

# How wide is the gender empathy gap?

Rico Fischer

Jordan Holbrook

John Barry

*Male Psychology Network*

Contact [john.barry@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:john.barry@ucl.ac.uk)

# Gender Empathy Gap

- Described by **Collins** (2016)
- Seen in “...situations where we feel less empathy for men that we would for women in a similar situation”
  - Barry JA (2016). Can psychology bridge the gender empathy gap? *South West Review*, Winter 2016, 31–36
- An attribution bias (Gawronski, 2004).

# Male Gender Blindness

(Seager et al, 2014; Russ et al, 2015)

- Suicide (ONS, 2015)
- Domestic violence (Strauss, 2010)
- Workplace deaths (InsideMan, 2015)



**MIND THE GAP**

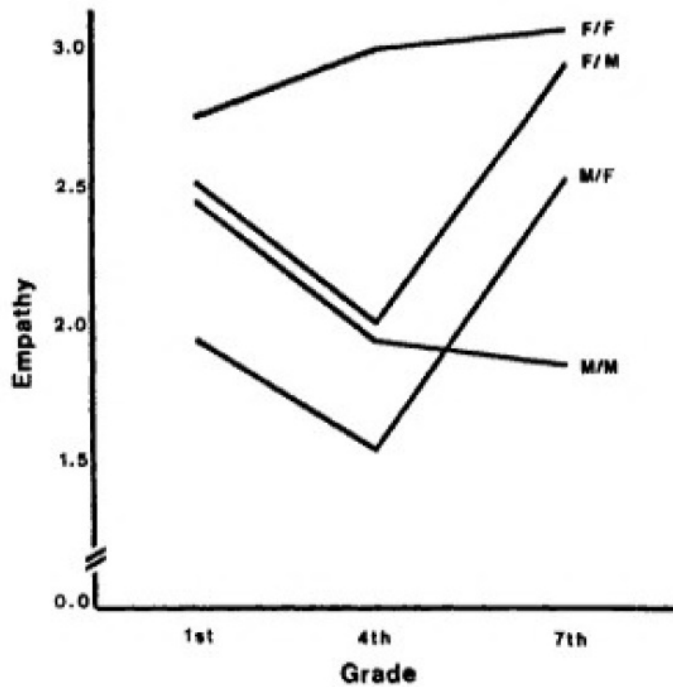
# Empathy

- It is a reliable research finding that women show more empathy than men do (e.g. [Batson et al., 1996](#); [Macaskill et al., 2002](#)).
- Empathy might be related to other factors too
  - Blame is less when situational factors are responsible rather than the person (Gawronski, 2004)
  - This may be especially in collectivist cultures (e.g. Choi et al, 1999).
  - Body focus affects mind perception, lesser moral agents but greater moral patients ([Gray et al, 2011](#)).
  - Empathy to pain modulated by fairness ([Singer et al, 2006](#)).

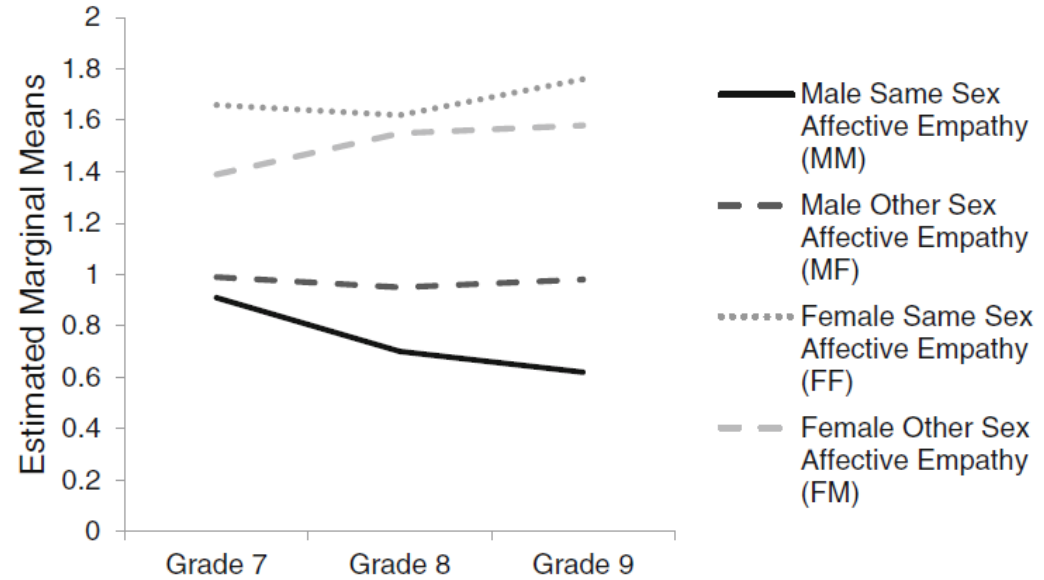
# Findings in children

- Both adolescent boys and girls produce more empathy towards a fictional woman compared to a fictional man (Stuijzand et al., 2016)
- Studies of children and adolescents have found similar (Bryant, 1982; Olweus and Endresen, 1998).
- To date, no research into empathy gap in adults

# Bryant, 1982



# Stuijtzand et al, 2016





# Men and Boys Maintain the Gap (Chivalry/Gynocentrism)



Jim Clark

--  
1w

Today, I operated on a little girl. She needed O-blood. We didn't have any, but her twin brother has O- blood. I explained to him that it was a matter of life and death. He sat quietly for a moment, and then said goodbye to his parents. I didn't think anything of it until after we took his blood and he asked, "So when will I die?" He thought he was giving his life for hers. Thankfully, they'll both be fine

12,133 likes • 837 comments





# Possible causes of gender empathy

## gap

- ‘Women are wonderful’ effect (Eagly & Mladinic, 1994)
  - ‘halo effect’ where women are seen as warm and nurturing
  - Contrast with stereotype of men as violent
- It’s normal for men and women to care more about women than men (Rudman & Goodwin, 2004)
  - Contra to *Social Identity Theory* (Tajfel and Turner, 1979)
- Male disposability (Farrell, 1993)
  - Men are more expendable because numbers of women are more important to birth rates than numbers of men
  - Evolutionary forces shape culture to ensure survival
- She more than he: gender bias supports the empathic nature of yawn contagion in *Homo sapiens* ([Norscia, Demuru and Palagi, 2016](#)). Also observed in Bonobos ([Demuru and Palagi, 2012](#)) – suggests bio influences. (Yawn contagion is influenced by emotional, not distal, proximity.)
- Pair Bonding, Paternal Investment, Size Sexual Dimorphism (& Pelvic Structure), Sexual Division of Labour, Alloparenting and Diet (helped facilitate altricial, fatter and big brained neonates).
- Sexual History and Experience ([Rudman and Goodwin, 2004](#))

# Method

- Cross-sectional online survey
- Participants randomly presented with 15 stories of either a man/boy in a difficult situation or woman/girl in the same situation
- Empathy was measured as
  - rating of the person not being to blame (empathy for person)
  - rating for the context not being to blame (less empathy for person)

# Emphysema

- A woman started coughing blood and was admitted to the emergency room. She was suffering from emphysema after 40 years of smoking cigarettes. She was ordered to stop smoking and was prescribed a medical inhaler.
- How much do you agree with the following statements? [Totally agree – Totally disagree]
- [Person]: If smoking caused her condition, then she should pay for the treatment.
- [Context]: More health promotion work is needed to help women stop smoking.

# Lacking friends

- A YouGov survey suggests that around 28% of teenage boys have no close friends they can turn to in a crisis.
- [Person]: If boys want friends it is up to them to go out and make some friends.
- [Context]: The government should create community outreach programs to get boys together so that they have friends.

# Burglary

- A man was rushing late for work one early morning and, as he ran out of the door, he forgot to lock it. In fact, when he tried slamming the door behind him when running out, it bounced slightly ajar. When he returned from work, he found he had been robbed.
- [Person]: He is at least in part to blame for the robbery.
- [Context]: More needs to be done for Community Watch programs.

# Homeless

- A homeless man almost froze to death outside a major department store and only recovered after a hospital treatment. The department store claimed that it did not allow rough sleeping outside their premises, and therefore denied responsibility for his suffering.
- [Person, reversed]: Department stores should allow homeless men to sleep outside of their premises if needed.
- [Context, reversed]: Homeless men should take more responsibility for where they sleep.

# Participants and analysis

- 2\*2 (Gender of Participant \* Gender of Character) between groups ANCOVA controlling for age
- 364 recruited online for small fee
- UK, nationally representative sample
  - 86% rejected as did survey too quickly (< 15 minutes)
- Final sample
  - 21 men & 30 women
  - mean (SD) age 41.1 (12.8), similar in men & women



# Preliminary findings

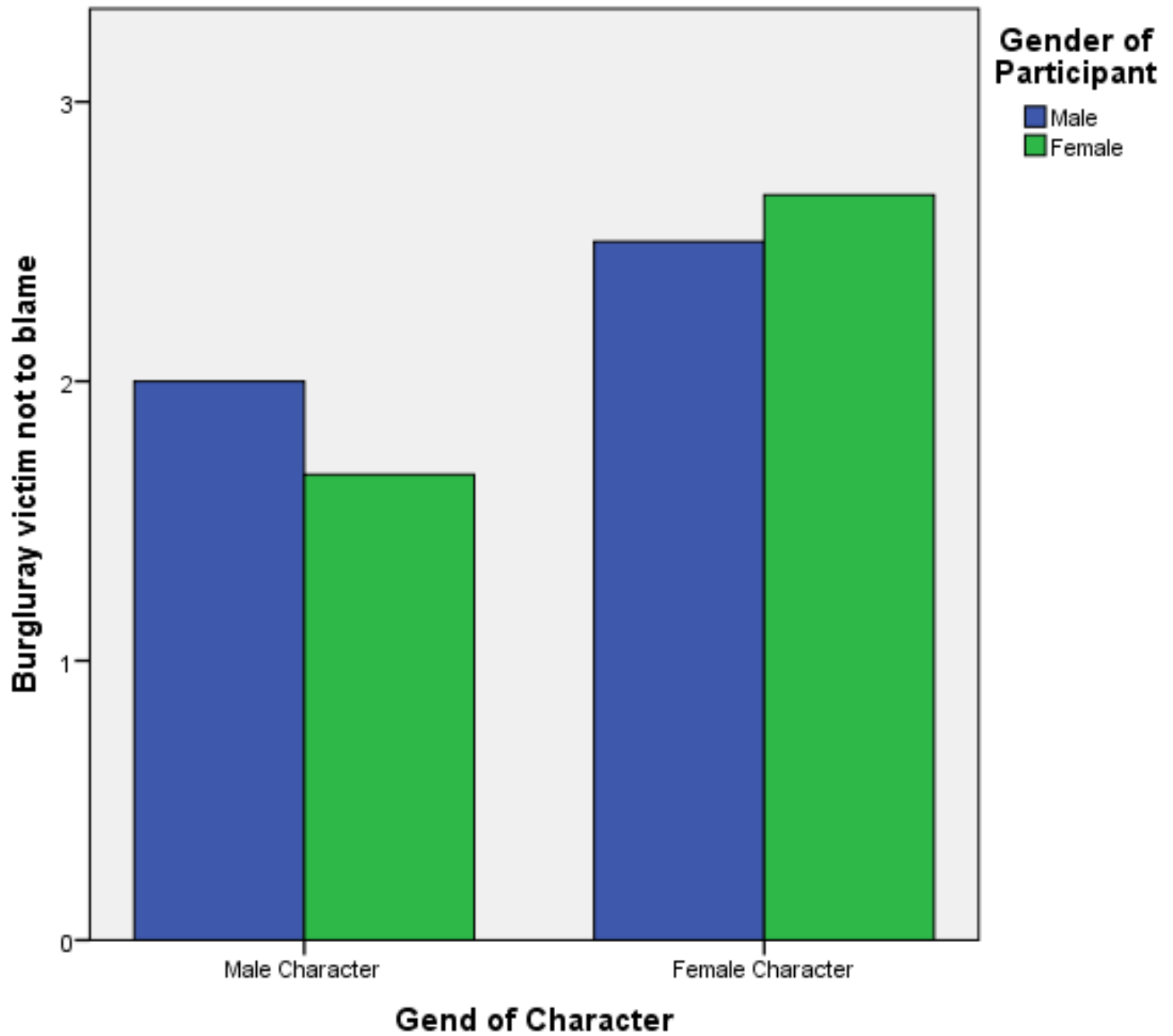
- Data just in – there are other variables to be assessed

# Gender and empathy

- Not taking the gender of the character into account, in 6 of 7 questions that were significant, women showed more empathy than men
  - Supports previous research

# Gender of Character

- Significantly more empathy for women
  - Burglary (person) ( $F=5.133$ ,  $p<.028$ )
  - Emphysema (context) ( $F=5.064$ ,  $p<.029$ )
  - Lacking friends (context) ( $F=5.072$ ,  $p<.029$ )
  - Homeless (person) ( $F=4.142$ ,  $p<.048$ )



# Interaction between *Gender of Participant* and *Gender of Character*

- Emphysema (context) ( $F=8.105$ ,  $p<.007$ )
  - Men thought the context less to blame when it was a man (4 vs 2.3)
  - women thought the context was less to blame when it was a woman (1.7 vs 1.9)
  - Thus both men and women thought their own gender was more to blame for emphysema

# Conclusions

- Some evidence for gender empathy gap against men
  - 4 of 30 questions were significantly more sympathetic to women
- Empathy possibly related to specific story
  - Topicality, realistic etc
- Larger replication needed
  - Difficulty in this study of participants excluded for speeding through the study carelessly