

“Momma Knows Best”:

**The Relationships Between Mothers’ and Fathers’ Gender Essentialism and Their
Involvement With Their Adolescents**

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Abstract

Gender essentialism refers to the belief that men and women are biologically better fitted for different societal roles, including parental roles (Bem, 1993). Past research has shown that parents' gender essentialist beliefs are associated with the division of parental responsibilities. This study examined the relationships between gender essentialist beliefs and parents' engagement in positive (responsiveness, autonomy support) and negative (overprotection, controlling parenting) forms of involvement, within a sample of 1,260 parents of adolescents. Using actor-partner interdependence modeling, we found that for both mothers and fathers, essentialist beliefs were related to more controlling and overprotective parenting. Among fathers, essentialist beliefs were also associated with less responsiveness and autonomy support. Parents' essentialist beliefs can relate to diverse forms of parental involvement which may differently impact adolescents. Therefore, it appears important to consider the quality of parental involvement, in addition to its quantity, when studying the impact of gender beliefs on family lives.

Keywords: gender; essentialism; parenting; adolescence; APIM

Despite growing convergence in women's and men's family responsibilities, gender-based disparities persist, with women performing the lion's share of caring for children (Craig & Mullan, 2011; Ralph, 2016; Sullivan et al., 2018). Studies have shown that before having children, heterosexual couples in Western countries tend to organize their everyday life in a relatively equitable way, aligning with more egalitarian expectations and norms (Faircloth, 2021; Yavorsky et al., 2015). However, upon becoming parents, couples often move to a more traditional organization of family life, adopting a gendered and unbalanced division of family responsibilities (Katz-Wise et al., 2010; Yavorsky et al., 2015). In this study, we aimed to examine the role of gender essentialist beliefs in parents' engagement in positive and negative forms of involvement. Indeed, while previous studies have demonstrated the importance of essentialism for gender equality in family responsibilities (e.g., Pinho & Gaunt, 2024), the existing body of research is characterized by an exclusive focus on the quantity rather than quality of parental involvement. In addition, whereas previous research primarily focused on caregiving to infants and young children, studies suggest that unequal gendered division of parenting continues well into adolescence (e.g., Phares et al., 2009). Hence, this study investigated the role of parents' essentialist beliefs in their involvement with adolescence, distinguishing positive (responsiveness, autonomy support) and negative (overprotection, controlling parenting) forms of involvement. We further used actor-partner interdependence models to explore mutual effects of each parent's endorsement of essentialist beliefs on the other parent's positive and negative involvement.

Gender Essentialism and Disparities Between Mothers and Fathers

Inequalities regarding mothers' and fathers' involvement in household and childcare tasks can be related to individuals' values and beliefs about gender roles (e.g., Aassve et al., 2014). In the context of parenthood, for instance, this might involve beliefs about the distinct roles of mothers and fathers who are considered as fundamentally different (Pinho & Gaunt,

2024). The idea that women and men, and by extension mothers and fathers, fundamentally differ due to their biological features is referred to as gender essentialism (Pinho & Gaunt, 2024; Saguy et al., 2021). Essentialist beliefs are thus rooted in the notion that men and women are biologically different, and therefore better fitted for different roles and responsibilities in society, including parental roles (Bem, 1993). In that way, biological essentialist beliefs may rationalize and justify gender inequalities in the family (Bem, 1993; Pinho & Gaunt, 2024) by considering the mother as the primary caregiver and the father as the breadwinner (Huffman et al., 2014).

Past research has shown that gender essentialist beliefs might affect how parents divide their family roles and behave within the family (e.g., Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020; Ross-Plourde et al., 2022), including their involvement in caregiving (e.g., Gaunt, 2006; Gaunt & Deutsch, 2024). For example, Pinho and Gaunt (2024) found that, for mothers, endorsement of essentialist beliefs was related to more involvement in childcare tasks, whereas for fathers, endorsement of essentialism was associated with less involvement in childcare. Most of the existing studies target parents of infants and young children (e.g., Pinho & Gaunt, 2024; Ross-Plourde et al., 2022) postulating that while babies and young children need more intensive physical care, essentialist beliefs about mothers' innate abilities may play a particularly important role (Gaunt & Deutsch, 2024). Nonetheless, disparities in parental involvement continue into adolescence, and mothers still spend more time than fathers providing emotional support and guidance to adolescents (Mastrotheodoros et al., 2019; Phares et al., 2009). It is therefore important to examine whether essentialist beliefs play a role in explaining parental involvement, even during later developmental stages, such as when the child is an adolescent.

Another particularity of this empirical literature concerns the operationalization of parental involvement. Indeed, so far, parental involvement has been mainly operationalized in terms of quantity, by referring for example to the number of hours spent with the children or

the number of childcare tasks accomplished by the parent (e.g., Pinho & Gaunt, 2024; Ross-Plourde et al., 2022), rather than in terms of quality of parental involvement. This focus on the quantity of parental involvement is mainly driven by the assumption that greater involvement is generally positive and beneficial for the children (Ross-Plourde et al., 2022). However, parental involvement which is not aligned with children's developmental stages may contribute to developmental and psychosocial difficulties among children and youth (e.g., Van Petegem et al., 2020) as well as among parents themselves (e.g., Zimmermann et al., 2022). Therefore, in this study, we aimed to examine the relationship between parents' essentialist beliefs and the quality of their involvement with adolescents.

The Many Faces of Parental Involvement

Parental involvement can take many forms, varying from parents offering emotional support when their children face difficulties to parents interfering in their children's lives in order to prevent these difficulties from happening. According to the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012) and stage-environment fit theory (Eccles et al., 1993; Gutman & Eccles, 2007), parents' practices can be attuned to children's emotions and adjusted to their developmental and psychological needs, or they may not be attuned to children's developmental stage and frustrate their psychological needs. Adopting developmentally appropriate parenting practices is especially important for parents of adolescents. Indeed, the developmental stage of adolescence is characterized by significant changes in adolescents' relationships with their family and increasing needs for independence and self-direction (Soenens et al., 2017; Van Petegem et al., 2013). Therefore, parents face the challenge of providing a level of involvement that is adjusted to their adolescent's needs and demands (Smetana & Rote, 2019).

In this study, we focused on two positive forms of parental involvement (responsiveness, autonomy support) and two negative forms (overprotection, controlling

parenting). First, parental responsiveness encompasses parents' sensitive reactions to their adolescents' needs and emotions by conveying attention and warmth, for instance, when the adolescent is facing distress (Davidov & Grusec, 2006). Parental responsiveness has repeatedly been found to support children's and adolescents' psychosocial development (for a review see Piquart, 2017), for example by reducing internalizing problems and enhancing adolescents' responsibility regarding their own schedule and activities (Bogenschneider & Pallock, 2008). Another form of positive parental involvement is parents' autonomy support, which involves parents' active encouragement for their adolescent to pursue their personally endorsed values, goals, and interests (Soenens et al., 2007). Autonomy-supportive parents will, for example, be attentive to adolescents' perspective and offer choice whenever possible (Joussemet et al., 2008). Autonomy-supportive parenting practices have been found to foster children's and adolescents' optimal development, including their self-regulation, academic achievement, and wellbeing (for a review see Vasquez et al., 2016).

Parents' involvement can also be less attuned to adolescents' psychological and developmental needs. Despite parents' good intentions, they may become overly involved in their children's lives (Grolnick, 2003). For example, parents may become overprotective by conveying a level of attention and protection that is excessive considering the adolescent's developmental level (Thomasgard et al., 1995). They may offer premature and unrequested assistance when the adolescent is facing difficulties (Segrin et al., 2013), or display excessive worries about their adolescent's safety (Brenning et al., 2017). Research has shown that overprotection may put adolescents at risk for psychosocial difficulties, including internalizing and externalizing problems, as it may frustrate their needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy, and undermine the development of their emotion regulation capabilities (e.g., Mathijs et al., 2024; Van Petegem et al., 2020). Similar to overprotective parenting, controlling parenting reflects a form of parental involvement that is not attuned to

adolescents' developmental and psychological needs. When relying upon controlling strategies, parents seek to pressure their child to think, feel, or behave in parent-imposed ways, by using strategies such as emotional manipulation, guilt induction, and love withdrawal (Assor et al., 2004; Barber, 2002). Extensive empirical evidence supports the detrimental effects of controlling parenting practices for adolescents' wellbeing and adjustment (e.g., Barber et al., 2002; Pinquart, 2017; Van Petegem et al., 2015).

Based on previous work on the relationship between gender essentialism and parental involvement, we might expect that parents' essentialist beliefs about parenting may be related to specific parenting practices (e.g., Pinho & Gaunt, 2024). Specifically, fathers adhering to essentialist beliefs might be less involved with their children, and thus have a lower tendency to display all forms of parental involvement, both positive (responsiveness, autonomy support), and negative (overprotection, control). Regarding mothers, the opposite effect could be postulated. That is, mothers gender endorsing essentialist beliefs appeared to be more involved in childcare tasks in past research (e.g., Pinho & Gaunt, 2024; Gaunt & Deutsch, 2024), and consequently, they may be expected to engage more often in both the positive and negative forms of parental involvement.

In addition to this, we expect potential interrelations between the beliefs and involvement of the two parental figures. Indeed, one parent's essentialism might guide expectations regarding the other parent's involvement and therefore influence the dynamics between parents as well. In this respect, family systems theory suggests that family members are interdependent and mutually influence each other (e.g., Bowen, 1978; S. Minuchin, 1974). Each member is therefore affected and affects the other family members. In family research, past studies have used actor-partner interdependence models (APIM; Kenny et al., 2006) to investigate interdependence between parental figures (e.g., Brenning et al., 2017; Kuo et al., 2017). For instance, McBride and colleagues (2005) found that mothers' beliefs about the

father's role were more strongly associated with paternal involvement than fathers' own beliefs about their parental role. Another study using APIMs has shown significant relations between mothers' gender equality values and fathers' warm parenting and coparenting support (Eira Nunes et al., 2024). In the current study, we examined both actor and partner effects by testing APIMs that model the associations between mothers' and fathers' gender essentialist beliefs and their own parenting practices (i.e., actor effects), while at the same time modeling mothers' and fathers' gender essentialist beliefs as related to the other parent's parenting practices (i.e., partner effects).

The Present Study

This study has been conducted on a sample of Belgian parents of adolescents. Belgium ranks fifth out of 27 EU-countries in the gender equality index (EIGE, 2023), which encompasses equality indicators in various domains such as health, work, and time allocated to care and social activities. Nonetheless, when focusing on the private sphere, gender disparities are still prevalent, with inequalities in terms of unpaid work as the most prominent example. For instance, in Belgian couples with children, mothers are more likely than fathers to do the housework (76% of mothers vs. 35% of fathers) and care for children (63% of mothers vs. 39% of fathers) on a daily basis (EIGE, 2023). More than half of Belgian mothers (59%) work full-time against 88% of fathers in 2022 (Statbel, 2023). Women are also more likely than men to have a part-time job with 41% of working women against only 12% of working men (Statbel, 2023). Despite the relatively egalitarian context of Belgium, it appears important to understand what might underlie the remaining gender disparities among Belgian parents and to clarify the role of gender essentialist beliefs.

Indeed, existing evidence highlights the importance of parents' adherence to such beliefs in determining their involvement in everyday childcare, mostly in terms of hours spent with young children (e.g., Pinho & Gaunt, 2024). However, gender disparities in terms of

parental involvement pertain into adolescence (e.g., Mastrotheodoros et al., 2019) and therefore should also be investigated. Moreover, involvement can take many forms and research has shown that forms which are not attuned to children's and adolescents' developmental stage and needs may contribute to psychosocial difficulties (e.g., Van Petegem et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to document the overlooked contribution of these beliefs to the quality of parents' involvement with adolescents. In this paper, we focused on positive (i.e., responsiveness and autonomy support) and negative (i.e., overprotection and control) forms of parental involvement, given their paramount importance for adolescents' development and wellbeing. In addition, we aimed to adopt a family systems perspective, by considering how parents mutually influence each other. Specifically, we estimated the relationship between a parent's beliefs and their own parental involvement as well as the relationship with the other parent's involvement.

Based on previous studies on essentialist beliefs and the quantity of parental involvement, we expected to find significant positive associations between mothers' adherence to essentialist beliefs and their engagement in both positive and negative forms of parental involvement. This hypothesis draws upon evidence which indicates that mothers endorsing gender essentialist beliefs report more parental involvement in childcare tasks (e.g., Pinho & Gaunt, 2024). We also expected fathers' adherence to essentialist beliefs to be negatively related to their own involvement (both positive and negative forms of involvement), because past research has shown that fathers adhering to gender essentialist beliefs were also less involved in childcare (e.g., Gaunt & Deutsch, 2024). Finally, based on family systems theory and empirical evidence, we expected that mothers' gender essentialist beliefs would be related to fathers' behaviors. Indeed, previous findings (e.g., McBride et al., 2005) indicated that mothers' beliefs are more likely to relate to fathers' involvement in childcare, compared to fathers' beliefs as a predictor of mothers' parenting. Therefore, we

expected that mothers' endorsement of essentialist beliefs would be negatively related to fathers' involvement (both positive and negative). Moreover, based on previous findings (e.g., McBride et al., 2005), we expected that fathers' adherence to essentialist beliefs would not be significantly related to mothers' involvement (neither positive nor negative).

Method

Our sample consisted of 774 mothers (61%) and 486 fathers (39%), resulting in a total sample of 1,260 parents of adolescents ($M_{\text{age}} = 16.9$, $SD = 0.9$; 54% girls). This sample included 934 families with an average of 2.1 ($SD = 0.9$) children at home; there were 326 families in which both the mother and the father participated, 448 families in which only the mother participated, and 160 families in which only the father participated. We used all available data as Little's (1988) MCAR-test indicated that data were missing completely at random ($\chi^2/df = 1.64$), and MANOVAs revealed that families in which both parents participated did not differ significantly from families in which only one parent participated, for any of our target variables (for mothers $F(5,477) = 1.10$, $p = .36$; for fathers $F(5,326) = 1.49$, $p = .19$). Overall, mothers and fathers were on average 48.9 ($SD = 4.8$) and 50.6 ($SD = 5.4$) years old, respectively. The majority of the participants were in a relationship, with 54% reporting being married and 25% reporting being in a couple but not married. Twenty percent of the parents were single or divorced, and 1% widowed. As for their education level, our sample included a wide range of education levels, with an over-representation of highly educated parents. Indeed, 81% of mothers and 75% fathers reported having a higher education diploma (i.e., 36% of mothers and 28% of fathers with a bachelor's degree or equivalent, 45% of mothers and 47% of fathers with a master's degree or higher), whereas in the Belgian population, only 46% of women and 44% of men possess a higher education diploma (Statbel, 2023). Our sample only included 4% of mothers and 6% of fathers who did not finish high school and 14% of mothers and 18% of fathers who reported high school as their highest level

of education. Concerning parents' employment status, 88% of mothers reported being currently employed and 65% of them worked full-time, whereas in the father sample, 92% of the participants reported being employed, and 94% worked full-time. More generally, parents reported on their subjective socio-economic status using a visual ladder ranging from 1 (very high status) to 10 (very low status) (Adler et al., 2000). Mothers scored in average 4.2/10 and fathers 3.9/10.

Procedure

Parents were recruited via secondary schools in the French-speaking part of Belgium. During a regular class period, the research team distributed questionnaires and informed consents to adolescents for their parents. Each student received two questionnaires and two pre-stamped envelopes for their parents or parental figures. Parents were invited to complete the questionnaires separately and return them, along with the signed consent, to the university. An online version of the questionnaire was also available. Data from the same family were linked using random codes assigned to parents of the same adolescent. The study received the approval of the Ethic Committee of the Université libre de Bruxelles.

Measures

The items of all questionnaires in the present study were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*) and were completed in French. Participants' responses to all items within each scale were averaged to obtain their score on that scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of the measured construct. Data were deposited on a data repository (see 10.5281/zenodo.10792389).

Gender Essentialism. Mothers and fathers reported upon their gender essentialist beliefs about parenting. We used one item (i.e., "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 (MIMI, 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 Intensive Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire (IPAQ, Liss et al., 2013). This final scale consisted of 6 items measuring the endorsement of gender essentialist beliefs in the specific context of parenthood. In the present study, Cronbach’s α s were .87 and .84 for mothers and fathers respectively.

Parental Responsiveness. A parent version of the Acceptance-Rejection subscale from the Child Report of Parent Behavior Inventory (CRPBI, Schwarz et al., 1985) was used to assess parental responsiveness. Parents indicated the extent to which they agreed with 7 items (“I make my child feel better after he/she talks over his/her worries with me”). The CRPBI has demonstrated in the past good psychometric characteristics (e.g., Boughton & Lumley, 2011). In the present study, the Cronbach’s α s were .75 for mothers and .82 for fathers.

Parental Autonomy Support. Parents completed the Parental Autonomy Support subscale from the Parental Control scale (Cheung et al., 2016) to measure autonomy-supportive parenting in the school context. It 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”). We removed one item as it decreased the internal consistency of the scale. The Cronbach’s α s of the 9-item scale were .84 for mothers and .80 for fathers.

Parental Overprotection. Parental overprotection was measured with the Anxious Overprotection Subscale of the short version of the Multidimensional Overprotective Parenting Scale (Chevrier et al., 2023). The scale includes 10 items assessing anxiety-driven overprotective behaviors, as reported by the parent (e.g., “I immediately see danger whenever my child wants to do something new”). Cronbach α s for mothers and fathers were respectively .84 and .85.

Controlling Parenting. Parents completed the 8-item Parental Control subscale from the Parental Control scale (Cheung et al., 2016). This scale measures 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”). Cronbach’s α s were .84 for mothers and .82 for fathers, after removing one item which was decreasing the scale’s internal consistency.

Sociodemographic Variables. Participants indicated their gender, age, relationship status, level of education, employment status, and their subjective social status. They also reported on information about their children: the number of children living with them, the target child’s age, and their gender.

Analytic Strategy

All analyses were conducted using the R statistical software version 4.1.2 (R Core Team, 2023). We first conducted preliminary analyses to examine gender differences in our target variables. Mean-level differences between mothers and fathers were estimated through five multilevel models, one for each target variable (i.e., essentialism, responsiveness, autonomy support, overprotection, and control), using the *nlme* package (Pinheiro et al., 2021). Multilevel modeling allows us to account for the interdependence within the data, as some participants were the parents of the same adolescent. We also explored mean-level differences in the five target variables according to parents’ education level. To do so, we conducted two separate MANOVAs for mothers and fathers with our target variables as dependent variables and educational level as the independent variable. We subsequently controlled for significant differences in the main analyses.

For the main analyses, we used the *lavaan* package (Rosseel, 2012) to fit actor-partner interdependence models (Kenny et al., 2006) within a structural equation modeling (SEM) framework. APIMs allow for the exploration of both actor and partner effects of parents’

essentialist beliefs on parenting; specifically, we simultaneously estimated the associations between essentialism and parenting within each parent (actor effects), as well as between parents (partner effects). We fitted four separate models for responsiveness, autonomy support, overprotection, and controlling parenting. We used SEM with latent variables. To model each latent variable we used parceling, more particularly three parcels consisting of a set of randomly selected items (varying from two to four items). Missing values were handled through full information maximum likelihood (FIML). Model fit was assessed using the comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). A model with a good fit is characterized by CFI over .95, RMSEA under .06, and SRMR lower than .08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). For each model, we first fit the saturated model, estimating all associations between the variables without any constraints for the estimated parameters. Second, when associations were significant for mothers and fathers, we examined gender differences in these associations. We then compared the models with and without constraints using a χ^2 -difference test. A significant difference in the χ^2 -value indicates that the associations are significantly different for mothers and fathers, thus indicating moderation by parental gender.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 presents the descriptive analyses of the study variables. Preliminary analyses of gender differences revealed significant differences for all variables. Specifically, compared to fathers, mothers reported significantly higher levels of essentialism ($b = .13$, $SE = .05$, $p = .009$), responsiveness ($b = .45$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$), autonomy support ($b = .14$, $SE = .06$, $p = .018$), and overprotection ($b = .21$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$), but lower levels of controlling parenting ($b = -.18$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$).

The MANOVAs examining effects of parents' educational level yielded several significant differences. For fathers, we found a significant difference for essentialist beliefs ($F(4, 320) = 3.31, p = .01$). Tukey post-hoc tests showed that fathers with higher educational levels reported less essentialist beliefs. For mothers, the MANOVA revealed significant differences in terms of essentialist beliefs, overprotection, and controlling parenting ($F(4, 467) = 2.98, p < .001$). Post-hoc explorations based on Tukey tests showed that mothers with a higher educational level reported less essentialist beliefs, but also reported less overprotection and controlling parenting.

Main Analyses

To test our main hypotheses, we conducted four sets of APIMs. The final best fitting models are presented in Figures 1 to 4.

Essentialism and Responsiveness. The model examining the associations between parents' gender essentialism and parents' responsiveness fitted the data well (CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = .042 [90%CI: .031 - .053], SRMR = .05). Specifically, we found evidence for a significant negative actor effect of fathers' essentialist beliefs on their own responsiveness (see Figure 1). For mothers, we found no significant relationship between their essentialist beliefs and their own reports of responsiveness. We also found no significant partner effects between one parent's essentialist beliefs and the other parent's responsiveness.

Essentialism and Autonomy Support. The final model for parents' autonomy support also fitted the data well (CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = .045 [90%CI: .034 - .056], SRMR = .05) and is presented in Figure 2. Similar to the results for responsiveness, fathers' essentialist beliefs were significantly associated with less paternal autonomy support (i.e., an actor effect). The model revealed no significant actor effect for mothers and no partner effects of both mothers' and fathers' essentialist beliefs on the other parent's autonomy support.

Essentialism and Overprotection. Regarding the model including overprotection (Figure 3), we found significant positive actor effects across mothers and fathers, with parents' endorsing essentialist beliefs also reporting higher overprotection. We then examined whether actor effects were significantly different for mothers vs. fathers. It was found that the model constraining the associations across mothers and fathers was not significantly different from the saturated one ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 0.07, p = .79$) and had good fit measures (CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = .045 [90%CI: .037 - .025], SRMR = .06). Thus, gender did not moderate the associations between parents' gender essentialist beliefs and overprotection. Partner effects were not significant for either parent.

Essentialism and Controlling Parenting. We also found that both mothers' and fathers' essentialist beliefs were significantly and positively associated to their own controlling parenting (i.e., actor effects). Gender did not moderate the association between parents' essentialist beliefs and their own controlling parenting practices. Indeed, the final model (Figure 4) with the best fit (CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = .042 [90%CI: .034 - .049], SRMR = .07) was the model constraining the actor effects across mothers and fathers. There was no significant difference between the constrained and saturated model ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 2.77, p = .10$). For this model, we also did not find any significant partner effects.

Supplementary Analyses

As supplementary analyses, we investigated the potential moderating role of family structure on our four models, as parents' interdependence may vary across family structures and parents who are separated may no longer influence each other to the same extent as parents who are living together. To do so, we conducted multigroup analysis comparing separated and non-separated parents. We first estimated all associations freely across groups, and then constrained the relationships to be equal across the different groups. We then compared the models with and without constraints using a χ^2 -difference test. The difference

test for all models was found to be non-significant (p -values of the $\Delta\chi^2$ ranging from .33 to .93), indicating no moderation of the family structure in the relations between parents' gender essentialist beliefs and parental involvement.

Discussion

This study examined the relationship between parents' adherence to gender essentialist beliefs about parenthood and their engagement in positive and negative forms of involvement. Using actor-partner interdependence modeling, we examined the dynamics between mothers and fathers, estimating the relations between a parent's essentialist beliefs and both their own and the other parent's parenting practices. In general, we found that only actor effects were statistically significant across our models. Thereby, both mothers' and fathers' endorsement of essentialist beliefs were significantly positively related to their own overprotective and controlling parenting, and fathers' endorsement of gender essentialist beliefs was also negatively related to their own responsiveness and autonomy support. These results are discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Overview of the Findings

The present findings partly confirmed our hypothesis that higher maternal adherence to gender essentialism would relate to a greater engagement in both positive and negative forms of parental involvement. Specifically, mothers' endorsement of gender essentialist beliefs significantly related to more negative forms of involvement (i.e., overprotection and controlling parenting), but did not relate to positive forms of involvement. In this context, intensive mothering ideology (Hays, 1996) portrays "good mothers" as unconditionally providing all their resources to their children and placing their children's needs before their own's (Faircloth, 2014; Liss et al., 2013). These unrealistic expectations towards mothers draw on the perception of mothers as "natural" caregivers (Forbes et al., 2020), and are thus consistent with a gender essentialist perspective on parenting. Endorsement of gender

essentialism may therefore create an enormous pressure for mothers (Forbes et al., 2020), potentially pushing them to become *overly* involved in their children's lives, for instance through overprotective and controlling practices. This particular result is also in line with a recent study documenting that mothers who perceive more societal pressure to be perfect as a parent tend to report more negative forms of parental involvement (i.e., overprotection), while it was not significantly related to positive forms of involvement (i.e., responsiveness; Lampranidou et al., 2025). Overall, these findings indicate that mothers endorsing gender essentialist beliefs do not necessarily engage in parenting practices that are beneficial for adolescents' development; if anything, they may engage in a *less attuned* manner, which may pose potential risks for adolescents' development and psychosocial well-being (e.g., Pinquart, 2017; Van Petegem et al., 2020). By extension, intensive mothering ideology and its social prescriptions on how to successfully raise children, could paradoxically turn to be rather detrimental for both children and adolescents.

Regarding fathers, we found evidence for both less positive and more negative involvement among fathers who endorsed more gender essentialist beliefs. Concerning positive involvement, as postulated, our findings revealed a significant negative association between fathers' endorsement of essentialism and their responsiveness and autonomy support. This aligns with prior research, which has consistently shown that fathers who embrace gender essentialist beliefs tend to report lower engagement in childcare tasks (e.g., Pinho & Gaunt, 2024). Interestingly and unexpectedly, a stronger paternal endorsement of gender essentialism was also associated with a stronger engagement in negative forms of parental involvement. Indeed, similar to mothers, fathers endorsing essentialist beliefs about parenting reported higher levels of overprotection and controlling parenting, that is, they reported a tendency to be involved in a way that is excessive considering their adolescent's developmental and psychological needs.

This positive association between essentialism and fathers' overinvolvement may be a reflection of a more traditional image of fatherhood, in which the father is seen as the head of the family, the decision-maker, and the disciplinarian who is responsible for setting the rules and enforcing obedience (Summers et al., 1999). In addition, fathers who endorse gender essentialism may consider themselves as responsible for ensuring the welfare of their adolescent children, in support of a more traditional ideal of the father as the "protector" of the family (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999; Trahan & Cheung, 2012; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019). This traditional father may thus be more likely to display overprotection and controlling practices, rather than warmth and responsiveness, in order to ensure their children's protection and enforce their good behavior. This interpretation corresponds to a depiction of fatherhood consistent with traditional masculine norms emphasizing, for instance discipline, toughness, and emotional restraint (Kaplan & Offer, 2022; Petts et al., 2018). Kaplan and Offer (2022) also found that fathers who endorsed traditional masculine norms were less likely to be involved in childcare compared to fathers endorsing new masculinity norms, for instance emotional expressivity, authenticity, and self-realization. Last, as we measured gender essentialism by focusing on beliefs that women are naturally better at childcare, future studies could examine essentialism by also focusing on traditional father's role. Based on our results, measuring, for example, agreement with beliefs that fathers are naturally better at setting rules or protecting their families, can provide more information into how traditional norms about fatherhood may impact fathers' practices.

Additionally, our findings highlight the importance of considering the quality of parental involvement, in addition to the quantity of involvement. As our results show, more involvement is not necessarily more *positive* involvement. Instead, it can also manifest in more negative ways, such as in overprotective and controlling parenting. For fathers, in particular, previous research has highlighted the association between traditional gender beliefs

and lower involvement in terms of quantity, however, considering the quality of involvement gives a more nuanced picture. Indeed, our findings showed that fathers' gender essentialist beliefs were associated with less positive forms but also with more negative forms of involvement. This distinction between parental involvement that is attuned to adolescents' needs as opposed to parental overinvolvement is thus important to consider when interpreting the results for both mothers and fathers, as well as for future research addressing gender disparities in the family.

Finally, this study also investigated the interdependence between a parent's gender essentialist beliefs and the other parent's parenting. Contrary to our hypotheses, we did not find any significant partner effect for any of our four models. One potential reason for the lack of partner effects could be that parents are more likely to influence each other during transitional phases where they need to renegotiate their family functioning to find a new equilibrium. Indeed, according to systems theory, families are dynamic self-regulated systems who tend to maintain homeostasis by, for instance, minimizing deviation from a set of usual behaviors and re-establishing equilibrium in the family after a change occurs (P. Minuchin, 1985; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Therefore, when stability is challenged, for example when a new member arrives or manifest new behaviors, parents need to readjust. Parents' interdependence in terms of beliefs might thus be more important at the transition to parenthood or when the child moves into adolescence than later in adolescence when the family system challenges might be less significant.

Another explanation could be statistical in nature. In actor-partner interdependence models, partner effects are estimated concurrently with actor effects. This is a conservative approach, since we relied upon self-reported measures, where actor effects are estimated based upon measures completed by the same informant. By extension, these measures share more variance than the measures used for the partner effect (Orth, 2013). Consequently,

partner effects may be underestimated in the present study. Future studies should therefore combine informants (e.g., mother's perception of the father's parenting, and vice versa) and assessment methods (e.g., observational measures) to address this limitation.

Limitations and Future Research

Our study has other limitations that need to be acknowledged. A first limitation concerns the demographic characteristics of our sample, specifically the relatively high educational attainment of the participants. Our sample was characterized by an over-representation of highly educated parents who may be less likely to endorse gender essentialist beliefs. Replicating our analyses on a more heterogeneous sample with various educational backgrounds would potentially allow us to include parents who endorse gender essentialist beliefs more strongly. We could then examine whether the observed relationships between parents' essentialist beliefs and their parenting hold across more heterogeneous samples.

A second limitation of our study is its cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to establish the direction of effects. It remains unclear whether parents' beliefs are predictive of their own parenting, or whether parents adapt their gender-related beliefs in response to their parenting (and its potential consequences). According to the cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), we could argue that parents might adapt their gender beliefs to align with their everyday family life. When faced with an imbalance in their everyday involvement, parents may shift from egalitarian views of the family to more traditional ones (e.g., Buchler et al., 2017). We might thus wonder whether for example fathers who find it challenging to be responsive and autonomy supportive might adopt more essentialist beliefs, seeing mothers as better fitted for these practices. Endorsing such beliefs could then solve the dissonance between their desire for equal involvement and the reality of their parental experience. To address this, future longitudinal research could offer crucial insights by investigating the

direction of the effects between parents' essentialist beliefs and their parenting behaviors over time.

Finally, our sample consisted of Belgian parents. Considering the importance of culture when examining gender dynamics, future cross-cultural studies could explore whether the associations between parental essentialist beliefs and parenting behaviors are consistent across different cultural contexts, or whether sociocultural factors play a moderating role in these associations. Different cultural contexts may exhibit either more traditional or egalitarian gender ideologies, which in turn could bolster or challenge individuals' gender essentialist beliefs about parenting. For instance, in countries characterized by higher gender inequality, the relationships between parents' individual gender essentialist beliefs and more negative types of involvement could be stronger. This is because parents' gender essentialist beliefs would align with a cultural context emphasizing gendered differences between mothers and fathers in terms of parenting. From this standpoint, examining parents' endorsement of essentialist values in varying cultural contexts can shed light on how cultural variations in terms of gender equality may impact the interplay between parents' individual gender beliefs and their parenting practices.

Practice Implications

The results of our study may have several practical implications. The findings highlight the importance of putting into question essentialist beliefs about parenthood, by challenging the assertion that gender differences are fixed, and thus parents' disposition to parenthood is predefined (Saguy et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2018). Deconstructing gender essentialist stereotypes can not only foster a more egalitarian mindset but can also be especially meaningful in the context of parenting, as the present results suggest. More specifically, our results indicate that both mothers' and fathers' endorsement of gender essentialism relates to more negative, developmentally inadequate parental behaviors, while

fathers' essentialism also relates to less positive involvement. Challenging such gender beliefs may therefore facilitate higher-quality parenting for both mothers and fathers, which ultimately may be beneficial for children's and adolescents' development and adjustment.

In addition, our study found that essentialist beliefs are significantly associated with parenting during adolescence. Even though children's needs change as they develop, and adolescents do not require the intensive daily care that is traditionally associated with mothering, traditional gender beliefs still were found to influence gendered parenting practices as it related differently to mothers' and fathers' involvement in their adolescent's life. By extension, gender beliefs could also matter for the way in which parents negotiate gender socialization during adolescence. Previous research for instance has demonstrated a significant link between parental gender beliefs and the development of gender-related cognitions in their children (Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2002). While the process of gender socialization may begin early in a child's life (e.g., Mesman & Groeneveld, 2018), adolescence emerges as a critical period for challenging or consolidating established gender norms and beliefs (Kågesten et al., 2016). Thereby, awareness of the gender dynamics can inform targeted interventions and guidance to support parents to deconstruct gender traditional beliefs also in the context of their interactions with their adolescents.

Our findings have further implications for interventions designed to promote fathers' involvement. Past research indicated that the quality of the parent-child relationship may be more critical for children's socio-emotional development than the time spent in the presence of the parent *per se* (Pleck, 2010). It is therefore essential for future interventions to focus not only on the quantity but also on the quality of parental involvement, considering the different developmental outcomes for children of more or less "attuned" types of involvement (e.g., Van Petegem et al., 2020). In addition, these interventions should be cautious not to pressure fathers and succumb to an intensive parenting discourse. Indeed, some authors propose that

the discourse on intensive parenting is now expanding to include fathers (e.g., Petts et al., 2018), often referring to new “involved fatherhood” models (Faircloth, 2014). However, previous studies have indicated that pressuring fathers to become “better parents” may lead to counterproductive outcomes. Specifically, such pressure may result in overinvolved parenting styles, which can ultimately backfire and negatively impact children's developmental outcomes (Venard et al., 2024; Lamprianidou et al., 2025).

Conclusion

In summary, this study indicates that parents' endorsement of gender essentialist beliefs about parenthood is associated with more negative forms of parental involvement for both mothers and fathers. Specifically, when parents more strongly endorsed the belief that mothers are naturally better suited to parenthood, they reported higher levels of overprotective and controlling parenting. Furthermore, fathers endorsing gender essentialist beliefs reported lower levels of parental responsiveness and autonomy support. These findings highlight the paramount importance of considering the quality of parental involvement, in addition to its quantity, when studying how parents' gender role beliefs may impact gendered practices within the family.

Footnotes

¹ For the analyses on parental responsiveness and autonomy support, we used a subsample of 842 parents (498 mothers and 344 fathers; 236 couples) because these two variables were not assessed for the whole sample.

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Table 1. Means (SD) and Correlations Between Target Variables for Mothers and Fathers.

	<i>M (SD)</i>		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
	Mothers	Fathers					
1.Essentialism	1.98 (0.78)	1.86 (0.72)	—	-.30***	-.22***	.28***	.29***
2.Responsiveness	4.18 (0.45)	3.94 (0.57)	-.03	—	.31***	-.10	-.12*
3.Autonomy support	4.40 (0.53)	4.32 (0.52)	-.12*	.34***	—	-.30***	-.43***
4.Overprotection	1.80 (0.53)	1.68 (0.52)	.31***	-.29***	-.35***	—	.45***
5.Controlling	1.89 (0.65)	2.02 (0.67)	.52***	-.17**	-.43***	.52***	—

Note. Pearson's correlations for mothers and fathers are below and above the diagonal, respectively.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

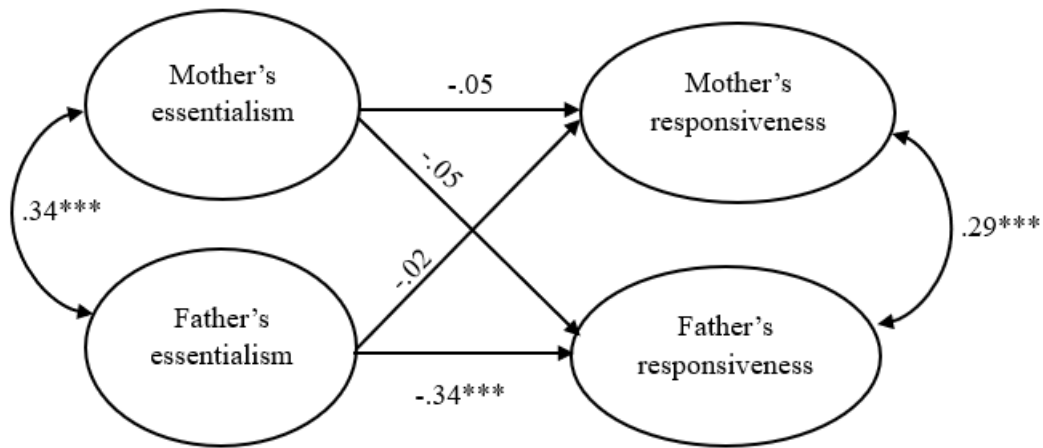


Figure 1. Actor-Partner Interdependence Model for Responsiveness

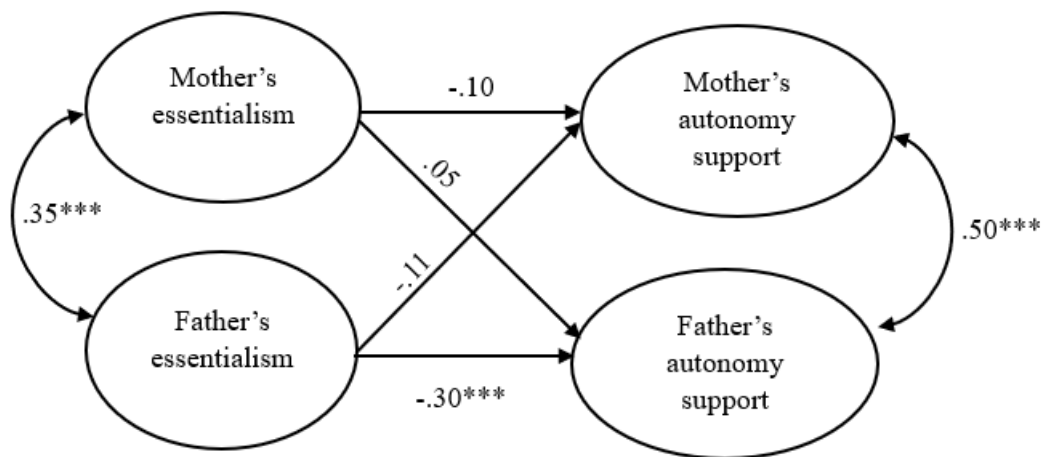


Figure 2. Actor-Partner Interdependence Model for Autonomy Support

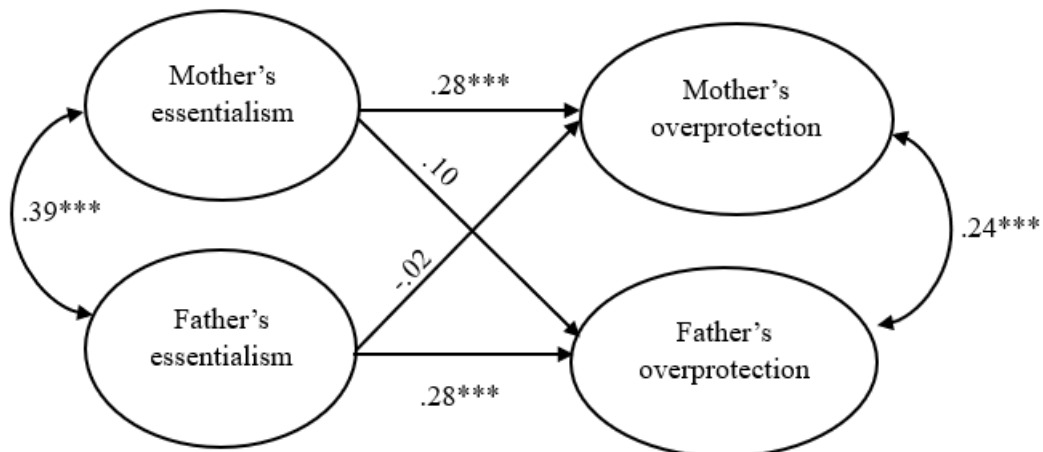


Figure 3. Actor-Partner Interdependence Model for Overprotection

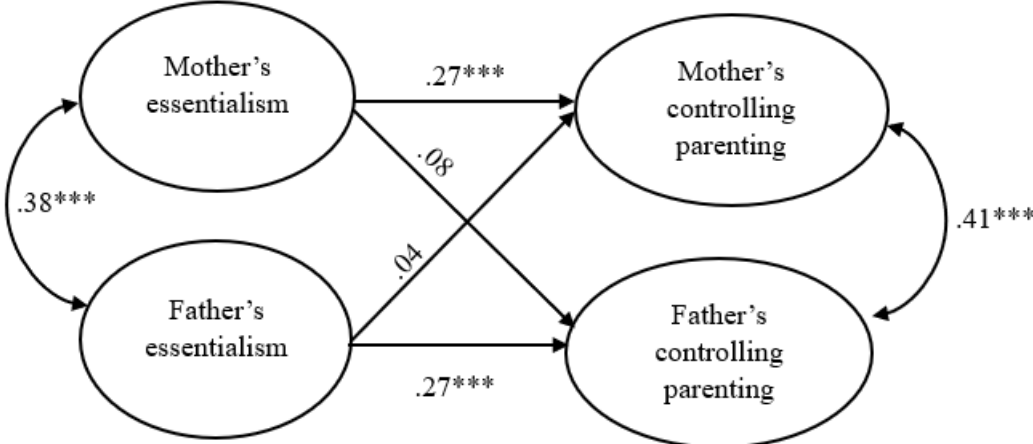


Figure 4. Actor-Partner Interdependence Model for Controlling Parenting