

A Comparative Study of the Impact of Family Education Styles in Chinese and Western Cultural Backgrounds on the Development of Gender Role Cognition in Preschool Children

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Abstract. With the advancement of globalisation, the exchange of cultures between China and the West, along with cross-culture families, has become the norm. Families with diverse cultural origins from China and the West are steadily growing. However, cultural differences frequently cause disputes, significantly influencing children's gender knowledge and self-identity. It is worth noting that pre-school age is significant as they develop self-identity and socialization. Therefore, the study aims to reveal how parental parenting style affects the development of gender awareness in preschool children in different cultures of China and the West. The study conducted semi-structured interviews with 8 participants: 2 Chinese parents, 2 Western parents, 2 Cross-cultural parents and 2 Teachers. The research identified unique patterns of gender role socialization among cultural groups. The unique role of grandparents was also identified among Chinese families. Results also point to the important role of grandparents in the reinforcement of traditional gender roles, as well as the role of schools in reinforcing or subverting gender norms. Despite the practical implication, the study was limited due to a small sample and recruitment method. Therefore, there is a future scope to increase diverse cultural contexts.

Keywords: Family education, Parenting, gender role cognition, comparative study, preschool children.

1. Introduction

According to social learning theory, gender socialisation starts early in the life of an individual, with the family playing a major role in the formation of gender identity through reinforcements and communication. During early childhood, children build their cognitive of gender roles upon observing the attitudes and conduct of their parents [1]. Parents, caregivers, and close family members shape children's knowledge of gender through direct teaching, reinforcement, role modelling, and emotional connection. According to the Social Learning Theory, children acquire gender roles through observing and mimicking parental actions [2]. Additionally, the Gender Schema Theory entails that children learn mental structures about gender through social experience, shaping their preferences and behaviour [3]. It also entails receiving feedback for gender-conforming or non-conforming behaviours and adopting societal expectations. For instance, when a father does physically exhausting activities such as mowing the lawn while the mother takes on caregiving, traditional gender roles are promoted through unconscious imitation.

In China, gender identity is founded on Confucian values establishing familial order, male dominance, and obedience or filial piety [4]. This is reflected in family education, where boys are encouraged to seek leadership positions, while girls are taught to value caregiving and household work. Chinese parents tend to exercise an authoritarian child-rearing pattern, where there is discipline, organization, and high expectations [5]. Despite greater gender-balanced outlooks in modernization, such conventional attitudes remain conservative. Even in urban areas today, most Chinese households still practice traditional gender roles, but in a flexible way [6]. Thus, gender socialization in the Chinese family is still stringent, and its influence is expected among children.

Contrary to traditional gender socialization in China, Western societies have increasingly adopted egalitarian gender roles, valuing individuality, personal autonomy, and gender neutrality [7,8]. Western parents are more liberal in granting children freedom of gender expression, allowing them

to participate in activities based on their interests and not strict gender roles, mostly following an authoritative parenting style. Western education systems also actively encourage gender-inclusive practices, affirming flexible gender roles and defying stereotypes [9]. However, gender inequalities remain in some Western subcultures in the form of traditional gender roles. Western families are more flexible in gender role socialization compared to Chinese families [10]. These structural variations produce different preschool environments, influencing their gender cognition development.

Education at this stage directly affects their psychological development, gender awareness, and the initial formation of social cognition. Preschool children are in a critical period of early childhood for socialization and self-identity development [11]. The family is the first place for children to socialize and carry the early education of gender awareness and gender roles. Although Chinese parenting aims to stress regimented, tradition-oriented gender roles, Western parenting increasingly encourages fluidity of genders and personal expression [10]. Gender socialization during early childhood influences children's interactions with their peers. Moreover, as globalization promotes cross-cultural contacts, children are exposed to various gender viewpoints. Cross-cultural parenting subsequently informs families about how they can adjust their gender socialization in multicultural societies.

As parents' cultural backgrounds influence how children cope with gender roles and schooling approaches, the disparity in parenting style is especially pronounced in cross-cultural families [12]. While there have been studies on cross-cultural parenting methods, there is yet to be a cross-cultural comparative study on the influence of Chinese and Western family parenting styles on the development of gender awareness in preschool children. Thus, this study aimed to reveal how parental parenting style affects the development of gender awareness of preschool children in different cultures of China and the West.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

A semi-structured interview was conducted to investigate the influence of family styles of education on gender role cognitions among preschool children. This qualitative approach was appropriate for discovering the subtle, contextual, and culturally embedded ways parents socialize children into gender roles [13]. It aided in probing not only overt parenting approaches but also tacit attitudes and unconscious gender socialization biases. Additionally, the method also ensured avoiding social desirability bias whereby participants followed cultural expectations, which could have occurred if the focus group or observation method had been adopted as a qualitative approach.

Subsequently, the design prompted participants to provide genuine, personal anecdotes, offering a richer understanding of how cultural norms shape parenting. It also discovered the subtle, contextual, and culturally embedded ways parents socialize children into gender roles. Contrary to quantitative design, which quantifies gender awareness, this study gathered in-depth, narrative data that discloses subjective meanings and lived experiences [14,13]. Additionally, the design encompassed parents from Chinese, Western and cross-cultural backgrounds to enable analysis of universal themes across cultures but with a focus on differences relevant to contexts. It ensured that the findings were relevant to actual parenting practices and useful for educators looking for culturally grounded gender socialization tactics.

2.2. Participants

The selection of participants considered important demographic variables such as parents' level of education, socioeconomic status, and work to provide a significant cross-cultural comparison. This study included eight participants from diverse groups to represent a broader cultural group: 2 Chinese parents, 2 Western parents, 2 Cross-cultural parents and 2 Teachers (1 from a Western school and 1 from a Chinese school). This distinct participant aided in obtaining cultural influences on gender socialization, which provides different insights that may not be discovered in a mono-cultural sample.

Although cultural differences were the focus of this study, economic status and parental education were also reported as being possible determinants of gender socialization. The inclusion criteria were parents of children in preschool (3–6 years old). Moreover, while the influence of family styles of education on gender role cognitions among preschool children would be directly gathered from the parents, the teachers would provide an external perspective on how parental influence affects the cognition of gender roles among the children. Additionally, a purposive approach was used for the recruitment as the socialization of gender is not strictly ruled by cultural standards but by economic conditions, levels of parental education, and exposure to gender-progressive or conservative educational settings [15]. Thereby, the purposive sampling technique promoted heterogeneity across socioeconomic status.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The interview was conducted face-to-face, whereby, the interview responses were recorded with permission of the participants. Each interview was taken separately, for about 60 minutes. The questions were developed based on the theoretical framework. Each parent was separately interviewed to avoid social desirability bias, in which parents might conform to what they believe are cultural expectations if interviewed in the presence of their spouse or peers. The questions entailed topics such as gendered toy choice, division of household chores, and attitudes toward the expression of emotion in boys versus girls. To ensure ethical integrity, the identity of the participants was not disclosed, instead, the participants were represented through pseudonyms such as parents of Western culture were discussed as W1, W2 and so on. Additionally, all participants were provided with informed consent. Subsequently, the recorded data were transcribed. The data in the transcripts were studied to identify patterns and coded through an inductive approach. Subsequently, reflective thematic analysis was used to interpret the data.

3. Findings

The responses of the participants were analyzed based on key concepts such as “cultural expectations”, “parental influence”, emotional expression”, “gendered play” and “parental concerns or reactions”. Following the analysis, four major themes were recognized as discussed below:

3.1. Theme 1: Parenting Approaches to Gender Role Development

The first theme provided insight into the parenting approaches to gender identity development. In Chinese families, fathers tend to stress strength, independence, and leadership for boys, whereas girls are expected to be gentle, obedient, and family-oriented. For instance, a Chinese father (C1) of a 5-year-old boy, identifying himself from the middle class responded that,

“I have never stopped my son from playing with something that is considered girly, but I know my mother would disapprove.”

A similar response was identified from the Chinese mother (C2) of a 3-year-old girl, from a high social class, where she responded that,

“...my mother-in-law gets irritated when my daughter prefers more of her elder brother’s toy cars.... adamant that girls play with dolls”

The responses also show the unique involvement of the grandparents in the development of gender identity in all social classes in Chinese culture.

Contrarily, Western parents promote a gender-neutral environment where children are free to pursue their interests. There was also a greater emphasis on individual personality rather than gender norms, with conversations that actively counteract stereotypes observed from both Western culture parents and social class. For instance, the mother (W1) of a 3-year-old girl responded from the middle class,

“I want my daughter to know she can be anything, whether a mechanic or a princess.”

Additionally, no distinction was observed from

These show that parenting styles differ strongly across cultures, with Chinese parents being more inclined to reinforce traditional gender roles, Western parents advocating flexibility, and cross-cultural parents dealing with tensions between the two. For example, a Chinese mother (CC2) of a girl having a Canadian father responded,

"I want my son to be free to explore, but I also know my parents have strong opinions about what boys should and shouldn't do."

This tension indicated the constant change of gender role conceptions between generations. However, the response also shows that the influence of the grandparents is weaker in cross-culture families than in Chinese-culture families.

3.2. Theme 2: Preferences during Play

The second theme highlighted how the choice of play or toys might also be influenced by parents. The Chinese father (C1) from the middle class reported,

"My son likes cars and superheroes, by nature, but when he chose a doll during marketing, my mother immediately stopped him."

This shows that modern parents tend to be open-minded, potentially trying to be open-minded. However, family structures with grandparents might hamper the process. Western teachers and parents actively facilitate gender-neutral play to allow diverse skill development. For instance,

"We expose all children to building blocks, dolls, and kitchen sets without saying they are 'for boys' or 'for girls.'"

This openness encourages children's preferences to be more open. On the other hand, a Chinese educator (CE1) responded,

"Boys resist playing in the pretend kitchen section initially, but they join others as soon as they see friends having fun there."

Thus, in both societies, the teachers notice that if they are provided with independence, boys and girls like unconventional pursuits. This implies that gender-specific interests are mostly conditionally rather than biologically acquired.

3.3. Theme 3: Gender-oriented Expectations

The third theme encompassed the gender-oriented expectations which might contribute to gender role identification. According to Chinese culture, boys are supposed to be tough, and showing emotion is usually discouraged. For example, C2 from a high social class responded that,

"I don't want to say 'be strong and don't cry' to my son, but I catch myself doing it sometimes because that's how I grew up"

Additionally, the Chinese teacher responded that,

"When boys cry in class, some parents say, 'Don't spoil him, let him toughen up.'"

On the other hand, Western parents support emotional expressiveness, seeing emotional intelligence as being important for both boys and girls. This was inferred from the response from the Western father from high social class,

"I want my son to understand that feelings are natural and healthy, you know, you cry, just like my daughter should be able to stand up for herself" (W2)

This implies that by instilling boys and girls with the ability to express emotions freely, Western families support mental health and healthier relationships. Interestingly, teachers from both cultures point out that if boys are provided a secure environment, they are equally able to express emotions as girls. It indicated that emotional repression is socially learned and not biologically determined. Thus, cultural norms dictate that boys and girls are educated differently to show their emotions, and Chinese families usually discourage boys from being vulnerable, whereas Western parents encourage openness for both sexes.

3.4. Theme 4: Household Environment

The fourth and final theme showed that the household environment, along with parenting style, may contribute to gender role identification. One of the Chinese parents (C2) responded,

"My daughter helps set the table and clean up after dinner... I don't ask my son..."

Conversely, Western and cross-cultural families encourage shared responsibilities, with both boys and girls being involved in domestic chores. The participant belonging to the cross-culture family (CC2) described,

"In our household, everyone pitches in... you know we have a schedule—my 6-year-old son and 10-year-old daughter both set the table, clean their rooms, and all."

These findings highlight the way that conventional values are still influencing gender roles in Chinese households, while Western or cross-cultural parenting supports co-responsibility, encouraging both sexes to become independent. Moreover, one of the teachers responded that children often bring in their gender identities developed as influenced at home. Thus, cultural norms have a great impact on how household tasks are allocated to girls and boys. Consequently, it might affect the gender roles that might be adopted by a child as they grow up as children in pre-school age learn through such reinforcements.

3.5. Theme 5: Methods of Education

The theme follows the common methods of education observed among families in different cultures. W1, who has a Master's degree, responded that,

"...my child is in a public school.... Private schools introduce gender-neutral lessons...umm... public school still seems to reinforce some gender roles."

Additionally, CC1, who has a PhD degree, responded,

"I know boys must be good at science, and girls at literature...I feel in the Western background, there's a bit more room to move, so I make an effort to expose my child to both."

This implied that the education level of parents is also involved in influencing the gender identity development. This reflected that parents tend to have distinct notions of the approach to gender identity. Thus, future policies must encourage gender-neutral curricula providing equal educational opportunities for all children.

3.6. Theme 6: Influence of Social Class

The last theme discussed the potential influence of social class. Middle-class families struggle to reconcile traditional and contemporary points of view, promoting both academic achievement and gender equality. For instance, W1 responded,

"We teach our son and daughter that they can pursue any line of work, but schools still reinforce some gender expectations."

On the other hand, it was found that upper-class families enjoy more freedom in gender-neutral parenting. For instance, CC1 responded,

"My daughter does STEM and ballet, but my in-laws still think she must be 'elegant' and polite."

While, C2 responded that,

"Boys have to concentrate on a stable profession, and the girls should be educated to take care of the household. That's how families make ends meet."

These responses implied that Chinese parents might unconsciously influence the development of gender identity among preschool children. Affluent families offer progressive, non-gender-specific environments, whereas working-class families perpetuate gender norms out of economic pressure and conservative standards. Middle-class families struggle to reconcile traditional and contemporary points of view, promoting both academic achievement and gender equality. Understanding these implications, it can be inferred that to ensure gender role socialization, it is essential to inculcate gender-inclusive education.

4. Discussion

The findings revealed certain differences in the three types of cultural studies that influence the development of gender role cognition. For example, an intensive or authoritarian parenting style would be observed for a male child [16,17]. This behaviour, in turn, influences the gender role of the child. Additionally, [8] found democratic fathers embrace less authoritarian and more egalitarian attitudes towards child-rearing and are more engaged in the day-to-day care of their children. On the other hand, Republican peers, are more likely to hold authoritarian and traditional views about parenting and to stress obedience over independence and self-reliance. However, the instances where the parent-reported their attempts to overcome the traditional norm on gender labelling show evidence of modern influence.

Additionally, Western parents take on authoritative and egalitarian styles of parenting, emphasizing individuality, self-expression, and gender equality. Such findings align with a study conducted on Chinese Americans, whereby these families are proactive in endorsing gender-neutral parenting, where children are encouraged to explore their interests instead of following conventional gender roles [18]. Moreover, Western parents are likely to encourage emotional intelligence and independent choice in their children compared to Chinese families [19]. Thus, Chinese families reinforce traditional norms, while Western and Cross-culture families promote inclusivity.

The findings further showed how parenting impacts preschool children and their understanding of gender role style. Chinese boys are less inclined to participate in activities that are seen as "feminine," like caregiving play because they are directly discouraged by parents and grandparents [17]. The responses of the parents and their expectations align with the understanding. Thus, Chinese children learn gendered expectations at an early age. Contrarily, Western children have a more fluid conception of gender. It is further supported by existing studies which confirmed that Western preschoolers have weaker gender stereotypes, as boys and girls are both introduced to diverse models and gender-free education at a young age [20]. Parents promote gender neutrality in some families, while others with traditional roots, such as grandparents, uphold stricter gender roles [21]. However, in cross-cultural households, children are subjected to a combination of modern and traditional gender viewpoints.

However, it implies that Chinese and Western children alike develop gender awareness at a young age, though, with significant differences in the degree. For advancing gender-inclusive family education, both theoretical constructs and practical policies need to be established to favour well-balanced gender socialization. Based on this understanding, it is recommended that policies should inculcate Social Learning theory by Bandura and Walters (1977) [22] focusing on how children acquire gender roles from parents, the media, and social contacts. Schools need to collaborate with families towards gender-balanced curriculum changes, providing representative gender portrayals within children's books, toys, and classroom exercises.

5. Conclusion

This study reaffirmed that parenting styles significantly influence preschool children's gender role cognition, with wide differences in cultural contexts. The findings identify how family education consciously informs children's knowledge of gender, steering their behaviour, emotional expression, and future identity formation. This study confirms that parenting styles have a great impact on preschool children's gender role cognition, with extensive variations in cultural contexts. Cross-cultural families, influenced by traditional and modern thinking, tread a balanced path toward gender socialization, balancing cultural heritage with shifting societal norms. On the other hand, Chinese families uphold traditional gender expectations and encourage masculinity in boys and nurturing in girls, whereas Western families are gender-neutral in encouraging children to pursue their interests.

Although this study made contributions, it has limitations such as a small sample size and targeted recruitment methods, which may restrict generalizability. Subsequent research must broaden the scope to cover multiple cultural contexts, especially non-Western and non-Asian ones, to enhance

understanding of gender socialization patterns globally. Additionally, the perceived development of gender roles among preschoolers was not assessed. Thus, longitudinal studies can examine how early gender role cognition develops over time with educational changes and shifting societal norms.

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