Is Anthropomorphism in Children's Picture Books Helping to Reinforce Traditional Gender Stereotypes? A Content Analysis Using Gender Schema and Social Role Theories

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Anastasia McDevitt

Abstract

This research is based on a content analysis of five bestselling children's picturebooks in the United Kingdom that employ anthropomorphism – giving human traits to non-human objects, animals, or gods - between January and June 2021 to assess whether the use of anthropomorphism is helping to reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. Approaching the analysis with a pre-determined coding framework, the narrative, visual, and textual elements of the books were explored, focusing on: the construction of gender; the interplay between text, images, colour, and symbols; the representation of gender norms, traits, and behaviours; and the depiction of gender relations and roles. The analysis found that, out of 94 identified characters, 27% were presented as female, 26% male, and 47% ungendered, with more main characters presented as female than male. However, males were more likely to appear as supplementary characters with lines than females were, and female characters appeared most in the category of characters who had no lines at all. A mixed theoretical framework using Gender Schema and Social Role theories underpins the discussion, with four dominant themes covering Gender Cues, Traditional and Reversed Gender Roles, Dominance, Power and Control, and Gender Neutrality.

Keywords

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Introduction

This research examines the textual, visual, and narrative elements found in five bestselling picturebooks for children in 2021 in the United Kingdom which employ anthropomorphism, defined as "the showing or treating of animals, gods, and objects as if they are human in appearance, character, or behaviour" (Cambridge Dictionary 2021). The gender constructions of anthropomorphic characters; representations of gender norms, traits and behaviours; depiction of gender relations and roles; and interplay between text, images, colour, and symbols in the books are analysed and discussed under four themes: Gender Cues; Traditional and Reversed Gender Roles; Dominance, Power and Control; and Gender Neutrality. A combination of Social Role Theory (García-Sánchez, Almendros and et al. 2019) and Gender Schema Theory (Bem 1981) provides the theoretical framework for the discussion, helping to explore whether the use of anthropomorphism in children's picturebooks reinforces traditional gender stereotypes.

Literature Review

Children's picturebooks are characterised by text and illustrations and play a significant role in socialisation and development of children (Moya-Guijarro and Ventola 2021). Gender representation issues in picturebooks have a long history, first drawing attention in the 1970s with seminal research by Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada and Ross (1972) highlighting the underrepresentation of women in titles, central roles, and illustrations as well as the reinforcement of traditional gender stereotypes in award-winning children's books (Berry and Wilkins 2017). Similar data-based findings, 45 years later, revealed that most children's books in 2017 were dominated by male characters in stereotypically masculine roles (Ferguson 2018), with 2018 presenting a white and male-dominated world (Ferguson 2019).

In recent years, a cultural shift has seen diversity and inclusion become international buzzwords within workplaces and industry sectors (Cooper 2006). A move from the publishing industry to adopt this can be seen in a range of activities such as the increase of picturebooks that break gender stereotypes or celebrate gender equality, with an example including *Jabari Jumps* by Gaia Cornwall (2019). Progress also includes Penguin Random House's removal of gender-based labels "for boys" and "for girls" on children's books published under its Ladybird imprint (Shaffi 2014) as well as the annual Publishers Association diversity survey, which reports on gender, BAME and LGBTQI+ representation within publishing workplaces (Anderson 2021).

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Despite this progress, academic research on gender representation and the reinforcement of gender stereotypes continues to yield similar results as the 1970s. A 2020 study found male characters routinely depicted as active and domineering and female characters meek and mild (Tsao 2020). In the same year, a visual and linguistic analysis of four picturebooks found gender stereotypes encoded in image-text relations, features of characters, and relations between male and female characters (Moya-Guijarro and Ventola 2021).

Anthropomorphic figures are popular in children's books to add variety, humour, and emotional distance for young readers (Andrianova 2021) and are an important area of study within the context of gender representation. Any non-human characters that walk, talk, sing or dance are examples of anthropomorphism, such as Peter Rabbit and Winnie-the-Pooh (Cambridge Dictionary 2021). A study of inanimate characters in 103 children's picture books found male characters represented more than females in anthropomorphic form and were typically associated with traditionally male objects such as cars, trucks, trains, and construction equipment (Berry and Wilkins 2017). The fact data has been found within recent years to support research conducted by Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada and Ross almost half a century ago highlights that the study of gender representations in children's picturebooks is still an important focus, particularly with non-human characters who are given human traits.

Methodology

This research relies on a content analysis for the collection of qualitative data through a coding scheme (Lune and Berg 2017) and draws interpretations in words and themes (Bengtsson 2016).

The sample and unit of analysis

A purposive sampling approach allows for the sample to exemplify certain characteristics (Lune and Berg 2017). This approach was best based on needing each title to feature anthropomorphism. The sample was selected using Nielsen BookScan (2021), searching for the bestselling picturebooks in the United Kingdom between January to June 2021 using a TCM Chart with Prompts and "Y1.3 Picture Books" product class. Starting from the top of the list, any books that featured non-anthropomorphic characters were removed and repeated until the top five bestsellers in the list employed anthropomorphism. This date parameter was chosen to ensure the analysis was conducted on current titles, giving an up-to-date angle.

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Studies of gender representation in picturebooks often select a sample from award-winners, because they are "theoretically the best books, but also accessible and widely read" (Kristensen 2016) and if gender stereotypes can be found, they are probably apparent throughout the genre (Taylor 2009). However, not all award-winning books are bestsellers, making an award-winning sample unrepresentative (Kristensen 2016). This study opted for bestsellers, regardless of award status, as they have the highest volume numbers and therefore can help combat the limitations of a small sample size.

The five titles chosen for analysis were *Supertato: Bubbly Troubly* by Sue Hendra and Paul Linnet, *Superpoop* by Sam Harper and Chris Jevons*, Peppa Pig: Peppa's Best Birthday Party* by Lauren Holowaty, *Night Monkey, Day Monkey* by Julia Donaldson and Lucy Richards, and *The Creature Choir* by David Walliams and Tony Ross.

Data collection method

The narrative, textual and visual elements were analysed, including text, illustrations, characters, clothing, use of colour, phrases, storylines, symbols, behaviours, roles, relations, personalities, and anything else related to gender (Taylor 2009).

The analysis took a deductive approach, meaning a coding scheme was created before the process began (Taylor 2009). Underpinning the coding scheme was three categories based on Moya-Guijarro and Ventola's study on gender stereotypes: image-text relations, features of characters, and character relation roles, each with sub-research questions (Table 1).

Research category	Sub questions	Focus on
Image-text relations	How does the narrative and image relations represent gender and what symbols can be seen?	Text, illustrations, symbols, phrases, storylines, use of colour.
Features of characters	To what extent are anthropomorphic characters gendered and what behaviours, physical appearances, interests, and personality traits are exhibited.	Characters, clothing, behaviour, traits, personality.
	Do they reinforce or break traditional gender stereotypes?	
Character relations and roles	What roles do gendered-anthropomorphic characters adopt within the narrative and how are relations between genders presented?	Character roles and relations with others.

Table 1: Research categories and questions

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A table of traditional gendered traits (Table 2) was created using a similar resource found in Taylor's 2009 content analysis of gender stereotypes in children's books, which drew on feminine and masculine traits found in Macionis' *Sociology* (2001).

Feminine traits	Masculine traits
Submissive	Dominant
Dependent	Independent
Unintelligent	Intelligent
Emotional	Rational
Receptive	Assertive
Intuitive	Analytical
Weak	Strong
Timid	Brave
Passive	Active
Cooperative	Competitive
Sensitive	Insensitive

Table 2: Gendered traits based on traditional gender stereotypes

To further explore representations of gender, an inductive approach was also utilised to pick out areas of significance not included in the above coding scheme.

Analysis method

To draw meaning from the chosen sample a qualitative approach was adopted, however the frequency of male and female-gendered characters was also quantified.

The theoretical approach was based on Social Role and Gender Schema theories. Gender Schema Theory describes how young children can learn information about gender roles from a number of socialising agents, which allows for the creation of "gender schemas" to organise gender-related knowledge, understand their own lived experience and make decisions on how to behave according to the gender they identify with (Steinke 2005).

While gender schemas are important for child development, they can also contribute to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes (Koss 2015) and one socialising agent children can learn information from is books (Coats 2017). This theory was chosen as the critical lens to examine patterns found in the content analysis regarding gender markers, behaviours, and characteristics from the perspective of how a child might interpret the representations.

Complementing Gender Schema Theory, which is concerned with societal and cultural influences on children's creation of schemas (Cherry 2020), was Eagly's 1987 Social Role Theory, which argues that widely accepted gender stereotypes are formed because communities divide different roles and responsibilities within society based on gender (García-Sánchez et al. 2019). This theory focuses on how family, organisations and communities have caused men and women to behave in different ways and that stereotypical gender roles are produced by social norms and shared expectations of how a particular gender should behave (Dulin 2007). This theory helped to frame the discussion of how genders roles, relations and power dynamics were represented in the chosen sample.

Results

A total of 94 characters were identified with 27% female, 26% male and 47% ungendered (table 3). In all titles, seven main characters were identified, 57% female and 43% male. Two out of five titles featured a villain character, both presented as male. Characters with and without lines were grouped, resulting in 22 characters with lines and 63 without. Out of the 22 characters with lines, 32% presented female, 41% male and 27% ungendered. Characters without lines were 22% female, 16% male, and 62% ungendered.

Total characters	Main characters	Villains	Other with lines	Other without lines	Total
Female	4	0	7	14	25
Male	3	2	9	10	24
Ungendered	0	0	6	39	45
Total	**7**	**2**	**22**	**63**	**94**
Female %	57%	0	32%	22%	27%
Male %	43%	100%	41%	16%	26%
Ungendered %	0	0	27%	62%	47%

Table 3: Character breakdown according to gender

More main characters presented female, however male characters accounted for all villains, and were more likely to have lines as supplementary characters than females were. Characters with no visible gender markers made up the majority of those without lines, followed by female characters. Out of all four groupings, females appeared most in the category without lines. To complement the quantitative data, themes of significance based on Gender Cues, Traditional and Reversed Gender Roles, Dominance, Power and Control and Gender Neutrality are discussed in the next section.

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Discussion

Gender cues

Prior studies on gender representation in children's picturebooks conclude that females are underrepresented (Scott 2020), however this study found that after the 47% ungendered characters, there were more characters with visible feminine attribution cues than males.

Gender attribution comprises physical, behavioural, and textual cues (Bornstein 2003) and, according to Gender Schema Theory, children will create gender schemas by looking for gender-specific cues in whatever media is available in their society (Vinney 2019). Textual gender cues that could contribute to gender schemas include gender pronouns such as "he", "him", "her", and "she". In *Superpoop* and *Peppa's Best Birthday Party*, masculine and feminine names were used such as "Peppa Pig", "Octogirl" and "Mummy Mouse" for female characters and "Doug", "Mr Rabbit", and "Safety Stan" for male characters.

Out of the 25 female characters, most exhibit at least one form of stereotypical physical gender cue, with makeup, long eyelashes and use of colour predominate markers (figure 1). In *Night Monkey, Day Monkey*, Night Monkey is established as female with a flower in her hair and long eyelashes. Similarly, the two main characters in *Peppa's Best Birthday Party* are shown wearing dresses in colours culturally associated with a specific gender (Cunningham and Macrae 2011), in this case pink or purple to signify femininity. In *Superpoop*, two out of the five superheroes are female with textual cues including "Octogirl" and the use of feminine pronouns.

Figure 1: Main female characters

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Reinforcing the construction of gender is Octogirl's pink body and thick blond hair, with Giganta-Raffe wearing a pink eye mask and jet pack. Similarly to characters in *Peppa's Best Birthday Party* and *Night Monkey, Day Monkey*, both female characters in *Superpoop* have long eyelashes. Furthermore, when two elephant characters feature side by side, the only difference distinguishing their genders are eyelashes and rosy cheeks for the female (figure 2).

Figure 2: *Superpoop* male and female character comparison

In contrast, *The Creature Choir*'s main character, anthropomorphised by speech, singing and a knitted hat, is assigned female pronouns, but did not display any obvious feminine markers. Figure 3 shows the main character, Warble, on the left in comparison to male characters. There is little difference other than their sizes and without the textual cue of gender pronouns, a reader could mistake Warble for male, particularly with a 2011 study on almost 6,000 children's books in mind, where Janice McCabe found that gender-neutral animal characters were frequently identified as male by mothers reading to their children (Flood 2011), suggesting that the default character is male unless specific, obvious and recognisable female markers are apparent.
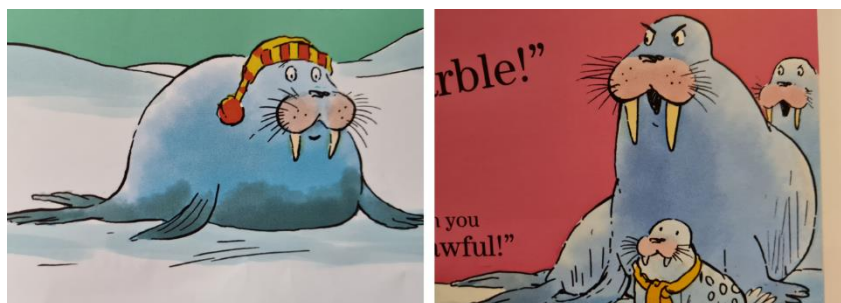

Figure 3: *The Creature Choir* male and female character comparison

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Female markers also cross age boundaries, specifically in *Peppa's Best Birthday Party*. The adult characters, Miss Rabbit and Mummy Rabbit, are dressed similarly to the child characters, but are distinguished as older with more pronounced eye make-up (figure 4). As picturebooks play an important role in early sex-role socialization (Coats 2017), stereotypes that only women wear make-up, have long eyelashes, or wear pink play a negative role in informing children's gender schemas, further fuelling gender stereotypes.

Figure 4: Feminine gender markers across age groups

Male gender markers have less focus on embellishment and decoration. Similarly to how the elephants' genders are distinguished, Day Monkey *in Night Monkey, Day Monkey* presents male through what he doesn't have – a flower in his hair or long eyelashes like Night Monkey (figure 5). This suggests that these two titles represent the male version of a human as the dominant, default type that is then added to, embellished, or decorated to characterise as female.

Figure 5: Day Monkey vs. Night Monkey gender markers

As in seen in figure 6, instead of wearing dresses like the female characters in *Peppa's Best Birthday Party*, all male characters have rounded bodies in masculine colours such as blue (Cunningham and Macrae 2011). The colours red and yellow are also used for male

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characters' clothing, but in darker shades than the female characters, who are all in light pastel colours. The four male characters in figure 6 embody more exotic, large or dangerous animals than the females: a fox, particularly dangerous to the female characters who are sheep, pigs and rabbits; a giraffe and rhino which are more exotic than the farm animals; and a horse, much larger than all the female characters. These male characters are also seen to group together throughout the narrative creating a gender divide, but also allowing for the female characters to dominate the story.

Figure 6: Male characters in *Peppa's Best Birthday Party*

In *Supertato* and *Superpoop*, both title characters play the role of superheroes. A study on gender stereotypes in popular products for children found that male characters were more likely to be portrayed with masculine characteristics such as functional clothing and body-in-motion poses (Murnen et al. 2015), which can be seen in both titles (figure 7). Superpoop has little else except what he needs to complete superhero missions – functional, protective googles, a cape to signify his superhero role, and a waistbelt full of tools.

Similarly, Supertato has a belt and an eye mask to hide his identity, with both characters posing with confidence.

Figure 7: Main male characters in *Superpoop* and *Supertato*

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Superpoop is, as the name suggests, an illustrated faeces anthropomorphised by speech and clothing. Anthropomorphising a result of a bodily function, along with the superhero context, points to this text being marketed predominately at male readers and can be linked to one of the four types of "subversive/transgressive" humour in children's literature, "the comic grotesque" (Cross 2011), which incorporates bodily realism and toilet humour and is strongly present in humorous fiction aimed at boys. It also reinforces the societal myth that girls do not go to the toilet or pass gas, with a professor of psychology noting that the bathroom is saturated with gender and associates women with purity, acting as a double standard for hygiene with women expected to be clean, odourless, and groomed (Bennet and McCall 2019).

Traditional and Reversed Gender Roles

Previous research on gender representations in children's books has collectively found female characters more commonly depicted in the home, doing traditionally feminine activities such as caregiving or baking, and taking passive roles in the narrative, whereas male characters are active, brave, adventurous, and assertive (Munro 2015). Social Role Theory explains this as sex differences and similarities arising from the distribution of men and women into social roles, all acting to form expected behaviours that support the division of labour with women more likely to be homemakers and men more likely to have roles that involve physical strength, assertiveness, or leadership skills (Eagly and Wood 2016). A significant number of examples supporting this argument was found in this study, however a mixture of representations with traditionally stereotypical male and female behaviour, roles and relations blurred was also observed.

The clearest representation of gender roles found in the sample was the portrayal of two male superheroes in *Superpoop* and *Supertato*. A study on stereotypes in contemporary colouring books found that male characters were more commonly depicted as superheroes (Fitzpatrick and McPherson 2010). Supertato appears larger than all the other vegetable characters, signifying his dominance and leadership of the group and saves the day without any issues by solving the problem using science. This shows his intelligence, which is a masculine characteristic according to the feminine and masculine traits found in Macionis' *Sociology* (2001). Superpoop does not exhibit such intelligence, and instead experiences failed missions, which are successfully completed by other superheroes, two of whom are female. Octogirl is introduced as confident and capable, exclaiming that she will "untangle this mess in no time!" making Superpoop appear weak and less able. Despite the blurred gender traits and roles, *Superpoop* ends with the title character finally saving the day because no one else can, with

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the two female superheroes gushing, congratulating him, and ultimately repositioning themselves as damsels who need saving.

In both superhero titles, the villains present male (figure 8) – a large green crocodile wearing a black and white striped top in *Superpoop* and a small frozen pea in *Supertato*. Villains are commonly depicted as male, with an in-depth analysis of 100 popular children's picture books in 2018 finding that male villains were eight times more likely to appear than female villains (Ferguson 2018).

Figure 8: Male villains in *Supertato* and *Superpoop*

Occupational gender stereotyping is also apparent in *Superpoop* and *Peppa's Best Birthday Party.* Male occupations in *Superpoop* include a lifeguard, professor, businessman, and plumber portrayed by Superpoop's waistbelt with tools, with female characters generally having no occupation at all. In *Peppa's Best Birthday Party*, the children at the party are supervised by the caregiving mother, Mummy Mouse, who observes and passively follows. Miss Rabbit leads the group of children around and answers questions, however, it is Mr Rabbit who conducts the technical aspect of the tour and operates the aeroplane ride. Characters without lines include a mother and daughter on a slide, as well as a father and son. The difference between these pairings was that the father and son are running to the ride, whereas the mother passively stands watching the daughter.

Despite the appearance of several occupations typical of a particular gender, role reversal of traditional gender behaviours is visible in two titles. In *Peppa's Best Birthday Party*, Mandy Mouse and Peppa Pig play more of an active role in the narrative than male characters. More female characters have lines than males, and most lines from Peppa are inquisitive and confident, whereas the first time a male child character has a line is near the end of the story and is in agreement with a female character.

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In *Night Monkey, Day Monkey*, female Night Monkey is introduced as playful, brave and independent, and teases Day Monkey, who is male, for his "daft" questions. These untraditional feminine behavioural and personality traits are reinforced further in comparison to the unconventional masculine portrayal of Day Monkey's fear and hesitancy. Halfway through the narrative, the characters switch roles, with Night Monkey scared and Day Monkey brave. This format allows for a mixture of traditional feminine and masculine traits, behaviours, and roles to be applied to both the male and female characters, reflecting what is realistically a blurred gender binary in wider society (Munro 2015).

Dominance, Power and Control

Across cultures, studies have shown that men are socially dominant (Küpper and Zick 2009) and, in children's books, power and superiority are usually traits of male characters (Hussein and Ali 2021). *Superpoop* and *Supertato* exhibit dominance as superheroes, and, in the instances that Superpoop fails, it is usually because of another male – Dynamo Dog, Cat Attack, and the much larger hippo lifeguard, who capture Superpoop and exert control over the smaller character. In *The Creature Choir*, a display of male power is demonstrated when "the biggest, fattest" male walrus tells the main female character, Warble, that she can't sing anymore because she is terrible. The next day, Warble sings, resulting in the male walrus encouraging the other characters to abandon Warble because she disobeyed him. Ending the story, Warble wins a choir competition, and the male walrus and others apologise, reversing the power dynamic but portraying Warble as forgiving and subordinate.

Gender Neutrality

Hill and Bartow Jacobs' observation of school children's responses to non-human characters' identities found that even with ungendered characters, children drew on the social binary of boy/girl, as well as similar social norms and gender expectations to assign a particular gender (Hill and Bartow Jacobs 2020). All main characters in the sample were gendered, with only 13% of ungendered characters having lines. *Supertato* presented only male and ungendered characters, and the majority of *The Creature Choir* was made up of ungendered characters. As a researcher, it was difficult to ignore the significance that my first response to the ungendered characters was presuming they were male – a first-hand example of a reader drawing on their own learned social binary of gender and supporting Coat's (2018) argument that when an animal character is ungendered in a picture book, most readers gender it male. From this, it can be argued that simply having the appearance of gender-neutral characters as supplementary background characters without lines is not enough to equally balance the representation of traditional genders binaries, which have dominated this sample.

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Conclusion

The underrepresentation of female characters was not the most prominent issue as expected based on previous research, with more main and supplementary characters presenting female than male. Supporting this finding is Hussein and Ali's study on female characters in children's picturebooks, which also found that underrepresentation of female characters was shrinking (Hussein and Ali 2021). However, despite the equal representation in quantitative form, gender markers, roles, relations, and power dynamics reinforce traditional ideas of gender, suggesting that anthropomorphism is helping to maintain gender stereotypes.

Apparent in the sample was recognisable feminine and masculine names and pronouns, which on their own do not constitute stereotyping, however the female characters exhibited gender cues typical of femininity – pink clothing, makeup, and long eyelashes. Female characters are assigned their gender based on what the male characters do not have, reinforcing the idea that the male human is dominant and supporting studies that argue non-gendered characters are perceived as male unless specific feminine markers are present (Flood 2011; Coats 2018; Hill and Jacob 2020).

In the application of anthropomorphism, stereotypes play an instrumental role in recognition (Persson, Laaksolahti and Lönnqvis 2000), playing on readers' gender schemas. This study presents an overall traditional portrayal of the gender binary, which ultimately illustrates that anthropomorphism in children's picturebooks is not only helping to reinforce gender stereotypes but is doing so in a very noticeable way. To take this research further, a similar study with a larger sample size or integrating the use of observational methods to assess how children identify characters' genders would provide richer qualitative data.

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