

The effect of gender on judgments about the future prospects of a baby girl or boy:
Does our gendered culture also influence judgments about the future?

Peter Grimbeek and Brendan Bartlett (Griffith University)¹

CLSE, Mount Gravatt Campus, GU

Abstract

This study reports a novel examination of the gendered culture that predominates not only in the educational system but also in the wider reaches of present day Australian culture. It furthers this examination by examining linkages between the point of view of the observer (male versus female) and the effect on judgment when males versus females are the objects of that judgment. That is, it deliberately focuses on the complex contexts entailed by these joint activities. The effect of demography on these judgments is examined in passing by taking account of the effect of educational achievement and age in years. The methodology utilised was to administer a questionnaire containing 16 items asking about the likelihood of a baby having specific experiences in the future ranging from going to prison to travelling to Mars regularly. Items were selected for their capacity to produce gender-biased responses. The gender of the participant and the gender of the baby were controlled with a view to enhancing the questionnaire's capacity to elicit gender-biased responses. Surprisingly, the results suggest that these male and female participants agree rather than disagree about the future, and the future is aspirational rather than dystopic.

Introduction

Gender is a social construct. It is about the roles that males and females play as their worlds and cultures prescribe and grow. Part of this Janus—like interaction is that gender has been shown to be an important issue in making judgments about others. Though there have been considerable shifts (Flood, 2005) over the past 60 years in what expectations people have of gender as a social factor, there is evidence that people continue throughout life to believe that gender is associated with how we should behave (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2003). Gender is an important social category in the perception of others (Harper & Schoeman, 2003). It impacts on judgments in various ways. One major issue is that the gender of the person being

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judged influences responses, as discussed by Harper and Schoeman (2003). Another major issue is that the gender of the respondent influences the types of judgments made, as discussed by Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2003).

Barron (2003) examined the social construct of gender in relation to the literacy of boys. Barron did so in part by surveying junior primary children and their parents and teachers to determine the locus of significant differences between girls and boys in relation to attitudes to reading, being read to and to constructs of self and others as readers.

Barron reported that boys were more reluctant readers. They displayed poorer attitudes generally and reported reading less in quantity and frequency in both school and home settings.

Nonetheless, when comparisons were made at the most general level (male vs. female, private vs. state school) gender did not predict scores on an externally administered comprehension test. This and related outcomes (Barron, 2003) points to the possibility that internally-based ratings that report gender differences are to some extent driven by teacher perceptions of literacy competence, and such perceptions can at times be unreliable. These outcomes also affirm the notion that a school culture of gendered literacy is influencing teacher and student and parent attitudes related to the achievement of literacy. That is, Barron's study highlighted a cultural consensus in relation to gender and literacy that presumably acts elsewhere as well.

An issue of interest that emerges from a consideration of the above is that the gender of the judgment maker and the gender of the person being judged interact in curious ways. More specifically, the generalisation (Harper & Schoeman, 2003) that the gender of the person being judged influences judgments (sometimes adversely) is complemented by the generalisation that males and females make similar judgments about, say, the literacy of boys (Barron, 2003).

This study examines these complementary generalisations by testing the hypothesis that participants make differing judgments about the likely future of male or female children, and that the gender of participants influences the nature of these judgments.

Methods

This study used a novel quasi-experimental design, which mingled survey administration in semi-natural settings and the random allocation of participants to conditions. That is, the

dataset was collected by personal administration of a questionnaire in the field to a purposive sample of 12 males and 12 females assigned randomly to one of two experimental conditions.

Table 1. Between groups design for study

Participants	Questionnaire about life in future
6 males	Condition A: Items about baby boy
6 females	Condition A: Items about baby boy
6 males	Condition B: Items about baby girl
6 females	Condition B: Items about baby girl

As indicated in Table 1 (above), half the male and half the female participants were allocated randomly to Condition A in which they answered 16 questions about the future life of a baby boy, and the other half to Condition B in which they answered the same 16 questions about the future of a baby girl. The questions were selected as likely to be associated with gender differences, either in terms of the object of the test (young girl, boy) or the test-taker (male, female).

Results

Descriptive analyses

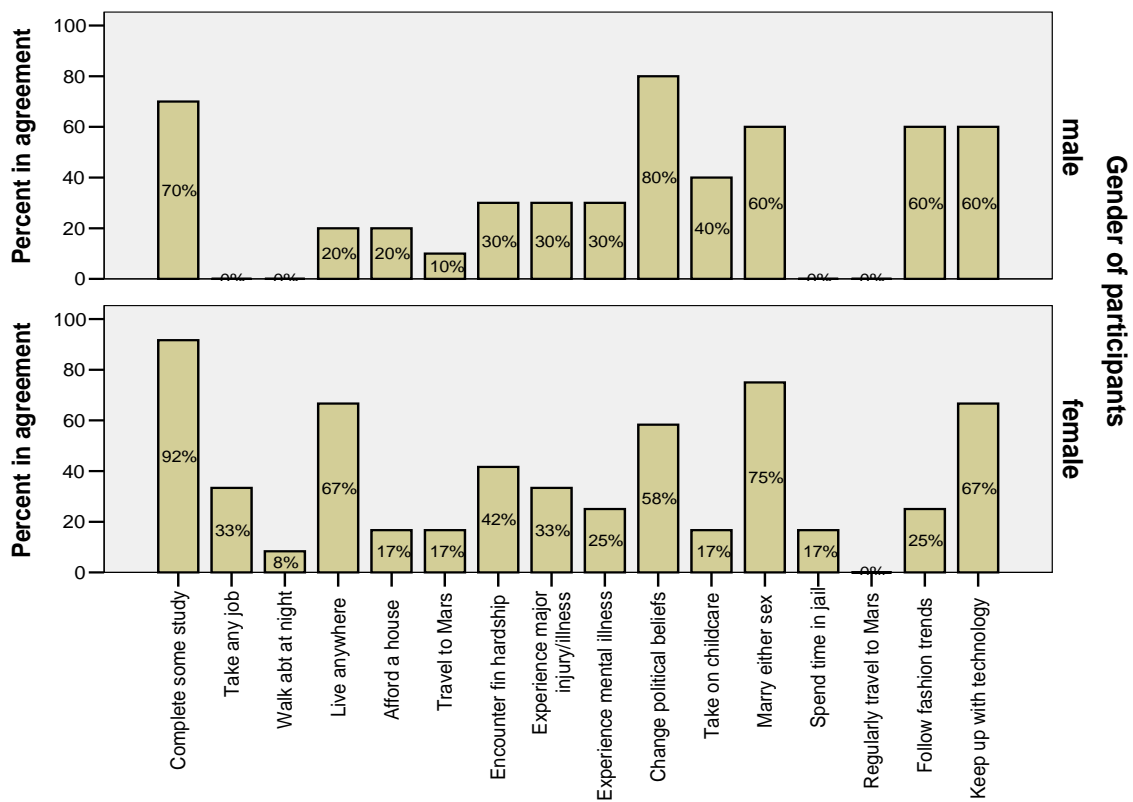


Figure 1. Percent of agreement for each of the sixteen items, grouped by gender of participant

Twelve participants (six males, six females) answered questions about the likely future of a baby girl. Another twelve participants (six males, six females) answered the same questions about the likely future of a baby boy. The ages of these participants varied between 16 and 78, with an average age of 38 years. The educational attainments of these participants varied from primary through to tertiary, with one third of the participants (N=8) reporting at best Junior Certificate levels of educational achievement.

Figure 1 illustrates the percent of participants in agreement (agree or strongly agree) for each of the 16 items. It's clear that males and females tended to agree equally strongly on some items (e.g., Complete some study) whereas they disagreed in relation to other items (e.g., Follow fashion trends). The other dimension of potential difference (not illustrated here) is in terms of level of agreement about the future of a baby boy versus baby girl.

Joint Plot of Category Points

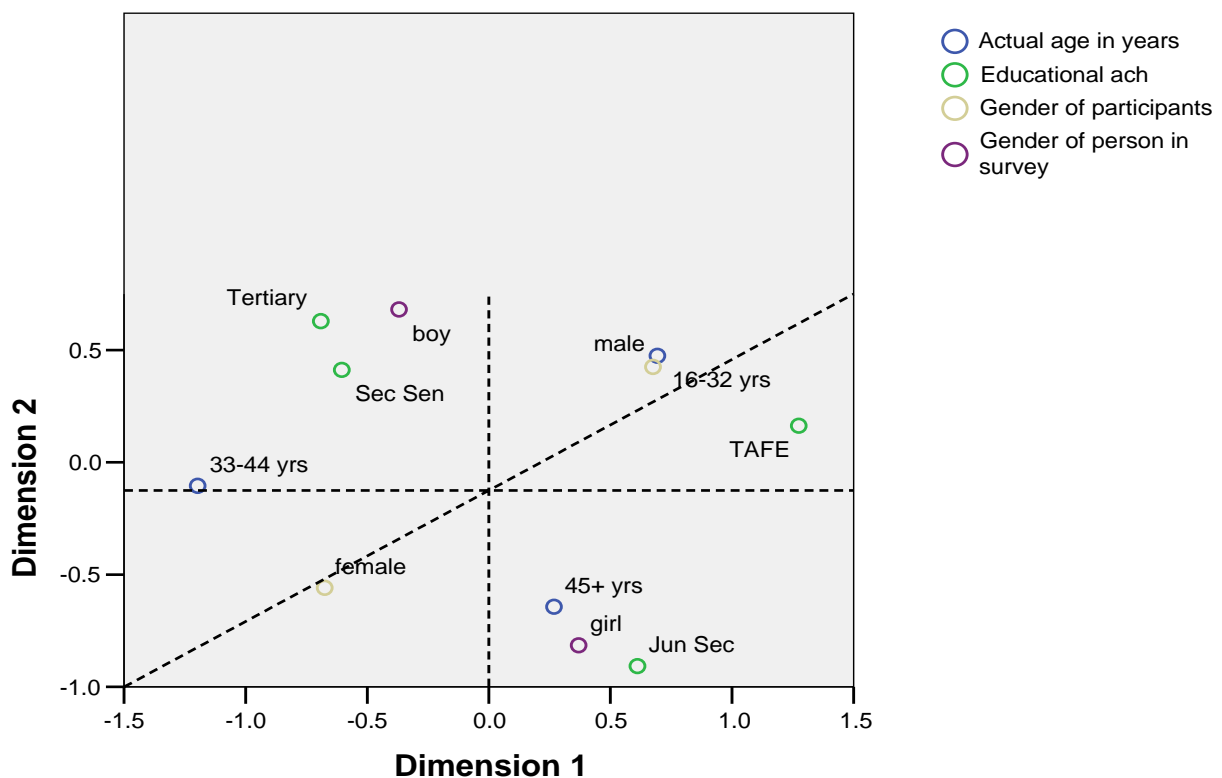


Figure 2. Demographic profile of the 24 respondents, represented spatially by Optimal Scaling

The SPSS Optimal Scaling procedure, with all response categories assumed to be nominal (i.e., multinomial categories) was used to plot the associations between four variables of interest (gender of participant, gender of child in survey, age of participant, educational achievement of participant) with the aim of examining the apparent randomness of the

allocation of participants to conditions. The importance of this examination is that random allocation to conditions is a corner stone of experimental design, and its absence has implications for the interpretation of outcomes.

The outcomes of Optimal Scaling (Figure 2) can be described in terms of the distribution of categories (e.g., female, male) across quadrants and in the clustering of categories within quadrants. In these terms, the orthogonal distribution of categories for gender of participants versus categories for the gender of the object of survey across the four quadrants is consistent with the research design. However, the distribution of participants in terms of age and educational qualification was somewhat uneven. First, the sample included a subset of 16-32 year old males with TAFE qualifications (Upper right-hand quadrant). Second, the participants who made judgments about the boy tended to be 33-44 year olds with either Senior Secondary or Tertiary qualifications (Upper left-hand quadrant), whereas participants who made judgments about the girl tended to be in the oldest age group (45-78 years old) and with the most minimal educational qualifications (Primary School or Junior Secondary: Lower right-hand quadrant).

Inferential analyses

Exploratory factor analysis (Maximum likelihood, Varimax rotation), after excluding two items (*Complete some study, Take on childcare*), clustered the remaining 14 items such that five items measured the latent variable of **Personal change** (*Unlikely to change political beliefs, Likely to travel to Mars, Likely to spend time in jail, Unlikely to experience major injury or illness, Unlikely to encounter financial hardship*). Another four items measured responses to the latent variable of **Consumer trends** (*Likely to follow fashion trends, Likely to keep up with technology, Unlikely to regularly travel to Mars, Likely to marry either sex*). Another five items measured the latent variable of **Emerging lifestyle**: *Likely to take any job, Likely to walk about at night, Likely to live anywhere, Likely to afford a house, Unlikely to experience mental illness*).

An initial MANOVA examined age and educational literacy as covariates, the three latent variables as dependent variables (DVs), and gender of baby in survey and gender of participant as independent variables (IVs). After excluding age and educational level as nonsignificant, a follow-up MANOVA examined associations between the DVs and IVs described above. It showed a significant multivariate effect for the three latent variables as a group in relation to the gender of the baby in the survey (girl versus boy: $p < .001$) and the

gender of the participant completing the survey ($p < .01$). However, the interaction between gender of participant and gender of baby in survey was nonsignificant.

Univariate analyses for the effect of the baby in the survey significantly predicted responses related to *consumer trends* ($p < .05$), with responses significantly more positive for girl than boy babies. Follow-up nonparametric tests for items related to *consumer trends* indicated that male and female participants as a group were likely to indicate that baby girls in the future were not only more likely to follow *fashion trends* ($p < .01$) but also to *keep up with technology* ($p < .01$).

Univariate analyses for gender of participant significantly predicted responses related to *consumer trends* such that males responded more positively than females and for *emerging lifestyle* such that females responded more positively than males. Follow-up nonparametric tests for items related to *consumer trends* indicated that despite the significant univariate effect, the gender of participant did not influence responses to these items significantly. Follow-up nonparametric tests for items related to *emerging lifestyle* indicated that females were more likely to respond that babies of either gender would in future be able to live anywhere ($p < .05$).

Discussion

The outcomes of the survey are as interesting for what is not differentiated by the gender of the baby about whom future judgments are made, and also what is not differentiated by gender of the participant making the judgments, as for what is. That is, neither the gender of the baby identified in the survey nor the gender of the participant significantly influenced responses related to the latent variable of *personal change* in the future.

In terms of what did discriminate significantly, participant responses indicated a mixture of present day conventional wisdom (*females more likely follow fashion trends*) and the aspirational (*females more likely to keep up with technology*), an aspirational response that flowed through into female positivity about likely increases in mobility (*Both male and female babies more likely to be able to live anywhere in the future*). This aspirational trend in responses in fact seems a rather straightforward reaction to the present-day gender based culture in which despite examples to the contrary, women may keep up with fashion trends, but are less likely to keep up with technology or enjoy enhanced mobility.

The major methodological issue in the study is the extent to which specific types of participants made judgments about the likely future of the baby girl versus the baby boy. That

is, the tendency of the survey giver to select older men or women (45-78 years) with limited educational achievements (Primary or Secondary Junior levels) to make judgments about the likely future of the baby girl problematic. In these terms, it is interesting that these guardians of the culture have opted for a less conservative future for the potential adult woman.

The other curious thing is the absence of a significant interaction between the gender of person identified as the focus of survey and the gender of the participant making judgments about the future of that potential adult woman or man. Given the conventional wisdom about our present day gender based culture, one might, for instance, have expected female participants to be more positive than male participants about the future of the baby girl, but this was not the case. It seems instead that male and female participants largely concurred when making judgments about the likely futures of this baby boy and girl. That is, the future appears to be the same from these differing gender based perspectives, and with a remarkable absence of the essential tensions beloved of constructivist perspectives on social realities.

One conclusion to be drawn from the above is that this lack of significant differences of opinion about items relating to personal change, and the lack of significant interactions that highlight gender based disagreement about the future of these baby boys and girls is in fact consistent with the notion of a cultural consensus about the lives of men and women of the kind highlighted by Barron (2003) in relation to the achievement of literacy. In short, this act of future gazing tells us as much about the present as the future.

In these terms, it is not surprising to find that these 24 men and women share common cultural expectations about the *future* lives of baby boys and girls that extend beyond the sphere of educational achievement (See Barron, 2003: *Girls like reading, Boys like sport*) into the broader spheres of personal change, consumer trends, and emerging life style, regardless of the extent to which these expectations suffice to predict the lives of individuals or indeed, life in the future.

References

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Appendix: Life in the 22nd Century

Predicting the future for a girl in the 22 nd century	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
This person will complete some form of study	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This person will be able to take whatever job they want	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This person will be able to walk about safely at night	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This person will be able to live anywhere in the world	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This person will be able to afford a house of their own	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The person will be able to afford to travel to Mars	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This person will encounter major unexpected financial hardship	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This person will experience a major personal illness or injury	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This person will experience a mental illness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This person will change their political beliefs more than once	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This person will take on childcare of children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This person will be able to marry the sex of their choice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This person will spend some time in jail	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This person will regularly travel to Mars just for fun	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This person will follow fashion trends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This person will keep up-to-date with new technologies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>