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Nathan N. Taylor
Robert Morris University

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Hegemonic Masculinities and Children's Picture Books

About the Author(s)

Dr. Nathan N. Taylor is an Assistant Professor at Robert Morris University in the Department of Education.

Keywords

hegemonic masculinities, picture books, patriarchy, feminism, gender



HEGEMONIC MASCULINITIES AND CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS

Nathan N. Taylor, Robert Morris University

Abstract

This study focused on the role of hegemonic masculinities in children's picture books. Chiefly, marginalized and subordinated masculinities are highlighted to investigate their relationships with dominant and complicit masculinities. This was done under a feminist reading of patriarchy and the connection between patriarchy and masculinities. Utilizing a critical discourse analysis framework, the author problematizes the personal transformation of the protagonists in three children's picture books. The personal transformation attends to the masculine subject on an individual level but fails to address how hegemonic masculinities and patriarchy operate at a discursive and corporeal level. Suggestions are made from the findings on promoting new ways of addressing gender inequities in the U.S.

Introduction

The focus on the enactment of masculinities in children's literature from feminist perspectives is critical in highlighting the inequities that exist in the larger U.S. society. These inequities emerge in the form of social structures, ideologies, and intersecting identities. To build on the work of gender representations in children's picture books from a feminist and critical position, this article will position the masculine subject across three articulations: the racialized minority, the indigenous masculinity, and the queer¹ boy.

To guide this examination, the author posits two guiding questions. First, in the 21st century, how are masculinities being positioned in children's picture books? Two, does this positioning differ across different identities (i.e. the racialized minority, the indigenous masculinity, and the queer boy)? If so, how and what does this differing tell us about the state of gender inequities in the U.S?

The focus on men and masculinities is not an apolitical choice. As Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) note, '...the tendency for sociologists to embrace the men-and-(fill in the blank) pattern when studying men and masculinities has, in our view, becoming limiting' (p. 278). As such, and undergirding this piece of research, the author focuses on how men's lived experience incorporeal and discursive formations help to place in relief how '...women as a group are subordinated to men as a group and such that some men are subordinated to others' (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009, p. 278). By rendering visible the domination of masculinities in the U.S., researchers, activists, and policymakers can begin to dismantle the deleterious effects of masculinity on women, men and those that do not fit into either category.

In concert with this motivation, Flood (2005) suggests that having men as allies can support a more just society concerning gender equity. More poignantly, Anzaldúa (1987/2010) suggests,

... it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat...both are reduced to a common denominator of violence (p. 100).

Therefore, the intent of this article is to critically examine the impact of masculinities across multiple, intersecting identities so that the conversation of gender equity may be continued within a U.S. perspective. The remainder of this paper will provide an overview of the literature concerning men and masculinities, a review of the methods and methodology, findings from the research on children's picture books and conclude with what work still needs to be done to promote a more gender equitable society.

Review of the Literature

Much has been documented about men and masculinities since the second wave of feminism began. Topics have included men violence (Kilmartin, 2000), men in prisons (Miller, 2006), transmen (Schilt, 2006), boys and schooling (Martino & Berrill, 2003), fraternity life (Rashawn, 2009), men and popular culture (Keith, 2011; Hurt, 2007), LGBTQIA youth (Blackburn & McCready, 2009; Pascoe, 2005; Taylor, 2012.), and men and pornography (Garlick, 2010) among countless other topics. This review of the literature will highlight two key topics from this canon, a conceptual foundation of men and masculinities, and the performative aspect of gender. This review will serve as a touchstone for understanding how masculinities are positioned in children's picture books.

Conceptual Placements

At a foundational level, 'masculinities refer to the social roles, behaviors, and meanings prescribed for men in any given society at any given time' (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004, p. 503). The social roles attached to men reside within a patriarchal system that can be identified as male-dominated, male-centered and male-identified (Kahn, 2009). Male dominated notes that 'cultural institutions of a given society are over-represented by men' (Kahn, 2009, p. 24). For example, the United States Congress is comprised of 19.6% of women, while no woman has been elected president. In tandem with male domination is male-centered, which suggests that the focus of a given society is on men and their activities (Kahn, 2009, p. 25). Kahn (2009) demonstrates this point in the number of male directors nominated for awards compared to women. Finally, male-identified supports the patriarchy by focusing on male norms and values. Male norms and values are neutral or good. Halperin (1995) elucidates this charge as follows:

The heterosexual/homosexual binarism is itself a homophobic production, just as the man/woman binarism is a sexist production [same can be said for Black/White, able-bodied/disable bodied, rich/poor, masculine/feminine, etc.]. Each consists of two terms, the first of which is unmarked and unproblematized—it designates 'the categories to which everyone is assumed to belong' (unless someone is specifically marked as different)—whereas the second term is marked and problematized: it designates a category of persons whom something differentiates from normal, unmarked people. The marked (or queer) term ultimately functions not as a means of denominating a real or determinate class of persons but as a means of delimiting and defining—by negation and opposition—the unmarked term (p. 44).

The 'othering' through negation allows the (unmarked to reside in a space of neutrality and in opposition to the problematic 'other.' The structural constraints of patriarchy posit masculinities into an arena of domination of men over women. However, masculinities also work to position men over other men to allow some men access to privilege not equally available to all men; hence, the term masculinities.

Kimmel and Aronson (2004) suggest that the pluralization of masculinity 'recognizes the dramatic variation in how different groups define masculinity, even in the same society at the same time...' (p. 503). In short, masculinities vary across cultures, are historical and varies over

a person's life. The portrayal of masculinities can be decidedly different among Muslim men and White Anglo-Saxon Protestants in the U.S. The performance of masculinities varies over time as well. The idealized father figure of White, middle-class Americans of the 1950s in popular culture (ex. *Leave it to Beaver*) is a different position of the partner relationship espoused in such television shows as *Modern Family* in the 21st century. Finally, men perform their masculinity over the course of their lives. The rough and tumble boyhood gives way to competition driven masculinity in their work lives of adulthood. Though it can be argued that the foundational aspects of childhood influence the behaviors and norms guiding a person in adulthood.

The pluralization of masculinities is best seen in Connell and Messerschmidt's work on hegemonic masculinities. In this positioning of masculinities, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) note that there are dominant, complicit, marginalized and subordinated masculinities. Dominant masculinities is an idealized version of masculinity only achieved by a small minority of men. The dominant masculinity is approved and rendered viable and valuable through a patriarchy system. Complicit masculinity may not have access to dominant masculinity but ensures its viability by not challenging the status quo of patriarchy or masculinity. Marginalized masculinity is those rendered unviable for access to dominant forms of masculinities due to external factors such as race or class. Finally, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) note that subordinated masculinity such as gay or effeminate men is a lesser version of masculinity, seen in direct opposition to dominant masculinities.

This relational understanding of masculinities was critiqued by Demetriou (2001), noting that the external (men and women) and internal (men and men) hegemony was an oversimplification, and the relationship between external and internal hegemony needed further development. This critique serves as a starting point for my own analysis later in this article. Finally, while the social construction of gender categories is real and omnipresent, there is a performative aspect of gender that plays an important role in gender inequities. Butler (1993a) bypasses the illusionary binary of nature and culture (sex and gender) by her argument for "performativity." That is, sex, not simply gender, is constructed over time through the 'forcible' reiteration of norms and signs'. In short, subjects perform their sex and gender based on available norms and signs. The use of forcible is interesting in that Butler is saying these norms are not benign, but instead are forced into existence through the hegemonic forces of the heterosexual matrix. Norms are used to buttress the heterosexual subject. Extrapolated from this is the idea that norms and signs also buttress the dominant masculine subject.

Butler (1993a) continues that 'I', the subject, 'neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves' (p. 7).

Butler (1993b) further notes,

Indeed, I can only say 'I' to the extent that I have first been addressed, and that address has mobilized my place in speech; paradoxically, the discursive condition of social recognition precedes and conditions the formation of the subject: recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject. (p. 18)

The signs, symbols, and norms present in any given society, community, institution or family render visible certain options for the performance of masculinities. Therefore, and borrowing from Butler, masculinity is not simply placed upon a subject rather it forms the subject in adherence to one's available scripts in life.

In sum, masculinities are a complex social construct reliant on (un)stable categories and the performance of subjects. The available storylines to perform one's masculinities is dependent on the norms, signs, social structures of a given time and place. While this may appear to be

overly deterministic, Butler (1990) does campaign that there are opportunities to explore the gaps and fissures in these power relations. These gaps and fissures will be investigated later in this article.

Methodology

I engaged critical discourse analysis (CDA) to answer the following questions: 1) How are masculinities positioned in children's picture books? 2) Does this positioning differ across different identities (i.e. the racialized minority, the indigenous masculinity, and the queer boy)? If so, how and what does this differing tell us about the state of gender inequities in the U.S? CDA focuses on 'the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context' (van Dijk, 2001, p. 352). I purposefully excluded picture books that had as their main character portraying the characteristics of dominant masculinity. Instead, I focused on marginalized and subordinated masculinities. Nonetheless, complicit and dominant masculinities are considered in my analysis of these picture books as subjugated and marginalized masculinities are a reaction to and against complicit and dominant masculinities.

The main reason to exclude dominant masculinities was an attempt to examine what counter stories are available to readers and as Butler (1990) suggests, to determine the gaps and fissures within the matrixes of power relations. Beyond articulating my use of CDA, I explain the sampling and coding procedures used in this research project.

Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA, as a methodology, is cognizant of the positionality of the researcher. CDA does not purport to unearth some universal, objective truth. Instead, it seeks to uncover social practices that render some subjects visible and viable for advantages in a given social environment and "others" invisible or marginalized. As such, CDA, particularly from a Foucauldian perspective, has the following six characteristics: (1) discourse is a social pursuit with material consequences, (2) discourses are mediated through social relations, (3) power/knowledge is articulated through discourse, (4) discourse is political and contentious, (5) discursive practices change, and (6) discourse is dependent on the time and space it inhabits (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 55–56; van Dijk, 2001, p. 353).

The consequences for my analysis of children's picture books utilizing this interpretation of CDA are twofold. First, I understand the text I read is a discursive practice that is informed by one or more epistemes and its subsequent discourse(s). That is, the texts I analyze here are contingent on the space and time in which the authors created them. As such, authors could not actualize the masculine subject in other times (e.g., the United States in the 1950s) or in other locales (e.g., present-day Shanghai). The deployment of the masculine subject is dependent on a Western, present-day episteme with its reliance on middle-class status, consumerism, whiteness, and heterosexuality, among other factors.

Second, texts are to be read politically and thus are contentious by nature. To be read politically indicates that all texts are socially constructed and therefore dependent on the power relations/political viability provided within a given time and space. Identities, such as the masculine subject, are not static or monolithic. Instead, they are malleable, transitory constructs experienced and seen differently based on one's own positionality. Moreover, I am fully aware that the three children's picture books analyzed in this article do not alone create, or are not solely a result of, the masculine subject... Rather I explore masculinities within these three books within the larger project of patriarchy.

In sum, CDA allows me as the researcher to understand the text as a social construct—one that is continually shifting and changing depending on the time and space it inhabits (Fairclough, 1992). Moreover, CDA allows for the resurrection of 'subjugated knowledges' or knowledges 'that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity' (Foucault, 1980, p. 82). Using CDA as a methodology reaches through the halcyonic haze of dominant discourse and brings forth those pieces of knowledge often denied a voice in daily life.

Sampling

Due to the nature of this research project, I used purposeful sampling, rather than random sampling (most commonly used in quantitative research projects), as a method to answer my research questions. Purposeful sampling 'leads to selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of research' (Patton, 2002, as quoted in Glesne, 2006, p. 34). While my intent was to use 'maximum variation sampling' as a type of purposeful sampling, the outcome was much more aligned with the characteristics of homogenous sampling' (Glesne, 2006, p. 35). This was due to the singular focus on masculinities. Each of the books I chose had to meet the following criteria. First, it had to be a picture book with a male subject as the protagonist. Second, I wanted to use books that were accessible to everyone through the public library system in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Third, while there were quite a few picture books with male protagonists, I chose the titles with the most copies in the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, had an online following, and related to the topics of my research: the racialized minority, the indigenous masculinity, and the queer boy.

By choosing the titles with the most copies on site and with an online following, I deduced that either these were the most popular picture book titles related to my topic of interest or, because they were the most widespread titles, it is more likely that these picture books would be read than, say, a title with only one copy in the entire library system. Finally, I chose recent books, with the oldest being published in 2008. Choosing books that are more recent enabled me to assess current discursive practices within the genre. I should note that using books located in a Midwestern public library system limits my analysis. Other libraries throughout the United States may carry more diverse children's picture books, but undertaking that analysis was beyond the scope of this research project.

Once I determined my books for analysis, I conducted a thematic analysis of each book. Thematic analysis is 'a process that involves coding and then segregating the data by codes into data clumps for further analysis and description' (Glesne, 2006, p. 147). This process allowed different themes to emerge from the analyzed books. Moreover, not only were words and storylines examined, but the images and the portrayals of subjects were analyzed to delve deeper into the subject matter. I interpreted these themes via a feminist framework with influences from queer theory. The queer theory allows for the analysis to include how gender is performed under the constraints of textual regulations. Having briefly outlined the methodology and methods used in this project, I now turn to the books themselves and my analysis.

Analysis

This analysis of three picture books is divided into three sections. First, I provide a brief synopsis of each book, cataloging the title, main characters, setting, and plot. Second, I lay out the different themes that emerged from the readings. This section answers part of my first

research question: How are masculinities being positioned in children's picture books? Third, I answer my second question of inquiry, does this positioning differ across different identities (i.e. the racialized minority, the indigenous masculinity, and the queer boy)? If so, how and what does this differing tell us about the state of gender inequities in the U.S?

Book Summaries

Chocolate Me! (2011) highlights the experiences of an African American 5-year-old boy who wants to be like his 3 White friends. His skin is darker, hair curlier, teeth brighter and nose bigger than his friends. He speaks to his mom who tells him that his skin, hair, teeth, and nose are beautiful. And, he is perfect the way he is. He comes to realize that chocolate is wonderful and gives his friends chocolate cupcakes. They all enjoy the cupcakes, and he is happy to be who he is.

The author Taye Diggs is an actor who has written another picture book, *Mixed Me* (2015). The illustrator, and long-time friend of Taye Diggs, Shane W. Evans has illustrated numerous award-winning books for children. *Thunder Boy Jr.* (2016) written by Sherman Alexie and illustrated by Yuyi Morales tells the story of a young boy who wants to change his name. He speaks to a new friend this concern and the other possibilities he could have for names including Not Afraid of Ten Thousand Teeth, Touch the Clouds and Gravity's Best Friend among others. He was named after his father Thunder Boy Sr. but wants a name that represents something that is uniquely him based on what he has done in his life. Various activities are highlighted include climbing a mountain, touching a wild orca, riding a bicycle while standing on the seat with one leg, going to garage sales with his mom, and powwow dancing in a grass skirt. The author is a National Book Award winner and has written about Native American culture in the past. The illustrator is a Caldecott Honor winner and immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico in 1994.

10,000 Dresses (2008) written by Marcus Ewert and illustrated by Rex Ray centers on Bailey who dreams about magical dresses. Bailey's parents see her as a male and do not want to hear about Bailey wanting to wear dresses. Bailey's brother goes so far as to threaten to kick Bailey is (*is ?*) Bailey mentions wearing dresses again. Finally, Bailey finds an older girl who is inspired by Bailey's creativity; together they make beautiful dresses. Marcus Ewert is the co-creator of the animated series *Piki & Poko* on the LOGO Channel. The illustrator is a graphic designer and artist whose work can be seen on billboards, museums and book covers among other locations.

Thematic analysis

Three reoccurring themes were found in the three children's picture books: dominant masculinities, marginalized/subordinated masculinities, and patriarchy. Though the focus of the research was to render visible the enactment of marginalized and subordinated masculinities, this can only be done in opposition to the traditionally unmarked dominant masculinities.

In *Chocolate Me!* the African American protagonist had 3 White friends. These 3 friends exhibited activeness (ex. playing soccer, baseball, and skating), risk-taking (ex. hanging upside down), aggression (ex. pointing fingers and ridiculing at the main character). This contrasted with the protagonist who was passive agency (ex. sitting on the stoop alone, frowning throughout the book, and hiding his 'wide' nose with his hands from his friends). The dominant and marginalized masculinities were enacted in adherence to what has been posited in Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) work on hegemonic masculinities.

Variations on enacting masculinities start to occur in *Thunder Boy Jr.* While the main character's father enacted traditional dominant masculinities (ex. father disproportionately larger

than other characters throughout the illustrations and being the decision maker in the family), the son also exhibited dominant masculinities. Thunder Boy Jr. was active insofar as he played ball and the guitar. He had agency in being determined to change his name. He was a risk taker in that he touched the nose of a wild orca, rode a bike with one leg on the seat, and he was adventurous by wanting to travel the world. Thunder Boy Jr's masculinities were marginalized in that his name was not easily accepted by others, and he did not have the power to change his name on his own.

In *10,000 Dresses* the subordinated masculinity is marginalized the most. This would concur with the fact that subordinated masculinities are the largest threat to dominant masculinities and are perceived as flawed and less than normal (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The dominant masculinities are executed by the mom, dad, and brother in the text. The father is outside pulling weeds and the brother is outside playing soccer. Both being active characters and utilizing spaces outside of the house. The mother is complicit in supporting the dominant discourse by telling Bailey that 'boys don't wear dresses' (p. 9). The father and brother go a step farther and tell Bailey to get away and that he will kick Bailey, respectively. Bailey's subordinated masculinity is seen through isolation from her family and the threat of physical violence. This display of dominant masculinities appears more extreme than in the two prior books.

The other major theme appearing in all 3 children's picture books is patriarchy. In all three books, the mother is inside doing domestic work (ex. cooking and cutting coupons). The mother is passive in *Thunder Boy Jr.* in that she has a limited storyline and does not have the power to let her son change his name. In *10,000 Dresses*, the mother while least aggressive still is complicit in following the dominant masculinities when she tells Bailey that 'boys don't wear dresses' (p. 9). Finally, in *Chocolate Me!*, the mother does provide a counter-story in that she tells her son that he is special because of who he is. Though the counter story does serve as a catalyst of agency, the mother is a supporting character taking care of the emotional needs of her son, a one-dimensional view of women.

In sum, patriarchy, as defined by Kahn (2009), is present in each book. The books are male dominated in that the majority characters in 2 of 3 books are male and male characters played active roles. The books are male-identified insofar as they show what men do is normal and of value (ex. risk-taking, aggression, decision maker). All 3 books are male-centered in that they are focused on male activities. Women were mainly seen as supportive, secondary characters in traditional roles. As mentioned earlier the exception is the mother in *Chocolate Me!* who actively provides a counter-story to the protagonist.

Discussion

The three picture books analyzed in this research support the ideas and ideals posited by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) on hegemonic masculinities. Dominant, marginalized, subordinated, and to a lesser extent complicit masculinity were seen to adhere to Connell and Messerschmidt's work on these types of masculinities. As an expansion of Connell and Messerschmidt's work, I would argue that the narrative of personal transformation needs to be problematized. In each book, the protagonist engages in a personal struggle vis-à-vis friends or family members. Through counter stories in *10,000 Dresses* and *Chocolate Me!* (i.e. the new friend and the mother, respectively), new ways of being in the world become available for the protagonist. In *Thunder Boy Jr.* this was achieved in the leniency of the father in allowing the son to change his name. This self-acceptance is not to be dismissed. As Fitch (1998) has noted, social valuing or one's sense of self comes through signifying practices and ideologically

structured acts. The new storylines become available based on new dialogues and conversations. Concurrently, Butler (1990) has contended that it is these gaps and fissures in the matrix of domination that new ways of being can be had.

What must be added to this analysis though is that personal self-transformation is not enough to create social change and reduce the pressures of hegemonic masculinities and patriarchy? None of the available storylines did anything to challenge the structural and ideological practices of patriarchy. Instead, these texts examine self-acceptance rather than create social change. They promoted individualism over social justice and community—a critical component of hegemonic masculinity, particularly in a capitalist, meritocratic based society. This idea of focusing on the individual rather than the social structures and ideologies that impede liberation allows for the status quo to be maintained. This aligns with Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity; insofar as Hegemonic masculinity is a social structure in place within patriarchal societies to marginalize some men who do not perform dominant masculinity and subjugates all women through the process of patriarchy.

Though focused on sexuality Manalansan IV provides some insight as to the dangers of this individualistic approach. Influenced by Lisa Duggan, Manalansan IV (2005) states, 'Homonormativity is a chameleon-like ideology that purports to push for progressive causes such as rights to gay marriage and other 'activisms,' but at the same time it creates a depoliticizing effect on queer communities as it rhetorically remaps and recodes freedom and liberation in terms of privacy, domesticity, and consumption' (p. 142). Because of gaining certain rights (e.g. right to marry, right to serve in the military, right to adopt and so on), certain segments of the LGBTQI communities are brought into the fold of a modern, neoliberal citizenry in exchange for 'passively accepting alternative forms of inequality....' (Manalansan IV, 2005, p. 142). In short, while some marginalized, subordinated and complicit masculinities may enjoy the benefits of joining the neoliberal citizenry a part of dominant masculinities, it comes at the expense of 'others.' As mentioned previously, these other forms of othering may include men that do not adhere to the dominant masculinity protocol and all women especially subjects that are on the margins of society due to race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and others.

Conclusion

Though there are children's picture books that show different types of masculinities that are not completely adherent to patriarchal structures (ex. *The Princess Boy*), these seem to be the exception rather than the rule. It would be beneficial to see more female characters in active roles in children's picture books balancing traditional and non-traditional roles to match the reality of lived experiences in the 21st century and to challenge patriarchy. Patriarchy and hegemonic masculinities should be challenged rather than solely focusing on personal transformation and individual self-acceptance. Finally, social structures and ideologies need to be examined in a critical manner in the pursuit of gender equity.

Endnote:

¹Queer: Usually, by queer, I am referring to 'dykes, fags, bisexuals, radical feminists, and other subversive heterosexuals, transvestites, transsexuals, poor queers, Black queers, Asian-American queers, Latino queers, homos, drag queens, leather queens and dykes, muscle queens, lipstick lesbians, bull dykes, gay women' among other counter-normative individuals' (Rosenblum, 1994, p. 91).

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