

Viewer Perceptions of Gendered Characters: Parent and Child Reports on Gender Stereotypical and Gender Counter-Stereotypical Behaviors on iCarly

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ABSTRACT: The present study was designed to examine viewer perceptions of gendered behaviors in children's television shows. We asked children and parents to view and then describe an episode of iCarly to explore how they perceived the behaviors of the characters, investigating whether they noticed the stereotypical and/or counter stereotypical characteristics in a show that represents both. Both parents and children used gendered terms to describe the characters. Although both stereotypical and counter-stereotypical attributes were noticed, parents and children tended to attribute either primarily feminine or masculine attributes to the same character. Rarely were both gender stereotypical and counter-stereotypical attributes noticed in the same character. Both parents and children described the characters fairly consistently. Few boys identified with a character on the show. The girls were generally split on whether they thought they were more like Sam or Carly, but most children identified Carly as the character like most girls.

Keywords: children, television, gender stereotypes, gender counter-stereotypes, viewer perception, iCarly

Introduction

Numerous studies indicate gender stereotypical behaviors and characteristics in children's television (for a review see Lemish, 2010). Most studies involve content analyses where trained coders view an episode of a television show and code that show as they view it (for example, Gerding & Signorielli, 2014). Although the content analysis literature indicates the existence of gender stereotypes in children's programming, it is less clear whether parents and children themselves perceive these same stereotypes. Content analytic studies train coders to insure reliability and validity, but this training may cause coders to perceive different messages than the typical viewer. Given increased diversity in televised representations (Cavalcante, 2015; Marwick, Gray, & Ananny, 2014), it seems particularly important to consider what gender messages viewers extract from programming.

Content analyses indicate that males are more prominent in children's television programming in terms of total representation (Collins, 2011; Gerding & Signorielli, 2014; Hentges & Case, 2013, Leaper et al, 2002), as leading characters (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995), and in time spent speaking (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004). Additionally male characters are more likely to behave aggressively (Leaper et al, 2002), be leaders (Barner, 1999), and be goofy (Hentges & Case, 2013). In contrast female characters are more likely to be concerned with appearance (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Gerding & Signorielli, 2014), be highly attractive (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Gerding & Signorielli, 2014), and display nurturing behaviors (Barner, 1999). Female characters are more likely to display masculine attributes, than male characters are to display feminine attributes (Calvert, Kotler, Zehnder, & Shockey, 2003). Thus, there are probably more gender counter-stereotypical portrayals of female characters than

Content Analyses

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gender counter-stereotypical portrayals of male characters.

Whereas studies from the 20th century indicated clearly delineated gender stereotypical portrayals (for example Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995), research on programs from the 21st century show fewer gender stereotypical behaviors, and a greater amount of gender counter-stereotypical (Baker & Raney, 2007) or gender neutral behaviors (Gerding & Signorielli, 2014). For example, Gerding & Signorielli (2014) analyzed tween programming for gender portrayals in terms of total representation, physical attractiveness, facility with technology, and bravery or being rescued. Whereas male characters outnumbered female characters, and female characters were more attractive and concerned with appearance, there were no differences in facility with technology, being brave, or getting rescued. With a greater range of possible behaviors for both male and female characters, the viewer has access to gender stereotypical, gender counter-stereotypical, and gender neutral content, often within the same program.

Although few studies examine whether children notice the gender stereotypical portrayals on television (for exceptions see Calvert, Kotler, Zehnder, & Shockey, 2003; Walsh, Sekarasih, & Scharrer, 2013), research does indicate a link between television viewing and holding gender stereotypical beliefs (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004) and playing in more gender stereotypical ways (Coyne, Linder, Rasmussen, Nelson, & Collier, 2014). Aubrey and Harrison (2004) coded children's television programs for gender stereotypical, gender counter-stereotypical, and neutral messages using trained coders. Shows were not classified as stereotypical, counter-stereotypical, or neutral, but instead were rated on all three dimensions because Aubrey and Harrison argued that there could be mixed gender messages in the same program, and children might receive all of those messages. Similar to other studies, they found a greater number of male characters and male leads, and a certain level of gender-stereotypical behaviors. They then interviewed children about their favorite programs and characters to see whether there was a relationship between children's preferences and their gender-role values. Children generally did not identify with opposite-sex characters, although their gender-role values were related to the types of content they preferred. Boys that preferred male stereotypical content, also endorsed more male stereotypical values. Girls were more attracted to female characters who either displayed gender counter-stereotypical or gender neutral behaviors. Thus, children's preferences and identifications varied

depending on the gendered content of the programming.

Coyne and colleagues (2014) examined the longitudinal relationships between viewing superhero programs and gender stereotypical play. They found that viewing superhero programs did predict increased gender stereotypical play for boys, but not for girls. Coyne and colleagues argue that the relationship between viewing and play was moderated by gender because of prior learning history and social expectations. Children's behaviors did not exist only in the context of television, instead television contributed to the larger social context. Even though girls watched superhero programs, sometimes with female superheroes, they did not necessarily emulate the behaviors. Coyne and colleagues did however find that girls who viewed a lot of superhero programming, and whose parents engaged in active mediation, did engage in increased weapons play over-time. They suggest this might occur because the parents highlighted the behaviors of the characters, thus drawing the girls' attention to it.

Wishful Identification

It is also important to consider the social aspects of beloved television characters. Characters on television shows can become like social partners (Richert, Robb, & Smith, 2011); that is they can come to seem like people the viewer knows personally. This is not to say that school-aged children do not realize that television characters are fictional, but despite that realization they come to seem like familiars. A similar process occurs for adults as well, where "(o)ver time, viewers become familiar with characters and performers on continuing series and often feel as though they know these individuals as well as they know their friends and neighbors" (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005, 326). If television characters are perceived as known individuals, then it is possible that viewers attribute personality characteristics to them. The viewer perception of a television character's personality is not determined by single events/behaviors (as is often used in coding studies), but by the character's repeated actions over multiple viewings. In terms of gender stereotypical representations, it might be more important to assess the gendered personality characteristics of television characters rather than assessing specific behaviors from individual episodes.

In his Social Cognitive Theory, Bandura (2001) argued that learning and imitation from televised models involves 4 sub-processes: 1) attention to the model, 2) retention of the information, 3) translation of the symbolic action on the screen into possible real world actions, and 4) motivation to imitate. Viewers may not

attend to all information in a program, especially when there are multiple pieces of information simultaneously. For example, if a female character dresses in a provocative way, has long perfectly curled hair, is wearing extremely high-heels, as she chases down and captures a male criminal, the viewer could attend primarily to the stereotypical and impractical mode of dress, or attend to the counter-stereotypical action of a female being strong and capable of physically restraining a male. Which message is attended to, and retained, is most likely affected by multiple factors, including identification with the character (Bandura, 2002), and personal characteristics of the viewer.

Developmental Intergroup Theory suggests that children will simplify social tasks by placing individuals into categories that are personally salient (Bigler & Liben, 2007). Salience may be increased by perceptual factors such as dress or hairstyle (Bigler & Liben, 2007). Clothing and hairstyle are societal gender signals and influence how we categorize others. These categories may extend beyond simply male/female to butch, tomboy, metrosexual, etc. (Buerkle, 2009; Skerski, 2011). These categories then influence how the child processes information about the target, influencing what they know and remember, and also with whom they identify. Viewers that identify with a character might be more likely to focus on what they perceive as positive attributes, rather than negative attributes. This is particularly true if the viewer is engaging in wishful identification (Bandura, 2002).

Wishful identification is a process where the viewer attaches particularly positive attributes to a character, that they themselves wish they could possess (Reeves & Miller, 1978). Viewers attend more closely to characters they identify with (Bandura, 2002), and may pay more attention to those characteristics that they wish to have themselves (Hoffner, 1996). Thus if a character displays a combination of attributes and behaviors, some stereotypical and some counter-stereotypical, it is not clear which of those will be perceived by the viewer. Children do not approach television viewing as blank slates, but instead view shows through a lens created through their own experiences and cultural expectations (Richert, Robb, & Smith, 2011). Their prior expectations influence how they react to shows, and what aspects of the show they perceive (Bandura, 2002; Richert, Robb, & Smith, 2011). Characters are not viewed only in terms of specific behavioral acts, but are instead evaluated on the basis of human personality traits (Reeves & Lometti, 1979).

While acknowledging that the television characters are not real, the viewer can come to evaluate them as they would real people (Giles, 2002; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). A perception of the realness of the characters (e.g. this character is like most girls), increases the possibility of the viewer believing the character is similar to them, which is associated with an increased possibility of the viewer identifying with the character (Austin, Roberts, & Nass, 1990).

Hoffner (1996) asked children to identify their favorite characters and then answer questions about their personality traits. In this case, the children themselves determined whether the characters exemplified the trait, although the possible attributes were provided by the researcher (attractiveness, strength, humor, intelligence, and social behaviors). Their level of wishful identification with the identified favorite character was examined in terms of character gender and identified character attributes. Boys identified most often with male characters, while girls identified with both male and female characters. For both boys and girls, wishful identification was strongest for male characters that displayed intelligence. Girls' wishful identification with female characters was predicted by attractiveness only. Hoffner & Buchanan (2005) had similar results for young adults, although the number of characteristics was expanded. Young adult males had greater wishful identification with male characters who they perceived as smart, successful, and violent, whereas young adult women identified more with female characters who they perceived as smart, successful, admired, and attractive. Importantly in both of these studies, participants determined whether the characters displayed the attributes themselves, rather than the researchers.

Viewer Identification of Attributes

Steinke and colleagues (2012) examined gender differences in wishful identification with scientists on television. They selected both male and female scientists from a variety of programs with each character meant to represent a particular attribute (intelligent, dominant, alone, respected, caring). The researchers determined whether the character exemplified the particular attribute. Children then viewed a clip from one of the shows and answered questions about the character and their own interest in science. Both boys and girls showed greater wishful identification for same-sex characters that were dominant and alone, but girls identified more with male characters who were intelligent, dominant, and caring than female characters who exemplified those attributes. The participants were not asked why they were drawn to particular characters, so it is unclear whether the researcher identified

attributes caused the different levels of wishful identification. The finding that girls displayed wishful identification with both male and female characters, whereas boys primarily identified with male characters only is consistent with other research (for example Hoffner, 1996).

There is the question of whether viewers have to consciously notice the attributes/behaviors of television characters in order for them to affect attitudes or behaviors. However, behaviors that are consciously acknowledged/noticed are likely to have a more significant effect on behavior (Rubin, 2002). Particularly in the context of wishful identification, children are more likely to adopt characteristics of characters they want to emulate, which at some level would require them to be consciously aware of the attributes they are emulating. Media is interpreted by the viewer (Fingerson, 1999; Lemish, 2010); even when the same behaviors/attributes are noticed, they may not have the same meanings for all consumers. Although content analyses are an important source of information about gender portrayals in children's television, it is equally important to consider the interpretations of the child viewer as well (Fingerson, 1999).

Since parents also influence children's interpretations of media content, their views may be equally important. Parents may draw attention to certain aspects of a program (Weaver et al, 2013) as well as encourage certain interpretations of the content. Parents mediate their children's media consumption in several ways (Warren, 2003). Parents can control what their child watches by restricting access (Valkenburg, Piotrowski, Hermanns, & deLeeuw, 2013). Although this is the most common form of parental mediation, parents also co-view programs with their children (Valkenburg, Piotrowski, Hermanns, & deLeeuw, 2013), and while co-viewing they frequently comment on the programming (Valkenburg, Piotrowski, Hermanns, & deLeeuw, 2013). Parents' comments probably influence what children notice in programming and how they interpret it (Nathanson, 2015). In a program with mixed gender content (stereotypical as well as counter-stereotypical behaviors) parents may serve as a particularly salient source of information. Thus, it is important to consider parents' interpretations of gendered content, as that might interact with their child's understanding. There are a few studies examining the effects of parental co-viewing and active mediation on children's reception of televised messages (for example, Paavonene, Roine, Penmonen, & Lahikainen, 2009). Some of the literature suggests that actively co-viewing and discussing programming with children may counteract negative effects of things like

violence (Nathanson & Cantor, 2000) and stereotypical depictions (Nathanson, 2010). However, there is also work suggesting the opposite (Nathanson, 2010; Paavonene et al, 2009), parental discussion of televised content may serve to highlight the messages they are trying to negate (Desmond, Singer, & Singer, 1990). Although further work on parental influence while actively co-viewing television with their children is warranted, it is also probably important to examine what messages parents extract from children's television when they are not actively watching with their child. Parental attitudes about programming, and the messages they perceived in children's programming, may affect children's viewing even when there is no active mediation occurring. A search of the literature did not turn up any research examining parental/adult perceptions of children's television, so it is unclear how parents are reacting to the shows their children watch.

The Present Study

The present study was designed to examine viewer perceptions of gendered behaviors and attributes in children's television shows. Television characters are not completely gender stereotypical; most characters display a mixture of stereotypical, neutral, and counter-stereotypical attributes and behaviors (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004). Most previous research on gendered behaviors on television involves trained coders, but few studies have examined viewers' perceptions (for exceptions see Calvert et al, 2003; Walsh, Sekarasih, & Scharrer, 2014). Although establishing the existence of gender stereotypes in programming from an empirically based approach is valuable and important, it is also important to consider what messages viewers explicitly perceive. When presented with stereotypical, counter-stereotypical, and neutral behaviors/attributes it is not completely clear which children and their parents will notice. Children do notice gendered behaviors, and interpret information based on their knowledge of gender stereotypes (Bigler & Liben, 2007). Thus, it is probable that given characters who display a variety of behaviors, they are likely to notice those that are generally gender congruent (Signorella & Liben, 1984), and identify more with characters who fit into gender norms (e.g. Hoffner, 1996). Given that parents can influence their children's perceptions and reactions to televised characters, we also wanted to examine parental reactions to characters from a popular television program as viewers themselves. In our review of the literature, we could not find any previous research that explicitly examined parental perceptions of children's television programs outside of attempts to examine parent's active mediation. The experience of watching a program with your child while attempting to

mediate the message, is probably quite different than watching the show without your child. Thus, we felt that parents' reactions to a program, separately from their children, was worthy of examination.

I had several research questions guiding the project:

Question 1: Will children focus on gender consistent (i.e. female characters feminine attributes), gender inconsistent (i.e. female characters masculine attributes), and/or gender neutral attributes?

Question 2: Will parents focus on gender consistent, gender inconsistent, and/or gender neutral attributes?

Question 3: Will children identify with characters who were the same gender as themselves, or would they identify with characters who exhibited the behaviors that were gender consistent with themselves (a girls identifying with a character that acted feminine even if they were male)?

Question 4: Will parents identify characters with their child based on the characters being the same gender, or based the characters attributes being gender consistent with their child?

Question 5: Will participants (both parents and children) see the characters as representative of boys and girls?

Question 6: - Will children's perceptions of gendered messages (e.g. focusing on gender consistent attributes versus gender inconsistent attributes) relate to their liking of the show?

Question 7: Will parents' perceptions of gendered messages (e.g. focusing on gender consistent attributes versus gender inconsistent attributes) relate to their liking of the show?

In order to address these questions, I asked children and parents to view an episode of *iCarly* to explore how they perceived the gendered behaviors of the characters. I chose to use an episode of *iCarly* because it is a popular program (IMDB *iCarly*), was still running in syndication at the time of the study, and had been given positive reviews for its portrayal of gender (www.truechild.org), with non-gender-stereotypical characters. Additionally the show has 4 main characters, 2 male and 2 female, allowing for depictions of various gender attributes.

I investigated whether children and their parents noticed the stereotypical and/or counter stereotypical character attributes in a show that represents both. There is also the possibility that children who regularly

watch and like a particular show will notice different things in a specific episode compared to children who never/rarely watch that particular show. I also wanted to understand parents' perceptions of gendered messages in the programs that their children are watching, and how those perceptions would affect their reactions to the show. Because there I could not find previous research examining this, I had no specific hypothesis:

There are four main characters on *iCarly*; Carly, Sam (anthea), Freddie, and Spencer. Carly and Sam are best friends who run a web show (*iCarly*) with their friend Freddie taking care of the filming. Spencer is Carly's older brother, and guardian. The show ran on Nickelodeon from 2007-2012 (IMDB *iCarly*). The show also encouraged viewer participation by asking them to send in video clips, which were then incorporated into the show. The show followed a standard 30-minute sitcom format.

Methods

Participants

I recruited 30 parents with children aged 9-12, 16 girls (MEAN Age=10.49 years, SD=1.16) and 14 boys (MEAN Age=10.8 years, SD=1.07), through a university participant pool. Although I did not recruit mothers specifically, all of the participating parents were women, and students at the university. The parents received course credit for their participation. No other demographic information was collected.

Materials

The children and parents watched the same episode of *iCarly*, each on a separate iPad, and were then interviewed individually using a semi-structured interview. I separated the parent and child because I wanted to get the child's description of the show without immediate parental influence. I selected *iCarly* because its characters are at least partially gender counter-stereotypical, while at the same time displaying some gender stereotypical behaviors. The parents and children watched a typical episode of *iCarly*, selected because it contained both male and female characters, gave some context of the show's premise, and had all 4 main characters well represented in the episode. The episode chosen was "iTech Foot." In this episode, Carly, Sam, and Freddie are asked to market an athletic shoe on their WebCast. The shoe is faulty, and Carly, Sam, and Freddie have to figure out how to get out of the contract with the shoe company. Carly's brother, Spencer, has a secondary subplot involving a bike. In the end Spencer, who attended law school, helps Carly and her friends out of the contract.

Interview

Participants first summarized the episode. The interviewer then asked them a series of questions including, whether they had seen *iCarly* before, to identify their favorite and least favorite characters and parts of the show, and to describe the characteristics of the main characters. Other questions included “Who on the show is most like the girls/boys you know?,” “Who would you most like to be?,” and “Who is most like you?” I asked parents the same questions in regards to their child - for example, “which character is most like your son/daughter”.

Coding

I first read the interviews to identify themes in the participants’ descriptions of the characters. Based on this, I created a list of behaviors and attributes mentioned by at least 2 participants in connection to the 4 main characters. Each of these attributes/behaviors was then coded as feminine, masculine, or gender neutral based on prior published research (Buerkle, 2009; England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011; Lenton, Sedikides, & Bruder, 2009; Liben & Bigler, 2002). Some of the prior research involved content analysis of television, advertising, or movies (Buerkle, 2009; England, Descartes, & Collier-Mee, 2011), linguistic analysis (Lenton, Sedikides, & Bruder, 2009), or participant ratings of the gendered qualities of behaviors and attributes (Bem, 1974; Liben & Bigler, 2002). There were a few descriptors used by several participants that could not be found in previous publications. In those few cases I used a thesaurus to identify synonyms for words used by participants compared to published studies (Crazy, Dumb, Lazy, Silly, and Weird); all of these words were coded as gender-neutral. All interviews were coded by the author. As a reliability check, a trained research assistant coded 10% of the interviews to assess. The coders agreed 91% of the time on the presence of a particular characteristic for a character. Given the high level of agreement, I used all of the coding by the author.

Results

Familiarity and Liking of the Show

All of the participants had seen *iCarly* before, although some of the parents had never watched a full episode. Most of the children reported liking the show, although two boys said they did not like the show. Parents were more split in their reactions; parents of girls seemed more positive in their reactions than parents of boys. For example, one parent of a daughter said she “liked

the moral of the story. In the end they did the right thing.” In contrast a parent of a son said “I disliked the whole show. Throughout the adults were portrayed as pretty much idiots.” No participants recalled the specific episode used in this study.

Description of Characters

Both parents and children used gendered terms to describe the characters. Although both stereotypical and counter-stereotypical attributes were noticed, parents and children tended to attribute either primarily feminine (*Carly*, a female character, was nice, pretty) or masculine behaviors/attributes (*Sam*, a female character, was mean, argued, and was into food) to the same character. Rarely were both gender stereotypical and counter-stereotypical behaviors/attributes noticed in the same character (See Tables 1 and 2), although gender neutral behaviors/attributes were noticed for most characters. Both parents and children described the characters fairly consistently (*Carly* was “nice”, *Sam* was “aggressive”, *Freddie* was a “nerd”, and *Spencer* was “silly”).

Carly was generally described by both parents and children using feminine attributes; however, for the children “funny” was the most common descriptor for *Carly*., with “sweet”, “nice”, and “singer/dancer” following. One boy described *Carly* as “Nice, respectful, talented, helpful, and she follows the rules.” Parents did not describe *Carly* as “funny,” but did comment frequently on her looks, or her concern with her own appearance; sometimes in a positive way: “She is thoughtful, got a good head on her shoulders, smart, pretty;” other times negative, “she seemed high maintenance.” This was something the children never mentioned. Some parents also noted that *Carly* was “smart,” which was mentioned by a few children. Similar to the children, parents did comment that *Carly* was “nice,” “polite,” and “sweet.”

In contrast, *Sam* was described with more masculine attributes. This is despite the fact that both characters display a combination of masculine and feminine attributes. For example, both characters have long, well-groomed hair and wear fashionable clothes. This was mentioned for *Carly*, particularly by parents, but no participants mentioned this for *Sam*. Instead, the children most often described *Sam* as “hungry,” “mean,” “lazy,” and “angry.” “She likes to eat, and is lazy, and likes to lounge around. ” Although, similar to their description of *Carly*, “funny” was the most common adjective children used to describe *Sam*. Again, no parents described *Sam* as “funny,” and few mentioned her eating/being hungry. Parents more often focused on her being “rude,” “boyish,” and “wild”.

Sam was sometimes described as being like a boy by both parents and children. "She seems almost like a boy that's always in trouble with the teacher and acting up in class."

Parents and children were in more agreement about Freddie. Almost all participants mentioned that Freddie was into "computers and technology," and/or that he was a "nerd." "He's a geek, a nerd. He's weird. He likes to do a lot of technology with computers, phones, and speakers." Again, some children mentioned that Freddie was "funny." Although no parents described him this way. Instead, several parents noted that Freddie was a "wimp," or a "Momma's boy." "Freddy is a goody-two-shoes,. A sweet boy. A Momma's boy." No children used these terms for Freddie.

Spencer was mostly described as goofy, silly, and funny. This fits with the television stereotype of the goofy male (Hentges & Case, 2012). Although children described him as "funny," Although parents were more likely to describe him as "goofy." The children also commented that Spencer was an "inventor," who "built or made things." Parents were more likely to describe him as "dumb."

Although there was variation in the description of the characters, many children described all of the characters as funny. Since *iCarly* is a sitcom this makes sense. Although some parents found some of the characters funny, this was not as common a descriptor as it was for the children. Some of the parents expressed intense dislike for the character portrayals, saying they found the characters "ridiculous" or "dumb." Across both parents and children the largest consensus seemed to be Freddie as "computer geek/technology" focused. Children were more likely to comment on Sam as being "hungry" and "eating a lot", Although parents were more likely to focus on her being "mean." For Spencer, children were more likely to describe him as an "inventor" and/or "creative", Although parents labeled him as "dumb" and "goofy."

Identification

When asked, "Which characters is most like you." children typically identified with a same sex character. A couple of boys said that none of the characters was similar to them, but most of the boys identified with either Spencer or Freddie. Although most of the girls identified with Carly, a couple said they were a combination of Carly and Sam, although no participants said they were totally like Sam. Two of the

girls identified with Freddie, a male character, because he "is smart and into technology, like me."

Parents never chose a character of a different gender when asked, "Which character is most like your son/daughter?" Parents of boys said either no character was like their son, or that Freddie, or Spencer were the closest; however, several parents did not seem to want to choose any character as representative of their son. "No character was like my son, because none of them were real." "No one was like my son. Well maybe the older brother, Spencer...because he's kind of a little goofy." Parents of daughters almost always chose Carly as most like their daughter. "If any of the characters it would be Carly—because she is sweet." Although some parents said their daughter was a mixture of Carly and Sam. "She is a mix of Carly and Sam. She usually tries to do the right thing, but she definitely has that strong-willed assertive side."

Children were also asked, "Which character would you most like to be?" Although many times their response coincided with the character they chose as "most like them," quite often they responded with a different character. Although most of the participants chose a same-sex character as the one they would "most like to be," a few chose a different gendered character. Only 2 males identified a female character as the one they would most like to be, and both times they identified Sam. For example, one boy said he would like to be Sam because "she eats a lot. I already eat a lot, but I just want to be able to eat more." This same boy described Sam "as manly... She just, acts more like a boy." Five of the female participants identified a male character (3 picked Freddie and 2 picked Spencer) as they character they would most like to be. For Freddy the girls wished to have his intelligence and computer skills. "I would like to be good at technology and smart." Whereas with Spencer they mentioned his artistic talent. "I would like to make things like him. Sculptures and stuff."

When asked which character was most representative of boys and girls, most participants chose a same sex character. Carly was the character most often named as "like most girls," however, many parents and children said girls were a combination of Carly and Sam. For example, one female participant said, "Girls are like both Sam and Carly. Sam, because some of them are bad, cruel, mean. They think they are better than everyone else." Those who said most girls were like Sam, seemed to be tapping into negative attitudes about "girls today." This occurred most often among parents of boys: "I would love to say most girls are like Carly because she is nice, but I think a lot of girls are more like Sam."; "Sam-because unfortunately girls are not as

sweet as Carly. Girls are mean... I think unfortunately most girls are more like Sam than Carly."

There was not a distinct pattern in responses to the question, "which character is like most boys?" Whereas it rarely seemed to bother participants to answer this question about girls, many parents and some children found it difficult to name a character as representative of boys. For example, one parent who named Carly as representative of girls in general, said "I do not think any of those characters are like most boys. Because no boy...children aren't the same. They just aren't." Some even named Sam as the character like most boys. "The girl that was always hungry. She was like most boys because she was always hungry." Another child reported that both Sam and Freddy were like most boys they knew. "Ummm, most boys are kinda like Sam and Freddy. They're all kinda mean and lazy and have brains and stuff."

Reactions to Show

All of the children had seen iCarly before, although they did vary in how much they liked the show. Some of the child participants were big fans of the show, but few remembered the specific episode shown. Children who had more experience with the show did provide richer descriptions of the characters "as people." For example, a boy, who said that he only watched the show, "if nothing else is on," described Carly as "really soft and really kind. That is pretty much it." In contrast, a child who reported frequent viewing of the program gave a longer and more nuanced description of Carly, "Carly is smart, and she's caring towards people. She likes to make people laugh. She's more like a communicator. And she likes to be caring towards people. And she's knowledgeable because she understands people's problems and tries to help them."

Although almost all children seemed to enjoy the show, parents' reactions were more split. Parents of daughters were more likely to be positive about the show, some even reported enjoying watching it with their daughter: "I thought the show had a lot of funny parts. I like the moral of the story. In the end they did the right thing."; "I like the fact that they spoke up for themselves." In contrast, parents of boys were more likely to be neutral, or even quite negative about the show. For example one parent of a boy said they did not like "the whole show, I don't find it to be for kids. It is more for like teenagers. The characters themselves are characters who are playing...I mean to start with...they were holding a show on the internet without any parental supervision. Who knows what they are doing out there?"

The biggest division between parents and children was focused on the character of Spencer. Few parents thought Spencer would be their child's favorite, although half the children picked him. Children appeared to enjoy the slapstick humor of the character. "I like Spencer best because he always makes wacky stuff...And he does all kinds of crazy stuff." The difference in parents' and children's reactions may be amplified by Spencer's role on the show. Spencer is Carly's adult brother. Their parents are not there to take care of Carly, so Spencer is her guardian. However, Spencer does not act like a typical adult. The children found that amusing, whereas some of the parents were offended by his portrayal. "Not the role that he needs to fulfill for Carly. He's more of a friend and not a guardian, because their parents are not in the picture. So, haphazard."; "(F)or me, to have the adults portrayed as idiots from beginning to end...it just didn't make sense."

All of the parents of boys assumed their child's favorite character would be male, whereas almost all of the parents of girls assumed their daughter's favorite would be Carly. One mother predicted Sam as her daughter's favorite, whereas one assumed her daughter would prefer Spencer. Boys most frequently named Spencer as their favorite, but Sam was also named quite frequently. Girls chose Sam as their favorite most frequently, and then Carly and Spencer. No child chose Freddie as their favorite character.

Discussion

Although many content analyses of children's television demonstrate the prevalence of gender stereotypes, it is also important to consider what messages children actually extract from shows with both stereotypical and counter-stereotypical gendered behaviors. Since parents often regulate what their children can watch (Valkenburg et al, 2013), their perceptions of gendered behaviors/attributes should also be investigated. Furthermore, parents' reactions to a program may affect what their child notices in the program (Nathanson, 2015). Based on the children and parents in our study, parents seem to react to characters in a more judgmental manner than their children. This could be because parents are more likely to view characters in children's programming as role models for their children (Downey, 2006), or because the show was not designed for adult tastes. Parents that reacted positively to the show were more likely to note on Carly's positive qualities. In contrast, parents who viewed the show negatively seemed more concerned with perceived negative attributes of the characters,

particularly the adult character, Spencer. The most negative parental reactions to the episode came from parents of boys, whereas the most enthusiastic parents had daughters. If parents view television characters as potential role models for their children (Downey, 2006), and they believe that girls should display a mixture of agentic and communal attributes, while boys should display primarily agentic attributes (Croft, Schmader, & Block, 2015), the female characters on *iCarly* could be good role models for daughters, while the male characters might be viewed as poor role models for sons.

Decades of content analyses of adult and children's programming have demonstrated gender stereotypical portrayals on television. In more recent years programming seems to be adding a layer of gender counter-stereotypical depictions, while maintaining a certain level of gender stereotypes (for example, Gerding & Signorelli, 2014). However, little research exists examining viewer's perceptions of gendered portrayals. Although there is an argument that gender stereotypical portrayals might influence viewer behaviors even if they are not consciously aware of them, it is also important to consider what behaviors viewers notice. This research indicates that parents and children notice some gender stereotypical and some gender counter-stereotypical behaviors, but not necessarily in the same character. It is possible that personal characteristics of the viewer influence what they notice, an area for future exploration.

Both parents and children noticed a variety of gendered behaviors, but most often seemed to assign either feminine or masculine attributes, but not both, to an individual character. The character's gender did not necessarily determine whether the participants assigned them feminine or masculine attributes, but in some cases a mismatch did produce a negative reaction. So although a few participants said Sam (a girl) was "strong", or a "leader", many assigned more negative attributes such as "mean," and "bad." Similarly Freddie (a boy) was sometimes described as a "sissy" or a "Momma's boy," but rarely described as "sensitive," or "caring." Parents of boys seemed particularly troubled by the portrayal of males on the show, saying that no character on the show was a typical boy. Parents of both boys and girls had less difficulty selecting female characters as a typical female, although many wanted to say most girls were a combination of Sam and Carly. There was a trend among parents of boys to say many girls were too much like Sam, "mean and obnoxious." They were less likely to comment on a blend of masculine and feminine attributes in the same character. This is partially the nature of *iCarly* as a

sitcom. The characters are not really represented as complex human beings, but are instead presented as broad character types. Further research could examine viewers' perceptions of gender in more complex characters. Additionally, it might be important to consider children's view of characters on shows they choose. Although all of the children we interviewed had seen *iCarly* before, not all liked the show.

Children's view of characters on shows might differ depending on how much they like the show. Also, there is a difference in describing a character on the basis of a specific episode, versus describing them over the context of a series of episodes. The more episodes a child watches, the more they are likely to react to the character as a "real" person rather than a fictional portrayal. Future studies could examine gendered descriptions of children's favorite television characters.

Human beings have a complex blend of attributes, including stereotypically masculine and feminine behaviors. Well-rounded fictional characters will also display a combination of attributes. Unfortunately many television characters are portrayed stereotypically for simplification. Even when there is a blend of masculine and feminine attributes, viewers may place characters into stereotypical categories. Whether counter-stereotypical portrayals might have beneficial impacts is unclear. If male characters display feminine behaviors, but are perceived negatively, children are not likely to adopt more egalitarian attitudes. In fact, similar to previous work (Hoffner, 1996; Steinke et al, 2012), the boys in our study rarely identified with female characters. Some of the girls identified with a male character, primarily because of his intelligence and computer skills. This is similar to previous work where girls sometimes identified more with male characters because of intelligence, than with female characters (Hoffner, 1996; Steinke et al, 2012). Wishful identification may not be completely tied to character gender, but instead based on desirable behaviors. If masculine behaviors are generally more desirable (Croft, Schmader, & Block, 2015), viewers may identify more with masculine characters whether they are male or female. Some previous research indicated that both boys and girls focus more on masculine than feminine behaviors for both male and female characters (Calvert, Kotler, Zehnder, & Shockley, 2003). This might help to explain why several girls in the study identified with a male character, and a few boys identified with a masculine female character. Future research could examine the relationship between attitudes towards feminine and masculine attributes and reactions to television characters.

Both parents and children were more negative in their reactions to a male character displaying feminine attributes, using derogatory terms such as “wimpy.” They were also split on their attitudes towards a female character with masculine attributes. Some children, and a few parents, reacted positively to her “strength,” whereas others reacted quite negatively to her aggressiveness. This might be partially explained by societal encouragement for females to explore traditionally agentic roles, associated with masculinity, without a corresponding encouragement for males to engage in communal/feminine roles (Croft, Schmader, & Block, 2015). When males on television are displaying communal behaviors it may be serving as a signal that they are not truly masculine, and therefore are “funny.” Having counter-stereotypical behaviors as the joke in a plotline is not progressive, and does not constitute a positive portrayal. Future research could examine viewer perceptions of characters who display gender counter-stereotypical behaviors that are not exaggerated, or are in a more serious context.

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