



Beyond Niceness: Rethinking People-Pleasing Within a Cultural Context

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Abstract: The present paper understands people-pleasing as a relational pattern of chronic self-adjustment in which individuals prioritize relational harmony over personal needs, essentially within their close relationships. While frequently observed in women's relational experiences, there remains no comprehensive account integrating its dispositional, developmental, socio-cultural aspects within specific cultural systems and the domain of close relationships. This conceptual paper addresses that gap by proposing an integrative, descriptive model of people-pleasing, outlining its manifestations within close relationships (familial, romantic and friendships) of young Indian women in early adulthood. Drawing on theories and ideas from the literature on personality, feminist psychology's relational identity theory, developmental psychology, cultural psychology, theories of hermeneutic labour, self-silencing and psychological well-being; this paper argues that people-pleasing in the young adult population can be best understood as a culturally scaffolded identity strategy, one that is learned through primary gender socialization, endorsed through cultural-moral frameworks, embedded at the level of identity through specific personality mechanisms and sustained in close relationships through ongoing relational labour. This paper is positioned as a precursor to a forthcoming study that employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of ten young Indian women, understanding and negotiating this behaviour in their everyday lives. Implications emphasize intersectional and culture-specific primary research, need for clinical interventions such as boundary-work, and gender-norm awareness.

Keywords: *People-Pleasing, Close Relationships, Gender Socialization, Kartavya (Duty)*

1. Introduction

In everyday discourse as well as clinical and academic literature, people-pleasing is widely recognised as a relational orientation. This pattern involves consistently prioritizing the needs, expectations and emotional comfort of others over one's own comfort. Despite its clinical recognition, its not clearly defined as a formal construct. Closely related constructs such as self-silencing, approval-seeking, interpersonal dependency, unmitigated communion etc., overlap but are rarely integrated into a coherent framework. This lack of conceptual clarity becomes particularly notable when examining the experiences of women in relational contexts.

Feminist psychological literature has long emphasized on women's identities being constructed through relational roles and expectations of emotional responsiveness (Gilligan, 2003; Surrey, 1985). These expectations may encourage relational attentiveness and empathy, but they also lead to self-suppression when interpersonal harmony becomes prioritized over personal needs. Research on self-silencing theory suggests that women may suppress thoughts, emotions or dissatisfaction in order to preserve relational stability (Jack & Ali, 2010). Such tendencies can gradually develop into chronic habitual patterns of self-adjustment within relationships. Existing psychological literature also highlights implications of people-pleasing on psychological well-being. Studies have linked patterns of approval-seeking and relational accommodation to emotional distress, decreased self-esteem and difficulties in maintaining relational boundaries (Emran et al, 2020; Kaya & Kaya, 2023). Recent research, examining this orientation as a measurable construct, similarly suggests associations with psychological well-being and interpersonal functioning (Kuang et al., 2025; Varshini & Jha, 2025). However, much of this research fails to acknowledge and examine the sociocultural context that shapes the emergence of such relational patterns.

The cultural dynamics play a significant role in shaping interpersonal expectations and the behaviour. Norms regarding autonomy, responsibility and relational conduct are embedded within broader systems of meaning (Pandey & Srivastava, 2025). In a collectivistic society maintaining relational harmony and fulfilling responsibilities towards one's family and other community members is often framed as part of one's core moral values. These norms in turn influence how individuals interpret interpersonal conflict, emotional expression and relational obligation.

Within the Indian sociocultural context, relational expectations are frequently organized around the ideas of familial duty and moral responsibility. Interpersonal relationships are often structured around the moral framework of *kartavya* (duty), commonly translated as duty or obligation. Duty here, refers to the ethical expectation that individuals must act in accordance with their relational roles and responsibilities, within the family system and within the society at large (Bhangaokar & Kapadia, 2019). The emphasis on family cohesion and relational responsibility can encourage behaviours that prioritize collective harmony over individual preferences and needs (Avasthi, 2010). While these cultural frameworks support and strengthen relational bonds, they are also likely to influence how individuals negotiate personal autonomy within close relationships.

Gender norms further interact with these cultural values and beliefs, in shaping an individual's relational orientation. Research on gender socialization indicates that children learn culturally appropriate roles through early experiences within their social environments (Carter 2014). Girls are often encouraged to demonstrate empathy, cooperation and emotional sensitivity, even during play. Qualities of assertiveness or over expressions of disagreement often receive less social approval. Over the years, these patterns of reinforcement contribute to internalization of relational expectations that prioritize harmony and accommodation. The intersection of gendered socialization and cultural norms may therefore create certain conditions in which relational accommodation becomes embedded within identity formation. The feminist relational theory proposes that women's sense of self often develops in connection with relationships and interpersonal responsiveness (Koggel et al., 2022). When maintenance of relational harmony becomes closely associated with self-worth or moral responsibility, individuals may have trouble asserting personal needs and establishing interpersonal boundaries.

Such dynamics are particularly relevant during the period of emerging adulthood, a developmental period characterized by expanding social roles and evolving relational commitments. During this stage individuals navigate close interpersonal relations of friendships, romantic relationships and evolving relations with family members while simultaneously developing personal autonomy (Jorgenson & Nelson, 2018; Xia et al., 2018). The construct of people-pleasing may therefore represent a relational strategy shaped by multiple interacting influences, including developmental experiences, personality dispositions, gender socialization, and cultural moral frameworks. Rather than conceptualizing people pleasing solely as an individual central or secondary personal trait, it may be more accurately

understood as a chronic pattern that emerges through ongoing socialization and interpersonal interaction.

The present paper aims to integrate insights from theories of personality, feminist relational theory, developmental psychology, and cultural systems, in order to develop a clearer understanding of people-pleasing within close relationships. The discussion focuses particularly on young Indian women in early adulthood and the ways in which relational expectations may shape patterns of interpersonal accommodation within familial, romantic, and friendship contexts. Through drawing from a number of theoretical sources across fields, the paper presents a comprehensive conceptualization of people pleasing as a socially-constructed, relational orientation to interpersonal connections and offers it as a basis on which future studies can empirically investigate the ways in which people negotiate and navigate relational demands on a day-to-day basis. This conceptualization is also intended to precede an upcoming study which will investigate the experiences of young Indian women in terms of enacting people pleasing in interpersonal contexts.

2. Main Body

Cultural-Moral Scaffold: Duty, Collectivism, and Gendered Relational Norms

In the Indian sociocultural context, relational behaviour may be governed by moral principles of obligation towards family or one wish to uphold in relation to one's social role. One such principle, that of *kartavya*, which has been loosely translated as duty or moral responsibility is a useful example. In normative everyday life, *kartavya* prescribes the way by which close relations and familial position are to be respected, enacted and preserved. That moral judgment is used as a primary criterion for evaluation of family practices amongst Indian families is well documented (Bhangaokar & Kapadia, 2019; Avasthi, 2010).

In collectivist cultures the concept of individual self is often situated within, rather than conceptualized as separate from, relationships. Indeed, cultural psychology research has demonstrated that those socialized in collectivist environments tend to emphasize, in their daily lives, the values of interdependence, relationality, and group harmony (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Sinha & Tripathi, 1994). As such, accommodation and relational sensitivity may be viewed as valued behaviours to be achieved in social encounters rather than disinterested acts of selflessness. Indeed, acts of compliance and responsiveness—repeated expressions of relational sensitivity—may be seen as evidences of moral character.

Gendered expectations operate to shape the content of these norms. Girls across cultures are socialized into relational roles of care, responsiveness, and emotional

responsibility. Feminist psychology research has pointed out that women's identities are often organized around relational orientation and caring in response to the needs of others (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, et al., 1991). In the Indian context, social expectations of femininity often revolve around caring, modesty and deference to family roles and responsibilities. All of these expectations shape their behavioural repertoire in such a way that relational harmony becomes a moral issue and is judged positively or negatively accordingly.

Accordingly, the group's cultural focus on duty creates the general outer structural conditions that shape patterns of relational behaviour. As accommodation and emotional responsiveness are continually conceptualized as a moral obligation people may internalize this as part of their relational self-concept over time. These cultural conditions have thus supplied the foundational structure from which person pleasing type behaviours can meaningfully emerge and be reinforced.

Developmental and Personality Mechanisms: Socialisation and Identity Formation

These culturally normative expectations create the larger, normative framework. However, the development of people-pleasing tendencies within this framework is psychologically meaningful through development. The family is the first contextual setting during which the interpersonal expectations implicit in behaviours are instilled in the developing child. Through many repeated experiences, children learn which behaviors result in positive and negative reinforcers (e.g., love, rejection) from caregivers. When the predictable consequence of being accommodating is reinforcement, the behavior might become increasingly crystalized across contexts.

Social learning theory holds that culturally reinforced behaviours are most likely to be repeated and generalized (Bandura, 1977). Accordingly, in family environments where being compliant, emotionally attuned, or helpful is constantly reinforced, children might come to view relational accommodation as acceptance and belonging. Ultimately, this not only influences the individual's perceptions of relational standards, but can also serve to modify their own behaviour in a relational context. In addition to moral development, personality psychology has identified many dispositional dispositions that may lead to other-oriented relational behaviors.⁶ For example, unmitigated communion (UC), which refers to an overinvolvement in others' needs that comes at one's own expense (Helgeson & Fritz, 1998), may increase a motivation to maintain relationships and a propensity for emotional distress when such relationships are in danger (Cooper & Cox, 2004). Although such orientations likely encourage empathy and caregiving, they may also foster a chronic disposition toward self-regulation in the absence of firm boundaries.

Still another relevant construct can be derived from Karen Horney's (1945) interpersonal theory of personality. Horney depicted a "moving toward people" attitude, in which individuals desire a great deal of approval, love, and acceptance from others. Those adopting this mode of relating to others could attempt to stay close to others by avoiding or suppressing conflict and attending to other people's needs. When this orientation becomes a core component of identity, relational accommodation would no longer be a temporary response to a situation but, rather, an integral part of who one is.

Attachment theory represents another developmental framework that may shed light on helping behaviors. Those with an avoidant or anxious attachment style may learn ways to maintain relationship stability when an impending threat to intimacy is perceived (Bowlby, 1988). For some, the suppression of own needs may act as a way to stay away from rejection or conflict. This may early on, but in time, such a way of being may translate to patterns of silencing oneself and suppressing one's own emotions in intimate relationships. Through repeated socialization experiences and personality development, relational accommodation gradually acquires psychological significance. Behaviour that was initially learned as a context-specific response may eventually become integrated into the individual's self-concept. This developmental process helps explain how people pleasing may become embedded at the level of identity rather than remaining a temporary behavioural strategy.

Daily Relational Practice: Emotional and Hermeneutic Labour

When people pleasing tendencies are internalized, they typically appear in day-to-day relational engagement. While the expression of such tendencies are evident in all close interpersonal relationships: family, friends, romantic partners, individuals will find themselves engaged in various forms of relational work, the purpose of which is to create harmony within relationships, as well as mitigate potential interpersonal strain.

One instance of this type of labor is emotional labor, the concept first introduced by Hochschild (1983) to define the regulation of one's emotions to comply with felt social expectations. Initially theorized about workplace interaction, the concept has since been expanded to interpersonal relationships. In individuals who are relationship-oriented, this might translate to a constant modulation of emotions, repressing negative feelings, and feigning a sense of empathy, warmth, or agreement, just to maintain equilibrium in relationships.

Similar to emotional labor, is the idea of hermeneutic labor, which involves the processes an individual uses to attempt to predict and make sense of another's emotions (Bergen, 2016). In interpersonal relationships, people will expend a significant amount of their cognitive and emotional energies trying to understand how another person might feel, in

order to avert conflict or manage their feelings in ways that will be pleasing to the other. These processes often occur all the time and may become a routinized aspect of highly affectual relationships.

These relational practices are also often coupled with self-monitoring where one monitors one's own behaviour to ensure it conforms to one's expectations about the nature of relationships. Feminists have been keen to highlight women's socialization into policing their behavior in ways that uphold both approval and relations (Jack, 1991). With time, this can develop into an enduring tendency on the part of the individual to silence or diminish his or her needs. These everyday behaviors repeat over the course of repeated interaction, helping to strengthen the behaviors that make up people pleasing. Accommodation moves from a specific behavior used as a response strategy to the default mode of relating to others. Once these behaviors become normalized within a relationship, they also affect individuals' understanding of relational demands and their perceptions of their own behavior.

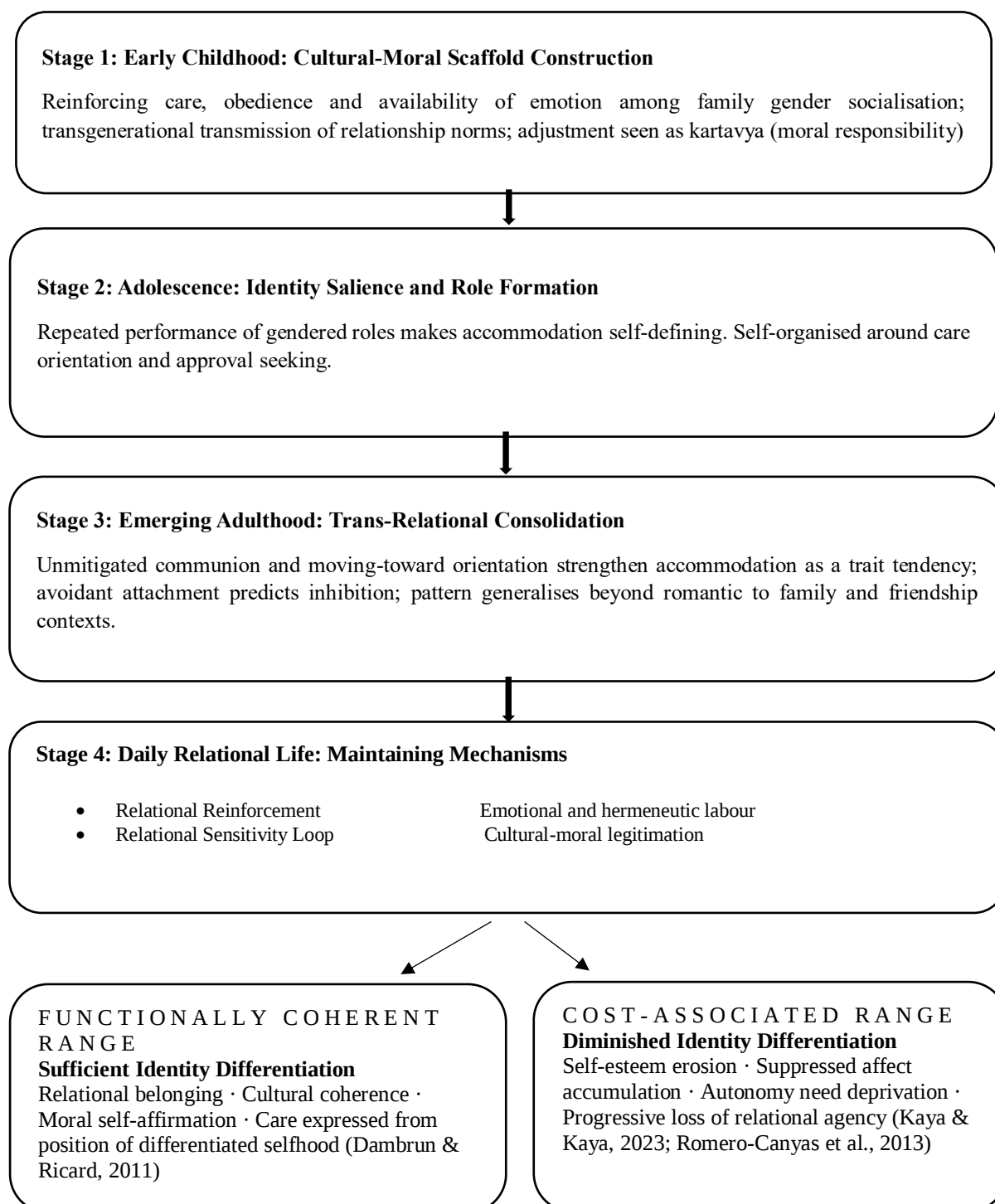
Maintaining Mechanisms: Rejection Sensitivity and Reinforcement Loops

After developed, people-pleasing may be maintained by various cognitive processes. One important cognitive process maintaining people-pleasing is rejection sensitivity. Rejection sensitivity is the tendency to eagerly anticipate and experience as pervasive and unpredictable experiences of rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). High rejection sensitive people are generally hyper vigilant to indicators of interpersonal rejection. They tend to exhibit behavior to avoid conflict or rejection once they sense threats to relationship acceptance.

Accommodating behavior is reinforced when it seemingly avoids conflict with another person. The result is a feedback loop whereby harmony with the other person increases the perception that suppression is effective. The individual's dependency on accommodative behavior may increase. Similarly, cultural norms might even justify it. In social situations in which sacrificing the relationship is taken as an indication of "character" or relational commitment, accommodating behavior could be rewarded with the approval of others. Individuals are rewarded with social validation for displaying behaviors that both restrain the expression of personal needs and further entrench their behavior.

By way of these various channels, people pleasing can become a self-perpetuating strategy for relating with others. In the absence of immediate or intense negative feelings, the positive goal of relational stability might encourage further adjustment.

3. Developmental Trajectory: Stacked Processual Model of Acquisition, Consolidation, and Outcomes



Developmental trajectory of people-pleasing as a culturally scaffolded identity strategy across four stages. Stage 1 (early childhood): the cultural-moral scaffold is constructed through primary gender socialisation, differential reinforcement, and kartavya instruction within the family relationship. Stage 2 (adolescence): repeated accommodating conduct generates identity salience and the relational self becomes increasingly organised around care orientation and

approval-seeking. Stage 3 (emerging adulthood): the personality mechanisms of unmitigated communion, the moving toward orientation, and avoidant attachment consolidate the orientation concurrently across the three close relationship domains. Stage 4 (daily relational life): four maintaining mechanisms sustain the orientation across close relational contexts. From Stage 4, the trajectory is dimensional rather than binary. When identity differentiation is sufficient, the orientation operates within a functionally coherent range associated with relational belonging, cultural coherence, and moral self-affirmation. When identity differentiation progressively diminishes, the orientation is associated with the cost outcomes documented in the empirical literature. A feedback path from the cost-associated range back to Stage 4 indicates that these outcomes tend to intensify the maintaining mechanisms. The absence of a fixed boundary between outcome ranges reflects the model's dimensional account.

4. Implications for Future Research

Seeing people pleasing as a culturally sustained relational strategy has several implications. Firstly, it underlines the significance of studying relational behaviour through a broader attachment cultural lens. Most studies exploring approval-seeking and self-silencing have been rooted within Western settings, prioritizing individualism as a fundamental cultural characteristic. Using these approaches without culturally tweaking them may neglect to appreciate the culturally driven concept of relational duty and collectivism in other cultures. Thus, future research should focus on more culturally contextualized work that directly investigates the integration of relational norms with individual cognition. Among Indian participants, constructs such as *kartavya*, family obligation, and deference to hierarchy may influence the individual understanding of relational expectations. Studying the manner in which these cultural variables influence the formation and expression of people pleasing can potentially enrich the phenomenon with a more contextually specific understanding.

Secondly, suggested that people pleasing could be understood as a continuum rather than an entirely maladaptive behaviour. In some relational situations, being attuned to the needs of others and being accommodating may be appropriate, desirable, and facilitate relational bonds and care giving. When these tendencies are inflexible or part of one's sense of self, they may be harmful to the individual and cause emotional and boundary problems and reduced autonomy.

Clinicians too may address chronic under-regulation by not encouraging individuals to just stop their sensitivity to relationship but by helping to increase their identity differentiation and boundary awareness. Interventions that facilitate expression of needs without

disengagement might thus reduce the mental health toll of chronic self-suppression. Lastly, the framework suggests that there is a need to compare people pleasing across different types of relationships. Participants may encounter different types of standards across family, friends, and romantic relationships. Comparing how the domains inform each other may give insight into how the standards of various relationship contexts are negotiated in people's everyday lives.

5. Conclusion

Clinical observation has a history of viewing people pleasing as chronic interpersonal accommodation. However, current frameworks tend to be narrowly based on either personality or interpersonal processes rather than on their interconnectedness and embeddedness in wider socio-cultural processes. It is argued that accommodating is a culturally mediated identity strategy that develops via the interaction of cultural norms, developmental process, personality mechanisms, and relational interactions. In the Indian culture, frameworks such as *kartavya* and collectivistic relational norms set the moral context for the initial acquisition of accommodating as socially accepted behavior that subsequently becomes a relational aspect of self through social learning and identity construction.

After people-pleasing is internalised it is enacted in daily relational practices such as the emotional labor and interpretive work they perform, as well as monitoring their own selves. It might also be maintained through operant processes and the tendency to react strongly to relational rejection. The resulting behavioral tendency could be both a strategy for relational inclusion, and also for possible psychological distress. Positioning the discourse of people pleasing within this multifaceted conceptualization contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. This model can also be an impetus for future empirical studies exploring the everyday negotiation of these relational expectations by young Indian women.

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