

Gender Differences in College Students' Future Aspirations

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INTRODUCTION

Gender studies show that men and women prioritize different life goals. Blakemore, Lawton, and Vartanian (2005) found that women had a higher drive to marry than did men. Greene and Wheatley (1992) found that females also expected to marry and become parents at younger ages than what males anticipated. An example of another aspiration that women have rated more important to them than men is being well educated (Abowitz & Knox, 2003). In addition to the significant difference between the way men and women rated being well educated in Abowitz and Knox's study, the researchers also referred to a study conducted by the American Council on Education and the University of California (2001). In American Council on Education and University of California survey of more than 280,000 undergraduates, 79% of the women estimated that they would earn a bachelor's degree. Whereas, only 74% of men shared this expectation, which is a finding similar to Abowitz and Knox's study. Furthermore, Singer, Cassin, and Dobson (2005) showed that more women than men anticipated child rearing would disrupt their career, which begs the question, do women expect to delay pursuing their careers and educational goals because they anticipate that their investment in child rearing would disrupt their careers, or do women still expect to pursue their career and educational goals despite these concerns?

It is believed that women, more frequently and consciously than men, incorporate marriage and parenthood in their future goals. This desire for family life, possibly influenced by a lifetime of expectations from society, family, and peers, is so deep-rooted among many women that they prioritize it before any other future aspirations, although this does not suggest that most women do not have educational and occupational aspirations. It is believed that men aren't as pressured from society, family, and peers to get married and have children. This would allow them to invest in and prioritize other future aspirations, such as their education and career, before family life. The current study examines whether there is a gender difference in prioritizing and ranking life goals.

Hypotheses

1. Women would frequently think about all future aspirations, including domestic and occupational aspects of life, more often than men.
2. Women would plan to accomplish future aspirations by a younger age than men.
3. Men and women would differ in their perception of social pressure regarding future aspirations in marriage, family, education and careers.
4. Men and women would differ in their ranking of various future events.

METHOD

Participants

One-hundred and four traditional undergraduate students at a small, private university in Southern California participated in this study. The 50 female and the 54 male participants were conveniently recruited in classrooms and around campus and participants ranged in age from 18 -28 years (Males M age = 20.30, SD = 2.03; Females M age = 19.96, SD = 1.44) Ethnicities of participants varied, with 42.3% White (n = 44), 33.7% Latino/Hispanic (n = 35), 11.5% African American/Black (n = 12), 6.7% Asian American/Asian (n = 7), and 5.8% "Other" (n = 6). A majority of the students (39.4%) were juniors, 25% were sophomores, 24% were seniors and 11.5% were freshmen.

Materials and Measures

The demographic portion of the questionnaire consisted of four questions identifying the participant's age, gender, class standing, and race/ethnicity. The rest of the survey was based on an adjusted version of Abowitz and Knox's (2003) survey. Besides using Likert-scales to rate different aspects of life, the current study included ranking of these values as well. With permission of the authors, this adjustment was included to identify how participants would rank six possible future goals from one to six, with one being the most important to six being the least important. A couple of examples of a life value that were ranked include, "having a career and work" and "getting married." The survey included nine items total with some items having multiple sub-parts for ranking or rating.

Procedure

Prior to completing in-person questionnaires, a consent form briefly explaining the survey and granting the researcher to use their responses as well as a referral to the University's Counseling Center was given to participants to sign. The nine-item survey (including the demographic section) took a maximum of twenty minutes for a participant to complete.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine the first hypothesis that women would frequently think about all future aspirations, including domestic and occupational aspects of life, more often than men. Results showed that women thought about all future aspirations, including domestic and occupational aspects of life more often compared to men, supporting the first hypothesis. Specifically men (M = 7.98, SD = 2.60) and women (M = 9.18, SD = 2.75) differed significantly in how much they thought about stereotypical feminine goals, $t(102)$ = 2.29, p < .05, r^2 = 0.02, such as developing friendships, getting married, and becoming a parent. However, results showed no difference in how men and women thought about educational and career goals, which did not support the 2nd part of the first hypotheses (p > .05).

Hypothesis 2

A Pearson's chi-square analysis was used to test the second hypothesis that women would plan to accomplish future aspirations by a younger age than men. Both men and women answered similarly regarding what age they planned on accomplishing future goals (p > .05). Most men and women planned on completing graduate school, getting married, becoming a parent, having a career, and becoming financially stable before the age of thirty or younger. This did not support the 2nd hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3

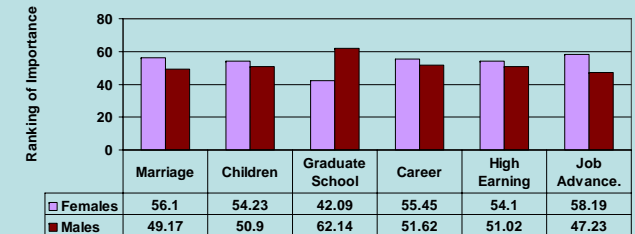
An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine the third hypothesis that men and women would differ in their perception of social pressure regarding future aspirations in marriage, family, education and careers. No significant differences were found in the perception of social pressure that each gender felt about the various future goals (p > .05), which did not support the hypothesis. Means for all 6 questions relating to social pressures ranged between 1.42 to 2.98 for both men and women, which suggests that for certain life events (e.g., developing life-long friends) they felt very little pressure (Males

M = 1.70, SD = 1.33, Females M = 1.42, SD = 1.18), but for other events (e.g., having a career), they felt a lot of pressure (Males M = 2.63, SD = 1.22, Females M = 2.98, SD = 1.10).

Hypothesis 4

The fourth hypothesis tested if men and women would differ in their rankings of various future events, specifically focusing on stereotypical gender aspirations. The data was analyzed using the Mann-Whitney U nonparametric test for independent groups. Results showed that men and women did not differ significantly in their rankings of the various future events (p > .05), except for the importance they placed on completing a graduate program. Women ranked completing a graduate program much lower in terms of importance (mean rank = 42.09) compared to men (mean rank = 62.14), Z -value = -3.48, p < .001. However, women in the sample did find future occupational and family events equally important as men. See Figure 1 for importance rankings.

Figure 1.
Mean Ranking of Life Goals' Importance



DISCUSSION

Results indicate that part of the first hypothesis was supported. Women frequently think about various future aspirations in comparison to men. Women also tended to think more about stereotypical feminine goals such as relationships and child bearing than men. The second hypothesis regarding gender differences in expected goal completion was not supported. Instead, results showed that the majority of both men and women expected to accomplish various life goals by the time they are thirty years old. This included completing a graduate program, getting married, becoming a parent, having a career, and being financially secure. In addition, the third hypothesis was not supported. Both men and women feel an equal amount of social pressure regarding accomplishing educational, occupational, and domestic aspirations. The last hypothesis examining gender differences in ranking importance levels of various future goals had some significant differences. Men ranked completing a graduate program much higher than women. But the women did equally rank the importance of family and occupation.

Limitations to the study include the sample and its characteristics. Undergraduate students in this study reported majors of study that highly encourage graduate study, whereas if other students in fields not encouraging this would have yielded different results. Future research may consider incorporating the participants' declared major in the demographic section. It would also be interesting to analyze the students' race in relation to their life goals. Additionally, collecting data on participants' self-esteem levels in relationship to their future aspirations would also be important.