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Examining gender differences in parental cognitions towards personality traits in children: A comparative study

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Abstract

Parenting is undoubtedly a gendered activity because both parent and child gender is of essence. Beliefs, behaviors and structures are all organized by gender. Both Child characteristics and parental influences interact to consolidate gender differences in children. The present study was undertaken to assess gendered role attitude of parents towards children's personality traits. The study was based upon the sample of 120 nuclear families selected purposively from Udaipur city. 40 mothers and 40 fathers each were selected from families having their eldest child as preschooler, school aged and adolescent. Data was collected through a gendered expectations scale developed by the investigator and was standardized by calculating validity and Reliability of the scale. The findings of the study reveal that greater percentage of respondents in all the stages had androgynous or gender neutral expectations towards traits of their children however there was decline in androgyny or corresponding increase in traditionality as we progressed from preschool stage towards adolescence stage. Fathers were slightly more traditional than mothers however the difference was found to be non-significant for all the stages.

Keywords: Examining gender, parental cognitions, personality traits

Introduction

Children learn at a very early age what it means to be a boy or a girl in our society. Parent's constitute initial influences on development of their children's gender. Through a myriad of activities, opportunities, encouragements, discouragements, overt behaviors, covert suggestions, and various forms of guidance, children experience the process of gender role socialization. Gender-typed expectations may occur regarding personality traits (e.g., "boys are aggressive"), abilities (e.g. "girls are good at reading"), activities, and roles (e.g. "men are scientists") Ruble *et al.* (2006) [3]. Parents may convey gender related expectations with regard to the various subjects like parents tend to expect boys to do better than girls in science and math, despite a lack of actual gender difference in performance (Tenenbaum and Leaper, 2003) [4]. Parents may hold different beliefs about girls and boys in wide array of domains. As children grow and develop, the gender stereotypes they are exposed to at home are further reinforced by other elements in their environment and are thus perpetuated throughout childhood and on into adolescence.

These gender stereotypes become firmly entrenched beliefs and thus, are a part of the child's self concept. Gendered parenting influences family functioning and child well-being also there are various costs involved in the maintenance of gender role stereotypes; these costs include limiting opportunities for both boys and girls, ignoring talent, and perpetuating unfairness in our society. Gendered parenting can potentially hamper development of natural talents and abilities of girls and boys, as well as their educational and professional experiences and life opportunities in general. It may affect their ability to process emotion in healthy ways and their capacity to engage in equal and respectful relationships. Childhood gender differences pave the way for later adult gender differences in roles and status. The present study was undertaken to assess gender differences in parental attitudes towards children personality traits.

Material and method

Present study was conducted within the municipal limits of Udaipur city. The City was divided into four zones geographically i.e. North, South, East and West.

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From each zones two colonies were selected. The total sample for the study comprised of 120 urban nuclear families. 40 mothers and 40 fathers each were selected from three stages that are families with preschoolers, families with school aged children and families with adolescents. For the purpose of data collection Total of 200 preliminary samples were distributed personally to families selected from different zones, from which 182 were received back and 16 families were discarded as they did not fulfill the criteria for the sample selection. Thus the total eligible families were 166. Out of 166, 120 families were selected on the basis of convenience of the researchers to contact them and families assurance of cooperation in data collection.

Gender Role attitude Scale

Gender role attitude scale was constructed and developed by the investigator to assess the attitude of mothers and fathers towards masculine and feminine traits of their sons and daughters. Three broad categories of traits were selected social, emotional and aspirational and within each broad

category, significant traits were selected for which parental biasness for sons and daughters was considered to be maximum. Then for each particular trait positive and negative statements were formulated. The total number of items included under the scale was 78. Each statement had three alternatives namely agree, moderately agree and disagree. The Positive statements were assigned scores as 3, 2 and 1 for agree, moderately agree and disagree respectively and negative statements were assigned reverse scores. On the basis of scoring, three level criteria were formulated low, average and high which represented traditional, gender neutral and androgynous attitude of mothers and fathers towards their children. For the standardization of the scale, the scale was given to a panel of experts from various disciplines to evaluate the suitability and relevance of the items for assessment of gender role attitude. The reliability score calculated for the scale was 0.95 and Content validity of the scale was found to be 4.3.

Results and discussion

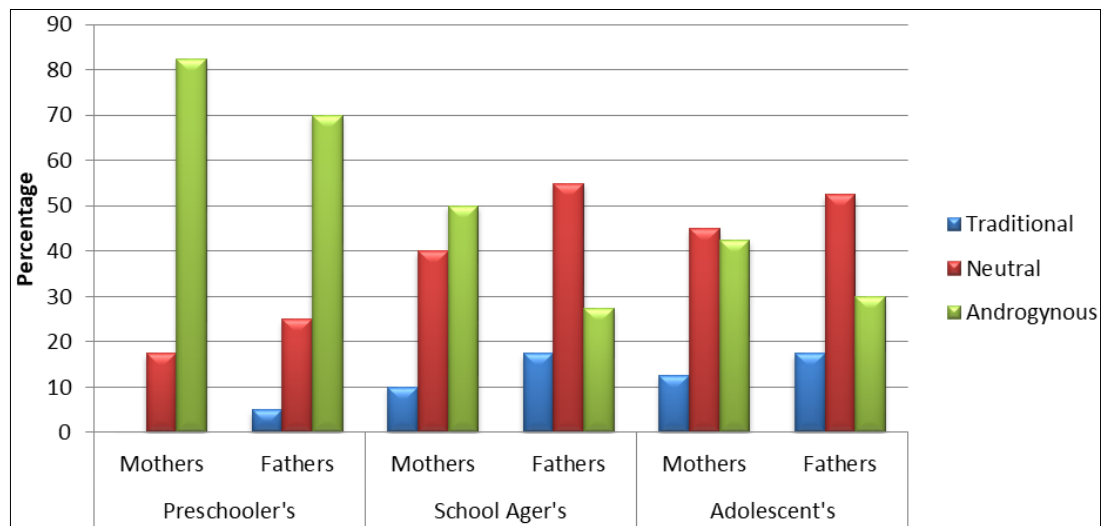


Fig 1: Percentage distribution of respondents for their gender role attitudes towards children.

Data presented in fig1. depicts percentage distribution of respondents for their gender role attitudes towards children. Majority of respondents that is mothers and fathers in all the three stages (Preschool, school age and adolescence) scored high on gender role attitude scale and thus were having androgynous attitude towards their children. Data regarding preschooler's mothers and fathers revealed that a high percentage of preschooler's mothers that is 82.5 percent showed androgynous attitude and 17.5 percent were gender neutral. None of the preschooler's mothers were found to be traditional. Similarly 70 percent of preschooler's fathers were androgynous. As far as school ager's mothers and fathers were concerned half of the school ager's mothers were androgynous, 40 percent were gender neutral and only a few percentage that is 10 percent were traditional. Whereas a greater percentage of school ager's fathers were found to be gender neutral that is 55 percent. 17.5 percent were having traditional attitude and 22.5 percent had androgynous attitude towards their children. For Adolescent's mothers it was observed that almost equal percentages of mothers were having androgynous and

gender neutral attitude that is 42.5 percent and 45 percent respectively. Only 12.5 percent mothers were traditional. Data regarding adolescent's fathers reveal that greater percentage of them had gender neutral nature that is 52.5 percent. 30 percent were having androgynous attitude and remaining 17.5 percent were traditional in their attitude regarding children.

Thus on the basis of these figures it can be concluded that change has been observed in parental attitudes towards children as parents now have become more flexible and have egalitarian attitudes towards their sons and daughters. The findings of the study are in line with study undertaken by Begum *et al.* (2014) ^[1] which by using experimental techniques identified parental attitudes towards different-gendered children in rural Bangladesh. Sample for the study comprised of those households that had at least two school-age children (6–18 years) of different genders. The results suggested that there was no systematic inherent bias in parental attitudes toward children of a specific gender, neither parent is systematically biased and there were no significant differences in parent's behavior.

Table 1: Comparison of mothers and fathers for their gender role attitude towards children. n=240

Sub Stages	Mothers		Fathers		Z Value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Preschooler's	203.1	21.04	192.2	27.63	1.97*
School Ager's	179.47	35.55	164.87	34.43	1.86NS
Adolescent's	174.5	35.89	163.12	35.57	1.45NS

NS- Non Significant at 5% level of significance

* - Significant at 5% level of significance

Findings presented in table 1 reveal that there was overall significant difference in gender role attitude of preschooler's mothers and fathers with regards to the traits present in their sons and daughters. The results so obtained is in line with the study conducted by Kane (2006) ^[2] who interviewed 42 parents of preschool aged children (3 to 5 years) to explore their view of children's gendered behaviour and attributes. Findings indicated that the fathers were more likely to support clearly defined gender roles for boys and girls than were the mothers, who tended to be more flexible with their concepts of appropriate behaviour for boys and girls. Fathers were also more conscious of maintaining stricter gender boundaries for their sons than for their daughters. No significant difference was observed in gender role attitude of school ager's mothers and fathers and between adolescent's mothers and fathers.

Conclusion

The findings of the study reveal that majority of parents had androgynous or gender neutral attitude, indicating a shift from traditional rigid gender stereotypes towards more egalitarian attitude. Although, parents may not have gendered parenting goals but they may be victims of unconscious gender stereotypes and may implicitly reinforce gender stereotypes through various behaviors and practices. Also it was observed that some parents still have traditional mindset and that their gendered attitudes and expectations becomes more prominent as we move from childhood to adolescence. It can be also drawn from the study that Fathers compared to mothers are more traditional and rigid. Thus it becomes imperative to educate parents about the negative implications of gendered parenting on child well being, aware them of the ways they may unintentionally and subtly reinforce gender stereotypes and help them portray gender equality in their own relations.

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