


**Research Article**

## Role of Parents in the Gender Role Identity Formation of Offspring: An Exploratory Study

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### Abstract

Gender role identity tends to shape an individual's self-concept, playing a significant role in shaping their behaviour and interpersonal relationship patterns across different societies, races, and ethnicities. This study explores the relationship between perceived parenting styles (authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive for both parents) and gender role identity in young adults, and also the pattern of gender role identity of parents and their offspring. The sample consisted of 100 young adults ( $M=20.60$ ,  $SD=1.98$ ) and both of their parents (father and mother). Both the young adults and their parents responded to the Bem Sex-Role Inventory, whereas only young adults responded to the Parental Authority Questionnaire. Descriptive statistics showed that out of 100 young adults, 38% identified as androgynous, followed by feminine (29%), masculine (12%), and undifferentiated (21%). 54% of male young adults rated themselves as androgynous, whereas 46% of females identified as feminine. A considerable proportion of the parents reported themselves as androgynous (both 48%). A significant correlation was found between permissive parenting style in mothers and undifferentiated gender role identity in young adults ( $r= 0.75$ ,  $p= 8.1e-05$ ). A positive, moderately significant correlation was also found between fathers' permissive parenting style and masculinity in young adults ( $r= 0.83$ ,  $p= 0.00093$ ). This information will help us understand parents' role in gender identity formation and may also help us formulate management plans in terms of the parent-child relationship and their gender role identity.

**Keywords:** Gender Role Identity; Parenting Styles; Young Adults; Undifferentiated Gender Role

### Introduction

Gender role identity is an important aspect of an individual's self-concept. It plays a significant role in shaping the behaviour and interpersonal relationship patterns of men and women across different societies, races, and ethnicities. The World Health Organization defines gender roles as "socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women". Masculinity and femininity, the two important dimensions within gender roles, were traditionally considered as two opposite ends of a single continuum [1]. However, Dr. Sandra Bem's pioneering works on gender roles and gender discrimination, redefined these concepts, where she put forth the concept of psychological androgyny. Bem [1] defined androgynous individuals as having both instrumental and expressive traits [1]. These individuals do not process information based on their gender schema [2], and can demonstrate a range of situationally

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appropriate behaviours. In contrast, sex-typed individuals, that is, those who are either solely feminine or masculine, tend to have gender-polarized thinking, which is often found to reinforce the gender inequality between men and women [3]. Adding to this, past research indicates, that compared to sex-typed individuals, androgynous people are better adjusted [4] and, thus, androgyny can be thought of as "a more human standard of psychological health" [1].

Gender roles, being a social construct, are interwoven with and influenced by several aspects of our society- media, peer groups, culture, and religion, which contribute significantly to its formation. Perhaps the most important influence is from parents and their style of parenting. Parenting styles may vary in the degree of parental warmth and control that is being displayed in the relationship, which creates an emotional climate in which the child is raised [5]. In authoritative parenting, parents display warmth and are moderate in control, and they raise children who report higher self-esteem. Authoritarian parents show little or no warmth and are high on control, whereas permissive parenting is characterized by high warmth but low in control and discipline [6]. In any typical household, children are encouraged by their parents to adhere to the gender roles appropriated by society. Parents, through instructions, stories, and gendered toys, socialize their children on what are the acceptable and improper behaviours of their gender.

Studies on gender are a relatively new and emerging field. Going through the literature, we found that there are very few studies regarding how parenting styles are related to gender role identity formation. Thus, extensive research is required in this area. Much of the focus was on parents' androgyny and authoritative parenting style. In a study conducted by Baumrind [7], it was found that androgynous parents are more likely to use an authoritative style of parenting than those parents who report being masculine or feminine [7]. Therefore, it can be considered that parents using an authoritative parenting style may have personality characteristics that can be viewed as the androgynous gender role, and their children may emulate these characteristics in their behaviour through the process of modeling [8]. Similar findings were also reported by Spence and Helmreich in 1978 [9]; parents who were more involved with their children and were more encouraging, both of which characterize the authoritative parenting style, are more likely to have children who are androgynous [10]. Thus, through gender socialization, the children internalize the gender rules of their parents and integrate them into their self-concept [11].

The present study aims to expand our understanding of the different parenting styles and their influence on young adults' gender role identity. The study also explores the pattern of gender role identity across two generations for a comparative analysis of two consecutive generations.

## Methodology

The proposal of the study was submitted to the Department of Applied Psychology, The Neotia University for consideration and approval. On receiving the approval, the participants required for the study were approached. The participants were young adults (18-25 years;  $M=20.60$ ,  $SD=1.98$ ) from different universities and colleges in Kolkata, as well as both of their parents.

First, the names and contact information of the young adults were collected from the student database and the sports and cultural clubs of different schools and universities. Around 250 young adults were selected. They were then approached via personal phone calls and emails and were informed about the study. The young adults who agreed to participate were further requested to ask their parents to take part in the study. Only those participants have been considered who met the inclusion and exclusion criteria and whose parents were also willing to participate. Following this, a meeting was organized by the researcher with the young adult and their parents. The study's purpose was explained to them, and their consent was taken. The final sample size was 100 young adults (50 males, 50 females) and their parents.

The gender role identities of the young adults and their parents were assessed by the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI, 1981). The young adults also responded to the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ, 1991) which assessed the young adults' perception of their parents' parenting style.

### ***Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria***

#### **Inclusion criteria:**

- a) Young adults between 18 to 25 years
- b) Living with parents since birth
- c) Both parents are present, and both parents have participated in child rearing since birth

#### **Exclusion criteria:**

- a) Participants are not suffering from any major, acute, or terminal illness and have no major psychiatric or neurological conditions
- b) People who identify with the LGBTQ spectrum, as would have confounded the data

### ***Tools***

Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ): Developed by Buri in 1991 [12], the Parental Authority Questionnaire is a 30-item self-report questionnaire that assesses an individual's perceptions of parental authority across three dimensions: permissive, authoritative, and authoritarian. The questionnaire reported test-retest reliabilities of 0.77-0.92 and Cronbach alpha values of 0.74-0.87 across the six scales [12]. The PAQ is thus a reliable tool for identifying the parenting styles used by the parents who tend to have a significant impact on children's overall development and well-being [13].

Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI): BSRI is a 60-item self-report inventory developed by Sandra Bem. It measures an individual's degree of masculinity, femininity, and androgyny. The measure reports high test-retest reliability (Masculinity  $r = .90$ ; Femininity  $r = .90$ ; Androgyny  $r = .93$ ) and a coefficient alpha value of 0.85 [1]. BSRI has been used in a wide range of research including studies on gender stereotypes [14], and to categorize individuals as Masculine or Feminine [8,15,16] and further distinguish such individuals from those categorized as Androgynous [17].

### Statistical Methods

All statistical analysis was performed using the R statistical tool. Pearson correlation analysis was performed to evaluate the relationship between the parenting style and the gender role identity of the child. The ggscatter function from the ggpubR package [18] was used to visualize the correlation plot. Other visualizations were performed using ggplot2 [19].

### Results

A pattern of gender role identity across two generations was obtained. The Mean age of the young adults was 21 years with an SD of 2 years. In the case of parents, the mean age and SD of the mothers were 47 years (SD: 5.3), and the fathers' mean age was 54 years (SD: 5.3). Descriptive statistics for the four gender role identity groups were calculated. As seen in Table 1, out of 100 young adults, 38 identified as androgynous, 29 identified as feminine, 12 identified as masculine, and 21 identified as undifferentiated. On categorizing the young adults according to their gender, it can be observed that most of the male young adults identified as androgynous whereas, a large proportion of female young adults identified as feminine.

Looking at parents' gender role identity patterns, it can be seen that a majority of both mothers and fathers reported as androgynous (Table 2). A considerable proportion of both parents also reported being sex-typed, among which 27 mothers reported as feminine and 24 fathers reported as masculine.

**Table 1:** The different categories of gender role identity in male and female young adults.

Gender Role	Gender of Young Adults			
	Males		Females	
	n	%	n	%
Androgynous	27	54%	11	22%
Feminine	6	12%	23	46%
Masculine	7	14%	5	10%
Undifferentiated	10	20%	11	22%
Total	50	100%	50	100%

**Table 2:** The different categories of gender role identity in mothers and fathers.

Parents		Gender Role Identity				Total
		Androgynous	Feminine	Masculine	Undifferentiated	
Mother	n	48	27	4	21	100
Father	n	48	10	24	18	100

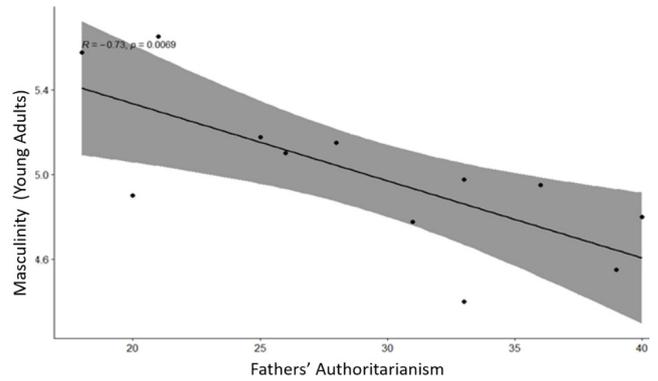
**Table 3:** Demographic overview of the gender role identity of mothers and fathers within each age range.

Age Range	Number of Mothers within each age range	Androgynous	Masculine	Feminine	Undifferentiated
35-39	9	3	0	3	3
40-44	15	8	0	5	2
45-49	50	24	3	13	10
50-54	18	10	0	4	4
55-59	5	3	0	1	1
60-64	3	0	1	1	1
Total	100				
Age Range	Number of Fathers within each age range	Androgynous	Masculine	Feminine	Undifferentiated
40-44	5	1	1	0	3
45-49	13	8	4	0	1
50-54	41	18	10	7	6
55-59	27	16	4	2	5
60-64	11	4	4	1	2
65-69	3	1	1	0	1
Total	100				

Table 3 is a demographic overview of the number of mothers and fathers in each age range and the most prominent gender role identity of that corresponding age range. It can be seen most of the mothers and fathers are around the age range of 45-49 years and 50-54 years respectively. Adding to this majority of the mothers within the age group 45-49 years report themselves as androgynous while fathers reporting themselves as androgynous fall in the age range of 50-59 years.

A correlation between the perceived parenting styles of the parents and the young adult's gender role identity was done and the scores are plotted on a scatterplot. Correlations between scores of mothers' perceived parenting style and gender role identity of young adults revealed a positive significant correlation between mothers' permissiveness and undifferentiated gender role identity in the young adults ( $R=0.75, p=8.1e^{-05}$ ) (Figure 1).

Similarly, on correlating fathers' permissive parenting styles with the gender role identity of the young adults, a significant correlation was obtained between fathers' permissive parenting style and masculinity in young adults ( $r=0.83, p=0.00093$ ) (Figure 2). In addition to this, a negative, significant correlation between the authoritarian parenting style of fathers and masculinity in young adults was observed



**Figure 3:** Scatterplot showing a negative correlation between fathers' authoritarian parenting style and masculine gender role identity of young adults.

( $r=-0.73, p=0.0069$ ) (Figure 3). This shows that masculine young adults did not perceive their fathers to be authoritarian.

No significant differences are found between the rest of the parenting styles and gender role identities.

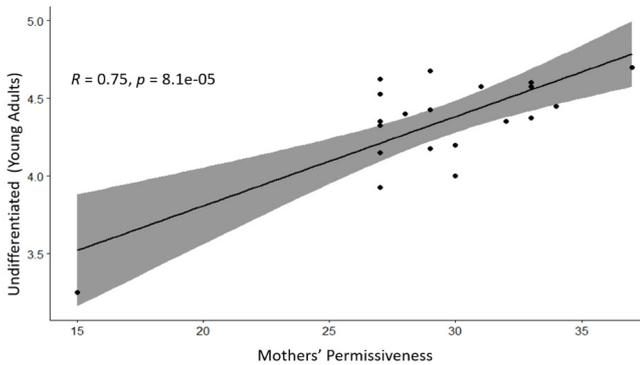
Next, we evaluated the gender role identity pattern in parents and their offspring. It can be observed that a larger proportion of masculine young adults' mothers are androgynous (40%), followed by undifferentiated (25%). In the case of feminine young adults, most of their mothers (50% of total feminine young adults' mothers) are feminine. A large proportion of androgynous young adults' mothers are also androgynous (80%), and for those young adults who reported as undifferentiated, the majority of their mothers are undifferentiated (60%) (Figure 4).

It is also seen in Figure 5, that masculine young adults have fathers who are androgynous (40%) and masculine (40%). This pattern can also be seen in feminine young adults, who have masculine (30%), and androgynous fathers (30%). Young adults who are androgynous have a large proportion of fathers who are androgynous (80%). And lastly, most of the undifferentiated young adults' fathers are also undifferentiated (40%), followed by masculine (35%) and then androgynous (30%).

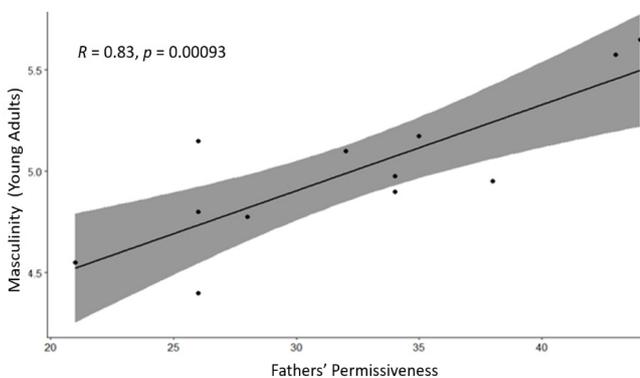
### Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the relationship between perceived parenting style and the gender role identity of young adults. Additionally, the study also tried to unravel the gender role identity of the parents to see the pattern of gender role identity across the two generations. The study was a cross-sectional one, conducted on 100 young adults and their parents who consented to participate in the study. Most of the young adults were graduate students from different colleges and universities in India.

In terms of their gender role identity, the majority of male young adults were found to belong to the category of



**Figure 1:** Scatterplot showing a positive correlation between mothers' permissive parenting style and undifferentiated gender role identity of young adults.



**Figure 2:** Scatterplot showing a positive correlation between fathers' permissive parenting style and masculine gender role identity of young adults.

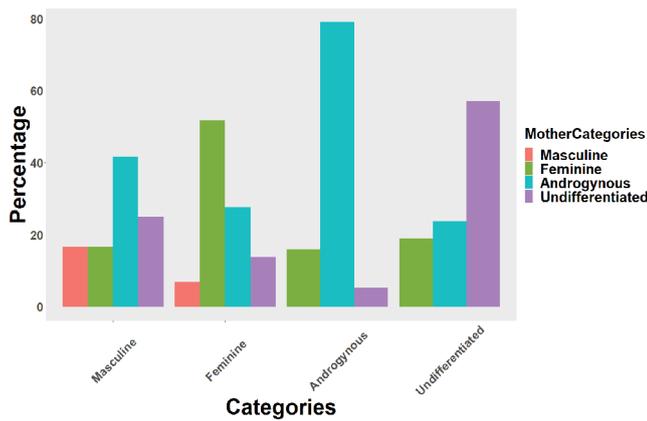


Figure 4: Gender role identity patterns in mothers and young adults.

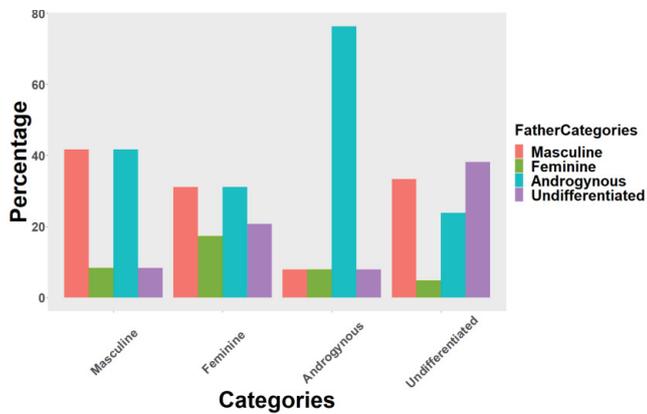


Figure 5: Gender role identity patterns in fathers and young adults.

Androgynous (54%), followed by Undifferentiated (20%). On the other hand, a greater percentage of young adult females were found to be feminine (46%), followed by Androgynous and undifferentiated (both being 22%). Androgynous gender role encompasses both masculine and feminine patterns of behaviour and is thus less stereotyped towards gender. As Datan [20] proposed, such individuals may have an adaptive advantage over solely masculine or feminine individuals. This variation in gender role identity between males and females may reflect that the males are more adaptive and adhere to a more flexible pattern of gender role identity.

On the other hand, females showed a greater prevalence of feminine traits, indicating that females had a greater interest in adhering to sex-typed gender roles. This might result from cultural affirmation for females to adhere to sex-type gender roles for approval, specifically in the Indian culture. Masculine traits are found to be less prominent in young adults with only 7 males and 5 females rating themselves as masculine. The Bem Sex Role Inventory defines masculinity as being self-reliant, competitive, aggressive, and having leadership abilities. These masculine qualities, however, were not seen to be favoured by young adults.

Moreover, interestingly, for both mothers and fathers,

androgyny came out as a prominent gender role. Androgyny can be seen as specifically high in the age group between 45 to 49 years for mothers (24 mothers out of 50 in this age range reported as androgynous) (Table 3). In the case of fathers, androgyny is higher in the age group between 50 to 54 (18 fathers out of 41 in this age range reported as androgynous) (Table 3). It might be that with age people become more inclined towards adaptive behaviour than sex-typed characteristics [21,22]. Similar findings were also reported by Fischer [23], who suggested that with age, people begin to hold less rigid views about gender and tend to demonstrate contextually appropriate behaviour [23].

The current study also sought to explore how the different parenting styles are related to gender role identity formation in young adults. Results show some interesting trends. On correlating perceived parenting styles and gender role identity of young adults, it was seen that young adults with undifferentiated gender role identities rated their mothers to be more permissive. In the case of fathers, a positive correlation between fathers' permissive parenting style and young adults' masculinity can be seen. Several researches suggest that permissive parenting is not the most suitable parenting style [24]. Permissive parenting may have an array of negative effects on the offspring [25]. Such parents do not impose any restrictions on their children's behaviour and neither do they regulate their behaviours, thus failing to be appropriate role models for their children. It has been found that children of permissive and over-permissive parents are often insecure, aimless, irresponsible, lack self-esteem, and are more likely to be delinquent [26].

Although the sample size of the present study is small, there is a clear indication that in both cases of mothers and fathers, a permissive style of parenting contributes to less adaptive gender role identities in young adults. Both undifferentiated and masculine gender roles have their own set of difficulties. The undifferentiated, unlike androgyny, is characterized by a lack of well-defined gender-based characteristics and they show inconsistent patterns of behaviour [27], suggesting that such young adults do not have a well-formed gender role identity. This is an interesting finding as the area of undifferentiated gender role is yet to be explored more [28-30]. On the other hand, a masculine gender role identity cannot be considered a very adaptive gender role identity. Research is primarily focused on males' adherence to traditional gender roles. Findings indicate that males who show greater commitment towards masculine gender role may exhibit masculine gender role stress, show an increased risk of abusive behaviour [31], and are also at a greater risk of substance abuse [32]. The correlation between fathers' permissiveness and young adults' masculinity might indicate that, somehow, permissiveness in fathers may lead to the development of masculine traits in offspring, although

there is a dearth of research in this area. One study highlighted the relationship between permissive parenting style and externalizing behaviours (characterized by aggression, and substance use) in female offspring [33]. These externalizing traits are also linked to aggressive masculinity [34]. Negative correlations between fathers' authoritarianism and young adults' masculinity can be seen. This is another interesting finding that shows that when fathers use an authoritarian type of parenting, the offsprings report less masculine traits. As opposed to permissive parenting, the authoritarian parenting style is characterized by a high degree of parental control and low warmth [35,36]. Therefore, we can say that when the father's control is less, the offspring tend to be more dominating, and when the father's control over their offspring is more, the dominating traits are reduced in the offspring.

The present study tries to systematically see the relationship between gender role identity and parenting style in the context of an intergenerational perspective. The aim was not only to see how parenting style is related to gender role identity but also an attempt to see if parental gender role identity has any reflection on their offspring. It was seen that the proportion of specific gender role identity of young adults has a directly proportional relationship with the specific gender role of fathers and mothers. This is especially true in the case of Androgynous. The majority of androgynous young adults had parents having proportionately high androgynous traits (80% of fathers and mothers were androgynous). Although the sample was small and more critical analysis may be required to establish such a relationship, our study was among very few to date to try to systematically see such a relationship. Parental role in gender identity development is an area that needs more definite and systematic exploration, specifically in the present context where the focus is more diverted towards studying alternate gender roles and their mechanism, this important aspect of parenting and its influence in forming gender role identity has somehow receded to the background. Further studies can also focus on undifferentiated gender role identity and its formation. This study was done on typical families, thus alternative family patterns, and the children of single and divorced parents should be considered.

The parenting style adopted by the parents undoubtedly plays an important role in guiding the children in their quest for self-identity. Parental inputs serve as building blocks of their child's gender schema. Thus, proper guidance and parental attention are crucial in this regard. The current study was, therefore, an attempt to shed some light on this area. This knowledge can be used in designing psychological management strategies for adolescents and young adults as well as their parents who are having trouble defining their gender role leading to interpersonal and personal difficulties.

## Conclusion

The present study's findings show the pattern of gender

role identity of parents and young adults. Despite the absence of a statistically significant relationship between androgyny and the different parenting styles, androgyny was the most prominent gender role identity in male young adults and both mothers and fathers. In the case of female young adults, an adherence to feminine gender role identity was found. The study also shed some light on the relationship between parenting styles and gender role identity. In the case of mothers, a more permissive type of parenting leads to the development of an undifferentiated gender role identity. We also found that, in the case of fathers, permissiveness results in young adults having a masculine gender role identity. A directly proportional relationship was also obtained between the gender role identity of young adults and that of their parents, particularly in the case of young adults who identified as androgynous.

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## Author's Contribution

- Shreya Chowdhury: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Resources, Data Curation, Writing original draft, Review and Editing, Visualization
- Suvosree Bhattacharya: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Resources, Review and Editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration
- Surajit Bhattacharya: Formal Analysis, Data Curation, Review and Editing
- Anjan Bhattacharya: Supervision, Resources, Review and Editing

## Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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