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Parenting styles and Psychological control: similarities and differences between mothers and fathers of school-age children

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ABSTRACT

Background: The first aim of the present study was to investigate differences and similarities in perceived parenting styles between fathers and mothers in the same family. Secondly, this study wanted to verify the relation between parental anxiety and parenting dimensions, assuming differences according to the parental gender.

Methods: The 80 parents of 40 school-age children independently completed the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ), the Parenting Instrument (PI) and the State Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI).

Results: revealed differences between fathers and mothers in almost all the variables considered, with mothers who reported the highest scores. Significant correlations between paternal and maternal perceptions were found in authoritarian style and in the practices of psychological control (disappointing and shaming). Finally, parental anxiety was associated positively with authoritarian style and inadequate parental practices, and negatively with authoritative style, expressive warmth and supportive involvement: the constructs however correlated in a different way according to parental gender.

Conclusions: Independent assessment of both mother's and father's parenting styles and, especially, parental practices of psychological control seem to be necessities both in research and practical settings.

Keywords: *Parenting styles; Psychological control; Parental anxiety.*

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Introduction

The investigation of parenting styles and its effects on children's development are an area of research important and always current. For many years, studies have almost entirely focused on the analysis of some parenting styles. In this regard, very important is the work of Baumrind (1966), who has identified three different parenting styles: authoritarian, permissive and authoritative, that continue to be relevant constructs in psychological literature. Subsequently, researchers have paid more attention to the specific dimensions within each parenting styles and have introduced a distinction between parenting styles and parenting practices (Barber, 1996). In particular, Barber, Stolz & Olsen (2005) have identified two different forms of control practiced by parents: behavioral control defined as a "control exercised by parents on the child's behavior", and psychological control, that "refers to parental control that intrudes on the psychological and emotional development of the child".

Many studies have especially emphasized the maladaptive effects of psychological control on children (Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Luyten, et al., 2005), such as depressive symptoms (Barber, Stolz & Olsen, 2005), anxiety (Pettit & Laird, 2002; Whaley, Pinto, Sigman, 1999) and low levels of self-esteem (Barber & Harmon, 2002), less consistent associations with aggression, delinquency, and antisocial behavior have also been found (Barber, Stolz & Olsen, 2005).

Recently some studies have examined the relationship between parental anxiety and parenting styles, showing that parents with a high degree of anxiety tend to use ineffective disciplinary strategies, increasing the severity and punishment. Anxious mothers, in fact, tend to be more critical and less affectionate, and often they are not able to adopt educational strategies and practices that promote the development of psychological autonomy in the child, but rather facilitate the emergence of internalizing symptoms in him (Laskey, Cartwright-Hatton, 2009; Patrizi, Rigante, et al., 2010). However, these studies have mainly analyzed the associations between anxiety and parenting strategies in mothers, and to a lesser extent in fathers. One of the major limitations of work in parenting area, in fact, has been an almost exclusive focus on maternal parenting style, despite of the importance of paternal role, considering the trend of increased father involvement in children's lives among two-parent families (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, et al., 2000). Little information so exists about fathers' parenting practices and possible gender differences in parenting style, but it seems that mothers tend to adopt more frequently an authoritative style, whereas fathers exhibit especially an authoritarian style, particularly with regard to disciplinary strategies (Russell, Hart, Robinson & Olsen, 2003). Winsler, Madigan, Aquilino (2005), in their study on parents of preschooler, found that mothers' self-reports of authoritativeness were significantly higher than fathers', whereas no significant differences were found between mothers' and fathers' self-reports

of their permissive or authoritarian parenting; furthermore, significant correlations between mothers' and fathers' parenting styles were for authoritarianism and permissiveness, but not for authoritativeness.

Given the theoretical assumptions above, the purpose of this study was to investigate not only parenting style, but also some educational practices and anxiety of parents of children aged between 7 and 11 years, in order to highlight any gender differences in educational management of children.

Method

Participants

Fathers and mothers of 40 school-age children took part in the study. The average age of parents was 40.26 years (fathers $M = 41.75$, $SD = 6.448$; mothers $M = 38.48$, $SD = 5.154$). 25 children were males and 15 females, and their age varied between 7 and 11 years (males $M = 9.64$, $SD = 1.469$; females $M = 9.20$, $SD = 1.32$). 65% of parents had 2 children, while 35% had one child. All participants in this study were Italian and all parents were married.

Procedure and Measures

Participants took part in the research voluntarily. Parents completed questionnaires separately under the supervision of an experimenter. It was guaranteed the anonymity of responses. The relevant university ethics committee granted ethical approval for the study.

Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ) (Robinson, Mandleco, Olsen, & Hart, 2001). It is a self-report instrument consisting of 16 items (6 for authoritative style and 10 for authoritarian style), on which participants rate themselves from 1 (never) to 5 (always). It allows assessing two parenting styles (authoritative and authoritarian) and five stylistic dimensions: Verbal hostility, Physical coercion, Directiveness, Regulation reasoning, Autonomy granting-democratic participation. The internal consistencies (Cronbach's α) for the parenting styles in the present study were, respectively, .87 and .88.

Parenting instrument (PI) (Confalonieri, Giuliani, Tagliabue, 2009). It is a self-report questionnaire in which parents independently rate the frequency of their engagement in specific parenting behaviors utilizing a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = Never; 5 = Always). It comprises 15 items and it is designed to assess 4 parenting practices: Disappointment, Shaming, Expressive warmth, Supportive involvement. The internal consistencies for the four subscales in the present study were between .70 and .85.

State Trait Anxiety Inventory Form Y (STAI) (Spielberger, Gorsuch, Lushene, et al., 1983; Pedrabissi, Santinello, 1998). This questionnaire was used in order to assess reported anxiety symptoms. It consists of 2 scales containing 20 items each, based on a 4-point Likert scale: the first

scale addresses State Anxiety (a temporary condition of anxiety), whereas the second scale addresses Trait Anxiety (more general and long-standing quality of anxiety). The internal consistencies for the two sets of scores in this study were, respectively, .90 and .85.

Results

Three paired-sample t-tests were conducted to determine if there were significant differences between mothers and fathers in their self-reported mean levels of the parenting styles, parental practices and anxiety levels.

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for parenting styles, practices and levels of anxiety in fathers and mothers subsamples separately.

	<i>Fathers</i>		<i>Mothers</i>	
	M	SD	M	SD
Verbal hostility	6.83	2.3	8.25	2.6
Physical coercion	6.45	2.3	7.45	2.7
Directiveness	9.45	2.5	9.5	3.1
Regulation reasoning	11.5	2.5	12.4	1.8
Autonomy granting	7.15	2.0	7.9	1.7
Authoritative style	18.6	4.1	20.3	2.9
Authoritarian style	22.7	5.5	24.8	3.7
Disappointment	13.4	3.4	14.9	3.3
Shaming	8.5	3.4	9.68	3.9
Expressive warmth	11.6	2.4	13.35	1.6
Supportive involvement	17.0	2.3	18.8	1.7
State Anxiety	32.6	6.6	36.9	11.5
Trait Anxiety	34.9	7.1	41.83	10.7

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Key Variables in Paternal and Maternal Samples

Mothers reported to use Verbal hostility [$t(39)=3.33$, $p=0.002$], Physical coercion [$t(39)=2.66$, $p=0.011$], and Autonomy granting [$t(39)=2.37$, $p=0.022$] more frequently than fathers. Although authoritarian style appears to be more used by both fathers and mothers than the authoritative one, mothers tended to consider themselves more authoritative [$t(39)=2.37$, $p=0.023$] and authoritarian [$t(39)=2.52$, $p=0.016$], than their husbands. Furthermore, significant differences were found between fathers and mothers in the use of Disappointment [$t(39)=2.94$, $p=0.005$], Expressive warmth [$t(39)=4.03$, $p<0.001$], and Supportive Involvement [$t(39)=3.83$, $p<0.001$], but not in the use of Shaming [$t(39)=1.86$, $p=0.07$]: even in this case, the mothers reported higher scores than fathers in all the parenting practices assessed by Parenting Instrument. Finally, t-test showed significant differences between fathers and mothers in State [$t(39)=2.45$, $p=0.019$] and Trait Anxiety [$t(39)=3.95$, $p<0.001$]: levels of maternal anxiety were higher than those of the fathers.

The second question was concerned with similarity across parents in parenting style and parental practices. Pearson's correlations were computed to estimate the correspondence between mother and father ratings: significant correlations were found for authoritarian style ($r=0.635$; $p<0.001$), but not for authoritative style ($r=0.259$, $p=0.106$). Furthermore, fathers' and mothers' self-reported practices correlated significantly for Disappointment ($r=0.97$, $p<0.001$) and Shaming ($r=0.338$, $p=0.033$): no significant correlations between mothers and fathers were found for Expressive warmth ($r=0.081$, $p=0.62$) and Supportive Involvement ($r=0.003$, $p=0.98$).

	Fathers		Mathers	
	State Anxiety	Trait anxiety	State anxiety	Trait anxiety
Verbal hostility	.342*	.198	.516**	.657**
Physical coercion	.186	-.109	.323*	.353*
Directiveness	.277	.077	.436**	.454**
Regulation reasoning	-.145	-.510**	-.177	-.105
Autonomy granting	-.250	-.574**	-.263	-.349*
Authoritative style	-.211	-.594**	-.268	-.275
Authoritarian style	.353*	.076	.517**	.543**
Disappointment	.262	.256	.541**	.427**
Shaming	.307	.104	.410**	.438**
Expressive warmth	.038	-.432**	-.040	.090
Supportive involvement	.124	-.318*	-.153	-.132

Table 2 - Correlations between parenting dimensions and parental anxiety

Finally, Pearson's correlations were used to investigate the association between fathers' and mothers' anxiety with parenting variables, obtaining interesting results according to parental gender. The results are summarized in table 2.

Mothers' anxiety was significantly associated with Authoritarian style (state anxiety: $r=0.517$, $p=0.001$; trait anxiety: $r=0.543$, $p<0.001$), Disappointment (state anxiety: $r=0.541$, $p<0.001$; trait anxiety: $r=0.427$, $p=0.006$) and Shaming (state anxiety: $r=0.410$, $p=0.009$; trait anxiety: $r=0.438$, $p=0.005$). In Fathers, instead, only trait anxiety was associated negatively with Authoritative style ($r=-0.594$, $p<0.001$), Expressive warmth ($r=-0.432$, $p=0.005$) and Supportive involvement ($r=-0.318$, $p=0.046$) (see Table 2).

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine differences and similarity on self-reported parenting styles for mothers and fathers of school-age children. The second aim was to investigate the relation between parenting dimensions and parental anxiety.

The results showed significant differences in style and parenting practices of fathers and mothers: mothers reported to be more authoritarian and to use more frequently physical coercion and verbal

forms of hostility towards their children. Furthermore, they perceived themselves more authoritative than fathers and these results are consistent with previous research (Winsler, Madigan, Aquilino, 2005). Mothers referred also to support the autonomy of children, to be warmer and more involved in their lives, but at the same time reported to be more disappointed than fathers were when the child does not meet their demands. Moreover, mothers tended to be more anxious than fathers were, and anxiety seemed to be correlate with parenting style: the more anxious mothers preferred authoritarian style and made a greater recourse to forms of physical coercion and verbal hostility towards their children. In addition, they referred to prefer shaming and disappointment when the child does not show compliance to their demands. These results are very interesting, according to us, because extend those of previous research (Laskey, Cartwright-Hatton, 2009): anxious mothers not only more frequently use severity and punishment, but also implement forms of psychological control on their children.

Different results were found for fathers: those who reported higher levels of trait anxiety were less authoritative and did not support the autonomy and democratic participation of children in the family. Therefore, anxiety prevented fathers to adopt functional educational strategies, even if it seemed not to be directly linked to the use of psychological control forms, as in mothers. Future studies should deepen these results.

Finally, an interesting result that needs further investigation is relate to the significant correspondence between mothers and fathers only in less functional educational practices (disappointment and shaming).

The results of this preliminary study could have relevant clinical and practical implications. Many studies underline the relationship between parental stress and parental education, while less studies focus on the relationship between parental personality characteristics (such as anxiety) and parenting stiles (Gallagher, Cartwright-Hatton, 2008). Most of the research focused on family contexts were a child with specific difficulties lives (Cuzzocrea, Larcan, Westh, 2013; Cuzzocrea, Murdaca, Costa et al., 2016). or the effect of parenting in children anxiety (Thergaonkar, Neerja, Wadkar, 2007). In this research, we focused on those aspects that con influence the parenting of children with typical development, underling the importance to organize specific parent training in order to help parents to better control their individually personality characteristics. Moreover, we underline the importance of specific training to mothers and fathers (Winsler, Madigan, Aquilino, 2005). In the clinical practice, we observer a high participation only from mothers.

A number of limitations should be underlined: the relatively small sample size, the use of self-report questionnaires, and the lack of child outcome measures. Further studies should consider these limitations and deepen this area of research, even taking a longitudinal prospective.

Few studies have examined fathers' parenting practices and possible gender differences in them. This study, therefore, is part of a new area of research that highlights the importance of analyzing, in addition to parenting style, the practices of psychological control, focusing on fathers as well as mothers. Future studies should examine the role of anxiety as antecedent of these practices and investigate their effects on the emotional and behavioral development of the child.

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