

# Examining the Role of Gender in the Factor Structure of Parenting Behaviors



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# Introduction

- This project examines the role of gender in mothers' and fathers' parenting behaviors during a free play context.
- Studies have assessed caregiving behavior using multiple dimensions, but few focus on how these behaviors are associated and whether such associations vary by gender.
- For example, mothers and fathers have been found to exhibit comparable sensitive caregiving across different caregiving contexts (Branger et al., 2019). However, this study only focused on sensitivity and did not include other aspects of parenting behaviors.
- When considering other parenting behavior, prior research indicates that maternal caregiving behaviors are best represented by two factors (Mills-Koonce et al., 2009): *emotional engagement* and *negative intrusiveness*.
- In line with such evidence, in the current study we examine the comparability of mothers' and fathers' caregiving behavior across a range of parenting dimension and examine the comparability of the latent structure of these caregiving behaviors for mothers and fathers.

#### Method

- <u>Participants:</u> 142 mothers and 129 fathers and their 6-month-old infants
- Free Play (5 min): mothers and fathers played with their 6-month-old infant as they normally would without toys
- Free play sessions were videotaped and then coded using scales adapted from NICHD Study of Early Child Care
- Caregiving Behavior (Frosch & Owen, 2016):
  - Sensitivity: prompt, appropriate responding to child
  - Intrusiveness: impose parent's own agenda on the child
  - Detachment: lack of emotional connection and physical involvement with the child
  - Positive Regard: warmth and affection toward the child
  - Negative Regard: physical and verbal harshness toward the child

### Results

#### Comparability of Mothers' and Fathers' Caregiving Behaviors

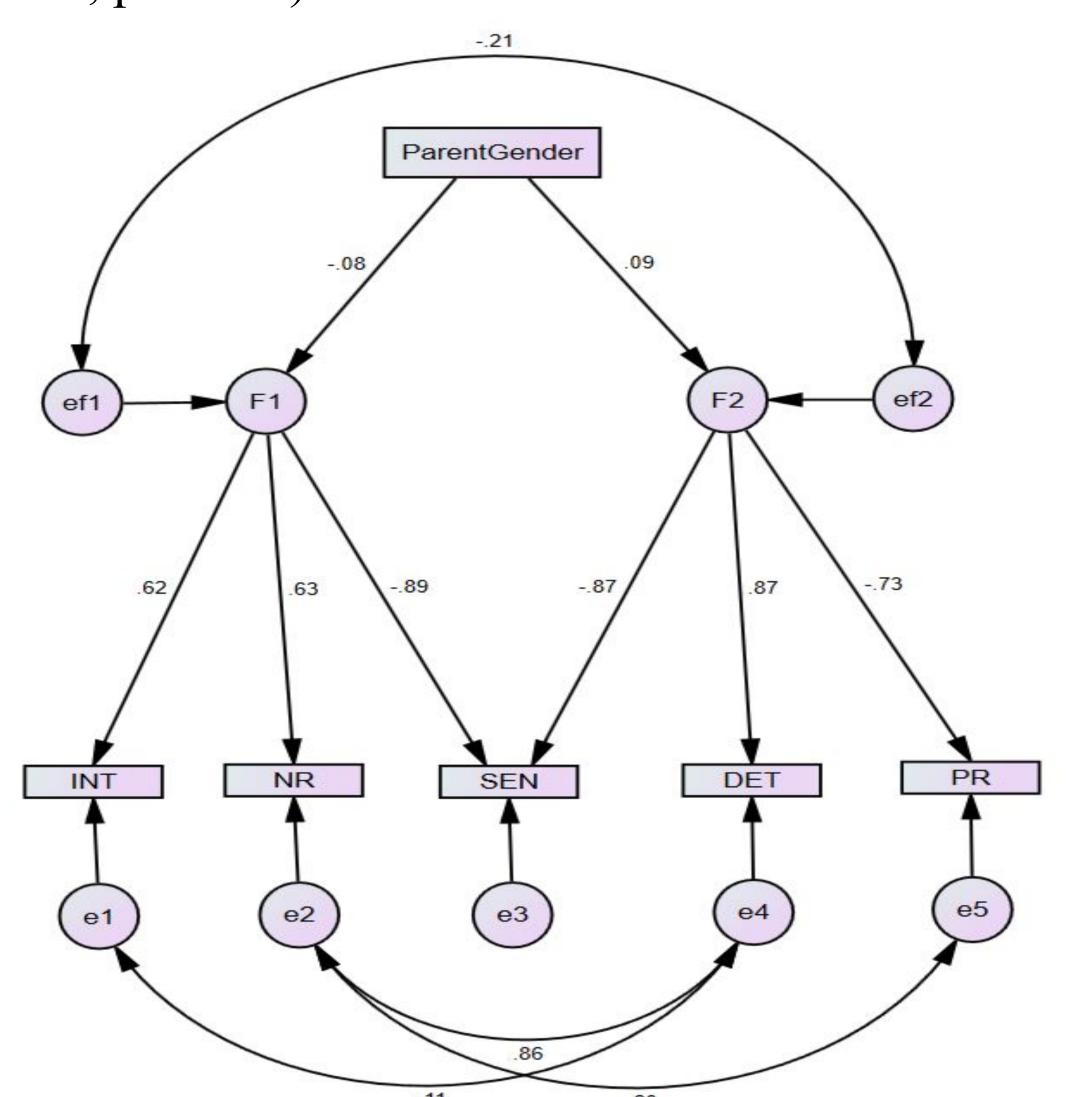
• Mothers and fathers demonstrated comparable levels of parenting behaviors on all caregiving variables except detachment. Fathers demonstrated significantly higher levels of detachment than mothers.

	Mother		Father			
Variable	M	SD	M	SD	t	p
Global Sensitivity	3.16	0.86	3.11	0.91	0.52	0.61
Intrusiveness	2.27	1.01	2.24	0.87	0.20	0.84
Detachment	1.77	1.02	2.13	1.02	-2.88	0.00
Positive Regard	3.26	0.86	3.26	0.99	0.01	0.99
Negative Regard	1.42	0.73	1.48	0.74	-0.64	0.52

## Latent Structure of Parenting Behaviors for Mothers and Fathers

As seen in the figure below:

- A two-factor model best accounted for the data. The first factor reflected negative intrusiveness. The second factor reflected emotional disengagement.
- The latent structure of parenting behaviors did not vary across mothers and fathers ( $\chi = 3.81$ , p = 0.43).



Parent Gender  $\rightarrow$  F1:  $\beta$  = -.08, n.s.; Parent Gender  $\rightarrow$  F2:  $\beta$  = .09, n.s. Model Fit: TLI = .90, CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = .12

#### Discussion

- Fathers demonstrated higher levels of detachment than mothers, suggesting that fathers may be less aware of the infant's needs for appropriate interaction.
- Few studies focused on fathers' detachment. Most studies focused on comparing mothers' and fathers' sensitivity (e.g., Branger et al., 2019). Future studies should examine the role of detachment across gender and the implication for parenting.
- Converging with and extending prior research (Mills-Koonce et al., 2009), the current study demonstrated the latent structure of parental caregiving behavior can be best accounted by two factors: *negative intrusiveness* and *emotional disengagement*, for both mothers and fathers during the free play with their infant.
- Contradicting with previous literature (Steenhoff et al., 2019), mothers and fathers exhibited the same latent caregiving structure in our sample, suggesting that their caregiving behaviors may start from the same origin.
- Steenhoff and colleagues (2019) recruited preschoolers in their study. This suggests that the latent structure of caregiving behaviors may change over time. Future studies should examine parenting trajectory across gender in longitudinal studies.

#### References

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