Intensive Parenting Among Mothers and Fathers:

Identifying Profiles and Examining Differences in Parental Involvement

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Abstract

The literature reveals particularly high standards of good parenting in Western societies, especially for mothers. However, parents as active agents of their parenting may react differently to societal prescriptions, and this variability may translate into different parental practices. The present article had two aims. A first aim was to identify profiles of parents by considering their adherence to intensive parenting beliefs, their perceived societal pressure to be a perfect parent, and their gender essentialist beliefs (i.e., the idea that mothers are naturally better parents than fathers). A second aim was to examine differences between parent profiles in terms of positive and negative parental involvement. To identify clusters among mothers and fathers, we conducted model-based cluster analysis (Fraley & Raftery, 1998) on a sample of 1002 Belgian parents (609 mothers and 393 fathers) of adolescents (M_{age} = 16.83, SD = 0.96; 53% girls), based on parents' scores on intensive parenting beliefs, gender essentialism, and perceived societal pressure. Differences between mothers' and fathers' clusters were examined in terms of interpersonal involvement, responsiveness, autonomy support, overprotection and controlling parenting. Analyses revealed five clusters for mothers and three for fathers. In both samples, traditional intensive profiles were associated to higher levels of parental overprotection and controlling parenting, whereas no cluster differences were found in terms of positive parenting. These results suggest that demanding social prescriptions of parenthood may have an ironical effect, as they might push some mothers and fathers to adopt parenting practices that are less attuned to their adolescents' developmental needs.

Key words: intensive parenting, societal pressure, gender essentialism, parental involvement, cluster analysis

In an age characterized by unlimited information on "good" parenting practices, being a parent seems to have become an increasingly difficult task in most Western societies (e.g., Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2017). Several authors have documented a shift in parenting cultures in the last 30 years, arguing that the demands towards parents are now greater than ever before (e.g., Bianchi et al., 2006). The impact of these time and labor-intensive expectations on parents has received significant attention during these last decades, especially since Hays' work on the social prescriptions of motherhood in the 90s (Hays, 1996; Ishizuka, 2019). More recently, and inspired by Hays' work, numerous authors argued that both mothers and fathers now face high expectations for intensive parental investments in children (e.g., Schiffrin et al., 2014). These expectations are attributed to the increased societal emphasis on both parents' responsibility – and not only mothers' – for children's future success in more neo-liberal societal contexts (Lee et al., 2014).

Many studies have suggested that intensive parenting prescriptions are now "pervasive", and have become the norm of modern parenting (Elliott et al., 2015; Gauthier et al., 2021). Yet not all parents may endorse these ideas in the same way and to the same extent. That is, parents may exhibit variance in the degree to which they adhere to social prescriptions about parenthood. Hence, by adopting a person-centered approach, a first aim of this study was to identify profiles of parents by considering their adherence to intensive parenting beliefs, their perceptions of societal pressures to be a perfect parent, and their gender essentialist beliefs (i.e., the belief that mothers are naturally better parents than fathers). A second aim was to examine differences between these profiles in terms of parental involvement, as parents' beliefs about parenthood can influence the way they are involved in their children's life (e.g., Ishizuka, 2019). Especially in adolescence, parental involvement attuned to adolescents' psychological and developmental needs can be particularly important for their psychosocial development (Soenens et al., 2015). However,

parental involvement that is less adjusted to adolescents' needs may set them at risk for psychosocial difficulties (e.g., Segrin et al., 2015). Therefore, we examined differences between parent profiles in terms of positive (i.e., interpersonal involvement, responsiveness, autonomy support) and negative types of involvement (i.e., overprotection and controlling parenting).

Contemporary Norms of Parenthood

Much of the contemporary work on social prescriptions about parenthood draws upon the work of Hays (1996) on intensive mothering. According to Hays, the ideology of intensive mothering corresponds to a contemporary model of "good" mothering that expects from mothers to unconditionally invest all "their time, physical and emotional energy, money, emotional support, and love" in their children's upbringing (Green, 2019, pp. 89). In this gendered model of parenting, mothers are expected to follow unattainable parenting standards, derived from traditional norms about motherhood (Forbes et al., 2020). Inspired by Hays' work, an extensive body of research has studied several interrelated facets of contemporary parenthood. These include, first, parents' adherence to intensive parenting beliefs; second, their perceptions of societal pressure to be perfect as a parent; and third, their endorsement of gender essentialist beliefs about parenthood. We aimed to disentangle these three facets as we expect them to not necessarily co-occur. This distinction may unveil different ways in which parents respond to social prescriptions about parenthood.

Parents' Adherence to Intensive Parenting Beliefs

"Good" parents nowadays, including fathers, are expected to be intensively invested in their children's life (Petts et al., 2022), with studies indicating that intensive parenting expectations are increasingly affecting parents, regardless of their social class, civil status or race (e.g., Elliott et al., 2015; Ishizuka, 2019). Intensive parenting beliefs promote a completely child-centered view on parenthood. Child-centeredness, the idea that a parent's life must be completely constructed

around the needs of their children, has been evoked as an essential part of the intensive parenting discourse (e.g., Liss et al., 2013). Relatedly, parents are expected to sacrifice their own personal desires to ensure their children's future success (Gauthier et al., 2021). In other words, intensive parenting beliefs suggest that parents should surrender their desires for the sake of their children's benefits (Leung et al., 2016). At the same time, these intensive parenting approaches have been linked with a neo-liberal discourse of parental risk-consciousness, which emphasizes the importance of parents' responsibility in raising their children (Martin & Leloup, 2020). Parental determinism, the idea that children's future success is exclusively determined by their parents' practices (Lee et al., 2014), is thus another aspect of the intensive parenting discourse. To sum up, intensive parenting beliefs refer to a child-centered, self-sacrificing and deterministic view of parenting, which may impact parents themselves as well as their parenting.

Despite the prevalence of these intensive parenting beliefs, the majority of the literature remains mother-centered with only a few studies focused on fathers (Shirani et al., 2012) or men (Schiffrin et al., 2014). This literature also concerns especially mothers of younger children (Wall et al., 2010), and little is known about parents of adolescents. Previous work suggests that parents who adhere to intensive parenting beliefs are likely to engage in overprotective parenting due to "too much love" (Lee et al., 2014, pp. 62). In other words, intensive parenting beliefs may put parents at risk of "over-doing" (Martin & Leloup, 2020). Drawing upon this work, in the present study we examined specifically parents' personal endorsement of these intensive parenting beliefs.

Perceived Societal Pressure

Past research also focused on parents' perceived societal pressure to be perfect as a parent. Trying to meet high parenting expectations may cause parents to feel pressured to excel in the "performance" of their parenting (Henderson et al., 2016). That is, some parents may feel that the

bar for good parenting is set very high, hence experiencing pressure to live up to these ideals of perfect parenthood. These pressures may be fueled by a neo-liberal societal context of increasing competitiveness, where parents are held personally responsible for raising competent and successful children (Grolnick & Seal, 2008). Hence, these pressures may have pervasive consequences for parents' mental health and for their way of raising children (Shirani et al., 2012).

Several studies explored the consequences of perceived societal pressure on parents, illustrating the detrimental effects for parents' mental health. For instance, feeling pressured to be a perfect parent has been found to relate to less self-efficacy, more stress and anxiety (Henderson et al., 2016), and more parental burn-out symptoms (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018). As the existing literature on perceived societal pressure is also often mother-centered, arguing that mothers are more sensitive to the over-demanding prescriptions of modern parenthood (Forbes et al., 2020), fathers' perceived societal pressure remains to be explored. Only a small number of studies have explicitly examined the relations between parents' perceived pressure and parenting among both mothers and fathers. These studies showed that highly pressured parents are at risk for becoming overprotective towards their adolescents (Venard et al., 2024), and are more likely to rely upon controlling parenting practices (Wuyts et al., 2015). In this study, we focused on parents' perceived pressure from three external sources, that is, society, media, and other parents.

Parental Gender Essentialism

Parenting prescriptions are often colored by traditional gender beliefs about the roles of mothers and fathers. In the context of parenting, many scholars have examined the concept of gender essentialism (e.g., Gaunt, 2006). Gender essentialism refers to the belief that men and women are fundamentally different due to biology, and consecutively proposes that women are inherently better predisposed to parenthood (Liss et al., 2013). Essentialist beliefs sustain thus the

traditional vision of women – and mothers – as "naturally" better parents that men. Moreover, by depicting the bond between mother and child as more "natural", essentialism dictates that fathers need special help to be good parents (Hays, 1996). In that way, essentialism reflects Hays' original notion that intensive mothering concerns mostly mothers, as it would be better performed by them.

It has been proposed that gender essentialism can be used as a "gender lens" to understand culturally imbedded gender inequalities between men and women (Bem, 1993). In the parenting context, essentialist beliefs can explain parenting-related gendered expectations, by sustaining gender differences regarding the distribution of care in families. Past research showed that when mothers endorse essentialist beliefs, it puts a significant burden on them as the principal caregivers (Forbes et al., 2020). At the same time, essentialism is not necessarily beneficial for fathers either, as it sustains the traditional depiction of mothers as the "ideal parent", against which fathers are often compared and judged (Perälä-Littunen, 2007). This double standard of parenting can create a judging context for both parents – setting unattainable standards for mothers, and eliciting feelings of doubt and disappointment for fathers when faced with the same mother-centered high standards. Adherence to essentialist beliefs relates also to how parents are involved in their children's lives. Specifically for fathers, research has shown that the rejection of gender essentialist ideas relates to more paternal involvement in everyday child care (Pinho & Gaunt, 2021).

A Person-Centered Approach for Understanding Parents' Beliefs About Parenthood

Previous quantitative research on intensive parenting has often adopted variable-centered approaches focusing on specific facets of intensive parenting, implying that parents' adherence to intensive parenting beliefs always co-occurs with higher societal pressures for parents or with a more gender essentialist view on parenting (Novoa et al., 2022). However, parents as active agents of their parenting experience, may respond differently to social prescriptions of parenthood. They

may vary in the degree to which they endorse intensive parenting or essentialist beliefs and experience pressure to be perfect as a parent, and these beliefs and experiences may not necessarily co-occur. It remains thus to be examined whether parents adhere to intensive parenting beliefs, but do not necessarily experience high pressure or adhere to essentialist beliefs. Similarly, some parents may perceive high societal pressure, without necessarily personally endorsing intensive parenting ideals. Therefore, a person-centered approach is essential when examining these facets.

This methodological choice offers researchers several benefits. While in variable-centered approaches the researchers investigate associations between variables, suggesting that these links are similar across individuals, person-centered approaches are used to identify subpopulations of similar subjects within a population (Fraley, 2015). Person-centered approaches enable the examination of combinations of the variables under investigation, revealing more varied profiles, and they permit one to study associations of these profiles with outcomes (Howard & Hoffman, 2018). In this contribution, we aimed not only to distinguish different profiles based on parents' beliefs about parenthood, but also to investigate differences between profiles in terms of positive and negative forms of parental involvement. Little is known about the way in which parenting expectations can translate into parenting, and especially during adolescence. Thereby, we focused on the quality of parents' involvement during this developmental stage, as involvement that is more or less attuned to the adolescents' developmental needs may relate differently to different psychological outcomes during adolescence (e.g., Van Petegem et al., 2020).

When Parents are Positively Involved

Parental involvement can manifest in many forms, from parents' emotional support when their adolescents face difficulties to their intrusive interference in their adolescents' lives to avert such difficulties. According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012) and stage-

environment fit theory (Gutman & Eccles, 2007), parents' practices can be either attuned to adolescents' developmental and psychological needs, or these practices may be out of tune with adolescents' developmental stage and frustrate their psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Starting with more positive, developmentally attuned practices, we examined profile associations with parents' interpersonal involvement, responsiveness, and autonomy support. *Parental interpersonal involvement* pertains to the degree to which parents put effort into child-rearing and provide important resources to their children. When parents are involved, they spend more time with their children, they know more things about their children's life, and they create a warm and caring environment (Grolnick et al., 1997). In the context of adolescence, parents' interpersonal involvement has been linked to numerous positive outcomes for the adolescents' development such as more autonomous regulation for school, more perceived competence and autonomy, and higher academic achievement (e.g., Grolnick et al., 1991).

Parental responsiveness involves parent-child interactions in a warm, stimulating, positive way, sensitive to their child's needs (Jeong et al., 2019). Responsive parents also react through sensitive responses, such as comforting and helping when the child is upset (Davidov & Grusec, 2006). Parental responsiveness has been associated with positive outcomes, such as better negative affect regulation among adolescents (Boughton & Lumley, 2011). In addition, responsiveness has been shown to decrease adolescents' sensitivity to peer influence (Yang & Laroche, 2011).

Finally, parents may be positively involved by being supportive of their adolescent's autonomy. *Autonomy-supportive parenting* corresponds to the degree to which parents encourage children to initiate and make their own choices (Grolnick et al., 1991), and is particularly crucial during adolescence. Autonomy-supportive parents support their adolescent's volitional functioning, by acknowledging for example the adolescent's point of view, by providing different

choices, and by communicating a meaningful rationale when introducing rules (Wuyts et al., 2015). Past work has shown that autonomy supportive parenting facilitates adolescents' self-reliance and it nurtures their autonomy, competence and relatedness (Soenens et al., 2015).

When Parents are Negatively Involved

Herein, we are also examined differences in terms of negative types of involvement. Indeed, the pressures of modern parenting cultures (Shirani et al., 2012) may put some parents at risk to become involved in a way that is not attuned to their children's developmental and psychological needs. *Overprotective parenting* involves parents' provision of parental protection that is excessive, given the adolescent's developmental level (Thomasgard et al., 1995). Parental overprotection can manifest through a variety of parenting practices, such as constantly warning about potential dangers, anxious rearing, or prematurely solving the adolescent's problems. These practices can have detrimental effects for adolescents' developmental needs, such as their need for autonomy (Segrin et al. 2015). As a consequence, parental overprotection can be a risk factor for mental health difficulties, such as internalizing problems (Van Petegem et al., 2020).

Parents who are negatively involved in their adolescents' lives may also use *controlling parenting* strategies that intrude into their adolescent's psychological and emotional world (Cheung et al., 2016). Controlling parents may seek, for example, to induce feelings of anxiety and guilt in their adolescents, in order to force them to comply with their own demands (Soenens et al., 2015). Controlling parenting has been linked to various difficulties among adolescents, such as internalizing and externalizing problems, and low school performance (Barber et al., 2002). Finally, it has been found to hinder identity development during adolescence (Luyckx et al., 2006).

The Present Study

As past quantitative research on intensive parenting prescriptions typically drew upon variable-centered approaches, the first aim of this study was to identify profiles of parents by considering their adherence to intensive parenting beliefs, their perceptions of societal pressure, and their gender essentialist beliefs. As parents can differ in the degree to which they respond to society's expectations about parenting (e.g., Shirani et al., 2012), we expected at least three profiles for mothers and fathers, namely a first one characterized by high scores on all three target variables; a second profile with low scores on all three variables; and a third more ambivalent profile combining a stronger endorsement of intensive parenting and more pressure with less essentialism. This third profile was expected based on more recent, less traditional descriptions of intensive parenting injunctions, where fathers are also expected to be highly involved in their adolescent's upbringing (e.g., Collier & Sheldon, 2008). Last, we hypothesized a fourth profile among fathers. Specifically, some scholars argue that fathers may still be less affected by intensive parenting norms and societal pressures, especially if they adhere to more traditional gender norms (Novoa et al., 2022). For this reason, we expected a fourth father profile characterized by high levels of essentialism but low levels of intensive parenting and perceived pressure.

Past research has yielded conflicting findings regarding associations with parents' socio-economic status, such as their educational level or their subjective socio-economic status. Some researchers argue that parents vary by social class in their perceptions of good parenting (Lareau, 2003), while others assert that parents from different social classes now demonstrate similar levels of support for intensive parenting norms (Elliott et al., 2015; Ishizuka, 2019). Based on these contradictory positions, we explored whether parents with higher educational level or subjective socio-economic status were particularly over- or underrepresented among specific profiles.

Further, we aimed to examine differences between parents' profiles in terms of positive and negative types of parental involvement. Based previous work, we expected that profiles characterized by a stronger endorsement of intensive parenting and essentialist beliefs and more perceived pressure would display more negative practices (i.e., overprotection, controlling parenting) and less autonomy support, when compared to profiles characterized by lower levels on all three variables. For fathers specifically, we also expected lower levels of interpersonal involvement and responsiveness from the more traditional profile (i.e., lower intensive parenting, lower pressure, higher essentialism), given that fathers' gender essentialism has been related to less paternal involvement in the past (e.g., Gaunt et al., 2006).

The present study was conducted among Belgian parents of adolescents. In Belgium, parenting cultures have shifted towards more intensive parenting norms, which has amplified pressure on parents (Beckers, 2022). Prevailing norms and expectations about parental involvement prescribe that parents should be well-informed and highly involved in their children's upbringing (De Graeve & Longman, 2013). Belgian parents generally adopt parenting practices that are in line with the Western ideal of authoritative parenting, combining responsiveness, autonomy support, and rule-setting, and they tend to be highly involved in their children's schooling (Goossens & Luyckx, 2007). The struggles to reconcile work and family responsibilities are particularly high for double earner families in Belgium, with 70% of parents finding it challenging to work full-time while raising children. These pressures are often gendered, as seen in mothers' overrepresentation in part-time work (Le Baromètre, 2022), and in the gendered division of childcare within heterosexual couples. In Belgian couples with children, mothers are more likely than fathers to do the majority of housework (76% of mothers vs. 35% of fathers) and care for children daily (63% of mothers vs. 39% of fathers) (EIGE, 2023).

Method

In the following sections, we report how we determined our sample size, detail any data exclusions and manipulations undertaken, and outline all measures utilized in the study.

Participants

Participants were 1002 French-speaking Belgian parents (609 mothers and 393 fathers) of adolescents (M_{age} = 16.83, *SD* = 0.96; 53% girls). We determined our sample size based on literature proposing that sample sizes of 500 participants or larger are appropriate for person-centered approaches (Howard et al., 2018). Mothers and fathers were, on average, 48.67 (*SD* = 4.63) and 50.59 (*SD* = 5.10) years of age, respectively. In terms of civil status, 52% of mothers and 60% of fathers reported being married, 25% of mothers and 24 % of fathers being in a couple but not married, and 22% of mothers and 17% of fathers being single or divorced. As for educational level, 4% of mothers and 6% had lower than secondary education, 13% of mothers and 19% of fathers had a secondary school diploma, 38% of mothers and 26% of fathers had a bachelor's degree, and 44% of mothers and 48% of fathers had a master's degree or higher. As for work status, 76% of mothers and 92% of fathers reported being employed. Parents reported on their subjective socio-economic status, using a visual scale from 1 *(very high status)* to 10 *(very low status)* (Adler et al., 2000), with mothers scoring on average 4.19/10 and fathers 3.83/10.

Procedure

Parents were recruited via secondary schools in the French-speaking part of Belgium. After obtaining approval from the Ethics Committee of Université Libre de Bruxelles, the research team visited the schools and explained to the pupils the study goals during a regular class period. Then, they distributed pre-stamped envelopes, which contained two informed consents and two questionnaires for the parents. The pupils were instructed to pass the documents to their parental

figures. Parents were invited to fill out the documents separately, and to send them back to the university. An online version of the questionnaire was also available.

Measures

All items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 *(totally disagree)* to 5 *(totally agree)* and were filled out in French. When French versions were not available, we used a reconciliation procedure for a translation from English to French, followed by a back-translation by an independent researcher. All reliabilities are reported in the supplemental material (Table S1).

Clustering Variables

Intensive Parenting Beliefs. We constructed the Intensive Mothering/Fathering Ideology Scale to measure parents' adherence to intensive parenting beliefs. Fifteen items were developed based on existing scales, including the Intensive Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire (IPAQ, Liss et al., 2013), the Child-Centrism Scale (Ashton-James et al., 2013), The European Values Survey (Gauthier et al., 2021), the Measure of Intensive Mothering Ideology (Loyal et al., 2017), and the Parental Sacrifice Scale (Chao & Kaeochinda, 2010), in addition to newly formulated items based on the literature (e.g., Lee, 2020; Martin, 2017). We particularly aimed to assess parents' endorsement of three key components: (a) child-centeredness (e.g., "The children's matters should take priority over the needs of their mother/father."), (b) self-sacrifice (e.g., "A mother/father should be willing to make almost any sacrifice for her/his children."), and parental determinism (e.g., "Ultimately, it is the mother/father who is responsible for how her/his children turn out."). Each component was assessed through five items. As this scale was adapted, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA). All items had factor loadings of at least .40 and .37, while 38% and 36% of variance was explained by one factor, for mothers and fathers respectively.

Perceived Societal Pressure. Parents' perceived societal pressure was examined with a 15-item scale measuring external pressure to be a perfect parent. A combination of two scales was used: the Perceived Social Pressure Scale (Wuyts et al., 2015), where we adapted 12 items to assess the degree to which parents perceive pressure from society/media/other parents to be a perfect parent (e.g., "Society expects me to be a perfect parent."), as well as a gender-neutral version of the Pressure to be a Perfect Mother Scale of Meeussen and Van Laar (2018), consisting of 3 items (e.g., "The bar to be a good parent seems to be placed very high."). The two scales were combined, as we found high correlations between them (r = .72 and .73 for mothers and fathers, respectively). EFA revealed that all items had factor loadings of .48 and .56 and higher, while 52% and 52% of variance was explained by one factor, for mothers and fathers respectively.

Gender Essentialism. To assess parents' gender essentialist beliefs about parenting, we used one item ("There is a more natural, strong and direct link between mother and child than between father and child.") from the Essentialism subscale of the Measure of Intensive Mothering Ideology (Loyal et 2017) and adapted 5 items (e.g., "According to me, men do not naturally know what to do with children.") of the Essentialism subscale of the IPAQ (Liss et al., 2013).

Parenting Variables

Parental Interpersonal Involvement. Parental interpersonal involvement was measured with a parent version of the Involvement subscale of the Perceptions of Parents Scale (Grolnick et al., 1991). The scale included 6 items (e.g., "I put time and energy into helping my child.").

Parental Responsiveness. A parent version of the Acceptance-Rejection subscale from the Child Report of Parent Behavior Inventory (Schaefer, 1965) was used to assess parental responsiveness. Parents indicated the extent to which they agreed with 7 items (e.g., "I make my child feel better after he/she talks over his/her worries with me.").

Parental Autonomy Support. Parents completed the Parental Autonomy Support subscale from the Parental Control Scale of Cheung et al. (2016). This subscale measures autonomy-supportive parenting in the school context, and comprises 10 items (e.g., "I encourage my child to give his/her ideas and opinions when it comes to decisions about his/her schoolwork.").

Parental Overprotection. Overprotection was measured with the Anxious Overprotection Subscale of the short version of the Multidimensional Overprotective Parenting Scale (SMOPS, Chevrier et al., 2023). The 10-item scale measures anxiety-driven, age-inappropriate overprotective parental behaviors (Chevrier et al., 2023). A parent version was administered to participants (e.g., "I immediately see danger whenever my child wants to do something new.").

Controlling Parenting. Parents filled out the 8-item Parental Control subscale from the Parental Control Scale of Cheung et al. (2016), which measures controlling practices in the school context (e.g., "I insist my child do things my way when it comes to his/her schoolwork.").

Data Analysis

Analyses were performed on R statistical software, version 4.3.1 (R Core Team, 2023). These were conducted for mothers and fathers separately, as there was interdependence in the data: for 48% of the participants, the other parent also participated in the study. We created profiles based on parents' scores on intensive parenting beliefs, gender essentialism, and perceived societal pressure. We first calculated the standardized scores for these variables, and we removed outliers (i.e., values more than 3 *SD* below or above the mean). Then, we conducted a principal component analysis (PCA) on these scores by using the *FactoMineR* package (Lê & Husson, 2008). As we performed a PCA of three variables and retained three components, there was no reduction in information. However, after transformation, the position of the individuals became expressed in

an orthonormal frame of reference, necessary to determine true Euclidean distances for the clustering (Waterschoot, 2020).

Based on the three components, we then conducted model-based cluster analysis (Fraley, 2015), using *mclust* (Scrucca et al., 2016), which relies upon finite Gaussian mixture modelling. In this approach, the data are seen as coming from a mixture of probability distributions, each representing a different cluster (Fraley & Raftery, 1998). Clustering solutions are inferred by using a statistical modeling framework and applying standard statistical inference methods (Scrucca et al., 2016). We relied upon the ‘‘VII’’ statistical covariance parametrization to identify groups characterized by equal shape and spherical distribution, but a potentially variable cluster volume. Next, to identify the most optimal cluster solution, we used four criteria. First, we examined the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) (Fraley, 2015). A higher BIC value indicates a better fit of the model. Second, the cluster solution should explain at least 35% of variance of the three clustering variables. Third, to avoid very small groups, we assured that each group contains at least 5% of the sample. A last consideration was the interpretability of the clusters. As we expected at least three clusters for mothers and fathers, the solution should include meaningfully distinct clusters. Then, we explored cluster-differences in terms of parents’ educational level and subjective SES. In a next step, we examined cluster-differences in terms of parental involvement. We conducted a MANOVA with cluster membership as the fixed factor, and the parenting variables (interpersonal involvement, responsiveness, autonomy support, overprotection and controlling parenting) as the dependent variables. This study was not preregistered. The data are deposited at the Zenodo depository. The analysis code is available upon request from the authors.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Data were found to be missing at random, as Little's MCAR-test (Little, 1988) produced a normed χ^2 of 1.99 for mothers and 1.57 for fathers. To handle missing values, we conducted a Hot deck imputation with *VIM package* (Kowarik & Templ, 2016). This imputation method replaces every missing value with an observed response from a "similar unit" (Andridge & Little, 2010). Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in the supplemental material (Table S1).

Model Based Clustering: Description of Clusters

For mothers, the model-based clustering revealed 5 clusters (see Figure 1a and 1b for the raw and the standardized scores respectively), as it was the best option for the VII parametrization, corresponding to a BIC value of -5129.47. For the next best fitting model (4 clusters), the BIC value was of -5135.21. The difference between the BIC values (5.74) provides "positive" evidence for a better fit if the 5-cluster model (Raftery, 1995, p. 139). A MANOVA revealed that the five clusters differed significantly on all three variables, $F(4,604) = 114.22$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .43$, confirming its tenability. The 5-cluster solution accounted for 45% of the variance in intensive parenting, 62% of the variance for perceived pressure and 49% of the variance in essentialism.

The first cluster, *traditional intensive mothers*, reported relatively high levels of intensive parenting and gender essentialist beliefs, as well as relatively average scores for perceived pressure ($n = 54$; 8.87%). The second group was labeled as the *pressured, moderate intensive mothers* ($n = 179$; 29.39%). This cluster was distinguished by higher scores on perceived pressure, and relatively average scores for the two other variables. The next group was the largest in size, and was labeled *low-pressured, moderate intensive mothers* ($n = 281$; 46.14%). Participants in this cluster reported average scores on the intensive parenting and the gender essentialism scale, as well as lower than average perceived pressure. The fourth cluster, labeled as *egalitarian mothers* ($n = 53$; 8.70%), reported low essentialist values and intensive parenting beliefs, but average levels of pressure.

Last, *laid-back egalitarian* mothers, the smallest cluster, (n = 42; 6.90%) reported low values on all three target variables. An ANOVA indicated cluster differences in terms of subjective SES [$F(4,604) = 43.51$, $p = .001$]. Post hoc analyses showed that the *traditional intensive mothers* reported lower subjective SES compared to the other clusters. A chi-square analysis also revealed a significant association with educational level [$\chi^2(16, N=600) = 36.76$, $p = .002$], where mothers with lower than secondary education were overrepresented in the *traditional intensive* cluster.

For fathers, the model-based clustering revealed 3 clusters (see Figure 2a and 2b for the raw and the standardized scores), as the best option for the VII parametrization. The three-cluster solution had the highest BIC, equal to -3298.051, a value significantly better than the next best model, with a BIC equal to -3305.470. The difference between the two BIC values (7.42) provides thus "strong" evidence (Raftery, 1995, p. 139) in favor of the three-cluster solution. An additional MANOVA revealed that the three clusters were significantly different on the three target variables, $F(2,390) = 73.92$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .36$. The cluster solution accounted for 33%, 33% and 42% of the variance in intensive parenting, perceived pressure, and essentialism respectively.

The first cluster, *traditional intensive fathers* (n = 97; 24.68%) scored relatively high on all three variables, reporting the highest scores on intensive parenting and gender essentialism, as well as high levels of perceived societal pressure. The second group was largest in size and was labeled as *egalitarian, moderate intensive fathers* (n = 256; 65.14%). It included fathers reporting average scores on the three variables. However, when considering their raw scores, they reported particularly low scores for essentialism, whereas their scores for intensive parenting and perceived pressure were closer to the mid-point. Last, *laid-back egalitarian fathers*, the third and smallest cluster (n = 40; 10.18%), reported the lowest levels on all three variables. An additional ANOVA showed that the clusters differed in terms of subjective SES [$F(2,389) = 42.86$, $p < .001$]. Post hoc

analyses revealed that *traditional intensive fathers* reported the lowest SES. Cluster assignment was also associated to educational level [$\chi^2(10, N=387) = 46.05, p < .001$], with fathers with secondary or lower education being overrepresented in the *traditional intensive* cluster.

Between-Cluster Differences in Parental Practices

Then, we performed MANOVAs, which confirmed statistically significant effects of the cluster solution for mothers [$F(4,604) = 114.22, p < .001$] and fathers [$F(2,390) = 73.92, p < .001$]. Then, a series of ANOVAs were conducted, followed by post hoc analyses based on Tukey's HSD, to test for between-cluster differences in terms of interpersonal involvement, responsiveness, autonomy support, overprotection and controlling parenting. The results of the univariate follow-up comparisons are presented in Table 1. In the mother sample, analyses of variance showed no significant difference between groups in terms of interpersonal involvement [$F(4,604) = .79, p = .53$], responsiveness [$F(4,604) = .17, p = .96$], or autonomy support [$F(4,604) = 1.34, p = .25$]. However, the mother clusters were significantly different for overprotection [$F(4,604) = 10.74, p < .001$] and controlling parenting [$F(4,604) = 7.97, p < .001$]. *Traditional intensive mothers* reported the highest levels of parental overprotection and controlling parenting, while *laid-back egalitarian mothers* reported the lowest levels of overprotection and controlling parenting.

In the father sample, the results were similar. Clusters did not differ in terms of interpersonal involvement [$F(2,390) = .21, p = .64$], autonomy support [$F(2,390) = .05, p = .83$], or responsiveness [$F(2,390) = .39, p = .63$]. However, significant differences were found for overprotection [$F(2,390) = 11.43, p <. 001$] and controlling parenting [$F(2,390) = 17.57, p < .001$] with *traditional intensive fathers* reporting the highest scores on both variables. For overprotection, *egalitarian moderate intensive fathers* and *laid-back egalitarian fathers* followed

with lower scores that did not differ significantly, whereas for controlling parenting, *laid-back egalitarian fathers* reported the lowest scores.

Discussion

Previous studies have suggested that an intensive parenting discourse has become the norm of modern parenting, increasingly affecting parents (Ishizuka, 2019; Petts, 2022). Given though that parents may experience and react to prescriptions about parenthood in different ways, this contribution had two main goals. A first goal was to identify profiles of parents by considering their adherence to intensive parenting and gender essentialist beliefs, as well as their perceived pressure to be a perfect parent. A second goal was to examine differences between parent profiles in terms of positive (interpersonal involvement, responsiveness, autonomy support) and negative types of parental involvement (overprotection and controlling parenting). We identified five profiles for mothers and three for fathers, and these profiles differed significantly in terms of overprotection and controlling parenting, whereas differences for positive involvement were not significant. These results suggest that parents' endorsement of intensive parenting beliefs does not lead them to engage in parenting practices that are beneficial for adolescents' development; if anything, they were rather predictive of parents' engagement in practices that are not attuned to adolescents' developmental needs (Van Petegem et al., 2020). These findings highlight the importance of considering the quality of parental involvement – in addition to quantity – when studying how societal pressures and expectations are related to parenting practices.

In both the mother and father sample, negative parenting practices were significantly higher among the *traditional intensive profiles*, thus confirming our hypotheses. In other words, mothers and fathers with the highest scores on intensive parenting, essentialist beliefs, and perceived pressure, reported significantly higher levels of controlling and overprotective parenting than all

other profiles. Demanding parenting prescriptions about "good" parenting appear to have an ironical effect, since they seem to push mothers and fathers to adopt parenting practices that are unattuned to the adolescent's developmental needs, and which may hamper (rather than support) optimal development (Barber et al., 2002). It is particularly interesting to note that we identified this profiles among fathers as well: the *traditional intensive* father profile seems to contradict previous suggestions that men as fathers are more likely to remain unaffected by the demands of intensive parenting (Shirani et al., 2012) or by the pressures for perfect parenthood (Green, 2019).

Interestingly, regarding gender essentialism, both mothers and fathers in the *traditional intensive* clusters reported the highest scores of all profiles. Although the link between intensive parenting demands and gender essentialism for women is more evident (Hays, 1996), fathers in this cluster also endorsed beliefs that mothers are inherently better predisposed to rear children, yet at the same time reported higher scores on intensive parenting beliefs and perceived pressure. This cluster did not differ from other clusters in positive involvement, and they even reported higher levels of overprotective and controlling parenting. In other words, these *traditional intensive fathers* are not so much uninvolved; if anything, they are *too* involved, that is, they exhibit a type of involvement that is not attuned to adolescents' needs. Drawing upon this observation, future research could explore how these fathers conceive their paternal role, which may for instance involve ensuring the welfare of their children, in support of a more traditional ideal of the father as the "protector" of the family (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). Lastly, in the *traditional intensive* profiles, there was an overrepresentation of parents with lower subjective SES and educational level. Potentially, feelings of uncertainty may drive these parents to adopt more controlling and overprotective practices in an attempt to secure their adolescents' future success

in a societal context of increasing competitiveness (Grolnick & Seal, 2008), or in order to ensure their safety in a lower-income neighborhood, potentially fraught with various sources of threat.

Following our hypothesis about an ambivalent profile combining higher adherence to intensive parenting and more perceived pressure with lower gender essentialism, a *pressured, moderate intensive* cluster was found, but only for mothers. This finding seems in line with Henderson's (2016) ideas that pressures for perfect motherhood may be "inescapable" for many women. Contrary to previous literature suggesting that these pressures are related to the dominant discourse of intensive mothering or the internalization of their role as primary caregivers (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018), mothers in this group reported only average levels of intensive parenting and gender essentialist beliefs. This suggests that some modern mothers might feel pressured to conform to the seemingly all-pervasive norms of perfect motherhood, even when they find these norms contradictory or disagree with them (Newman & Henderson, 2014). This can also have repercussions for their parenting, as this cluster reported higher levels of controlling parenting and overprotection. Thus, even though these mothers do not necessarily endorse these beliefs, they still seem to act upon them to some degree. Finally, this group was similar to the *low-pressured, moderate intensive mothers*, with the only difference being the varying levels of perceived societal pressure characterizing these groups. Future research should explore how mothers in these clusters experience parenthood-related pressures through qualitative study designs in greater detail.

For fathers, a similar dynamic may be at play among *egalitarian, moderate intensive fathers*. Affected to some extent by intensive parental demands and pressures for perfect parenting, while scoring relatively low on essentialism, this group showed neither strong adherence to, nor an explicit rejection of these beliefs. This group may align with a gradual cultural shift from a more traditional disciplinarian, breadwinner model toward a newer, more intensive fathering

approach (Faircloth, 2014), which involves increased societal expectations for men to be more engaged as parents (Collier & Sheldon, 2008). While not embracing essentialist ideas about parenthood, these fathers reported moderate scores on intensive parenting and pressure, which could reflect a new, more emotionally involved father. This shift towards more intensive, pressured fatherhood models seems to also affect fathers' parenting, as *egalitarian, moderate intensive fathers* reported relatively higher levels of overprotection and controlling parenting.

The *laid-back egalitarian* profiles, characterized by the lowest scores on intensive parenting, gender essentialism and perceived pressure, included mothers and fathers that reported the lowest levels on overprotection and controlling parenting. With low scores on gender essentialism, these profiles showed support for a less traditional and more egalitarian vision of gender roles related to childcare. In addition, these parents were at odds with the ideals of intensive parenting, experiencing low levels of pressure to be perfect as a parent, and were less inclined to endorse intensive parenting expectations. Their low scores on the negative parenting dimensions highlight the value of parents' rejection of parenting standards reflective of "perfect" parenthood. Indeed, remaining unaltered by pressures for perfect parenting, and adopting more egalitarian views on childcare can, for some parents, act as a buffer against more negative parenting practices. This finding is particularly valuable as overprotective and controlling parenting have been associated to numerous deleterious outcomes for adolescents' development (e.g., Van Petegem et al., 2020). Finally, in the mother sample, analyses also revealed the *egalitarian* profile, a group similar to the *laid-back egalitarian mothers*, with the only difference being the relatively higher (i.e., average) levels of perceived pressure characterizing this first group. Given that *egalitarian mothers* also reported lower levels of overprotection and control, it could be suggested that lower adherence to intensive parenting and essentialist beliefs is particularly important for mothers.

The results of our study have several practical implications. A first one concerns the diversity revealed in parental responses to societal discourses about parenthood. Through our person-centered approach, we were able to reveal the different ways in which parents experience and respond to intensive parenting and associated beliefs. This diversity is mirrored in the distinct profiles identified for both mothers and fathers. A second practical implication concerns the importance of challenging and deconstructing intensive parenting ideals. Our findings suggest that these ideals can "backfire", as they relate to more negative parenting practices that may be detrimental for adolescents' mental health (Barber et al., 2002). Further, our study focused on the developmental phase of adolescence. Even though children's needs change as they develop, intensive parenting norms may still relate to how parents are involved in their adolescent's life. Lastly, our findings carry significant implications for interventions targeting the promotion of fathers' involvement. Traditionally, societal norms have placed the primary responsibility for child-rearing on mothers, leaving fathers with fewer guidelines. As these social expectations begin to shift, many fathers may find themselves without a clear template for understanding how to effectively engage with their adolescents. As our results show, more pressure and endorsement of intensive parenting relate to more negative types of involvement among fathers as well. Future interventions could thus include educational programs and accessible information on effective parenting strategies tailored specifically for fathers.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged. First, in terms of sociodemographic characteristics, our sample is relatively well-educated. Although there is evidence of the prevalence of intensive parenting prescriptions among parents across different socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g., Ishizuka, 2019), future research should examine how parents

experience parenting norms in less privileged contexts, in which more sources of structural pressures exist (such as poverty and racism; Elliott et al., 2015). Second, our participants are French-speaking Belgian parents. It is essential for future research to examine the impact of parenting norms across different sociocultural contexts, especially given the large variability of gender norms and childcare policies (e.g., paternal leave) found in different cultures (e.g., Olsson et al., 2023). Such differences likely affect the way in which mothers and fathers experience parenthood. Third, given the cross-sectional study design, no causal effects can be demonstrated. Future experimental or longitudinal research could examine whether experimentally induced pressure to be a perfect parent may elicit overprotective or controlling parenting practices. Finally, our analyses indicate that not all parents are equally sensitive to social norms about parenting. Future research could focus on why some parents are more likely to endorse certain standards and beliefs. In line with previous work on the link between intensive parenting and conservatism (Girerd et al., 2022), endorsement of traditionalism or progressivism could explain parents' differential responses to social prescriptions about parenthood. Potentially, *laid-back egalitarian* mothers and fathers may hold more progressive ideals, which allow them to better question societally imposed norms about "perfect" parenthood.

Conclusion

The present study shows that both mothers and fathers vary in their response to social prescriptions about "perfect" parenthood. This variability relates to different levels of negative parental involvement, as parents adhering to intensive parenting and gender essentialist beliefs and experiencing more societal pressure report higher levels of overprotection and controlling parenting. These findings underline the importance of a contextualized understanding when examining parenting, especially as the demands on parents are getting increasingly higher

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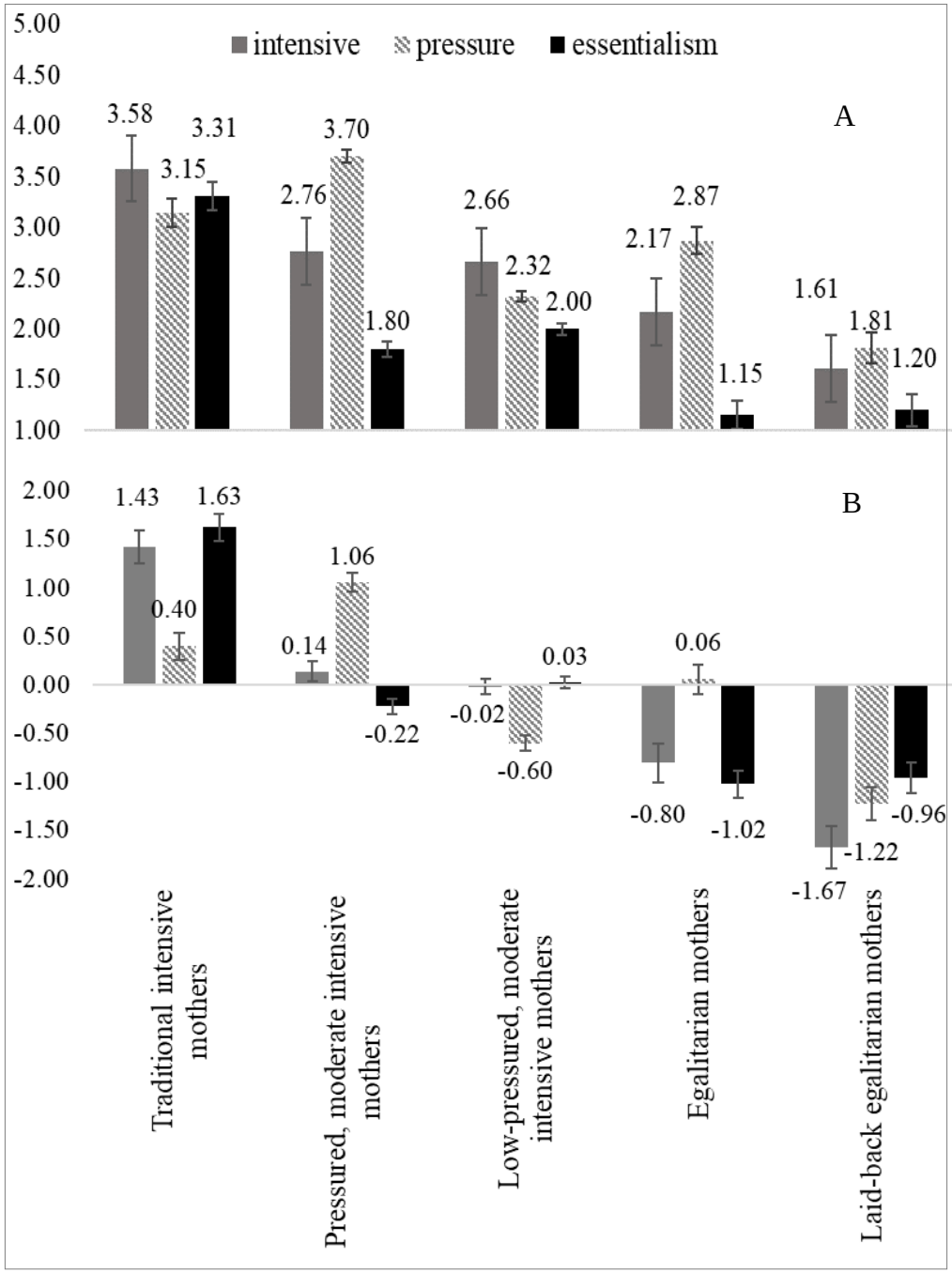

Fig. 1. *Raw (A) and standardized (B) scores for intensive parenting, societal pressure and essentialism in the five-cluster solution for mothers*

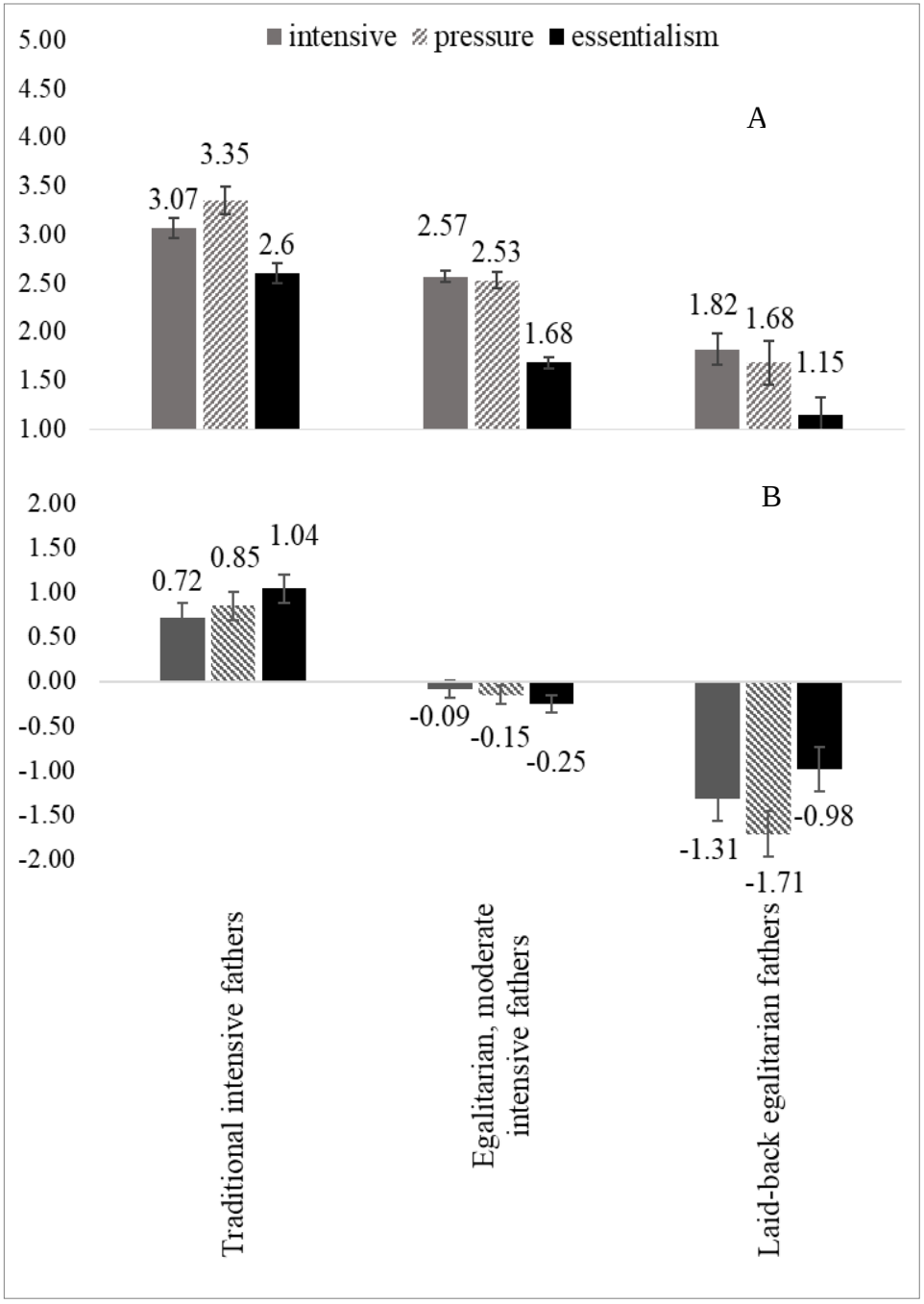

Fig. 2. *Raw (A) and standardized (B) scores for intensive parenting, societal pressure and essentialism in the three-cluster solution for fathers*

Table 1. *Results of comparing mothers' and fathers' clusters on all parenting variables*

Variable	Cluster					*F* (4,604)	Partial η^2
	Traditional intensive mothers	Pressured, moderate intensive mothers	Low-pressured, moderate intensive mothers	Egalitarian mothers	Laid-back egalitarian mothers		
Mothers							
Invo.	4.19_{a} (.07)	4.16_{a} (.04)	4.13_{a} (.03)	4.24_{a} (.07)	4.09_{a} (.08)	.79	.01
Resp.	4.18_{a} (.06)	4.21_{a} (.03)	4.22_{a} (.03)	4.21_{a} (.06)	4.25_{a} (.07)	.17	.01
Auto.	4.27_{a} (.07)	4.28_{a} (.04)	4.30_{a} (.03)	4.40_{a} (.07)	4.43_{a} (.08)	1.34	.01
Over.	2.09_{a} (.07)	1.82_{b} (.04)	1.78_{b} (.03)	1.62_{bc} (.07)	1.44_{c} (.08)	10.74***	.07
Cont.	2.25_{a} (.09)	2.01_{ab} (.05)	1.91_{b} (.04)	1.80_{bc} (.09)	1.52_{c} (.10)	7.97***	.05

Variable	Cluster			*F* (2,390)	Partial η^2
	Traditional intensive fathers	Egalitarian, moderate intensive fathers	Laid-back egalitarian fathers		
Fathers					
Invo.	3.73_{a} (.06)	3.71_{a} (.04)	3.78_{a} (.09)	.21	.00
Resp.	3.96_{a} (.06)	3.94_{a} (.03)	4.16_{a} (.09)	.39	.01
Auto.	4.26_{a} (.05)	4.26_{a} (.03)	4.43_{a} (.08)	.04	.01
Over.	1.86_{a} (.05)	1.62_{b} (.03)	1.42_{b} (.08)	11.43***	.06
Cont.	2.46_{a} (.07)	2.04_{b} (.04)	1.59_{c} (.10)	17.57***	.12

Note. Cluster means are significantly different if they have different letters.
Invo.: Interpersonal Involvement, Resp.: Responsiveness, Auto.: Autonomy Support, Over.: Overprotection, Cont.: Controlling Parenting
***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$