Gender Stereotypes in Children's Picture Books:
A Contemporary Content Analysis

Laura Cutler & Martha Buell, University of Delaware

UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE

Introduction

Children's picture books often serve as "windows and mirrors" for the youngest of readers. They offer children the opportunity to see themselves represented on the pages in front of them and also have the power to expose children to the lives of other individuals who may be unfamiliar to them. But what if the images presented in these books continually portray characters in stereotypical ways? What if boys are always seen as strong and adventurous and girls as passive and domesticated?

The lack of gender diversity in books published for young children has been well-established (DeWitt et al., 2013; Weitzman et al., 1972). These gender-stereotypical representations are especially problematic given that, prior to kindergarten entry, children have already begun to develop their personal gender identity, make gender distinctions based on how society classifies gendered roles, and have strong beliefs about behavior for males and females.

This study provides a contemporary content analysis of children's picture books as a means for determining if previous trends regarding gendered images and text are still evident in print media designed specifically for young children.

Methods

Sample:

Children's picture books published in America from the years 2000, 2005, 2010, and 2015 were sampled (*N* = 76). The books used for this study were those on the *Publishers Weekly* list of "Best Books" for the years mentioned above (*n* = 63), as well as Caldecott Medal and Honor winning books from those same years (*n* = 17).
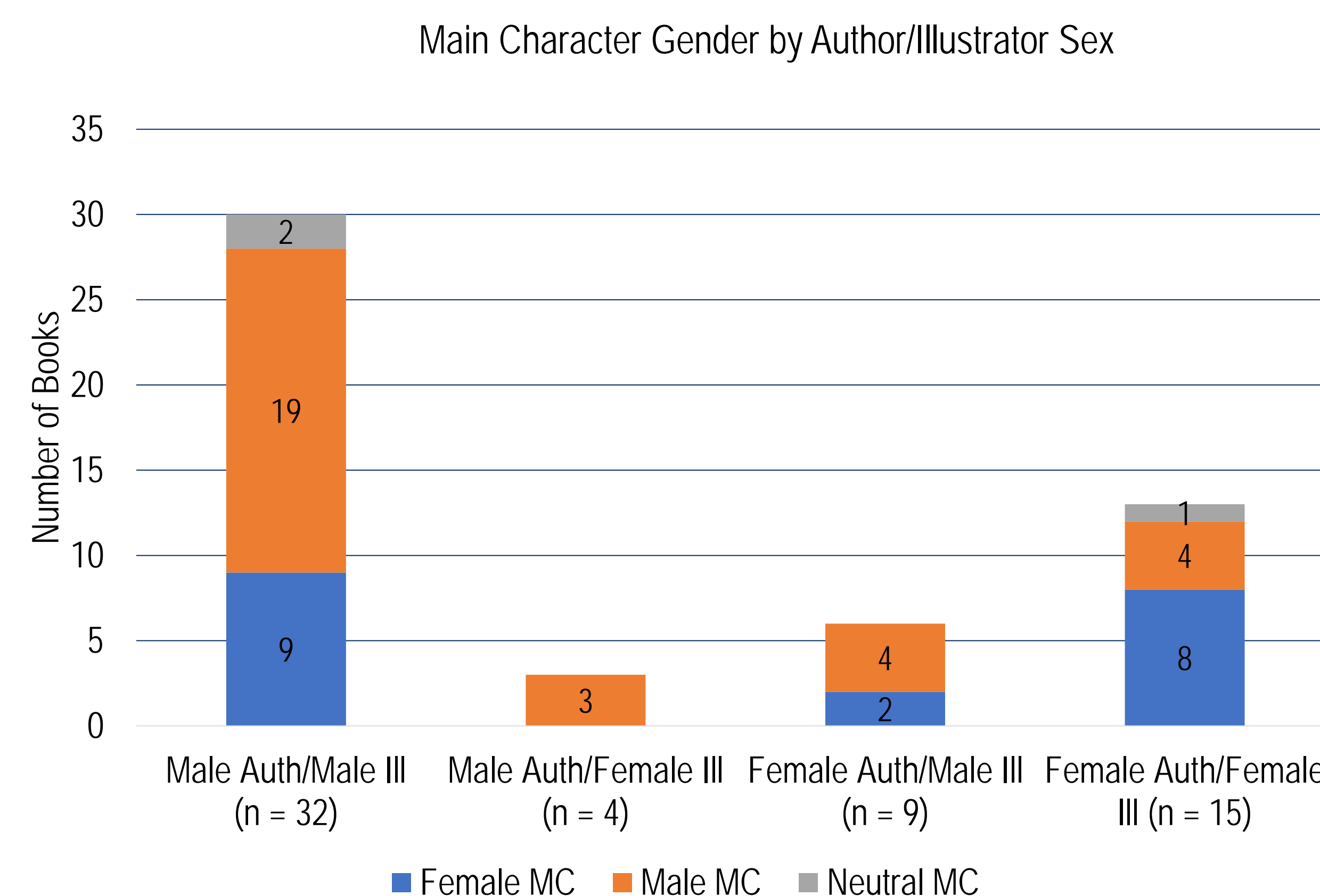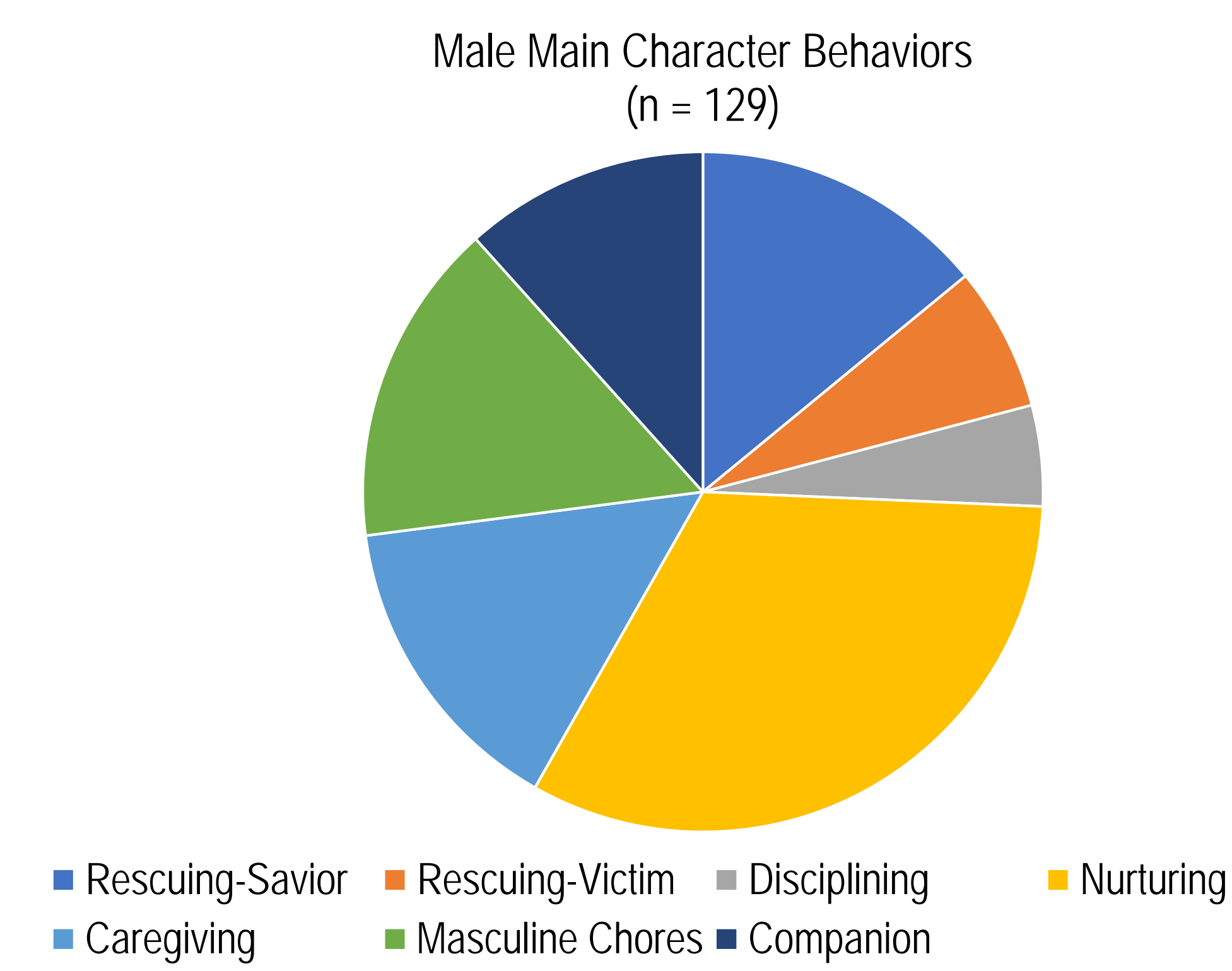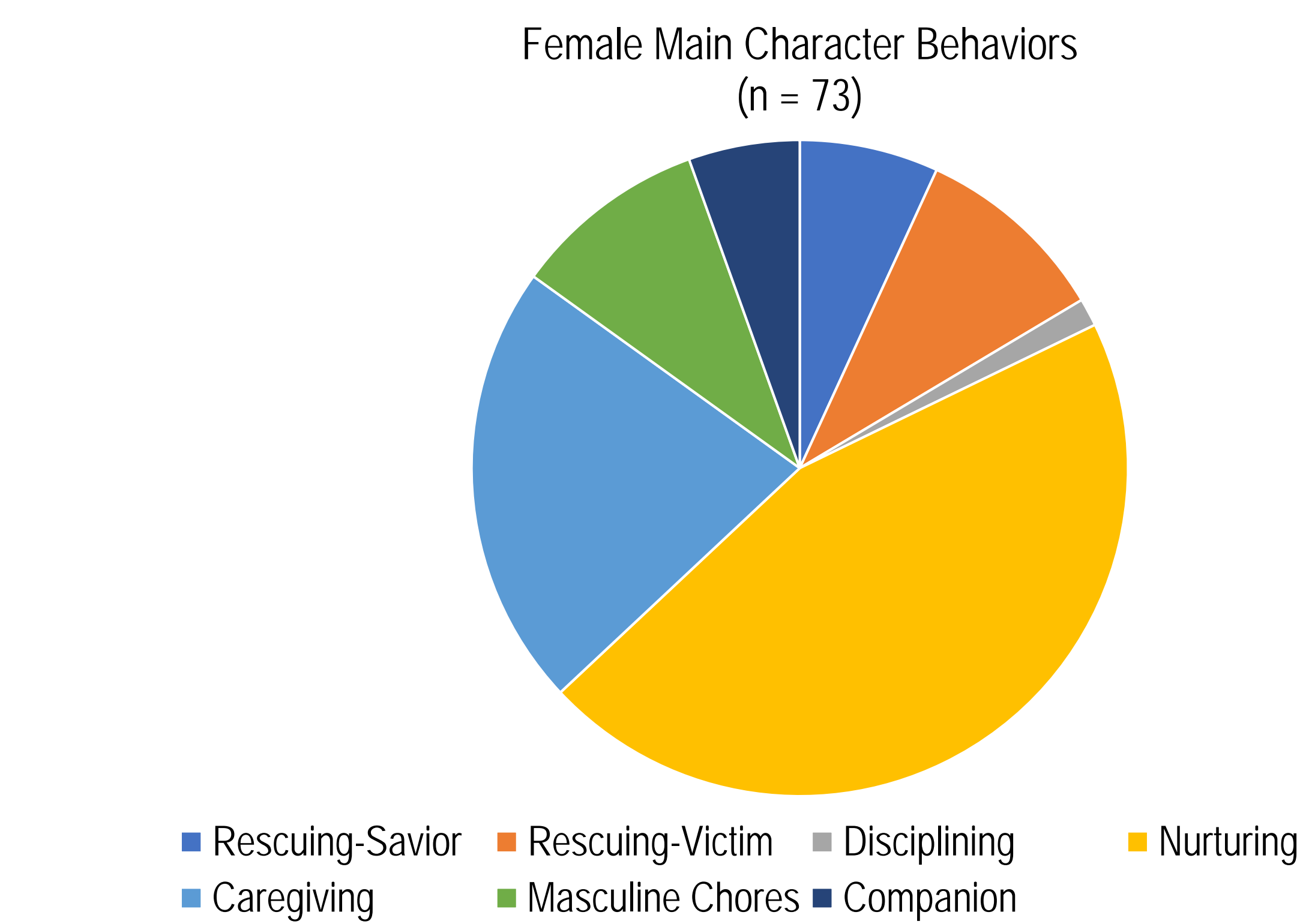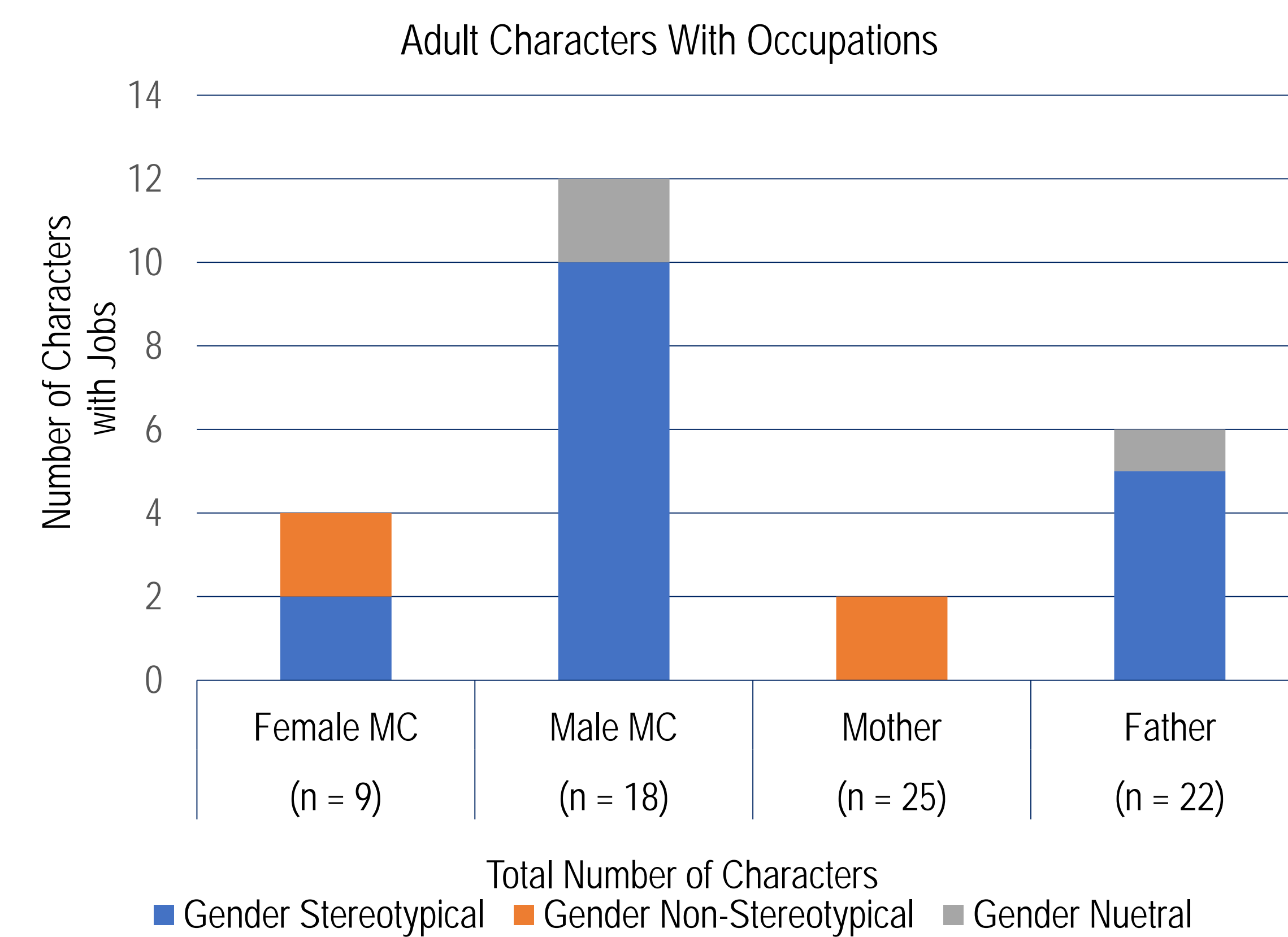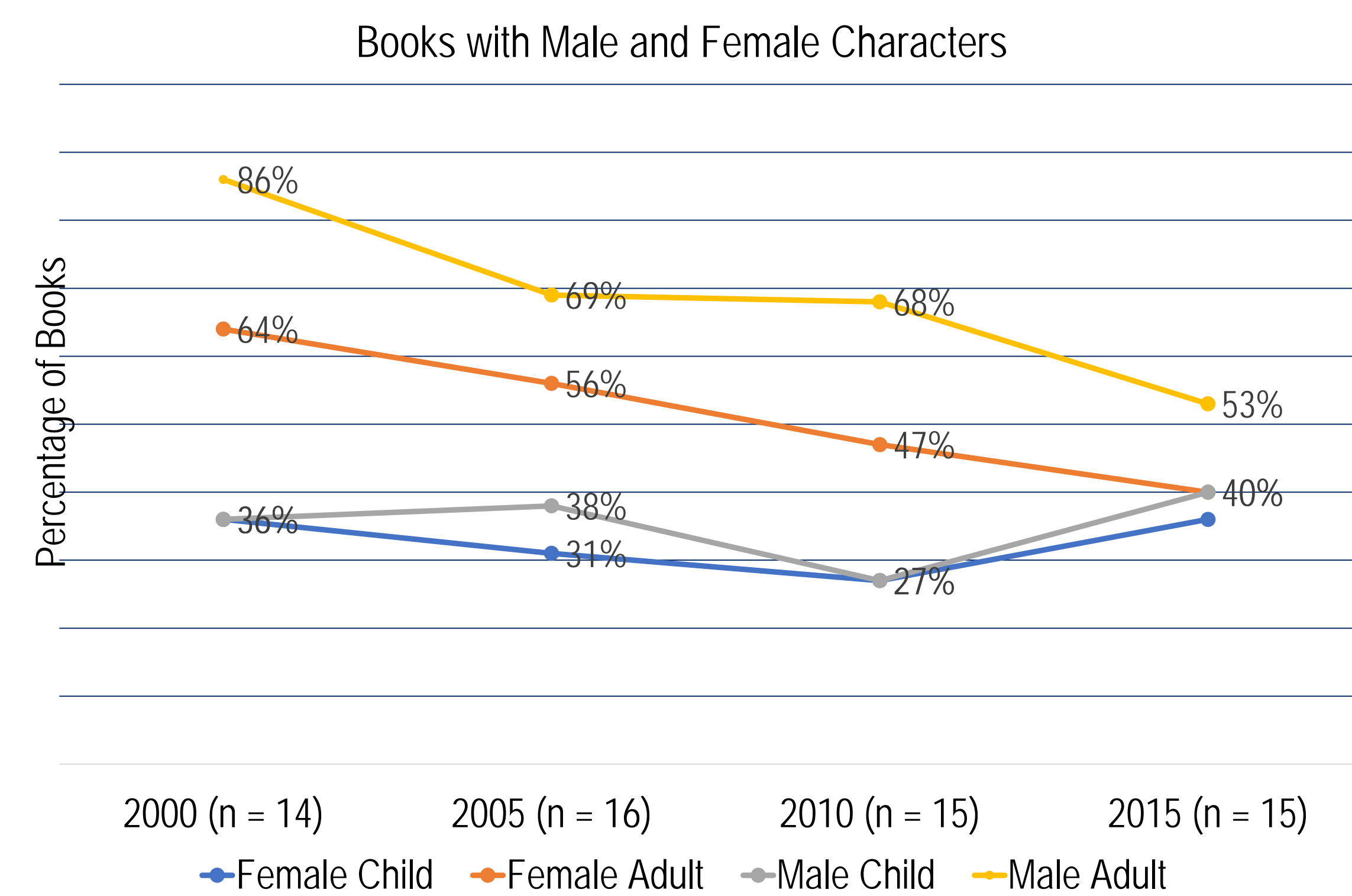
Books from the sample that contained at least one gendered character (human, animal, or object) (*n* = 74) were coded using an instrument that analyzed the frequency counts of male and female characters, behaviors of main characters and parental figures, and activity level and location of characters.

Books of collections (e.g., series, poems, fairy tales, songs) (*n* = 12) were eliminated from the sample due to their unique format and the high numbers of main characters present in these stories. A 3-dimensional pop-up book was also eliminated from the sample for similar reasons. One additional book could not be located. This reduced the final coded sample to 60 picture books.

Coding Instrument:

A coding instrument developed by Cutler and Buell (2016) was used to analyze both the text and illustrations of each picture book. The instrument was based on previous research in this area (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005; DeWitt et al., 2013), and included frequencies of male and female main characters and total numbers of male and female characters. The location of male and female characters was also coded, as well as the types of behaviors displayed by main characters and parental characters. Behavior categories analyzed included: rescuer, disciplinarian, caregiver, nurturer, companion, and provider. A set of these behavior categories was established a priori and several additional categories were added as the instrument was refined.

Results

Books with Male and Female Characters

Adult Characters With Occupations

Female Main Character Behaviors (n = 73)

Male Main Character Behaviors (n = 129)

Main Character Gender by Author/Illustrator Sex

References

Anderson, D. A., & Hamilton, M. (2005). Gender role stereotyping of parents in children's picture books: The invisible father. *Sex Roles, 52,* 145-151.

DeWitt, A. L., Cready, C. M., & Seward, R. R. (2013). Parental role portrayals in twentieth century children's picture books: More egalitarian or ongoing stereotyping. *Sex Roles, 69,* 89-106.

Weitzman, L. J., Eifler, D., Hokada, E., & Ross, C. (1972). Sex-role socialization in picture books for preschool children. *American Journal of Sociology, 77*(6), 1125-1150.

Conclusions

➢ Adult characters, especially parental characters, were often depicted as not having an occupation outside of the home: 59% of adult main characters were shown with an occupation while just 17% of parents were portrayed as providers. Further, no male adults were shown in gender non-stereotypical occupations.

➢ Male characters (adults and children) continue to outnumber their female counterparts. There were 25 female main characters and 44 male main characters in the coded books.

➢ Furthermore, six of the sampled books had *no* female illustrations, as opposed to only one book with *no* male illustrations. Additionally, nine of the books that had female illustrations depicted these females only as "extras" in the story. In only four of the books was this the case for males.

➢ In terms of gender stereotyped behaviors, 77% of female characters demonstrated the stereotypical female behaviors of nurturing, caregiving, or being a victim in need of rescue, while only 7% were shown as rescuing others. This is in contrast with males who displayed a more balanced profile of both stereotypical male (29%) and female behaviors (48%).

➢ There were more male authors and illustrators than female authors and illustrators: 36 of the sampled books had a male author as opposed to 24 books authored by females. Additionally, male and female authors depicted female main characters at similar frequencies (n = 9, n = 10), but male authors depicted male main characters (n = 22) more often than female authors (n = 8).

Recommendations

➢ Illustrations are critical to determining the range of gender possibilities in a book—do the characters provide children with "windows and mirrors"?

➢ Look for male and female characters who are positively portrayed in gender non-stereotypical roles and behaviors. Is it acceptable for males to show emotion or to be nurturing? Are females pictured having adventures or seen away from the home?

➢ Seek to create a balanced library—males and females come in all sorts of colors and sizes, and behave in many different ways. Do you have books that positively present these differences? Are adults as well as children depicted in multidimensional ways?

➢ Note the author and illustrator. Male authors more often feature male main characters. Are the books you select representative of both male and female authors and illustrators?

Contact Information

Laura Cutler, MA
Doctoral Student
Human Development and Family Sciences
University of Delaware
Email: lcutler@udel.edu