

A Person-Centered Study on Parental Responsiveness and Overprotection: Associations With Socio-Economic Pressures

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Abstract

Abundant research documented the importance of the quality of parenting, with responsive parenting typically being associated with better youth cognitive, psychological, and social development outcomes and overprotective parenting being related to developmental difficulties. At the same time, it is essential to consider how excessively high parenting standards and economic pressures can affect the parenting practices that parents may adopt. Using a person-centered approach, this study aims to analyse the parenting practices of Italian parents based on their responsiveness and overprotection. It also aims to explore how these parenting practices are linked to the socio-economic pressures faced by parents, in terms of perceived social pressure to be a perfect parent, financial scarcity, and perceived job insecurity at the national level. Finally, the study aims to examine regional differences (Northern Italy vs. Southern Italy) and gender differences (mothers vs. fathers). The sample consisted of 681 Italian parents ($M_{age} = 51.07$ years; 406 mothers and 275 fathers) of adolescents. By implementing a hierarchical *k*-means

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cluster analysis, we identified four parenting clusters, with combinations of high and low levels of responsiveness and overprotection. Subsequent analyses revealed significant between-cluster differences for each of the socioeconomic pressures, where those in the cluster “High responsiveness-high overprotection” reported particularly elevated levels of socioeconomic pressures. In terms of regional differences, Southern Italian parents were over-represented in the “High responsiveness-high overprotection” cluster, whereas Northern Italian parents were over-represented in the “Low responsiveness-low overprotection” cluster. We did not find evidence for gender differences. These results suggest that it is essential for researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to consider the broader socioeconomic context in which families are embedded. From an applied perspective, our results provide suggestions to tailor interventions to specific local circumstances, marked by unique sociocultural and economic realities.

Keywords

responsiveness, overprotection, parenting, socio-economic pressures, regional differences, gender differences

Extant literature has highlighted that parenting is essential and influential for children’s and adolescents’ development (e.g., [Bornstein, 2002](#)). A large body of research has noted that greater parental responsiveness leads to better outcomes, whereas overprotective parenting would put children and youth at risk for developmental difficulties (e.g., [Filus et al., 2019](#); [Jeong et al., 2019](#); [Ryan et al., 2026](#)). However, previous research has mostly focused on responsiveness and overprotection using variable-centered approaches, ignoring the possible co-existence of these two parenting practices within individuals. For this reason, the first aim of this study was to explore the possible co-occurrence of parental responsiveness and overprotection using a person-centered approach. Such an approach puts the individual in the foreground as it aims to identify clusters of parents who share specific characteristics, for example in terms of adopted parenting practices ([Liga et al., 2020](#); [Skhirtladze et al., 2023](#); [Zimmermann et al., 2022](#)). In addition, it allows researchers to identify patterns of behavior rather than considering parenting practices in isolation, and therefore to reveal interactions and profiles that are not detectable with variable-centered approaches ([Berge et al., 2010](#); [Maccoby & Martin, 1983](#)). A person-centered approach is particularly relevant in the context of the current study as classic scholarly work (e.g., [Parker, 1984](#); [Parker et al., 1979](#)) argued for the importance of considering the joint role of parental overprotection and responsiveness, with more recent research also suggesting that the correlates of these practices depend upon the degree to which these practices co-occur (e.g., [Nelson et al., 2015](#)).

A second aim of this study was to examine the relationship between these potential parenting clusters and three types of societal and economic pressure, in terms of parents’ perceptions of social pressure to be perfect as a parent, their experiences of financial scarcity, and their perceptions of job insecurity. This is deemed important as they may offer a more contextualised understanding that helps to explain why some parents are more likely to engage in overprotective and/or responsive parenting. Finally, we explored

whether the frequency of these parenting clusters and the level of socio-economic pressures differed according to participants' gender (i.e., mothers vs. fathers) and the region in which the participants live (i.e., Northern vs. Southern Italy), considering that the current study focused on the specific cultural context of Italy.

Parenting Adolescents: Between Responsiveness and Overprotection

During adolescence, parents have the challenging task to calibrate adequate responsiveness and protection, which should be attuned to adolescents' need for support, autonomy, and exploration (Arnett, 2004; Smetana & Rote, 2019). Indeed, the developmental phase of adolescence is marked by important changes in the parent-adolescent relationship, as youth strive for more independent decision-making within the family (Van Petegem et al., 2013). Specifically, *parents' responsiveness* refers to the degree of parental acceptance, warmth and their capacity to respond to their children's needs in a sensitive way (Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). In other words, it is a multidimensional construct involving "the prompt, contingent, and appropriate reactions parents display to their children in the context of everyday exchanges" (Bornstein et al., 2008, p. 867). Past research has shown that parental responsiveness promotes children's and adolescents' cognitive, psychological, and social development (Jeong et al., 2019). Furthermore, it is positively linked with emotional development, verbal and intellectual skills (Paavola et al., 2005), academic achievement (Pinquart, 2016), and well-being (Filus et al., 2019). In addition, parental responsiveness is linked to higher levels of trust towards the parent, which in turn leads to children displaying more adaptive coping strategies and self-regulation in stressful events (Davidov & Grusec, 2006), as well as to greater empathy for others and more prosocial behaviour (Kanat-Maymon & Assor, 2010). Finally, responsiveness is negatively linked with psychopathology, including depression and anxiety (Pinquart, 2016; Wouters et al., 2018; Yap et al., 2014).

Parental overprotection, on the other hand, is defined as parents' excessive provision of protection, considering the child's developmental level (Holmbeck et al., 1995; Parker et al., 1979). Overprotection can be manifested through parenting practices such as parents' invasion of the children's privacy (Hawk et al., 2009), infantilisation (Segrin et al., 2013), or solving children's problems without letting them try and solve their problems themselves (Chevrier et al., 2023). Overprotective parenting is related to negative outcomes in children from the earliest stages of development, being linked to indicators of maladjustment such as anxiety and more behavioural inhibition (e.g., Möller et al., 2015). During adolescence and young adulthood, overprotection is related to more learning difficulties (Schiffrrin & Liss, 2017) and psychosocial difficulties, including low self-esteem, higher levels of internalising and externalising problems (Roelofs et al., 2006; Van Petegem et al., 2020), and difficulties in terms of identity development (e.g., Skhirtladze & Van Petegem, 2025) and emotion regulation (Mathijs et al., 2024a).

Although a considerable body of research focused on these parenting practices through variable-centered approaches, research that empirically tests these practices through person-centered approaches is more limited. However, these parenting practices may potentially coexist among some parents, as they might engage in both responsive and

overprotective practices at the same time, whereas other parents might particularly adopt only one of the two parenting practices, or none of both. For instance, the combination of responsiveness and overprotection may reflect a parenting approach that is commonly described as “helicopter parenting”, where warmth and concern for the child may co-occur with overinvolvement and excessive support (e.g., [Padilla-Walker et al., 2021](#); [Rote et al., 2020](#)). Such a parent may be very attentive to their child’s educational needs and offer help with homework, encouraging and supporting them emotionally when they encounter difficulties (i.e., being highly responsive). Yet at the same time, out of fear for their child’s failure, this parent may also interfere excessively in school-related matters, preventing their child from developing autonomy and the ability to cope with difficulties (i.e., being simultaneously overprotective). The importance of studying different combinations of parental responsiveness and overprotection also resonates strongly with the theoretical model of [Parker et al. \(1979\)](#), which highlights that parents could score high on both practices (which they labelled as “affectionate constraint”), high in overprotection but low in responsiveness (labelled as “affectionless control”), low in overprotection and high in responsiveness (“optimal bonding”), or low on both practices (“absent or weak bonding”). While there is significant empirical work that was guided by this theoretical framework, it is mostly used to study risk factors for psychiatric disorders, including mood and anxiety disorders (e.g., [Kidd et al., 2022](#)), disordered eating (e.g., [Amianto et al., 2021](#)), and suicidality (e.g., [Goschin et al., 2013](#)). However, research examining why parents engage in (a combination of) these practices is sparser.

Socio-Economic Pressures that May Shape Parenting

In the present investigation, we were also interested in better understanding why parents adopt a specific type of parenting. While past research focused on child-related factors (e.g., temperament; [Taraban & Shaw, 2018](#)) and on parent-related factors (e.g., perfectionism; [Soenens et al., 2005](#)), less attention has been paid to characteristics related to parents’ broader socio-economic environment, including socio-cultural and economic pressures ([Venard et al., 2023](#)). A focus on these pressures is essential to obtain a more contextualised understanding of family dynamics, as families are inserted in specific socio-economic realities, characterised by specific socio-cultural standards about child-rearing ([Faircloth, 2023](#)), but also by economic insecurities and inequalities ([Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019](#); [Kalil & Ryan, 2020](#)), which are all factors that potentially explain why parents raise their children in specific ways ([Ulferts, 2020](#); [Venard et al., 2023](#)). Accordingly, in this study, we focused on parents’ perceptions of social pressure, their experiences of financial scarcity, and their perceptions of job insecurity.

As for parents’ perceptions of social pressure, we specifically focused on the pressure to be a perfect parent, which refers to parents’ experiences of felt obligation to conform to culturally imposed standards about parenthood ([Henderson et al., 2016](#)). While past research has found that these pressures may be deleterious for parents, relating to more parental distress and burnout symptoms ([Furutani et al., 2020](#); [Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018](#)), it was also to relate to more parental overprotection towards adolescent children, while associations with parental responsiveness were not significant (e.g., [Lamprianidou et al., 2025](#); [Venard et al., 2024](#)). In other words, when parents experience pressure to be

perfect as a parent, they seem to face difficulties in providing a degree of involvement and protection that is attuned to adolescents' developing need for autonomy (Lamprianidou et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2023).

Furthermore, according to the Family Stress Model (Masarik & Conger, 2017), feelings of economic hardship also directly affect parenting abilities by reducing the psychological resources available, whilst at the same time indirectly increasing difficulties in parental relationships and creating tensions within the family. For parents' perception of economic pressure, we focus on financial scarcity and perceived national job insecurity. *Financial scarcity* refers to the subjective experience of having insufficient resources (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). Past research has shown that financial scarcity impacts on parents' interactions with their children (Masarik & Conger, 2017), with financially stressed parents acting more harshly toward their children rather than in a caring way (McLoyd, 1989), as financial stress and economic hardship would elicit greater feelings of stress (Mistry & Elenbaas, 2021). In line with the family stress model, research has shown that under situations of financial scarcity, parents become less responsive and more hostile and controlling (Mistry & Elenbaas, 2021; Ward & Lee, 2020). Similarly, overprotective parenting is more common among socioeconomically disadvantaged parents of toddlers (e.g., Toscano et al., 2022), suggesting that these parents are lacking the psychological availability to be attuned to their children's developmental needs.

The third source of stress we took into consideration involves parents' *perceived national job insecurity*, which refers to parents' perceptions of the prevalence of job insecurity in their country (Shoss et al., 2023). Indeed, the stress and tensions caused by unstable job contracts and low income may lead parents to experience more worries and feel greater pressure, which, in turn, may contribute to increasing discomfort and family stress (Mistry & Elenbaas, 2021). Also at a macro-economic level, it has been argued that increases in inequality and job insecurity would push parents to become overly involved in their children's upbringing (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019). Although research specifically relating parents' macro-economic perceptions with their parenting practices is relatively rare, a recent study showed that parents who perceived more job insecurity at a national level were more likely to be overly involved in their adolescent's school lives, above and beyond their own experience of financial situation (Van Petegem et al., 2025). When parents feel they have little control over important areas of their lives, such as finances or job stability, they may resort to overprotective or overly controlling behaviours as a form of compensation, in an attempt to re-establish a sense of mastery (Conger et al., 2010). Another explanation could be that such macro-level economic insecurities may encourage parents to be overly involved in children's lives and education in order to promote their children's academic success and maintain their social status (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019; Van Petegem et al., 2025).

Since such social and economic pressures may shape parenting and parent-child relationships, it is fundamental to focus on the socio-economic context in which family life takes place in order to fully understand why parents adopt specific parenting practices. Herein, we focused specifically on the cultural context of Italy, characterized by specific socio-economic differences between the North and the South.

The Italian Context: Northern vs. Southern Italy

Italy provides a singular framework for investigating the blending of traditional and modern cultural norms, particularly with regard to parenthood (Bornstein et al., 2001). Thereby, it is noteworthy that Italy presents a large gap between North and South regarding family models. The South is especially known for its “family culture”, prioritizing family objectives over individual goals, particularly valuing respect, obligations, and social cohesion (Lo Cricchio et al., 2019). Research in this regard has shown that as young adults in Southern Italy, there is a greater propensity to value respect for norms, family skills, and interdependence, elements that are easily ascribable to a more collectivist culture, unlike young adults in the North who express a greater propensity for more individualist ideals, ultimately reporting higher levels of life satisfaction (Piumatti et al., 2016). As a consequence, parents from the South may adopt educational strategies focusing on obedience and respect, which would reflect their belief that the family is of fundamental importance and that strong family bonds are highly valued (Abdou et al., 2010; Stein et al., 2014). In Southern Italy, “good parenting” seems to be particularly characterised by a balance between love and control, communication, trust, and respect. In line with this, in a qualitative study, Southern Italian mothers reported valuing discipline, affection, as well as autonomy, highlighting the importance of understanding and balancing these cultural norms in parenting (Lo Cricchio et al., 2019). Thus, differences in cultural norms and expectations may explain potential regional differences in perceived pressure as well as in parenting practices. In addition, North and South of Italy present a significant gap with respect to the economic reality. For instance, families in Northern Italy have an average income per inhabitant of over 22,000 euros, compared to 14,000 euros in Southern Italy (National Institute of Statistics- ISTAT, 2020). Furthermore, the overall unemployment rate in Italy has increased to 7.6% in 2022 (ISTAT, 2022), and although employment conditions for those between the ages of 15 and 24 have significantly improved, there are still significant disparities between the conditions of young people from the North compared to those from the South, with the latter experiencing over 40% unemployment (ISTAT, 2023). Consequently, Southern Italian parents may be particularly worried about their children’s uncertain futures and economic prospects. For these reasons, we expected regional differences in socio-economic pressures and parenting.

Gendered Differences in Socio-Economic Pressures and Parenting

In the present contribution, we not only aimed to investigate associations with the region of residence, but we also sought to examine potential differences based on parental gender, as past studies documented gender-related differences in specific parenting practices and perceived pressure. Specifically, past research indicated that mothers experience more pressure to be a perfect parent than fathers (e.g., Venard et al., 2024). In addition, mothers are more accepting and responsive but also more often overprotective (e.g., Pakaluk & Price, 2020; Venard et al., 2024), whereas fathers are more restrictive, coercive and punitive, showing on average less concern than mothers (Yaffe, 2023).

These gender differences between mothers and fathers are likely driven by gender norms and societal roles (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Traditionally, mothers' role is associated with caring for children and being in charge of the household chores and home management (Huffman et al., 2014; Yaffe, 2023). According to prevailing social conventions, mothers should prioritise the needs of their children over their own, and they should see themselves as primarily responsible for their children's care, healthy development, and well-being (Faircloth, 2021; Newman & Henderson, 2014). Combined with commonly held conceptions of mothers as being "naturally" better equipped for parenting (Eira Nunes et al., 2025; Gaunt & Deutsch, 2024), mothers are more likely to feel pressure to be the ideal mother, putting them at risk for mental health difficulties linked to their role as parents and for becoming overly involved in their child-rearing (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018; Venard et al., 2024). As a consequence, we expect gender-related differences in terms of parenting and related societal norms and pressures.

The Present Study

Building on previous research (e.g., Jeong et al., 2019; Pinquart, 2016; Van der Storm et al., 2022; Van Petegem et al., 2020), the present study had three overall aims. The first aim was to identify different parenting clusters, focusing on the possible combinations of the practices of parental responsiveness and overprotection. To do so, we relied upon a person-centered approach, which allows for the identification of groups of parents who adopt similar parenting practices (RQ1). The second aim was to explore whether these parenting clusters differ in terms of perceived socio-economic pressures, namely, parents' perceptions of pressure to be a perfect parent, financial scarcity, and perceived national job insecurity (RQ2). We hypothesised that these pressures may particularly be present among clusters characterized by more overprotective and less responsive parenting. Indeed, a previous study conducted among parents of Australian adolescents indicated that demanding (as opposed to responsive) features of overprotective parenting are especially associated with more experiences of socio-economic pressures (Ryan et al., 2024). Finally, the third aim was to explore possible differences between parents in southern and northern Italy and between mothers and fathers with regard to perceived socio-economic pressures and parenting styles. In light of the different traditions and economic structures between northern and southern Italy, we expected differences between northern and southern Italy in terms of parenting profiles and socio-economic pressures (RQ3a). Specifically, due to the more family-oriented cultural tradition of southern Italy, we expected southern Italian parents to adopt more responsive but also more overprotective parenting, as compared to northern Italian parents. In addition, we hypothesised that southern Italian participants would report more socio-economic pressures due to a more disadvantaged socio-economic situation in southern Italy. Further, due to gender norms related to parenting, we expected differences in parenting profile distribution between mothers and fathers, as well as in the perception of socio-economic pressures (RQ3b). Specifically, we expected mothers to be overly represented in profiles characterized by high levels of responsiveness and overprotection, and we expected them to report more socio-economic pressures, and more pressure to be perfect in particular.

Method

Procedure and Sample

For the data collection, secondary schools were contacted to disseminate the questionnaire to the parents of adolescents in their last year of schooling (5th year of secondary school). Before contacting the schools, the ethical committees of the Universities involved in the project approved the research. Schools were contacted through e-mails, asking for a first meeting with the school principals or the school staff members in order to explain the project's aim and procedure. A total of 15 schools (5 in the South and 10 in the North) accepted to participate in the project. After the first meeting, the research team delivered envelopes containing two questionnaires and two consent forms to the schools. Each student received an envelope and was asked to give it to their parents. Participation was on a voluntary basis and the confidentiality of the data was guaranteed. Parents completed questionnaires and consent forms were returned to school by the students and picked up by the research team.

The participants are parents of children in the last year of high school, living in Italy. Specifically, the Northern Italian sample concerned participants living in Emilia Romagna region, whereas the Southern sample was gathered in Sicily region and in Calabria region. Our initial sample consisted of 762 parents (447 mothers and 315 fathers). We removed 63 participants due to errors made on the attention questions, 7 participants because of the high number of missing data, and another 11 participants who were considered outliers in terms of their parenting scores (i.e., z -scores for overprotection or responsiveness greater than +3 or smaller than -3). The latter participants were removed to enhance the accuracy and interpretability of the cluster analysis results. The final sample consists of 681 parents, 269 parents from Southern Italy (39%) and 412 parents from Northern Italy (61%), of which 406 mothers (60%; $M_{age} = 50.06$, $SD = 4.98$) and 275 fathers (40%; $M_{age} = 52.56$, $SD = 5.59$). Table 1 shows the specific characteristics of the sample. Their children are adolescents aged between 17 and 20 years ($M_{age} = 18.17$; $SD = 0.51$), 58% girls and 42% boys, 98% attended a public school, of which 63% attending a Lyceum, 32% a technical institute and 4% a vocational school.

Measures

Participants filled in self-report questionnaires, which were all translated from English to Italian by the research team. The forward translation was performed independently by two researchers, which was followed by a reconciliation phase. Then, a backward translation was performed by a third person. Potential divergences were then resolved through a discussion between all researchers. An initial translation of the questionnaire was administered in a small group of parents of adolescents (5 in person and 3 online), asking them to indicate features of the questionnaire that were unclear and to suggest possible adaptations. After this pilot study, the questionnaire was further refined in terms of both the translation of individual items and some explanations on how to complete it. All items were scored on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Parents

		South	North
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)
Civil status			
Married	517 (76%)	208 (77%)	309 (75%)
Single	24 (3%)	5 (2%)	19 (4%)
Separated	76 (11%)	27 (10%)	49 (12%)
Legal cohabitation	19 (3%)	6 (2%)	13 (3%)
In a relationship but not living together	12 (2%)	1 (1%)	11 (3%)
Widowed	26 (4%)	18 (7%)	8 (2%)
Other	7 (1%)	4 (1%)	3 (1%)
Level of education			
Primary education	6 (1%)	4 (1%)	2 (1%)
Middle School Diploma	113 (17%)	58 (22%)	55 (13%)
High School Diploma	380 (55%)	151 (56%)	229 (55%)
University 1st cycle bachelor	41 (6%)	15 (6%)	26 (6%)
University 2nd cycle master	114 (17%)	33 (12%)	81 (20%)
University 3rd cycle doctorate	22 (3%)	6 (2%)	16 (4%)
Other	5 (1%)	2 (1%)	3 (1%)
Professional Situation			
Employed	562 (82%)	188 (70%)	374 (90%)
Unemployed	30 (4%)	23 (9%)	7 (2%)
Homemaker	66 (10%)	44 (16%)	22 (5%)
Student	5 (1%)	4 (1%)	1 (1%)
Retirement	12 (2%)	9 (3%)	3 (1%)
Permanent disability	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	-
Other	5 (1%)	-	5 (1%)
Social class			
Lower class	10 (2%)	8 (3%)	2 (1%)
Working class	104 (15%)	43 (16%)	61 (15%)
Lower middle class	72 (11%)	24 (9%)	48 (12%)
Middle class	425 (62%)	160 (60%)	265 (64%)
Upper middle class	61 (9%)	30 (11%)	31 (7%)
Upper class	9 (1%)	4 (1%)	5 (1%)

Responsiveness. Responsiveness was measured with a parent-report version of the 7-item Acceptance scale of the Child Report of Parenting Behavior Inventory (CRPBI; [Schaefer, 1965](#)). The items examined parents’ perception of availability and support when their child experiences distress (e.g., “I am able to make him/her feel better when he/she is upset”) as well as parental warmth (e.g., “I smile very often at my child.”). The parent-report version of the measure has shown good reliability indices in previous studies (e.g. $\alpha = .76$ and $\alpha = .80$, respectively, for mothers and fathers; [Venard et al., 2024](#)). In this study the measure showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .82$).

Overprotection. Parental overprotection was measured with 10 items from the anxious overprotection subscale of the short version of the Multidimensional Overprotective Parenting Scale (Chevrier et al., 2023; Kins & Soenens, 2013). The items assess overprotective parenting practices, such as violation of the child's privacy (e.g., "I violate my child's privacy"), infantilization (e.g., "I give my child the impression that I don't want him/her to grow up"), and premature resolution of problems (e.g., "I often take tasks out of my child's hands without giving him/her the chance to try him/herself first"). Previous research offers evidence for the validity of the parent-report version for both the father-child and mother-child relationship (Chevrier et al., 2023). In this study the instrument demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .82$).

Perceived Social Pressure. Perceived social pressure to be a perfect parent was assessed using a 15-item instrument (Lamprianidou et al., 2025). The measure comprises 12 items adapted from Wuyts et al. (2015), assessing perceived expectations from society (e.g., "Society expects me to be a perfect parent"), from other parents (e.g., "Other parents expect me to be a perfect parent"), and from the media (e.g., "The media wants me to be perfect as a parent"). Furthermore, three items, adapted from Meeussen and Van Laar (2018), also assess the perception of pressure experienced by parents (e.g., "I feel pressured to be 'perfect' in my role as a parent"). The present version of the has shown excellent reliability in previous research (e.g., $\alpha = .94$, for both mothers and fathers; Lamprianidou et al., 2025). The instrument had an excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .95$) also in this study.

Financial Scarcity. The perception of financial scarcity was measured through the 12-item Psychological Inventory of Financial Scarcity (Hilbert et al., 2022; Van Dijk et al., 2022). The items assess parents' perceptions of their ability to manage their financial needs and their economics in daily life (e.g., "I often don't have the money to pay for the things I really need", "I worry about money a lot", "I am not able to manage my finances properly"). Information regarding the psychometric properties and its validity are presented in Van Dijk et al. (2022). In our study, the instrument had a good internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$).

Perceived National Job Insecurity. Parents' perception of national job insecurity was assessed through 3 items (Shoss et al., 2023). Past research used this instrument across multiple samples from multiple countries, demonstrating good reliability indices (e.g., $\alpha_{UK} = .88$, $\alpha_{US} = .88$, and $\alpha_{Belgium} = .89$; Shoss et al., 2023). The items were adapted to the Italian context to evaluate the perception of job insecurity within Italy specifically (e.g., "In Italy, there is a general feeling that many people will soon lose their jobs", "In Italy, a lot of people feel insecure about the future of their jobs"). The instrument presented a good internal consistency in line with others country ($\alpha = .88$).

Data Analysis

All analyses were performed with R studio version 4.2.1 (R Development Core Team, 2022). The MCAR-test indicated that the missing data were not completely missing at

random, $\chi^2(1872) = 2298.0, p < .001$. For this reason, missing data were handled using Hot deck imputation (Andridge & Little, 2010). Preliminary analyses involved descriptive analyses of the target variables (means, standard deviations, and correlations). For our first research question, we used hierarchical *k*-means cluster analysis to identify parenting clusters based on parental responsiveness and overprotection. The *k*-means approach is a well-established technique that is widely documented in the literature, offering clear interpretability of results and immediate replicability, which are crucial aspects for our objective of identifying distinct groups within the sample. Furthermore, *k*-means produces independent profiles, facilitating the analysis of between-group differences and reducing statistical issues such as multicollinearity (Waterschoot et al., 2022). To do so, the scores of responsiveness and overprotection were first standardized. Then, we performed a hierarchical cluster analysis using Ward's approach with squared Euclidean distances (Steinley & Brusco, 2007). To select the best cluster solution, we used the following three criteria: (a) the average silhouette approach, (b) the elbow method, and (c) the gap statistic. The average silhouette approach (a) is a method for evaluating the quality of clustering, by maximizing within-clusters similarity and minimizing between-clusters similarity. The average silhouette coefficient ranges between -1 and 1 . Data points are better grouped and thus more similar to other data points in the cluster when the coefficient is closer to 1 . The elbow method (b) is a graphic method that represents the intra-cluster variation for each cluster solution. An "elbow" or noticeable curve in the graph is considered an appropriate number of clusters. This curve represents the number of clusters at which adding a new cluster no longer improves the within-cluster variation meaningfully. Finally, the gap statistic (c) compares the observed and the expected within-cluster variation for various cluster solutions. The best cluster solution should thus have the larger gap statistic for the lower number of clusters. Based on these three criteria, we selected the cluster solution that was most commonly supported. Then, the second step involved an iterative *k*-means cluster analysis. We used the centres of the hierarchical clusters as the starting point of the *k*-means analysis and allowed participants to be reassigned to a cluster, in order to optimize the cluster solution. Clusters were then described according to their level of overprotection and responsiveness.

Subsequently, to address the second research question, a MANOVA was performed to assess between-cluster differences in terms of perceived social pressure, financial scarcity, and perceived job insecurity. The cluster solution was entered as a fixed factor, and perceived social pressure, financial scarcity, and job insecurity were entered as dependent variables. This was followed by post hoc analyses using the Tukey test.

Finally, as for our third research question, the relation between region (Northern vs. Southern Italy) and the cluster solution was analysed with a chi-square test. In case of a significant difference, a post hoc independence test was conducted using adjusted standardized residuals. Then, a MANOVA was also performed to assess between-region differences in terms of perceived social pressure, financial scarcity, and perceived job insecurity. The same analytical strategy was used to examine the relation between gender and the cluster solution, as well as gender differences in terms of perceived social pressure, financial scarcity, and perceived job insecurity.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables of interest. Parental responsiveness was significantly and positively correlated with perceived social pressure and perceived job security. Overprotection was significantly and positively correlated with perceived social pressure, financial scarcity, and perceived job security. Perceived social pressure was significantly and positively correlated with financial scarcity and perceived job security. Finally, financial scarcity was significantly and positively correlated with perceived job security. The other correlations were not statistically significant.

Cluster Analysis

As detailed in the Data Analysis section, we started with a hierarchical cluster analysis. A combined consideration of the three criteria supported a 4-cluster solution. Specifically, the average silhouette method supported the 2, 3, and 4-cluster solutions; the elbow graph highlighted the 4-cluster solution as the most optimal solution; whereas the gap statistic supported both the 4- and 7-cluster solutions. The 4-cluster solution also had an explained variance of $R^2 = .65$ for overprotection, and $R^2 = .67$ for responsiveness. For these reasons, we performed the *k*-means clustering approach using the centres of the 4-cluster solution. In addition, the robustness of this solution was evaluated using a split-half method. The sample was randomly divided into two independent halves, on which separate cluster analyses were performed. The results showed a good similarity between the two solutions, and the Adjusted Rand Index showed excellent stability ($ARI = 0.94$), demonstrating the stability and replicability of the solution.

The final 4-cluster solution is presented in Figure 1. Cluster 1, which we labelled as “High responsiveness/low overprotection” ($n = 258$, 37.9% of the sample), was characterized by parents reporting relatively higher levels of responsiveness and lower levels of overprotection. Cluster 2, labelled as “High responsiveness/high overprotection” ($n = 113$, 16.6% of the sample), encompassed parents who scored relatively high on responsiveness and relatively high in overprotection. Participants in Cluster 3, which was labelled “Low responsiveness/low overprotection” ($n = 167$, 24.5% of the sample),

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Responsiveness	3.98	0.59				
2. Overprotection	1.99	0.51	.04			
3. Perceived Social Pressure	2.74	0.77	.12**	.18**		
4. Financial Scarcity	2.12	0.64	-.05	.23**	.17**	
5. Perceived Job Insecurity	3.12	0.81	.08*	.15**	.26**	.29**

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

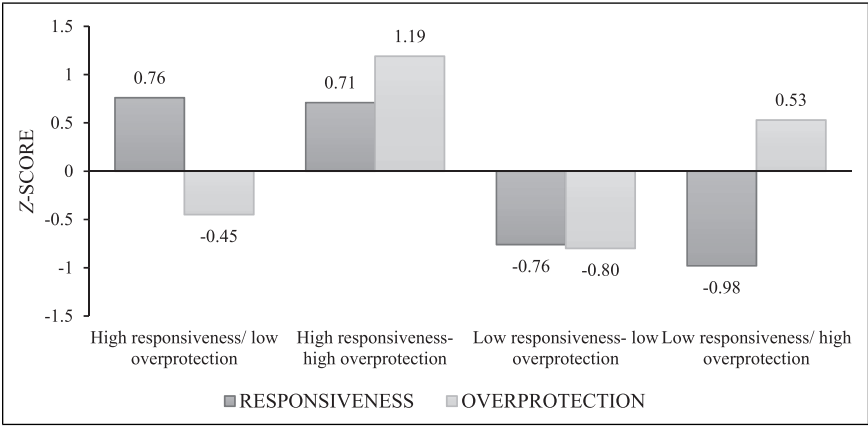


Figure 1. Parenting clusters

reported relatively low scores on both responsiveness and overprotection. Finally, parents in Cluster 4, “Low responsiveness/high overprotection” ($n = 143$, 21% of the sample), reported the lowest scores on responsiveness and a relatively high score on overprotection (see Figure 1).

Between-Cluster Differences in Perceived Social Pressure, Financial Scarcity and Job Insecurity

A MANOVA was conducted with the cluster solution as the independent variable and social pressure, financial scarcity, and job insecurity as dependent variables. The multivariate test was significant, Wilks’ $\lambda = .92$, $F(9, 1642.9) = 6.04$, $p < .001$. Subsequent univariate analyses indicated significant between-cluster differences for each of the dependent variables (see Table 3). Regarding perceived social pressure, Tukey’s post-hoc test revealed that parents belonging to the *Low responsiveness/low overprotection* cluster reported significantly lower levels of social pressure than parents from the other clusters ($p_{adj} = .009$ with Cluster 1; $p_{adj} < .001$ with Cluster 2; $p_{adj} = .016$ with Cluster 4). No other group differences were significant for perceived social pressure.

For financial scarcity, post-hoc tests showed that parents belonging to the *High responsiveness/low overprotection* cluster reported significantly lower levels of perceived financial scarcity than the parents of the *High responsiveness/high overprotection* ($p_{adj} < .001$) and *Low responsiveness/high overprotection* ($p_{adj} = .001$) clusters. Parents belonging to the cluster *Low responsiveness/low overprotection* reported significantly lower levels of perceived financial scarcity than the parents of the *High responsiveness/high overprotection* ($p_{adj} < .001$) and *Low responsiveness/high overprotection* ($p_{adj} = .007$) clusters (Table 3). No other differences emerged in term of perceived financial scarcity.

Finally, the parents belonging to cluster *Low responsiveness/low overprotection* reported a significantly lower perception of job insecurity than the parents of clusters *High*

Table 3. Mean Level Differences Between Clusters for Different Pressures

Pressure	Cluster 1 (n = 258; 37.9%)	Cluster 2 (n = 113; 16.6%)	Cluster 3 (n = 167; 24.4%)	Cluster 4 (n = 143; 21%)	F- value	df	η^2
	High responsiveness- low overprotection	High responsiveness - high overprotection	Low responsiveness- low overprotection	Low responsiveness- high overprotection			
	M (SD)CI lower-CI Upper						
Perceived Social Pressure	2.77 ^a (.82)	2.94 ^a (.83)	2.53 ^b (.64)	2.79 ^a (.70)	7.06***	677	.03
	2.66-2.86	2.80-3.08	2.42-2.65	2.67-2.91			
Perceived Financial Scarcity	2.01 ^b (.63)	2.35 ^a (.68)	2.02 ^b (.55)	2.25 ^a (.64)	11.29***	677	.05
	1.93-2.08	2.23-2.46	1.93-2.12	2.15-2.35			
Perceived Job Insecurity	3.10 ^{ab} (.83)	3.32 ^a (.82)	2.95 ^b (.71)	3.19 ^a (.81)	5.30**	677	.02
	3.00-3.20	3.17-3.47	2.83-3.07	3.06-3.32			

Note. Means with different superscripts indicate statistically significant differences between them.
** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

responsiveness/high overprotection ($p_{adj} < .001$) and Low responsiveness/high overprotection ($p_{adj} < .01$). No other group differences were significant for perceived job insecurity (Table 3).

To sum up, our results indicate that parents from the cluster characterized by relatively low levels of responsiveness and low levels of overprotection perceived lower pressure than the other groups. Conversely, parents for the clusters characterized by relatively high levels of overprotection reported perceiving the highest level of job insecurity and financial scarcity.

Regional Differences

Regarding the relationship between region (i.e., North vs. South of Italy) and the cluster solution, the chi-square test revealed a significant difference, $\chi^2(3) = 28.66, p < .001$ (see Figure 2). Specifically, results indicated that Southern Italian parents were overrepresented in the High responsiveness/high overprotection cluster, while Northern Italian parents were overrepresented in the Low responsiveness/low overprotection cluster. In addition to the chi-square test, we calculated Cramér’s V to assess the strength of the association between region and cluster membership. Cramér’s V value was 0.21, indicating a weak-to-moderate but significant association, which supports the validity of the regional differences observed in cluster distribution.

A MANOVA was then conducted with region as the independent variable and social pressure, job insecurity, and financial scarcity as dependent variables. The multivariate test was significant, Wilks’ $\lambda = 0.89, F(3, 677) = 27.65, p < .001$. Subsequent univariate analyses indicated significant differences between Northern and Southern Italy for each of the dependent variables. The specific mean and standard deviation values are presented in Table 4. Overall, these results indicate that Southern Italian parents perceive higher

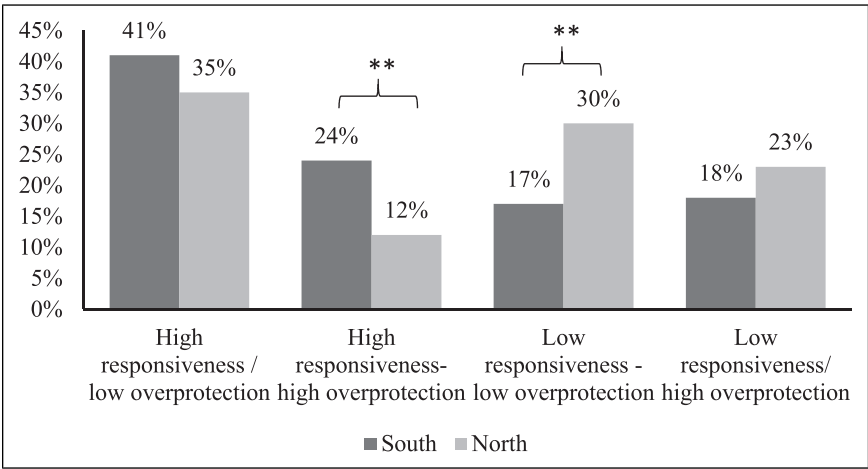


Figure 2. Results of the Chi-square Test on the Differences of Regions Between Clusters
Note. ** groups in which there is a statistically significant difference $p < .001$

Table 4. Regional Differences in Socio-Economic Pressures

Pressure	South	North	F-value	df	η^2
	M (SD) CI lower - CI Upper				
Perceived social pressure	2.90 (0.74) 2.81 - 2.99	2.64 (0.77) 2.57 - 2.71	19.75***	679	.03
Perceived financial scarcity	2.26 (0.70) 2.18 - 2.33	2.03 (0.57) 1.97 - 2.09	21.74***	679	.03
Perceived job insecurity	3.42 (0.83) 3.33 - 3.52	2.92 (0.73) 2.84 - 2.99	70.37***	679	.09

Note. Means and standard deviations are reported. *** $p < .001$.

levels of social pressure, report more financial scarcity and perceive more job insecurity as compared to Northern Italian parents.

Gender Differences

We then examined whether parents' gender was related to the cluster solution through a chi-square test. We did not find evidence for a significant gender difference, $\chi^2(3) = 6.92$, $p = .07$, indicating that fathers and mothers were equally represented in the clusters. Finally, a MANOVA was conducted with gender as the independent variable and social pressure, job insecurity, and financial scarcity as dependent variables. The multivariate test was not significant, Wilks' $\lambda = 0.99$, $F(3, 677) = 2.28$, $p = 0.07$. Subsequent univariate analyses only indicated significant differences between mothers and fathers in the perception of social pressure, $F(1, 679) = 6.32$, $p = .01$. Specifically, mothers perceived more social pressure ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.75$) than fathers ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 0.78$). No gender differences were found for job insecurity and financial scarcity.

Discussion

The present study aimed to identify clusters of parents, based on their levels of responsiveness and overprotection. Further, building on previous work highlighting the importance of the socio-economic context for understanding parenting (Bornstein, 2002; Lamprianidou et al., 2025; Masarik & Conger, 2017), a second aim was to examine the relationship between these parenting clusters and three types of socio-economic pressure (i.e., perceived social pressure to be a perfect parent, financial scarcity, perceived national job insecurity). Third, this study set out to examine whether the prevalence of these parenting clusters and the perceived level of socio-economic pressure differed according to participants' gender and region of residence, contrasting Northern and Southern Italy.

The first important finding of this study was the identification of four different parenting clusters uniquely combining different levels of responsiveness and overprotection, which is in line with the Parker et al. (1979) model. Specifically, the first cluster, which we have labelled as "High responsiveness/low overprotection", corresponds to the

“optimal bonding” profile in the model of [Parker et al. \(1979\)](#), where parents combine high levels of care with low levels of overprotection. This was the most common cluster in our sample, and is considered to most adaptive profile (e.g., [Rote et al., 2020](#)). The second cluster “High responsiveness/high overprotection” particularly matches with Parker’s “affective constraint” profile, where parenting is characterized by a mix of both responsiveness or care and overprotection, while the third cluster “Low responsiveness/high overprotection” particularly matches with the “affectionate control” profile, as identified in the model of [Parker et al. \(1979\)](#). In other words, both positive and negative dimensions, such as responsiveness and overprotection, can coexist, thus highlighting the importance of considering multiple parenting dimensions simultaneously through person-centered approaches. This finding may be particularly relevant when considering ongoing research on helicopter parenting. While some research uses the concepts of helicopter parenting and overprotection in an interchangeable way (e.g., [Vigdal & Brønnick, 2022](#)), other studies suggest that some helicopter parenting practices also may contain elements of warmth, care and support (e.g., [Luebbe et al., 2018](#)). In line with this, recent research provided evidence for the necessity of distinguishing between more demanding and controlling features from the responsive features within the helicopter parenting concept, as their correlates diverge in important ways ([Ryan et al., 2024](#)). Overall, if the literature highlights the importance of distinguishing between helicopter parenting and overprotection, this distinction is further reinforced by our findings. Whereas these demanding features are likely to be particularly present in our “Low responsiveness/high overprotection” cluster, the responsive features are likely more common in our “High responsiveness/high overprotection” cluster. More generally, our results illustrate how a person-centered approach is needed to capture the subtleties and potential coexistence of these parenting practices, allowing us to be more specific and distinguish parents who are overprotective but also responsive from those who rely primarily on overprotective practices with less responsiveness. The fourth and final cluster, labelled “Low responsiveness/low overprotection”, particularly corresponds to the “negligent parenting” profile of Parker’s model. Overall, the present results not only provide evidence for the validity of the model of [Parker et al. \(1979\)](#), they also highlight the importance of considering multiple parenting dimensions simultaneously through person-centered approaches (e.g., [Liga et al., 2020](#); [Skhirtladze et al., 2023](#)).

Our approach also seemed helpful for understanding potential regional differences in the prevalence of these parenting clusters. Indeed, our analyses highlighted that parents from Southern Italy were particularly overrepresented in the “high responsiveness/high overprotection” cluster, while parents from Northern Italy were overrepresented in the “low responsiveness/low overprotection” cluster. These results are consistent with a previous study conducted with mothers from Southern Italy, which showed that these parents particularly considered both discipline and affection as important practices ([Lo Cricchio et al., 2019](#)). Thus, a “good” parent-child relationship in this cultural context should be characterised by a balance between love and control. The overrepresentation of the South in the “High responsiveness/high overprotection” cluster could therefore reflect cultural ideals and norms that tend to value tradition, stability, strong family interdependence and interpersonal bonds, as well as greater parental involvement ([Lansford et al., 2021](#)). On the contrary, Northern parents were more often represented in the

parenting cluster characterized by lower levels of overprotection and responsiveness. These results could be linked to the greater importance of individualistic values in Northern Italy, which emphasise individual success, autonomy and personal fulfilment, rather than family and community bonds (Piumatti et al., 2016).

In addition to differences in terms of parenting practices, parents from the North and South of Italy are also confronted with a different socio-economic reality. In line with the economic differences between the North and the South of Italy (ISTAT, 2020, 2023), our results indicated more perceived financial scarcity and job insecurity among parents living in the South of Italy, compared to parents living in the North. This differential economic reality also seems to shape parenting practices. Indeed, we found that both the financial scarcity and the perception of national job insecurity were associated with more overprotective parenting practices. In particular, the “high responsiveness/high overprotection” and “low responsiveness/high overprotection” parents reported higher levels of economic pressure. Thus, both the individual situation of parents and their perception of the broader economic situation are related with more overprotective parenting, which resonates with previous research documenting similar links with parents’ controlling school involvement (Van Petegem et al., 2025). These findings suggests that parents might be more inclined to adopt overprotective parenting practices in a socio-economic context where their adolescents and young adult children are likely to be financially dependent on them for a longer period, due to lengthier schooling and difficulties in entering the labour market. In the Northern Italian context, which is characterized by more job opportunities and better economic conditions, parents may feel less socio-economic pressure and therefore may be able to support their adolescent children’s independence to a greater extent.

Further, parents’ perceived social pressure also differs significantly between the North and the South, with Southern parents reporting more pressure to be a perfect parent. A possible explanation may lie in the fact that Southern Italian parents may identify more strongly with the ideal of perfect parenthood, since they value the parental role and family well-being more strongly. However, when parents are particularly sensitive to cultural norms and expectations related to perfect parenting, they are more at risk to experience stress, anxiety, and parental burnout (Furutani et al., 2020). In addition, these parents may particularly adopt more intensive and involved parenting practices, investing a great deal of energy in caring for their children. Indeed, a perfect parent is often considered a parent who puts the child’s needs before their own (Henderson et al., 2016; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2017). As our results suggest, this pressure seems to result in greater involvement, yet such involvement is not always attuned with the needs of their adolescent children.

The last overall goal of the study concerned the potential differences between mothers and fathers. First, we did not find gender differences among the parenting clusters. As past research suggests, fathers are more involved in their children’s lives compared to a few decades ago (Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020; Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020), which could explain the absence of significant differences between mothers and fathers in relation to parenting practices. At the same time, we did find significant differences in terms of perceived social pressure to be a perfect parent, which were higher among mothers compared to fathers. Despite the growing importance of intensive parenting discourses surrounding fatherhood, expectations and pressures are still mainly addressed

to mothers (Craig et al., 2014; Eira Nunes et al., 2025; Venard et al., 2024). Indeed, while *couple relationships* are often idealised as egalitarian, *parental relationships* often remain strongly gendered (Faircloth, 2021). In fact, previous studies have highlighted that, despite a post-modern era characterized by a climate of greater equality between fathers and mothers, mothers are still seen as the main provider of care and parenting prescriptions are mainly directed at them (e.g., Faircloth, 2021). Even today, contemporary women's experiences are crystalized in the characteristics of intensive mothering, which considers a mother to be responsible for all aspects of her child's physical, social, emotional and cognitive development - more than anyone else, including the father (Faircloth, 2023; Hays, 1996). Similarly, gender essentialism emphasises how men and women would differ due to biology, consequently emphasising that women are inherently better predisposed to parenting (Eira Nunes et al., 2025; Liss et al., 2013). Essentialist beliefs thus support the traditional view of women as better parents than men (Lamprianidou et al., 2025). Accordingly, women may particularly perceive greater social pressure to be performant in this role as a parent.

In particular, echoing our findings, mothers often emerge as central figures in these dynamics. Previous studies have shown that motherhood, especially in Southern Italy, is frequently represented in popular culture in negative terms, with mothers described as oppressive, controlling and authoritarian, and only rarely portrayed as affectionate and capable of conveying a positive image to their children (Brunetti, 2023). Furthermore, positive representations tend to be associated with conditions of economic marginalisation, while those relating to wealthy and socially influential mothers are often characterised by traits of selfishness and lack of care (Brunetti, 2023). Such narratives contribute to reinforcing the perception of constant social judgement on parenting, generating further pressure, and highlight the need to systematically consider the impact of the socio-economic context on educational and family practices.

Limitations and Future Research

The study has some limitations worth noting. Firstly, we used cross-sectional data, which does not allow us to verify causal relationships between the variables analysed. A longitudinal design is necessary to identify the direction of effects between pressures and parenting. Secondly, most of the participants report belonging to the middle class, and thus, the results related to the experience of the economic situation might not be fully generalisable to the entire Italian population. In addition, since parents with low incomes and less education tend to spend less quality time with their children (Kalil & Ryan, 2020) due to the stress resulting from financial strain (Masarik & Conger, 2017), future research could rely upon a more diverse or vulnerable sample in terms of socio-economic background. This could be done by employing flexible data collection methods, and integrating the approaches used in this study with qualitative methodologies that capture the daily experiences and challenges faced by families in greater depth, in order to examine whether economic strain and perceptions of national job insecurity affect parenting differently for low-income vs. middle-class families (see Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019).

Conclusions

This study highlights important implications for parenting practices and policy. This is important, as a culturally more sensitive approach may allow a better understanding of the different parenting experiences and may be particularly informative for the development of policies and programmes that seek to support parents and the family as a whole. As an economically challenging context may push parents to engage in parenting practices that are less optimal, policies that seek to reduce poverty and job insecurity would have positive spillover effects on parents and their parenting, and consequently, on children. Further, in light of our results, it also seems useful to encourage parent training programs that allow parents to discover and learn appropriate strategies to adopt with their children, as well as to acquire strategies aimed at reducing stress and discomfort. As parental depressive symptoms particularly improve in group settings specifically (Mathijs et al., 2024b), policy-makers may want to focus on implementing group programs that allow parents experiencing similar conditions to share and learn from one another, thereby acquiring not only better skills for managing family dynamics but also greater individual well-being. Similarly, acknowledging the role of cultural values, it seems useful to adopt support strategies that take into account the ideals of the parents' cultural background, while at the same time being able to challenge gender stereotypes and ensure balanced support for both fathers and mothers. It also seems important to promote and encourage new employment policies aimed at economically disadvantaged areas, ensuring equal access and practical tools to reduce stress and guarantee greater and fairer opportunities, providing the conditions that allow everyone to earn a decent income to support their families and limit inequalities.

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Ethical Considerations

The authors complied with the American Psychological Association's ethical standards in the treatment of participants for this work. This research has been approved by the local institutional research ethics committee.

Author Contributions

EDS contributed to the conception and design of the study, data collection, statistical analysis and manuscript original writing, CEN contributed with data analysis, data interpretation, and manuscript editing, FL supervised the data collection and assisted with data interpretation and manuscript editing, AS contributed to the data collection and provided critical revisions to the manuscript content, EPV supervised the data collection and assisted in revising the final manuscript and SVP was principal investigator of the project, supervised the design of the study and contributed to revision of the final manuscript. All authors take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis. All authors contributed to and have approved the final manuscript.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author (Eliana De Salvo-eliana.desalvo@unime.it).

Open Science Statement

As part of IARR's encouragement of open research practices, the authors have provided the following information: This research was not pre-registered.

The data used in the research are available. The data can be obtained by emailing: eliana.desalvo@unime.it. The materials used in the research are available. The materials can be obtained by emailing: eliana.desalvo@unime.it.

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