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Parental expectations towards children's personality traits: A peep through gender lens

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Abstract

Gender is one of the earliest social category a child becomes aware of and parents are the primary and most influential agents when it comes to gender socialization. The present study was undertaken to assess gendered expectations of parents towards children. 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 androgynuity or corresponding increase in traditionality as we progressed from preschool stage to adolescent stage. Fathers were slightly more traditional than mothers however the difference was found to be non significant for all the stages.

Keywords: gender, adolescent, androgynuity, gender lens

Introduction

The way we are, behave and think is the final product of socialisation. Since the moment we are born, we are being moulded into the being the society wants us to be. Through socialisation we also learn what is appropriate and improper for both genders. No human trait is so emphasized as gender. We are deluged, even as infants, with "Oh, you're a big boy" or "you are such a pretty little girl". Parents are children's first and primary source of information and learning and the most influential when it comes to gender socialization. They are the ones who provide children the very first lesson about gender. Through a myriad of activities, opportunities, encouragements, discouragements, overt behaviors, covert suggestions, and various forms of guidance parents may inculcate gender related values in children.

From the time their children are babies, parents treat sons and daughters differently, dressing infants in gender specific colors, giving gender differentiated toys, and expecting different behavior from boys and girls Thorne (1993) [8]. One study indicates that parents have differential expectations of sons and daughters as early as 24 hours after birth Rubin *et al.* (1974) [5].

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) [6]. 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) [7]. Parents may hold different beliefs about girls and boys in wide array of domains. Mothers of eleven months old underestimate girl's motor skills and overestimate boys motor skills even when objective tests show no gender differences in children's motor performance Emily *et al.* (2000) [2]. Also parents portray different role models for their children shaping children's experiences of what it means to be a man or woman.

Despite of the fact that females and males are biologically and psychologically more similar than different, unfortunately gendered socialization by parents is creating a huge rift between boys and girls. 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

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their capacity to engage in equal and respectful relationships. Children's self-perception of their strengths in various domains such as physical appearance, academics and athletics will be altered by gender biased parental attitudes thereby affecting their global sense of worth. During the past decade several changes has been witnessed in the landscape of urban Indian families. Amidst all those changes has there been any change in the notion of gendered parenting is the question of immense importance. Thus the present study was undertaken with the objective of assessing gendered expectation of parents towards children during expanding stage of family life cycle.

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. 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 of 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.

Results and Discussion

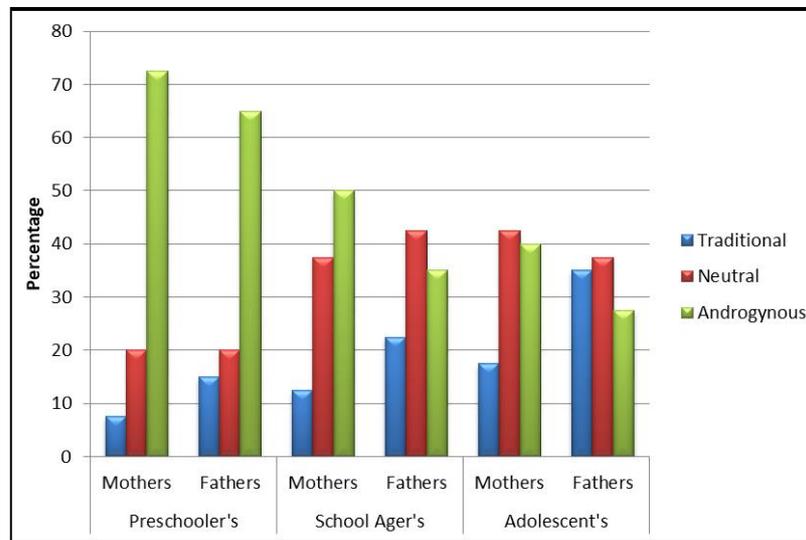


Fig 1: Percentage distribution of respondents for their gendered expectations towards children in expanding stage of family life cycle.

Data presented in Fig 1. Reveals that majority of mothers and fathers in all the stages (Preschooler's, school ager's and adolescent's) held androgynous and gender neutral expectations from their sons and daughters. Amongst preschooler's mothers more than half that is 72.5 per cent were having androgynous expectations from their children. Similarly 65 per cent of preschool fathers were androgynous. Data regarding school ager's mothers reveal that half of them that is 50 per cent were androgynous, 37.5 per cent neutral and 12.5 per cent were traditional in their expectations. As far as school ager's fathers were concerned it was seen that 35 per cent were androgynous, 42.5 per cent neutral and 22.5 per

Gendered Expectations Scale

In order to assess the expectations of mothers and fathers towards their sons and daughters, a scale was developed by an investigator and was standardized by calculating validity and Reliability of the scale. Three broad categories of traits were selected social, emotional and aspirational and within each broad category, significant traits were selected for which parental gendered expectations for sons and daughters was considered to be maximum. Then for each particular trait positive and negative statements were formulated. Total number of statements under social, emotional and aspirational traits was 38, 16 and 27 respectively. Thus the total number of items included under the scale was 81. For each statement there were five suitable alternatives Strongly agree, moderately agree, undecided, moderately disagree, strongly disagree. The Positive statements are assigned scores as 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 for strongly agree, moderately agree, undecided, moderately disagree, strongly disagree while the negative statements are assigned reverse scores. As the scale has total 81 items thus maximum score is 405 and minimum score is 81. This range is divided into three equal categories to obtain high, medium and low scores on gendered expectations scale. These scores further indicate traditional, neutral and androgynous nature of parents with regard to their expectations with 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 perception of family well-being by adults families. The reliability of the scale was found to be 0.94 and validity was 4.1.

cent were traditional in their expectations from sons and daughters. Almost equal percentages of adolescent's mothers had androgynous and gender neutral expectations that is 40 per cent and 42.5 per cent respectively. Only 17.5 per cent adolescent's mothers were traditional in their expectations from children. Regarding adolescent's fathers it can be concluded that greater percentages of them were gender neutral and traditional in their expectations that is 37.5 per cent and 35 per cent respectively. Only 27.5 per cent of adolescent's fathers had androgynous expectations from their sons and daughters.

Thus it can be concluded that majority of mothers and fathers

belonging different stages had androgynous and gender neutral nature of expectations towards their children this may be attributed to the fact that urban families have witnessed drastic changes during the past century. The traditional two parent heterosexual family with father serving as provider and mother as homemaker is no longer the norm, there has been tremendous influx of women into the work force due to rise in educational status and consequently the traditional gender role boundaries have converged. Men are equally sharing household and parenting responsibilities while women are adopting instrumental role. Because of these changes, changes in the attitudes and expectations of parents towards their sons and daughters can be witnessed.

Another trend which could be observed from the fig 1 is that fathers in all the stages were slightly more traditional in their expectations regarding traits possessed by sons and daughters when compared to mothers. Although the portrait of modern father is changing and fathers today are equally involved in child care and other household responsibilities but when it comes to parenting sons and daughters, fathers still are more traditional in their attitude and expectations from children when compared to mothers. This is supported by study conducted by Mc Hale *et al.* (2003) ^[3] which revealed that fathers tend to be more rigid than mothers in encouraging gender-typed play (especially in sons).

Table 1: Comparison of mothers and fathers for their gendered expectations towards children. n=240

Sub Stages	Mothers		Fathers		Z Value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Preschooler's	339.25	77.54	312.5	86.66	1.29 NS
School Ager's	292.12	77.53	264.45	82.17	1.49 NS
Adolescent's	281.4	79.58	250.65	82.41	1.69 NS

NS- Non Significant at 5% and 1% level of significance

Table 1. depicts comparative analysis of mothers and fathers for their gendered expectations and as it can be observed from the table that no significant difference was observed between the mean scores obtained by mothers and fathers in all the three stages (Preschool, School age, Adolescence). The results reveal that the majority of parents are androgynous or gender neutral in their expectations from sons and daughters. However, there is decline in androgyny or increase in traditionality as we move from preschool stage to adolescence stage this may be attributed greater pressure faced by adolescents to conform to the societal gender norms due to onset of puberty accompanied by various physical and psychological changes. Another point which could be highlighted here is parents may also inadvertently or subtly reinforce gender stereotypes by differentially treating sons and daughters and this may be particularly predominant during preschool years. During preschool years parents though implicit practices like activities, toys and language may unconsciously encourage gender stereotypes among children. The survey showed that parents are still stereotypic regarding some of the emotional traits like gentle, shyness, aggressive and excited and regarding some of the social traits like sense of responsibility, nurturance and dominance. Furthermore, more mothers were found to be androgynous than fathers. The findings may be in line with the observational research that has taught us that explicit messages to children (e.g., dolls are for girls) are rare in societies that value gender equality implying that gender stereotypes are mostly implicit and unconscious Nosek *et al.* (2002) ^[4]. When gender egalitarianism is dominant in a society, parents are reluctant to report that they have gender-

stereotypical ideas because they think that such ideas would not be accepted Axin *et al.* (2011) ^[1].

Conclusion

The findings of the study reveal that majority of parents had androgynous or gender neutral expectations towards traits of children. This indicates 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. 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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