

Gender Differences in Adult-Child Interactions: Evidence from non-parent undergraduate students



Darcy Smith, Ran An, Jyothirmayi Thippana, & Klaus Libertus

Department of Psychology, University of Pittsburgh

Background

- Parent-child interactions have been found to predict subsequent development (Stright, Gallagher, & Kelley, 2008; Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003).
- Parent-infant interactions have been found to differ systematically between mothers and fathers (Starrels, 1994; Lin, Xie, Li, 2019).
- It remains unclear what causes differences between mothers and fathers
- Primary caregiver may have more experience with the child
- Societal norms and expectations may influence mothers and fathers behaviors
- Gender stereotypes and expectations may affect parent-child interactions
- Previous work has examined parent-child interactions only in actual parents with their own children. Therefore, the unique impact of adult gender and child gender on interactions remains unknown.

The current study examines spontaneous language use during adult-child interactions between a non-parent adult and a toddler. Further, we examine the impact of gender-related experiences, interests, and perceptions on adult-child exchanges.

Participants

- Participants were 82 undergraduates enrolled in Intro to Psychology course (41 female) who interacted with a non-relative 15- to 17 month-old toddler (female).
- Dyads engaged in free-play for 15 minutes in a standardized playroom. The father of the toddler was present in the room at all times but pretended to read a book.

Word Category	Examples
Sounds	"hm", "ooh", "ahh", " <u>wooho</u> "
Number (excl. "one")	"zero", "four", "ten", "double"
Quantifier	"larger", "many", "least", "none"
Noun	"cow", "baby", "daddy", "car"
Verb	"play", "do", "can", "feel"
Name calling	"Sammy", "you", "Sam",
Space	"narrow", "up", "left", "inside"
Question	"what", "where", "who", "how"
Color	"red", "silver", "gold", "white"
Shape	"triangle", "square", "circle"
Mental	"think", "want", "like", "feel"
Praise	"yes", "cool", "wonder", "strong"
Self	"me", "I", "mine", "my"

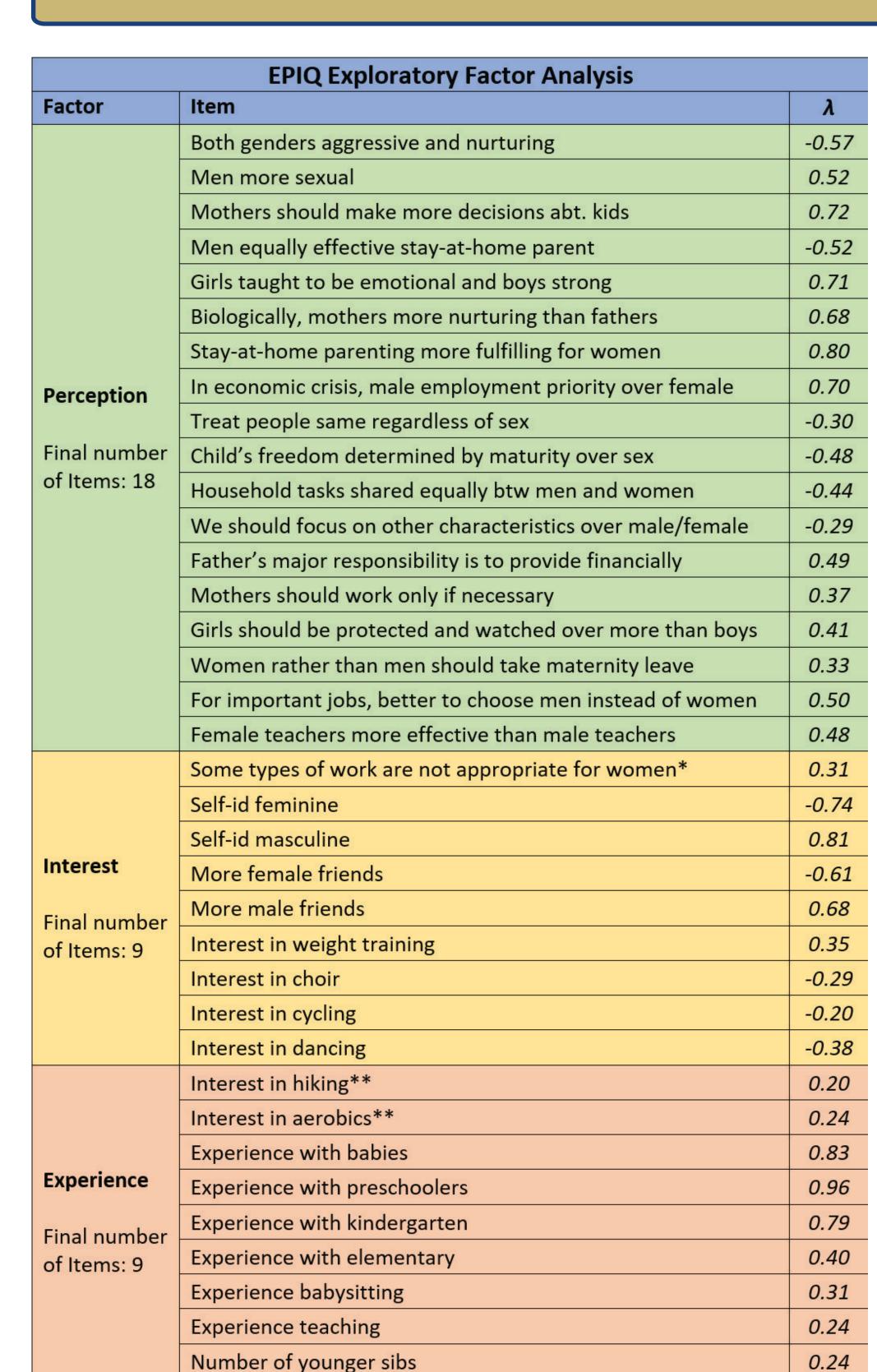
Note: Only results for highlighted categories are presented.



Measures & Manipulation

- Undergraduate interactions with the toddler were fully transcribed by trained coders.
- Extracting meaning, word counts and word categories
- Students completed the new Experiences, Perceptions, and Interests Questionnaire (EPIQ)
- Based on findings by Baber and Tucker (2006), and Leversen, Torsheim, and Samdal (2012).
- Validated on a separate sample of undergraduates
- Gender of the toddler was manipulated by dressing the child in pink or blue. The child was referred to as "Sammy".

Results

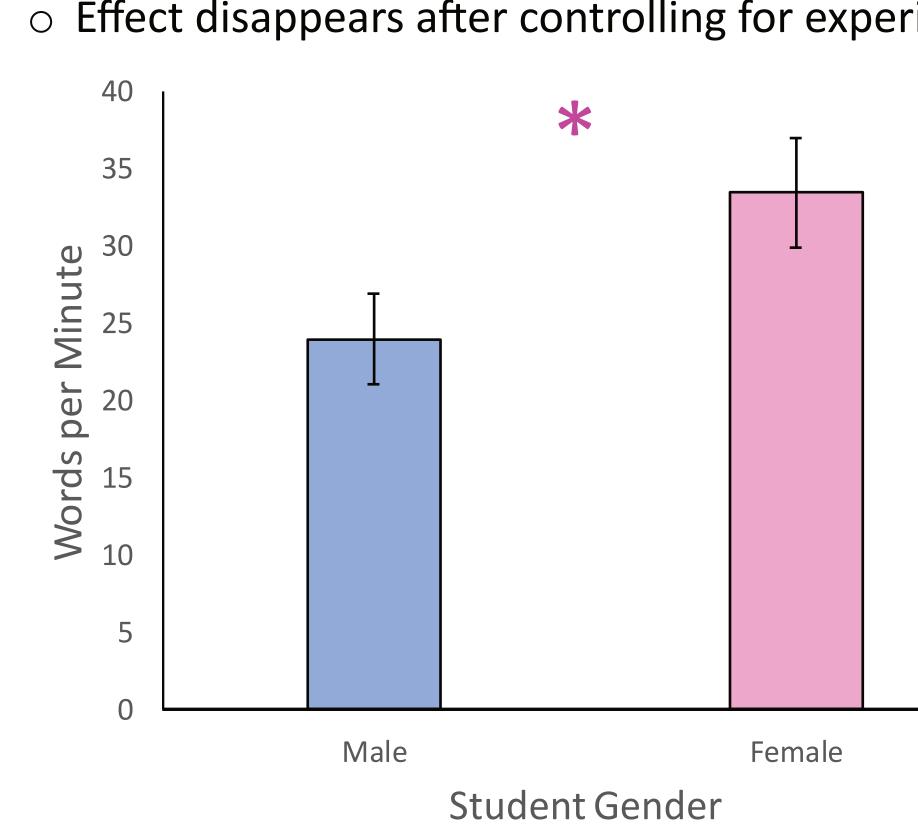


EPIQ Construction

- Original 44 items with three theoretical dimensions
- Factor analysis informs reduction to 36 items and three dimensions (see Table on the left)
 - *originally Perception dimension items ** originally Interest dimension items
- Continuous variable rather than binary gender Control for experiences, correlation analyses

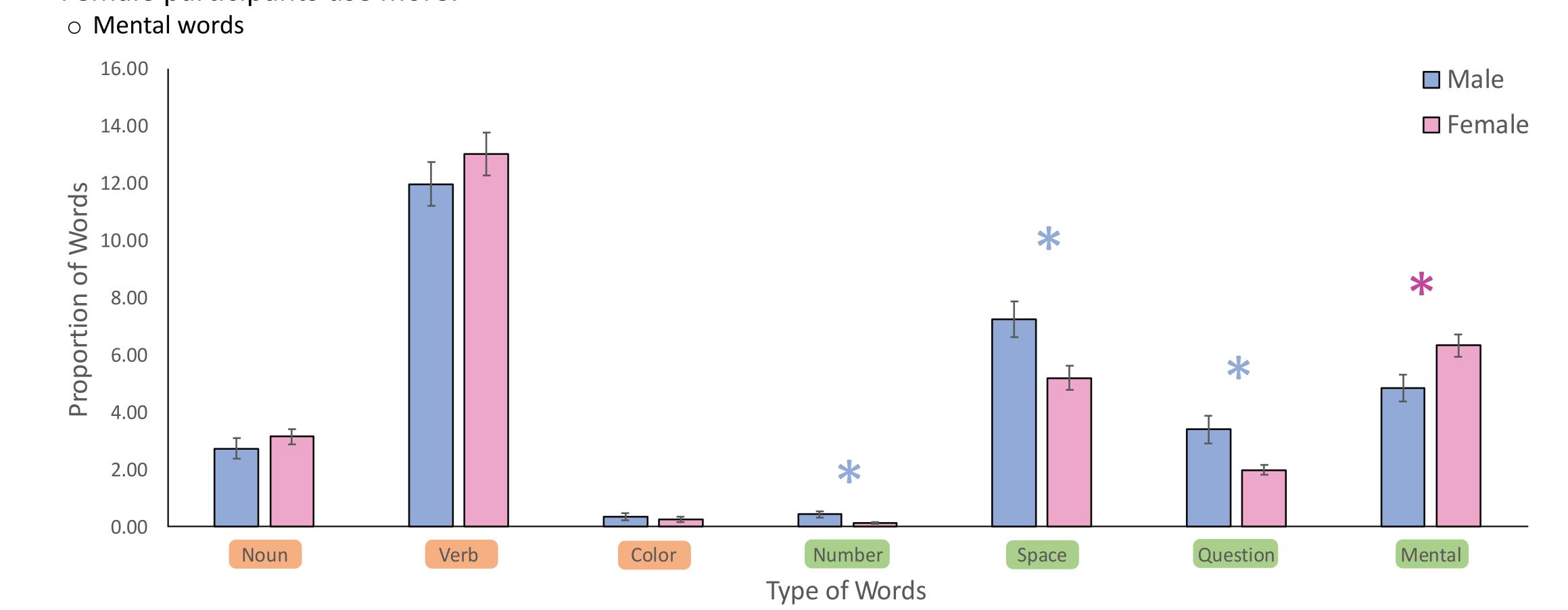
Communication Quantity

- Words per minute spoken by participants Significant effect of Student Gender
- Females talk more than males
- No effect of Baby Gender
- Effect disappears after controlling for experiences



Communication Quality

- Proportion of words used by category (including 10 different categories or language) MANCOVA reveals significant effect of Student Gender, but no effect of Baby Gender
- All analyses are controlling for participant's experiences with children
- Male participants use more:
- Number words, space words, and question words
- Female participants use more:



Male Participants

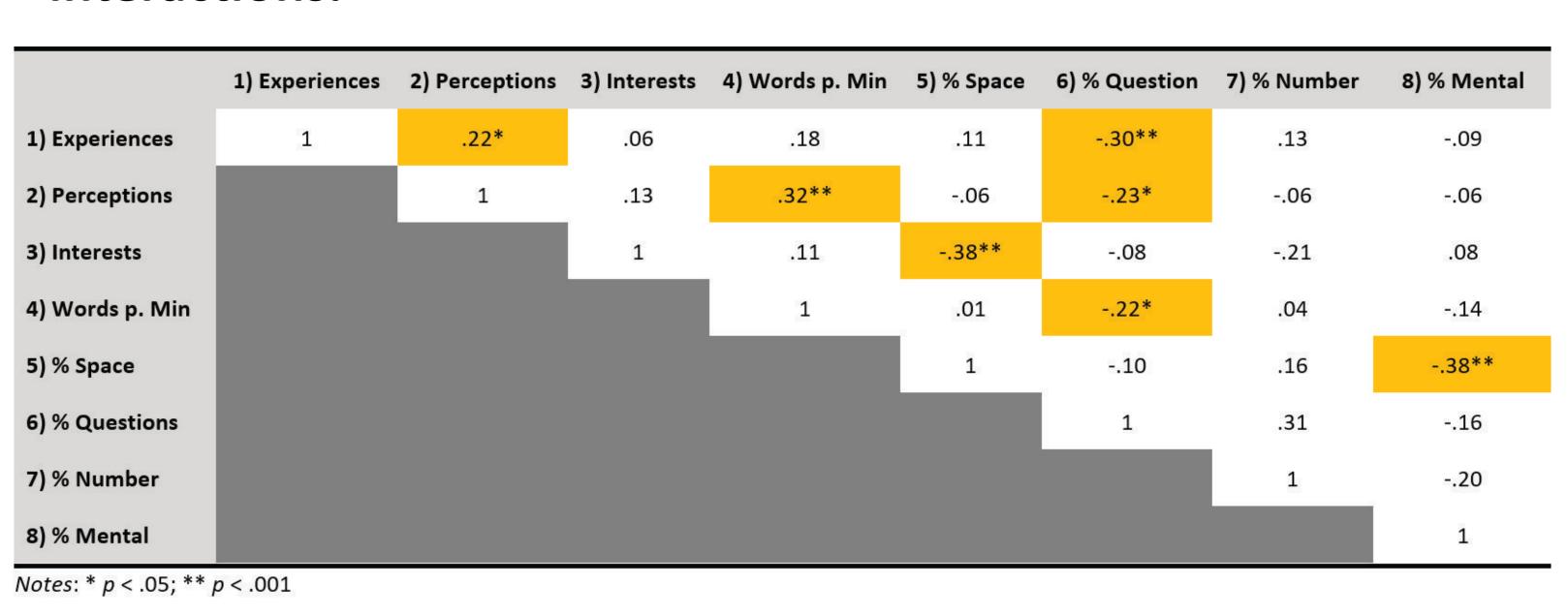


Female Participants



Correlations

- EPIQ dimensions correlate with participant's use of
- Question words
- Fewer questions asked with lower experience ratings
- Fewer questions asked with lower perception ratings
- Space words
- Fewer space words used with higher feminine interest ratings
- Overall words per minute used
- Fewer words produced with more gendered role perceptions
- Asking more questions correlates with producing fewer words Evidence for impact of gender-related factors on adult-child interactions.



Conclusions

- Child-directed language differs between male and female undergraduate students
- Experiences, Interests, and Perceptions explain some of the differences in communication quantity and quality between males and females
- Results suggest that differences between mothers and fathers are NOT due to day-to-day experiences with the child
- Rather, due to gender specific differences in interaction style
- Differences exist independent of parenting experiences or roles
- Males and females both offer important verbal stimulation that is likely to complement each other during a child's daily interactions.

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