Children's Construction of Fantasy Stories: Gender Differences in Conflict Resolution Strategies'

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Abstract:

While much work has been done on sex role development in children, conflict resolution, and sex role stereotyping in literature and television, little research has investigated conflict resolution and stereotyping in the fantasies children create themselves. The present study, analyzing gender differences in children's writing of fantasy stories, found significant differences in conflict resolutions they created. Boys used more violent resolutions to solve problems, while girls used more reasoning and analysis. Stories written by both sexes were— more often than not— sex role stereotyped, with female characters in traditional occupations and passive activities.

Article:

From the minute she is born, her sex is ascertained, and someone shouts, "It's a girl!" the female child is pressured to behave differently from the boy next door. She is dressed in pink, given dolls to play with, and handled more gently than her neighbor, who is dressed in blue, given toy soldiers to play with, and treated less like fragile glass. By the age of two, both children will have internalized the idea that there are boy things and girl things, and will prefer sex-appropriate toys and same-sex peers (Martin & Halverson, 1981). They will also demonstrate a knowledge of sex role stereotypes in the adult culture (Kuhn, Nash, & Brucken, 1978). Between the ages of three and five, their preference for sex-appropriate toys and activities will become increasingly stereotyped (Barry & Barry, 1976; Fling & Manosevitz, 1972) and they will become aware of sex-stereotyped behavior among adults (Muller & Gold-berg, 1980).

The boy will learn to be competitive (Baxter & Shepherd, 1978), and more concerned with control and uniqueness (Yelsma & Brown, 1985). He will play outdoors, in team sports and fantasy games, and she will play in-doors with dolls and board games (Pearson, 1985). As a result, he will have greater freedom of bodily and vocal behavior than she will. His involvement in socially approved competitive situations will lead him to become a specialist in interpersonal competition while she will become more adept at socio-emotional skills than he (Lever, 1976; Pearson, 1985).

The sex roles they observe on television and read about in books will contribute to their stereotyped view of the world. Several surveys of children's literature have revealed a preponderance of male characters, stereo-typed sex roles, and limited career options for women (Pearson, 1985).

Cooper (1984) found that males are portrayed as bankers, sailors, musicians, tailors, mine workers, farmers, magicians, and adventure seekers; women are portrayed as mothers, teachers, receptionists, nurses, caterers, musicians, professors, doctors, store owners, salespersons, and warriors. The overwhelming majority of mothers are depicted as serving, kind, and attentive—passive observers (Oliver, 1974; Pearson, 1985; Rachlin & Vogt, 1974).

These sex-stereotyped images may have an effect: several studies have shown that children pay closer attention

to or prefer stories in which characters display traditional sex role behavior (Jennings, 1975; Kolinsky, 1979; Kropp & Halverson, 1983). But counterstereotyped models also appear to have an effect. When asked about career preferences after hearing stories about characters in nontraditional roles, younger children made more non-traditional choices than older children (Lutes-Dunckley, 1978).

Similar findings have been reported after exposing children to counterstereotyped protrayals in television programs and commercials (Atkin, 1975; (Davidson, Yasuna, & Tower, 1979; Miller & Reeves, 1976). Atkin, for example, found that children who were shown a commercial featuring a woman as a judge were more likely to rate the profession as appropriate for women than were those in the control group.

But because television is more likely than not to be sex stereotyped, (Courtney & Whipple, 1974; Gerbner, 1972; Tedesco, 1974; Turow, 1974), heavy viewers are more likely than light viewers to have stereotypic beliefs (Beuf, 1974; Frueh & McGhee, 1975).

There is also ample evidence that television characters may influence-how children and adolescents resolve conflicts (Roloff & Greenberg, 1979) and develop sex role attitudes (Frueh & McGhee, 1975; Gross, 1974; Liebert, 1975; Liebert, Neale, & Davidson, 1973; Miller & Reeves, 1976).

Based on the above discussion, it appears that socialization is homogenizing and conforming, but as Wrong (1961) points out, perhaps this view reflects an oversocialized conception. Although all people are socialized to become human, Wrong says, this does not mean they have become completely molded by the particular norms and values of their culture. There may be instances in which they deviate from the norms and resist conformity.

Creative activity is an area in which it is safe to deviate— particularly creative activity done without input or interference from others. Creative writing, for example, affords children the opportunity to experiment with roles, try new things, practice skills, and exercise their imaginations in a situation in which there is little risk.

Will the stereotypes remain when children are given free rein to create whatever they want? Specifically, will children's writing reflect sex role differences and stereotyped attitudes when they have been given the task of writing about a world of their own design? Are there differences between boys and girls in the types of fantasy stories they write? Are the characters and roles they create stereotypically masculine and feminine? What kinds of conflicts and conflict resolutions do they present? Have gender differences become so in-grained that children cannot imagine the world any way but the way it is?

Based on the literature, it was expected that boys would create different fantasies from those of the girls. We expected, however, the sweeping social changes of the past 15 years to have some effect on the fantasies children invented. As the majority of mothers with children under 18 enter the labor force and previously male-dominated professions become acceptable fields for women, and as men are beginning to take a greater part in home and child care, we expected broader, more flexible ideas about the roles of men and women to be reflected in the stories children invent. Similarly, as the public has become more aware of violence as a social problem, we would hope to see children depict more creative means of resolving conflicts in their stories. Despite these social changes, we hypothesize that boys will use a significantly greater number of violent and/or aggressive conflict resolution strategies than will girls.

METHOD
Participants
A sample of 266 students at selected schools in Birmingham and Cull-man, Alabama, and Leoma, Tennessee, served as participants in this study. The students ranged in age from 9 to 14 years old, with most students falling into the 11- to 13-year-old age group. (There was one 9-year-old, one 10-year-old, and ten 14-year-olds in the sample. Forty-one percent of the sample was 12 years old, $N = 110$; 36% of the sample was 13 years old, $N = 95$; and 18% of the sample was 11, $N = 49$.) Equal numbers of boys and girls participated. The sample was predominantly white; 5% was black and 1% was oriental. Although not considered a probability sample of all

preadolescents or even all Southern preadolescents, the students in the sample did represent a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and abilities from very small to medium and large metropolitan areas.

Procedure

The students were asked to invent a story, which was written in their classroom as part of regular writing activity but not to be graded by the teacher. The students were allowed to write about anything they liked with no restrictions. In addition, students were advised that authorship of these stories would remain anonymous.

The categories chosen for content analysis of these stories were based on the physical, social, and emotional aspects of the fantasy characters and plots the children created, Special attention was paid to the gender of characters and the adjectives children used to describe the characters they invented. Setting and plot were analyzed to see if basic themes or genre types emerged. Stories were classified as comedy, horror, scientific fiction, western, adventure-fantasy, family stories, murder mysteries, romances, or placed in an "other" category.

The kinds of conflicts the children imagined, if any, were given careful consideration. Conflicts were coded as either competitive, such as those involving sports and games; conflicts within a person; conflicts between a person and society; conflicts between individuals; conflicts within a family; conflicts between families, such as feuds; conflicts within organizations, such as the FBI or CIA; conflicts between nature and humanity; conflicts within nature, which included the predatory behavior of animals; conflicts between humans and machines, such as those involving people and robots or computers; and conflicts between good and evil, such as evil forces attempting to command the universe. Several stories presented more than one conflict. These were coded as either primary or secondary conflicts, depending on the emphasis they received in the story. The resolution of conflicts in the stories was coded as being either violent (the use of physical force) or nonviolent (the use of reasoning, persuasion, compromise, etc.). Within the violently resolved category, stories were coded on a 5-point scale ranging from excessive use of violence to minimal use of violence. (Here the number of times violence was employed was considered as well as the described intensity of the violent act.) In the nonviolently resolved category, stories were coded similarly, ranging from displaying a great amount of reasoning to solve problems to letting problems solve themselves. Stories were also coded as ending happily, somewhat happily, having neither a happy nor a sad ending, somewhat sadly, or having a sad ending.

Average intercoder reliability for three coders was 87%.

RESULTS

Story Genres

The preferred genre for the boys' stories was science fiction, with 41% of the boys choosing to write stories that could be clearly classified as science fiction. (See Table I.) These were stories involving travel to other planets, alien creatures, fantastic inventions, and mad scientists. This genre was nearly as populated among the girls; 31% of the girls wrote stories that could be classified in this category. There was no significant difference between boys and girls when it came to writing in the science fiction genre.

However, more girls than boys wrote crossover stories — stories that combined science fiction with romance, adventure, horror, mystery, or come-dy. Thirty-seven percent of the girls in the sample wrote stories that could not be clearly classified or fell into unanticipated categories. For example, some of the girls wrote satires of television commercials and fictions about rock stars, but no particular unanticipated classification predominated. The difference between boys and girls in the use of a recognized genre was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 6.24$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$).

Although more of the stories written by boys could be easily classified as belonging to a particular genre, 25% of the boys wrote stories that could not be clearly classified or fell into unanticipated categories. The main unanticipated category to emerge from this classification was war. Nine percent of the boys chose to write war stories. The war stories range from Rambo-like adventures to general descriptions of imaginary war-torn

countries. For example, one 13-year-old boy wrote about a violent land where wars were frequent. "People don't get along with each other," he wrote. "They don't listen to reason. The people would rather fight than get along. You would have to tie their hands behind their backs and tape their mouth up to make them listen."

Table I. Percentages[a] of Story Genres by Sex

	Boys	Girls[a]
Science fiction	41	31
Crossover	25	37[b]
Fantasy–adventure	15	12
Family	6	7
Horror	5	3
Mystery	3	5
Comedy	3	3
Romance	2	3

[a]Percentages for girls add up to more than 100% because of rounding.
[b]$p < .05$.

The next most popular category was fantasy-adventure. Fifteen percent of the boys and 12% of the girls wrote stories classified as fantasy-adventure. As with science fiction, there was no significant difference between boys and girls in choosing this genre. However, treatments did vary. Many of these stories were fairy-tale-type stories involving imaginary heroes and fantasy creatures like unicorns and cyclops. Unicorns were particular favorites among young girls writing in this genre. Also classified as fantasy were stories involving primitive Conan-the-Barbarian-type figures, like the warriors chief invented by one 12-year-old boy, who made his primitive hero discover fire, which his tribe used to fight off enemy tribes and "dinisours." The fantasy-adventure stories written by boys tended to be more action oriented than those written by girls. The girls tended to become more involved in the descriptions of their fantasyland and its inhabitants than in relating adventures. Many of the fantasy-adventury stories written by girls were set in eerie, cartoon-like fairylands, such as the story written by one 12-year-old girl in which she described a "pink sky, lavender grass, yellow trees with lavender branches and spring everywhere." One 11-year-old girl wrote about a fantasy land full of hard-edged geometric shapes and people that "looked like Qubert."

Stories about families were written by both boys and girls in nearly equal numbers. Seven percent of the girls and 6% of the boys wrote stories about family adventures or troubles. Five percent of the boys and 3% of the girls chose to write stories with horror themes; these included stories about terrible monsters or mad killers. Five percent of the girls and 3% of the boys chose to write mysteries in which crime was detected and solved. An equal number of boys and girls (3%) wrote comedies. As with the horror genre, the difference between boys and girls in choosing to write mysteries was not significant. Three percent of the girls wrote romances, while less than 2% of the boys chose this genre. While this might appear significant, more than 2% of the expected frequencies were less than five, violating the assumptions of χ^2 (Siegel, 1956, p. 46).

Stories about utopias abounded in the science fiction, fantasy-adventure, family, and "other" categories for both boys and girls. For example, one 12-year-old girl wrote about a land she called Tree." "This is a quiet and peaceful [world]," she wrote. "You can imagine this world because nothing dies, the world just gets bigger." In many of these utopias both boys and girls were careful to point out that there were no schools. Also, both girls and boys were equally likely to mention the absence of money problems in their utopias. One 12-year-old girl wrote, "No one will be poor and no one will be rich. They will all be middle class people that live in [a] two story house. Most of these houses will be either purple or pink." A 12-year-old boy wrote, "The government will furnish the money for everyone equally." Several boys (4%) wrote about flying a spacecraft to an alien planet populated only by beautiful, adolescent girls. In a story he called "Woman World," (one of two stories with this theme and title) a 13-year-old boy wrote about being the only man on a planet full of naked women. None of the girls wrote about utopias populated only by handsome or naked boys.

Characters
Analysis of characters revealed that 11% of the girls wrote stories in which the main character was male. Thirty-two percent wrote stories about female characters. In 3% of the girls' stories, the sex of the leading

character could not be identified. In 54% of the girls' stories no one character clearly predominated. A typical story of this type had no protagonists or antagonists, but descriptions of whole populations or groups. Forty-four percent of the boys chose to write about male characters, while only one chose to make a female character the protagonist of his story. In 9% of the boys' stories, the sex of the character could not be identified. In 47% of the boys' stories, no one character clearly predominated. There was a significant difference between boys and girls in the gender of the characters they chose to write about ($\chi^2 = 71.6$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$). One hundred and seventeen main characters emerged from the stories that could be clearly assigned to a gender —43 female characters and 74 male characters. The difference between the number of male and female leading characters was also significant ($\chi^2 = 8.2$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$).

As in fiction written for children, leading male characters in the stories that children invented themselves played a larger variety of roles than female characters. Male characters were rock stars, aliens, kings, fantasy creatures, explorers, soldiers, scientists, robots, motorcycle stunt men, engineers, etc. The total number of different roles for male characters was 53. Leading female characters tended to have more traditional roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, although some of these were queens or princesses as well. The total number of different roles for female characters was 12. A χ^2 goodness-of-fit test show significant differences between assignments of roles to male and female characters ($\chi^2 = 25.86$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$).

Occasionally, when writing adventures in the first person, the girls would cast themselves in the role of explorer, but very often these female explorers were passive, taken care of by friendly aliens or kings. Or, as in the case of a story written by another 11-year-old, the explorer is taken care of by a creature, in this case a flying, talking unicorn, whose gender is uncertain. The young author writes, "He [the unicorn] told me to take a rest and in the morning it [the unicorn] would take me for a ride. So I made a bed and went to sleep. The next morning I found myself in my own room with cup of hot tea beside me."

More boys than girls chose to populate their stories with villains or sinister elements. These were coded on a 6-point scale ranging from a very high number of sinster elements to none at all ($\chi^2 = 21.48$, $df = 10$, $p \leq .05$).

There were no differences between boys and girls in choosing whether to make leading characters into aliens, humans, animals, or machines. Hu-man beings were the predominating characters (44%) followed by aliens (26%) and animals (14%). Fourteen percent of the boys and 7% of the girls made a machine, such as a computer, robot, or car, a leading character. Eight percent of the girls and 2% of the boys had animated plants or objects as leading characters. Gender of the writers was not a reliable predictor of the type of character chosen.

Conflicts and Conflict Resolutions

Many of the children (29% of the sample) chose to avoid conflicts in their stories altogether or to give them only the vaguest mention. For example, one girl wrote about a utopia in which there were "no problems —but if some occur they will be solved the best way possible." Thirty-four percent of the girls and 24% of the boys had no conflicts in their stories. If conflicts did occur they tended to be between individuals (23%) or between nature and humanity (16%). Human abuse of the environment and animals was an important concern for both boys and girls, and was classified in the category of conflict between nature and humanity.

Six percent of the conflicts children created were within individuals, 7% were between an individual and society, 4% were between humanity and machines, 4% were between families, 5% were between good and evil, 2% were competition, 2% were within nature, and 1% occurred within a family.

Secondary conflicts also tended to be either between individuals or between nature and humanity.

Guttman's coefficient of predictability λ showed a low ($\lambda = .20$) association between a young writer's gender and the type of conflict chosen to write about. More girls than boys chose to avoid conflicts in their stories and more girls than boys chose to write about internal conflicts. Only boys chose to write about conflicts between humans and machines.

Table II. Cross Tabulation of Degree of Violence Chosen in Story Resolutions and Young Writers' Sex[a]

	Very high degree of violence	High degree of violence	Somewhat violent	Nonviolent	Row totals
Girls	16	12	59	46	133
	12.2	9.2	44.6	34.8	
Boys	40	17	43	33	133
	30.1	12.8	32.3	24.8	
Column total	56	29	102	79	266
	21.1	10.9	38.3	29.7	

[a] $\chi^2 = 16.26$, $df = 6$, $p < .01$.

χ^2 tests showed significant differences between girls and boys in the way these conflicts were resolved, with boys tending to avoid the nonviolent resolutions. Again, these were coded on a 6-point scale ranging from a very high degree of violence to no violence at all. ($\chi^2 = 18.08$, $df = 10$, $p < .05$). More boys than girls were likely to choose the extremely violent resolutions to problems, such as the murder of an enemy (see Table II).

A good illustration of this general finding is the story written by an 11-year-old girl about a ranch in a fantasy world where horses, flying horses, and unicorns were raised together. In this story a daughter of the man who owned the ranch had her pet unicorn stolen. The daughter had a hard time getting her unicorn back from the man who had stolen him, but she learned that the thief really loved unicorns. She solved her problem by finding another unicorn for the thief and by doing so was able to retrieve her own pet. A story with a similar conflict about the theft of a prized robot was written by a 12-year-old boy, but this author chose a more violent resolution to his story. Instead of analyzing the motives behind the theft of the robot and approaching the thieves with diplomacy, the young author had his hero band together with friends and go after the thieves with guns ablazing.

More girls than boys were likely to let the conflicts in their stories solve themselves. For example, one girl wrote a story about a fight between two friends. The friends avoided each other until they forgot what the fight was about, then they were friends again.

There were small but significant differences between boys and girls when it came to moralizing about the resolutions to their stories. Eighty-four per-cent of the children chose not to make any moral statement. Eighty percent of the girls and 87% of the boys made no moral judgments about the action of their characters. Sixteen percent of the children did make moral or value judgments about the behavior of characters in their stories. Most of the young authors who chose to make a moral statement were female ($\chi^2 = 4.02$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$).

There were no significant differences between boys and girls when it came to ending their stories or leaving their characters in a happy or sad state. Even stories with violent conflict resolutions often ended "happily ever after." Forty-six percent of the stories ended happily or somewhat happily, 37% had a neutral ending, and 17% had an ending that was sad or somewhat sad.

DISCUSSION
The results of this study seem to reflect previous research concerning sex role stereotyping by the media. As with plots children are exposed to in the media, the stories written by children tended to portray male characters as more violent in their approaches to conflicts and more varied in their occupations. Female characters were more traditional in their occupations and less violent in their methods of conflict resolution. Female authors tended to avoid conflicts in their stories or to use nonviolent means of resolving conflicts. Male authors were more likely to use violent conflict resolutions. In addition, leading characters in the children's stories tended to be the same sex as the author, although girls were more likely to write about male protagonists than were boys to write about female protagonists.

The social changes brought about by the movement of women and mothers into the work force did not seem to have much effect on the stories children created. Few female characters in the children's stories were active or

working, and most were passive. When the occasional aggressive female did appear, she was usually evil or undesirable. Utopias invented by the girls reinforced traditional sex role characterizations as well, so that even in the most ideal worlds or fairylands there was little flexibility in what were considered appropriate roles for women or men.

It might be concluded that young girls were either contented with a traditional future for themselves or could see no other possibilities. One reason for seeing limited possibilities could be traced to lifestyle options observed in their own homes. Although these data were not available to us, perhaps children of working mothers as opposed to mothers not employed outside the home might be more likely to see broader options for female characters. A future study should investigate this possible relationship. Another reason for limited possibilities might be that the girls were simply acting their ages — conformity reaches its peak during the middle childhood years when children believe rules require rigid imitation of others (Piaget, 1932). The results might be different with younger or older subjects; a future study could investigate this as well.

One of the more interesting findings was the tendency for both boys and girls to omit conflicts from their stories altogether, though this tendency was stronger among girls than boys. For these children, ideal worlds were not ones in which problems or conflicts were solved productively and happily, but ones in which conflicts did not occur at all. There are several possibilities for this finding. Perhaps these children — either through lack of imagination or exposure to other potentials — could only conceive of conflict as leading to violence and did not wish to include violence in their fantasies. Perhaps it was simpler for these children to write stories in which conflicts were omitted. Or perhaps these children truly preferred passive, descriptive fantasies without the excitement of conflict.

Finally, more boys than girls seem tied to violent strategies for ending conflict. Opponents are often physically restrained or eliminated in the fantasy stories written by boys. Girls are more varied in the resolution strategies employed in their fantasy stories. These included reasoning, analysis, trickery, and avoidance. This finding is consistent with that of Block (1978), and with the literature regarding children's play, which found that boys were active while girls were passive. In addition, girls were more likely to place a value judgment on the way the characters in their stories behaved.

Perhaps the most important finding of the study is the willingness of children to bring stereotyped sex role portrayal to the characters of their own fantasy stories even when given the freedom to write whatever they wished under the promise of anonymity. Results suggest that Southern schoolchildren have internalized society's expectations for them. A girl child is expected to be passive and cooperative, while a boy child is expected to be aggressive and competitive. The children did not think of defying cultural norms — not even in their wildest dreams.

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