

Exploring Gender Constancy and Identity Formation in Early Childhood: Insights from a Pilot Study in India

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the development of gender identity among Indian children, using Kohlberg's cognitive developmental theory as the framework. Unlike most prior research conducted in Western contexts, this pilot study explores how gender constancy, gender roles, and stereotypes are formed in early childhood within an Indian cultural setting. Two children aged four and five were interviewed using a semi-structured format. Results highlight that early awareness of gender labelling and stereotypical roles are both influenced by parental reinforcement and cultural cues. The findings support the cognitive-developmental model and also offer culturally nuanced implications for future large-scale research.

Keywords: *Gender identity, Gender constancy, Cognitive development, Indian children, Gender roles, Stereotyping*

A child's psychological development is significantly influenced by their gender identity. It describes a person's firmly held internal perception of being either male or female, neither, both, or somewhere in between (Bem, 1981). Gender identity is influenced by cognitive, environmental, and cultural factors, whereas sex is determined by biology. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020), gender is a socially constructed concept that includes the roles, behaviours, and characteristics that a particular society views as suitable for people based on their sex. Gender is frequently viewed as a binary construct in India, where children are exposed to strict gender roles from an early age. These roles are ingrained in cultural narratives, family structures, and educational practices (Daftuar & Kola, 2024).

Lawrence Kohlberg's (1966) cognitive developmental theory is frequently highlighted as the theoretical underpinning for comprehending how children develop their gender identities. Children go through three main stages, according to Kohlberg: gender labelling (around age 3), gender stability (by age 5), and gender constancy (by age 6 or 7), which signifies a complete comprehension that gender is constant over time and in various contexts. Kohlberg suggested that once a child attains gender constancy, the motivation to adopt gender-consistent behaviour is internally driven, in contrast to social learning theory, which places an emphasis on external reinforcement (Bandura, 1977). Children benefit from

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these cognitive processes as they develop schemas about the roles, behaviours, and looks that are appropriate for their perceived gender. By presenting gender schema theory in 1981 and 1983, Sandra Bem expanded on this knowledge by highlighting the ways in which cultural norms are internalised into mental models that direct behaviour and information processing.

Kohlberg's model has been validated by cross-cultural research. Research from Argentina and the US demonstrates that gender constancy changes gradually during early childhood and is connected to children's toy preferences and behavioural patterns (Ruble et al., 2007). Martin and Ruble (2004) emphasised how children selectively pay attention to information that is gender-congruent and actively seek out gender cues from their surroundings. According to their findings, children who start to identify with a gender category become more interested in peers and activities that are associated with that gender, which frequently reinforces stereotypes and traditional roles.

More recent works have offered culturally specific insights into the formation of gender identity in the Indian context. A study by Chowdhury et al. (2024) investigated how parenting practices affected Indian children's gender role identity. Regardless of the child's sex, they discovered that permissive paternal parenting promoted more masculine traits, whereas permissive maternal parenting was positively linked to undifferentiated gender identities. This illustrates how children's understanding and internalisation of gender roles are greatly influenced by the behaviour of their early carers. In their qualitative interviews with Indian parents, Daftuar and Kola (2024) found that the majority were unaware of non-binary or fluid gender identities and frequently showed discomfort or disapproval when the subject came up. Their results highlight the ways in which strict gender socialisation at home can stifle children's unrestricted identity exploration and reinforce binary thinking.

Research on gender-diverse Children in India offers a valuable perspective on how identities are formed outside of the framework. Saha et al. (2025) examined the ways in which caste, class, and family acceptance affected transgender youths' gender identity expression through an intersectional lens. They discovered that while children from marginalised groups experienced increased stigma, children who had supportive carers and access to affirming resources were more likely to express their identities with confidence. These results are consistent with previous research by Bhattacharya and Ghosh (2023), which found that trauma, anxiety, and depression were prevalent among LGBTQ+ youth in India as a result of social exclusion, discrimination, and limited access to mental health services. The National Education Policy (2020) and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act (2019) are examples of progressive policies, but according to Ganguli (2023), their implementation is still uneven, and many schools still lack gender-sensitive curricula and inclusive facilities.

In light of this, it is crucial to investigate how Indian children establish their gender identity in their early years, particularly in light of the interaction between cognitive development and culturally particular factors. Kohlberg's theory offers a helpful framework for comprehending developmental milestones, but new research from India suggests that contextual factors like parental beliefs, societal norms, and gaps in policy implementation should be taken into account. The purpose of this study is to examine how four to five-year-old Indian children come to understand gender roles, identity, and constancy, and how this development reflects both culturally specific dynamics and universal cognitive patterns. In

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order to promote more inclusive gender development, the findings are meant to inform theoretical knowledge as well as practical strategies in family and educational contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design:

This was a pilot exploratory study using a qualitative, semi-structured interview format guided by Kohlberg's developmental framework.

Participants:

Two children were selected using accidental sampling: one 4-year-old male and one 5-year-old female. Informed consent was obtained from the parents.

Tools Used:

- **Demographic Sheet was filled with the help of parents.**
- **Semi-Structured Interview consisted** 16 questions (8 general + 8 gender-specific) developed with reference to existing gender constancy measures (e.g., Ruble et al., 2007).
- **Participant Observation consisted** Behavioral responses were recorded and analyzed to understand non-verbal cues, comfort, and spontaneous gendered statements.

Procedure:

Participants were interviewed in a familiar environment, and the sessions were recorded (with consent). Observational notes were taken to supplement the verbal data.

RESULTS

Participant 1 (Male, age 4):

Demonstrated gender labelling ("I am a boy") and partial understanding of gender stability. He identified gender based on cultural roles "Papa goes to office, Mama cooks." He categorized a doll as female, but lacked conceptual reasoning beyond stereotypes. Preferences (cars, boy friends) aligned with typical gender norms.

Participant 2 (Female, age 5):

Displayed strong gender constancy and confidence in gender identity ("I was born a girl"). She used physical traits (hair, eyelashes) for gender identification and showed preferences consistent with gender stereotypes (pink, dolls). Her answers suggest both internalized gender schemas and observational learning from parental roles.

Table 1 Interviews on Early Gender Identity and Role Perception in Children

<p>INTERVIEW-1 Name- XYZ Age- 4years Gender- Male</p> <p>Interviewer: Are you a boy or girl (app boy ho ki girl)? How do you know (Kisne bataya)? Child: Boy, (silence/pause) muma ne bataya.</p> <p>Interviewer: What is this object? It is a boy or girl (yeh ladka hai ki ladki) how do you know (kesse pata)? Child: Doll, ladki and then silence</p> <p>Interviewer: What games do you like (apko kon si games pasand hai)? Child: Car valii</p> <p>Interviewer: Is your father a boy or a girl (papa boy hain yan girl) who cooks food (khana kon bnata hai)? Child: Boy, muma</p> <p>Interviewer: Is your mother a boy or girl (muma boy hain yan girl) who goes for work (kaam pe kon jata hai)? Child: girl, papa</p> <p>Interviewer: Do you have friends (apke friends hai) do all of them are boys or there are girls as well (kya sare boys hi hai yan girls be hai)? Child: bhoot sare boys</p>	<p>INTERVIEW-2 Name- XYZ Age- 5years Gender- Female</p> <p>Interviewer: Are you a boy or girl (app boy ho ki girl)? How do you know (apko kesse pata)? Child: Girl because I was born as a girl.</p> <p>Interviewer: What is this object? It is a boy or girl (yeh ladka hai ki ladki) how do you know (kesse pata)? Child: Girl, because she has long hair and eyelashes</p> <p>Interviewer: Which colour is your favourite colour? Child: pink and purple</p> <p>Interviewer: Who goes to office Mom or Dad? Child: Mom</p> <p>Interviewer: Who cooks food for you? Child: Mom</p>
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DISCUSSION

The findings support Kohlberg's developmental stages gender labelling was evident by age 4, and gender constancy began emerging by age 5. Both participants demonstrated early gender stereotyping, supporting prior findings by Serbin & Sprafkin (1986) and Bem (1989). Cultural reinforcement played a strong role. The male participant referenced his mother as the source of gender knowledge, highlighting the role of caregivers in early gender socialization (Martin & Ruble, 2004). Both children reflected gendered occupational expectations, consistent with findings by Campenni (1999) and Fisher-Thompson (1993). Behavioural modelling appeared influenced by same-sex parental roles, a potential research direction not well-explored in previous literature.

Limitations and Future Scope

- Limited to two participants, findings cannot be generalized.
- Additional items targeting flexibility in gender role understanding would enhance insight.

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- Including parent perspectives could clarify how household norms influence children's gender schemas.
- Future studies should incorporate children from diverse Indian socio-economic and regional backgrounds.

CONCLUSION

This pilot study affirms that Indian children begin forming gender identities and stereotypes early, consistent with global cognitive-developmental patterns. Cultural norms and parental modeling significantly influence gender-related knowledge. The study validates the feasibility of employing Kohlberg's framework in the Indian context and lays the groundwork for broader quantitative studies.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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