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## *'It's a girl!' So what?*

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Is it time to replace that homily, "Sugar and spice and everything nice, that's what little girls are made of," with, "Litigation and divorce, and parental suffering, that's what little girls are made of"? The answer is a resounding "yes," at least according to the media attention given a recent study by American economists Gordon B. Dahl and Enrico Moretti.

The pair originally intended to investigate why the wage gap between men and women persists. Did it, they wondered, result from preferential treatment given boys from birth? So they dug through census figures reviewing divorce rates and came up with, "The Demand for Sons: Evidence from Divorce, Fertility and Shotgun Marriages in the U.S. and Around the World," published a few months ago.

The study doesn't answer the wage gap question. But it does reveal boys might provide marital ballast. Parents of one girl, it found, are 5.6% more likely to divorce than the parents of a boy; the likelihood of marital breakdown rises to 13.2% when a couple has four girls. They also discovered that divorced women with girls are less likely to remarry than divorced women with boys, which has been interpreted to mean daughters are a liability in the marriage market.

Additionally, it found parents of three girls are 4% more likely to try for another child than a couple with three boys. And that unmarried couples who find out their child is a boy are more likely to wed.

The online magazine *Slate* gave the study big play. "Oh, No: It's a Girl! Do daughters cause divorce?" asserted "All over the world, boys hold marriages together and girls break them up." On Sunday, *The New York Times*

took a similarly alarmist tone with its headline "It's a Girl! (Will the Economy Suffer?)"

But before the handwringers start comparing the U.S. to India or China, countries in which female child infanticide and sex-related abortions are tragically common, let's put the study in perspective.

Yes, we can read the numbers, which it should be noted are often no larger than statistical margins of error, to mean sons improve the quality of married life. But there are countless other ways to cast them. Could it be that mothers of boys are more likely to put up with miserable marriages because they believe their sons need a male role model? Or could fathers' tendencies to bond more readily with sons result in them being more devoted fathers and husbands?

Why not turn the findings around and ask: "Does a divorce cause girls? We know that X (girl) and Y (boy) sperm behave differently. Conception of boys is more likely to occur on the day of ovulation; girls are more likely to be conceived a couple of days before or after. When sperm is frozen, Y sperm are more likely to survive. Could it be that couples under strain – those whose marriages are most likely to end in divorce – experience chemical fluctuations that influence sperm formation? We don't know. Similarly, the finding that divorced mothers of girls are less likely to remarry could mean that mothers are more selective about the men they're willing to bring into their daughters' lives.

Indeed, if we want evidence that blue trumps pink, or "masculine" out-muscles "feminine," the data marshalled in the study are less compelling than a glance at prevailing social behaviour. The most liberated yummy-mummy would sooner swaddle her little boy in polyester than in pink, though there's no such stigma about a girl in blue. Consi-

der also that the trend for "strong" masculine names for girls such as Sydney, Alex, and Morgan doesn't extend to a revival of Leslie, Francis, and Clare for boys. Then there's the reflexive tendency to give children their father's surname; even married women who keep their maiden name and unmarried women routinely do it. Let's also consider whether Marcelle Ryan, the B.C. woman who successfully contested her parents' will recently, claiming that they discriminated against her from birth because she was a girl, would have been as sympathetic to the court had she been a man. Statistics, as malleable as PlayDoh, are insidious things. Accurate or not, they infiltrate their way into cultural mythology and form public opinion.

Recall that erroneous stat from the 1980s that women over age 40 are more likely to be killed by a terrorist than marry. It may be now truer than ever, but it remains a fallacy. Yet it continues to be circulated.

What's most troubling about the report's findings is not that such small numbers are being given such big play, but rather the spin they've received which suggests girls are a liability. Why not highlight the fact that the divorce rate for parents with girls has dropped from being 8% higher in the 1940s? Or that the 4% of parents with three girls who try for another child in the U.S. is miniscule next to more oppressive, male-centric societies? In Mexico, the number is closer to 9%; in Vietnam it's 18% and in China, before the one-child policy was imposed in 1982, it was 90%.

As for *The New York Times'* freighted concern as to whether the economy will suffer if "It's a Girl," the answer is obvious. Of course not. That mysterious wage gap, the original, now lost, focus of the study which sees women paid less for equal labour, will see to that.

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The article EM0310 reprinted above is used in Chapter 10 of the STAT 231 Course Materials