When times are tough, parents favor daughters over sons

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In tough economic times, parents financially favor daughters over sons, according to researchers at the Carlson School of Management and Rutgers Business School. Their study, forthcoming in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, found participants preferred to enroll a daughter rather than a son in beneficial programs, preferred to give a U.S. Treasury bond to a daughter rather than a son, and bequeathed a greater share of their assets to female offspring in their will when they perceived economic conditions to be poor.

"Almost all parents say that they don't favor one of their children over another, but economic recessions subconsciously lead parents to prefer girls over boys," said Rutgers professor of marketing Kristina Durante, lead author of the study.

In one experiment, 629 participants read a news article that described the economy as either improving, getting worse, or neutral. They then were asked to make a will dividing their assets between an imaginary son and daughter as well as assign one to a beneficial program. Those led to believe tough economic times were ahead, allocated nearly 60 percent of their available resources to the girl compared to a nearly 50/50 split between the two children when economic conditions were viewed as either neutral or prosperous.

"These findings in humans align well with the behavior of other animals," adds Professor Vladas Griskevicius of the Carlson School. "When resources are scarce parents prefer females because they have a larger reproductive payoff. Almost every female child will produce some offspring, but many male children end up having zero offspring."

Another experiment in the paper explored the boundaries of age on resources allocation. As expected, the bias toward females was stronger as the children moved closer to reproductive age.

U.S. Spending Patterns Support Study's Findings

To bolster the findings in their experiments, the researchers also examined the relationship between U.S. Real GDP and retail spending on apparel for boys and girls between 1984 and 2011. They discovered that when the economy was struggling, the ratio of spending on girls versus boys increased 19.8 percent compared to when the economy was faring well.

"As the GDP decreased, relative spending on girls versus boys increased," said Associate Professor Joseph Redden of the Carlson

School.

Results Offer Lessons for Parents and Marketers

"Spending on Daughters Versus Sons in Economic Recessions" has implications for both parents and businesses. By being aware that they can unwittingly bias their spending toward specific children, parents can more carefully track specific spending to maintain equity.

"When we survey parents, it's very clear they want to treat their children equally," says Redden. "But if they're relying on feelings for how they're allocating resources, it's very likely this bias is seeping in, especially when times are tougher and they don't have money to do everything," added Redden.

For companies, recognizing the consumer bias towards girls in difficult economic times could allow them to better optimize manufacturing, sales, and marketing efforts.

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