

Margaret  
Cunningim  
Women's Center

## Of Barbie dolls and GI Joes: How children learn sex role stereotypes

*Kathleen V. Hoover-Dempsey,  
associate professor of psychology,  
Peabody College*

"We've always given Lucy 'boy' toys right along with her 'girl' toys — trucks, construction sets, soccer balls, you name it. And what does she want for her fifth birthday? Barbie dolls! Nothing but Barbie dolls and Barbie outfits! She even wants a Barbie birthday party — makeup, high heels, glamour gowns, the works!"

"I know," sighed Brian's parent. "We survived arguments with the grandparents over the issue, but we made sure Brian had dolls along with all the cars and trucks when he was little. Now all he can talk about is GI Joes and tanks. He's dying to have a toy machine gun just like his friend next door has. My Dad just laughs and says, 'At least he's finally acting like a boy — in spite of you!'"

\* \* \* \* \*

Lucy's and Brian's parents worked hard to overcome traditional sex role stereotyping. They avoided pink and blue, selected toys with care, enrolled their girls in T-ball and their boys in gymnastics, read *William's Doll* and *Sleeping Ugly*. They assumed that their children would avoid the stereotypes. They were wrong. Or were they?

All children learn sex roles — sets of behaviors and responsibilities recognized by a culture as appropriate for persons of each sex.

Many children also learn sex role stereotypes: limited, clearly defined sets of prescriptions for how one



ought to behave because one is male or female.

Families are the first important source of information about sex roles. Children learn what it means to be female or male in part simply by watching their parents and "trying on" some of what they see. They also learn from the ways their parents behave toward them. Many parents treat their children differently according to sex, even when they don't intend to.

Researchers have found that parents speak of their newborn girls as pretty and delicate, their newborn boys as strong and active. They keep their girls physically close, but allow sons more distance and independence. They talk more with their girls and show them more affection; they emphasize achievement with their boys and urge them to control their emotions.

As children grow, peers, teachers, and television play significant roles in their learning about "appropriate" sex role behavior. Peers may be relentless enforcers of current stereotypes ("Only sissies take ballet!" "Girls aren't good at video-games!"). Teachers may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes; some researchers have found, for example, that teachers require girls to raise their hands before giving answers, but accept more actively assertive responses from boys. Children's television programs are replete with stereotypes (e.g., the strong, invincible hulk and the gorgeous, dependent companion); accompanying commercials assume unequivocally differentiated pictures of girls' and boys' "natural" interests in childhood (e.g., camouflage tanks vs. purple ponies).

Biological variables may also play a role. Some research indicates that variations in hormone levels and brain lateralization may contribute to

(continued page two)

## Sex roles (continued from page one)

boys' preference for rough-and-tumble play and girls' early verbal development. Such variations, of course, are supported by different socialization practices (e.g., adults accept more aggressive play from boys and talk more with girls).

Psychologists have suggested that children use many sources of information in a developmental process of learning about sex roles. Beginning with the establishment of *sex identity* — recognizing oneself as a girl or a boy — they next learn *sex stability*: "If I am a girl, I will always be a girl and I will grow up to be a woman." (Young children who haven't developed this understanding may ask startled parents when they're going to "turn into" the other sex.) Finally, children learn *sex constancy*: a person's sex stays the same even if something superficial changes (e.g., the man is still a man even if he wears a ponytail).

In this process, children first learn to recognize the labels "girl" and "boy," then assign experiences and ideas to each label. When the categories are formed, they begin to engage in sex stereotyped behavior because doing so confirms their "girlness" or "boyiness." (Thus, Lucy's and Brian's behavior makes a great deal of developmental sense; it confirms their receipt of social messages — from the rest of society — that "real little girls play with Barbies" and "real little boys play with GI Joes.") As they grow, children usually gain more flexible understandings of the "rules" for sex-appropriate behavior. They become able to understand exceptions, and are much more able to move away from unitary sex role stereotypes.

If cultural prescriptions for sex-linked behaviors are a consistent, notable, and approved part of their world, children will learn the stereotypes well. If stereotypes are but *one* part of the information they receive, they will have much wider options for defining and choosing their own life-long roles. ■

## It's your health

Beth Colvin Huff, RN, MSN  
Department of OB/GYN

### Ovarian cancer

Gilda Radner's death last year has brought ovarian cancer to the public's attention. Now, Nancy on "thirtysomething" also has ovarian cancer and many television news programs have addressed the subject.

By the time ovarian cancer is diagnosed, it is usually widespread and the cure rates are low. As with almost all cancers, the best chance to cure cancer of the ovary comes with detecting it in an early stage.

Other than a family history of ovarian cancer, there are no identifiable risk factors. Until recently, the only opportunity to diagnose the disease was by physical examination. If a mass or enlargement was palpated, further evaluation, usually requiring surgery, would be undertaken. Two newer tests are now available that may prove to be useful in detecting this cancer at an earlier stage. These are the transvaginal ultrasound and the CA-125 blood test.

The transvaginal ultrasound uses a probe in the vagina to visualize the ovaries. This technique gives a clearer picture of these structures than the abdominal ultrasounds that have been around for some years. A full bladder is not necessary (as with the abdominal ultrasound) and the test takes about 15 minutes.

The CA-125 blood test has been commercially available for about three years. It is used primarily for monitoring the response of the tumor to chemotherapy in those women who have ovarian cancer. Recently, however, there has been some interest in utilizing the test as a screening tool.

The CA-125 can show a false positive result from benign conditions such as ovarian cysts, fibroids and endometriosis. Conversely, it may be falsely negative in women with ovarian

cancer. Therefore, it is important to remember that the CA-125 is not a completely accurate and predictable screening test when used alone. But when used together with transvaginal ultrasound and other clinical data, it may raise or lower the degree of suspicion when confronted with an abnormality.

Although the CA-125 has not been approved for general ovarian cancer screening, there are various studies being conducted to answer these questions: How accurate is the combination of transvaginal ultrasound and CA-125 in detecting early ovarian cancer? How often do they need to be performed to detect this cancer at an early, more curable stage?

Stay tuned as these developments unfold! ■

### A memorial for women Vietnam veterans

On November 11, *The New York Times* announced that Eileen Barry, a sculptor from East Islip, New York, was chosen from 317 entrants to design a statue honoring the military women who served in Vietnam. As winner of the design competition sponsored by the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project, Barry's statue will be installed near the existing Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. A landscape design consultant, Robert Desmond, will collaborate with Barry in designing a setting for her sculpture.

Barry's statue will represent "a single Vietnam-era woman of extraordinary dignity." This monument will honor all women who served in the military including the quarter of a million who were stationed outside Vietnam. Eleven thousand women served in Vietnam and eight women were killed there.

Last year the American Legion Post 272 in Queens commissioned one of Barry's statues as a memorial to women who served in all American wars. That sculpture of a military woman in fatigues is now displayed at the city park in Rockaway Beach. ■

# Speaking of women . . .



photo by Marni Jo Lessa

*Dona Tapp (right) interviews professor Barbara Bowen.*

*Barbara Bowen came to Vanderbilt in 1987 as professor of French and chair of the Department of French and Italian. She was interviewed in October by Dona Tapp, administrator of the Kennedy Center.*

**D.T.** Were you the first woman to chair a department in Arts & Science?

**B.B.** I was the only one 3 years ago. Now there is Susan Wiltshire, and I hope there will be more, especially in the sciences. It's not so hard in the humanities because soon there may be more women faculty than men, especially in language departments.

This may be because boys are more likely to have had a choice between French and nuclear physics, or French and computer science. Regrettably, girls are not encouraged to pursue scientific areas.

**D.T.** Did you have role models?

**B.B.** When I was a student at Oxford, I had a wonderful tutor, a tough-minded woman who encouraged me to think for myself. That she happened to be a woman is a coincidence. A man can also be a role model. Indeed, a remarkable man at Oxford influenced me intellectually. I would like a world in which the first thing one notices about a person is not whether they are male or female. I do think it's a good idea at Vanderbilt to have more women on the

faculty because undergraduates are, by my standards, young, intellectually and emotionally. Later on, I don't think it matters because I do not believe there are any fundamental differences between men and women.

**D.T.** Who influenced you?

**B.B.** I'm not sure anybody influenced me as a child. I was remarkably determined — or so I am told. Certainly my parents wanted me to go to university. But it was all quite different in England. Although we had separate schools, girls were brought up much more like boys and played the same sports. At Oxford, our all-women hockey team played against a team from a men's college. There wasn't this dreadful American custom of bringing up girls to be "feminine."

I wish someone would persuade American parents that cute little girls are not essential. There are American women who manage to resist this, but it must take much strength of character.

**D.T.** How difficult has it been for you to balance being a parent with your professional life?

**B.B.** While the children were young, the answer to your question of how I managed two jobs is "Badly, on all counts," I'm sure. There is no way to be the perfect mom and the perfect

university professor. The only way I could survive was by having the family (husband, son, and two daughters) act as a team, which it always did. Even so, I sometimes felt that I was surviving by the skin of my teeth and I lost about 10 years of scholarly reading that I ought to have been doing. You do the best you can.

**D.T.** Do you see Vanderbilt today as a good place for women? Or should I say a good place for scholars?

**B.B.** I am impressed overall with what Vanderbilt has done for women, and I have antennae a mile long for this sort of thing. I would still like to see more recruiting of women students in the departments where there are few, and to see the hard sciences hire more women faculty and have women department chairs. But I think Vanderbilt has done a tremendous job in this area in recent years.

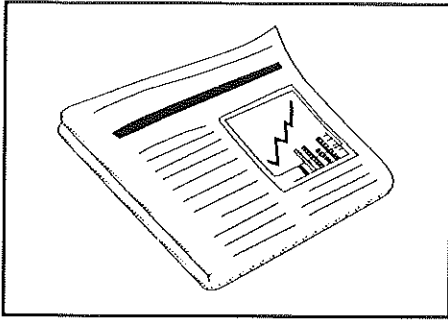
One thing that's made a difference here and elsewhere is that 20 years ago it was the top administrators who were the problem and today the top administrators nearly all have wives who are professional women. They have learned that women are people. ■

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**Vanderbilt Women's Political Caucus (VWPC)** is a non-partisan student organization, serving two purposes:

1. To serve Nashville and Tennessee politics by supporting individuals, who are running for office or are in office, who support and advocate progressive women's issues. VWPC does this in conjunction with the Tennessee Women's Political Caucus.
2. To bring awareness of and action for women's issues on the Vanderbilt campus.

The caucus meets approximately every two weeks. Non-students are welcome. Contact Coco Weiss at 421-8291 for further information.



## News quotes

### Women elected officials make substantial gains in state government

A new study, *Women in Congress*, points out that the number of women on Capital Hill has increased 5.4 percent in seventy years — a rate, if continued, that means equal representation will be achieved in the year 2582, nearly 600 years away.

A new fact sheet from the Center for the American Woman and Politics at the Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, shows that the number of women serving in state legislatures since 1969 has more than quadrupled.

Taken together, the information indicates that women continue to face an uphill battle for elected office, especially since the electoral process greatly favors incumbents. Yet in recent years, women have won elections at an unprecedented rate that could signal an acceleration of the rate to which women are elected to Capitol Hill.

Both sources show that women this year hold 17.1 percent (1,273) of the 7,461 state legislative seats. In state senates, women hold 13.4 percent (267) of the 1,995 seats; in state houses or assemblies women hold 18.4 percent (1,006) of the 5,466 seats. A significant change in the 1980s is the nature of campaigns for women, shifting from women who succeeded their deceased fathers or husbands to solo campaigning — a shift that likely will influence the nature of women elected to office in the future.

excerpt from *The National Voter*  
October/November 1990

### Books by women but not African-Americans are added to canon

Almost forty years after the "Great Books of the Western World" was published to wide critical acclaim, the collection of many of the seminal works of almost 3,000 years of Western civilization has been given an editorial facelift. Homer, Shakespeare, Plato, and John Stuart Mill are still represented, but for the first time they will share the grandeur with 20th century writers. And for the first time, women will be included. The sixty volumes that make up the revised "Great Books," published by the Encyclopedia Britannica, is to be introduced [October 25] at the Library of Congress.

But with no blacks represented among the 130 authors and four newly chosen women — Jane Austen, Willa Cather, George Eliot, and Virginia Woolf — the revision seems likely to intensify criticism that any such claims to greatness are expressions of Western cultural bias by and in behalf of white males.

"It distresses me that the editors couldn't find more women and persons of color to include in this new edition," said Henry Louis Gates Jr., a professor of English literature at Duke University. "Especially after all of the debates over the last few years about the relationship of historically excluded voices to the reshaping of the canon for the twenty-first century. Obviously, there's still a 'whites only' sign on what precisely constitutes a great thinker."

excerpt from *The New York Times*  
October 25, 1990

Anna Quindlen, columnist for *The New York Times*, comments on the case of the desperate mother in New Jersey who left her child in the hatchback of her Toyota while she worked

The professional agitators at the Child Care Action Campaign, a national advocacy group, have come up with some extraordinary figures. They estimate that there are thirty-five million American children under

the age of fourteen whose mothers work. And there are five million places in licensed or registered day-care facilities.

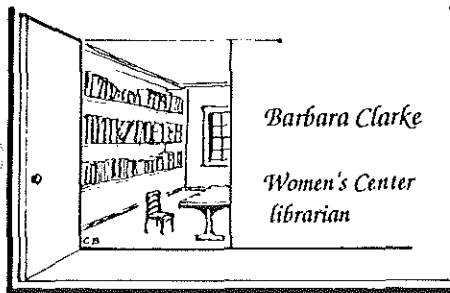
Congress just passed a child-care package worth \$2.5 billion over the next three years, the first major legislation in the area since World War II. The measure is designed to increase quantity and quality, and to help parents with lower incomes pay for child care. The money goes to the states, because one thing we all know is that we don't want the feds in the business of child care. Given what they did with the census, they could lose a couple million kids.

While Congress was passing that legislation, and the woman who kept her kid in the trunk was being showered with job and baby-sitting offers, another little child-care crisis was unfolding elsewhere in the state, in a pretty suburb called Verona. Two women who run family day-care centers in their homes have discovered they must be granted a variance to continue to look after other people's children while they are looking after their own.

Like everything else labeled social policy, child-care issues will be shaped on two levels, in great arenas and the small battles of our own lives. The \$2.5 billion is a good beginning. Now I'm looking for a change in Verona's zoning laws. No step is too small if it will keep kids out of car trunks.

excerpt from *The New York Times*  
November 8, 1990

Women's Center Book Group will discuss *The Dirty Duck* by Martha Grimes on Monday, December 10, from 5:15 p.m. until 6:15 p.m. in Godchaux Hall living room. Joyce Laben will lead the discussion. New members are welcome.



## In the library

The library is now receiving *Research News Reporter*, which is published by the Institute for Women's Policy Research. The *Reporter* consists of a binder of photocopies of recent articles from major U.S. daily newspapers. The subjects covered are relevant to women and their families, and new pages are received bimonthly. The articles are arranged under the following five headings: Work & Education, Politics & Society, Family Life, Health & Reproductive Issues, and Poverty & Income. *Research News Reporter* can be found in our Reference section.

Joan Jacobs Brumberg's *Fasting Girls: the History of Anorexia Nervosa* is an interesting historical and social look at the problem of anorexia nervosa. The general public knew little about this disorder until the 1970s, but it was known to the doctors of the 1870s. As far back as the thirteenth century some very religious young women refused to eat, and their complaint was known as anorexia mirabilis. By the 1870s physicians had begun to describe a special form of anorexia that afflicted mainly young girls from middle-class families. It was fashionable for women in the Victorian era to be slim and delicate, and many girls felt that moral superiority was expressed through the denial of appetite.

Over the years many different causes of anorexia nervosa have been suggested, and many different biomedical treatments have been tried. Though the disorder had been linked to psychosexual development before the end of last century, this theory became widely accepted by the 1930s.

American women today are

preoccupied with weight control, and at least half of them are on a diet at any given time. Recent studies show that almost eighty per cent of prepubescent girls — some as young as eight — restrict their food intake in order to control their weight. However, young boys are not concerned about their weight. Many anorexics exercise a great deal in a further attempt to stay as slim as possible; they feel that they must be slimmer than all their peers. Some experts estimate that about twenty per cent of female college students suffer from anorexia.

The problem of anorexia nervosa is a common and complex one, and the incidence is not expected to decrease. Brumberg has offered some possible solutions, though she is a historian rather than a clinician. She summarizes by saying: "Ultimately, mature women must tell younger women the truth: reliance on beauty as power is a dangerous form of dependency."

*Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945* by Phyllis Palmer is an interesting study of servants and housewives in middle-class homes. The author focuses on the relationships between the servants and their mistresses, and gives us a picture of the often difficult lives of domestic workers. Most of the servants had live-in positions, and this facilitated their exploitation. Many worked much longer hours than originally agreed upon. Few middle-class women worked outside the home during this period, and Palmer writes that those who could afford household help confirmed their self-worth as women through the mistress-servant relationship that emphasized class and often racial distinctions.

Linda Gordon's *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence: Boston 1880-1960* is based on the records of three Boston social work agencies, each of which was involved in family violence in a different way. Little has been written about the history of family violence, but the writer shows that the incidence has not changed as

much as has its visibility. Although the data in the book are from the Boston area, Gordon feels that the findings would be typical of other urban areas of the country. Most of the clients of the agencies were poor and uneducated, and many were immigrants. The agencies originally focused on child abuse, but soon became concerned with the other aspects of family violence. Child neglect was more common than child abuse, and the agencies soon were dealing with problems like incest and wife-beating.

This is a very detailed and enlightening look at the lives of the poor in Boston over an extended period of time, and it shows us also how the mostly middle-class social workers felt about the lives of their clients. ■

### Each day in America . . .

- 2,795 teenagers get pregnant.
- 1,106 teenagers have abortions.
- 372 teenagers miscarry.
- 1,295 teenagers give birth.
- 6 teenagers commit suicide.
- 7,742 teenagers become sexually active.
- 1,512 teenagers drop out of school.

The U.S. teen pregnancy rate is twice as high as that of other industrialized countries. Two in every five American girls get pregnant and one in every five American girls bears a child before the age of 20. The vast majority aren't married. Much of this has to do with poverty and lack of achievement: regardless of race, teens with below-average academic skills and from poor families are about five to seven times more likely to be parents than are teens with solid skills and from non-poor families.

*Data from Children 1990: A Report Card, Briefing Book, and Action Primer published by the Children's Defense Fund. Available for \$2.95 from CDF, 122 C St. NW, Washington, DC 20001, (202) 628-8787.*

# Announcements et cetera

**Geraldine Ferraro speaks at VU**  
December 5. SGA Speakers Committee sponsors a lecture by the first woman vice presidential candidate on a national party ticket. Langford auditorium, Wednesday, December 5, 7:30 p.m. Tickets are free with a Vanderbilt ID. All others \$5. Tickets are available at the Sarratt Student Center Desk. Chair of the Speakers Committee and contact for this event is Steve Sterka.

**Carter Heyward speaks on homophobia and heterosexism** December 3. The Divinity School hosts one of the first women ordained an Episcopal priest. She is currently a professor in the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Divinity School Commons, 10:10 a.m. Open to the public.

**A Rockefeller Humanist-in-Residence Program 1991-92.** The Center for Advanced Feminist Studies at the University of Minnesota is offering two Rockefeller Humanist-in-Residence Fellowships for one post-doctoral and one senior scholar on the theme "Theorizing Female Diversity: The Social Con-

struction of Difference."

The Center encourages interdisciplinary proposals which move towards a richer understanding of the multiple dimensions of women's experience along racial, ethnic, class, and other lines.

A 1,200 word proposal must be postmarked by January 15, 1991. For complete details see brochure at the Women's Center.

## Call for papers

"1990s Decade for the Globalization of Women's Issues Series" is a Japan-U.S. conference to be held May 5-11, 1991 in Phoenix. It is designed to provide a forum for the sharing of information, ideas, and research on four key issues related to women:

- Education Systems
- Politics and Peace
- Women and Work
- Health and Well-Being

Abstracts must be postmarked no later than December 15, 1990.

Complete information at the Women's Center.



This issue of Women's VU is printed on recycled paper.

**Rape and Sexual Abuse Center (RSAC).** RSAC is seeking volunteers to serve as telephone counselors on the 24-hour Crisis Line. Volunteers can answer the Crisis Line from their own homes, providing invaluable information, emotional support, and crisis intervention counseling to sexual assault victims and their families.

A twenty-five hour comprehensive training will be held January 10-19, 1991. The training is on two Saturdays and three evenings. If you are interested in becoming part of this vital service to the community, please contact Ginger Miller at 259-9055 by December 13.

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*"No one should have to dance backward all their lives."*

Jill Ruckelshaus, former officer,  
U.S. Commission on Civil Rights  
*from Special Issue of Time,*  
*"Women: The Road Ahead"*  
Fall 1990

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