

The Role of Perceived Societal Pressure and Parents' Child-Oriented Self-Construal in Overprotective and Controlling Parenting in Belgian Parents of Adolescents

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Abstract

Societal expectations and demands regarding parenting roles have significantly intensified in recent decades, putting pressure on parents to be perfect in their parental role, which may push them to become overly involved in their children's lives. Although evidence suggests that perceived societal pressure is associated with overprotective and controlling parenting, less is known about which parents are more sensitive to such pressure. We investigated whether parents' child-oriented interdependent self-construal (the degree to which parents consider their relationship with their children as self-defining) moderates the relations of perceived societal pressure with overprotection and controlling parenting in Belgium. Thereby, we also examined potential parental gender differences. Participants were predominantly highly educated parents of adolescents (276 mothers, 142 fathers; most were married or cohabiting). Results showed that perceived societal pressure was associated with more overprotection among both mothers and fathers and more controlling parenting among fathers. For mothers only, interdependent self-construal was significantly related to more overprotection and controlling parenting. Sensitivity analyses suggested that gender differences in these associations were attenuated in families characterized by shared caregiving. We found no evidence that parents' self-construal moderated the association between perceived pressure and parenting. These findings suggest that excessive societal expectations may contribute to negative parenting practices, and that although child-oriented interdependent self-construal does not increase sensitivity to such pressures, mothers with a more interdependent self-construal may be at greater risk of overprotective and controlling parenting. Findings highlight the importance of addressing societal pressures in parenting support/prevention programs aimed at reducing overprotective and controlling parenting.

Keywords: societal pressure, parenting, self-construal, parental gender

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Introduction

In the last decades, societal expectations and demands for parents to be strongly invested in their children have increased considerably, to the point where it is almost impossible for contemporary parents to meet those expectations (see Henderson et al., 2016; Novoa et al., 2022; Walper & Kreyenfeld, 2022). Parents, and especially mothers, are expected to invest vast amounts of time and energy in their children's development and to know a great deal about what is best for their child's well-being (Faircloth, 2014b; Hays, 1996; Lee, 2014). Consequently, parents may experience considerable pressures to be a perfect parent through various channels, such as through traditional and social media, from other parents, and from society in general, and this heightened pressure is more pronounced now than it has been in the past (Walper & Kreyenfeld, 2022). Ultimately, such feelings of societal pressure not only put parents at risk for mental health difficulties (e.g., Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018), they also may push some parents to become overly protective and controlling in their child-rearing (Lamprianidou et al., 2025). In this study, we examined whether some parents, depending on the degree to which they consider their relationship with their children as an important part of their identity, are more sensitive to societal pressures to be perfect as a parent, and thus are more likely to adopt overprotective and controlling parenting practices.

Overprotective and Controlling Parenting

In the present investigation, we investigated relations between perceived societal pressure and both parental overprotection and controlling parenting in the academic domain. Parental overprotection refers to an excessive and inappropriate protection considering the developmental level and skills of the child (Chevrier et al., 2023; Thomasgard et al., 1995),

whereas controlling parenting can be defined as parents' reliance upon intrusive and manipulative parental behaviors (Cheung et al., 2016). Herein, for controlling parenting, we centered specifically on the academic domain as it is one of the prominent domains where expectations towards parents are much higher than in the past (Jezierski & Wall, 2019). Focusing on overprotective and controlling parental practices is important as they may hinder adolescents' developmental needs, such as their need for autonomy (Schiffrin et al., 2014; Smetana et al., 2015), their social development (Mathijs et al., 2024), and their identity formation (Albert Sznitman et al., 2022; Skhirtladze & Van Petegem, 2024). Relatedly, it has been demonstrated that both parenting practices are associated with adolescent adjustment problems such as lower academic and emotional functioning (Cheung et al., 2016) and higher externalizing and internalizing problems (Flamant et al., 2022; Piquart, 2017), which highlights further the significance of examining the determinants of these practices. A small number of studies have found that parental perceptions of societal pressure to be a perfect parent relate to more overprotective and controlling parenting in adolescence (Lamprianidou et al., 2025; Ryan et al., 2024; Venard et al., 2024), as is outlined in the next section.

Perceived Societal Pressure and Parenting

It has been argued that an ideology of intensive parenting has become a dominant discourse about parenting in many contemporary societies, where parents are expected to always prioritize their children's needs and desires over their own and to spend vast amounts of time, energy, and financial resources to their children (Hays et al., 1996; Novoa et al., 2022; Walper & Kreyenfeld, 2022). Parents are also prompted to be fully informed and constantly reflect on their parenting practices (Novoa et al., 2022), while being at the same time continuously exposed to messages and advice regarding how to be a "good parent" (Lee, 2014). Indeed, parents are increasingly expected to be highly involved in their children's upbringing, facing an increasing number of tasks that fall on their shoulders (e.g., following

up schoolwork, being involved in school activities, monitoring their children, organizing leisure time through structured activities; see Faircloth, 2014b; Novoa et al., 2022). Although not all parents endorse the ideology of intensive parenting, it is argued that this set of beliefs and expectations has become the standard by which parents are nowadays evaluated (Arendell, 2000; Novoa et al., 2022). Additionally, increased labor market competition that may trigger higher educational aspirations in parents for their children could further fuel these pressures (Van Petegem et al., 2024; Walper & Kreyenfeld, 2022).

These changes are important since these societal pressures have been found to relate to negative repercussions for parents' mental health and parenting practices (Henderson et al., 2016; Wuyts, Chen, et al., 2015). Indeed, it has been shown that among mothers, perceived pressure to be a perfect parent is related to feelings of guilt and stress, as well as lower self-efficacy beliefs (Henderson et al., 2016; Rotkirch & Janhunen, 2010). In addition, perceived societal pressure has been associated with work-family balance difficulties for mothers, as well as putting them at risk for parental burnout symptoms (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018). There is also some evidence indicating that parental perceived societal pressure is linked to overly involved parenting practices. For instance, Wuyts, Chen, et al. (2015) showed that societal pressure on parents positively relates to achievement-oriented controlling parenting. Corroborating this finding, Venard et al. (2024) revealed that societal pressure to be a perfect parent predicted higher levels of overprotection. Similarly, in a person-centered study, Lamprianidou et al. (2025) revealed that profiles of parents perceiving higher societal pressures reported higher levels of overprotection and controlling parenting. However, some parents may be more sensitive to these societal pressures than others and may be more likely to enact upon these pressures by becoming more controlling and overprotective. Unfortunately, we are not aware of previous research examining possible moderators in this

relation. In the present study, we focused specifically on the potentially moderating role of parents' self-construal.

The Moderating Role of Parents' Interdependent Self-Construal

Self-construal refers to “how individuals see the self in relation to others” (Cross et al., 2011, p. 143). Researchers have differentiated self-construal into two types: independent and interdependent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991b). Independent self-construal refers to a view of the self that is differentiated from others whereas interdependent self-construal reflects the view of the self as more connected to others and less separated (Cross & Madson, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991b). A considerable body of research compared these dimensions across cultural contexts, as it is argued that interdependent self-construal is predominant in Eastern cultures whereas independent self-construal is predominant in Western cultures (Han & Humphreys, 2016; Markus & Kitayama, 1991b). However, individuals' self-construal may vary considerably within one cultural context as well, and variations in self-construal can help to understand within-cultural differences in perceptions and behaviors (see Cross et al., 2011, for an overview). In addition, although interdependent self-construal is considered to be particularly prominent in cultures where familism and collectivism is emphasized, research suggests that Western cultures also often retain interdependent elements, especially within the family domain (Pomerantz et al., 2009; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008; Vignoles et al., 2016). Examining the moderating role of interdependent self-construal may therefore allow capturing meaningful within-culture variability in parents' relational orientations that may shape the way in which societal pressures to be a perfect parent translate into parenting practices, even in predominantly individualistic national contexts. Past studies considered interdependence in self-construal in the context of nonspecific (e.g., in relation to “close others”) or specific relationships (e.g., in relation to the parents; Pomerantz et al., 2009). Considering our focus on perceived societal pressure and parental practices, in this study, we focused on parents'

child-oriented interdependent self-construal. This refers to the extent to which parents view their relationships with their children as central to how they define themselves (see Eaton, 2003).

Previous research has shown that parents with a more child-oriented interdependent self-construal reported higher levels of parental control in the academic domain, as they are more likely to base their self-worth on their children's successes and failures – also known as *child-contingent self-worth* (Eaton, 2003). Similarly, past research demonstrated that parents who are high on child-contingent self-worth are more prone to use overprotective (Eberly Lewis et al., 2023) and controlling (Wuyts, Chen, et al., 2015) parenting practices, as they seek to ensure their child's success. Further, it is also possible that parents with more interdependent self-construal may feel personally responsible for their children's well-being and development, as individuals with interdependent self-construal place strong emphasis on relational obligations and responsibility toward others (Cross et al., 2011; Markus & Kitayama, 1991b). As a result, these parents may be particularly worried or preoccupied with their children's future success and overall well-being, such that even well-intentioned concerns can lead to overprotective or controlling behaviors (Gurland & Grolnick, 2024; Mouton et al., 2025). Moreover, individuals with more interdependent self-construal tend to prioritize maintaining relational closeness and fulfilling their roles within important relationships (Cross et al., 2011; Markus & Kitayama, 1991b). As such, they may engage in overprotective and controlling parenting not only out of concerns about success and failure, but also from a desire to maintain relational closeness, ensure safety, and fulfill perceived parenting responsibilities (Brenning et al., 2017).

Building on this, in this study, we hypothesize that interdependent self-construal may not only directly relate to overprotective and controlling parenting, but also may amplify the relation between societal pressure and these parenting practices. Indeed, we expect that

parents with more interdependent self-construal may be more prone to perceive societal pressure and intensive parenting norms, and may be more likely to act upon these norms and pressures. This is because self-construals and cultural orientations may shape how parents interpret and respond to such external social expectations (Bornstein & Cheah, 2006; Rudy & Grusec, 2001), including parenting norms. Parents with a more interdependent self-construal may internalize social expectations more deeply and feel a stronger obligation to meet idealized parenting standards. Therefore, these parents may feel more compelled to control their children in order to maintain social approval and social harmony, fulfill perceived societal expectations, and be seen as a “good parent” (see Markus & Kitayama, 1991a). The existing literature on self-construal provides indirect support for this hypothesis, as it was shown that individuals with interdependent self-construal are more susceptible to social influences and group pressure (Iyengar & Brockner, 2001). For instance, one study revealed that individuals with an interdependent self-construal are more inclined to follow others’ expectations and are more willing to please others (Oeberst & Wu, 2015). As such, parents with a more interdependent self-construal may be more likely to use overprotective and controlling parenting practices to conform to societal pressure to be perfect parents. Therefore, we expected that parents’ interdependent self-construal would play a moderating role in the relationship between perceived societal pressure and overprotective and controlling parenting. In addition, we also tested whether the pattern of these associations would differ depending on parents’ gender, for the reasons outlined below.

The Role of Parental Gender

Men and women are socialized differently starting from the early years of life. Specifically, women are taught to be nurturant, compassionate, and relationship-oriented whereas men are taught to be independent, competitive, and achievement-oriented (Block et al., 2018; Edwards et al., 2003). Gender socialization processes lead individuals to internalize

traits strongly associated with their gender and reject those that are not (e.g., Endendijk et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2002), which may contribute to gender differences in self-construal (Cross & Madson, 1997; Smith et al., 2020). Supporting these arguments, parental identity research suggests that the importance of parental identity to the parents' self-concept is higher among mothers than fathers (e.g., Gaunt & Scott, 2017). Specifically, research showed that mothers attach more importance to parental identity (Gaunt & Scott, 2017) and have a more salient parental identity than fathers (Gaunt & Scott, 2017; Pinho & Gaunt, 2023).

Moreover, even though expectations regarding father involvement in childcare have changed (Faircloth, 2014a), societal expectations still prescribe mothers to spend more time and energy on caregiving, considering them as the primary caregiver (Henderson et al., 2016). Indeed, mothers are expected to devote more time to caregiving than fathers (see Sullivan et al., 2018). Therefore, mothers may be more likely to perceive more societal pressure to be a perfect parent, as past research also indicates (e.g., Venard et al., 2024). Relatedly, the associated literature often focuses on mothers. These gendered pressures may also explain gender differences in parental involvement that are coherent with traditional gender roles (i.e., the mother as the main caregiver), with gender disparities persisting into adolescence (Mastrotheodoros et al., 2019). For instance, it was shown that mothers' involvement in childcare tasks is higher than fathers (Gaunt & Scott, 2014), and mothers tend to use higher levels of overprotective parenting practices (e.g., Venard et al., 2024) and to set more rules regarding their children's out-of-home activities (Mastrotheodoros et al., 2019; see also Yaffe, 2020 for a review). Taken together, this evidence underlines the importance of considering the possible role of gender when studying the associations of societal pressure and parents' self-construal with parenting practices.

The Current Study

This study aimed to investigate (a) the associations between perceived societal pressure to be a perfect parent and overprotective and controlling parenting, (b) the moderating role of parents' interdependent self-construal in these associations, and (c) whether the relations of perceived societal pressure and parents' interdependent self-construal with both parenting practices differ across parental gender. We examined these associations in Belgium, a Western European country that has a relatively egalitarian economy (Gini = 0.249; Eurostat, 2024) and low youth unemployment (5.1% in 2022; Eurostat, 2023), and characterized by a stronger emphasis on individualism than on collectivism (Hofstede Insights, 2025). Parental involvement in schooling is high (Hampden-Thompson et al., 2013) and Belgian caregivers predominantly employ an authoritative style - combining high responsiveness and appropriate level of parental control (Goossens & Luyckx, 2007). In addition, parental burnout is relatively higher in Belgium than many other countries including some Western countries (Roskam et al., 2021), which could be reflective of the intensity of societal pressure to be a perfect parent and the ways in which parents integrate their child relationship into their self-construal. Finally, while Belgium is frequently characterized as a relatively gender-egalitarian context (e.g., according to the Global Gender Gap Index; World Economic Forum, 2025), evidence suggests that gender disparities persist, especially in the family realm. For instance, women often continue to assume greater responsibility for childcare and household tasks than men, even when both partners are employed (Meeussen et al., 2016).

We hypothesized that perceived societal pressure to be a perfect parent would be associated with higher levels of overprotective and controlling parenting (Hypothesis 1). Additionally, we expected that parents' interdependent self-construal would moderate the relations between perceived societal pressure and overprotective and controlling parenting practices (Hypothesis 2). Finally, we anticipated that the positive relations of perceived

societal pressure and parents' interdependent self-construal with both parenting practices would be particularly pronounced among mothers (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants

Participants of this study were 276 mothers ($M_{\text{age}} = 48.51$, $SD = 4.51$) and 142 fathers ($M_{\text{age}} = 49.73$, $SD = 5.56$) of adolescents ($M_{\text{age}} = 16.35$, $SD = 0.84$; age range = 14 – 20 years; the large majority was 16 or 17 years old; 52% girls) residing in the French-speaking part of Belgium. In total, 330 families participated: 88 dyads in which both parents completed the questionnaires, 188 families in which only the mother participated, and 54 families in which only the father participated. Most parents were married (44.2% mothers, 56.3% fathers) or cohabiting (26.8% mothers, 25.4% fathers), whereas 15.6% of mothers and 14.1% of fathers were divorced or separated. Most of the parents were married (44.2% mothers, 56.3% fathers) or cohabiting (26.8% mothers, 25.4% fathers), whereas 15.6% of mothers and 14.1% of fathers were divorced, separated. As for educational level, the majority of the mothers (59.9%) and fathers (65.5%) had a bachelor's degree or higher; 34.4% of mothers and 30.3% of fathers were secondary school graduates, and only few mothers (less than 2%) and fathers (less than 1%) had lower than secondary education. The vast majority of mothers (87.7%) and fathers (90.8%) were employed. Parents also reported on their subjective socioeconomic status (SES) on a visual ten-rung ladder ranging from 1 (*very high status*) to 10 (*very low status*; Adler et al., 2000). For ease of interpretation, the scores were reversed so that higher values reflect higher perceived SES (1 = *very low*, 10 = *very high*). Mothers and fathers scored on average 6.77 ($SD = 1.74$) and 7.07 ($SD = 1.66$), respectively.

Procedure

Before conducting the study, we received the approval of the Institutional Review Board of the Faculty of Psychological and Education Sciences of the Université libre de Bruxelles,

Belgium. Parents were recruited through 16 secondary schools in the French-speaking part of Belgium that voluntarily agreed to take part in the project. All parents of participating adolescents were invited to complete the parent questionnaire. There were no formal exclusion criteria for participation. However, participation was based on the voluntary agreement of schools, parents, and adolescents, and thus reflects a convenience sample.

The research team visited classes of the penultimate and final years of obligatory schooling. During a regular class period, the team first introduced the study, and then distributed questionnaires and informed consents to adolescents for their parents or parental figures. Each student received two questionnaires, two consents, and two pre-stamped envelopes. Parents were invited to sign the consent form and complete the questionnaires individually. Using the pre-stamped envelopes, participating parents returned the questionnaires to the university. An online version of the questionnaire was also available but almost all parents completed the paper questionnaire (90.86 of mothers, and 93.33% of fathers). Data from two parents of the same adolescent were linked using unique randomly generated codes.

Measures

All scales were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*). Cronbach's α coefficients for all scales are presented in Table 1 and ranged from .80 to .94 for mothers and from .84 to .94 for fathers (see Table 1). Parents were instructed to answer the overprotective and controlling parenting questionnaires with reference to the specific child who had provided them with the questionnaire.

Perceived Societal Pressure to be a Perfect Parent

Parents reported on their perceived societal pressure with 15 items adapted from two scales. Twelve items were adapted from the Social Pressure to Be an Achievement-Promoting Parent Scale (Wuyts, Vansteenkiste, et al., 2015), and 3 items were adapted from the Pressure to Be a Perfect Mother Scale (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018; see Lamprianidou et al., 2025). The

combined scale assesses perceived external pressure to be a perfect parent from society, media, and other parents (e.g., “Society expects me to be a perfect parent.”). The two scales were highly correlated ($r = .72$ for mothers, $r = .76$ for fathers), supporting their conceptual similarity. Exploratory factor analyses indicated that all items loaded adequately on a single factor (factor loadings $\geq .57$ for mothers and $\geq .54$ for fathers), which explained 56% and 53% of the variance for mothers and fathers, respectively. These results suggest that the combined scale is a valid measure of perceived societal pressure in this sample, consistent with prior work from the same project (Lamprianidou et al., 2025).

Parents’ Interdependent Self-Concept

Parents’ interdependent self-construal was assessed with 16 items adapted from Pomerantz et al. (2009). The original items that assess children’s parent-oriented self-construal were modified to address the degree to which parents consider their relationship with *their children* as central parts of their self (e.g., “My relationships with my parents are an important part of who I am” was modified to “My relationships with my children are an important part of who I am.”). In this study, we used the 9 items having factor loadings above .40.

Parental Overprotection

Parents reported on their parental overprotection through the Anxious Overprotection Subscale of the short version of the Multidimensional Overprotective Parenting Scale (Chevrier et al., 2023). The scale is composed of 10 items measuring anxiety-driven overprotective behaviors (e.g., “I immediately see danger whenever my child wants to do something new.”).

Controlling Parenting

Controlling parenting was measured with the Parental Control scale (Cheung et al., 2016). This 10-item scale assesses controlling parenting practices in the academic context (e.g., “If my child is not studying as much as I think he/she should, I tell him/her of all the sacrifices I have made for him/her.”). One item (“For things related to school, I am usually in charge”)

was excluded because it reflects parental role responsibility rather than psychologically controlling academic parenting practices, which are the primary focus of the scale. Its exclusion also resulted in improved internal consistency (Cronbach's α increased from .83 to .85 for mothers and from .83 to .86 for fathers).

Missing Data

The rate of missing data for each variable was very low, ranging from 0.23% to 2.63%. Little's (1988) test of missing completely at random (MCAR) revealed that the data were missing completely at random, $\chi^2(32) = 36.9, p = .251$. We excluded missing values from the analyses.

Data Analysis

We performed all analyses in R statistical software (R Core Team, 2023). Parent gender was dummy coded (mothers = 0, fathers = 1) and the study variables were standardized by converting to *z*-scores before the analyses. As preliminary analyses, first, we examined correlations among the study variables. Then, using the *nlme* package (Pinheiro et al., 2023), we tested whether parental gender, age, education, perceived SES, child gender, and family structure (married, cohabiting, divorced-separated) were associated with the study variables via linear mixed modeling. We used maximum likelihood estimation (ML), and as mothers and fathers (Level 1) were nested within dyads (Level 2), random intercepts per dyad were included in all models to account for the interdependence within dyads. For the main analyses, we conducted separate linear mixed-effects models for overprotective and controlling parenting. We also controlled for the sociodemographic variables that were significantly associated with our dependent variables.

We then conducted three subsequent models for both overprotective and controlling parenting. The first step involved testing the main effects of parent gender, perceived societal pressure, and interdependent self-construal (Model 1). The second step involved adding the two-way interactions between parent gender and perceived societal pressure, between parent

gender and interdependent self-construal, and between perceived societal pressure and interdependent self-construal (Model 2), whereas the third step involved adding the three-way interactions between parent gender, perceived societal pressure, and interdependent self-construal (Model 3). We compared the subsequent model with the previous model using a deviance test (likelihood ratio test, LR χ^2), and if they did not differ significantly (i.e., if the p -value of the LR χ^2 is above .05), we preferred the more parsimonious model. For significant interactions, simple slopes were examined with the *emmeans* package (Lenth et al., 2023). These steps were performed separately for overprotection and controlling parenting.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among the study variables by gender are presented in Table 1. All correlations were significant and positive, except for the correlations of fathers' interdependent self-construal with overprotection and controlling parenting. Linear mixed models examining the role of parental age, parental education, perceived SES, adolescent's gender, and family structure showed that parents with higher education levels reported lower levels of overprotection ($b = -.10$, $SE = .03$, $p = .005$) and controlling parenting ($b = -.08$, $SE = .03$, $p = .024$). In addition, perceived SES was negatively associated with perceived societal pressure ($b = -.08$, $SE = .03$, $p = .007$), overprotection ($b = -.12$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$), and controlling parenting ($b = -.07$, $SE = .03$, $p = .015$). All other relations were not significant ($ps > .05$). We included parental education as a control variable in the main analyses because it represents a more objective indicator of socioeconomic background. Because perceived SES also showed significant associations with some study variables, we additionally controlled for perceived SES alongside parental education in the sensitivity analyses.

Main Analyses

Results for Overprotection

The deviance test comparing the model with only main effects (Model 1) and the model including two-way interactions (Model 2) was significant for overprotection ($p < .001$). The deviance test indicated that the model including three-way interactions (Model 3) did not differ significantly from the Model 2 ($p = .149$). Therefore, we retained the more parsimonious model (Model 2) for overprotection as our final model.

Inspection of the main effects (see Table 2) revealed that (a) parents who perceived more societal pressure reported higher levels of overprotection and (b) parents with more interdependent self-construal reported higher levels of overprotection. The main effect of parent gender was not significant. Inspection of the interaction effects showed that the interaction between self-construal and perceived societal pressure was not significant. The interaction between gender and perceived societal pressure was significant. Simple slope analysis revealed that the relation between perceived societal pressure and overprotection were positive and significant for both mothers and fathers ($b = .13$, $SE = .06$, $p = .031$ for mothers; $b = .54$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$ for fathers) but the relation was stronger for the fathers (see Figure 1a). Finally, the interaction between gender and interdependent self-construal was significant as well. Simple slope analysis revealed that the relation between interdependent self-construal and overprotection was significant and positive for mothers ($b = .17$, $SE = .06$, $p = .007$), but not significant for fathers ($b = -.06$, $SE = .08$, $p = .497$; see Figure 1b).

Results for Controlling Parenting

As in the overprotection models, the deviance test comparing the model with only main effects (Model 1) and the model including two-way interactions (Model 2) was significant ($p = .005$), whereas the model including three-way interactions (Model 3) did not differ significantly from the Model 2 ($p = .080$). Therefore, we retained the more parsimonious model (Model 2) for controlling parenting as our final model.

Inspection of the main effects revealed that parents with more interdependent self-construal reported higher levels of controlling parenting. In addition, the main effect of parent gender was significant, with fathers reporting higher levels than mothers. Further, inspection of the interaction effects showed that the interaction between self-construal and perceived societal pressure was not significant. However, the interaction between gender and perceived societal pressure was significant. Simple slope analysis revealed that the slope between perceived societal pressure and controlling parenting was significant for fathers ($b = .37$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$) but not for mothers ($b = .11$, $SE = .06$, $p = .061$; see Figure 2a). Finally, the interaction between gender and interdependent self-construal was significant as well. Similar to the results for overprotection, simple slope analysis revealed that the slope between interdependent self-construal and controlling parenting was significant for mothers ($b = .18$, $SE = .06$, $p = .004$) but not for fathers ($b = -.12$, $SE = .08$, $p = .133$; see Figure 2b).

Sensitivity Analyses

Given that perceived SES was also associated with several study variables (see Preliminary Analyses), we additionally tested the final models, including both parental education and perceived SES as control variables, to examine the robustness of the findings. The pattern of results remained largely unchanged (see Table S1).

To address potential bias arising from the inclusion of parents without spousal data and to account for the partial non-independence of mother and father reports in the full sample, we conducted sensitivity analyses including only complete dyads (i.e., families in which both parents participated; $n = 88$ families). As the reduced sample size limited statistical power for detecting interaction effects, perceived societal pressure and self-construal were examined in separate mixed-effects models.

Consistent with the original analyses based on the full sample (see Table 2), the main effect of perceived societal pressure on overprotective parenting, the main effect of

interdependent self-construal on both overprotective and controlling parenting, and the interaction between perceived societal pressure and parent gender predicting overprotective parenting remained statistically significant in the complete-dyads subsample (see Table S2). Simple slope analyses indicated that perceived societal pressure was positively associated with overprotective parenting for both mothers ($b = .29, SE = .09, p = .002$) and fathers ($b = .57, SE = .10, p < .001$), with a stronger association for fathers, replicating the pattern observed in the full sample.

However, some differences also emerged in the analyses with the complete-dyads subsample. First, the main effect of perceived societal pressure on controlling parenting became statistically significant, which is in line with our initial hypotheses. Second, the interaction between perceived societal pressure and gender predicting controlling parenting, as well as the interactions between self-construal and gender predicting overprotective and controlling parenting, were no longer statistically significant. These discrepancies may partly reflect reduced statistical power associated with the smaller dyadic sample, particularly given that interaction effects are generally less stable and more difficult to detect than main effects. Indeed, supplemental simple slope analyses indicated that, even when interaction terms were not statistically significant, the direction of associations was generally similar to those observed in the full sample, albeit with reduced magnitude (see Supplemental Materials). Beyond power considerations, we conducted additional analyses comparing parents from complete vs. incomplete dyads on a range of sociodemographic variables as well as the study variables (see Supplemental Materials for details). While there were no significant differences in terms of age, education, perceived SES, societal pressure, self-construal, and overprotective and controlling parenting (see Tables S4a and S4b), we did find that parents from complete dyads—particularly mothers—constituted a more homogeneous subgroup in terms of family

structure (higher proportion of married mothers and a lower proportion of divorced mothers compared to mothers from incomplete dyads) and they reported more balanced parental caregiving roles (i.e., both parents equally sharing the care for the children), which may attenuate moderation effects involving parental gender. Taken together, these sensitivity analyses suggest that the main effects of perceived societal pressure and interdependent self-construal on parenting behaviors are relatively robust across samples, while it is important to be more careful in the interpretation of interaction effects involving parent gender.

Discussion

Recent research suggests that parents' subjective perceptions of societal pressure to be a perfect parent relate to overprotective and controlling parenting (e.g., Lamprianidou et al., 2025). Yet, little is known regarding the factors that may influence the extent to which parents are affected by these societal pressures. In addition, most of the previous studies regarding intensive parenting norms focused on mothers, yet there is some evidence that fathers as well may be impacted by these norms (Lamprianidou et al., 2025). To address these gaps in the literature, this study examined the links between perceived societal pressure to be a perfect parent and overprotective and controlling parenting, where we tested for the moderating role of parents' interdependent self-construal across both mothers and fathers. Our findings revealed a nuanced picture, as detailed below.

First, the results of the current study support theory and previous research on how societal pressure arising from intensive parenting expectations negatively shapes parenting practices (e.g., Faircloth, 2014b). Consistent with past studies (e.g., Venard et al., 2024), we found that perceived societal pressure was positively associated with overprotection across mothers and fathers and controlling parenting among fathers. It seems that pressure to be a perfect parent disseminated through traditional and social media, other parents, and society in general may push parents to become overprotective and controlling in their parenting. This is

somewhat paradoxical, as these intensive parenting norms focus on what “good parents” ought to do (Lamprianidou et al., 2025). However, if anything, they seem to push parents to become overly involved, which sets adolescent at risk for developmental difficulties (Albert Sznitman et al., 2022; Smetana et al., 2015).

Further, our study revealed that the relationships of perceived societal pressure and self-construal with overprotection and controlling parenting differ to a certain extent as a function of parental gender. Specifically, perceived societal pressure was related to overprotection more strongly among fathers than among mothers. In addition, societal pressure was significantly associated with controlling parenting only among fathers. One explanation could be that fatherhood is more contextually sensitive, meaning that fathers’ parenting practices may be more influenced by external factors such as societal expectations or academic pressures (Doherty et al., 1998). Consequently, fathers may be more likely to translate societal pressure to be a perfect parent into overprotective and controlling parenting behaviors. At the same time, because mothers are more frequently exposed to intensive parenting norms, they may already have internalized societal expectations surrounding parenthood more strongly (Hays, 1996; Henderson et al., 2016). As a result, these expectations may be less consciously experienced as externally imposed pressure, potentially masking its association with overprotective or controlling parenting. In this sense, mothers’ parenting behaviors could reflect the enactment of internalized norms rather than responses to consciously perceived external pressure, which may explain the weaker or lack of association between perceived societal pressure and overprotective or controlling parenting in mothers. In contrast, for fathers—who may experience these expectations as more externally imposed—perceived societal pressure may be more salient and therefore more strongly related to overprotective and controlling parenting behaviors. However, these interpretations warrant further investigation.

It is also possible that fathers perceive the outside world as more competitive than mothers, and as a consequence are more likely to engage in controlling parenting in the academic domain specifically (Clay, 2016; Jonason et al., 2019; see also Van Petegem et al., 2025). Fathers may then particularly respond through control to meet social expectations for discipline and success, or to make up for perceived shortcomings. Taking into account our finding that fathers reported on average higher levels of controlling parenting than mothers, these results may also reflect gendered tendencies in protective versus controlling parenting behaviors. Fathers may be more inclined to express their parenting role by enforcing discipline and obedience, and by having stronger performance expectations—particularly in achievement-oriented domains (Sriram & Sandhu, 2013; Venard et al., 2024)—leading to more *controlling* behaviors in response to societal pressures to be a perfect parent (Van Petegem et al., 2025). Moreover, the stronger association between societal pressure and overprotection among fathers compared to mothers may reflect traditional views of fatherhood, in which the father is seen as the protector of the family and the head responsible for ensuring the welfare of the child (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999; Trahan & Cheung, 2012; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019). This perspective aligns with traditional masculine norms, suggesting that under conditions of high societal pressure, fathers may adopt overprotective behaviors as part of fulfilling this culturally sanctioned role, emphasizing protection, decision-making, and maintaining family order (see Eira Nunes et al., 2025; Venard et al., 2026). However, these interpretations remain speculative, and future research should examine whether these patterns are replicated across different cultural contexts and parenting practices. This is particularly important given that other studies (e.g., Venard et al., 2024; Wuyts, Chen et al., 2015) did not find evidence for moderation by gender.

Further, the results confirmed the main effect of interdependent self-construal on both overprotective and controlling parenting practices. It was revealed that this association

between self-construal and negative parenting was only significant among mothers. This finding suggests that mothers who see their children as central parts of their self may be more likely to engage in overprotective and controlling practices. Given that interdependent self-construal involves a strong focus on fulfilling relational obligations and responsibility toward close others (Cross et al., 2011; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), mothers who define themselves strongly through their relationship with their child may experience heightened responsibility for their child's well-being and outcomes. This may make it more difficult for them to tolerate their child's frustration, mistakes, or autonomy, potentially increasing the likelihood of engaging in overly protective and controlling parenting practices. Additionally, these mothers' self-worth may become intertwined with how well their children perform, given evidence that child-oriented interdependent self-construal is significantly associated with higher levels of child-contingent self-worth (Eaton, 2003). This, in turn, can make them more likely to rely on overprotective and controlling parenting practices to ensure that their children succeed in life and avoid failures (Eaton 2003; Wuyts, Vansteenkiste, et al., 2015). Importantly, the present study did not assess specific mechanisms underlying this association; these interpretations are therefore hypothetical. Future research is needed to directly examine underlying mechanisms that explain why child-oriented interdependent self-construal relates to overprotective and controlling parenting. Finally, the finding that the association was significant only for mothers may reflect mothers' generally higher levels of relational connectedness and involvement, as well as more frequent conflict, with their adolescent children compared to fathers (Shearer et al., 2005; Smetana et al., 2006). However, this explanation is also hypothetical and requires further empirical examination. Taken together, whereas fathers' engagement in overprotective parenting and controlling parenting appears to be more externally driven (i.e., by societal pressures), mothers' overprotective and controlling parenting could be driven more strongly

by internalized societal ideals of mothering as a central part of their maternal identity (Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2007).

Importantly, the findings regarding gender as a moderator should be also interpreted with caution, as only one of the four tested interactions remained statistically significant in the sensitivity analyses that included only complete dyads (i.e., families in which both parents participated). While power issues could be at play, there were also differences between parents from complete dyads vs. incomplete dyads in terms of family structure and caregiving burden. In households where caregiving tasks are shared more equally (and where parents potentially hold more egalitarian gender role beliefs), mothers and fathers may also experience parenthood relatively similarly (see Gaunt et al., 2024)—which may explain why gender plays a less prominent moderating role in the sensitivity analyses.

Contrary to our expectations, parents' interdependent self-construal did not moderate the link between perceived societal pressure and both parenting practices. In our study, we focused on the degree to which parents consider their relationship with their children as part of their self (child-oriented interdependent self-construal) rather than interdependence with other people in general or group-oriented interdependence (i.e., the inclusion of group membership in one's self-definition; see Cross et al., 2000). Although relational and group-oriented forms of interdependence are closely related, they represent conceptually distinct aspects of self-construal (Cross et al., 2000; 2009). Prior work suggests that individuals in Western European contexts are more likely to incorporate close relational ties, rather than group membership, into their self-definition (Cross et al., 2000). Accordingly, the translation of perceived societal pressure to be a perfect parent into parenting practices may be less strongly associated with child-oriented interdependence within the parent–adolescent relationship, as assessed in the present study. Instead, it may be more closely linked to group-oriented interdependence, because group-oriented interdependence may be more directly

implicated in responding to societal and normative expectations—such as the pressures parents perceive to be a perfect parent. Therefore, future research may employ complementary measures of interdependent self-construal outside the parent-child relationship, by assessing parents' self-construal in the context of relationships with other people in general and/or group-oriented interdependence (Cross et al., 2000). In addition, parents may be sensitive to societal pressure for reasons beyond interdependent self-construal. Other psychological processes, such as tendencies toward social comparison or differences in parental self-efficacy, may also shape their susceptibility to external expectations regarding parenting role (Burman et al., 2025).

The specific cultural context could be another possible explanation. It may be that, only in cultural contexts where compliance to social norms and group cohesion are highly valued can interdependent self-construal serve as a moderator of societal pressure to be a perfect parent. Given that Belgium is considered relatively high on individualism (Hofstede Insights, 2025), which emphasizes personal achievement and autonomy above group cohesiveness, parents' child-oriented interdependent self-construal may not necessarily translate into a greater sensitivity for social or societal pressures. Finally, methodologically, the statistical power to identify moderating effects may have been diminished due to the relatively restricted variability in the interdependent self-construal scores. To overcome this limitation, future research could employ person-centered approaches and/or multidimensional measures (e.g., differentiating between relational and group-oriented/collective interdependence; Hardin et al., 2004) to more accurately represent how parents with different self-construal react to societal expectations to be a perfect parent.

It is important to note that current findings may primarily reflect the experiences of highly educated and employed parents, who comprised the majority of our sample. Although a previous study has suggested that parents from different social classes tend to support

intensive mothering and fathering to a similar degree (Ishizuka, 2019), our findings revealed negative associations between perceived SES and perceived societal pressure, as well as between perceived SES and parental education with overprotection and controlling parenting. Given that the extent to which intensive parenting ideology is internalized may differ across socioeconomic status (SES) groups (Faircloth, 2014b), these results underscore the importance of including families with a broader range of socioeconomic backgrounds to determine whether this pattern generalizes to families from diverse socio-economic backgrounds in future research.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, our data was correlational so our findings may have alternative explanations. Although we suggested that parents who perceive societal pressure are more likely to engage in overprotective and controlling parenting, it is also possible that more overprotective and controlling parents are more likely to perceive societal pressure. Future studies with longitudinal or experimental designs would provide stronger inferences regarding the directionality of these associations. Additionally, conducting qualitative studies would provide more insight into the mechanisms through which societal pressure relates to parenting practices. Second, our findings may not be generalizable to all socioeconomic classes given that our sample mainly consisted of highly educated and employed parents. Future studies may focus on parents from more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and examine whether the current findings differ across different SES groups. Moreover, the majority of parents in the current sample were married or cohabiting heterosexual parents. Parents who did not participate may have been more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, to have lower levels of education, to lack fluency in French, or to be part of single-parent families, potentially resulting in the underrepresentation of more diverse family contexts. This limitation is particularly relevant in light of the

sensitivity analyses based on complete dyads, which suggest that family structure and caregiving arrangements also may shape the gendered nature of how societal pressure and self-construal relate to overprotective and controlling parenting practices. In addition, adolescents could choose not to pass on the questionnaire to their parents, which may have further limited representation. We also did not collect information about parents' cultural background (e.g., nationality, mother tongue, years in the country), biological relationship to the child, or sexual orientation. Therefore, future studies should also examine whether the present findings generalize to other family structures, such as single parent families, same-gender families or families with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Third, our findings rely on self-reports of a single informant (i.e., parents) which might have increased common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Fourth, although we focused on each parent's individual perceptions of societal pressure and interdependent self-construal, we did not examine potential inter-spousal influences. That is, one parent's perceived societal pressure or self-construal may also affect the other parent's parenting. Future research could employ actor-partner interdependence models (APIM) to explore these mutual influences, including how one parent's characteristics affect both their own and their partner's parenting behaviors (Leung et al., 2023). While prior research using APIM has found no partner effects for perceived societal pressure on parenting (Venard et al., 2024), dyadic qualitative designs (e.g., Venard et al., 2026) may also provide additional insights into coparenting dynamics and how parents negotiate societal expectations and parenting responsibilities. Finally, another possible avenue for future research would be examining whether the associations of perceived societal pressure and interdependent self-construal with parenting practices differ across cultures given that susceptibility to social influence (Iyengar & Brockner, 2001) and the dominant self-construal differ among varying cultural contexts (Han & Humphreys, 2016; Markus & Kitayama, 1991b).

Conclusion

This study indicates that both perceived societal pressure and interdependent self-construal are significant predictors of higher overprotective and controlling parenting, and some gender differences emerged in these associations. Sensitivity analyses revealed that the main effects of perceived societal pressure and interdependent self-construal were relatively robust, whereas gender-based moderation effects were attenuated in samples characterized by shared caregiving, highlighting the importance of considering family context when interpreting differences between mothers and fathers.

All in all, our study highlights the significance of paying closer attention to societal influences on parenting. As shifting expectations and norms may trigger feelings of pressure to be a perfect parent (Novoa et al., 2022), the current findings suggest that these expectations may backfire as they actually promote parenting practices that are harmful to adolescent development.

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Table 1*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among the Study Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
1. Perceived societal pressure	—	.30**	.47**	.35**	2.67	0.79	.94
2. Interdependent self-construal	.25**	—	.08	-.03	3.56	0.61	.84
3. Overprotection	.19**	.23**	—	.56**	1.60	0.54	.86
4. Controlling parenting	.16**	.23**	.43**	—	1.94	0.72	.86
<i>M</i>	2.80	3.62	1.67	1.77	—	—	—
<i>SD</i>	0.86	0.58	0.49	0.65	—	—	—
α	.94	.80	.81	.85	—	—	—

Note. The values above the diagonal are for fathers; the values below the diagonal are for

mothers. α = Cronbach's alpha.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

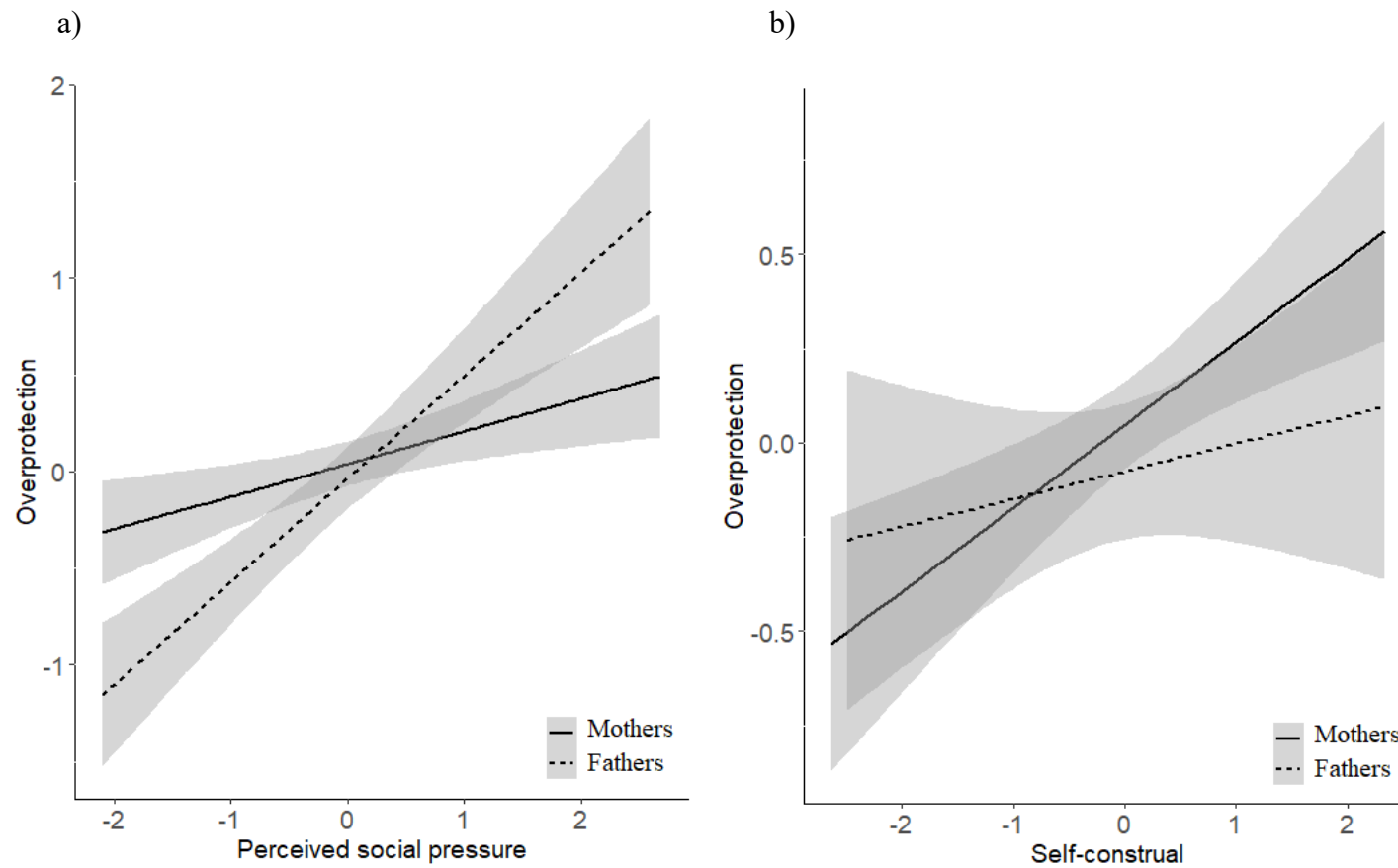
Table 2*Linear Mixed Effect Models of Overprotection and Controlling Parenting*

	Model 2		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Overprotection			
Parental education	-.079	.033	.020
Gender	-.048	.095	.617
Societal pressure	.133	.060	.031
Self-construal	.171	.061	.007
Self-construal X Societal pressure	.040	.046	.387
Gender X Societal pressure	.404	.106	< .001
Gender X Self-construal	-.227	.102	.030
Controlling Parenting			
Parental education	-.069	.033	.039
Gender	.266	.088	.004
Societal pressure	.111	.059	.061
Self-construal	.177	.060	.004
Self-construal X Societal pressure	.035	.045	.439
Gender X Societal pressure	.257	.100	.013
Gender X Self-construal	-.296	.098	.004

Note. Significant coefficients ($p < 0.05$) are shown in bold.

Figure 1

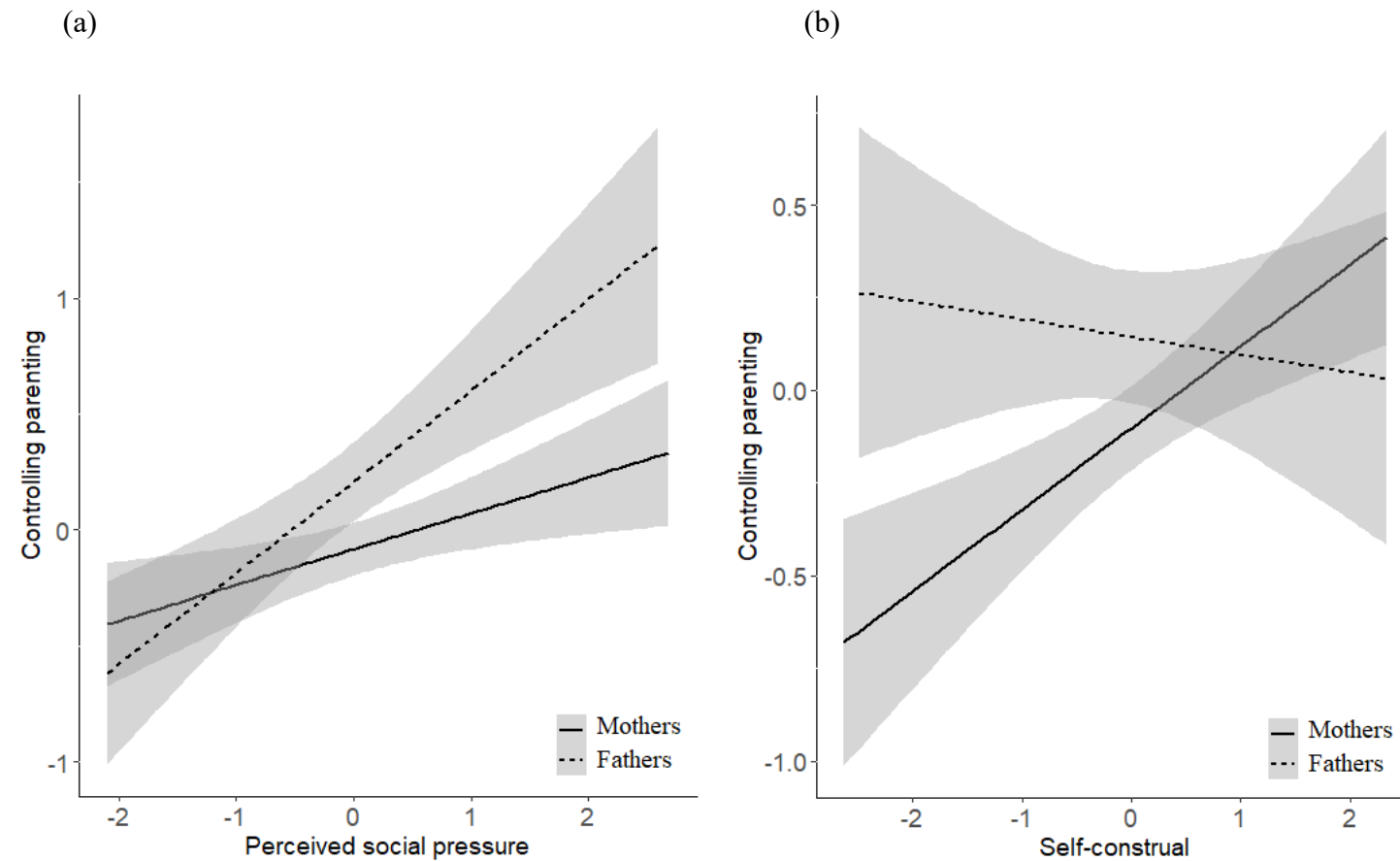
Moderating Role of Parental Gender in the Relations between Perceived Societal Pressure, Interdependent Self-Constraint, and Overprotection



Note. The gray area represents 95% confidence bands.

Figure 2

Moderating Role of Parental Gender in the Relations between Perceived Societal Pressure, Interdependent Self-Constructual, and Controlling Parenting



Note. The gray area represents 95% confidence bands.