

Love, money and involved parenting? Associations between parents' perceptions of economic inequality, financial scarcity, and their school involvement

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Abstract

It has been suggested previously that rising economic inequality would push parents to become overly involved in their children's academic lives. In the present investigation we examined whether parents' perceptions of economic inequality, in terms of perceived income inequality and perceived job insecurity, is predictive of their school involvement, thereby distinguishing between controlling and autonomy-supportive school involvement. Further, we also tested whether these associations are particularly pronounced among parents facing financial scarcity. To test these hypotheses, we gathered data among 908 parents (58.70% mothers), who filled out questionnaires assessing their perceptions of income inequality and job insecurity, their financial scarcity, as well as their controlling and autonomy-supportive school involvement. Analyses indicated that higher levels of perceived income inequality related to more autonomy-supportive school involvement, whereas higher levels of perceived job insecurity related to more controlling school involvement. Parents' financial scarcity did not moderate any of the associations, but higher levels of financial scarcity consistently predicted more controlling school involvement. To conclude, these results suggest that both parents' macro-economic perceptions as well as their personal financial situation shape their child-rearing practices in ways that may potentially perpetuate socio-economic disparities.

Introduction

Both within the scientific literature and in the public debate, economic inequality is increasingly recognized as one of the major societal challenges for the 21st century (Hauser & Norton, 2017; Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015). Economic inequality refers to the unequal dispersion of resources among individuals in a society (Wienk et al., 2022), and it has been growing significantly over the past decades within many countries, especially in advanced economies (e.g., International Monetary Fund, 2017; Solt, 2020). In fact, reducing inequality is identified by the UN as one of the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2023), as it comes with important social and health costs. Indeed, there is now considerable evidence showing that many types of social and health problems (such as mental illness, substance abuse, violence, infant mortality, and obesity) are more prevalent in societies that are economically more unequal (e.g., Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, 2017). Several processes have been identified that explain why inequality may be harmful. For instance, past research showed that people living in more unequal countries report lower levels of subjective well-being because they worry more often about their position on the social ladder (i.e., higher levels of status anxiety), which may cause chronic feelings of stress (e.g., Buttrick et al., 2017; Delhey & Dragolov, 2014). In addition, studies have shown that economic inequality erodes social ties and social cohesion, and that inequality weakens feelings of trust in others and in institutions (e.g., Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; Cheng et al., 2021; Knell & Stix, 2021), and it may polarize societies by intensifying social-class identification (Andersen & Curtis, 2012; Winkler, 2019).

In recent years, there has been growing inquiry about the potential connection between rising economic inequality and the ways in which parents raise their children (e.g., Doepke et al., 2019; Doepke & Zilibotti, 2017). Indeed, in their recent book *Love, Money & Parenting*, Doepke

and Zilibotti (2019) made the case that rising economic inequality would push parents to become increasingly involved in their children's lives, as doing so would be essential for maintaining their children's position on the social ladder. In other words, as wealth disparities are increasing and as future economic prospects and job opportunities are becoming increasingly uncertain, the stakes for parents would become higher. This would in turn incite them to be increasingly invested in their children's upbringing and education, in order to safeguard their future prosperity and success (see also Doepke et al., 2019; Doepke & Zilibotti, 2017).

Drawing upon this work, the present research sought to examine whether parents' perceptions of economic inequality, in terms of perceived income inequality and perceived national job insecurity, are related to parents' involvement in the academic domain. We focused on parents' school involvement, because educational attainment is considered as a cornerstone for a child's future success, including higher earning potential, enhanced career prospects, and improved overall well-being (e.g., Ng et al., 2005; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011). Further, we wanted to examine whether associations between perceived inequality and parents' school involvement differ depending on the parents' personal economic situation. Indeed, as the psychological consequences of economic inequality would be particularly pronounced among economically disadvantaged individuals (Sommet et al., 2018; Wienk et al., 2022), we examined whether associations between perceived inequality and school involvement were moderated by parents' financial scarcity.

Parents' School Involvement: Distinguishing Controlling from Autonomy-Supportive Involvement

In the present investigation, we focus on parents' school involvement, because past meta-analytical evidence indicates that school-specific parental involvement is a stronger predictor of

academic achievement among children and adolescents than general parenting styles or dimensions (Pinquart, 2016). Parental school involvement is typically defined as the degree to which parents invest effort and resources (e.g., in terms of time, money, and energy) in their child's academic lives (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). A broad distinction is often made between parents' school-based involvement, which pertains to parents' direct contacts with the school (e.g., attending parent-teacher meetings, being a member of parents' associations), and their home-based involvement, which relates to involvement taking place outside the school (e.g., monitoring homework, discussion and encouragement, cognitive-intellectual support; Barger et al., 2019; Epstein & Sanders, 2002). A substantial body of research documented the adaptive correlates of parents' school involvement for children's and adolescents' academic adjustment (in terms of achievement, motivation, and engagement), as well as for their emotional and social adjustment (for meta-analyses, see e.g., Barger et al., 2019; Castro et al., 2015). At the same time, effect sizes are relatively small to moderate, with correlations typically ranging between .10 and .25 (depending on the outcome variable and the meta-analysis). In addition, it has been argued that more parental involvement is not always better (Li et al., 2020; Pomerantz et al., 2012), as the effects of involvement also may be qualified by "the how, whom, and why of parents' involvement" in children's academic lives (Pomerantz et al., 2007, p. 373).

Herein, drawing upon self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), we particularly focus on the *how* of parents' school involvement, distinguishing between their controlling and autonomy-supportive style of school involvement. Controlling parenting refers to the exertion of pressure to force children to act, think, or feel in parent-imposed ways, such as through the use of forceful language, guilt induction, or threats with punishments (e.g., Grolnick, 2002; Joussemet et al., 2008; Skinner et al., 2005). Thus, according to self-determination theory, parents are

controlling when they rely upon practices that are experienced as intrusive, pressuring, and coercive, and controlling parenting is therefore expected to be detrimental for children's development and their psychosocial functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010; Van Petegem et al., 2017). Autonomy-supportive parenting, on the other hand, refers to the degree to which parents encourage their children to act upon personally endorsed values, interests, and goals, by for instance encouraging initiative, allowing choice, and taking their perspective (e.g., Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Mageau et al., 2015; Soenens et al., 2007). There is now a considerable body of research showing that parents' autonomy-supportive involvement is conducive to children's motivation, learning and achievement, whereas parents' controlling involvement would undermine their motivation, engagement, and performance (e.g., Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2022; Lerner & Grolnick, 2020; Lerner et al., 2022; Moroni et al., 2015; Oh et al., 2022). For these reasons, the present investigation focuses on the quality of parental school involvement, in terms of autonomy-supportive vs. controlling involvement, rather than the quantity of involvement per se, in terms of time, money and energy.

Parents' Perceptions of Economic Inequality – And Why it May Matter for their School Involvement

Considering the meaningful effects of parents' controlling and autonomy-supportive school involvement, it is important to better understand the determinants of such involvement. Ecological perspectives on parenting and development emphasize that it is important to not only consider individual-level factors (including parents' and children's personal characteristics), but to also focus on contextual factors in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of parents' school involvement (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Grolnick et al., 1997). Even though there exists a considerable body of research focusing on the ways in which

socioeconomic disparities are linked to parents' school involvement, most of this research focuses on parents' socio-economic status (for reviews, see e.g., Malone, 2017; Tan et al., 2020); there is less research examining the way in which broader socio-economic factors are related to parents' school involvement. This is unfortunate, as Doepke and Zilibotti (2019) argued that the current economic context may play a particularly important role for understanding contemporary parenting. Because of rising economic inequality, parenthood would have become increasingly intensive in recent decades, as the stakes in parenting would be higher in unequal societies. In order to maintain their children's position on the social ladder, parents would feel pushed to invest more in their children's lives and education (Doepke et al., 2019). Indeed, perceptions of competitiveness and feelings of status anxiety that are associated with inequality (see Buttrick et al., 2017; Melita et al., 2021) would encourage parents to become more strongly invested in their children's upbringing.

Doepke and colleagues offer initial evidence for this hypothesis, by drawing parallels between historical changes in economic inequality and changes in parents' overall rearing style. They also provided cross-country comparisons in parenting as a function of differences in terms of economic inequality (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2017, 2019). For instance, they show that in more equal countries (such as Sweden), parents are more often permissive as compared to parents in countries that are more unequal (such as the United States; Doepke & Zilibotti, 2017). Although extremely insightful, these analyses are also limited as they use either very general or indirect operationalizations of parenting (e.g., focusing on parenting goals as a proxy of parenting, rather than on actual parenting practices; Ulferts, 2020).

In addition, much of this research also focused on objective indicators of income inequality, such as the Gini index or the S90/S10 ratio (i.e., the ratio of the 90th to the 10th

percentile of earnings distribution). However, research increasingly indicates that people often strongly misperceive current levels of inequality, and that these (mis)perceptions particularly drive individuals' behaviors and preferences, more than actual levels of inequality (e.g., Gimpelson & Treisman, 2017; Hauser & Norton, 2017). For instance, in a study conducted in China, it was found that participants living in regions characterized by higher levels of actual inequality, in fact perceived less inequality. This association was qualified by participants' system justification and legitimacy beliefs (i.e., people perceived less inequality when they legitimized economic inequality; Du & King, 2022; See also Willis et al., 2022). As past research particularly paid attention to objective indicators of economic inequality, the present study focused on parents' subjective perceptions of economic inequality.

A first, direct indicator of parents' perceptions of economic inequality involves their perceptions of income inequality, which refers to laypeople's beliefs about the distribution of outcomes, such as money and wealth (Hauser & Norton, 2017). A second indicator involves parents' perceived national job insecurity, which refers to individuals' perceptions of the prevalence of job insecurity in one's country (Shoss et al., 2023). Even though perceived job insecurity is not a direct measure of economic inequality, it is a factor that can both result from and contribute to economic disparities within a society (e.g., Jiang & Probst, 2017; Marmot et al., 2001), and therefore yields a more comprehensive understanding of parents' perceptions of economic inequality.

Past research on parents' perceptions of income inequality and national job insecurity indicated that these perceptions are important predictors of people's policy and wealth redistribution preferences, their political attitudes, and their attitudes about the government and about others in society (e.g., Garcia-Sanchez et al., 2020; Shoss et al., 2023; Sprong et al., 2019).

However, as far as we are aware, no research to date examined the relations between parents' perceptions of economic inequality and their school involvement. Based on Doepke and Zilibotti (2019), we expected that parents who perceive more economic inequality (in terms of income inequality and job insecurity) would be more involved in their children's academic lives, through more controlling and/or more autonomy-supportive practices, in an attempt to try and ensure their children's future academic success in an unequal and insecure economic reality. In addition, we expected that parents' reliance upon either controlling or autonomy-supportive involvement would depend upon parents' very own socio-economic situation, as is outlined in the next section.

Considering Parents' Personal Economic Situation: Financial Scarcity as a Moderator?

An ongoing discussion on the consequences of economic inequality revolves around the question of whether people are impacted differently depending on their personal economic situation. Indeed, there is an increasing number of studies indicating that inequality is particularly experienced negatively among economically disadvantaged families (e.g., Du et al., 2019; Oishi et al., 2011). For instance, Oishi et al. (2018) found that years characterized by higher income inequality particularly negatively affected the well-being of individuals in lower social strata in the US. In addition, past research indicates that people's experiences of financial scarcity (i.e., the subjective experience of having insufficient resources; Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013) are particularly important to consider, as economic inequality would function as a catalyst for the negative consequences of economic vulnerability for one's psychological health (Sommet et al., 2018). This is potentially the case because facing scarcity has been linked to diminished social capital, including less social trust and lower fairness perceptions (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017),

and these processes have been found to explain the negative effects of income inequality among economically disadvantaged individuals (Oishi et al., 2011, 2018; Wienk et al., 2022).

At the same time, it has also been suggested that different mechanisms could be at play for individuals with different socio-economic backgrounds: whereas responses of poorer individuals may be driven by relative deprivation perceptions, responses of wealthier individuals rather may be determined by status anxiety (see Jetten et al., 2017; Wienk et al., 2022). Following the same line of reasoning, it is possible that parents from different social strata might respond differently when confronted with increasing economic inequality. That is, they may be inclined to engage in different parenting practices as a way of coping with these changes in the economic environment.

Unfortunately, no research to date examined whether social class or financial scarcity moderated associations between parents' economic inequality perceptions and their school involvement. Even though almost all parents will say that they will do as much as they can for their children, economically disadvantaged parents more often lack the resources (e.g., financial, psychological) or the knowledge to be fully invested and psychologically available for their children (e.g., Kalil & Ryan, 2018; Smeeding, 2015). For instance, they may have less time available to be involved in their children's academic lives, and they may lack the economic resources to purchase educational materials or finance extra-curricular activities (Tan et al., 2020). In addition, conditions of economic hardship may also elicit psychological distress, yielding these parents more vulnerable to engage in disruptive and harsh parenting strategies (Masarik & Conger, 2017). As a consequence, we expected that economically vulnerable parents particularly would engage in controlling school involvement.

More affluent parents, by contrast, might respond differently. The sociologist Anne Lareau (2003) introduced the notion of “concerted cultivation” to describe how highly educated, upper-middle-class parents engage in more intensive parenting approaches, which seek to cultivate children’s skills, talents, and educational opportunities (see also e.g., Vincent & Maxwell, 2016). As a consequence, we expect more affluent parents to particularly engage in autonomy-supportive school involvement, as they are less constrained by feelings of stress and a lack of psychological availability, hence disposing of more psychological resources that are needed to be able to engage in such parenting (Van Der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2019). In addition, we expect these differences (i.e., more affluent parents engaging in autonomy-supportive and poorer parents engaging in controlling school involvement) to be particularly pronounced when parents believe that the society is characterized by high levels of income inequality and job insecurity. Thus, depending on the parents’ personal economic situation, they may respond differently to perceptions of income inequality and job insecurity.

The Present Study

Against the backdrop of a broader societal context characterized by increasing socio-economic disparities on a global level, the present study seeks to examine whether parents’ perceptions of economic inequality are linked to their school involvement. Our first research question focuses on the direct relationship between parents’ perceptions of income inequality and job insecurity, on the one hand, and their controlling and autonomy-supportive school involvement, on the other hand. Specifically, we expected that the two indicators of perceived economic inequality would be related positively to both types of school involvement. Our second research question aimed to address the issue of whether parents’ personal economic situation potentially plays a moderating role in the association between parents’ perceived economic

inequality and their school involvement. In particular, we expected that parents facing financial scarcity would especially engage more often in controlling school involvement when perceived high levels of economic inequality, whereas parents facing low levels of scarcity were expected to engage more often in autonomy-supportive school involvement when perceiving high levels of economic inequality. The overall hypothetical model is presented in Figure 1.

The study was conducted in the sociocultural context of Belgium, a country that is characterized by relatively low-to-moderate levels of economic inequality, with a Gini index of 0.249 and a youth unemployment ratio of 5.1% in 2022 (Eurostat, 2023, 2024). Further, there is a strong emphasis in Belgium on education and academic achievement, with free compulsory education provided to children aged 6-18 years. Higher education is considered accessible for students, as public universities and colleges are strongly subsidized by the government, and there are various scholarships and financial aid options available. In 2022, 66% of all 18-to-24-year-olds were still in education or training at either upper secondary or tertiary level (OECD, 2022). Further, parents are generally involved in their children's schooling, and they tend to rely upon parenting practices that approximate the western ideal of authoritative parenting (i.e., a combination of responsiveness, autonomy-support, and rule-setting; Goossens & Luyckx, 2007).

Method

Sample and Procedure

Our sample comprised of parents of adolescents in their penultimate or last year of secondary schooling. We focused on parents of adolescents in this age range, because the issue of future profession prospects becomes salient at the end of secondary schooling, when they will either pursue higher education or enter the job market (Albert-Sznitman et al., 2022). Participants were recruited through schools in the French-speaking part of Belgium. Specifically, trained

researchers visited the schools and explained the overall study objectives during a regular class period, including the voluntary nature of participation and the anonymous treatment of the data. Then, each pupil received two pre-stamped envelopes, which each contained the questionnaire and informed consents, and they were instructed to deliver these documents to their two parents (or the persons they considered as their parental figures). Parents were invited to fill out the consent forms and questionnaires individually, and to send them back to the university using the pre-stamped envelopes. Detailed information and instructions on how to fill out the questionnaire were available on the informed consents as well as on the first page of the questionnaires. Parents also had the opportunity to complete the questionnaire online using a QR code. In total, approximately 5200 questionnaires were distributed, and 936 questionnaires were either sent back to university or filled out online, yielding a response rate of 18%. Parents of the same adolescent were paired using a unique, randomly generated code on the questionnaires. The study was approved by the ethical committee of (BLINDED FOR REVIEW).

After data cleaning (e.g., removing participants who failed on an attention check question), the final sample included 908 parents of adolescents ($M_{\text{age}} = 17.09$ years, 54.83% of girls). The sample contained 533 mothers (58.70%), with an average age of 48.93 years ($SD = 4.59$), and most of them were employed (88%). In terms of education, 19% of the mothers indicated having obtained a high school degree or lower, whereas 39% had obtained a bachelor's degree (or equivalent) and 42% had obtained a master's degree (or equivalent) or higher. In terms of self-reported monthly net household income, 3.3% reported a household income of below €1500, 14.3% reported an income between €1500 and €2800, 24.7% between €2800 and €4300, 36.7% between €4300 and €6500, and 20.9% reported a household income of above €6500. Finally, mothers indicated their subjective socio-economic status on a ladder ranging from 1 (*the*

best off) to 10 (*the worst off*; Adler et al., 2000). In other words, higher scores represent a lower subjective socio-economic status. The average score for mothers' subjective socio-economic status was 4.20/10.

The 375 fathers (41.30%) had an average age of 50.90 years ($SD = 5.35$) and were mostly employed as well (92%). In terms of education, 25% of the fathers had obtained a high school degree or lower, whereas 29% had obtained a bachelor's degree (or equivalent) and 47% had obtained a master's degree (or equivalent) or higher. In terms of self-reported monthly net household income, 3.0% of the fathers reported a household income of below €1500, 10.8% reported an income between €1500 and €2800, 20.5% between €2800 and €4300, 38.3% between €4300 and €6500, and 27.5% reported a household income of above €6500. Finally, their average subjective socio-economic status was 3.84/10.

As for the socio-economic characteristics of the population in Belgium, 24% of the 25-to-64-year-olds in Belgium have a bachelor's degree as the highest obtained degree, and 19% obtained a master's degree (OECD, 2022). This suggests that our sample is relatively highly educated, compared to the Belgian population. In terms of household income, the poverty line in Belgium is €1366 for a single person and €2868 for a family with two adults and two children, and 13.2% of the Belgians live in a household with a total disposable income lower than the poverty line (Statbel, 2023a). Further, the average net taxable income per month is €1696 per capita (Statbel, 2023b). Thus, our sample seems to have a higher income than the Belgian population.

Measures

Participants completed French versions of the questionnaires, and items were completed using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*).

Controlling and autonomy-supportive involvement. We measured parents' quality of school involvement using the questionnaire of Cheung et al. (2016). Controlling involvement was assessed using 10 items, and an example item reads "Even when my child is not having trouble with his/her homework, I tell him/her how to do it." After the removal of one item with a low item-total correlation, the scale had a good reliability for both mothers and fathers ($\alpha = .82$ and $.80$, respectively). Autonomy-supportive involvement was assessed using eight items (e.g., "I allow my child to make choices about his/her studying whenever possible"). After removing one item with a low item-total correlation, the scale had a good reliability as well ($\alpha = .81$ and $.78$, for mothers and fathers, respectively).

Perceived income inequality. We assessed parents' perceptions of country-level income inequality using three items adapted from Sommet et al. (2019). Specifically, rather than referring to "my town/city," the items referred to the country (e.g., "In Belgium, there is a huge gap between the rich and the poor"). The reliability was good for both mothers and fathers ($\alpha = .84$ and $.79$, respectively).

Perceived national job insecurity. Further, we also assessed the degree to which parents perceive that job insecurity is prevalent in their country, thereby making use of the three items developed by Shoss et al. (2023). An example item reads "In Belgium, a lot of people feel insecure about the future of their jobs". The scale was found to be reliable as well ($\alpha = .81$ and $.83$, for mothers and fathers, respectively).

Financial scarcity. Finally, parents also completed the Psychological Inventory of Financial Scarcity (van Dijk et al., 2022) that assesses an array of experiences associated with financial scarcity – that is, it measures experiences of insufficient resources, lack of control over one's financial situation, financial worry and rumination, and a short-term focus. The scale

consists of 12 items (e.g., “I often don’t have the money to pay for the things I really need”) and had an excellent reliability ($\alpha = .90$ and $.91$, for mothers and fathers, respectively).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using R version 3.3.0+ (R Core Team, 2023). To account for the interdependence within the data (i.e., some mothers and fathers are the parents of the same adolescent), we used multilevel modeling with persons (Level 1) being nested within dyads (Level 2), thereby making use of a Generalized Least Squares (GLS) framework (Kenny & Kashy, 2011). As a preliminary analysis, we examined mean-level differences between mothers and fathers in our study variables through five separate regression analyses, with parents’ gender as a Level 1 predictor and each of the study variables as the dependent variable. Specifically, we estimated the following model:

$$y_{ij} = \beta_0 + u_{0j} + \beta_1 x_{1ij} + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (1)$$

In Equation (1), y_{ij} refers to the score of person_{*i*} in dyad_{*j*} on the dependent variable (e.g., controlling involvement). β_0 is the overall intercept, whereas u_{0j} is the random error at Level 2, β_1 is the fixed effect of variable x_{1ij} (gender; 0 = father, 1 = mother), which varies across persons and dyads, and ε_{ij} is the residual error at Level 1. The regression coefficient β_1 thus represents the estimated difference between mothers and fathers in the dependent variable.

Our main research questions were also examined using linear regressions within a GLS framework. We controlled for parental gender throughout the analyses, and we standardized all continuous predictor variables in the interest of the moderation analyses for Research Question 2 (Cohen et al., 2003). As for Research Question 1, we performed four separate regression analyses (two independent variables \times two dependent variables). Specifically, we estimated the following model:

$$y_{ij} = \beta_0 + u_{0j} + \beta_1 x_{1ij} + \beta_2 x_{2ij} + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (2)$$

Thus, in Equation (2), we added β_2 as the fixed effect of variable x_{2ij} (perceived economic inequality) to Equation (1). The standardized regression coefficient β_2 represent the change in the dependent variable for a change of one standard deviation in the predictor variable. Further, our interpretations of the magnitude of the effects were based on the guidelines of Gignac and Szodorai (2016), who indicate that effects of .10, .20, and .30 should be considered as, respectively, relatively small, medium, and relatively large effects.

As for Research Question 2, we conducted four series of regression analyses, similar to the regression analyses for Research Question 1. We first examined the main effect of the independent variable (either perceived income inequality or job insecurity) and the main effect of financial scarcity in the prediction of the dependent variable (either controlling or autonomy-supportive involvement). This was done by estimating the following model:

$$y_{ij} = \beta_0 + u_{0j} + \beta_1 x_{1ij} + \beta_2 x_{2ij} + \beta_3 x_{3ij} + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (3)$$

In Equation (3), we thus added β_3 as the fixed effect of variable x_{3ij} (financial scarcity) to Equation (2). In a next step, we added the interaction effect between the independent variable and financial scarcity. Specifically, we estimated the following model:

$$y_{ij} = \beta_0 + u_{0j} + \beta_1 x_{1ij} + \beta_2 x_{2ij} + \beta_3 x_{3ij} + \beta_4 x_{2ij} x_{3ij} + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (4)$$

Thus, in Equation (4), we added β_4 as the fixed effect of the interaction between variable x_{3ij} (perceived economic inequality) and variable x_{3ij} (financial scarcity). We then examined whether the more complex model (i.e., including the interaction term) significantly improves the fit compared to the simpler model (i.e., without the interaction term), through the likelihood ratio test statistic (Littell, 2002).

Finally, as sensitivity analyses, we examined whether the SES indicators of household income, subjective SES and educational level moderated the relation between perceived economic inequality and parents' school involvement. We estimated separate models for each of the SES indicators, through the same procedure as our tests of the moderating role of financial scarcity.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Means, standard deviations and correlations between the variables of interest are presented in Table 1. As a preliminary analysis, we examined mean-level differences between mothers and fathers (see Equation 1). These analyses indicated significant differences for controlling involvement [$b = -.13$, $SE = .04$, $t(905) = -3.48$, $p < .001$] and autonomy-supportive [$b = .08$, $SE = .03$, $t(905) = 2.71$, $p = .007$], and for perceived income inequality [$b = -.12$, $SE = .05$, $t(897) = -2.64$, $p = .009$] and financial scarcity [$b = .08$, $SE = .04$, $t(902) = 2.28$, $p = .023$], but not for perceived national job insecurity [$b = .05$, $SE = .04$, $t(902) = 1.03$, $p = .303$]. Specifically, mothers reported lower levels of controlling involvement and higher levels of autonomy-supportive involvement, and they perceived less income inequality and reported more financial scarcity. For this reason, we controlled for gender in our subsequent analyses.

Main Analyses

Research Question 1 involved examining the relation between perceived economic inequality (in terms of perceived income inequality and job insecurity) and parents' controlling and autonomy-supportive involvement (see Equation 2). An overview of the results is provided

in Table 2. On the one hand, parents' perception of income inequality was not a significant predictor of controlling involvement ($b = -.02, p = .431$), but there was a relatively small but significant association with parents' autonomy-supportive involvement. Specifically, a higher level of perceived income inequality predicted more autonomy-supportive involvement ($b = .04, p = .027$). As for parents' perceptions of job insecurity, on the other hand, we found evidence for a relatively small but significant relationship with controlling involvement ($b = .10, p < .001$), while it was unrelated to autonomy-supportive involvement ($b = -.01, p = .517$). In particular, when parents reported perceiving more job insecurity, they reported being more controlling in their school involvement.

Research Question 2 involved examining the role of financial scarcity (see Equations 3 and 4). An overview of the results is presented in Table 3. We first tested the moderating role of financial scarcity in the relation between perceived income inequality and controlling involvement. The regression analysis examining the main effect of financial scarcity yielded evidence for a significant small-to-medium effect, indicating that higher levels of financial scarcity predicted more controlling involvement ($b = .16, p < .001$). However, the likelihood ratio test statistic yielded a value of 0.95, $df = 1, p = .331$, indicating that financial scarcity does not moderate the relation between perceived income inequality and controlling involvement. As for the potentially moderating role of financial scarcity in the relation between perceived income inequality and autonomy-supportive involvement, our analyses provide no evidence for either a main effect of financial scarcity ($b = -.03, p = .156$) or a moderating effect (likelihood ratio test = 2.85, $df = 1, p = .091$). The analyses focusing on perceived job insecurity, and the potentially moderating role of financial scarcity in its relation with parents' school involvement, yielded very similar results. That is, there was evidence for a small-to-medium main effect on parents'

controlling involvement ($b = .13, p < .001$), but not for a moderating effect (likelihood ratio test = 0.02, $df = 1, p = .877$), whereas no evidence was found for either a main effect ($b = -.02, p = .271$) or a moderating effect (likelihood ratio test = 1.01, $df = 1, p = .314$) in the prediction of parents' autonomy-supportive involvement.

Sensitivity Analyses

As sensitivity analyses, we examined whether household income, subjective SES and educational level moderated the relation between parents' perceived inequality and their school involvement. The results were highly similar to the results for financial scarcity as a moderator. Specifically, we found evidence for main effects on controlling involvement, that is, lower household income ($b = -.05, p = .03$), lower subjective SES ($b = .07, p = .002$), and lower educational level ($b = -.11, p < .001$) predicted higher levels of controlling involvement. There was no evidence for moderation in the relation between perceived income inequality or perceived national job insecurity and controlling involvement. In the models with autonomy-supportive involvement as a dependent variable, we did not find evidence for any main effects or moderating effects, neither for subjective SES, nor for family income, nor for educational level. Overall, these results corroborate the robustness of our findings.

Discussion

Tackling inequality and reducing socio-economic disparities are considered major global challenges (e.g., International Monetary Fund, 2017; United Nations, 2023). Indeed, there is a substantial body of research indicating that economic inequality is related to a wide range of social and health problems (e.g., Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, 2017). In their book *Love, Money & Parenting*, Doepke and Zilibotti (2019) argue that economic inequality would also relate to the ways in which parents raise their children, particularly

pushing parents to become highly involved in their children's education. The present study aimed to examine associations between parents' perceptions of economic inequality, in terms of income inequality and job insecurity perceptions, and their school involvement, distinguishing between autonomy-supportive and controlling involvement. Overall, we found that, whereas parents' perceptions of income inequality predicted more autonomy-supportive school involvement, their perceptions of national job insecurity predicted more controlling school involvement. Further, even though financial scarcity did not moderate the relation between perceived economic inequality and school involvement, we found that parents facing scarcity engaged more often in controlling practices. These results are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Overview of the findings

The first main goal of this study was to examine the relation between perceived economic inequality and school involvement. To do so, we focused on two indicators of perceived economic inequality (perceived income inequality and perceived national job insecurity), and we distinguished between an autonomy-supportive and a controlling style of parental school involvement. These distinctions seem to be important as we found evidence for a distinct pattern of associations. First, we found that parents' perceptions of income inequality predicted more autonomy-supportive school involvement. Potentially, when perceiving high levels of income inequality, parents may try to empower their children to take ownership in their education, as a means to equip them with the skills and confidence that are needed to navigate a competitive and unequal world (Lerner et al., 2022; Van Petegem et al., 2023). In addition, by engaging in autonomy-supportive practices, parents would foster self-determination and intrinsic motivation and enhance educational outcomes (Froiland et al., 2016; Vasquez et al., 2016), which are

important for overcoming potential obstacles associated with economic disparities and for increasing their children's chances of success.

The results for parents' perceptions of job insecurity diverge from these findings, as this indicator of perceived economic inequality particularly predicted more controlling school involvement. Potentially, income inequality may be rather seen as a systemic and distal issue that would require collective action (Jetten et al., 2021), whereas job insecurity might be perceived as a more immediate and proximal threat to their child's future well-being and financial security. These worries and feelings of uncertainty may push parents to engage in more controlling and overprotective parenting practices as a means to try and ensure their child's future success (Gurland & Grolnick, 2023; Robichaud et al., 2020). Unfortunately, such practices may backfire, as past research found that controlling school involvement tends to undermine children's motivation, engagement, and achievement, in addition to eliciting more school worry and lowered child well-being (e.g., Cheung et al., 2016; Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2022; Lerner et al., 2022). More generally, the present results illustrate how parents' macro-economic perceptions shape the ways in which they are involved with their children's academic in ways that may be more or less attuned to their adolescent's needs.

A second overall objective of the present investigation was to examine the role of parents' perceived personal economic situation (in terms of financial scarcity) in the relation between perceived economic inequality and school involvement. Although past research indicated that financial scarcity particularly exacerbates the negative effects of income inequality for one's psychological health (e.g., Sommet et al., 2019), we did not find evidence for financial scarcity as a moderator in the relation between perceived economic inequality and school involvement. This resonates with the findings of Kalil et al. (2023), who found that both low-

and high-income parents are doing more than ever for safeguarding their children's future, when considering their time investment in children's schooling. Nevertheless, the quality of their involvement may differ, as we found that parents' financial scarcity consistently predicted more controlling school involvement. This finding is generally in line with the family stress model, which describes how situations of economic hardship create economic pressures and psychological distress among parents. As a consequence, they are more likely to rely upon insensitive and disruptive parenting practices, setting their children at risk for developmental and adjustment difficulties (for a review, see Masarik & Conger, 2017).

Even though this was not the main focus of our study, we also found evidence for gender differences in several variables. First, we found that mothers reported higher levels of financial scarcity than fathers. This difference may reflect the still-existing gender pay gap in Belgium, which amounted to 5% in Belgium in 2022 (Statbel, 2024), indicating that women earn on average 5% less per hour than their male counterparts. As for parents' perceptions of income inequality, whereas past research indicates that women tend to be more sensitive for inequalities (Bavetta et al., 2019), we unexpectedly found that fathers perceived higher levels of income inequality than mothers. Potentially, both societal norms (e.g., about masculinity and men's role as the primary breadwinner; Coron & Schmidt, 2023; Miller, 2011) as well as psychological factors (e.g., perceptual biases and perceptions of fairness; Verwiebe & Wegener, 2000) could play a role, yet more research is needed to better understand these gender differences. Finally, we also found that fathers engage less often in autonomy-supportive and more often in controlling involvement practices. This could partly be driven by fathers more frequently endorsing more traditional masculine norms about fatherhood, which emphasize discipline and enforcing obedience (Miller, 2011). In line with this, past research found that fathers' endorsement of

traditionally masculine norms predicted a more frequent engagement in harsh discipline practices (Petts et al., 2018). Overall, it would be interesting for future research to delve deeper into the potential dynamics explaining these gender differences.

Overall, these results provide insight into the ways in which the family environment may play a role in explaining why social disparities are produced and perpetuated across generations through parenting practices, and therefore may play a role in explaining lower social mobility and less equal life chances for children from disadvantaged families (e.g., Kalil, 2015; Smeeding, 2015; Wadsworth & Ahlkvist, 2015). Thus, if we want to address these disparities, it is important to put parental school involvement into a broader context. That is, potential interventions targeting economically vulnerable parents should refrain from only focusing on parental behaviors as such, as doing so might in fact exacerbate parental stress, putting the child further at risk for developmental difficulties (e.g., Ceballo et al., 2012). Rather, interventions should recognize and address the multiple ways in which poverty directly and indirectly affects child development – such as by targeting parenting stress, parental depression, and family conflict, in addition to suboptimal parenting (Rienks et al., 2011; Wadsworth & Ahlkvist, 2015). This may be particularly important for (single) mothers, as our results indicated that women experience on average more financial scarcity than men, and as single mothers are particularly at risk for poverty (e.g., Christopher et al., 2002). More generally, the present results indicate that policy should seek to reduce poverty and job insecurity. Indeed, in addition to its previously documented negative consequences (e.g., Yoshikawa et al., 2012), our results indicate that financial scarcity and perceived job insecurity may put parents at risk for engaging in potentially harmful and counterproductive parenting practices.

Limitations and future research

Although insightful, the present study also has a number of limitations. First, the study relied upon data collected within one country. The Gini index of Belgium suggests relatively low-to-moderate levels of inequality, whereas mean levels of perceived income inequality were rather high in our sample (i.e., above 4 on a scale from 1 to 5). This discrepancy is in line with past research that indicated important differences between objective economic inequality and people's perceptions of inequality (e.g., Gimpelson & Treisman, 2018). Future research may therefore want to compare data from different countries, in order to examine whether objective and subjective indicators of inequality interact in their prediction of parental school involvement. Further, we relied upon cross-sectional data, precluding us to draw any conclusions about causality. Future research could rely upon experimental or long-term longitudinal designs to examine causal associations and the long-term consequences of economic inequality. In addition, future studies could also include child-reports of parents' school involvement, as a multi-informant design would allow researchers to examine discrepancies between different perspectives (e.g., Van Petegem et al., 2020). Another avenue for future research is to focus on parenting styles, as the broader emotional climate has been found to play a role in understanding children's achievement as well (Pinquart, 2016; Stright & Yeo, 2014), and parents' general parenting style may be affected by their macro-economic beliefs as well. It also should be noted that our sample was also relatively highly educated as compared to the Belgian population (OECD, 2022). Future research should therefore rely upon more heterogeneous samples in terms of sociodemographic composition. Finally, future research could also take into account other parental macro-economic beliefs and perceptions, including parents' perceptions of fairness of the economic system and their social mobility beliefs (see e.g., Willis et al., 2022). Indeed, past research in the US found that perceptions of economic inequality are negatively associated with

individuals' social mobility beliefs, both upward and downward (Browman et al., 2022). These mobility beliefs may possibly play a role in the prediction of parents' school involvement as well, as economic models on parenting suggest that parents would rely upon specific parenting strategies to increase their children's chances of success (Doepke et al., 2019).

Conclusion

In their recent contribution *Love, Money & Parenting*, Doepke and Zilibotti (2019) sought to draw attention to the ways in which the macro-economic context may explain how parents raise their children. The present study provides support for this hypothesis as we found that parents' perceptions of economic inequality significantly related to their school involvement. Specifically, whereas perceived income inequality predicted more autonomy-supportive school involvement, perceived job insecurity predicted more controlling involvement. In addition, parents facing financial scarcity were also more likely to engage in controlling practices. Overall, these findings provide evidence that socio-economic disparities impact families in ways that may jeopardize children's future and may perpetuate these disparities.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among the Variables of Interest

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Perceived income inequality					
2. Perceived national job insecurity	.26**				
3. Financial scarcity	.13**	.36**			
4. Controlling school involvement	-.03	.16**	.22**		
5. Autonomy-supportive school involvement	.06	-.02	-.06	-.40**	
<i>Mean</i>	4.08	2.82	1.95	1.98	4.35
<i>SD</i>	0.73	0.75	0.71	0.65	0.53

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

Table 2

Results of regression analyses examining the role of parents' perceived economic inequality in the prediction of school involvement

	Controlling				Autonomy-supportive			
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Perceived income inequality								
Gender	-.14	.04	-3.53	< .001	.09	.03	2.89	.004
Perceived inequality	-.02	.02	-0.79	.431	.04	.02	2.12	.027
Perceived job insecurity								
Gender	-.14	.04	-3.65	< .001	.08	.03	2.71	.007
Perceived job insecurity	.10	.02	4.58	< .001	-.01	.02	-0.65	.517

Table 3

Results of regression analyses examining the role of parents' perceived economic inequality and financial scarcity in the prediction of school involvement

	Controlling				Autonomy-supportive			
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Perceived income inequality								
Gender	-.16	.04	-4.28	< .001	.09	.03	3.04	.002
Perceived inequality	-.04	.03	-1.75	.081	.04	.02	2.33	.020
Financial scarcity	.16	.02	7.15	< .001	-.03	.02	-1.42	.156
Perceived job insecurity								
Gender	-.16	.04	-4.13	< .001	.09	.03	2.81	.005
Perceived job insecurity	.06	.02	2.50	.013	.00	.02	-0.14	.882
Financial scarcity	.13	.02	5.73	< .001	-.02	.02	-1.10	.271

Figure 1

Hypothetical model