Children's and Fathers' Perceptions of Children's Competence and Occupational Interests

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Abstract: The study attempts to understand how self evaluation in the child changes across differing periods of childhood and the interrelation between children's perceived competence and the perception of the father in the four selected domains of competence. The study tested children's perceptions of self competence, the father's perception of the child's competence and vocational aspirations. Ninety children from three occupational groups (thirty in each) rated themselves in four domains of competence- cognitive, social, physical and general self worth. The father of each child was also required to rate his child in the four domains of competence.

Children's ratings of self competence increased with age in the cognitive, social and general self worth domains of competence indicating better perceptions of self efficacy with development. Children in the business sector had higher ratings of self competence as compared to children in the service or skilled occupations. Father's perception of their children did not differ with age or occupation in all domains of competence, except for self worth ratings of the child, which increased with age.

The results indicated that with increasing age children's perceptions of themselves become more veridical with the views of their father as indicated by the more number of significant correlations amongst children at the beginning of late childhood.

Keywords: Self competence, parental expectations, vocational aspiration, self efficacy.

Parental occupations are important indicators for children's self competence evaluation and vocational aspirations. Research with adults indicated that beliefs of personal efficacy play an influential role in occupational development and pursuits [1-3]. The higher the individual's perceived efficacy to fulfill educational requirements and occupational roles, the more the career choices and greater the interest to pursue challenging careers. Further perceived self efficacy was found to predict occupational choice, preparatory achievement and perseverance in the chosen occupational pursuit [4-6]. [1] observed that the impact of parental self efficacy and aspirations on their children's perceived career efficacy and choice is mediated through the children's perceived efficacy and academic aspirations. Children's perceived efficacy than their actual academic achievement was the key determinant of their perceived occupational self efficacy. The question of interest in the present study is to know if children's perceptions of self competence in different domains can influence their occupational interests at an early age. It was also of interest to know the relation between the father's perceptions of children's competence and occupational interests.

Knowledge of self and self evaluation pass through periods of development [7]. The young child at the toddler to early childhood period can construct very concrete cognitive representations of observable features of the self such as the ability to count or spell [8, 9]. [10] label these categorical identifications, as that the child understands the self as separate taxonomic attributes that may be physical, active, social or psychological. However, the child may be unable to integrate single representations into a coherent self portrait; for example, the child may be unable to acknowledge that a person can possess opposing attributes such as good and bad or sad and mean [11]. Importantly self evaluations during this period are likely to be unrealistically positive, because young children have difficulty distinguishing between their desired and actual competence. The unrealistic nature of self evaluation suggests that kindergartners are not good predictors of their academic competence [12]. Such a problem in evaluation stems from the inability to make social comparisons about their competence [13]. This requires the child to relate one's own performance to some one else's performance- a skill that is not sufficiently developed in young children. [14] observed that children at this stage start to perceive that others have opinions toward them, though the child's I self cannot as yet evaluate the child's me self at this age [9].

At the early to middle childhood period, children show some abilities to coordinate previously compartmentalized concepts [15, 16]. For example they can form a category relating a number of their

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competencies, such as good at running, good at jumping, good at climbing, to one another. Also while describing the self and other, the ability to oppose attributes as good and bad (e.g. nice versus mean, smart versus dumb) becomes especially salient [7, 17, 18]. The child at this age continues to identify self attributes as positive and such a cognitive construction precludes from acknowledging negative characteristics for the self, although others may be perceived as bad. [19] found gender differences in self perceived competence. Boys followed male gender stereotyped behaviours that were related to perceived physical competence and peer acceptance and girls followed female gender stereotyped behaviours of affiliation related to perceived cognitive competence. [9] observed that there is an increased cognitive appreciation for the perspective of others, which influences self development, although children do not as yet internalize these evaluations sufficiently to evaluate the self independently [20].

During middle to late childhood the child is able to coordinate self representations that were previously differentiated or considered to be opposite. Further at this level, the child is capable of forming higher order concepts namely, trait labels based upon the integration of more specific behavioural features of the self. For example the higher order generalization that one is smart integrates observations of success in both English language and social studies. Such unidimensional thought is applied to emotional concepts as well [11, 17, 21] so that there is an integration of characteristics in self description.

In middle childhood comparative assessment with peers about self evaluation becomes salient [10]. The cognitive ability to form dispositional traits lead children to construct a more general evaluation of her/himself as a person [9]. This is consistent with [22] findings that the concept of global self worth, namely, as how much one likes oneself as a person does not emerge till middle childhood. Also children can focus on the type of person that others desire or expect them to be. As [20] noted, the child incorporates both the standards and opinions of significant others allowing the I self, to directly evaluate the me self.

The child's interest in a vocational future develops early, not because s/he must begin to prepare for work, but rather because her/his attention is focused on future choices with constant questioning about career choices. Child and adolescent vocational development includes the interfacing of parenting and developmental processes [23]. [24] found a strong concordance rate between childhood career aspirations and early adult attainment, particularly in scientific, artistic, helping and skilled trade professions. Subsequent findings showed that young children know that occupations are differently linked to men and women and attribute higher status for masculine jobs [25]. The child's future vocational aspiration and choice is more likely an interest that persists till the child is physically and mentally able to assess the available possibilities. Of the many factors that influence the child's interest in a particular vocation, the following ones are the most important: parental roles in shaping early adolescent occupations [26], parental wishes and family relationship [27], professional status [4], parental behaviour toward prestige value occupations [25], influence of admired people [28], gender appropriateness [25, 29].

The present study was designed to test the father's perception of the child's competence and vocational aspirations. The father was the only parent that was considered to report the child's competence in the study, because particularly in India, the father is considered to be more knowledgeable and often more educated than the mother or other members of the family. Therefore the father's opinion and assessment is considered to be important in most matters related to the family. Besides, there is little evidence on the effects of parental influence in the career developments of their children [1, 23]. The study aims to understand how self evaluation in the child changes across differing periods of childhood and the interrelation between children's perceived competence and the perception of the father in four selected domains of competence. [5] observed that children are motivated by a need to feel competent because perceptions of autonomy support parent attachment, competence and self worth which act as predictors of motivational orientation and academic achievement. Evidence indicates that parents who believe that they can affect their children's development are more proactive and successful in developing their children's competencies than parents who doubt that they can do much to assist their children's development [23], [30]. Review of theory and research related to educational and occupational aspirations revealed that important career development processes occur well before adolescence. In fact, tentative college plans may be formed at school [31], with career preferences evident as early as kindergarten [32]. In particular, children's occupational aspirations are strongly related to parental occupations, and especially the mother's occupation [33]. This

relationship appears to be mediated by children's perceptions of their parents' job satisfaction, with children more likely to aspire to the occupation of the parent perceived as most satisfied [34].

Of additional interest was whether the father's occupation (service, business or the skilled sector) differs among themselves in the perception of competence and vocational aspirations of their children. It was hypothesized that children's perceptions of self competence in the domains of cognitive, social, physical and general self worth will differ from the perceptions of their father's evaluation of the child. Further the vocational aspirations of the fathers in the three occupational groups will differ for their children. Therefore it was expected that the self and father perceptions will differ for both competence and vocational aspiration.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were ninety children between the ages of 4 to 8 years and their fathers from three occupational sectors in Delhi, India; the service sector consisted of professionals, journalists, defense and government service; the business sector consisted of self employed profit oriented individuals; the skilled sector consisted of carpenters, artists, weavers, potters, musicians and dancers. Although people in the business sector may be skilled in their own pursuits of employment, they were differentiated from carpenters or artists that typically belong to the skilled sector and perform for personal interest and not for monetary gratification. Each occupational group contained 30 children and their fathers. There were 6 children at each age level, 4,5,6,7 and 8, three of whom were boys and three were girls. An attempt was made to take equal numbers of children and fathers as representative of the three occupational groups.

Measuring Instruments

1. The perceived competence scale for children by Harter [35].

This is a self report instrument placing emphasis on the child's sense of competence across different domains instead of viewing perceived competence as a unitary construct since children do not feel competent in every skill domain. The scale consists of four subscales in three domains of competence, such as cognitive competence, social and physical competence. The cognitive competence scale contained items on academic performance and school competence. The social competence scale contained items about friendship and personal importance. The physical competence scale contained items that focused on sport and preference for outdoor games. The fourth subscale measured general self worth, independent of any skill domain. The items directly inquired in to how much the individual liked her/himself as a person and the items referred to being sure of oneself, being happy with the way one is and thinking that one is a good person.

Since the scale was used with four years old children in the skilled sector, there was a possibility that few children in these categories would be school going.

Each subscale consisted of seven items, there being a total of twenty-eight items in the scale. Fourteen items of the twenty- eight began with high perceived competence and fourteen other items began with low perceived competence. The scale followed a structure alternative format, which was designed to offset the tendency to give socially desirable responses. The effectiveness of the question format lies in the implication that half the children in the world view themselves in one way, whereas the other half view themselves in the opposite manner. This format legitimizes either choice and broadens the range of choices over the typical two choice format. In addition, none of the choices involved the response 'false', rather the child must decide which option is most true for her/him.

Both the parents and children were required to respond to the perceived competence scale [36]. Each item was scored from 1 to 4, where a score of 1 indicated low perceived competence and a score of 4 for high perceived competence. Scores were summed and averaged for each subscale, resulting in four separate subscale means.

2. Statements related to different occupations.

Short statements related to eleven different occupations, that is, sports, music, dance, painting, defense, profession/service, handicraft, business, drama, journalism, news reading and politics were presented with a famous Indian role model in each to provide clarity and explain the nature of work required in the particular occupation. This was followed by four questions. For example, painting and art were presented as an occupation with the following statements:

Art is a good form of expression. M F Hussain is a famous Indian artist and is also one of world recognition.

Would you like to do the work that the role model does?

Do you think that you can do this work?

Would you like to take up that particular occupation when you grow up?

Do you think your parents think that you can do this work?

These statements for the eleven occupations were also presented to the father of each child. Each statement was scored as 1 for yes and 0 for no.

RESULTS

The results of the study are presented in different sections that describe both children's and parental perceptions of the child.

Table **1** presents the means and SD's of the children at the three age levels, 4-5 years, 6-7 years and 8 years for the four domains of competence, along with the means and SD's of the parental perceptions of their children in these domains at the three age levels.

The means indicate that the ratings of the child and parent evaluations are quite similar for most of the domains. The responses of the children at ages 4 and 5 years and 6 and 7 years were combined for analysis, so that there were three age levels in all. Analysis of variance computed to know if the children differed at the ages and occupational groups indicated an effect of development for cognitive domain ($F(2, 89) = 3.301$; $p < .05$), for physical competence ($F(2, 89) = 9.58$; $p < .01$) and general self worth ($F(2, 89) = 9.48$; $p < .01$). Children from the three occupational groups differed in their cognitive perceptions ($F(2, 89) = 3.67$; $p < .01$) with children from the business class (Mean= 3.35) having higher scores than that of the skilled (M= 3.31) or the services (3.08) groups of occupation. The means and SD for occupational groups and perceived competencies for children and fathers in the service, business and skilled sectors are presented in Table **2**.

The father's evaluations of their children did not differ for cognitive, social or physical domains. There was a main effect of age ($F(2, 89) = 3.7$, $p < .05$) for

Table 1: Mean and SD of Children's Self Perception at Three Age Levels and the Father's Perception of the Self Competence of their Children at the Three Age Levels

Ages In years	Cognitive	Domain	Social	Domain	Physical	Domain	General selfworth	Domain
child	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
4-5	3.39	.49	3.09	.57	3.42	.42	3.66	.37
6-7	3.14	.38	3.02	.57	2.96	.49	3.28	.54
8	3.18	.42	3.02	.75	3.10	.53	3.16	.49
father								
4-5	3.11	.39	3.02	.6	3.09	.57	3.41	.39
6-7	3.25	.43	2.93	.71	2.84	.58	3.49	.38
8	3	.6	2.98	.61	3.21	.61	3.15	.59

Table 2: Mean and SD for Gender and Perceived Competencies of the Children and Fathers

Gender	Cognitive	Domain	Social	Domain	Physical	Domain	General	Selfworth
Children	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Girls	3.27	.40	2.99	.56	3.05	.45	3.4	.52
Boys	3.23	.49	3.11	.64	3.29	.54	3.41	.51
Father								
Girls	3.12	.40	3.04	.63	2.91	.60	3.43	.40
Boys	3.17	.51	2.91	.66	3.12	.58	3.35	.48

Table 3: Correlations between Child and Father Perceptions in the Four Domains of Competence at the Three Age Levels

	Cognitive Domain	Social Domain	Physical Domain	General Self worth
Early childhood	.13	.34	.39; p<.05	.54; p<.001
Middle childhood	.38; p<.05	.31	.8; p<.001	.25
Start of late childhood	.62; p<.007	.65; p<.003	.64; p<.003	.05

only self worth. Children at ages 4-5 (M 3.41) and ages 6-7 (M 3.49) were rated higher than children at 8 years (M 3.15).

Table **3** presents the correlations between child and father perceptions in the four domains of competence at three age levels.

Table **3** indicates that by the beginning of late childhood there seems to be more significant correlations between child and parent perceptions for cognitive, social and physical domains.

Table **4** presents the means and SD's for gender differences among children and fathers in the four domains of competence.

Gender differences were only found for the physical domain (t=2.29, d f 88, p< .02) where boys (M 3.29) perceived themselves to be physically more able than the girls (M 3.05). The fathers' evaluations of their children were not significant for gender in any of the domains of competence.

Further to know the child's self perceived competence in the eleven vocations and her/his vocational aspirations as well as the father's perceptions of their child's competence and vocational aspirations for the eleven occupations, chi square tests were computed with the frequencies of responses to the four statements associated with each vocation. Table **5** presents the frequencies of child and father's perceived interest, perceived competence, future vocational aspiration and perceived thinking for the eleven occupations.

Chi squares for perceived interest, perceived competence, future vocational aspiration and child/father's perceived thinking for frequency of responses of children from the three occupational groups indicated that the children groups (X^2= .85 (d f =4) p n s) did not differ in their self perceived competence and the father groups (X^2= .22 (d f =4) p n s) did not differ in their perceived competence of their children. There was no effect of development (X^2= .29 (d f= 4) p n s) or gender (X^2= .25 (d f=4); p n s) in self perceived competence. Further product moment correlations computed between children and fathers were not significant for perceived interest (r .27), perceived competence (r .25), vocational aspiration (r .46) or child/parent's perceived thinking (r. 33).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to know the relation between the child's perceived competence and vocational aspirations and the father's perception of his

Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation for Perception of Competencies among Parents and Children in the Three Occupational Groups

Occupational Domains	Cognitive	Domain	Social	Domain	Physical	Domain	General Selfworth	Domain
Children	**Mean**	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**
Service	3.08	.54	3.17	.55	3.04	.51	3.26	.51
Business	3.35	.33	3	.60	3.31	.51	3.50	.49
Skilled	3.31	.40	2.97	.65	3.17	.5	3.46	.51
Parents								
Service	3.18	.50	2.96	.83	2.88	.54	3.36	.47
Business	3.18	.43	3.03	.41	3.19	.6	3.44	.54
Skilled	3.07	.45	2.92	.63	2.97	.61	3.37	.30

Table 5: Frequencies for Child/Father's Perceived Interest, Perceived Competence, Vocational Aspirations and Perceived Thinking for Various Vocations

Vocations	Perceived	Interest	Perceived	Competence	Vocational	Aspiration	Perceived	Thinking
	Child	Father	Child	Father	Child	Father	Child	Father
Sports	66	54	67	62	5	3	70	57
Music	59	50	62	51	2	3	61	57
Dance	57	50	55	58	4	2	63	56
Painting	74	67	75	64	4	0	71	72
Defense	58	48	60	63	21	6	59	60
Academics Service	82	84	81	87	43	55	77	81
Handicrafts	45	40	47	61	4	6	43	52
Business	58	52	63	60	5	13	57	50
Drama	51	36	58	58	2	2	58	56
Journalism	45	37	46	56	0	0	48	41
Politics	28	3	32	8	0	0	31	5

child's competence and related vocational aspirations. Children's ratings of self competence increased with age in the cognitive, social and general self worth domains indicating better perceptions of self efficacy with development. Children in the business sector had higher ratings of self competence as compared to children in the service or skilled occupations. Father's perception of their children did not differ with age or occupation in all domains of competence, except for self worth ratings of the child, which increased with age. The results indicated that with increasing age children's perceptions of themselves become more veridical with the views of their father as indicated by the more number of significant correlations amongst children at the beginning of late childhood. Existing literature indicates that parent's interest and involvement in children's academic pursuits have a positive effect on performance [30, 36]. [37] indicated parental involvement in students' academic self efficacy and intrinsic motivation. Parents' educational aspirations for their children and school-initiated contact with parents had strong positive effects on motivational outcomes for children.

The father's perceptions of their child's competence indicated no differences in the perception of their children at different ages. Perhaps by and large the fathers may have responded taking into account the age and the capabilities of the child for work at a particular age, when evaluating the child's competence on all the subscales.

There were differences in the perceptions of children from different occupational groups. This could be explained by the fact that the majority of children from the skilled sector reported that they were able to perform their work well and very young children reported ability to correct mistakes by introducing new colours or shapes in their art or modifying broken pots. Thus children from skilled sectors seem better able to adapt themselves to situations than children from the service or business occupations.

The analysis of results for vocational interest and perceived competence indicated that the most frequent occupation of interest was academics. This may be because both children and parents increasingly realize the importance of education in everyday life [23]. [38] for example found positive relationships between parents' aspirations and academic achievement of their children in Transkei, South Africa, regardless of whether the family was monogamous or polygamous indicating recognition of educational qualifications in most circumstances. [1] indicated that children's self beliefs about occupational efficacy influence career choices that shape ways that children would follow into adulthood. Different courses of occupational development lead to different types of social networks such as choice of friends and marriage partners.

Children from the three occupational groups did not differ in their perceived interests, perceived competence and reflected appraisals. This finding could be in part because of the encouragement and support given to children at home and school. This may also explain why there are no differences amongst children at different age groups, that is, early, middle

and beginning of late childhood in perceived interest, perceived competence and reflected appraisals, suggesting that children from nearly all age groups seem to perceive themselves as being equally interested and competent for various vocations. [39] reported from interviews with first, third and fifth grade children that older children desired careers that were socially prestigious and less sex typed as compared to younger children. The career aspirations of the older children were more specific and realistic than that of younger children. Children's choice of careers could also be influenced by self interest [40]. Although children from different cultures may select universal categories of occupations that include art and professions, American children for example chose professions for self related reasons while Japanese children's choices were for reasons related to both self and others.

There were no differences in perception amongst parents and children of different ages in their vocational interests and aspirations and no gender differences in perception of vocational interest, perceived competence and reflected appraisals indicating that boys and girls perceive themselves as equally competent and interested in different vocations. This is in consonance with findings on the perceived competence scale, wherein girls and boys differ only on perceived physical competence, but not in the other domains. [41] studied sex role expectations in boys and girls from preschool, second grade, and fifth grade in two socioeconomic levels and found a disparity between many children's perceptions of occupations as ones in which both sexes could work and their own personalized, sex-typed aspirations. Young children (ages 6-11years) know that occupations are differently linked to men and women and attribute higher status for masculine jobs, while expressing greater interest in jobs that are culturally associated with their own sex [25]. Some qualitative analysis of the responses of the fathers suggested that even though vocational aspirations of their child are considered taking into account the competence of the child, somewhere parental dissatisfaction with their own jobs and their unfulfilled wishes seem to influence the choice of occupation for the child. [42] for example found an effect of parental expectations of education and aspirations for their children. Whereas Australian Chinese and Vietnamese parents preferred university education for their children, Anglo Celtic parents from lower socio economic backgrounds in Australia were more likely to prefer their child attend an apprentice. However, in growing urban cities like Mexico, school aged children's self esteem, achievement and aspirations were affected by perceived parental educational involvement indicating that perceptions of parental education and interest effect self efficacy and school performance in children [43]. Besides parents' values that predict adolescents' occupational aspirations [26], the social historical context [31], and general cognitive ability [4] influence teenage career aspirations and adult career attainment. Furthermore, though boys prove to be better at mathematics and girls better at verbal tasks, parents have an effect on the career choices of their children [44]. [45] observed that though career self efficacy mediated career decision making, there were gender differences in career aspirations for high school boys and girls. Whereas girls preferred working with people and ideas or helping others, boys preferred occupations with realistic outcomes.

The present findings indicate a growing relationship between child self competence and father's perceptions of the child for most domains of competence among children of all three occupational groups. It reveals an influence of child and father perceptions about children's proposed ability in most domains of competence. Furthermore, the most preferred vocation was academics for both children and fathers, revealing that parent's preference for careers can influence the career aspirations of their children.

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