

Abstract: Examining the Role of Gender in the Factor Structure of Parenting Behaviors  
RCAF 2020 Proposal

This project examines the role of gender in the factor structure of parenting behaviors within a free play context. Although studies have assessed caregiving behavior using multiple dimensions (e.g., sensitivity, intrusiveness, detachment), few studies focus on how these behaviors are associated and whether such associations vary by gender. In one study comparing maternal and paternal sensitivity toward infants, mothers and fathers were equally sensitive across different caregiving contexts (Branger et al., 2019). However, there are two important limitations. First, the focus was only on parental sensitivity. Second, the researchers did not examine parenting behaviors using formal statistical procedure. This study addresses these limitations by examining mothers' and fathers' parenting behaviors using multiple dimensions in a latent structural model.

The sample for this study comprises 142 mothers, 127 fathers, and their 6-month-old infants. Mother-child and father-child dyads were observed separately during free play (i.e., the dyad plays without toys). The free play sessions were videotaped and then coded using scales adapted from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care (Frosch & Owen, 2016). Parenting behaviors included in analyses are sensitivity (i.e., prompt, appropriate responding), intrusiveness (i.e., parent imposes own agenda), detachment (i.e., lack of emotional connection), positive regard (i.e., warmth and affection), and negative regard (i.e., physical and verbal harshness).

Results of structural equation modeling indicate no gender differences for the underlying factor structure of parenting behaviors. Findings from the current study indicates parental caregiving behaviors are represented by two factors: emotional disengagement and negative intrusiveness, converging with and extending the previous studies (Mills-Koonce et al., 2009; Xu, 2018). Findings from the study provide evidence supporting the use of formal models (e.g., structural equation modeling) that capture underlying variation in caregiving behaviors and consider the role of gender in caregiving investigations of parent-child relationships and parenting outcomes.