Diversity in Literary Response: Revisiting Gender Expectations

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Drawing on and reexamining theories on gender and literacy, derived from research performed between 1974 and 2002, this qualitative study explored the gender assumptions and expectations of Language Arts teachers in a graduate level adolescent literature course at a university in the Midwestern United States. The theoretical framework was structured around a social constructionist lens, including reader response and gender theories. The methodology employed ethnographic methods, as well as critical discourse analysis.

This study explored the ways participants identified with or resisted gender expectations in their book discussion groups. It looked at the kind of discourses that were maintained and disrupted in the groups and within their personal blogs and written responses. The participants showed diversity within gender, which calls into question the use of gender as a major consideration for making reader's advisory, collection development, programming, or pedagogical decisions. It indicates that preservice librarians should be offered a variety of opportunities to examine and redefine our current strategies for motivating readers and recommending library materials. As library educators it is essential that we offer librarians lenses beyond gender in which to view their clients.

Introduction

For years literature has been seen as a gendered medium and reading has been viewed as a gendered practice (Bleich, 1986; Cherland, 1994; Flynn, 1983; Holland, 1977; Linkin, 1993; Millard, 1997). Much of the research on gender and literature preference is more than ten years old, yet book and media marketing relies heavily on gender stereotypes based on the findings of those studies. Teachers and librarians still say, "I don't know if I would use that book because it would only appeal to girls" or "boys won't read a book with a female protagonist." This demonstrates the continuing pertinence of the question of whether literacy practices are gendered, and what that might look like today.

When responding to literature, the reader approaches the text through the lens of their sociocultural identity constructions. These constructions are reflective of our interpretive communities and are based on shared assumptions about language, the nature of knowledge, cultural models, and social expectations (Gee, 2008). These invisible, common sense assumptions are the basis for ideology and ideologies are often local constructions built on the values of the communities in which we claim membership (Fairclough, 2001).

Experiences with literacy help shape our ideologies. The texts that are read or written and the social and cultural contexts in which they are read or written position readers within discourses of gender and sexuality (Davies, 1990). Societal discourses define certain texts and activities as feminine or masculine. The social discourses on gender that normalize certain characteristics and practices as masculine or feminine have a great influence on how we see ourselves in relation to many activities, including literacy practices. This is one reason it is often assumed that those literacy practices are gendered.

The problem with the notion of gen-

dered reading is that it assumes that all readers take up social constructs the same way. It also avoids looking at the ways we resist social and cultural constructs. Gender practices are neither innate nor omnipresent. Gender essentialism creates a norm, based on our sex characteristics, for how we are expected to engage in literacy practices. This does not consider the economic, social, and cultural factors that also influence identity and literacy. Although the professionals in libraries and schools are attempting to motivate struggling and alliterate readers, the result of such essentialism is text selection, book discussions, marketing of materials, and reader's advisory that reifies gender differences and promotes gender opposition.

Revisiting Prior Research

This study examined participants' responses to literature in order to revisit research that postulated the concept of gendered literacy. It questioned whether assumptions, based on research more than ten years old, should be used to guide reader's advisory, collection development, and pedagogical decision-making today. Because it is likely that gender expectations have changed over the last twenty-five years, this research looked at the assumptions about gender and literacy from early research done ten to thirty years ago and the current assumptions that the participants in this study brought to the literature they read and to which they responded. The study also sought to understand how those assumptions and expectations may have changed, how they shaped participant responses to the texts, and how the texts and the socially situated classroom discourse reproduced or resisted the gender norms described in earlier research.

Gender and Literacy Practices

Because we understand how to perform gender through our experiences with our communities, this research was guided by social constructionism, which looks at cognition as an external process, occurring during the negotiation of understanding in a discursive interaction (Hruby, 2001). We learn through talk and interaction with others. Within that framework, theories on reader response and gender help explain how our literacy practices intersect with our identity. Reader response theory provides a lens to look at the ways we respond to the texts we read. Gender theory helps evaluate ideas about gender differences and commonalities, adds language as a site of struggle to reader response theory, and it demonstrates how language can confer or restrict power in society.

Reader Response Theory

Reader response theory aids us in considering the multiplicity of factors involved in response to texts. There are many social, economic, and cultural aspects involved in identity construction, which play an important role in the way we take up literature (Gee, 2005). Reader response helps explain how readers connect and engage with texts and emphasizes the role the reader has in the creation of the literary experience.

Reader response theorists focus on the reader's experience of the text rather than only the text itself. The text reflects the author's values, experiences, and their expectations of the reader, but meaning does not just reside in the text. The reader constructs meaning during the act of reading. Each reader creates their own version of the work through the interplay of his or her social values, personal experiences, and cultural expectations with the text (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Language is nothing but marks on the page until the reader creates meaning from the symbols. The marks must be linked to meaning by the reader's set of assumptions, cultural influences, and predispositions. The words are fixed but they are symbols that evoke a response from the reader. Meaning is created during the

act of reading, when the reader and his or her experience and influences transact with the set of symbols that make up the text and a personal response "evokes the poem" (Rosenblatt, 1995). During reading, we take in the language and allow it to connect with our senses to trigger a response based on our experiences. The meaning that is evoked from a text incorporates the identity and worldview of both author and reader. It is a social transaction. Therefore, there is no one true reading of any text. In addition, as Louise Rosenblatt proposed, "there is no generic reader, that each reader is unique" because we all have different social and cultural experiences (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. xix).

One criticism of reader response theory is that it does not examine how social and cultural discourses work to position us in ways that we may not even recognize (Cherland, 1994; Lewis, 2001). We respond through beliefs that are so deeply enculturated that they have become invisible to us. Therefore, readers view texts through lenses that often reflect the dominant discourse instead of through their own unique and individual interpretations. This makes it difficult for us to really understand and empathize with narratives of those outside our own cultural experience.

In addition, we are socialized to reproduce conventional discourses, so we often resist texts that reject those traditional cultural conventions. In some cases, readers even rewrite the text so it conforms to their expectations (Gabriel & Smithson, 1990). Discourses can conflict with one another, even within a single group or community. Due to this conflict, we may or may not accept the discourses in which we are positioned by society (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007).

Louise Rosenblatt countered these charges by saying that she maintained her "linking of reader-response theory with the need for readers to be critical of the assumptions embodied in the literary work as experienced and also of the culturally acquired assumptions they themselves brought to the transaction" (1993, p. 385). She also stated that while she recognized the power of social and cultural factors in shaping beliefs, she believed that human agency provides many possibilities for resistance (Rosenblatt, 1993). It is possible for a reader to resist the dominant ideology in a text if they are aware of alternative discourses. If readers are able to make the normative messages visible, they can then determine if they want to accept that discourse.

Gender Theory

Our conception of gender guides us in our beliefs about who we are and how we should perform our identity. An essentialist construction of gender views masculinity or femininity as characterized by specific features or traits. These traits are seen as evident in all males or all females. A normative construction defines a normal and an abnormal, a standard of what masculinity or femininity should be. A better conception of gender is that it is a set of practices that males and females engage in on a daily basis (Connell, 2005).

Gendered actions are not innate; they are learned and performative (Butler, 2006). Standard notions of how males and females should act are often invisible to us. The performance of masculinity is often viewed as natural, 'boys will be boys' behaviors. These invisible male characteristics are seen as universal. This is particularly true of white, heterosexual, middle class men. They are not viewed as white, heterosexual, or middle class. They are just men. Masculinity is not gendered, heterosexuality is not an orientation, and whiteness is not raced. This means that males who are not white, heterosexual, or middle class are seen as "other", defined by their opposition to the dominant norm, and they are marginalized. Men must prove their masculinity and heterosexuality repeatedly in order to maintain this normalcy. "If masculinity were natural,

boys would not have to police gendered behaviors of themselves and their peers on the playground, and boys and men would not need to continuously prove that they are not feminine" (Wannamaker, 2008, p. 128).

Sex, sexuality, and gender are different constructs. Sex is biological. Gender and sexuality are social and cultural construc- tions (West & Zimmerman, 1987). They are fluid, rather than fixed. These different ways of performing gender can be domi- nant, in alliance, or subordinate to one another (Connell, 2005). Different mascu- linities and femininities can be produced in the same setting. We can cross gender boundaries depending on the context of a given situation. We may fit feminine gen- der expectations when we tuck our child into bed and we may fit masculine gender expectations when we mow the lawn or watch a football game.

Both gender and literacy position us within specific social structures that are mediated by language, which helps us make sense of the beliefs and expectations that we encounter in daily life (Gee, 2008). However, our literacy and gender practic- es are continuously challenged as we seek membership in various communities, so even within cultural norms there are many who do not fit into the normative standard (Connell, 2005). This supports the idea that there are many differences across gender, as well as between gen- ders.

The intersection of gender and literacy has been of interest to researchers for the last forty years, and there have been many investigations of males and/or females reading. However, much of that research is at least fifteen years old (Bleich, 1986; Cherland, 1994; Christian-Smith, 1990; Evans, 1997; Flynn, 1983; Holland, 1977; Millard, 1997; Moore, 1997; Radway, 1984; Smith, 1997). While those studies were enlightening and contributed much to the field of literacy, there have been so- cietal changes over the last few decades that have affected gender beliefs. Re-

search shows that men and women display increasingly less differentiation in their sex role attitudes (Loo & Thorpe, 1998), however some men still feel more com- pelled than women to maintain stereotypi- cal gender characteristics (Smiler & Gel- man, 2008; Vogel, Wester, Heesacker, & Madon, 2003). There is a need for new re- search that looks at gender and literacy to investigate if and how social changes have altered the way males and females respond to the texts they read. The research dis- cussed in this article explored the gender beliefs held by a group of educators, and how they took up texts in today's world, in the light of earlier research on gender and reading.

A Look at Gender and Literature Response Today

This study helped provide an under- standing of the ways the dynamics in small and whole book group discussions acted upon the participants' responses to the texts. It explored the assumptions the participants held about gender and exam- ined the ways the subjects identified with the gender expectations in their discussion groups, as well as how that influenced their responses to literature. It investigated the kind of discourses that were maintained and disrupted in the discussion groups. In addition, it looked for patterns of response that either reified or resisted dominant gender assumptions in our culture, and for any differences in response within gender.

The participants were pre-service and practicing secondary English education teachers who were working toward a Mas- ters in Education degree at a midwestern urban university. There were 8 males and 11 females enrolled in a *Literature for Adolescents* course. All but one of the par- ticipants were white. Nearly all of the par- ticipants grew up in middle class homes.

The students were required to read 25 adolescent level books over the course of the semester. This included twelve books, from various genres, that were read by the

whole class. Data was collected on all of the texts and discussions, however this paper focuses primarily on the participants' responses to four realistic fiction novels, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007), *How I live Now* (Rosoff, 2004), *A Northern Light* (Donnelly, 2003), and *Luna* (Peters, 2004).

As part of their assigned work, students wrote personal and critical responses to the texts. The personal responses were designed to allow the students to share any

Table 1. Measures of Gendered Reading.

Gender	Mode of Reading	Source
Female	Connections to community, emphasizes community relations	Linkin 1993
Female	Tries to understand characters	Linkin 1993
Female	Ethic of care	Gilligan 1993
Female	Requires personal context for moral decision making	Linkin 1993
Female	Invokes the personal to understand the public	Linkin 1993
Female	Cooperative	Linkin 1993
Female	Forms an emotional connection with the text	Bleich 1986
Female	Introduces their own experiences to the reading (interactive)	Linkin 1993
Female	Attempts to accommodate the text	Flynn 1983
Female	Focus on relationships	Cherland 1992
Female	More likely to break free of the submissive entanglements in a text and evaluate the characters and event with critical detachment	Flynn 1983
Female	Attempts to understand a text before making a judgment about it	Flynn 1983
Female	Enters into the fictive world without focusing on the voice that narrated the world into being	Bleich 1986
Female	Interested in feelings, associations, persons	Holland 1977
Male	Focus on hierarchical relations	Linkin 1993
Male	More apt to accept or reject a text outright	Linkin 1993
Male	Engages in confrontational reading strategies that entail resisting or submitting to the text	Linkin 1993
Male	Ethic of justice—based on conflicting rights	Gilligan 1993
Male	Works well with hypothetical or public situations	Linkin 1993
Male	Needs to feel powerfully in control of events	Linkin 1993
Male	Empowered through competition	Linkin 1993
Male	Engages in power relations—situates reading in a power struggle	Linkin 1993
Male	Comments on whether the text is difficult to understand or accessible	Linkin 1993
Male	Less need to accommodate the text	Linkin 1993
Male	Maintains distance between themselves and the literary world	Flynn 1983
Male	Reacts to disturbing stories by rejecting them or dominating them	Flynn 1983
Male	Focus on a strong narrative voice	Bleich 1986
Male	Intellectual, analytical response	Holland 1977
Male	Experiences text worlds in a more objective manner	Bleich 1986
Male	Interested in plot and character's actions	Cherland 1992

connections they made with their own experiences and to let them express their feelings about the reading experience and/or the text. The critical responses were intended to encourage the students to think about the literary aspects of the text and to provide a forum for the reader to evaluate the work as a piece of literature. In addition, the students regularly responded to each other on a blog that all class members had access to through the course Moodle page. The students then discussed the texts in whole class or small group settings. The small group composition varied due to instructor placement or student preferences.

The primary method of data collection for this investigation was through direct observation of whole class and small group literature discussions. The students' written and blog assignments were collected and analyzed. This data helped to corrobo-rate or contradict the responses that were presented in the group discussions. During initial analysis of the whole class and discussion group interactions, all identifiers and indicators of gender were removed from the transcriptions. This allowed data analysis without preconceptions based on gender or any prior knowledge that the researcher had about the individual participants. After the initial stage of analysis, the correct pseudonym for each participant was reinserted and the data was re-analyzed. At that point in the analysis, patterns in the actions and responses of males and females in the groups were noted.

Since the study was attentive to gendered responses in the data, research about socially constructed gender traits was gathered, the most commonly mentioned traits were culled from those readings, and a list of gender characteristics from the

Table 2. Bem Sex Role Inventory Traits (Bem, 1974).

Masculine Traits	Feminine Traits	Neutral Traits
Acts as a leader	Affectionate	Adaptable
Aggressive	Cheerful	Conceited
Ambitious	Childlike	Conscientious
Analytical	Compassionate	Conventional
Assertive	Does not use harsh language	Friendly
Athletic	Eager to soothe hurt feelings	Happy
Competitive	Feminine	Helpful
Defends own beliefs	Flatterable	Inefficient
Dominant	Gentle	Jealous
Forceful	Gullible	Likable
Independent	Loves children	Moody
Individualistic	Loyal	Reliable
Leadership ability	Sensitive to other's needs	Secretive
Makes decisions easily	Shy	Sincere
Masculine	Soft spoken	Solemn
Self-reliant	Sympathetic	Tactful
Self-sufficient	Tender	Theatrical
Strong personality	Understanding	Truthful
Willing to take a stand	Warm	Unpredictable
Willing to take risks	Yielding	Unsystematic

work of several scholars in the fields of gender theory and literacy was created.

The Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) was used to provide a list of words and phrases that have been traditionally used to describe males or females. This offered a method of noting ways that the participants were gendered or gendered others without relying on the investigator's view of the construct of gender. These words and phrases were used as a frame of reference, rather than a determination of what were true masculine or feminine traits. The Bem Sex Role Inventory is one of the most commonly utilized measures of masculine, feminine, and androgynous traits and has been used, and validated, as recently as 2014 (Lin & Billingham, 2014; Sarrasin, Mayor, & Faniko, 2014). Bem (1974) did not intend these traits to be considered biological determinants; they are used to indicate societal behavior expectations. The Measures of Gendered Reading (see Table 1) and the Bem Sex Role Inventory (see Table 2) were employed to determine what types of responses could be characterized as traditionally feminine, masculine, or neutral in the data.

The conversational traits used in the evaluation were determined by looking at research on gender and classroom interactions (Alvermann, Commeyras, et al., 1997; Moore, 1997; O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky, 1999) and gendered talk (Fishman, 1983; Haas, 1979; Tannen, 1990). From that research, a list of characteristics that are related to male and female conversational interactions was created (see Table 3). These analytic factors were systematically used to analyze the transcripts and written responses.

It is important to note that the studies used to determine gender traits, gendered modes of reading, and gendered ways of talking are all more than ten years old. These studies were selected because they have often been used, and still are, to make decisions about literacy and gender. In addition, there have not been many recent studies on those topics. Newer research continues to reference work from the 1970's through the 1990's (Cherland, 2008; Hartman, 2006; McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, & Tope, 2011).

Because the written responses were created before the classroom discussions, they were used as a baseline for the student's views on the text. Then any changes in the participant's position during discussion were noted. Those differences in may have been due to factors such as mutual interpretation, affiliation with other group members, or social policing.

While inductive analysis (Johnson & Christensen, 2004) helped identify the patterns of gendered traits and ways of responding to literature that were in the data, discourse analysis provided a method to examine ways the written and verbal interactions maintained or resisted sociocultural beliefs and expectations. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used to explore the constantly shifting power relations that exist in interactions with language and ideology (Fairclough, 2001). CDA techniques were employed because this study examined beliefs about gender and the preconceptions the participants brought to what they read. It was important to look at the common-sense assumptions that people are often unaware of because "they are a means of legitimizing existing social relations and differences of power, simply through the recurrence of ordinary, familiar ways of behaving which take these relations and power differences for granted" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 2). Adding discourse analysis also provided a way to triangulate methodologically (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000).

Limitations

Some factors could not be controlled in the context of a single classroom setting. This was a study of one group at one point in time. The participants were preservice or practicing Language Arts teachers, so they were predisposed to value reading. With one exception, the participants were all white, but they were diverse in sexual ori-

Table 3. Measures of Gendered Talk
(In classroom discussions in comparison to the other gender).

Gender	Trait	Source
Female	Rarely nominated to talk	LaFrance, 1991
Female	Talks less when they have the floor	LaFrance, 1991
Female	Are more likely to be interrupted	LaFrance, 1991
Female	Less likely to call out answers	Jones, 1989
Female	Less likely to initiate questions	Jones, 1989
Female	Less direct and aggressive, require more inference from listeners	Noddings, 1992
Female	Doubts the ideas they share	Lakoff, 1975
Female	Affiliates with others in the group	O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky 1999
Female	Attempts to cooperate and mutually interpret text	Linkin 1993
Female	Uses "sorry talk"	Alvermann, Commeyras, Young, Randall, & Hinson, 1997
Female	More tentative, hesitant, more false starts	O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky 1999
Female	Uses more qualifiers, repetition, and intensifiers	O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky 1999
Female	Makes more deferential remarks	O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky 1999
Female	Has a slower rate of speech	O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky 1999
Female	Encourages contributions from others in the group	O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky 1999
Female	Less likely to engage in conflict	O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky 1999
Female	More comfortable speaking in private	O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky 1999
Female	Uses other people as the characters in stories they tell	Tannen, 1990
Female	When telling stories about themselves, tend to be self-depreciating (seek acceptance from the listener)	Tannen, 1990
Female	Active listeners, nod and talk back while others are speaking	Tannen, 1990
Female	Asks questions to show interest and agreement	Tannen, 1990
Male	More likely to take the floor	LaFrance, 1991
Male	Holds the floor for longer periods of time	LaFrance, 1991
Male	More likely to debate about the text	Moore, 1997
Male	Directs the conversation	Fishman, 1978
Male	More confidence in their ideas	Lakoff, 1975
Male	Initiates more questions	Jones, 1989
Male	Calls out answers	Jones, 1989
Male	More direct in their speech	Noddings, 1992
Male	Uses a reporting style	Tannen, 1990
Male	More comfortable speaking in public	Tannen, 1990
Male	Tells stories about themselves	Tannen, 1990
Male	Tends to tell humorous stories	Tannen, 1990
Male	Asks questions to determine if the other person knows what they are talking about	Tannen, 1990

entation, religion, marital status, and world-view. The participant group appeared to be somewhat homogeneous in socioeconomic status. Like culture, socioeconomic status plays a role in the practices, including gender and literacy practices, of any group.

Because the small groups were most often determined by the instructor, student choice, or proximity, it was not possible to guarantee group composition. In terms of power relations, the discussion of *Luna* provided the most variation in groups of any of the class texts because it included a single gender group. Unfortunately, the opportunities to observe single gender groups were limited by the ways that the small groups were organized.

It was difficult to get a clear picture of each individual's gender beliefs because the participants had been socialized to understand that certain kinds of discourse were expected in the classroom. However, gender is performative (Butler, 1990/2006) and this research was intended to observe the performance of gender in that classroom, by those participants, at that time.

Text Preferences

In many ways, this group of participants showed a diversity within gender that raises questions about the current applicability of the results of earlier studies on gender and reading preference (Love & Hamston, 2003; Millard, 1997), which posited that males prefer nonfiction to fiction, science fiction, and fantasy over contemporary realistic fiction or historical fiction, and male protagonists over female protagonists.

In terms of genre, the participants often did not fall into gendered categories. Studies have indicated that males prefer science fiction, fantasy, and nonfiction while females have been shown to prefer contemporary realistic fiction and historical fiction (Love & Hamston, 2003; Merisuo-Storm, 2006; Millard, 1997; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Twist & Siansbury, 2009). In this group, fourteen participants mentioned their genre preferences.

Of those, two males and one female preferred science fiction, three males and two females preferred fantasy, one male and two females preferred contemporary realistic fiction, one male and one female preferred historical fiction. However, their preferences were not entirely borne out by their actions in this course. Nine of the participants (4 male and 5 female) selected a contemporary realistic fiction text as their course favorite. Emily said she did not care for science fiction, but she liked both *Feed* (Anderson, 2002) and *House of the Scorpion* (Farmer, 2002). Ellen said she did not enjoy nonfiction, however she chose a nonfiction book, *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World* (Armstrong, 2000), as one of her favorites.

Literacy researchers often discuss the belief that readers prefer protagonists that are of the same gender as the reader (Beyard-Tyler & Sullivan, 1980; Prosenjak, 1997; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Of the eighteen participants in this study, twelve identified a favorite book in the course. Of the twelve, ten of the participants (five male and five female) selected books with male protagonists as their preferred read of the semester. Eight of the twelve selected *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007) as their favorite. Despite the fact that several participants identified it as a "boy book", four of those who selected it were females.

All of the participants believed that certain texts were gendered. Four of the males and two of the females felt that they would be more likely to give *A Northern Light* (Donnelly, 2003) to a female than a male. Two males felt that *How I Live Now* (Rosoff, 2004) was gendered, but one felt it was more male oriented because of the topic of war, while the other thought it was more female oriented because of the female narrator.

Literacy Behaviors

In contradiction to earlier research, both males and females in this study made

emotional connections to the text (Bleich, 1986), focused on relationships as well as on action (Cherland, 1992), and read in both analytical and interpersonal modes (Holland, 1977). For example, Paul, who enjoyed the action and adventure in *Airborn* (Oppel, 1994), spoke of remembering what it was like to be a 15 year old in love when he discussed *How I Live Now* (Rosoff, 2004)

> (t)he hopeless romantic 15-year-old boy in me jumped at the chance to remember similar memories from when I was that age, and how finding someone that you connected with mentally as Edmond and Daisy do is breathtaking and frightening at the same time. You never want to let that feeling go (Paul, *How I Live Now* written response).

He was willing to compare his own feelings to the feelings of the female protagonist.

Linda, whose written responses were often very analytical and focused outside of the story world, spoke with a strong discourse of feelings in her small group discussion of *Luna* (Peters, 2004) saying, "(i)t was heartbreaking to read that Liam idolized his father" (Linda, *Luna* written response). Ben, who often talked about authorial intent, plot, and characterization, wrote with great emotion about Junior in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007).

> I had goose bumps when I read the passage about his triumph on the basketball court, and was almost as heartbroken as he was when he realized that his team was not David, and was instead Goliath. (Ben, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* written response).

Both males and females concentrated on the narrative voice, feelings and associations, characterization (Holland, 1977), and on authorial intent (Bleich, 1986). Both genders also told personal stories in order to show a connection to the text (Tannen, 1990) and attempted to jointly construct meaning in discussions (Moore, 1997). Paul often collaborated with the others in his groups to construct meaning from the books they discussed, as did Linda, Ben, Kate, Rose, Emily, and Ellen.

Role of Identity in Gender Beliefs

We construct meaning within the communities in which we participate and we learn how to navigate our social worlds through those groups. We use the beliefs and expectations we learn in our communities when we attempt to make meaning in the world (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2007; Paechter, 2003). This influence is demonstrated by the split in responses to *How I Live Now* (Rosoff, 2004). Several of the participants were offended by the sexual relationship between Daisy and Edmond, who were first cousins. Others either had no overt issue with the romance, or they found redeeming value in the way the author handled it. Judy talked about her family beliefs and her opinion that relationships between cousins were aberrant. Judy wrote,

> Another area I had issues with was the relationship between Daisy and Edmund. Perhaps it is that our time period and culture (in most areas in the US) are not in favor of cousins becoming romantic. More than likely it is because I have grown up with over 30 cousins and have NEVER thought of any of them in a way other than family. I realize she had not grown up with them and they were all strangers until they met—but still—they are cousins and I struggle with that . . . but when you combine their age with the fact they are cousins...couldn't get past it (Judy, *How I Live Now* written response).

She was relating back to her extended family and talking about a practice that was unacceptable in that community, romantic relationships between first cousins. It is legal in twenty-two states in the U.S., including California, New York, and Florida. First cousin relationships are legal

in most places in the world, so Judy was viewing Daisy and Edmund's relationship through the lens of her own socialization. As Fish (1980) theorized, Judy was reading with the lens of her own interpretive community.

Matt had a similar response,

I am just not okay with the cousin sex relationship aspect of this book. It happens pretty near the beginning of the book, and it threw me off right away. I know they don't know each other so it's like meeting someone new, but still, they are cousins, so stuff like that shouldn't go on. And it makes me wonder again what the author's intent is. Am I supposed to be okay with this type of relationship? Is it supposed to make me view Daisy and/or Edmund in a certain light? Is it supposed to tug at my heartstrings? Because it doesn't, it just grosses me out (Matt, *How I Live Now* written response).

Matt and Judy's responses to the love relationship in the book reflect the socialization they received in their communities regarding acceptable sexual relationships.

Paul's prior experiences were strong enough to overcome his socialization that Daisy and Edmund's relationship was incest, and, therefore, wrong. In Rose's case, the communities of practice that helped form her gender beliefs and expectations instilled a sense of romantic love that allowed her to justify the incest because the characters had true love and a deep connection.

I initially felt uncomfortable reading about her romantic relationship with Edmond and knowing that first cousins were having underage sex. However, somehow I was able to rather quickly overlook their blood relationship and instead focus on their romantic relationship. At most points in the book, I found myself approving of their relationship instead of frowning upon it. Perhaps it is because Daisy does such an effective job of convincing me of her love for Edmond. I never got the sense that this

was "puppy dog" love; rather, I could tell that Daisy and Edmond were twin souls that collided quickly and forcefully (Rose, *How I Live Now* written response).

Matt openly stated that he was conservative and an Evangelical Christian. Those beliefs caused him to have difficulty accepting some of the relationships and characterizations in the course texts. He often rejected behaviors that he did not approve of in the texts he read, such as *Luna* (Peters, 2004), *How I Live Now* (Rosoff, 2004), and *Looking for Alaska* (Green, 2005), and that affected his engagement with the texts. Bridget's relationship with her Lesbian mother and Kate's sexual orientation also gave them a perspective on *Luna* (Peters, 2004) that affected their responses. They both expressed an ability to connect with Regan and Luna because of their experiences with Lesbianism. Julia's family life also affected her reading of *Luna* (Peters, 2004). She wrote that she identified with the character of Luna because she, a child of an alcoholic, spent so much time "guessing at what normal is, judging myself without mercy, seeking approval/acceptance, taking myself too seriously, and most of all, feeling different from others" (Julia, *Luna* written response).

Classroom Community Norms and Expectations

There were common practices that developed so the participants could achieve their collective goal of learning more about adolescent literature. These practices gave the students an understanding of what was expected of them in the class, including accepted ways of talking about books and people. There was a shared understanding that the classroom was intended to be a place for open discussion. Still, some points of view were less acceptable than others. For example, the majority of the class members would reject an openly racist or sexist statement and a person

who made such a statement would be perceived as outside the classroom norm. One example of this was Matt's comments on the transgender character in *Luna* (Peters, 2004). He felt strongly about his opinion, but he prefaced it with a concern that he might offend someone saying, "I don't want to make anyone angry but . . ." (Matt, *Luna* written response).

Role of Small Group Configurations

A few studies have noted that participants responded differently when in mixed versus single gender groupings (Cherland, 1992; Davies, 2003; Evans, Alvermann, and Anders, 1998). In this study, there were differences in the responses within the discussion groups; nevertheless, it is not clear that the differences were due to gender. Each discussion group had a different configuration, either in terms of gender composition or in teaching experience, which could be seen as a power differential. In comparing the written or blog responses to the discussions, it was evident that the participants in this study often tailored their comments to the other members of the group. If a group was dominated by members who focused on the authorial choices or the literary merit of a book, the other group members would follow suit. If a group contained dominant members who were interested in the relationships in the book, that became the main topic of conversation.

The impact of group composition was apparent in one *Luna* discussion group. Kate and Matt, both dominant speakers, had oppositional views on sexual orientation. Kate had written a very positive opinion of *Luna* (Peters, 2004) in her blog response and she was usually forthright and gregarious in group discussions. However, after Matt said the book did not fit into his beliefs, she became very quiet. After that, her comments in the discussion were often just forms of active listening. When she did speak, she was very tentative in expressing her disagreement. Matt was also more tentative in expressing his opinions verbally than he was in his written response. In his written response, Matt said,

> Okay, I guess I have to get to the elephant in the room. Or . . . on the page. Whatever. I am not okay with the topic of this book. I don't want to make anyone angry, but my belief system does not allow for the GLBT philosophy to be okay. I believe saying it is okay for someone to be transgender implies that God made a mistake when he created them, and I don't believe in a God who can make mistakes. . . . When I saw what the book was about, I immediately thought, "I don't want to read this book" and I actually considered asking if I could read a different one. But I thought it was important to have the same book experience that my classmates are having, so I read it (Matt, *Luna* written response).

He was not as strong in his verbal opinions as he was in his written response. The larger classroom community, which privileged inclusive ideas, would have influenced his behavior in the Luna discussion group (see Transcription Conventions).

> MATT: Um, (.) I'll be *that* guy. Um (.), I loved this book and I thought it was really well written (.), *but* (.) it doesn't fit into my beliefs. And um, I hate using the term *religious* beliefs (*Uses air quotes for religious beliefs*) because it has such a like a negative connotation these days (1.0), but it doesn't. I mean its (.), that's just my beliefs (Matt, *Luna* small group discussion).

He tempered his comments by saying that he had more of a problem with Luna's father than with Luna. It is likely that both Kate and Matt altered the strength of their responses because of who was in the discussion and because of a sense of causing discomfort in the group.

Group Conversational Dynamics

Past research has indicated that men often speak more than women do and they speak for longer periods of time

(LaFrance, 1991, Tannen, 1990). In all of the mixed gender discussion groups in this study, males spoke longer than females. However, in the all-female group, three of the participants rivaled the males in the other groups in number of lines spoken. These results could be due to the speaking styles of the participants in the all female group, because Bridget, Linda, and Judy had a "high involvement style" (Tannen, 2000). It is also possible that the speakers felt evenly matched or less dominated by male speakers.

Males dominated the small group conversations of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007) and *Luna* (Peters, 2004) in terms of time spent speaking. The three gregarious females from the all female Luna discussion group spoke more than the other females in the class when they discussed *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007). This leads me to posit that the differences in time spent speaking were due more to personality than gender. The all female group equaled the males in the small group discussions of *Luna* (Peters, 2004), and the females in the course spoke as much or more than the males in the whole class discussions of *How I Live Now* (Rosoff, 2004) and *A Northern Light* (Donnelly, 2003). This is an interesting finding because previous research (O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky, 1999; Tannen, 1990) indicated that males were more comfortable than females speaking in public. In this group of participants, females spoke more in public (whole class discussions), while males spoke more in private (small group discussions).

Pamela Fishman (1983) found that males tended to control the topic in mixed group discussions. According to her study, this was because the topics introduced by men were more likely to be taken up than the topics introduced by women. In this study, topic control could not be explained by gender, time speaking, or number of turns taken. For example, in two of the *Luna* discussions, the males did control the topic a large percentage of the time. However, in the other *Luna* discussions, females controlled the topic more often. There was a diversity of results within gender.

Females in this classroom were more likely to exhibit active listening. An active listener gives the speaker verbal feedback indicating that the listener is paying attention and understanding what is being said. Previous research (LaFrance, 1991; O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky, 1999; Tannen, 1990) has related active listening to the nurturing and conciliatory characteristics that have been socially prized in women.

O'Donnell-Allen and Smagorinsky (1999) and Lakoff (1975) found that women were more likely to be unsure of their statements. Their research showed that females used more qualifiers and hesitated more often. Over all the *Luna* discussion groups, males were more likely to use tentative language and listener checks when speaking. Of the nine participants who used tentative language most, five were males. This does not imply that lack of confidence in one's ideas is the only possible explanation for the use of tentative language. This group of participants, however, refuted the results of earlier studies that indicated that females were more likely to use tentative language.

In O'Donnell-Allen and Smagorinsky's (1999) study, females showed more agreement with others in discussion and males were more likely to debate and made more oppositional comments than females. In this study, the females were more likely to disagree with their group mates than the males. Males were as likely to agree with other discussion members as females were.

Zimmerman and West (1975) and LaFrance (1991) postulated that women are discouraged from talking by a variety of conversational tactics, including interruptions. They saw interruption as a power tactic designed to send the message that women's ideas are less worthy. Their re-

search showed that women were interrupted more frequently than men were and that men interrupted women more than they did other men. In this study, the women interrupted others more than the men did. The largest number of interruptions was in the all female *Luna* discussion group (see Transcription Conventions).

LINDA: I felt like even in my (.), you know (.), in high school (.), when it was a GLBT {group}

BRIDGET: {uhhuh}

LINDA: {it still} was mostly, there (.) {weren't}

BRIDGET: {Well, T is} definitely more taboo. (*Chuckles a little*) T, transgendered, taboo, you know, (.) definitely (.), I agree (.) wholeheartedly but, for me, it's (.) just all kind of a (1.0) spectrum of sexuality and it didn't (.), you know, {so}

JUDY: {Even} the dad in the book (.), it's like (.) just tell me if he's gay. {Like}

LINDA: {He could} deal with *that,* {yeah}

JUDY: {Like he} could maybe handle that.

BRIDGET: Yeah

JUDY: But this transgender thing (.), yeah, (*Starts speaking as the father*) {what?}

BRIDGET: {right}

JUDY: {You lied} to me. (*Speaking as herself*) Well, no (.) he's not gay and {he couldn't}

LINDA: {Well}, and {even}

JUDY: {wrap his} mind around {that}

LINDA: {Ali too}, its the same thing (.) {like}

BRIDGET: {right}

These results may contradict the research by Zimmerman and West (1975) and LaFrance (1991) or it may indicate that the women in the all female *Luna* discussion group had a give and take conversational style that encouraged interruptions.

It may have been a way for the group to jointly create meaning from the text.

Discussion

In this study, specific individuals either reified or refuted research on gender and discussion, but there were no actions or traits that could be considered indicative of one gender over another. Many characteristics that have been attributed to gender can also be explained by other factors. To really understand the nuances of gender, one must take into consideration culture, socioeconomic status, religion, conflicting communities of practice, and other aspects of any individual's identity.

While these results present the responses of a specific group in a specific context, the data from this research demonstrate some of the ways that literature discussions can be affected by group composition and sociocultural expectations. The results of this study suggest that it is important to make reading group facilitators aware of the significance of group composition in discussion of texts, and to help them see how power relations operate within the group. It problematizes the need to provide single gender book discussion groups to accommodate gendered conversational traits. Single gender groups may provide opportunities for bonding or camaraderie, however promoting single gender discussion groups also reifies assumptions about gender differences and encourages binary thinking.

The study showed a diversity of response within gender. This indicates that, in this group, there were other contributing factors to literary practices beyond gender, which calls into question the use of gender as a major consideration in literacy policies. It would be efficacious to provide librarians with coursework that helps make their gendered assumptions visible. Teaching them to ask, "How do I feel and what do I know about this topic? Where does my knowledge come from? What is unknown to me?" will help pre-

service librarians unpack their presuppositions about gender and sexuality and will facilitate open and transformative discussions in the classroom (Winans, 2006, p. 105). Learning to step back and distance themselves from such expectations might provide a powerful impetus for considering the implications of ideology in their professional lives. In this way, they could then provide reader's advisory, programming, collection development, and pedagogical decisions that look beyond gender to see the multiplicity of factors constituting the reader.

This study suggests that some males prefer genres that have traditionally been considered to be of more interest to females, such as contemporary and historical fiction, and some females enjoy genres that have been considered the male domain, like nonfiction and science fiction. In readers' advisory, children's literature, and adolescent literature courses we must provide student librarians a variety of opportunities to examine and redefine our current strategies for motivating readers and recommending reading materials and media. It is still all too common to hear preservice librarians discuss materials through the lens of gender. Librarians still select materials, use marketing strategies, and develop programs based on gendered assumptions. As library educators it is essential that we offer librarians other lenses in which to view their clients.

If we subscribe to the belief that readers can be essentialized by gender, we minimize our opportunities to introduce readers to excellent texts that we assume will only interest one gender. The idea that literacy is gendered can lead to policies that promote gender inequality. The more we promote the notion of "boy books" or "girl books," the more we maintain a gender binary. Rather than making sweeping generalizations, we should value the complexity of readers and their responses to literacy. We will continue to see males and females that substantiate the gendered reading model, however we will also see many variations within gender. It is important to look at other dynamics that come to play in reading, such as culture and socioeconomic issues, and begin to formulate professional competencies and policies that will address those factors.

Transcription Conventions

These transcription conventions were adapted from a system developed by Gail Jefferson and printed in Atkinson & Heritage (1984).

{ }	brackets indicate overlapping utterances
=	equal marks indicate contiguous utterances, or continuation of the same utterance to the next line
(.)	period within parentheses indicates micropause
(2.0)	number within parentheses indicates pause of length in approximate seconds
ye:s	colon indicates stretching of sound it follows
yes	underlining indicates emphasis
YES	capital letters indicate increased volume
°yes°	degree marks indicate decreased volume of materials between
hhh	h's indicate audible aspiration, possibly laughter
·hhh	raised, large period indicates in-breath audible aspiration, possibly laughter
ye(hh)s	h's within parentheses indicate within-speech aspiration, possibly laughter
((cough))	items within double parentheses indicate some sound or feature of the talk which is not easily transcribable, e.g. "((in falsetto))"
(yes)	parentheses indicate transcriber doubt about hearing of passage

↑yes, ↓yes arrows indicate upward or
　　downward intonation of sound
　　they precede

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