Still Trapped in the U.S. Media’s Closet: Representations of Gender-Variant, Pre-Adolescent Children

Tony Kelso PhD

Department of Mass Communication, Iona College, New Rochelle, New York, USA

Accepted author version posted online: 11 Mar 2015. Published online: 11 Mar 2015.

To cite this article: Tony Kelso PhD (2015) Still Trapped in the U.S. Media’s Closet: Representations of Gender-Variant, Pre-Adolescent Children, Journal of Homosexuality, 62:8, 1058-1097, DOI: 10.1080/00918369.2015.1021634

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2015.1021634

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms &
Still Trapped in the U.S. Media’s Closet: Representations of Gender-Variant, Pre-Adolescent Children

TONY KELSO, PhD
Department of Mass Communication, Iona College, New Rochelle, New York, USA

Many studies have examined representations of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in the U.S. media. Yet they have centered on portrayals of adults or teenagers. This investigation considered a potential LGBT population that has been neglected in media research, namely gender-variant, preadolescent children. Surveying the U.S. media at large but with an emphasis on television, the article reveals that gender-creative youth are nearly invisible. When depictions of gender-variant kids do appear, they often focus on either children who express extreme gender dysphoria or in some way signify the “tragic queer” motif (or both). The implications of these findings are discussed.

KEYWORDS gay media representations, gender-creative children, gender-nonconforming children, gender-variant children, LGBT media representations, LGBT youth, symbolic annihilation

In recent years, the inclusion of gay male and lesbian characters as well as the appearance of “out” gay and lesbian public personalities in U.S. media has increased substantially (Gibson, 2006; Gross, 2001; Ng, 2008; Pratt, 2008; Tropiano, 2002). Transgender people also have received greater media attention of late (Siebler, 2010). Given this rise in queer representation, numerous scholars have produced work since the dawn of the new century that examines the nature of these portrayals of gay male, lesbian, and transgender characters and celebrities in U.S. media and their potential impact on audience perceptions (e.g., Bennett, 2006; Bonds-Raacke, Cady, Schlegel, Harris, & Firebaugh, 2007; Collier, Lumadue, & Wooten, 2009; Duggan & McCreary, 2009).
Still Trapped in the U.S. Media’s Closet

2004; Fetner, 2005; Fisher, Hill, Grube, & Gruber, 2007; Fouts & Inch, 2005; Gadsden, 2002; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Gonsoulis, 2010; Kalter, 2008; Kessler, 2011; Mazur & Emmers-Sommer, 2003; Morrison, 2010; Netzley, 2010; Nowlan, 2006; Padva, 2008; Raley & Lucas, 2006; Rigney, 2003/2004; Ringo, 2002; Saucier & Caron, 2008; Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2006; Siebler, 2010, 2012; Streitmatter, 2009; Willox, 2003). Some of these studies indicate that great symbolic progress has been made over the past several years because representations of LGBT people as a whole have become considerably more sympathetic. Rodger Streitmatter (2009), for example, while acknowledging that not all media portrayals of gay men and lesbians are “laudable,” nonetheless has declared, “there’s been a sea change in the depiction of gay people between 1950 and the early 2000s” (p. 182). Still, not all LGBT scholars of media have been as sanguine. For instance, Nathan Taylor (2012) has argued that, reflecting trends in the culture at large, lesbian- and gay-themed children’s picture books consistently formulate a homonormative subject. Duggan (2002) has defined homonormativity as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (p. 170). On the one hand, Taylor has implied, affirming news coverage of the same-sex marriage movement and scenes of the gay partners Mitchell and Cameron going about everyday life in Modern Family (Levitan & Lloyd, 2009–) no doubt stand as a quantum leap from the representation of the queer Communist pervert of the 1950s (Gross, 2001). Yet by “supporting existing systems of oppression in exchange for institutional recognition” (Taylor, 2012, p. 137), such “safe” images might benefit the relatively privileged LGBT people who conform to consumer, middle-class, White values, while keeping the many other queer communities confined to the margins, including “dykes, fags, bisexuals, radical feminists, and other subversive heterosexuals, transvestites, transsexuals, poor queers, Black queers, Asian-American queers, homos, drag queens, leather queens and dykes, muscle queens, lipstick lesbians, bull dykes, [and] gay women” (Rosenblum, 1994, p. 91).

Regardless of the positions media researchers have taken toward representations of LGBT people, however, their emphasis has been inevitably on adults. Sometimes, the lens has extended to teen members of LGBT communities (e.g., Evans, 2007; Meyer, 2003; Rockefeller, 2009). Yet as if queerness magically materializes only at puberty, studies on U.S. media depictions of young children who depart from gender norms or hint at—or even openly express—same-sex attraction (or both) have been almost entirely absent.

But homosexual or transgender identity formation generally begins in early childhood (Adelson, 2011; Corbett, 1999; Pleak, 1999; Steensma, Biemond, de Boer, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2010). Moreover, numerous scholars (e.g., Lind, 2013; Martin, 2008; Signorielli, 2001; Wilson, Gutiérrez, & Chao,
T. Kelso

2013), often drawing on social expectations theory or cultivation theory, have convincingly argued that representations in the media have a socializing influence on young people’s development of their notions of self, whether in regard to race, gender, class, sexual orientation, or other identity categories. Clearly, for emerging homosexual or transgender kids growing up, with few if any flesh-and-blood role models they can look up to regarding these core issues, LGBT images in the media take on especially heightened importance. Furthermore, people who rarely encounter members of a minority population in everyday life are more likely to rely on portrayals in the media in forming their opinions of these “others” (Hart, 2000).

Various researchers have discussed the role of media in the construction of homosexual or transgender identity. Gomillion and Giuliano (2011), for example, used surveys and conducted qualitative interviews with gay, lesbian, and bisexual respondents to discover the influence their transactions with adult sexual minority characters in the media had on their sense of self. Ringo (2002) executed a comparable study via e-mail interviews with transgender people. Similar research has been performed with people of color (e.g., Barrera & Bielby, 2001; Ho, 2013; Jhally & Lewis, 1992) and other groups that have been historically underserved (e.g., Ibrahim & Halim, 2013; Radway, 1991; Wolf, Krakow, & Taff, 2013). Scholars have noted that when typically marginalized communities gain little depiction in the media, they become victims of “symbolic annihilation” (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Tuchman, 1978) and can receive the message that they hardly matter to the culture at large. So to whom do preadolescents unsure about their gender identities or feelings of same-sex attraction that potentially alienate them from their peers have to turn? Yes, a positively portrayed gay man or lesbian, or a talk-show appearance by Chaz Bono might resonate. But where is the 7-year-old boy on television or in the movies who loves pretending to be a princess and drawing beautiful mermaids? Where is the 5-year-old girl who shuns the pink dress for a session of rough-and-tumble play in the park or baseball—forget softball—with the boys? In short, where are the gender-variant, preadolescent kids? And on those rare occasions when they are presented, how are they depicted? Not only does this relative absence matter to gender-variant children, but it is also a critical subject of concern for the parents who are doing their best to raise them in a safe environment. Indeed, it could be reasoned that if these kids are to be protected from social—and even physical—harm, or better yet, fully accepted by their families, peers, teachers, and all the other grownups they will spend time with in their day-to-day lives, then their symbolic presence in the media is salient to everyone.

Thus the intention of this study was to examine images in the U.S. media—with an accent on television—of preadolescent, gender-variant children. Any attempt to conduct a quantitative content analysis, however, would have been problematic because of the paucity of representations of these
youngsters. Therefore, this article will present a qualitative evaluation of a purposive sample that was gathered through extensive online correspondence with many parents of gender-variant children who are members of a private Listserv support group sponsored by the Children's Medical Center in Washington, DC. (The author is a member of the Listserv.) This decision was based on the premise that such guardians would have a heightened awareness of any depictions of gender variance in the media and, consequently, would be able to supply a representative number of texts. Although a short survey of portrayals in print and film was performed, the focus was on television in particular because of the extent to which even young children interact with the medium and, based on the work of scholars of many stripes (e.g., Croteau, Hoynes, & Milan, 2012; Picora, Murray, & Wartella, 2007; Witt, 2001), the socializing influence it has on them. An assumption that has driven the essay is that in the midst of the general public's demonstrating growing acceptance of people associated with LGBT communities, it is imperative that it understands such non-hetero and non-gender-typical attitudes and behaviors begin early in life and do not adhere to the simplistic gender and sexuality codes generally reinforced by the media (Comstock & Scharrer, 2007; Siebler, 2012).

DELIMITATIONS

Because the study took texts as its object of analysis, it was not intended to directly embody the actual voices of gender-variant children or adequately express their subject position, especially in relationship to how they themselves interpret the products of the media. At the same time, the author by no means wishes to convey the presumption that these children are necessarily in a state of painful confusion or turmoil. The extent to which their tastes and behavior are affirmed by their families, peers, teachers, and other influential people no doubt has a major bearing on how they contend with feelings of difference (Hill & Menvielle, 2009). What will be suggested, however, is that gender-variant children—regardless of their level of emotional contentment—would be better served by media industries that include more preteen gender-variant characters and present them in ways in which the kids in the audience can recognize these mediated figures as having similar qualities as themselves, possibly gaining a measure of self-validation in the process. For now, any deliberation on the effects or influence of depictions of gender-variant children on the lives of actual kids manifesting gender variance is beyond the scope of this article.

It should also be noted that, while both gender-variant girls and boys, as well as media representations of both male and female gender-variant characters, will receive significant consideration below, male gender-variant children and media figures might appear to gain the greater share.
Unfortunately, this reflects the nature of the studies on childhood gender variance that have been done to date, which seems to betray a masculinist bias among researchers. Perhaps this leaning can be partially explained (while not granted complete justification) by the supposition (whether rightly or wrongly) that feminine boys are more stigmatized than masculine girls in the culture. After all, the latter are often tagged with the sometimes endearing term of “tomboy,” while the former, at least as judged from the mainstream heteronormative position, have no designation that connotes anything encouraging (Thorne, 1993). In addition, the study was constrained in giving fully equal treatment to both male and female roles because the media themselves, particularly television, still give greater attention to males than females in general (Gill, 2007) and to queer males than queer females in particular (Gay & Lesbian Alliance against Defamation, 2012).

DEFINING GENDER VARIANCE AND OTHER TERMS

Before turning to an analysis of the texts, a definition of gender variant is in order. (Although recently gender variant has been the most commonly used term in the psychiatric literature [Pleak, 2011], there has been a push for vocabulary that conveys more positive implications than the word variant, including gender atypical, gender nonconforming, and perhaps the most sympathetic sounding designation [see Ehrensaft, 2011], gender creative. For the purposes of this article, all of these terms will be used synonymously.) First, strong acknowledgment must be given to the social constructionist theories of gender that have grown out of feminist studies, queer studies, and other academic disciplines (e.g., Butler, 1990; West & Fenstermaker, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Indeed, based on the socially constructed and performative nature of gender expression, the term gender variant is itself problematic—if neither maleness nor femaleness is essential, then no behavior whatsoever should be regarded as beyond the bounds of gender normality. Yet the definition and approach to the subject here was derived from the medical—especially the psychiatric—literature. Given that U.S. society at large tends to view gender through a dichotomous lens, which has very real consequences, the designation of gender variance as a concrete phenomenon still has relevance. At the same time, to dismiss the role of biology altogether in the development of identity would be reductionist. The presumption in this article is that gender is indeed socially constructed but that every person comes into the world with certain predispositions based on her or his chemical composition at birth. Gender identity, then, is a fluid process involving the complex interaction between biological impulses and internalized social expectations. Accordingly, gender variance and its equivalent terms, according to Richard Pleak (2011), a psychiatrist and associate professor of psychiatry who specializes in counseling kids struggling with
gender formation and educating future therapists pursuing a similar role, “connote behaviors and/or identities that are outside what is considered normal or typical by a society or culture for an individual’s natal sex or assigned gender as male or female” (p. 603). In other words, a gender-variant child is a youngster whose activities and verbalizations disclosing hints of personal identity are incongruent with the gender expectancies that have been socially constructed by the society or culture of which she or he is a part.

Complicating the issue is how, despite the common view as typified by the American Psychiatric Association (2008) that gender identity is “distinct from” sexual orientation, the two qualities become conflated in relation to gender variance in childhood—at least according to the medical literature. This binary perspective, however, has been by no means a consensus among scholars from various fields. The gender theorist Judith Butler (1990), for example, has argued that the general propensity to recognize gender as a term signifying two coherent categories—male and female—can occur only in opposition to the assumption of heterosexuality as a stable and innate behavioral inclination and identity for most of the population, a tendency she has related to the concept of the “heterosexual matrix.” Put simply, heterosexuality can exist only in relationship to opposite-sex desire. Thus, Butler has contended, the ordinary outlook on gender and sexuality, though probably unintended, actually entwines the two attributes. Queer theorists have sought to destabilize rigid binaries, pointing out that both gender and sexual orientation are pluralistic and highly variable expressions and aspects of identity (Dunphy, 2000). Still, as Surya Monro (2005) has made clear, most people, at the level of lived experience, perceive themselves as having an essential character. Consequently, she has warned, queer theorists risk alienating gender and sexual minorities, especially those engaged in political struggles to escape marginalization. As Riki Wilchins (2013) has put it, “What is left to organise around if we don’t use identities?” (pp. 95–96). Hence, while acknowledging the importance of the quest of poststructuralists and queer theorists to imagine alternatives to inflexible and potentially oppressive gender and sexuality binaries and recognizing that such dualistic distinctions are problematic, this article will nonetheless approach identity as it is generally sensed by people in their tangible lives.

Returning to a review of the psychiatric literature on childhood gender variance, then, it has revealed that most gender-creative youngsters—even the boy who insists on wearing a dress at 5 years old—do not fully identify as the sex opposite from the one they were biologically assigned. Instead, they lie at various points along a wide spectrum. Nor will the majority of these kids feel as if they were, so to speak, born in the wrong bodies once they reach puberty and beyond. Indeed, as Pleak (1999) has stated: “Although most transsexual adults report histories of gender dysphoria and cross-gender behavior going back to early childhood, most children with gender dysphoria do not grow up to be transsexual” (p. 35). (Pleak [2011] has defined
transsexual as a term applied to adolescents or adults who have a cross-gender identity completely opposite their natal or assigned sex of either male or female and who wish to, are in the process of, or have completed transition from one sex to the other with hormones or surgery (p. 604.)

Given all of the difficulties in obtaining a representative sample of gender-atypical kids and tracking their identities through longitudinal analysis, few studies have been conducted that demonstrate to what degree children diagnosed with gender identity disorder, the label encoded in the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (1994), will actually feel the same way once they develop and wish to undergo some sort of sexual transition. The studies that have been performed thus far (e.g., Davenport, 1986; Drummond, Bradley, Peterson-Badali, & Zucker, 2008; Green, 1987; Wallien & Cohen-Kettenis, 2008; Zucker & Bradley, 1995; Zuger, 1988), however, usually suggest it is far more likely that gender-creative children (especially boys) will later identify as homosexual than transgender. In one of the most cited inquiries in this area, Richard Green (1987) followed up with 44 “feminine” boys; his research showed that by their late teens or early adulthood, about 73% of them identified as gay or bisexual men. Roughly 27% evidenced a heterosexual male orientation when they reached maturity. Only one of his participants continued to exhibit gender dysphoria as an adult. Other studies have yielded comparable results in relationship to persisting feelings of transsexualism (Davenport, 1986; Zucker & Bradley, 1995; Zuger, 1988). Money and Russo (1979) tracked nine boys with what they called “gender disorder” and recounted that all of them later identified as gay. Zuger (1978) followed 16 boys who, he stated, displayed “extensive effeminate behavior” and learned that 10 of them disclosed they were homosexual when they became older. Conversely, some researchers have perhaps somewhat surprisingly reported that more of their participants eventually identified as heterosexual than gay (Davenport, 1986; Lebovitz, 1972; Zucker & Bradley, 1995). Then again, it is conceivable that a portion of these male adolescents and men were not ready to come out at the time of the investigations. At any rate, none of the studies ever have revealed that the majority—or even a sizeable percentage—of the subjects grew up to become transsexual adults. Research on gender-variant girls also has indicated that few of them will later transition to female-to-male transsexuals—it is far more probable they will eventually identify as either lesbians or heterosexual women (Drummond et al., 2008; Wallien & Cohen-Kettenis, 2008). So to sum up, the bulk of the research on gender variance that has been done to date strongly suggests that the young boy who contends he is a girl—or at least strongly wishes he were—is much more liable in due course to identify as gay or bisexual than would the male population at large. Likewise, his tomboy counterpart is more apt to later identify as lesbian or bisexual than would the female population at large; at the same time, she is somewhat likelier to identify as heterosexual.
than would gender-creative boys. In both cases, only a rather small percent-
age of them will express themselves as transsexual once they reach
adulthood (Children’s National Medical Center, n.d.; Pleak, 1999). As Stewart
Adelson (2011), the primary author of the forthcoming Practice Parameter on
Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual Orientation, Gender-Nonconformity, and Gender
Discordance in Children and Adolescents, has put it, “retrospective data
from studies conducted in several diverse cultures” regarding the connection
between childhood gender nonconformity and adult homosexuality signifies
“this association is a fairly common pattern and may be one normal develop-
mental pathway toward adult homosexuality, especially in males” (p. 656).
It could very well be, therefore, that a substantial number of gender-atypical
youngsters are experiencing a sort of homosexual (or bisexual) childhood.
Consequently, although the discussion below will focus on gender-creative
kids, the analysis will sometimes spill into issues related to sexual orientation
because the two areas cannot be neatly parsed out in the lives of children
who display gender variance (nor, for that matter, based on the discussion
above, can they be untangled relative to the population at large). In many
instances, a young boy may feel like a girl but is actually confusing his gen-
der identity with his emerging sexual orientation. Likewise, a girl who thinks
she should be a boy could be on her way to identifying as a lesbian or
bisexual.

The term transgender is slippery as well, as researchers differ in
the ways they have used the designation (Pleak, 2011). Not only that, as
knowledge of the complexity of gender identity and sexuality expands,
the commonly employed acronym LGBT has been and continues to be a
contested term. Part of the debate reflects the tensions among the various
communities brought together under the LGBT umbrella. Grouping lesbians,
gay males, bisexuals, and transgender people within a single categorization
risks presenting all gender and sexual minorities as a monolithic collec-
tive with entirely mutual interests. But since Stonewall there have been
numerous political conflicts pitting, for instance, gay men against lesbians.
On other occasions, gay men and lesbians together have clashed with both
bisexuals and transgender people, with bisexuals undermining the binaries
that many gay men and lesbians depend on for their sense of sexual identity,
and transgender individuals communicating concerns about gender rather
than sexual orientation (Monro, 2005). Yet for some transgender persons,
taking a different angle, the “T” seems like nothing but a perfunctory
“add on.”

At the same time, the LGBT label is becoming recognized as inade-
quately encompassing the full range of sexualities and gender experiential
or bodily manifestations, such as genderqueer or intersex. Thus, the four-
lettered abbreviation has been growing in length to LGBTQ (the Q meaning
either queer or questioning), or LGBTQI (the I specifying intersex), or
LGBTQIA (the A denoting “ally”) or even LGBTQQIA (granting a Q each
to both queer and questioning; Pleak, 2011; Schulman, 2013). But in relation to the goals of this article, discriminating among all of the distinctions would have proven unwieldy. The reader should therefore keep in mind that, here, the term transgender will be used in reference to both people who strongly and persistently identify as the gender opposite from their natal sex (thus mirroring the word transsexual as defined above, which, Butler [1993] has suggested, as an expressed identity actually reinforces heteronormative and binary conceptions of gender), as well as those who identify “off the binary” and experience themselves as neither male nor female as typically understood. Indeed, Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) has noted, in the transgender community, “gender variations abound” (pp. 107–108). Queer will serve as an umbrella term signifying any enduring departure from heterosexuality or the gender norms socially constructed by a given culture. Besides gender variance (and its synonymous expressions), queer, and the component designations associated with the acronym LGBT, other definitional markers related to the gender and sexuality continua will not be employed.

A MODEL FOR EVALUATING REPRESENTATIONS

Although media scholars have been inclined to agree that “representations matter,” the path they have pursued in interpreting them has varied widely. According to Gill (2007), this area of investigation is characterized by a plurality of different approaches and perspectives: different methodologies, different theoretical perspectives, different epistemological commitments, different understandings of power, different conceptualizations of the relationship between representations and “reality,” and different understandings of how media images relate to individuals’ sense of identity and subjectivity. (pp. 7–8)

Despite these disparate modes of evaluation, though, Clark (1969) once provided a model for assessing television depictions of ethnic minorities that can be suitably adapted to gender and sexual minorities as well. In fact, while the framework was conceived over 40 years ago in consideration of television in particular and is not above criticism (Fitzgerald, 2010; Fuentez & White, 1997), it has nonetheless proven to be especially useful in analyzing portrayals of diverse marginalized populations across various forms of media over time. In recent years, for example, Clark’s model has been applied to representations of African Americans (Coleman & Yochim, 2008; Nelson, 2008), American Indians (Fitzgerald, 2010), gay men (Hart, 2000), and LGBT people (Raley & Lucas, 2006) in television and other media, as well as to depictions of racial and ethnic minorities (Branchik, 2009) and gay men (Branchik, 2007) in print advertising.
Clark (1969) argued that a subordinated group tends to proceed through four stages of representation. In the first stage, non-representation, it is almost entirely excluded from the mediated environment altogether. He named the second stage ridicule, which entails a formerly disregarded group becoming fodder for demeaning humor. The third stage—regulation—finds its members now being cast in more socially acceptable, yet constrained roles. Finally, in the fourth stage, labeled as respect, the minority group is granted a broader range of portrayals, including both positive and negative depictions.

In his study on representations of gay men in print advertising, Branchik (2007) employed Clark's original model, but revised it to accommodate his own results. In place of non-recognition he substituted “targeted recognition,” illustrating how, for decades, magazine advertisements had presented cues gay men would have perceived but that would have been invisible to heterosexual men. Taking into account Clark's second stage, Branchik added “scorn” to the term ridicule. In addition, instead of reinforcing Clark's regulation phase, the author explained, gay men portrayed in print advertising fit into the pattern of “cutting edge,” that is, they stereotypically function “as edgy leaders of fashion and trends” (p. 49). Finally, Branchik found that Clark’s fourth stage, respect, held up for his investigation as well and thus needed no alteration.

Branchik did not position his modification of Clark’s model as applicable to all depictions of marginalized peoples. Rather, his adjustments demonstrate that Clark’s schema can be responsibly adapted to suit individual studies involving the evolution of representations of different minorities. Again, the model is not flawless. Fitzgerald (2010) pointed out, for instance, that portrayals of identity groups do not always proceed in a linear fashion; sometimes, depictions “backslide,” namely, they revert to a previous stage before once again forging ahead (p. 380). Perhaps for certain populations they do not follow a readily distinguishable straight line of development at all. Fitzgerald also noted that other stages could be added to the model. Still, notwithstanding its shortcomings, Clark’s theoretical tool remains a valuable device for categorizing the progression of portrayals of a group traditionally removed from the nexus of power. Accordingly, in the conclusion of this article, it will resurface in a summarizing discussion of the current state of representations of gender-variant youngsters.

GENDER-CREATIVE CHILDREN IN PRINT

Before relating gender variance to depictions on television, to gain a broader context, a brief overview of how gender-nonconforming, preteen kids have been presented in other forms of media is in order. Perhaps the media vehicle that has consistently delivered the most positive portrayals—and has
included them most often—is the children’s picture book. In her survey of children’s literature, Epstein (2012) noted, however, that frequently the LGBT characters in these texts are parents and not the kids themselves. “Many of the picture books,” she said, “seem aimed at comforting children of GLBTQ parents and confirming their ‘normality’” (p. 293). Yet much of Epstein’s survey centered on books targeted toward teens and young adults, revealing that gay males and lesbians are far more likely to appear in them than transgender people or otherwise queer characters. Only two of the texts she described are directed toward preadolescent readers and highlight gender variance in childhood per se. Oliver Button Is a Sissy, written by the openly gay and prolific, award-winning children’s book author Tomie dePaola (1979), tells the tale of a boy who “didn’t like to do the things that boys are supposed to do” (p. 3). Instead, he is more prone to picking flowers than playing football. Although the other boys call him a sissy, by the end of the book, his parents and classmates learn to stop their taunting and value him as he is. Button’s duckling counterpart, named Elmer, is the protagonist of The Sissy Duckling by prominent gay male celebrity Harvey Fierstein (2002), a Tony award winner for both acting and playwriting. A complement to the short animated film by the same name (Bell, 1999), which was also written by Fierstein and features him as the voiceover for the lead character, the book follows Elmer as he endures the inevitable teasing that comes with baking cookies and wearing a pink backpack, yet later earns the approval of others by heroically rescuing his father after his dad has been shot by a hunter.

But there are a number of children’s picture books devoted to debunking gender stereotypes and celebrating difference through stories about gender-creative youngsters that Epstein did not address. The Princess Knight (Funke, 2003), for example, presents a king’s daughter who secretly trains for a jousting tournament that her father is throwing for her birthday, which features the prize of her hand in marriage going to the victor. She foils the plan, though, by defeating every male participant and then taking off her knight’s helmet to unveil her true identity to the shock of all. On the other hand, My Princess Boy (Kilodavis, 2010) offers no such dramatic turning point—instead, the reader finds Dyson, a “girly boy” character based on the author’s own son, is fully accepted and loved by his family right from the start. Other notable children’s texts in a similar vein include the Pinky and Rex series written by James Howe and illustrated by Melissa Sweet. In these books, little boy Pinky has to overcome the obstacles that come from demonstrating tastes that do not match cultural expectations.

Yet despite this array of published stories that positively portray gender variance, as English scholar Neal Lester (2007) pointed out, when considering the big picture, heteronormalcy in children’s books is rampant. He illustrated that “little exists in this literature that directly addresses a child’s developing gay, lesbian or bisexual orientation” (p. 55). This is obviously problematic
Still Trapped in the U.S. Media’s Closet

for gender-creative children, who, when compared to their “gender-normal” counterparts, are considerably more likely to come out later as gay or lesbian. Not only that, to what extent the texts discussed above are being purchased mainly by mothers and fathers concerned about their children’s gender expression rather than parents or other guardians at large—thus limiting their potential cultural impact—is cause for conjecture.

Shifting attention from gender-nonconforming kids to their mothers and fathers, although there is an assortment of books available for parents seeking advice on how to nurture (or, sad to say, even learn to accept) their adolescent children or adult progeny who are either questioning their gender or sexual identity or have already come out as gay or transgender (e.g., Griffin & Wirth, 1996; Jennings & Shapiro, 2002), texts aimed at mothers and fathers raising preteen, gender-creative kids are nearly nonexistent (one notable exception is Diane Ehrensaft’s 2011 book, Gender Born, Gender Made).

Now and again, print newspapers, magazines, and online sites have produced stories about gender variance in childhood, sometimes concentrating on a particular youngster. Although they have been occasionally, to some degree, sensationalist in tone, they have usually presented sympathetic depictions and have sought to convey an understanding of the matter. (The same practice has occurred in radio, especially in National Public Radio reports such as “More Children Struggle with Gender Identity Disorder”; Sikka, 2012.) For example, the New York Times front-page article “Supporting Boys or Girls When the Line Isn’t Clear” (Brown, 2006) brought to light that “the tide is turning” regarding parents’ forcing their gender-creative children to adhere to traditional gender norms or rushing them into behavioral therapy. Probably at least partly motivated by the need to attract readers, however, the piece was accompanied by a photograph showing a boy with below-the-shoulder length hair wearing a brown dress that an observer rarely compelled to confront a lifetime of gender socialization might see as somewhat startling. But to the newspaper’s credit, at least the boy was viewed from behind, thus reducing the picture’s potentially provocative impact and ensuring the child’s anonymity. Elsewhere, in an extended piece in the San Francisco Chronicle, Ilene Lelchuk (2006) revealed that a private elementary school in Oakland, California, has instituted gender-neutral policies in an attempt to accommodate kids who display gender fluidity and described how more families and educators in general are not only acknowledging the existence of gender variance in childhood, but are also allowing their progeny and students to express it without judgment.2 Hanna Rosin (2008) focused on the lives of several gender-atypical children, including 8-year-old Brandon, who was, much more so than in the New York Times report, for the less than open-minded viewer, disquietingly displayed in a photo sporting a princess dress at age 5 and has, by the end of the journalist’s feature story in The Atlantic, transitioned into being “Bridget.” Thoughtfully
handled, Rosin treded the line between accepting parents who follow their kids’ lead, so to speak, by permitting them to adopt gender-creative attire and behavior and questioning whether these mothers and fathers are simply taking things too far. Other offline and online newspaper or magazine articles that have offered sensitive depictions of gender variance in childhood and have sought to educate the reader about the topic include Reischel, 2006; Smiley, 2007; and Williams, 2012. The comments in response to the articles posted online, though, generally have been decidedly mixed, ranging anywhere from communicating complete support for parents who embrace their children’s unconventional tastes and behaviors to displaying homophobic or transphobic anger toward the idea that kids could ever be confused about their gender identity or that their parents have not chosen to tell them in no uncertain terms to simply knock it off. One critical commenter, for instance, disagreed with fathers and mothers who are “not being strong enough to instill in their biological boys that they are indeed boys, and biological girls that they are girls . . . God did not make a mistake, never has, and never will” (Speaktruthe, 2008).

Overall, these print pieces have perhaps contributed to a better public comprehension of gender creativity and thus have indirectly benefited children who display the characteristics associated with it. But in terms of supplying portrayals that gender-nonconforming kids can actually identify with, their impact has been likely negligible since young girls and boys are not apt to discover and read such serious news and magazine stories about kids like themselves. Moreover, all of the articles above placed emphasis on gender-variant kids who convey intense gender dysphoria and typically ignored those gender-creative kids who nonetheless feel comfortable in their own skins.

Entertainment news stories, mostly in print and online but also on television, have recently underlined childhood gender variance as well. For instance, accounts have sparked buzz about Shiloh Jolie-Pitt, a young gender-nonconforming daughter of the famous acting couple Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt (e.g., US Weekly staff, 2010). Whether gender-creative children have been well served by these representations is debatable. Clearly, the stories were designed to generate hype and attract readers by exploiting difference. Then again, at least Jolie in particular appears to fully appreciate Shiloh’s gender-atypical expression, which could be read as an affirming gesture. Still, once more perpetuating a pattern, the boys who simply like “girl things” or vice versa have been downplayed in favor of kids who display intense gender dysphoria.

In advertising, probably the promotional material of late that has drawn the most attention to childhood gender variance was a single image in a J. Crew catalogue featuring a mother (none other than the company’s president and creative director, Jenna Lyons) painting the toenails of her young son (Ms. Lyon’s own 5-year-old boy) in hot pink, with the caption, “Lucky
for me I ended up with a boy whose favorite color is pink. Toenail painting is way more fun in neon.” When it ran, it became controversial, evoking considerable online discussion and news coverage, both in print and on the Internet (e.g., Stadtmiller, 2011), and on television (e.g., Cibrowski, 2011). Not surprisingly, comments from both media personalities and the public spanned the range from “Yeah, well, it may be fun and games now, Jenna, but at least put some money aside for psychotherapy for the kid” (Ablow, 2011) to “I think the add [sic] is adorable, at least the son and mother are having a great time and she is actually spending time WITH her son” (Jessica, 2011). Here again, what influence a lone image has had on the gender-creative child population or on how these kids are perceived by the wider public is beyond the bounds of this article. One might surmise that any gender-nonconforming boy exposed to the picture of an enthusiastically smiling male child sporting bright pink toenails would likely find it heartening. At the same time, including such a portrayal in an ad could signal an early step toward gaining greater understanding from the culture at large. Furthermore, in this case, unlike in the print stories described above, by featuring a boy in conventionally male clothing, the ad demonstrates that gender creativity is not confined to those who exhibit severe gender dysphoria but encompasses a full range of expression that defies social expectations. That such a point must come at the expense of a wave of sensationalism, however, shows there is still a long way to go.

GENDER-CREATIVE CHILDREN IN FILM

A few movies have included gender-variant children, even in starring roles. While none of the ones that have received significant recognition were actually produced in the United States, they have been included in this analysis because they eventually gained U.S. theatrical distribution, though sometimes in limited runs and usually with less than stellar box-office receipts. Probably the best known movie of this sort—one that was later translated into a Broadway musical—is the British production *Billy Elliot* (Daldry, 2000). Not only does Billy step out of the ring away from the boys in their boxing gloves to join the tutu-attired girls at the ballet barre, but his best friend Michael is a frill-loving crossdresser. Another important movie is the Belgium production *Ma Vie en Rose* (Berliner, 1997). The plot revolves around young Ludovic Fabre, a boy who believes God mistakenly swapped one of his X chromosomes for a Y and idealizes the hyper-feminine star of his favorite children’s television show. The director attempts to enlighten his viewers about the reality of childhood gender nonconformity and clearly wishes his audience to not only approve of but to adore the utterly innocent and charming Ludovic. Predictably, however, the movie serves as another example—albeit, not one that in due course leads to a literal death—of the “tragic queer” motif (Russo,
as Ludovic’s propensity to doll up brings great embarrassment to the family, ultimately resulting in the father being fired from his job and the Fabre clan branded as neighborhood pariahs. Ludovic finally acquires the acceptance of his parents for who he is, but not until after weeks of therapy to treat his “disorder,” his parents’ berating him during their own hostile meltdowns, and his suffering a vicious blow from his mother for trading outfits with another gender-creative child who is eager to replace her dress with Ludovic’s cowboy clothes in the middle of the girl’s costume birthday party. Interestingly, in spite of its lack of sexual content, violence, or colorful language, the film was given an R rating in the United States (Goodridge, 2003).

Shifting emphasis to representations of gender-nonconforming girls, one movie of note is the New Zealand production Whale Rider (Caro, 2002), which tells the story of a young girl who is a member of an indigenous tribe and wishes to become its chief. Her twin brother, who, along with their mother, died in childbirth, had been expected by her grandfather, currently the people’s most respected elder, to grow up to be the leader of the clan based on lineage and tribal traditions. After her birth, her father departs to pursue his art career, leaving Paikea behind to be raised by her very stern grandfather and warmhearted grandmother. Throughout the movie, her grandfather is determined to discover or train the youngster destined to assume the role of the ancient ancestor who, according to the tribe’s mythology, rode a whale to bring his people to what would become New Zealand. Though Paikea apparently believes she is fated to inherit this sacred mantle, she faces one major obstacle: custom dictates that the chief be a male. While her grandfather runs a small school dedicated to teaching tribal traditions and designating the boy who shows the most proficiency the new wise leader, Paikea spies on the proceedings and attempts to master the rituals in secret. Though she generally wears plain yet feminine attire, she clearly wants to do what the boys do, thus expressing herself as a gender-creative young girl. (The only physical features that signify gender variance are her androgynous face and hair, which apparently indicate a deliberate directorial choice and a reason the actor playing the role was cast.) When her grandfather catches her in the act of engaging in activities intended for her male peers, he is furious and scolds her for what he perceives as sacrilegious behavior. The tale reaches its conclusion when, after a series of mystical events, including Paikea saving a whale’s life by riding it from the shore back to sea, the grandfather finally realizes that his granddaughter is indeed the one who must lead her people.

Of the three movies in media website IMDb’s family genre that have been described in this section, Whale Rider is probably the most accessible for children. Given the trio’s relatively small reception in the United States, however, the films almost certainly were not screened in theaters by a substantial number of gender-creative children. Then again, they are available
for rent or purchase through subscription services. If *Ma Vie en Rose* with its especially poorly treated protagonist is omitted from consideration, gender-atypical boys and girls are left with only one film each to view characters that perhaps mirror aspects of their own gender nonconformity and that potentially resonate with them. Yet even in these two movies, the protagonists have to endure much suffering and rejection before being allowed to come into their own. On the big screen, it appears life is rarely easy for the girl or boy who departs from gender norms. Still, such overall favorable portrayals might at least encourage their modest-size U.S. audiences to begin to embrace gender variance. Of course, it is quite probable that many of the people in the country who choose or have chosen to watch the films are already more open to gender fluidity than the rest of the general population.

**GENDER-CREATIVE CHILDREN ON TELEVISION**

Television is, in all likelihood, the most important medium to evaluate because of its particularly substantial influence on young children (Croteau et al., 2012; Picora et al., 2007; Witt, 2001). Yet, overall, just as it has been the case with other forms of U.S. media, television has rarely depicted gender-creative children. Moreover, most of the representations have appeared in news, news magazine, or talk-show programs (e.g., Banks, Medina, Moriarty, & Redmann, 2010; Condon, 2011; Farley, Kostelnik, & O’Donnell, 2011). But even more so than their print counterparts, these stories have been generally sensationalistic in character since they inevitably either have underscored only the most extreme cases of kids whose gender identifications betray their bodies or have focused on gender-variant children marked by years of suffering.

One example of this treatment that received considerable attention was an episode of *20/20* (Neufeld, 2007) hosted by Barbara Walters. Through a full hour of slice-of-life footage and interviews, she examined the lives of three kids with severe gender dysphoria and their families. The subject who evoked the biggest stir was a then 6-year-old, strikingly cute, male-to-female child going by the pseudonym Jazz. A year earlier, the girl had been featured as supposedly the “country’s youngest transgender child” in the *Village Voice* piece “See Tom Be Jane” (Reischel, 2006). Jazz’s parents, like those of the other two kids, had already made the decision to allow their child to live as the gender opposite from her natal sex. Yet different from the other mothers and fathers, they had allowed the transition before Jazz even entered kindergarten. Walters yielded sensitive portrayals of all three families. But at the same time, with its maudlin musical soundtrack and Walter’s exceedingly compassionate demeanor, the show vaguely brings to mind the tragic queer trope (Russo, 1987) as it triggers the viewer’s sense of pity toward these children who, through no fault of their own, are shackled with gender
identity disorder, a malady given its designation by, as mentioned earlier, the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1994).

Yet Walter’s 20/20 episode was less troubling than Anderson Cooper’s CNN three-part series, “The Sissy Boy Experiment” (Moore, 2011). The news anchor told the gut-wrenching story of Kirk Murphy, who was gender nonconforming as a child and received treatment from George Rekers, a psychologist and ordained minister who believes homosexuality can be “cured” and was recently caught with a male prostitute he had hired to supposedly “carry his luggage” during a European vacation. After enduring dozens of Rekers’s homophobic therapy sessions, Murphy later committed suicide at the age of 38. Remaining true to the tragic queer scenario, Cooper conducted extensive interviews with Murphy’s surviving brother and sister, who recount their deceased sibling’s heartbreaking life—a person who began as a young, happy, “girly boy” suddenly took a drastic turn for the worse once he became the subject of Rekers’s anti-gay experiment, a defining event from which he ostensibly never recovered, battling with his feelings of homosexuality until putting an end to his feelings entirely.

Though the Walters and Cooper stories most likely have raised public consciousness about gender variance in childhood and might even have provided a stroke of support for parents raising such kids, they hardly have offered inspiring images for the children themselves should they unfortunately have encountered them. No youngster is prone to eagerly identify with peers who make people cry or even grow up to be suicidal.

So what about televised fiction—have there been any programs with representations of gender nonconformity that real-life children similarly disposed could have looked up to or that might have positively influenced the general public’s perceptions of gender variance? In a nutshell, they would have been hard pressed to find any—at least not directly. Of course, there is always the potential for a young reader or viewer to read queerly any media text, a topic Jeffrey Dennis (2010) took up in his investigation of child-created homoerotic fan art. In another article, the author demonstrated that sometimes gay allusions are embedded in the texts themselves. Through his content analysis of shows on children’s television networks, Dennis (2009) argued that in an hour of evening programming,

there will be a dozen hints and signals, references that make no sense without an awareness of gay culture, jokes that subtly acknowledge same-sex desire or practice, intimate friendships that would be instantly ravaged by watchdog groups if they used the word “gay,” and exhortations that “nobody can tell you who to love.” (p. 739)

For the particularly savvy, gender-atypical child who will one day identify as gay, these depictions perhaps present some reassurance. But for others
Still Trapped in the U.S. Media’s Closet

on the spectrum—especially those who will never take comfort in their biologically assigned bodies—these “hints” of queerness could be especially vague. Moreover, most of the programs Dennis analyzed that are aimed at preteenage children are cartoons, not television fare involving actual flesh-and-blood human beings.

Within the primetime lineup, however, for four seasons ending in 2010, there was a non-animated show featuring a youngster in a gender-nonconforming role. Very into fashion and flamboyant, Justin Suarez, the younger brother of the lead character on Ugly Betty (Fields, Hayek, Horta, Silverman, & Tamez, 2006–2010), exhibits a demeanor that could easily be associated with homosexual—not transgender—childhood. Indeed, many viewers wondered when his non-heterosexual orientation would be revealed. Finally, in the fourth and final season, Justin displays his true colors when he kisses a boy from his school in the fifth from last episode (Grubstick, Higginbotham, Horta, & Wolk, 2010) and later begins to secretly date him. One could question the merits of Justin’s not coming out until the program’s closing season. Even so, the character’s endearing depiction and thus his symbolic presence might have encouraged audiences to welcome him as simply another example of nature’s diversity or have appealed to any gender-variant boy in the audience, though this would have been more difficult once its start time moved from 8:00 to 10:00 p.m. (Martin, 2009). Still, the Justin character himself is by no means a young child, having begun the series on the cusp of adolescence.

The same is true of another apparently LGBT figure who preceded Justin on the small screen. Once and Again (Herskovitz & Zwick, 1999–2002) introduced Jessie Sammler, a girl who eventually discovers her same-sex desire for her best friend and fellow high-school classmate, Katie. The revelation surfaces when Jessie at first hesitantly and then passionately kisses her companion. Yet their display of romantic affection does not occur until the 14th episode (Herskovitz, Zwick, Holzman, Friedman, & Norris, 2002) of a 19-episode third and final season, leaving little time for their touching relationship to develop. Other young questioning or gay characters on fictional television, including Blaine from Glee (Brennan, Di Loreto, Falchuk, & Murphy, 2009–), also appear pubescent or immediately postpubescent. Furthermore, they are not necessarily gender variant—by the time budding homosexual, gender-creative boys transform into gay adolescents or men, they have generally given up their pink toys and dress-up clothes and no longer play with mostly girls. And even if they are displaying qualities typically correlated with masculinity, neither are lesbians usually pretending to be cops and robbers with the boys once they mature (Steensma et al., 2010). When it comes to finding portrayals of gender-atypical kids still years away from being teenagers, the pickings have been especially slim.

The most noteworthy gender-creative male character on television who is actually preteen—and thus probably too young to come out (if he is even
gay)—is Sam Malloy of The Riches (Izzard et al., 2007–2008). The show debuted on FX in March 2007 and was canceled in the middle of its second season, apparently a casualty of the writer’s strike in 2008. The Riches centers on a family of five, including father Wayne, mother Dahlia, and three children, of whom Sam is the youngest. Carrying on the tradition of their ancestors, they are considered “gypsies” or, more specifically, members of the Irish Travellers. Yet the Malloys, while utterly likeable, are also an intelligent and highly skilled band of con artists and thieves. In the pilot episode (Lipkin, Izzard, Franklin, & O’Fallon, 2007), the family is involved in an automobile accident that kills a wealthy, recently married couple. Initially distressed about the tragic incident, they eventually sense opportunity when they discover two house keys. Uncovering enough information in the car to locate the home the keys belong to, they find it is empty—the couple had not yet moved in—and elect to spend the night there. The next day, movers arrive with all of the deceased pair’s belongings. It does not take long before the Malloys decide to assume the identity of the Riches and trade in their nomadic existence for a go at living as “buffers,” their term for the vast majority of people who do not reside in the shadows.

When Sam first appears in the pilot episode (Lipkin et al., 2007), he is participating in an elaborate con with the rest of the family dressed as a girl. While departing the site of the swindle, Sam removes his wig to reveal he is a biological boy. Yet the viewer soon learns that he puts on feminine attire often and not just for the sake of various scams. It turns out that Sam clearly loves wearing “girly-girl” (frequently pink) clothes. (Interestingly, the actor who played Wayne and also co-produced the series, Eddie Izzard, is known for his own gender-variant crossdressing activity. But according to Dmitry Lipkin, the show’s creator, “The idea [to include a boy who likes to wear girls’ clothing] really came even before Eddie came on board.” Izzard himself acknowledged, “The idea had nothing to do with me”; McDaniel, 2007.)

What is striking about Sam’s cross-gender behavior, though, is that it never becomes a central issue on the show. There are no scenes of the parents scolding him for not acting like a boy, no humiliating encounters with teasing by his brother and sister, and no evidence of any of his family members’ struggling to come to terms with his gender nonconformity. Instead, they just let him be who he is. This is exemplified in a scene in the pilot episode (Lipkin et al., 2007), prior to the accident, when, for the first time, the audience is made aware of Sam’s gender-atypical taste. After shushing the kids out the door and quickly making love in their RV, Dahlia, who was just released from prison, spots one of Sam’s sister’s hand-me-down dresses and engages in the following quiet, matter-of-fact exchange:

Dahlia: Sam’s still wearing DiDi’s old dresses?
Wayne: Yeah . . . yeah, he likes ’em. Go figure.
Dahlia: Could be worse.
Wayne: Yeah. Could be on crack.

The couple neither judges nor laments their son’s behavior, nor feels compelled even to analyze Sam’s unconventional leanings. Sam is simply Sam.

The only occasions when the family asks Sam to remove a feminine garment are when such an accessory might get in the way of a con. A particularly heartwarming moment occurs in the third episode (Lipkin, Blitzstein, & O’Fallon, 2007), when Dahlia and Wayne attempt to enroll all three of their kids in the most prestigious private school in the neighborhood but have to construct an elaborate scheme to get past the school’s gatekeeper, Ms. Fidley. During a brief interlude, Dahlia spots Sam wearing pink shoes and begins the following dialogue:

Dahlia: Wow, I love them shoes. (Pause) Baby, come here. (Sam walks over to her) Okay, you gotta make a choice.
Sam: Whaddaya mean?
Dahlia: Right now. For the con. See when you roped that Fidley woman? You can be a girl. But then see you gotta stay a girl. Or you can be a boy. (Pause) Might be easier.
Sam: I gotta make a choice?
Dahlia: Not for me. Not ever. I love you, just like you are. But, yeah, you gotta make a choice. For them [i.e., his brother and sister]. You wanna go to that school, right?
Sam: Yeah.

Sam decides to be a boy at school. But unless it might ruin a swindle—and sometimes not even then—he will continue regularly to dress up as a girl throughout the series. With Sam’s depiction, according to Advocate writer Christopher Lisotta (2007), “in terms of actors under or just entering their teen years, [The Riches] appears to be breaking ground.” Unfortunately, however, the show was removed from FX’s schedule in 2010, before it had even reached the end of its second season.

If Sam has a fictional counterpart, then it would have to be Isabelle Hodes, the young daughter of Celia Hodes, who is friends with the neighborhood drug peddler on the Showtime series Weeds (Benabib et al., 2005–2012). Although preteen Isabelle does not present herself as gender-variant—she includes dresses in her clothing repertoire and gives no indication she thinks she is (or wishes she could be) a boy, she could be stereotypically described as a butch little girl. Unlike Sam, though, the way she carries herself is most definitely a problem—at least in her mother’s eyes. Celia constantly berates her, especially for being overweight. Eventually, in the last episode of the first season (Kohan & Spiro, 2005), tomboy Isabelle’s budding lesbianism is confirmed when Celia catches her 11-year-old daughter kissing another girl—and liking it.
Of the two, arguably the depiction of Sam is the more positive one. He is fully accepted for who he is and is not a tortured soul, while Isabelle is rejected by her mom and must battle with her self-esteem. Still, from the perspective of Rachel Shatto (2010), a writer at *Curve* magazine, Isabelle “could teach *The L Word* a thing or two about lesbian role models. Totally comfortable with her sexuality, this sassy, openly gay junior high school student holds her own against her domineering mother.” In 2012, however, like *The Riches*, *Weeds* reached the end of its original run (Ausiello, 2012).

**DISCUSSION**

Gender-variant children on U.S. television are both underrepresented and misrepresented. When news stories feature them, they tend to concentrate on extremes or cast the kids in a light likely to evoke feelings of pity toward them—or both. Gender-creative youth who feel comfortable with their biological sex or lead emotionally satisfying lives, then, are nearly invisible altogether. Fictional television has presented only two notable, recurring, preteen, gender-atypical characters. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, based on their critical reception as exemplified above, both of them—one male, one female—are portrayed in a sympathetic way. (Only Sam, though, fully transcends the tragic queer motif.) But with the cancellation of the two shows, Sam and Isabelle can be seen only through on-demand services such as the “Movies and TV” section of Amazon.com or on DVDs (*Weeds* also appears in syndication). Interestingly, both kids are included in dark comedies involving morally dubious families. Consequently, many parents with young children might feel uneasy about letting them watch these programs. For such cautious guardians, probably the constantly conniving scam artists in *The Riches* would be only slightly more palatable than the marijuana-dealing mother in *Weeds*. The departure of the two series leaves preadolescent gender-creative kids with no currently televised character in their peer group they can symbolically bond with—and the general audience with no televised fictional examples of gender variance that might disrupt its outlook on how young boys and girls should behave. Furthermore, from the perspective of the articulation of gender and ethnic or racial identities, the situation for gender-variant children of color is especially troubling because, with the possible exception of Justin Suarez from *Ugly Betty*, every character evaluated above is White. Likewise, a similar point could be made for the representations in the other forms of media outlined earlier as well.

Looking at the development of representations of the queer population in general could portend what type of portrayals of gender-creative children lie ahead. Leaving print aside to compare the two visual media explored in this article, it is by no means clear whether television or film is more sensitive in its approach to depictions of LGBT people. Considering
Still Trapped in the U.S. Media’s Closet

representations of gay and lesbian adults in particular, Streitmatter (2009) asserted that, because of the nature of the medium, television has been on the forefront in advancing the public perception of non-heterosexual men and women. He stated that “if an individual isn’t interested in seeing a movie about a gay man,” then “there are plenty of action films or chick flicks to go see instead” (p. 186). On the other hand,

if someone is chilling out in the living room and watching whatever happens to come on the TV, there’s the very real possibility that the viewer might, without really making a choice, run into that sitcom about those two gay dudes. (p. 186)

His argument, though, assumes passive audience members who, when exposed to images that challenge their outlook of heteronormativity, will continue to engage with them because it is too much effort to pick up their remotes and change channels.

Yet to flip the scenario and suppose that movies somehow surpass television in their depictions of LGBT people could be a mistake as well. In their essay “Revisiting Vito Russo’s The Celluloid Closet,” Campbell and Carilli (2013) analyzed four popular mainstream films and concluded, “these movies echo much that Vito Russo found objectionable in the history of gay and lesbian images” (p. 42). Recently, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD) released its 2013 Studio Responsibility Index. Mirroring the annual studies it has published on television for nearly 20 years, the report was the first one the organization has produced that examined the Hollywood film industry. The findings are not favorable. “As television has become increasingly inclusive—including a record high percentage of LGBT characters in the 2012–2013 season,” the document noted, “the film industry is lagging behind” (p. 3). GLAAD has postulated that its work has compelled television networks to adjust their practices regarding representations of LGBT people. Now, through exposing its shortcomings, the advocacy group wishes to apply the same pressure to Hollywood. Of course, merely featuring more sexual and gender minorities does not automatically translate into remarkable symbolic gains—the nature of the portrayals is a crucial factor as well. Here, once again, movies are found lacking. Providing an example of the limited scope in which LGBT characters have been represented, GLAAD “raises the question of whether a major studio would ever depict a male protagonist of an action franchise as anything other than straight” (p. 7). Reformulating the “Bechdel Test,” which was introduced by Alison Bechdel (while giving credit to her friend Liz Wallace) in her comic strip Dykes to Watch Out For (to access archives of this strip, see Bechdel, n.d.), as a means of assessing portrayals of women (Turpin, 2008), GLAAD presented “The Vin Russo Test,” named after the author of the classic book
The Celluloid Closet (Russo, 1987). To pass muster, a movie must meet the following standards:

1. The film contains a character that is identifiably lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.
2. That character must not be solely or predominantly defined by their sexual orientation or gender identity i.e. they are made up of the same sort of unique character traits commonly used to differentiate straight characters from one another.
3. The LGBT character must be tied into the plot in such a way that their removal would have a significant effect. Meaning they are not there to simply provide colorful commentary, paint urban authenticity, or (perhaps most commonly) set up a punchline. The character should matter. (p. 8)

GLAAD has claimed that these criteria are often satisfied on television but not so in movies. The three-point model could easily be adapted to evaluate images of gender-creative children as well.

Yet GLAAD has acknowledged that, unlike the colossal Hollywood ventures, independent studios have produced landmark LGBT films. Perhaps these smaller-scale operations are able to take more risks because they are freed from the severe financial demands placed on the major movie production companies. Foreign film studios—especially ones housed in Western Europe—too, have possibly been more consistent in their treatment of queer characters. If so, this could be due in part to the quicker acceptance LGBT people in many Western European countries have enjoyed in comparison to their counterparts in the United States (Rand, 2013). Future research involving content analyses of movies made abroad could indicate whether Hollywood indeed trails Western European studios in passing the “Vin Russo Test.”

Despite the uneven advances in mediated representations of the LGBT population at large, however, the same cannot be said for gender-variant preteens. As this study shows, they are nearly invisible. Moreover, though the rare depictions of them in fictional content—whether in films (generally foreign) or on television—have tended to be compassionate, the vehicle through which they have received the most attention has leaned toward portraying them as outliers deserving of pity. Conceivably, the news business—particularly in its televised forms—in often relying on entertaining or sensational angles (Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001; Thussu, 2007), inevitably resorts to depictions primed to trigger strong emotional reactions in audience members unaccustomed to seeing children who vividly defy gender conventions.

Not only must gender-creative children contend with the lack of portrayals of youngsters like themselves, but they are also forced to navigate
Still Trapped in the U.S. Media’s Closet

a culture that relentlessly promotes and reinforces gender normativity in relationship to youth fashion and expression in general. A walk down the children’s clothing and toy aisles in any department store vividly highlights the extent to which mainstream gender norms are rigidly enforced. One rack displays frilly blouses and dresses in seemingly every shade of pink, while in the next aisle a shopper finds sweaters and pants in traditional blue colors as well as black T-shirts decorated with images of skulls and vicious-looking monsters. Girls are expected to hurry toward the Barbie Dolls, toy ovens, and princess dress-up clothes, while boys are offered make-believe guns, exceedingly muscled “action figures,” and souped-up miniature race-cars. Moreover, these gender standards are presented through every form of media, from the commercials aimed at boys and girls that are placed in children’s television programming (Davis, 2003) to the video games depicting highly sexualized female characters and their violent male counterparts (Robinson, Callister, Clark, & Phillips, 2009). This “pinking” and “blueing” of children’s culture has been perpetuated for over a century, with a temporary pause for about 20 years starting from the mid-1960s, largely in response to the women’s liberation movement. Yet “as swiftly as it had appeared,” Jo B. Paoletti (2012) has explained,

the unisex trend faded. Neutral styles for infants were reduced to a very small part of the market in the mid-1980s and by the mid-1990s styles for toddlers and young children were more gender specific than they had been in the 1950s. (p. 100)

As stated earlier in this article, representations matter. For example, although their area of research has its critics, social scientists working in the media effects tradition have generally assumed the media to be a significant agent of socialization (Perse, 2001). Numerous other scholars, viewing the field from a range of theoretical positions (e.g., Collier et al., 2009; Croteau et al., 2012; Gross, 2001; Lind, 2013; Mazur & Emmers-Sommer, 2003; O’Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2008; Ott & Mack, 2010; Siebler, 2010; Spring, 2003; Streitmatter, 2003; Vera & Gordon, 2003; Wilson et al., 2013), also have contended that, given their pervasive presence, various types of media ineluctably function as instruments of education or socialization. By extension, not only do portrayals of minorities play a role in shaping how such populations are perceived by individuals outside of these groups, but they also affect the ways in which marginalized people think and feel about themselves (Bandura, 1994; Bissell & Zhou, 2004; Collier et al., 2009; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Greenberg, Mastro, & Brand, 2002; Grogan, 2008; Gross, 2001; Hart, 2000; Ochman, 1996; O’Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2008; Siebler, 2010; Streitmatter, 2009; Vera & Gordon, 2003; Wilson et al., 2013). The media effects researcher Gorham (2013), for instance, submitted evidence that stereotypes of diverse minorities in the media have a bearing on how
these groups are regarded—even for people who are resistant to viewing subjects through a narrow lens—because they often operate beyond the realm of consciousness. Correspondingly, several theories relate to the importance of media content in influencing ideas and beliefs about the world and the persons who inhabit it.

Based on an environmental approach to human development, social learning theory is concerned with the understanding that people ascertain how to conduct themselves through their experiences and observations of others (Bandura, 1969). Yet this imitation occurs not just in relationship to the concrete realm but to the mediated sphere as well (Bandura, 1977). According to Bandura (1994), “a great deal of information about human values, thinking patterns, and behavior is gained from models portrayed symbolically through verbal or pictorial means” (p. 66). The theory suggests, therefore, that the ideas about marginalized groups that people internalize can depend on how these populations are depicted in the media. Moreover, given that socialization begins at birth (Harro, 2013), the impact of such representations on children is of special importance (Asamen & Berry, 2003; Perse, 2001; Van Evra, 2004). And what about gender-variant kids in particular? As mentioned earlier, many of them have no grownups in their lives to emulate. Consequently, the media might serve as the only source through which they can encounter exemplars that relate to their budding gender and sexual identities. In his study involving queer theory and film, for example, Cover (2000) noted that for many LGBT individuals, television shows and movies featuring coming-out episodes are sometimes the first contact they have with figures expressing feelings of desire that depart from the mainstream heteronormative standard.

Originally conceived by George Gerbner and his associates (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002), cultivation theory provides another way of considering the part media play in the development of perceptions of diverse people. It presents the hypothesis that heavy watchers of television are apt to incorporate into their worldviews some of the distorted depictions of “real life” displayed on the screen. Television, they have contended, acts as “the primary common source of socialization and everyday information (usually cloaked in the form of entertainment) of otherwise heterogeneous populations” (p. 44). The theory raises the possibility that gender-creative children who spend a lot of time with television could very well internalize its predominantly gender-normative and heteronormative outlook, perhaps eventually learning to regard themselves as misfits.

Much work has been done on identity formation, a process that occurs through people’s social interactions and relationship with their environment. Along the way, expectations regarding gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other cultural classifications have a bearing on how the individual comes to generate a sense of self. In his investigation of the evolution of a person’s sexual orientation, for example, Hammack (2005)
discussed the salience of contextual elements, which, no doubt, include the media. As Gergen (2000) has put it, “our identities are importantly fashioned by the texts of media representation” (p. 43). Thompson (1995) has echoed the sentiment, stating that in “receiving and appropriating media messages, individuals are also involved in a process of self-formation and self-understanding” (p. 43). Other scholars have agreed. “Given the understanding that identities are developed through a social process,” Luther, Lepre, and Clark (2012) noted, “one can see the potential role of mass communication in influencing the development of each of these identities [i.e., gender, age, racial/ethnic, sexual orientation, etc.]” (Social Identity, para. 3). Milestone and Meyer (2012) have confirmed the point. Because “the media today are pervasive and inescapable,” they said, “the media can be seen as central to the formation of self-identity” (p. 164). Gauntlett (2008), too, has assumed that with the media disseminating so many “messages about men, women, and sexuality today, it is highly unlikely that these ideas would have no impact on our own sense of identity” (p. 1).

In the same way, as indicated above, role models, even when mediated, can be a factor in the construction of identity. Feilitzen and Linne (1975) averred that such media types can affect people’s values and personality traits through two kinds of identification—one entailing characters with whom they have attributes in common and the other involving figures they wish they could be. Looking at historical essays, Matthews (2003) ascertained that preschoolers and school-aged children strongly relate to media role models and imitate them through their play and other behavior, an experience whose sway can continue well into maturity. On a similar note, Boon and Lomore (2001) were told by young adults that their personality qualities, attitudes, and values were influenced through their parasocial relationships with celebrities.

Elsewhere, Ochman (1996) sounded a comparable theme in connection with identity. He observed that children’s exposure to positive same-sex, non-gender-role stereotyped characters in storybooks could enhance their self-image. Likewise, Cheung and Yue (2003) found that adolescents’ symbolic interaction with star idols could increase their self-efficacy.

Yet, as already suggested, to what extent a role model shapes a child or teenager can correspond to the degree to which she or he shares similar traits (such as gender or race) with the mediated figures (Basow & Howe, 1980; Giuliano, Turner, Lundquist, & Knight, 2007; Karunanayake & Nauta, 2004; Lockwood, 2006). Some studies have focused on people with same-sex orientations in particular, demonstrating, for instance, that gay and lesbian youth (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000) and adult lesbians (Dobinson & Young, 2000) use the media to discover characters they can relate to and to affirm their non-heterosexual identities. But for gender-variant children, who lack preadolescent media role models exhibiting the sort of attributes they spot in
themselves that challenge gender conventions, the “absence of such ‘mirroring’ of the self can lead to low self-esteem and shame” (Collier et al., 2009, p. 582).

Still, merely offering more representations of gender-creative children, even if depicted in a sympathetic manner, would not necessarily be sufficient for these youngsters to fully benefit from the shift in media attention. Kids—regardless of whether they convey gender-variant or gender-typical tendencies—need to be instructed on how to read or interpret such portrayals. Demonstrating that images in the media can work as effective tools of education on LGBT topics, Gilad Padva (2008) outlined a pedagogical framework for analyzing with students an episode of the long-running series, *The Simpsons* (Groening, Brooks, Simon, Hauge, & Anderson, 1997), as a means of confronting homophobia. In a similar vein, Kay Siebler (2010) has advocated “queering the curriculum” (p. 342). Discussing one of the common queer stereotypes, she stated that “there are no representations of transgendered people who are not in the process of having surgical modification of their bodies” (p. 338). To counter this simplistic rendering generally delivered by the media, she shows in class the documentary *Boy I Am* (Feder & Hollar, 2006), which complicates the issue. In her experience, after screening the film, the students “can no longer view the people as freaks but as complex individuals struggling to find a place where they feel good about themselves in a gender-obsessed culture” (p. 340). If gender-creative kids are to develop a healthy sense of self-esteem, then the culture at large needs to crucially change its outlook on these diverse children so that they no longer perceive themselves as social pariahs. That transformation must take place in the classroom.

But it also must extend into the home. A generation taught the importance of recognizing and embracing gender and sexual identity in all of its manifestations will be in a position to pass these lessons on to its progeny. Meanwhile, especially given the predictably slow pace in which representations in the media evolve, parents and other caretakers of gender-variant youth should consider watching television programs and movies with them within the safe confines of their own abodes and engaging them in a conversation about the depictions they see. Constituting a “special audience,” children in general need to be guided in learning strategies and skills associated with media literacy (Potter, 2008).

Turning to U.S. television in particular, maybe gender-nonconforming children are where gay men and lesbians were years ago and will someday begin to become part of its everyday fabric—in whatever form the medium takes. Analyzing the findings with the use of Clark’s (1969) model, as described earlier in this article, it appears that preteen, gender-creative youth are still primarily stuck in its first stage, that is, non-representation. One might hope they will never pass through the stage of ridicule: while it is true that a boy character on television who makes a feminine gesture
has often been a punchline for laughter, maybe U.S. society is approaching a place in which even the sometimes crass world of television will forego poking fun at already marginalized children who consistently display gender-creative activity and attitudes. Only time will tell. On the other hand, it could be contended that today, at least on television news, they are occasionally treated in a somewhat related manner, as objects of sensation who do not elicit our laughter but our pity.

As mentioned earlier, this qualitative content analysis is limited in its capacity to account for the ways in which gender-creative kids themselves assess representations (and the lack thereof) of childhood gender nonconformity in the products of media. Future research could address this shortcoming by interviewing gender-variant youngsters about their transactions with media texts, presenting their interpretations, and exploring their implications. These studies should also take into consideration that though both gender-atypical boys and gender-atypical girls might have some matching concerns, they are bound to have different ones as well.

For now, the hope of advocates of gender-variant children might be compared to the anticipation of any group that has been historically marginalized in the media—to see these youngsters who defy gender conventions be allowed to come out of television’s closet and be presented through a wide spectrum of representations, from the boys and girls trapped in the wrong bodies to the kids who love everything in the “wrong” aisle of the toy store and will later identify as gay. Sam Malloy was a good start. But there is a need for many more boys and girls who, like him, pierce the boundaries that delineate gender expectations. Yet looking at industry patterns, it is highly unlikely that media producers will take the initiative in regularly featuring such portrayals—commercial media businesses are more apt to follow, rather than lead, cultural trends because they are driven to a greater extent by financial incentives based on audience demand than the desire to effect positive social change (Wilson et al., 2013). After all, the media did not make fundamental modifications to their typical depictions of African Americans until their hand was forced by the civil rights movement (Cortese, 2007). Likewise, women were consistently stereotyped until the decision makers in the media were compelled to respond to the blowback that emerged from the women’s liberation movement (Croteau et al., 2012). A similar scenario occurred with representations of homosexuals post-Stonewall (Gross, 2001; Streitmatter, 2009).

Then again, viewed from a historical perspective, the products of the media have often reflected the worldviews of the industry professionals who have been instrumental in producing them (Croteau et al., 2012). Therefore, it stands to reason, if more LGBT people—especially those who once experienced gender-creative childhoods themselves—join the business and assume prominent positions as writers, producers, and directors, then the media
will feature a greater number of gender-variant boys and girls and generally depict them in a sensitive light. Rodger Streitmatter (2009) has spelled out a case in point. To a large degree, he has attributed what he perceives as the dramatic improvement in representations of gay men over the past half-century to the “Gay Mafia,” explaining that “an abundance of gay artists in Hollywood have committed their talent and energy to seeing that positive portrayals of gay people reach audiences watching both the large and the small screen” (p. 184). Perhaps an influx of LGBT people who express a wider range of gender and sexual identities into the ranks of power will result in depictions of engaging gender-atypical children occupying more space in the media.

Yet should LGBT professionals entering into the mass entertainment industries reach a groundswell, the probability of commercial media productions performing a formative function in cultivating a constructive understanding of gender behavior anytime soon is arguably small. Partly due to the consequences of their political economic structure, including their leaderships’ aversion to taking risks, the need to offer a symbolic climate amenable to sponsors (Gitlin, 1985; Kelso, 2008; Magder, 2004), and other related factors, advertising supported media are not inclined to generate content that upsets the status quo. Hence, even if they were to dramatically increase the number of representations of gender-variant children they deliver, the media would be more liable to contain these portrayals in ways that perpetuate gender and sexual normativity. On the other hand, as they continue to grow in popularity, subscriber-based channels such as premium cable networks (e.g., HBO) and streaming services (e.g., Netflix) might be willing to slowly build an audience for programs that open minds (Kelso, 2008).

Overall, though, some progress is better than none at all. Moreover, as families, teachers, LGBT organizations, and other allies continue to push for a heightened outlook on queer diversity, the media, as “gatekeepers of change” (McQuail, 2005, p. 500), can be instrumental in reinforcing and expanding any shift in cultural attitudes. At the same time, advocates can enact measures directly aimed at the media. In addition to LGBT people putting their mark on representations as executives, directors, producers, and writers, further improvement could also be achieved through pressure being applied from outside the industries. Clearly, however, gender-nonconforming children cannot conduct such a grown-up task. Thus it is up to the adults—especially parents—to speak out on their behalf. LGBT activists could also take up the charge. Further, scholars specializing in media, gender, and queer studies, as well as other interested and compassionate thinkers, could exercise praxis through their work to responsibly promote an affirmative presence of gender-variant children in the media. The girls steering toy trucks and boys decorating dollhouses deserve no less. Let’s face it—they’re here and they’re queer.
NOTES

1. For ethical reasons, the forthcoming fifth edition of this manual is considering eliminating the designation “gender identity disorder” and replacing it with another classification that does not harshly point to pathology (Pleak, 2011).

2. For a comprehensive account of parents who have chosen to completely welcome their gender-nonconforming children as they are and to help them healthily negotiate the resistance the kids might face, see Hill and Menvielle, 2009.

REFERENCES


Lelchuk, I. (2006, August 27). When is it OK for boys to be girls, and girls to be boys? Many kids want to look and act like the other sex. For some, it’s a phase; for others, it’s not. Parents and schools are adjusting. *San Francisco Chronicle*, A1.


Still Trapped in the U.S. Media’s Closet


Williams, M. E. (2012, April 19). When your child is gay: Kids are coming out at younger and younger ages—and parents need to help them. Here’s how. *Salon*. Retrieved from http://www.salon.com/2012/04/18/when_your_child_is_gay/?source=newsletter


