

**The Intersection of Race and Gender in the Portrayal of Family Structures and Familial Roles in Contemporary Children's Storybooks**

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**Abstract**

This study explores the intersection of race and gender in familial representations in children's storybooks by analyzing Caldecott award-winning books between 1999 and 2009. Noteworthy findings include continued under-representation of father figures but no such underrepresentation of black characters; pervasive ambiguity in familial relationships; an overall lack of explicit reference to marriage; a large proportion of lone-parents; and several gender and racial disparities. It was found that black families were slightly more likely than white families to be lone-parent families and, although white families were slightly more egalitarian in familial caregiving, black families were substantially more egalitarian in wage-earning. Books with black characters were more than twice as likely as those with white characters to include depictions of family wage-earning, and in black families half of wage-earners were female while all wage-earners were male within white families. In general, mothers were nearly twice as likely to be seen taking part in caregiving activities than were fathers, whereas twice as many fathers were shown in wage-earning activities than mothers. Wage-earning was much more likely to be shown as a shared responsibility than was caregiving. However, the pervasive ambiguity within these stories leaves much room for reader interpretation.

## INTRODUCTION

Within many cultures, storytelling and children's books are used to transmit societal values, ideals, meanings, roles, attitudes and social norms (Kohler-Flynn 2003; Kortenhaus and Demarest 1993; Roberts, Dean and Holland 2005). Children's literature is a well-suited medium for examination of the messages children are receiving via the media. It is widely accessible and used for both recreation and instruction. It also has a long 'shelf life' compared to other forms of media, as many collections found in classrooms, public libraries and homes include books from a range of decades (Flannery-Quinn 2003). As Heintz (1987) pointed out, "If picture books are indeed tools for developing children's self-concepts and their ideas of society, then we should be concerned about the kind of images that are being transmitted to children" (67).

Some believe that the "simplified and stereotyped images" often seen in children's books result in an "idealized version of the truth" (Weitzman et al. 1972:1147-8). These researchers speculate that in order for the most healthy development of self-esteem, children of all types and from all family forms must have the recurrent experience of seeing themselves mirrored in the stories they read. From cultural artifacts such as children's books, young readers come to form ideas and expectations about their current families as well as about their future roles as parents (Flannery-Quinn 2003).

The vast majority of past explorations of children's literature have focused on portrayals of gender, race and ethnicity. Relatively few have studied familial depictions. This paper seeks to gain an objective snapshot of family structures and roles portrayed in children's literature by considering what family structures are depicted as well as which family members are seen in wage-earning or caregiving roles. It examines whether or not diversity in family structures and/or roles vary by character gender and race. It also analyzes representations of family structures and

roles in children's storybooks regarding the extent to which they reflect the diversity found in United States families. Based on previous literature, I hypothesize that the majority of books have families depicted, but a substantial portion of these families remain ambiguous in their structure. I anticipate that most families depicted include children and that mother figures are more common than father figures, and lone-mothers more common than lone-fathers.<sup>1</sup> I expect mothers are more commonly shown as caregivers and fathers as wage-earners. I anticipate no racial disparities in terms of the presence of lone-parent characters but that black families are more egalitarian in familial roles and more likely to show female characters in caregiving and wage-earning roles than white families. Relative to the actual U.S. population, I expect that the higher rates of wage-earning depicted in black families result in more accurate portrayals of wage-earning in black family depictions than in white family depictions.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Children's books have been the focus of a variety of studies since the 1960s. Researchers have been compiling evidence that children's books play an important role in the development of children's self-concept and worldview (Chall et al. 1979). During the 1960s and 1970s it became clear that children's literature both reflected and affected society, most notably in relation to values, roles and standards of behavior (Heintz 1987; Weitzman et al. 1972). Three main areas of interest have emerged: gender, race and ethnicity, and family.

### *Gender*

Since the early 1970s researchers have conducted a large amount of research exploring the relative rates of portrayals of each gender. A pioneering study by Weitzman and colleagues

(1972) focused on sex-role socialization through picture books, using a sample of first- and second-place Caldecott award winning picture books, Newbury award winning books, Little Golden Books and etiquette books. Their main findings included a prevalence of gender stereotypes and an underrepresentation of females. While underrepresentation of females has lessened, the pattern of males outnumbering females has remained in later samples of children's books (Czaplinski 1972; Heintz 1987; McCabe et al. 2011).

Recent studies have also revealed discrepancies between the rates of depictions of males and females taking part in occupational activities as well as a wider range of types of occupational activities assigned to male versus female characters (Hamilton et al. 2006; Heintz 1987; Trepanier-Street and Romatowski 1999). Heintz (1987) found that male characters outnumbered female characters in every activity category and were depicted more often in occupational roles by a ratio of more than three to one. This finding indicated change since earlier samples. Adult female characters were often portrayed engaging in domestic duties and childcare while no male characters were depicted taking part in such activities. Other researchers have examined gender stereotypes (Anderson and Hamilton 2005; Clark and Morris 1993; Clark et al. 2003a; Clark et al. 2003b; Collins et al. 1984; Hamilton et al. 2006; Heintz 1987; Kortenhaus and Demarest 1993; Narahara 1998; Nilson 1971; Purcell and Stewart 1990; Weitzman et al. 1972), revealing that female characters are often portrayed as passive, inactive, dependent, incompetent, unambitious, insignificant and often in need of rescue, commonly by a male character.

A number of researchers have noted change over time, but findings have been inconsistent. Overall, studies show that gender stereotypes and female underrepresentation remain pervasive in children's literature and are not limited to award-winning literature

(Hamilton et al. 2006; McCabe et al. 2011). Davis and McDaniel (1999) found that their sample of 25 Caldecott-winning books showed a slight convergence of the discrepancy in representation in text uncovered in 1972 by Czaplinski, but an increase in the gender discrepancy in illustrations. Clark and colleagues (2003a) also found increasing visibility of female characters in Caldecotts between the 1960s and the early 1990s. In later research, Kohler-Flynn (2003) investigated more recent Caldecott award winning books (N=17), noting patterns of underrepresentation of female characters but also revealing a 30% increase in the portrayal of female characters since earlier samples. Though men were shown in both traditional and non-traditional roles in more recent publications, women continued to be “constrained to their role as mother and caregiver” (Kohler-Flynn 2003:50). Finally, though Clark (2007) noted a recent decline in female visibility among Caldecott-winning books published in the late 1990s and early 2000s, other researchers have noted a general decrease in the prevalence of gender stereotypes over the last three decades, as well as an increasing visibility of female characters (e.g., Clark et al. 1993; Clark et al. 2003a; Clark et al. 2003b; Collins et al. 1984; Dougherty et al. 1987; Kortenhaus and Demarest 1993; McCabe et al. 2011; Purcell and Stewart 1990).

### *Race and Ethnicity*

Representation of race and ethnicity within children’s literature has also received a great deal of attention. Researchers have examined rates of portrayals of characters of specific races or ethnicities, the manner in which these characters are portrayed and changes over time. While some researchers have adopted a multicultural approach (Agosto et al. 2003; MacCann 1997), others have paid focused attention to African American or black characters (Bishop 1990; Chall et al. 1979; Clark 2007; Kalisa 1990; Pescosolido et al. 1997); Hispanic, Mexican or Puerto

Rican characters (Nieto 1982; Nilsson 2005; Rocha and Dowd 1993); American Indian or Native American characters (Roberts and Holland 2005; Heller et al. 2003); Asian characters (Lo and Lee 1993; Yokota 1999); and the more broadly defined group of “minorities” (Clark 2007).

Though research has uncovered some change over time, overall, research has shown an underrepresentation of minority characters in children’s literature published throughout the twentieth century as well as revealing a persistence of oversimplified, stereotyped, inaccurate, negative, or even offensive portrayals of the majority of characters falling into racial or ethnic minority categories (Morgan 2009).

Clark and colleagues (1993) highlighted the intersection of race and gender in their research comparing Caldecott-winning books to award winning titles by black illustrators. They found that in stories with black illustrators, females were significantly less likely than males to be portrayed as dependent and more likely to be independent and highly active. More egalitarian gender roles were also uncovered in these books. Clark and colleagues (1993) suggested that the ethics of connectedness, caring, and personal accountability in black culture leads to female characters being depicted as relatively emotional, nurturing and independent in books with black illustrators.

### *Family*

Relative to issues of gender and race, studies of familial depictions in children’s literature have been scarce. A seminal exploration of picture book portrayals of familial roles conducted in 1985 found a shift in the image of the father from that of economic provider, in stories published between 1946 and 1955, to that of active caregiver, in those published between 1973 and 1982 (Heller 1994). Anderson and Hamilton (2005) later found an underrepresentation of father

figures in Caldecott-winning books and runners-up between 1995 and 2001 as well as in 171 non-award-winning best-selling children's books. Further, fathers were portrayed as hands-off, unaffectionate, or inept parents, as compared to mothers. Mothers were portrayed in nurturing activities with their children twice as often as fathers, and mothers were portrayed as more emotionally expressive and more involved in the care of children, including discipline.

In order to explore the connotations emerging within text and illustrations, Flannery-Quinn surveyed a general collection of children's picture books (2003), examined Caldecott award (N=67) or honor (N=204) winners between 1938 and 2002 (2006), and performed a hybrid semiotic analysis (2009). Flannery-Quinn (2006) found relatively equal proportions of fathers and mothers as well as engagement in nearly equal rates of nurturing behavior. Even though fathers portrayed as lone-parents were depicted engaging in more interactions with children than in stories in which there were two parents present, overall, fathers were found to be portrayed engaging in significantly fewer interactions with children than were mothers. Nevertheless, mothers were shown interacting in relatively equal amounts with their children regardless of whether they appeared as lone-parents or within two-parent families. Further, fathers were depicted "as providing direct care for their children 29% as much as mothers" (74). In families with both a mother and father present, this figure dropped to 17% (Flannery-Quinn 2003). Also, sampled books published in the 1960s and 1970s did not depict any fathers in direct-care roles. Single parents were noted in 28% of books (Flannery-Quinn 2003) and lone-parent portrayals were twice as likely to be lone-mothers as lone-fathers (Flannery-Quinn 2009). Lone-fathers were more common in books published after the 1960s and fathers in more recent books were more actively engaged with their children than fathers depicted in books from previous generations (Flannery-Quinn 2006).

Very few studies have explored family relationships beyond parents and children. Kramer and colleagues (1999) found an underrepresentation of characters as middle children in the family. In their sample of 64 randomly selected books involving grandparent figures, Beland and Mills (2001) noted that the grandparents' roles in the lives of their grandchildren were neither superficial, infrequent, nor solely based on play. Rather, these characters were often primary caregivers. Because only those books depicting sibling and grandparent character relationships were examined in the studies, it cannot be determined how common such depictions are in children's literature.

There have also been very few studies considering the intersection between the family and race or ethnicity. A series of studies conducted between 1997 and 2003 focused on the connection between race or ethnicity and portrayals of fatherhood (Heller 1994, 1997; Heller and Heller 1998; Heller et al. 1999; Heller et al. 2003). When advising parents and teachers on the selection of books with nurturing father figures, Heller recommended books with fathers from a variety of racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and those that portrayed a variety of family types "in order to broaden children's awareness of the diversity in fathering images" as well as the array of roles fathers play in the lives of children (Heller 1994:16). As Heller pointed out, exposure to positive portrayals of fatherhood within picture books with characters of varied races or ethnicities can aid in dispelling stereotypes regarding gender and parenthood (1997).

By exploring a select sample of picture books chosen for their positive portrayals of black fathers and father figures (defined as a male role model who interacts with children), Heller outlined recurring themes, including the father's role and participation in child care, recreation, school activities, discipline, household chores and maintenance, wage-earning, and temporary or permanent absence from the family (Heller 1997). Heller and Heller later provided insight into



children's books with Jewish families (1998), exploring these in much the same manner as the earlier work. Similar themes emerged, with added emphasis placed upon the father's role in religious activities. Focusing on Latino fathers and father figures, Heller and colleagues (1999) found that many books in their sample portrayed Latino fathers in diverse roles and non-stereotypical activities, serving as strong yet supportive role models for young children. Finally, Heller and colleagues examined a sample of 16 children's books specifically chosen for their depictions of fatherhood in the Native American culture and noted that these stories are often utilized as models of effective and appropriate fathering within Native American culture (2003). Heller and colleagues noted that the samples used for these studies were specifically selected to "project positive images of father" (19) and, as such, cannot be used to generalize to all literature available to young children. Due to the non-representative samples in these analyses, it remains unclear how common such portrayals are or what patterns exist in regard to the intersection of race or ethnicity and family structure or roles. Without generalizable samples, the work of Heller and colleagues serves as a call to researchers to determine how common such characterizations are within children's literature.

These studies have brought a wealth of knowledge to the field, but there remains a significant need for more data collection on the frequency with which readers are exposed to different types of family forms and roles.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

Although relevant insights were gained from the above-mentioned studies, there remains a need to explore the extent to which diverse family structures are being explicitly depicted within children's storybooks as well as how familial structures and roles vary by character

gender and race or ethnicity. Relative to the large number of studies focused on gender or race or ethnicity, little has been done with a family focus. Many of the previous studies have been limited in scope, focusing exclusively on depictions of fatherhood as they relate to depictions of motherhood, for example, or limiting the exploration to only those books depicting a particular family member (father, grandparent, sibling) or families of a particular race or ethnicity.

Given the findings of past research as to the characterization of individuals of different genders and of varied races or ethnicities, this research seeks to uncover any similar patterns in regard to familial structures or roles depicted within stories containing gendered characters of different racial groups. It further seeks to determine how accurately the depictions in children's books reflect family composition and roles in the U.S. population. It explores rates of depictions of diverse family forms and familial roles and compares these to rates found within the United States population during the same time period.

Based on results of past literature utilizing similar samples, I hypothesize that the majority of books in the current sample have families depicted, but a substantial portion of these families remain ambiguous in their structure. Based on previous findings (Anderson and Hamilton 2005; Clark 2007; Hamilton et al. 2006; Kohler-Flynn 2003; McCabe et al. 2011), I anticipate that most families depicted include children and that mother figures are more common than father figures and lone-mothers more common than lone-fathers. Past research exploring portrayals of gender in children's literature also inform the current study in terms of the gendered roles within families. Based on previous findings of stereotypic depictions of male and female characters (Anderson and Hamilton 2005; Clark et al. 1993; Clark et al. 2003a; Clark et al. 2003b; Collins et al. 1984; Hamilton et al. 2006; Heintz 1987; Kortenhaus and Demarest 1993; McCabe et al. 2011; Narahara 1998; Nilson 1971; Purcell and Stewart 1990; Weitzman et al.

1972) and previous research showing disparity in the type of activities of male and female characters (Hamilton et al. 2006; Heintz 1987; Kohler-Flynn 2003; Trepanier-Street and Romatowski 1999), I expect mothers to be more commonly depicted in the emotion-work and caregiving aspects of parenting and fathers to be primarily depicted in wage-earning roles. I expected to see some fathers performing caregiving tasks and mothers engaging in wage-earning, but I do not anticipate egalitarian divides.

Given the results of past studies (Agosto et al. 2003; Chall et al. 1979; Clark 2007; Kohler-Flynn 2003; MacCann 1997; Morgan 2009; Nilsson 2005; Pescosolido et al. 1997), I anticipate an underrepresentation of minority groups within the books studied here. I anticipate no racial disparities in terms of the presence of lone-parent characters but, based on the work of Clark and colleagues (1993), I expect to find families with black characters to be more egalitarian in the gender division of familial roles, showing more equal proportions of males and females as both caregivers and wage-earners than shown in white families. Finally, relative to the actual U.S. population, I expect higher rates of wage-earning depicted in black families.

### *Methodology*

After considering the sampling techniques used in previous studies, I determined that a balance between efficiency and external validity would come from a relatively small, focused choice of titles known for their high standards and appeal and, consequently, their high sales. Therefore, I examined all Caldecott Medal winning books and Caldecott Honor books (Caldecott runners-up) named between 1999 and 2009, a total of 47 books. The Caldecott Medal is awarded by the Association for Library Service to Children of the American Library Association to those books that are determined to be the most distinguished American picture books for children. As

such, the book must “display respect for children’s understandings, abilities, and appreciations” (Caldecott Medal Homepage 2012). ‘Distinguished’ books are those that are individually distinct and marked by conspicuous excellence in quality. Criteria of interest include excellence of pictorial interpretation of story, theme, or concept; delineation of plot, theme, characters, setting, mood or information through the pictures; and excellence of presentation in recognition of a child audience (Caldecott Medal Homepage 2012). These storybooks are intended for pre-school children. Winners and runners-up are widely accessible to children both in schools and public libraries (Flannery-Quinn 2006) and the eye-catching gold seal is often used by parents to choose books for home collections (Weitzman et al. 1972).

Although not fully representative, this sample focused upon the type of books often available to young children in daycares, schools, libraries and home collections. It has been noted that winning this prestigious award leads to extremely high sales (Clark et al. 1993). Furthermore, comparisons will be possible between results of the current study and previous findings, as several researchers have utilized the Caldecott collection for content analysis (Anderson and Hamilton 2005; Clark et al. 1993; Clark 2007; Clark et al. 2003b; Collins et al. 1972; Czaplinski 1972; Davis and McDaniel 1999; Flannery-Quinn 2003, 2006; Hamilton et al. 2006; Heller 1985; Heintz 1987; Kohler-Flynn 2003; Kortenhaus and Demerest 1993; Nilson 1971; Weitzman et al. 1972). Many researchers have also utilized comparable sample sizes when studying children’s literature (Beland and Mills 2001; Czaplinski 1972; Davis and McDaniel 1999; Heintz 1987; Heller et al. 2003; Kohler-Flynn 2003)

*Coding*

To begin, each book was coded by the author for references to family relationships and structure. If more than one family was depicted, each family was coded separately. In order to examine the hypotheses posed with a substantive sample size, analysis used familial representations as the unit of analysis.<sup>2</sup>

Gender was coded based on text and supplemental information within illustrations.<sup>3</sup> Familial connections were coded as either explicit or ambiguous. Explicit relations referred to direct references to the familial tie (including commonly used informal references such as “papa” or “sis”). Ambiguous relations were determined from both illustrations and text. For example, ambiguous familial ties coded as such based on illustration alone included such scenes in which a male child is walking hand-in-hand with an adult female (coded ambiguously as son and mother) or a scene at the dinner table where children, one adult male and one adult female are seated (coded ambiguously as children, father, and mother). Each family was also coded as consisting of human or non-human characters. However, only 8 of the 109 families consisted of non-human characters, leaving an insubstantial pool of cases from which to draw meaningful conclusions regarding non-human characters. Human characters were then coded for race. Within this sample, characterization of race was not commonly made explicit within the text. Only two books contained characters whose race was coded as neither white nor black, based on skin tone and facial features. This left an insubstantial pool of characters of other races or ethnicities from which to make generalizations, therefore analysis was conducted using only two categorizations, white and black.

Marriage was coded by explicit references only. These included text in which the characters were referred to within the role. For example, one passage read “At his inaugural ball

George Washington danced with every woman but his wife.” Also included were passages referring to the marriage, such as “He didn’t learn to write until after he was married.”

Caregiving enveloped a wide range of activities, including aspects of direct caregiving (i.e., care for the body) and indirect caregiving (i.e., forms of care for the child that do not directly affect the body), as described by Flannery-Quinn (2003, 40, 42-43). This included such activities as preparing meals, cleaning, knitting, tucking children into bed, bathing, helping with homework, and caring for the sick. Activities were coded as wage-earning when illustrations depicted the character engaged in wage-earning activity or based upon textual references such as “Every day when my dad gets home from work...” or “There once was an old farmer who...”

Though some researchers suggest avoiding subjective coding by coding ambiguous characters in neutral terms and assigning specific characteristics only in the presence of clear cues (Dougherty et al., 1987), other more recent authors assert that the subjective interpretation of the coder is likely to parallel that of the reader and consider it reasonable to expect that a young reader would make comparable judgments, and, therefore, would be receiving the same message from the book that is being extracted for the purposes of research (Hamilton et al. 2006). For example, in aforementioned studies involving the examination of portrayals of parents in children’s literature, mothers and fathers were coded as such when confirmed to be parents via textual reference as well as when unlabeled characters could be “reasonably assumed to be the parent” by the coder (Flannery-Quinn 2003:39). In order to allow for differentiation between subjective interpretation and explicit reference, this study determines the level of ambiguity in familial relationships within children’s literature by noting the explicit or ambiguous nature of each familial relationship.

*Analysis*

After data collection, analysis proceeded by deriving relative numbers of portrayals of different family structures, such as two-parent or lone-parent families. A subsequent analysis regarding familial roles was then undertaken. Next, the intersections between character gender, race, familial structures, and familial roles were examined. Finally, the rates of representations of familial structures and familial roles were compared to actual distributions in U.S. families, as determined by the 2000 U.S. Census and the 2004 Current Population Survey.

## RESULTS

### *Family Structures*

Similar to the results of Flannery-Quinn's research, in which just over half of the sampled books portrayed families (2006), it was found that 79% of the books in this sample had families depicted. However, only 62% of these family representations included explicit textual references to familial ties. More than half of mother figures (55%) and 41% of father figures were coded as such without direct textual reference to the parental relationship, but rather by ambiguous reference or illustration alone. (See Table I)

**TABLE I:** Number of Portrayals in Children's Books of Family Structures Among Total Family Structure Portrayals (N=109)

	Total (proportion)
<b>Families with a Mother Figure</b>	<b>60 (.55)</b>
Families with lone-mother	33 (.30)
<b>Families with a Father Figure</b>	<b>45 (.41)</b>
Families with lone-father	18 (.17)
<b>Families with a Gender-Ambiguous Parent</b>	<b>1 (.01)</b>
<b>Families with a Mother and Father</b>	<b>28 (.26)</b>
Explicitly married	3 (.03)
Not explicitly married	25 (.23)
<b>Families without Children</b>	<b>12 (.11)</b>
<b>Families with Child(ren)</b>	<b>97 (.89)</b>

Families with one child	53 (.49)
Families with multiple children	44 (.40)
<b>Families with Extended Family Members</b>	<b>19 (.17)</b>
<b>Families with Married Individuals</b>	<b>14 (.13)</b>
With Children	3 (.03)
Without Children	11 (.10)
<hr/> <b>Total Family Portrayals</b>	<hr/> <b>109 (1.0)</b>

As anticipated, and consistent with the findings of Anderson and Hamilton (2005), it was found that mother figures were more common than father figures (60 and 45 respectively). Only 26% of all families included both a mother and father and only 11% of two-parent families were explicitly married (3 out of 28 families with both a mother and father present). On the other hand, 48% of families were one-parent (33 lone-mother families, 18 lone-father families and one gender-ambiguous lone-parent family). In 30% of families there was only a mother present, and more than half of all mothers were shown without a partner (33 out of 60 mother figures). By comparison, in 17% of families there was a lone-father, and 40% of all fathers were shown without a partner (18 out of 45 fathers). No books in this sample portrayed families with same-sexed parents.

Of the families represented in these stories, 89% included children and 40% included multiple children. It was found that 17% of families included extended family members: grandparents, godparents, uncles, cousins, nieces and/or nephews.

Upon examination of explicit representations of marriage, it was found that only 14 depictions of families included at least one married individual (13% of all families portrayed), 4 of which were within 1 book. Furthermore, only 3 of the families containing married characters also had children in the family, i.e., of all families depicting children, only 3% included explicitly married parents.



*Caregiving and Wage-Earning*

Depictions of caregiving and wage-earning responsibilities are presented in Table II and show several noteworthy patterns. First, 22% of families included at least one caregiver, and at least one wage-earner was represented in 21% of families. Almost all mothers shown in caregiving roles were the sole caregivers depicted within the family: 23% of mothers were shown as caregivers and only one mother was shown sharing this responsibility with another family member, the father figure. In contrast, 13% of fathers were shown as caregivers and, again, only one of these men was depicted as sharing this responsibility. These numbers stood in stark contrast to depictions of wage-earning: only 7% of mothers and 18% of fathers were shown as wage-earners.<sup>4</sup>

**TABLE II:** Number of Portrayals in Children's Books of Family Structures Among Total Family Structure Portrayals by Familial Caregiving and Wage-Earning Roles (N=109)

	Role				Total
	Caregiver	Wage-Earner	Sole Caregiver	Sole Wage-Earner	
<b>Families with a Mother Figure</b>	<b>14 (.23)</b>	<b>4 (.07)</b>	<b>13 (.22)</b>	<b>2 (.03)</b>	<b>60 (.55)</b>
Families with lone-mother	10 (.30)	2 (.06)	10 (.30)	2 (.06)	33 (.30)
<b>Families with a Father Figure</b>	<b>6 (.13)</b>	<b>8 (.18)</b>	<b>5 (.11)</b>	<b>3 (.06)</b>	<b>45 (.41)</b>
Families with lone-father	3 (.16)	3 (.16)	3 (.16)	3 (.16)	18 (.17)
<b>Families with Mother &amp; Father</b>	<b>6 (.21)</b>	<b>8 (.28)</b>	<b>6 (.21)</b>	<b>4 (.14)</b>	<b>28 (.25)</b>
Mother within role	4 (.11)	3 (.11)	4 (.14)	1 (.04)	
Father within role	2 (.07)	5 (.18)	2 (.07)	3 (.11)	
<b>Total Family Structure Portrayals</b>	<b>24 (.22)</b>	<b>23 (.21)</b>	<b>20 (.18)</b>	<b>19 (.17)</b>	<b>109 (1.0)</b>

*Intersection of Character Race and Gender*

Of the family depictions with human characters, race was represented fairly proportionally to the United States population: 73% were white families (74 out of 101 human

character families), 20% were black families (20 out of 101 human character families), and 2% were biracial families (2 out of 101 human character families). As shown in Table III, of all family depictions with white characters, 45% were lone-parent families: 28% were lone-mother families and 16% were lone-father families. Similarly, 50% of all black character family portrayals were lone-parent families: 30% were lone-mother families, 20% were lone-father families.

**TABLE III:** Number of Portrayals in Children's Books of Family Structures by Character Race (N=94)

	Race	
	White	Black
<b>Lone-parent families</b>	<b>33 (.45)</b>	<b>10 (.50)</b>
Families with mother as lone-parent	21 (.28)	6 (.30)
Families with father as lone-parent	12 (.16)	4 (.20)
<b>Families with a Mother and Father Figure</b>	<b>18 (.24)</b>	<b>7 (.35)</b>
Explicitly married mother and father	2 (.03)	2 (.05)
Not explicitly married mother and father	16 (.21)	5 (.25)
<b>Families without Children</b>	<b>6 (.08)</b>	<b>3 (.15)</b>
<b>Families with Child(ren)</b>	<b>68 (.92)</b>	<b>17 (.85)</b>
<b>Families including explicitly married members</b>	<b>9 (.12)</b>	<b>7 (.35)</b>
with children	2 (.03)	3 (.15)
without children	7 (.09)	4 (.20)
<b>Families with Extended Family Members</b>	<b>15 (.20)</b>	<b>2 (.10)</b>
<b>Total Families</b>	<b>74 (1.0)</b>	<b>20 (1.0)</b>

When considering the intersection of race, gender, and familial role, families of both racial categories were about equally likely to portray family members as care-givers: 24% of white families and 20% of black families had caregivers. However, unexpectedly, as shown in Table IV, white families were slightly more egalitarian in familial caregiving than black families: 61% of white caregivers were female and 39% were male, while 75% of black caregivers were female while 25% were male.<sup>5</sup>

**TABLE IV:** Number of Portrayals in Children's Books of Familial Caregiving and Wage-Earning Roles by Character Gender and Character Race (N=94)

	Race	
	White	Black
Female as caregivers	11(.61)	3 (.75)
Male as caregiver	7 (.39)	1 (.25)
Total family members as care givers	18	4
Mother as caregivers	9 (.64)	2 (.67)
Father as caregiver	5 (.36)	1 (.33)
Total parents as care givers	14	3
Married females as caregivers	na	2 (1.00)
Married males as caregivers	na	0 (.00)
Total married caregivers	0	2
Females as wage-earners	0 (.00)	5 (.50)
Males as wage-earners	13 (1.00)	5 (.50)
Total family members as wage-earners	13	10
Mothers as wage-earners	0 (.00)	3 (.75)
Fathers as wage-earners	5 (1.00)	1 (.25)
Total parents as wage-earners	5	4
Married females as wage-earners	0 (.00)	4 (.57)
Married males as wage-earners	5 (1.00)	3 (.43)
Total married wage-earners	5	7

Racial discrepancies in regard to wage-earning activities were in line with hypotheses. Black families were more than twice as likely as white families to show wage-earning family members (50% compared to 18%; not shown in tables). And, as expected, black families were more egalitarian than white families in familial wage-earning. When family members of all types were considered, in black families, 50% of wage-earners were female and 50% were male. In contrast, all wage-earners within white families were male.<sup>6</sup>

*Children's Books Versus U. S. Families*

In a subsequent analysis not shown, many noteworthy differences were found between representations within this sample of children's storybooks and statistics for U.S. families. There was a significant discrepancy between rates of lone-parent representations and actual rates of lone-parenthood in the population. According to the U.S. Census, in 2000, 76% of U.S. families had 2 parents present. This figure is far greater than the percentage of families containing both mother and father characters found in the books (35%). On the other hand, although only 24% of families in the actual population were single-parent families, 45% of all white families and 55% of all black families in this sample portrayed only one parent. Furthermore, of all families depicted in these books having both a mother and father present, only 11% of these couples were explicitly married. In contrast, the Census shows that, in 2000, 68% of children lived with two married parents.

Substantial discrepancy was also found between the sampled books and the actual distribution of family structures with extended family members in the United States. According to the U.S. Census, in 2004, 4% of children lived without a parent in the household, and the majority of these children (2% of all children) lived with only grandparents in the home. Of all families depicted in this sample, 17% included extended family members (20% of white families and 10% of black families). These figures included situations in which the family members were explicitly depicted as, for example, grandson and grandfather, but the living arrangements were often unclear. In the majority of these books, it was impossible to know with any certainty from the text and illustrations if the extended family members lived within the same household. Similarly, the lack of parent portrayals within many of these stories did not necessarily imply that the parents did not live in the household. The reader is left to interpret the absence in a

variety of ways, including making the assumption that the parent is simply missing from the story but does live within the household or that the child is visiting the home of the extended family member.

Another noteworthy finding relates to the number of parents portrayed as wage-earners in the books studied. The number of wage-earning parents depicted in this sample was significantly lower than the actual rates of labor force participation among U.S. parents in 2004. For example, only 6% of characters portrayed as lone-mothers were shown working, while in the actual population in 2004, 72% of single mothers were in the labor force. Those families with black characters were more representative of the actual population in terms of wage-earning activities. It was found that 15% of black mothers were depicted in wage-earning activity, but no white mothers were shown in this role.

## **DISCUSSION**

Though family structure and marital status were left ambiguous in most of the stories sampled, mothers remained more common than fathers in this sample. This finding was consistent with the findings of Anderson and Hamilton (2005) but stood in contrast to that of Flannery-Quinn (2003) which found that fathers and mothers were depicted in relatively equal rates, a discrepancy that may be due to the use of disparate units of analysis. The current study reveals that 64% of lone-parent families were lone-mothers and 35% were lone-fathers. These findings are similar to Flannery-Quinn's later work (2009), indicating that lone-parent portrayals were twice as likely to be lone-mothers as lone-fathers. In no lone-parent stories was it made explicit that the parent was a lone-parent, leaving room for individual reader interpretation.

Consistent with the findings of Flannery-Quinn (2003), and in line with our hypotheses, mothers were much more commonly (nearly twice more likely) portrayed within familial caregiving roles than were fathers. Although relatively few mothers were shown in wage-earning roles (7% of all mothers), and twice as many fathers were shown taking part in wage-earning activities than mothers, this stood in stark contrast to the findings of the 1972 study by Weitzman and colleagues which found that no Caldecott award-winning books depicted females in occupational roles as well as later work that noted only one portrayal of a working mother (Kortenhaus and Demarest 1993). Within the current sample, wage-earning was much more likely to be shown as a shared responsibility than was caregiving. Only 1 family depicted shared caregiving responsibilities but half of wage-earning mothers and nearly two thirds of wage-earning fathers shared wage-earning responsibility. Thus, as more women have moved into the workforce and the number of dual wage-earner families has increased, children's literature has become more likely to reflect this reality than in the past, although that amount is still negligible. Though the changes noted in the current research are promising, overall, findings indicate that children's literature continues to transmit a message to children that mothers play a larger part in children's day-to-day lives than fathers, while fathers assume more of the financial responsibility in families. As Heller noted, "presenting nurturing images of fathers in picture book illustrations reinforces the young child's positive view of parenthood. This ideally should include fathers in both child care and occupational roles" (1997:38).

When discussing these findings, it must be taken into consideration that the number of wage-earning activities depicted in these books were not large, and, even in those families in which wage-earning activity was included in the story, it was unclear if the character was the only wage-earner or if responsibilities were shared but left undiscussed. A lack of explicit

portrayal of wage-earning does not necessarily imply lack of employment, but, rather, leaves room for individual interpretation. This ambiguity affords the reader the opportunity to view the characters in a variety of ways, free from the constraints of clearly defined roles. This could serve as a great benefit to children whose family members take on a variety of responsibilities. This is true for familial caregiving as well.

Noteworthy results also emerged in regard to the intersection of race and family structure and roles, especially in relation to gender. Overall, of the family depictions with human characters, 73% were white and 20% were black. These results run contrary to our hypotheses based on an underrepresentation of black characters found in earlier research exploring children's literature throughout the twentieth century. Not only were minority families represented in the current sample more proportionally to the United States population than discovered in previous research, this sample was also void of any negative, oversimplified or stereotyped portrayals of minority characters. This finding offers evidence of more accurate and positive representation of black characters in contemporary children's literature and should serve as a call for future research using larger sample sizes and a wider variety of book types to see if substantial change can be noted since Morgan's (2009) findings of underrepresentation and pervasive negative and inaccurate portrayals of minority characters in children's literature published during the twentieth century.

In the current study, black families were slightly more likely than white families to be lone-parent families. As hypothesized, families of both racial categories were equally likely to portray care-givers but it was shown that white families were slightly more egalitarian in their familial caregiving than black families. This discrepancy was small but unanticipated. This could be due to a stronger focus on familial wage-earning within stories with black families. This

finding warrants further investigation, as it could also be a result of the small number of black families depicted.

Notable racial disparities were found in regard to wage-earning activities. As hypothesized, black families were substantially more likely than white families to show wage-earning family members. In black families, wage earners were three times more likely to be mothers than fathers, but in white families no wage earners were mothers. When considering all family members, it was found that half of wage earners in black families were male and half were female, while in white families, all wage earners were male. This finding of more egalitarian gender divisions and less gender stereotyping in books depicting black families lends support to the suggestion of Clark and colleagues that those books created within or for the African-American community would constitute a more “culturally conscious literature” (1993:235). The disparity may be a product of a difference in focus, meaning that books with themes that highlight wage-earning within families (particularly female wage-earning) are more likely to portray racial diversity because authors who are culturally conscious in terms of gender and familial roles may also be more culturally conscious in terms of racial diversity. Just as an underrepresentation of female characters has implications for children’s understanding of the value our society places upon women and girls (McCabe et al. 2011), a lack of portrayal of white working mothers could also constitute evidence of “symbolic annihilation” (Tuchman 1978). This exclusion may lead to a devaluing of a mother’s role as familial wage-earner, further reinforcing the current patriarchal system and teaching children that this role is less important for mothers than for fathers within white families. This could be of particular concern for white readers, as they may be more likely to identify with white family portrayals and therefore create



a self-image around these depictions. Rather than being exposed to diversity in familial roles, existing stereotypes may be reinforced.

The higher rate of wage-earning within black families relative to white families led to more consistency between familial portrayals and the actual population, as hypothesized. Books with black families were more accurate in their representation of the gender divisions found in the population. However, there remains a great deal of ambiguity as the lack of explicit portrayal of wage-earning does not necessarily imply lack of employment, but, rather, leaves room for interpretation of familial roles.

This research opened up lines of inquiry that need further development. By examining books authored over a longer time span, future research could reveal changes in patterns uncovered here as well as determine if the lack of explicit reference to familial ties is a new phenomenon. Further investigation with a larger sample size is also warranted. Future research should incorporate samples of non-award-winning books, as discrepancies have been noted between various types of books (McCade et al. 2011; Pescosolido et al. 1997; Weitzman et al. 1972). It would be worthwhile to investigate any differences between family depictions found within books of different types and with different audiences. It would also be meaningful to connect the variables explored here to the gender, race and age of the author.

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### Endnotes

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1. It is important to note here that the term “lone” is used to indicate a parent who is not depicted with a partner. This does not necessarily imply a lack of partnership, only a lack of portrayal of such a partnership.
2. For similar decisions regarding unit of analysis, see Beland and Mills 2001; Weitzman et al. 1972.
3. Several children were coded as ‘child’ rather than assigning a gendered label, but the gender of the child did not enter into this analysis. Of the 109 families coded, only 3 included parents whose gender was coded as ambiguous. None of the three families that included a gender non-specified parent had depictions of caregiving or wage-earning, so these ambiguous characters did not affect the analyses of family roles.
4. In analysis not shown, it was found that no husbands were depicted as caregivers and only 2 out of 14 families depicting married individuals depicted a mother as a caregiver. Furthermore, 71% of families depicting married individuals also depicted one or both spouses as wage-earners (10 out of 14 families including at least one spouse). And though only 7% of mothers were shown as wage-earners, 31% of wives were shown as wage earners (4 out of 13 depicted wives).
5. It was further noted that the only instances of shared caregiving responsibilities were within white families. All black caregivers were depicted as sole caregivers.
6. No married white individuals and only 2 married black individuals were shown in caregiving roles (both female). On the other hand, though only about half of married white individuals were depicted in wage-earning roles, all married black individuals were shown as wage-earning. In black families, more than half of the married wage-earners were female (57%) but in white families no females were depicted as wage-earners.