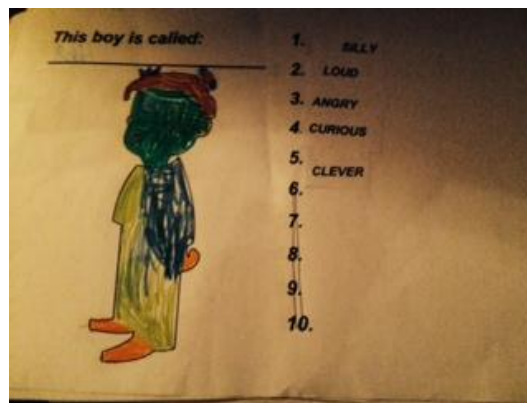
A gender gap in moral cognition
Looking at a very different assessment of character, the Defining Issues Test, a neo-Kohlbergian test of moral judgement development based on individuals' responses to 'moral dilemmas', is an overall assessment of character which has been completed by thousands of people over the past few decades. DIT responses also show a persistent gender gap. Boys consistently come in about a half of a standard deviation below girls. Although the DIT is administered primarily in the US, the same gender gap was recently reported in the UK in survey responses distributed to secondary school students by the Jubilee Centre. The gender gap in the DIT is more interesting because it intends to assess moral cognition rather than to describe a character profile. It intends to measure *how moral you are* rather than what kind of character you have. Shelving the methodological concerns for the time being, if girls are consistently more 'moral' than boys, what is responsible for this? Is it related to different paths of cognitive development? Is the difference in moral make up of the character profiles associated with girls v boys priming the moral development in girls and boys?

How gender stereotypes shape the story making and storytelling industry
In interviews with Walker Books and Random House for this paper, editors and illustrators shared their views about gendered decision making in publishing based on their professional experience.

The anecdotal evidence from these interviews suggests that there is a dominant view that content aimed at boys has a greater appeal across both sexes, whereas content aimed at girls tends to be less popular with male audiences. To unpack this statement a bit: by 'content aimed at girls', interviewees referred to books with pink covers, or about feminine concepts or characters like princesses and romantic love; by 'content aimed at boys' they referred to a broader spectrum of content from stories with male main characters, about superheroes or action. Whereas the latter have appeal across boys and girls the former stories had only a singular appeal to girls. One interviewee pointed out that ideas around appeal were often based on sales figures, and noted that whilst purchasing behaviours reflect children's interests, they are also highly predicated on parents' views, as buyers, about what their children will like or should like. From the publishing point of view, the greater cross-gender appeal of 'boy led' stories or content primarily aimed at boys, supports publishing and commissioning decisions of male-led character stories, as well as influencing choices on content and character within those stories.

In a parallel development in the educational publishing world, as awareness has increased around the gap between girls' and boys' literacy in primary school (with boys falling behind), the children's book publishing industry has responded by

producing more content aimed explicitly at boys, much of which is reinforcing

stereotypes of 'what boys like' and 'what girls like'.

These are pictures from Hackney Central library in London.

This anecdotal evidence is also mirrored by wider trends in the children's and family film industry.

In 2010, Walt Disney executives declared the 'end' to new films about princesses. This was, somewhat prematurely, embraced as a positive move for girls away from stereotypical female characters to more complex, and active female leads, but in fact, the decision was owed to the dud box office performance of the release of the Princess and the Frog in late 2009, and in particular a failure to successfully court viewership from boys.

The result was a slew of male-led films being made in the following years and a move away from traditional fairy tale stories. But fast forwarding to 2013, and Disney returned to fairy tale terrain, instead experimenting with using different, and more gender neutral, language in the titles of films. A recent New York Times articles from December 1, 2013 explores this in more detail:

A blockbuster response to "Frozen," about two princess sisters and a wisecracking snowman named Olaf, was [not] a sure thing. To justify the film's cost — roughly $250 million in production and global marketing expenses — Disney needed "Frozen" to charm everyone. The studio was confident that girls would show up, but it was scared that boys would take one look and respond with a sneer: Eww, a princess movie.

That concern became deeply ingrained at Disney after the 2009 release of ["The Princess and the Frog,"](#) which was a box-office dud; studio research indicated that boys recoiled in part because of [the word princess](#) in the title. Disney decided to give its next fairy tale musical, centered on Rapunzel, the gender-neutral title ["Tangled,"](#) prompting a mini-controversy.

For "Frozen," very loosely based on the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale [The Snow Queen,](#) Disney's marketing ploys seemed to work. About 43 percent of the opening-weekend audience for the movie was male, according to exit polls. To compare, the first weekend of "Tangled" drew a crowd that was 39 percent male.

Fastforwarding to 2012 and the approach can be definitively called a success. *Brave,* is the Pixar produced and Disney released film about the Scottish, red-headed girl Merida who causes chaos in her kingdom by defying the age old custom of being bethrothed, and in seeking support from a witch, accidently turns her mother into a bear, a situation which she then has to work to rectify. Conceived, written, and directed by Brenda Chapman – Pixar's first female director for a feature length film- she drew inspiration from her relationship with her own daughter. *Brave* was the third highest grossing animated film in 2012, won an Academy Award Golden Globe, and BAFTA for best animated film, and achieved a viewership of 44% male to 56% female.

The *Brave* example suggests that the gender of a lead character is less important than the qualities and characteristics of that character in garnering children's interest in stories.

In the 1970s, 80% of writers of children's books were female yet less than 1% of children's books featured heroines as central characters (The Gender Trap). The fact that women writers, illustrators, and producers are often as much part of reproducing gender norms and marginalising female characters, and therefore female readers and audiences, is a testament to the overwhelming power of what is considered 'the norm' in public discourse. The great disparity in lead female versus lead male roles alongside the clear delineation of males as 'fixers' and females as 'fixed' (crucial in most popular narratives) creates a powerful message about the place of girls and boys in society to audiences of all ages, but has a particularly influential effect on young children, who are so much more open and developing so much more quickly. Despite recent work – raising awareness of gender bias, reducing disparities between visibility of male and female characters on screen and in stories - the cumulative impact of these messages still make up a massive influence on children's development – their character and the feelings they associate with their gender.

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