The Role of Parents' Gender Role Perceptions in Predicting Psychological Resilience in Preschool Children: Exploring the Moderating Effect of Empathy

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Abstract

The present study aimed to examine the direct relationships between parents' gender role perceptions, empathy, and their children's levels of psychological resilience, as well as to investigate the moderating role of parents' empathy levels in the relationship between gender role perceptions and children's levels of psychological resilience. The study sample consists of 206 parents (196 mothers and 10 fathers) with children attending preschool. Participants were provided with measures of gender role perceptions, empathy, and psychological resilience along with a personal information form. The research was conducted within the framework of a correlational survey model. The findings indicated significant relationships between parents' gender role perceptions, empathy, and their children's levels of psychological resilience. However, the findings did not provide evidence for the moderating role of parents' empathy levels in the relationship between parents' gender role perceptions and their children's levels of psychological resilience. The results underscore the importance of considering the strong role of parents' gender role perceptions in their children's levels of psychological resilience. The research findings are discussed in the light of literature.

Keywords: gender role perceptions, empathy, psychological resilience, early childhood, parents.

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Introduction

Early childhood is characterized as a sensitive period in terms of physical growth, brain development, language, cognitive, and psychosocial development (Wachs et al., 2015). Negative psychosocial experiences encountered during this period can threaten individuals' holistic development. Children who have early experiences characterized by neglect and abuse, poor economic resources, communication barriers, negative parental attitudes, harsh family relationships, low-quality childcare, negative school experiences, and exposure to violence in society often display significant maladaptive emotional and cognitive outcomes as well as physical health problems (Demircioğlu & Günindi, 2021). The influence of such early experiences can be pronounced not only during adolescence and childhood but also throughout the lifespan (Campbell et al., 2016). Therefore, it is believed to be crucial to empower individuals against negative life experiences during early childhood, a period where the foundations for future life are laid. In this context, the concept of psychological resilience emerges as an important personal strength.

The relationship between gender role perceptions and psychological resilience

Psychological resilience is a broad concept that describes the ability to adapt over time and in various domains in the face of challenges (Werner, 1995). It is expressed as the ability to bounce back after adversity or distress (Masten, 2014). Psychological resilience, as defined by Windle (2011), involves effectively managing significant stressors or factors that could lead to trauma and adapting to this process. This concept is not a singular characteristic that an individual either possesses or lacks. A psychologically resilient individual is suggested to demonstrate positive outcomes across various domains of life over a certain period. Furthermore, psychological resilience can indicate that an individual possesses varying degrees of skills to cope with difficulties in their life. A common perspective on this matter is that individuals, despite being at a higher risk than average when facing serious problems, can sustain more successful lives than expected (Brooks, 2006).

Bernard (1995) asserts that everyone possesses an innate capacity for psychological resilience. Characteristics that define children with high levels of psychological resilience include critical consciousness, problem-solving and social skills, a sense of purpose, and autonomy (Bernard, 1995). Critical consciousness involves having insightful awareness of negative experiences and developing ways to cope with these experiences healthily. Social competence is associated with traits such as compassion, communication skills, empathy, and a sense of humor. Children with social competence establish healthy relationships with adults and peers, forming healthy bonds within the family, community, and school structures they live in. A sense of purpose entails having goals, aspirations related to education, and a belief in a positive future. Problem-solving skills, shaped around two main competencies of making plans for seeking help from others and proficiency, are abstract thinking abilities that enable individuals to develop different solutions to social and cognitive problems they encounter. Finally, autonomy encompasses

children's identification with their identity, the ability to act independently, and having control power over their environment (Bernard, 1995). According to research, psychologically resilient children have elevated self-esteem, demonstrate superior problem-solving types, show lower behavioral issues compared to their friends, and can effectively avert negative issues (Lussier et al., 2007; Malmberg & Flouri, 2011; Trask-Tate et al., 2010).

Additionally, psychological resilience is believed to have a variable, dynamic, and fluid nature (Denckla et al., 2020). Psychological resilience, in a sense, reflects an individual's interaction with their environment and is therefore either hindered by risk factors or strengthened by protective factors. Research on psychological resilience tends to converge on three general categories of risk factors that play a role in psychological resilience. These are individual, environmental, and familial risk factors.

Individual risk factors encompass characteristics that originate from the individual, such as high self-esteem, cognitive abilities, effective problem-solving skills, empathy, a sense of control over one's life, and optimism. Environmental risk factors are associated with experiences such as inadequate nutrition, exposure to societal violence, homelessness, lack of friends and social support, and low socioeconomic status. Finally, familial factors include experiences such as having a large family, exposure to negative parenting approaches, having a parent with mental illness, parental divorce or death, and exposure to familial violence (Gizir, 2007). In contrast, positive parental involvement in their children's lives has been demonstrated to enhance psychological resilience and facilitate a successful transition into adulthood (Quach et al., 2013).

Studies modeling the risk effects on child adjustment often reveal risk indices that include not only distant ecological factors like neighborhood poverty but also factors such as parental approaches that influence the child's behavioral development (Gassman-Pines & Yoshikawa, 2006). In this context, evidence has shown that parents adhering to strong conventional or traditional gender roles pose a risk to their children's levels of psychological resilience (Arslan & Demircioğlu, 2023; Endendijk et al., 2017).

The social role theory posits that gender disparities stem from the prevailing division of gender roles in societies, wherein women are often perceived as homemakers and men as economic providers (Eagly et al., 2000). This divide is still visible in modern societies; mothers are more likely to be the primary caregivers for young children, women are more represented in education and caregiving professions, while men are more represented in professions associated with power, physical strength, status, and action-oriented personality traits (Huerta et al., 2013). Therefore, the literature indicates that parents who embrace non-egalitarian gender roles may engage in maladaptive parenting practices that pose a risk to their children's psychological resilience (Hoffman & Kloska, 1995).

For example, in a longitudinal study conducted in the Netherlands with a sample of 299 two-parent families with a 3-year-old child, the relationships between parents' gender role stereotypes, parental physical control, child gender, and child aggression were examined. The research findings indicated that fathers and mothers with strong traditional gender role perceptions applied more physical control to boys compared to girls. Additionally, the findings revealed that fathers adhering more to traditional gender roles applied more physical control, and children exposed to this exhibited more aggression (Endendijk et al., 2017).

Gender role perceptions involve the acknowledgment of gender-specific and communal roles by both men and women in the familial and societal contexts. Parents who adhere to conventional gender roles may view men as the principal providers for the family and women as caregivers for family members. Conversely, parents who adopt egalitarian gender role perspectives regard child-rearing as a collective obligation (Gaunt, 2006; Hoffman & Kloska, 1995). Parents' egalitarian gender role perceptions are associated with greater adjustment and positive behavior in children. In contrast, parents' conventional gender role perceptions are related to maladjustment in children, such as increased emotional and behavioral problems (MacMullin et al., 2021). For example, research involving parental involvement with children aged 4-7 found that parents who adhere more strongly to traditional gender roles tend to be less involved in their children's lives, resulting in lower levels of adjustment in their children. According to the intuitive parenting model (Cabrera et al., 2007), parents' attitudes, beliefs, and role identities, mediated through parents' behaviors, are associated with child development.

According to a study conducted in the Turkish population, fathers with high levels of gender equality approach, predicted high levels of father involvement, and higher father involvement predicted higher levels of child psychological resilience (Arslan & Demircioğlu, 2023). In this context, one of the unanswered questions is how certain personal characteristics of parents moderate the negative effect of traditional gender roles on children's psychological resilience. Therefore, the current research focuses on empathy as one of the potential personal characteristics of parents.

The moderating role of empathy

Empathy is a personality trait that enables individuals to understand and even feel the emotions, needs, and situations of others (Beavan, 1987). It is a multidimensional construct that includes the ability to understand others' intentions (cognitive empathy) and the capacity to indirectly share their emotional experiences (emotional empathy). The cognitive component of empathy involves considering and comprehending what another person is thinking and feeling. The emotional component of empathy involves experiencing a similar emotion in response to another person's feelings (Davis, 1983). Empathy is considered as fundamental building block of healthy and effective interpersonal communication. Prior research has shown that individuals who have higher levels of empathy are more likely to be present in communication networks based on trust, support, and close relationships (Morelli et al., 2015; Ringwald & Wright, 2021). Additionally, empathy has been positively associated not only with positive social behaviors but also with psychological well-being, self-esteem, and functional coping strategies (Bayraktar et al., 2009; Levesque et al., 2014; Vinayak & Judge, 2018).

Empathy is considered an effective factor in maintaining healthy parenting approaches (Brems & Sohl, 1995). Parents who are not supportive and participatory in their parenting approach are said to lack the ability to perceive and integrate cues from their children, accurately understand their situation, and respond appropriately to their needs (Steele, 1980). As a moderating variable, empathy could influence the predicting effect of parents' gender role perceptions on children's psychological resilience. Parents with high levels of empathy might engage in more adaptive parenting behaviors, potentially buffering the negative impact of traditional gender roles on psychological resilience. Research has shown that parents

with high levels of empathy display more positive parenting approaches toward their children. For example, in a study, parents who adopted a more empathetic approach in communicating with their children were found to prefer lower levels of psychological control and physical discipline (Bi & Keller, 2019).

The current study

The development of psychological resilience is seen as an indicator of successful adaptation within the context of childhood developmental tasks (Luthar, 2006). Early achievements play a unique role in future periods. It is substantial to underscore the determinants of psychological resilience levels as children complete the developmental tasks of each period. In this process, parents play a crucial role. There is strong evidence supporting the idea that parenting approaches can serve as a protective factor against stress associated with risk factors (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009). The current research was designed to uncover the predictive role of parents' gender role perceptions on their children's levels of psychological resilience within the framework of empathy's moderating role. The current study may provide the initial evidence for the relationships between these variables. Accordingly, the aim of the present study is to examine the direct relationships between parents' gender role perceptions and empathy, and their children's psychological resilience levels, as well as to examine the moderating role of empathy in the association between gender role perceptions and psychological resilience. Thus, the hypotheses of the research are as follows:

1. Gender role perceptions of parents will be significantly and positively associated with their children's levels of psychological resilience.
2. The relationship between parents' gender role perceptions and their children's levels of psychological resilience will be significantly moderated by the parents' level of empathy.
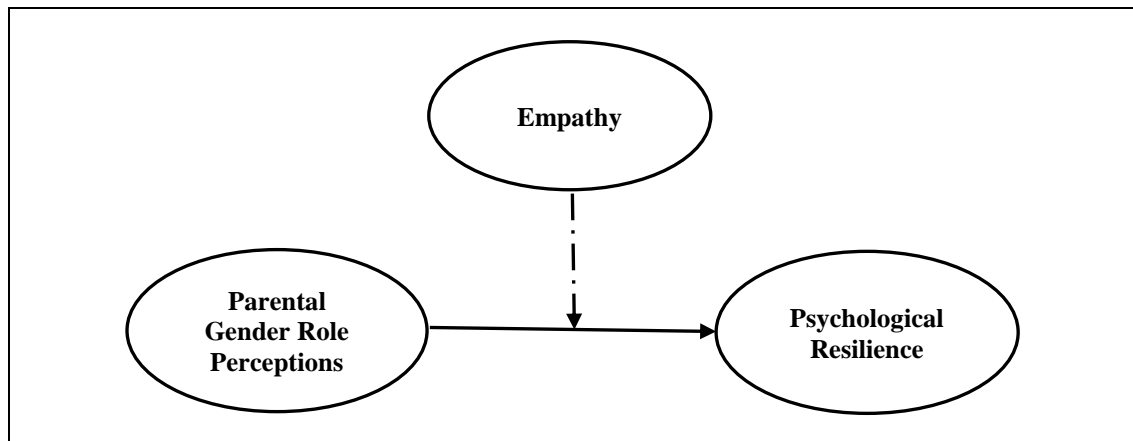

Figure 1. The research model

Method

Participants

The current study was conducted using a correlational research design. The research model is presented in Figure 1. The population of the research consists of parents of children attending pre-school education

institutions in Afyonkarahisar province. The convenience sampling method was adopted for the study. The participants of the study consisted of a total of 206 parents (196 mothers and 10 fathers) of children aged 48-72 months attending three independent preschools during the fall semester of the 2023-2024 academic year. The ages of the parents ranged from 22 to 49, with a mean age of 33.46 (SD = 5.04). Table 1 presents demographic information about the participants.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Demographic characteristics	Subgroups	Values	
		N	*%*
Role of parents	Mother	196	95.1
	Father	10	4.9
Level of education	Primary school	11	5.3
	Secondary school	13	6.3
	High school	64	31.1
	Graduate and post-graduate	118	57.3
Family type	Nuclear	191	92.7
	Extended	5	2.4
	Single parent	7	3.4
	Blended	3	1.5
Age of the child	Between 48-59 months	118	57.3
	Between 60-72 months	88	42.7
Number of children in the family	1	73	35.4
	2	106	51.5
	3	22	10.7
	4	5	2.4

Data collection tools

Demographic information form

In this section, age, parenting role, the educational status, family type, age of the child, and number of children in the family characteristics of the participants were obtained.

The Gender Role Attitudes Scale

In the study, the Gender Role Attitudes Scale developed by Zeyneloğlu (2008) was used to determine the perception levels of parents' gender roles. The scale, consisting of 38 items, is of the 5-point Likert type (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The scale has five sub-dimensions: men's gender role, women's gender role, egalitarian gender role, gender role in marriage, and traditional gender role. An example item is "A woman should experience sexual encounter after they are married" for women's gender role sub-dimension, "Decision to have a child should be made by both spouses in a marriage" for egalitarian sub-dimension, "Man should decide on how to use family income" for men's gender role sub-dimension, "The head of the household is man" for traditional gender role sub-dimension, and "Husband's cheating on a wife should be regarded as normal" for gender role in marriage sub-dimension. The highest score that can be obtained from the scale is 190, and the lowest score is 38. Higher scores on the scale indicate higher levels of egalitarian gender role perceptions. In the scale development study, Cronbach's alpha internal

consistency reliability coefficient was calculated as 0.80 for the women's gender role sub-dimension, 0.78 for the egalitarian gender role sub-dimension, 0.72 for the men's gender role sub-dimension, 0.78 for the traditional gender role sub-dimension, 0.78 for the gender role in marriage sub-dimension, and 0.92 for the total scale. In the current study, the total score of the scale was used, and the internal consistency coefficient was calculated as 0.90.

The Toronto Empathy Scale

To assess the participants' empathy levels, the Toronto Empathy Scale, developed by Spreng et al. (2009) and adapted into Turkish by Totan et al. (2012), was utilized. This single-dimensional scale consists of 13 items and is rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not suitable at all, 5 = completely suitable). An example item is "Other people's misfortunes do not disturb me a great deal." The score range that can be obtained from the scale is between 15 and 65, with higher scores indicating higher levels of empathy. In the adaptation study, the Cronbach's alpha was calculated as 0.79. Additionally, the test-retest reliability coefficient, conducted with a two-week interval, was found to be 0.73. In the current study, the scale's internal consistency reliability coefficient was calculated to be 0.72.

The Ego Resilience Scale

The Ego Resilience Scale for 5-6-year-old children, which was developed by Eisenberg et al. (1996) and translated into Turkish by Önder and Gülay-Ogelman (2011), was employed to determine the psychological resilience levels of preschool students. This single-factor scale, consisting of 12 items, is rated on a 9-point Likert scale (1 = does not describe at all, 9 = describes completely). An example item is "When under stress, he/she gives up and backs off." As the scores obtained from the scale increase, ego resilience also increases. In the adaptation study, the Cronbach's alpha was calculated as 0.86 for mother form and 0.89 for father form. In the current study, mothers and fathers completed the scale, and internal consistency coefficient was calculated as 0.86.

Procedure

The dataset for the study was obtained from the research sample during the first semester of the 2023-2024 academic year. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical approval (2023/321) granted by Afyon Kocatepe University. The first author of the study took responsibility for the process of reaching the participants. Participants were reached by sharing the research link in class groups through voluntary classroom teachers. Informed consent forms were obtained from all participants. The participants were presented with the Gender Role Attitudes Scale, the Toronto Empathy Scale, and the Ego Resilience Scale, along with a demographic information form. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. It took approximately 20 minutes for participants to complete the scales. The data were collected using Google Forms.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses for the study were conducted using SPSS version 23 software. The MACRO for SPSS (Model 1), developed by Hayes (2018), was utilized to test the moderating role of parental empathy levels in the relationship between parental perceptions of gender roles and psychological resilience levels of preschool children. The Model 1 of the Process Macro with Moderation Analysis uncovers the role of moderator variable in the relationship between independent variable and dependent variable using a categorical moderator, continuous independent, and dependent variables. In the analysis, parental perceptions of gender roles were included as the independent variable, psychological resilience levels of preschool children as the dependent variable, and parental empathy levels as the moderating variable. Based on 5000 random samples, an effect is considered significant if the 95% confidence interval does not include zero. The p-values were two-tailed, and p< .05 was considered statistically significant. The analyses within the scope of the study were conducted by the researchers.

Findings

Correlational analysis

Descriptive statistics for the examined variables are presented in Table 2. The results of Pearson correlation analysis indicated that gender role perceptions were associated positively with empathy (r = .16; p < .05) and psychological resilience (r = .25; p < .001). Also, the research findings demonstrated that there was a positive relationship between empathy and psychological resilience (r = .15; p < .05).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlational relationships

Variables	Correlations		Descriptive Statistics				Cronbach's
	1	2	M	Sd.	Skew.	Kurt.	Alpha
1. Gender role perceptions	1		158.33	15.73	-.71	1.00	.88
2. Empathy	.16*	1	55.64	5.65	-.51	.13	.70
3. Psychological resilience	.25***	.15*	75.21	17.98	-.59	-.04	.83

*p <.05; **p <.01; ***p <.00

Moderation analysis

The Table 3 present the findings regarding the moderating influence of empathy on the relationship between gender role perceptions and psychological resilience. The analysis results indicate that the level of gender role perceptions among parents significantly predicts the level of psychological resilience in children (β = 1.36, p < .05, 95% CI = [.02, 2.70]). However, no significant predicting role of parents' empathy levels in predicting children's psychological resilience levels is reached (β = 3.60, p > .05, 95% CI = [-.34, 7.54]). Furthermore, the findings indicate that the interaction of gender role perceptions and empathy, when included as predictor variables, does not significantly contribute to psychological resilience (β = -.02, p > .05, 95% CI = [-.05, .00]). Therefore, the results indicate that empathy does not moderate the relationship between gender role perceptions and psychological resilience.

Table 3. Moderation analysis results

Model Paths				%95 Confidence Interval	
Predictor Variables	**Effect Value**	**Standard Error**	**t**	**Lower limit**	**Upper Limit**
Constant	-159.7594	107.6385	-1.4842	-371.9988	52.4799
Gender Role Perceptions	1.3607	.6777	2.0080*	.0245	2.6969
Empathy	3.6018	1.9966	1.8040	-.3350	7.5386
Interaction	-.0205	.0125	-1.6362	-.0452	.0042

*p <.05, **p <.01, ***p <.001

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

The current study aimed to investigate the direct relationships between parents' gender role perceptions and empathy levels and their children's psychological resilience levels, as well as to investigate the moderating influence of parental empathy on the association between parents' gender role perceptions and their children's psychological resilience levels. While the findings reported significant correlations among the variables under investigation, parental empathy did not demonstrate a moderating role. It is hoped that these findings will guide future research and shed light on prevention and intervention efforts.

The research findings confirm Hypothesis 1 by demonstrating the significant positive predictive role of parents' gender role perceptions in their children's levels of psychological resilience. A review of the literature reveals significant relationships between perceived gender roles and children's psychological resilience levels (Arslan & Demircioğlu, 2023; Endendijk et al., 2017). For instance, a study by Karadağ and Akcinar (2022) found that fathers' adherence to egalitarian gender roles significantly predicted their children's adaptive social behaviors in a positive direction. Maladaptive parenting approaches may explain the predictive role of gender role perceptions on psychological resilience. In line with this, previous studies have shown that parents with traditional gender role perceptions exhibit more maladaptive approaches to their children (Endendijk et al., 2017; Karadağ & Akcinar, 2022). For example, a study found that boys from families where traditional gender roles are prevalent are subjected to twice as much physical discipline compared to children from families where traditional gender roles are not dominant (Endendijk et al., 2017). This explanation is supported by literature documenting that children exposed to maladaptive parenting approaches are at risk of low psychological resilience. For instance, a meta-analysis indicated that both maternal and paternal hostility and rejecting attitudes predict negative worldview outcomes in children, including psychological maladjustment, hostility/aggression, dependency or defensive autonomy, negative self-efficacy, negative self-esteem, emotional unresponsiveness, emotional instability, and negative worldview outcomes based on ethnic origin, culture, and geographical boundaries (Khaleque, 2017).

Our assumption in Hypothesis 2, expecting that empathy would moderate the relationship between parents' gender role perceptions and their children's levels of psychological resilience, was not supported. This result, in a sense, indicates that parents' gender role perceptions are strong predictors of their children's levels of psychological resilience, unaffected by parents' levels of empathy. Gender role perceptions are relatively rigid beliefs that involve excessive generalizations about the characteristics, roles, or behaviors of an entire group based on gender (Ellemers, 2018). Individuals are exposed to entrenched gender beliefs from parents, media, and peers from birth (Endendijk et al., 2018). Firmly embraced gender beliefs become

powerful predictors shaping parents' approaches to their children.

Limitations

The current findings should be interpreted within the framework of some limitations of the current study. Firstly, the current research findings are limited to parents with preschool-aged children in a patriarchal culture. The low rate of father participation in the current study can also be considered as a limitation. Testing the research hypotheses with a higher rate of father participation and in different cultural groups could contribute to the generalizability of the findings. Another limitation of the study is that it was conducted with a cross-sectional design. A cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inferences regarding predictive effects among variables. For causal inferences, future research could be conducted within experimental or longitudinal frameworks. Finally, the moderating effect in the relationship between gender role perceptions and children's levels of psychological resilience is limited to empathy only. Future research could test the moderating roles of different parental characteristics in the relationship between gender role perceptions and children's levels of psychological resilience. The Toronto Empathy Scale used in this study measures general empathy but does not distinguish between cognitive and emotional components, which could not provide more nuanced insights. Confounding variables such as socioeconomic status were not controlled for, which could influence both gender perceptions and resilience outcomes.

It is believed that this study is the first attempt to investigate the moderating role of empathy in the relationship between parents' gender role perceptions and their children's levels of psychological resilience in the literature, making it significant. The study underscores, firstly, that focusing on parents' gender role perceptions may be a promising target for enhancing the psychological resilience levels of preschool children. Secondly, it suggests that interventions focusing on empathy to mitigate the impact of parents with non-egalitarian gender role perceptions on their children's psychological resilience may be insufficient.

Declarations

Ethical statement: Before collecting the research data within the scope of the research, permission dated 15/11/2023 and numbered 2023/321 was obtained from Afyon Kocatepe University, Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee.

Conflict of interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest.

Data availability: Data are available upon request from the authors.

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