

Does Having Children Influence Societal Values and Attributions Based on Gender?



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Background

Societal value is assigned to individuals based on the achievement of their social roles and each role has a prescribed value based on societal perception of what that role entails (Wilder, 2000).

Attribution is also based on the societal perception of how an individual fulfills his or her social role.

New technology has altered the ability for women to bear children, to work outside the home, and to choose whether to have children like in the case *Evans v. Amicus Health Care* (Sheldon, 2004). In light of the new technology, traditional expectations of women might be changing.

The current research examined how having children affects the value and attribution placed on an individual because of gender.

Design and Hypotheses

This study was a 2 (character gender) x 3 (number of offspring) between variables design. The independent variables (IV) were character gender and the number of offspring depicted in the scenarios. The independent variable, character gender, consisted of two levels: male and female characters depicted in the scenarios. The other independent variable, number of offspring, consisted of three levels: zero children, one child, and five children. The dependent variables (DV) were attribution and value placed on the characters in the scenarios by the participants.

Considering the limited research in this area, an exploratory hypothesis was based on Sheldon (2004); I hypothesized the participants would rate the woman in the scenario depicting no children as not fulfilling her social roles. In support of the research conducted by Gannon (1999), I predicted that more value would be placed on the male in the scenario regardless of number of offspring. In maintaining the attribution theory and the fulfillment of social roles (Gannon), I predicted the participants would rate the female in the scenario depicting five children higher value scores.

Method

Participants

132 participants voluntarily participated in this study. The age range of the participants was 18-57 with the median age of 20.

Materials and Procedure

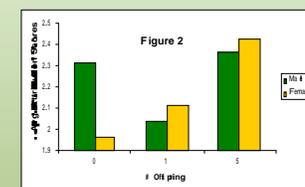
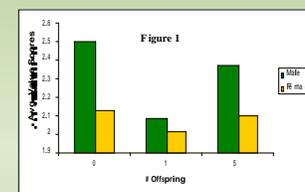
A cover page for the questionnaire was a signed consent form for the participants to sign and return to the experimenter. Following the scenario depicting a character, thirty years old, going through a day completing simple tasks like going to work. The scenario was followed by two value questions (How successful and important) and then by two attribution (good and fulfillment of social roles) questions. After these questions were completed, those were two demographic questions (gender and age). The participants completed the questionnaire in approximately five minutes and then were given a debriefing form with contact information and thanked for their participation.

Results

All of the questions on the questionnaire were rated on a four-point Likert scale (min=1, max=4). For each of the dependent variable measures one of the two questions was reverse scored. The demographics were correlated with each dependent variable; sex and value had a significant correlation, $r(132) = -.20$, and was thus included as a covariate.

The 2x3 between ANCOVA for the average of value scores showed two trends (Figure 1). The male character in the scenario ($M=2.3$) was rated lower than the female character in the scenario ($M=2.1$), $F(1,132) = 3.43, p=.07$. The character with five children ($M=2.23$) was rated with less value than the character with one child ($M=2.05$) or zero children ($M=2.3$), $F(2,132) = 2.49, p=.09$.

The 2x3 between ANOVA for the average of attribution scores (Figure 2). A significant main effect for number of offspring, $F(2, 132) = 3.34, p=.04$. A Tukey HSD, $(2, 132) = .05$, showed that the level of five children (mean= 2.4) was given lower attribution scores than one child or no children. There was no significance for character gender or an interaction between the two.



Discussion

Contrary to past research (Sheldon, 2004), participants attributed the woman with no children higher than any of the other conditions and the woman with five children worse. Contrary to Gannon (1999), the participants also attributed the man with no children worse than the woman and man that had one child. Further, males were not rated higher on value than females in any condition.

These results provide evidence for the changing of traditional values and the way that society is evolving. The finding that women with no children is more acceptable and is far more prevalent in today's society. It could be that rating women that are single and have no children as more successful and fulfilling their social roles is now politically correct. In the modern work place, more women are working alongside men and are in controlling positions in major corporations. Thus women today can choose not to bear children and still be valued by society.

One limitation of this study was that the majority of the participants were undergraduate students whose values are being currently influenced by their environment. One possible threat to external validity could be that the majority of the participants were from the same area of the country with similar cultural backgrounds. Future research should compare older generational values to current values in different areas of the country.