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RESEARCH

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Paternal child-focused reflective functioning, parental sense of competence, and parental emotions recognition

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Abstract

Objective: We tested whether each dimension of the child-focused Reflective Functioning (i.e., prementalizing, certainty about, and interest/curiosity about the child's mental states) impacts the ability to recognize the child's emotions through the sense of competence.

Background: Child-focused reflective functioning is the parental ability to keep in mind their child's mental state. This parental ability is associated with recognizing the child's emotional states and sense of competence.

Method: One hundred forty-four Italian fathers, $M_{yo}(SD) = 38.62(6.6)$, solely of 3- to 5-year-old children, $M_{yo}(SD) = 3.34(1.91)$, filled out an e-survey.

Results: Results revealed a total and an indirect effect considering the potential predictive role of the certainty, interest, and curiosity dimensions, respectively.

Conclusion: Findings highlighted that fathers of older and full-term children showed a high sense of competence and emotional recognition ability.

Implications: Results encourage parent coaching programs to improve fathers' awareness of the opacity of their child's mental state, providing new directions for interventions to improve overall family well-being.

KEYWORDS

emotions recognition, father, mediation model, parenting, reflective functioning, sense of competence

Reflective functioning (RF) is the capacity of the adult to make behaviors meaningful by interpreting them in terms of underlying mental states (Fonagy et al., 2018; Luyten, Mayes, et al., 2017; Luyten, Nijssens, et al., 2017; Marchetti et al., 2013). Indeed, the RF is closely related to the concept of the theory of mind, which is the ability to attribute mental states to oneself and others to understand and predict behaviors (Premack & Woodruff, 1978). To be precise, the theory of mind is a cognitive component that allows people to understand mental states, whereas RF allows people to reflect on mental states about their emotional experience (Nijssens et al., 2021). This ability is often applied unconsciously in everyday social interactions (Epley et al., 2004; Samson et al., 2010). When this capacity is focused on understanding the child's mental states and behaviors, it is termed child-focused reflective functioning (henceforth child-focused RF; Allen et al., 2008; Fonagy et al., 2018). Luyten, Mayes, et al. (2017) proposed that child-focused RF exists on a continuum rather than as a binary construct. Adequate child-focused RF enables parents to grasp that their child's mental states can be complex and concealed, allowing for more accurate responses to the child's needs, which promotes better developmental outcomes (McMahon et al., 2019; Rostad & Whitaker, 2016). This ability is associated with enhanced theory of mind (Petrocchi et al., 2025; Marchetti et al., 2013; Meins et al., 2012), trust in significant others (Betts et al., 2014; Petrocchi et al., 2018; Rotenberg et al., 2015; Talwar et al., 2007), and interpersonal communication skills (Betts et al., 2014; Petrocchi et al., 2021; Talwar et al., 2007), applicable across both typical and atypical developmental trajectories (Kampis et al., 2017; Lecciso, Petrocchi, & Marchetti, 2013; Lecciso et al., 2016; Peterson & Wellman, 2019; Petrocchi et al., 2017). In addition, a recent meta-analysis (Madigan et al., 2024) highlighted that maternal as well as paternal RF are equivalent in magnitude to be associated with the child's attachment security. Additionally, child-focused RF plays a critical role in helping parents accept and manage a child's diagnosis (Gur et al., 2023; Lecciso, Petrocchi, Savazzi, et al., 2013), thereby supporting the development of a secure parent–child attachment (Demers et al., 2010; Meins et al., 2018).

Inadequate child-focused RF can manifest in two problematic ways, each failing to accurately grasp the child's mental states. At the lowest end of the RF continuum is hypo-mentalization, where parents exhibit a reduced ability to understand their child's mental states, leading to indifference toward the child's needs (Allen et al., 2008; Luyten, Mayes, et al., 2017). Conversely, at the highest end is hyper-mentalization, where parents excessively interpret or "misread" the child's mental states, often attributing emotions or thoughts that are not present (Luyten et al., 2012). Both ends hinder a parent's ability to accurately detect and respond to their child's needs (Rostad & Whitaker, 2016), negatively impacting the child's self-regulation and potentially leading to behavioral and emotional symptoms (Bianco et al., 2021; Ensink et al., 2017; Ha et al., 2011).

Differences in RF between mothers and fathers

Studies on child-focused RF have highlighted differences between mothers and fathers, with fathers often facing challenges in this area. Research shows that fathers are more likely to make inappropriate comments about their child's mental state (Arnott & Meins, 2007) and exhibit less interest or curiosity about their child's emotions (Cooke et al., 2017) compared to mothers. Luyten, Nijssens, and colleagues (2017) have suggested that these differences may stem from the distinct ways men and women experience the transition to parenthood and their culturally assigned roles in parenting (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Erickson, 2005). Buttitta et al. (2019) found that higher child-focused RF in fathers was associated with greater socioemotional support and better attunement to their child's emotions. However, their study considered fathers' RF in the context of the mothers' RF. It is worth noting that these studies have been conducted in Western, White, and middle-class families (Diniz et al., 2021) where mothers usually are

primary caregivers (Luyten, Mayes, et al., 2017). Therefore, further investigations are needed to better explore paternal attitudes, motivations, and beliefs considering their role in child development (Cabrera et al., 2007; Lewis & Lamb, 2003). In this vein, a recent systematic review (Diniz et al., 2021) outlined the difficulty of understanding whether fathers perform an autonomous parental role or are only helpers of mothers. Thus, to better understand the difference between maternal and paternal child-focused RF, more focused research on fathers' RF is necessary.

Demographic features affecting RF

Demographic features of both children and parents impact child-focused RF. Research on child gender shows mixed results: Pazzagli et al. (2018) and Gordo et al. (2020) found parents of girls faced more challenges in understanding their child's mental states and exhibited prementalizing modes, whereas parents of boys showed greater interest and curiosity. León et al. (2018) reported better child-focused RF in parents of girls, whereas Sleed et al. (2020) found no link between child gender and child-focused RF. Children's age also influences child-focused RF. Pazzagli et al. (2018) observed that parents of 3- to 5-year-olds had lower child-focused RF compared to those with 8- to 10-year-olds. However, Sleed et al. (2020) and Luyten, Mayes, et al. (2017) did not find a correlation between age and child-focused RF for mothers. Birth status plays a role as well. Ruiz et al. (2020) found that parents of full-term children had higher child-focused RF than those with preterm children. Specifically, fathers of preterm children showed lower child-focused RF, indicating that prematurity is associated with reduced RF. On the parental side, age and education affect child-focused RF. Some studies suggest that older parents tend to have higher child-focused RF (Arkle et al., 2023; Luyten, Mayes, et al., 2017), although results for fathers are mixed, and some studies report no significant effect or a negative association for mothers (Rutherford, Booth, et al., 2015). Education levels also matter: Educated mothers generally exhibit higher child-focused RF compared to low-educated ones (Sleed et al., 2020), but education level does not significantly impact fathers' child-focused RF (Luyten, Mayes, et al., 2017).

Assessment of child-focused RF

Child-focused RF is typically assessed through detailed methods such as the Adult Attachment Interview and Mind-Mindedness assessments (Schiborr et al., 2013). These methods provide in-depth insights but are time-consuming and require extensive training. To offer a more practical alternative, Luyten, Mayes, et al. (2017) developed the 18-item Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (henceforth PRFQ), a parent-report tool designed to be more accessible. The PRFQ evaluates child-focused RF across three dimensions: prementalizing modes (PM), certainty about the child's mental states (CM), and interest and curiosity about the child's mental states (IC; Luyten, Mayes, et al., 2017). The PM dimension measures difficulties in accurately inferring the child's mental state, with high scores indicating struggles in understanding feelings and thoughts (Luyten, Nijssens, et al., 2017; Meins et al., 2001, 2012; Slade, 2005). The CM dimension assesses confidence in recognizing the child's mental state, with high scores reflecting either excessive or inaccurate attributions (hyper-mentalization) or intrusive behavior, and low scores indicating hypo-mentalization (Burkhart et al., 2017; Luyten, Mayes, et al., 2017). The IC dimension gauges curiosity about the child's mental states, where high scores might indicate intrusive or imprecise mentalization and low scores show a lack of interest (Luyten, Mayes, et al., 2017).

The PRFQ assesses RF through dimensional scores but does not provide an overall RF score. Limited studies using the PRFQ suggest differences between mothers and fathers. Fathers generally show higher PM (Cooke et al., 2017; Gordo et al., 2020; E. B. Madsen et al., 2023). For CM, results vary, with some studies indicating no differences (Cooke et al., 2017; Gordo et al., 2020; Pazzagli et al., 2018) and others showing higher levels in mothers (Luyten, Mayes, et al., 2017; E. B. Madsen et al., 2023). Mothers typically report higher levels of IC compared to fathers (Cooke et al., 2017; Gordo et al., 2020; Luyten, Mayes, et al., 2017; E. B. Madsen et al., 2023; Pazzagli et al., 2018).

Based on the aforementioned literature, research on paternal child-focused RF is scarce despite its critical role in child development (Cabrera et al., 2007; Lewis & Lamb, 2003). The fathers' emotional recognition and their sense of competence are two main constructs associated with child-focused RF. The following sections explore the potential relationships between these constructs.

Fathers' emotions recognition ability

In this study, we hypothesized that fathers' child-focused RF directly affects their ability to recognize and respond to their child's emotions, both positive and negative. This paternal ability is considered a component of fathers' sensitivity (Fonagy et al., 1991). Accurate recognition of a child's emotional states is crucial during early childhood, as it enables parents to respond appropriately and sensitively, which is essential for the child's development (Chronis-Tuscano et al., 2022). Consistent and sensitive responses to a child's emotions help the child develop emotion regulation strategies (Islamiah et al., 2023; Morris et al., 2017) and promote healthy parent–child interactions (Mesman et al., 2012; Murray et al., 2010). Conversely, harsh, incoherent, or critical responses can impede the child's ability to self-regulate and increase frustration and dysregulation (Bianco et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2017; Rutherford, Wallace, et al., 2015).

Most research on parental emotion recognition has focused on mothers, particularly those with psychopathology (Arteche et al., 2011; Elliot et al., 2014; Webb & Ayers, 2015), with less emphasis on fathers. Studies suggest that child-focused RF—the ability to understand and reflect on a child's mental state—is crucial for effective parental responsiveness (Fonagy et al., 2018; Gordo et al., 2020; Luyten, Mayes, et al., 2017). Higher child-focused RF in fathers may enhance their awareness of their child's emotions and mental states, leading to more sensitive responses (Alvarez-Monjarás et al., 2019; Rutherford, Booth, et al., 2015).

Demographic features affecting the fathers' emotion recognition ability

The impact of demographic features on emotion recognition ability has shown mixed results. For instance, studies by Chronis-Tuscano et al. (2022) and Malmberg et al. (2016) found no significant differences in emotional recognition between parents of boys and girls. Age-related findings are also varied; whereas Klimes-Dougan & Zeman (2007) and Labella (2018) reported less ability to recognize emotional needs in parents of older children, Jin et al. (2017) found no association. Regarding birth status, De Rouck & Leys (2009) and Koliouli et al. (2022) noted that fathers of preterm children often face stress that can impair their ability to recognize emotional needs due to the child's fragility. Further research is needed to better understand these relationships.

On parental demographic features, studies on age and educational levels are limited. Malmberg et al. (2016) found that only maternal age was positively associated with sensitivity, whereas Drake et al. (2007) found no significant differences in the ability to recognize emotional needs between fathers of different educational levels.

Parental sense of competence

In this study, we hypothesized that the parental sense of competence may mediate the relationship between each dimension of child-focused RF, as measured by the PRFQ—namely PM, CM, and IC—and fathers' ability to recognize their child's emotions.

Following Gibaud-Wallston and Wandersman (1978), the parental sense of competence is conceptualized as a two-factor construct: (a) self-efficacy, which is the parental perception of their competence in the parenting role, and (b) satisfaction, which is the individual experience in the parenting role. Hence, the parental sense of competence includes feelings of efficacy and satisfaction in caring for, educating, and protecting their children (Coleman & Karraker, 2000) and encompasses parents' beliefs about their ability to manage parenting tasks and positively impact their child's development (Coleman & Karraker, 1998). A positive sense of competence is linked to effective and less harsh discipline, whereas a low sense can lead to inadequate parenting and reduced interaction (Albanese et al., 2019; Lopes & Dixe, 2012; Garaigordobil & Machimbarrena, 2017).

Differences in the sense of competence between mothers and fathers

Research comparing mothers and fathers shows mixed results. Some studies found fathers less competent (Gordo et al., 2020; Hudson et al., 2001), whereas others noted higher satisfaction levels in fathers (Gilmore & Cuskelly, 2009). Yet, other research reported no significant differences between mothers and fathers (Favez et al., 2016; Latham et al., 2018; Rogers & Matthews, 2004). Demographic factors such as children's gender, age, birth status, and parental age and education influence this sense of competence. Understanding these factors is crucial for examining their potential effects on child-focused RF and emotional recognition.

Demographic features affecting the parental sense of competence

Studies on parental sense of competence show mixed results based on children's gender, age, and birth status. Regarding gender, Gordo et al. (2020) and Grady and Karraker (2017) found parents of boys reported higher competence than those of girls. In contrast, Ohan et al. (2000) reported higher competence in parents of girls, whereas Rogers and Matthews (2004) found no gender difference. Age also impacts competence: Grady and Karraker (2017) and Rogers and Matthews (2004) found lower competence among parents of older children, particularly those aged 3–5 years. Birth status presents varied findings. Fathers of full-term children generally report greater competence compared to those of preterm children, though Koliouli et al. (2022) found higher competence in fathers of very preterm children (born before 28 weeks) compared to those with later preterms. Pennell et al. (2012) found no significant difference between parents of very preterm and term infants. On demographics features, Grady and Karraker (2017) reported lower competence in older mothers, and other studies (Grady & Karraker, 2017; Preyde et al., 2015) found no link between maternal education and competence. Gilmore and Cuskelly (2009) noted higher education correlates with higher competence, but Karp et al. (2015) found no education-related differences.

The link between the parental sense of competence and RF

Evidence supports the mediating role of parental sense of competence in child-focused RF. Research highlights that child-focused RF positively influences parental competence.

Nijssens et al. (2018) emphasized that RF helps parents manage parenting stress (Borelli et al., 2016), and studies using the PRFQ (De Roo et al., 2019; Gordo et al., 2020; Rostad & Whitaker, 2016) confirm that strong child-focused RF boosts parental involvement and positive parenting. However, differences between mothers and fathers are evident. PM modes, which involve difficulties in understanding a child's mental state, lead to parental dissatisfaction and inefficiency, particularly affecting mothers (De Roo et al., 2019; Gordo et al., 2020). De Roo et al. (2019) found these modes result in significant dissatisfaction and inefficiency among mothers. Conversely, CM positively correlates with parental competence. This dimension is associated with higher paternal satisfaction and efficacy, as well as maternal efficacy (De Roo et al., 2019; Gordo et al., 2020). IC also positively influences parental satisfaction and efficacy (De Roo et al., 2019; Gordo et al., 2020; Rostad & Whitaker, 2016), contributing to both parents' competence. Studies (Deković et al., 2010; Huang et al., 2023) show a link between high parental competence, especially self-efficacy, and sensitivity to children's needs. Research into how parental competence affects emotion recognition remains limited, suggesting a valuable area for further study. Preliminary findings indicate that greater child-focused RF may enhance understanding of children's emotional needs and increase parental competence.

Study's hypotheses

Overall, based on the literature reviewed above, the paternal role has been explored mainly in comparison with mothers. Thus, understanding only paternal competence concerning the child's needs is the novelty of the current study. In particular, this study explored whether parental competence mediates the relationship between child-focused RF dimensions and fathers' emotion recognition abilities. Specifically, three mediation models were used where each child-focused RF dimension was measured using the PRFQ (i.e., PM, CM, and IC) to potentially predict the fathers' emotions recognition ability via their sense of competence. Three hypotheses were formulated: We expected that the fathers' PM (H1), CM (H2), and IC (H3) would be potential predictors of the fathers' emotions recognition ability through the mediation of fathers' sense of competence.

As displayed in Figure 1, because the coding system does not provide a child-focused RF total score (for details, see Assessment of Child-Focused RF section), the three dimensions and

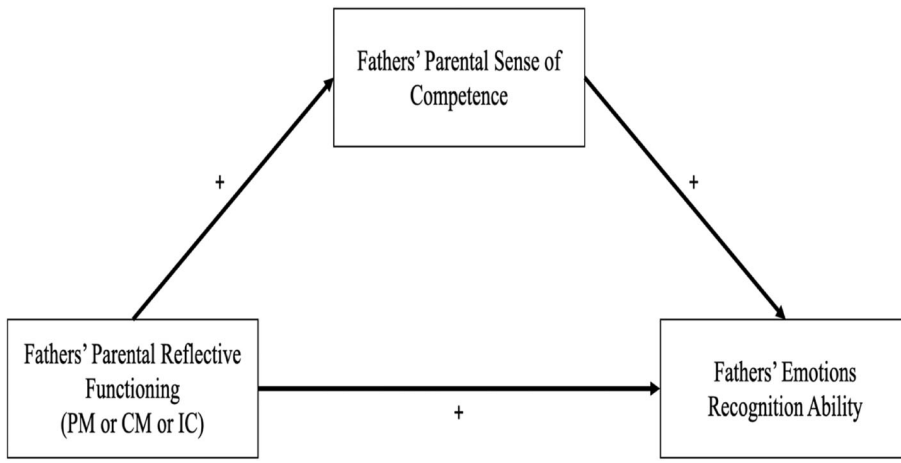

FIGURE 1 Hypothesized mediation models. *Note*. CM = certainty about the child's mental states; IC = interest and curiosity about the child's mental states; PM = prementalizing modes.

the related HP were posited as potential predictors. Based on the literature previously reviewed and the correlations (see Descriptive and Preliminary Results section), we included the following demographic features as covariates: children's age, birth status (full-term vs. preterm birth), paternal age, and educational levels.

METHOD

Procedure

Data were collected cross-sectionally from Italian fathers between October and December 2020 using an e-survey on Microsoft Forms spread via social platforms (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp). Due to the challenge of reaching this population (fathers) because caregiving is mainly a mother issue, above all in the Western context, the snowballing sampling strategy was used. Inclusion criteria were fluency in Italian, being a father aged ≥18, having a typically developing child aged 3–5 years, and not having a disability. The Ethical Committee for Research in Psychology approved the study, University of Salento (No. 144542). Fathers signed the e-consent before filling out the survey. Via an information sheet, participants were informed about the goals of the study and their rights before they filled out the e-survey. Furthermore, participants were informed that they could leave the e-survey at any time. No compensation was provided to participants.

Participants

One hundred forty-four fathers, $M(SD)_{\text{year}} = 38.62(6.6)$, range: 25–58 years, completed the e-survey. The fathers' educational level was clustered into three levels: low (up to 8 years of education) for 21.5% of fathers, intermediate (up to 13 years of education) for 55.6% of them, and high (18 or more years of education) for 22.9% of the sample. Children's mean age was 3.34 years ($SD = 1.91$; range = 3–5); fathers completed the e-survey for 76 boys (52.8%) and 68 girls (47.2%). Finally, 71 (49.3%) children were born preterm, and 73 (50.7%) children were born full-term.

Materials

Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire

The PRFQ (Luyten, Mayes, et al., 2017) is an 18-item, self-report questionnaire designed to assess parental reflective functioning in parents of children aged 0–5 years. The PRFQ consists of three dimensions: PM, which includes items evaluating the parent's inability to capture the child's mental states; CM, which includes items evaluating the parents' inability to conceive the child's mental states as changeable and flexible; and IC, which includes items evaluating the parent's interest in or curiosity about their children's mental states. The Introduction section reported other detailed information. The questionnaire is scored on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). The syntax file provided by the authors was used to compute each dimension score https://www.ucl.ac.uk/psychoanalysis/research/parental-reflective-functioning-questionnaire-prfq). The section Assessment of Child-Focused RF explains the scores and their interpretation.

Parenting Sense of Competence Scale

The Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (Gibaud-Wallston & Wandersman, 1978) is a 17-item, self-report questionnaire assessing the parental sense of competence according to Gibaud-Wallston and Wandersman's (1978) assumption. The authors defined the sense of competence as the parents' confidence and self-esteem in their parenting role. The questionnaire was scored on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). A high score reflects a higher level of parental sense of competence.

Father's emotions recognition ability

To assess the fathers' emotions recognition ability of a child's positive and negative emotions, a 7-item questionnaire was administered. It has been developed by two authors of this paper (i.e., AL & FL) and applied in other studies with successful feedback both in typical (Petrocchi et al., 2020) and atypical populations (Levante et al., 2021, 2022). We asked parents to say how much they recognized their child's positive and negative emotions during the last week. The questionnaire scored on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). A higher score indicates a higher level of fathers' emotions recognition ability.

Data analysis plan

Statistical analyses were carried out using IBM SPSS (Version 25). Given that all items were mandatory, no missing data imputation techniques were computed. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test (K-S test) was used to test if the distribution of scores significantly differs from a normal distribution. Descriptive scores of each psychological dimension included in the current study have been tabulated. We computed group comparisons (i.e., children's gender, and his/her birth status, fathers' educational levels) and correlation analyses between demographic features (children's and fathers' age) and psychological dimensions. PROCESS macro (Version 3.0; 5,000 bootstraps) for SPSS was adopted to perform the mediation models: Each dimension of the PRFQ (i.e., PM, CM, and IC) was the potential predictor (X), the fathers' emotions recognition ability was the outcome (Y), and the fathers' parental sense of competence was the mediator (M). According to the preliminary analyses, the following demographic features were included as covariates in all mediation analyses: children's age, birth status (full-term vs. preterm birth), paternal age, and educational levels.

RESULTS

Descriptive and preliminary results

The K-S test was not significant for all scores, that is PM (K-S = .147; $p > .050$), CM (K-S = .085; $p > .050$), IC (K-S = .069; $p > .050$), parental sense of competence (K-S = .098; $p > .050$), and fathers' ability to recognize child's emotions (K-S = .106; $p > .050$). This means that scores are not significantly different from a normal distribution.

The mean score, the standard deviation, and the theoretical range of each child-focused RF, parental sense of competence, and paternal ability to recognize the child's emotions have been tabulated (Table 1).

Three PRFQ dimensions (theoretical range = 0–7) were not above the critical threshold. This means that the participants reported low difficulties in accurately inferring the child's

TABLE 1 Mean scores, standard deviations, and score ranges for each psychological dimension.

	M(*SD*)	Theoretical range
Prementalizing modes	1.93(.88)	0–7
Certainty about child's mental states	4.10(1.08)	0–7
Interest and curiosity about child's mental states	5.41(.83)	0–7
Fathers' emotions recognition ability	2.25(.56)	0–5
Parental sense of competence	3.86(.77)	0–6

mental state in daily life activities and routines. On the CM and IC, fathers reported a medium to a high level of these dimensions. Also, the ability of fathers to recognize their child's emotions and their sense of competence were average. Overall, participants reported that child-focused RF adequately helped them recognize their child's emotional needs and perceive themselves as competent and satisfied in their parental role.

Group comparison showed mixed results. An independent sample *t* test showed no difference between male and female children ($p > .05$) in all psychological dimensions considered in the current study (i.e., child-focused RF, parental sense of competence, and fathers' emotions recognition ability). On children's birth status, findings revealed that fathers of full-term children showed higher levels of IC, $t(132) = -2.669$; $p = .009$; $M(SD)_{\text{full-term}} = 5.58$ (.92) versus $M(SD)_{\text{preterm}} = 5.23(.68)$; parental sense of competence, $t(140) = -7.188$; $p < .001$; $M(SD)_{\text{full-term}} = 4.25(.71)$ versus $M(SD)_{\text{preterm}} = 3.45(.61)$; and emotions recognition ability, $t(142) = -8.372$; $p < .001$; $M(SD)_{\text{full-term}} = 2.57(.46)$ versus $M(SD)_{\text{preterm}} = 1.93$ (.46), than fathers of preterm children. On fathers' educational levels, $\chi^2_{(2)} = 7.042$; $p = .030$, findings showed that those who have a low educational level reported higher, $M(SD) = 2.47$ (.46), emotion recognition ability than those who have an intermediate, $M(\text{SD}) = 2.23(.57)$, and high, $M(SD) = 2.11(.58)$, educational level. Overall, whereas fathers of full-term children perceived themselves as more interested in the children's mental states, more able to recognize their emotions, and more competent in parenting, the children's gender seems to have no discriminant variable. Fathers with a low educational level reported a high ability to recognize their children's emotions, meaning that the sensitivity may be more related to an individual characteristic than to education.

Correlation analyses highlighted that children's age was positively associated with the paternal CM ($r = .172$; $p = .039$) and IC ($r = .240$; $p = .004$) dimensions of PRFQ: The older the children were, the greater the fathers' certainty and interest in their child's mental states. In addition, the children's age was positively correlated with the paternal sense of competence ($r = .675$; $p < .001$) and the fathers' emotions recognition ability ($r = .749$; $p < .001$). Again, the older the children were, the more fathers were able to recognize their children's emotions and perceive themselves as more competent. On fathers' age, findings showed that it was positively associated with their ability to recognize children's emotions ($r = .341$; $p < .001$) and with their sense of competence ($r = .351$; $p < .001$). In conclusion, the older the fathers were, the more able and competent they perceived themselves in their parenting role.

Mediation models

In sum, in each mediation model, we posited each PRFQ dimension (Model 1: PM; Model 2: CM; and Model 3: IC) as a potential predictor (X), the fathers' ability to recognize the child's emotions as the outcome (Y), and the paternal sense of competence as the mediator (M). Preliminary analyses demonstrated small to moderate correlations and significant group comparisons between the PRFQ dimensions and several demographic features (children's age, birth

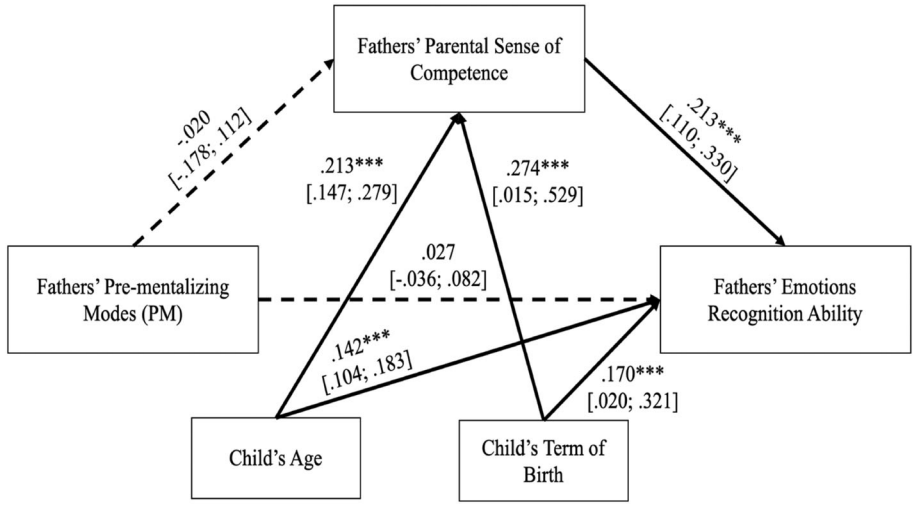

FIGURE 2 Results of Mediation Model 1. *Note*. The bootstrap confidence intervals are reported in brackets. The dotted line represents a nonsignificant path. Nonsignificant covariates were not reported. ***$p < .001$.

status [full-term vs. preterm birth], paternal age, and educational levels). Therefore, all mediation models analyzed these demographic features as covariates. The following sections present the main results according to the related hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1

Figure 2 shows the paths. Direct (β = .027; bootstrap lower confidence interval [BootLLCI] = −.040; bootstrap upper confidence interval [BootULCI] = .093) and indirect (β = −.007; BootLLCI = −.059; BootULCI = .042) effects can be excluded. The path between fathers' PM and fathers' emotions recognition ability (β = .027; BootLLCI = −.036; BootULCI = .082) and their parental sense of competence (β = −.020; BootLLCI = −.178; BootULCI = .112) were not significant. Only the path between the fathers' parental sense of competence and the fathers' emotions recognition ability was significant (β = .213; BootLLCI = .110; BootULCI = .330). This means that the more the fathers perceived themselves to be competent in their parental role, the more they perceived themselves as able to recognize a child's emotional state. On covariates, results showed that children's age (β = .213; BootLLCI = .147; BootULCI = .279) and their term of birth (β = .274; BootLLCI = .015; BootULCI = .529) impacted the parental sense of competence. Similarly, the children's age (β = .130; BootLLCI = .089; BootULCI = .173) and their term of birth (β = .170; BootLLCI = .020; BootULCI = .321 affected the fathers' emotions recognition ability. This means that fathers of older and full-term children perceived themselves as more competent in their parental role and more able to recognize children's emotional states. No significant paths between fathers' age and their educational levels on mediator and outcome were found.

Hypothesis 2

Figure 3 shows the paths between these variables. The direct path was significant and negative (β = −.059; BootLLCI = −.113; BootULCI = −.005): The more CM, the fewer fathers' emotions recognition ability. The indirect effect was achieved (β = .043; BootLLCI = .006;

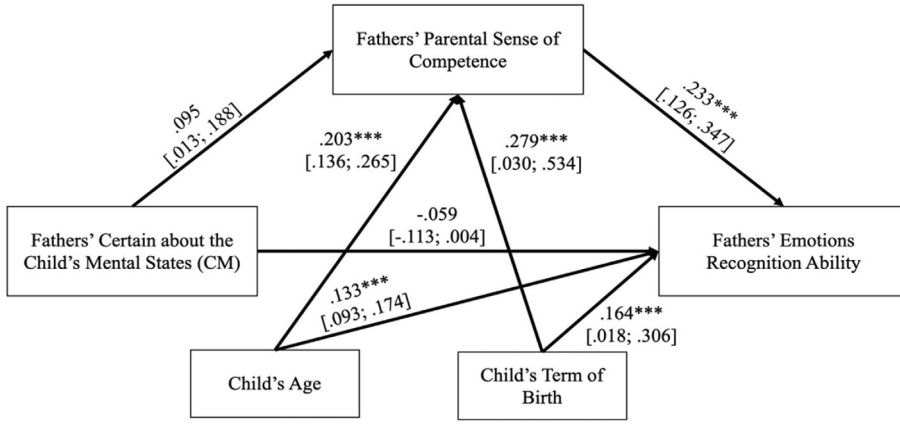

FIGURE 3 Results of Mediation Model 2. *Note*. The bootstrap confidence intervals are reported in brackets. The dotted line represents a nonsignificant path. Nonsignificant covariates were not reported. ***$p < .001$.

BootULCI = .089), which means that the fathers' CM positively predicted their parental sense of competence (β = .095; BootLLCI = .013; BootULCI = .188), which in turn, positively affected their ability to recognize child's emotions (both positive and negative; β = .233; BootLLCI = .126; BootULCI = .347). Among the covariates included in the model, the children's age impacted the mediator (β = .203; BootLLCI = .136; BootULCI = .265) and the outcome (β = .133; BootLLCI = .093; BootULCI = .174). Similarly, the children's term of birth affected the parental sense of competence (β = .279; BootLLCI = .030; BootULCI = .534) as well as the fathers' emotions recognition ability (β = .164; BootLLCI = .018; BootULCI = .306). This means that fathers of older and full-term children reported high levels of parental sense of competence and ability to recognize the child's emotions. No significant paths between fathers' age and their educational levels on the mediator and the outcome were found.

Hypothesis 3

Figure 4 shows the paths between the target variables. The direct path between the fathers' IC and their emotions recognition ability was not significant (β = .035; BootLLCI = −.039; BootULCI = .110). Conversely, an indirect effect was found (β = .034; BootLLCI = .008; BootULCI = .086): The fathers' IC impacted the parental sense of competence (β = .116; BootLLCI = .025; BootULCI = .262) which, in turn, affected the fathers' emotions recognition ability (β = .204; BootLLCI = .095; BootULCI = .320). On the role served by the covariates, results highlighted that the children's age impacted the mediator (β = .205; BootLLCI = .139; BootULCI = .267) and the outcome (β = .131; BootLLCI = .091; BootULCI = .173). The children's term of birth affected the sense of competence (β = .255; BootLLCI = .007; BootULCI = .496) and the fathers' emotions recognition ability (β = .171; BootLLCI = .021; BootULCI = .318). In other words, fathers of older and full-term children reported more sense of competence and more ability to recognize their children's emotions. No significant paths between fathers' age and their educational levels and the mediator and outcome were found.

DISCUSSION

The paucity of studies devoting attention to fathers' child-focused RF only emphasized that further investigations must be taken into consideration. Prior studies have shown that child-

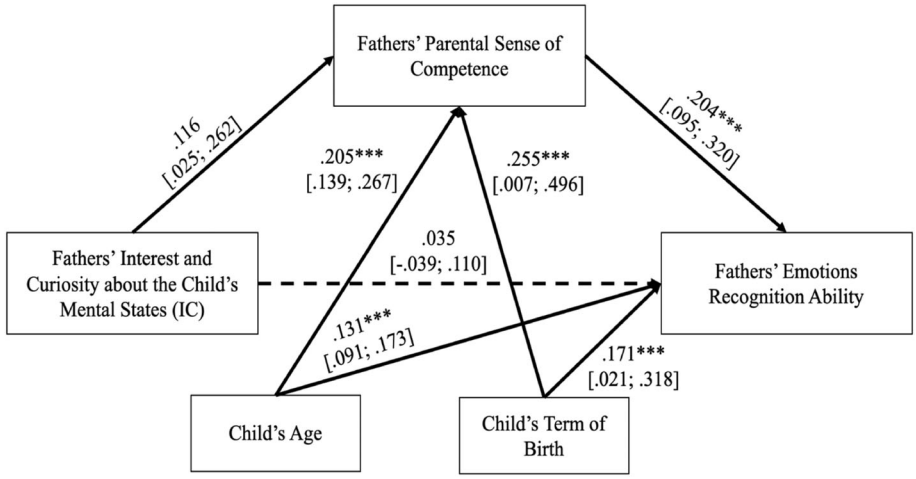

FIGURE 4 Results of Mediation Model 3. *Note*. The bootstrap confidence intervals are reported in brackets. The dotted line represents a nonsignificant path. Nonsignificant covariates were not reported. ***$p < .001$.

focused RF affects the ability to recognize a child's emotions, a key aspect of parental sensitivity (Alvarez-Monjarás et al., 2019; Rutherford, Booth, et al., 2015). This study explored novel models with a parental sense of competence as a mediator. This approach is based on two reasons: First, adequate child-focused RF leads to a strong parental sense of competence (De Roo et al., 2019; Gordo et al., 2020; Rostad & Whitaker, 2016); thus, the study aimed to explore the potential predictive role of each child-focused RF dimension by using the PRFQ (Gibaud-Wallston & Wandersman, 1978) on the parental sense of competence. Second, the potential predictive role of the parental sense of competence on sensitive parenting in the form of the parental ability to recognize the child's emotions (Deković et al., 2010; Huang et al., 2023) was tested. This study adds to the literature by focusing on a hard-to-recruit population, that is, fathers of 3- to 5-year-olds. Three hypotheses were tested: We expected that the fathers' PM (H1), CM (H2), and IC (H3) would be potential predictors of fathers' ability to recognize the child's emotions via their sense of competence. Albeit preliminary, results are promising, with most supporting the hypothesized relationships.

The role of prementalizing mode

In exploring mediation models, the study found that fathers' PM did not significantly impact their ability to recognize emotions or their parental sense of competence. An explanation for these nonsignificant results may be related to a paternal defense mechanism: Fathers may disengage in understanding and inferring accurately the child's mental state (PM dimension) because they may not consider this ability as a paternal task and/or they did not consider the 3- to 5-year-old children as a social partner with mental state. This may be the explanation for the paternity lack of competence and less engagement with their children (Rostad & Whitaker, 2016). Additionally, empirical studies (Cooke et al., 2017; Gordo et al., 2020; S. A. Madsen et al., 2007) have shown higher PM in fathers compared to mothers, suggesting this dimension's importance. The lack of significant findings in our study may be explained by the age of the children involved, as previous studies focused on fathers of children aged 2–36 months. The higher prementalizing scores in those studies might be attributed to the challenges of interpreting the mental states of preverbal children. During the 2- to 36-month age

range, fathers may be less involved in child care compared to mothers, leading to fewer opportunities for interactions and understanding their child's needs. Our study focused on fathers of preschoolers (3–5 years), where the PM dimension may be less influential. According to Lamb (2004), father–child interactions during this age are vigorous, and activities like rough-and-tumble play help fathers better understand their child's emotional needs. Thus, although the PM dimension might be significant with preverbal children, its impact appears reduced with preschoolers. Although further research is needed, the preliminary results suggest that the PM dimension did not negatively affect the father–child relationship in this context. This is a potential explanation; further investigations should deepen these relationships on a larger sample.

Only the relationship between fathers' parental sense of competence and their ability to recognize emotions was significant, indicating that fathers who felt more competent in parenting were better at recognizing their children's emotions. These findings diverge from previous studies (Krink et al., 2018; Rostad & Whitaker, 2016), which reported a link between PM and sensitivity to a child's emotional needs. Notably, those studies focused exclusively on mothers, suggesting a need for further research into these discrepancies.

The role of certainty in mental states

The second mediation model revealed a total effect where the direct effect showed a negative relationship: Greater certainty about the child's mental state (CM) made it harder for fathers to recognize their child's emotions. This supports Luyten, Mayes, et al. (2017), who suggested that high CM indicates imprecise attribution of others' mental states. Additionally, our findings align with Midgley and Vrouva (2014), who noted that inadequate RF leads to rigid and inaccurate mental state attributions, a concept previously explored mainly in psychopathological contexts like schizophrenia. Exploring CM in the general population and preschool parents is a novel area. The indirect effect revealed that parental sense of competence mediated the relationship between CM and emotion recognition, suggesting it acts as a protective factor. Adequate CM helps fathers recognize their child's emotional needs through a high sense of competence in parenting (De Roo et al., 2019; Coleman & Karraker, 2003; Slagt et al., 2012; Weaver et al., 2008). Further research is needed to explore the interplay between CM and the psychological dimensions of parenthood.

The role of interest and curiosity in the mental states

The third model examined the mediating role of parental sense of competence in the relationship between fathers' interest and curiosity (IC) about their child's mental state and their ability to recognize emotions. No direct path was found, meaning IC alone did not impact emotion recognition ability. However, a positive relationship was noted, suggesting that high IC might lead fathers to attribute mental states to their children more accurately. Despite this, further research is needed to confirm these findings with preschoolers. An indirect effect was observed where parental sense of competence buffered the relationship between IC and emotion recognition, aligning with Manshadi et al. (2023), who found that interest in children's mental states was linked to higher parental competence. However, this study's findings should be interpreted cautiously due to the specific population studied (mothers with childhood maltreatment histories). Our results also supported previous research on the link between parental competence and emotion recognition ability (Coleman & Karraker, 2003; Weaver et al., 2008). Further studies on the general population are necessary.

The role of the demographic features

In addition, the role of some children's and fathers' demographic features has been explored. Descriptive analyses revealed that fathers had low levels of PM. In contrast, their scores on CM and IC were adequate, as were their abilities to recognize emotions and their sense of competence. Most research on parental RF has focused on mothers, often with psychopathology (Håkansson et al., 2018; Krink et al., 2018; Rutherford, Booth, et al., 2015), making this focus on fathers a notable strength of the study. Group comparisons indicated no significant differences based on the children's gender, aligning with previous studies (Chronis-Tuscano et al., 2022; Sleed et al., 2020), which found similar RF and emotional recognition abilities in fathers of boys and girls. However, further research with larger samples is recommended. Regarding children's birth status, fathers of full-term children showed greater parental RF and IC, better emotion recognition, and higher parental competence compared to fathers of preterm children. This finding partially supports earlier literature (Ruiz et al., 2020) suggesting that preterm birth can increase parental stress and concern (De Rouck & Leys, 2009; Koliouli et al., 2022), potentially affecting their ability to engage with their child's emotional needs. Full-term fathers, facing fewer health concerns, might be more able to understand and respond to their children's emotions, leading to greater parental competence. The study also noted that low-educated fathers reported a high ability to recognize their child's emotions. This contrasts with Drake et al. (2007), who found no differences based on education level, suggesting that findings should be interpreted cautiously due to sample limitations.

Overall, the study highlights the need for further research into the effects of prematurity and education on parental abilities. Correlational analyses examined how children's age influences fathers' psychological dimensions. Fathers of 3- to 5-year-olds reported greater child-focused RF in terms of CM and IC as their children grew older. This may be linked to the development of verbal abilities and mental state terms (Bernier et al., 2017; Meins et al., 2012), as well as increased father–child play interactions (Lamb, 2004), which can enhance parenting efficacy, satisfaction, and competence. Additionally, older fathers showed a greater ability to recognize their children's emotions and a higher parental sense of competence, aligning with existing literature (Grady & Karraker, 2017; Malmberg et al., 2016). These findings, particularly regarding emotional recognition, should be explored further, as this aspect of sensitivity has been more studied in mothers.

The role of the demographic features has been examined in each mediation model, revealing that only children's age and birth status (full-term vs. preterm) affect fathers' sense of competence and emotion recognition ability. Contrary to previous studies (Knoche et al., 2007; Ohan et al., 2000; Rogers & Matthews, 2004), our results show a positive relationship between children's age and fathers' sense of competence and emotion recognition ability (Jin et al., 2017; Klimes-Dougan & Zeman, 2007). As children age, fathers perceive themselves as more competent and adept at recognizing emotions, likely due to increased play interactions with 3- to 5-year-olds, which enhance their parenting efficacy and satisfaction. Regarding birth status, fathers of full-term children reported higher competence and emotion recognition ability. This finding suggests that parents of preterm children might feel less secure and capable due to their child's vulnerability. However, these results are preliminary and should be interpreted with caution, indicating a need for further research.

Implications

The study makes a meaningful contribution to family science by exploring the psychological processes involved in father–child interactions and advancing our understanding of family dynamics.

The findings of the current study have important research and practical implications. Research-wise, future studies should examine the relationships in larger samples of fathers with

preschoolers and conduct multigroup analyses to compare the effects of child-focused RF on parental competence (in terms of self-efficacy and satisfaction) and emotion recognition between mothers and fathers. In addition, recruiting fathers using different sampling strategies could positively affect the results' applicability across different cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Longitudinal studies are recommended to follow changes over time. A further issue that could be investigated more in-depth may be the bidirectionality of the model tested in the current study considering paternal and children's mentalizing ability. A large amount of literature emphasizes the reciprocal effect of parental reflective functioning and children's mentalizing ability (Marchetti et al., 2013; de Rosnay & Hughes, 2006); thus, exploring this path on fathers only paves the way to expand knowledge on the topic. Considering the ecological systems approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the teachers' mentalizing ability may be considered. Teachers are the main extra-familiar attachment figure for preschoolers (Commodari, 2013; Spilt & Koomen, 2022); thus, expanding knowledge on the protective role of their mentalizing ability on their well-being (Levante et al., 2023)—a role that, in turn, may have an impact on children's needs—is an essential educational issue.

Clinically, practitioners and clinicians may use these findings to suggest coaching and/or parenting RF-based programs to improve fathers' awareness of their children's mental states. Usually, the target population of the intervention programs on RF are the caregivers (mainly the parents); nevertheless, designing intervention programs for fathers only is a pivotal caregiving issue. Because father–child interactions are mainly based on play (Lamb, 2004), fathers cannot consider the child as a partner with mental states. Therefore, intervention programs on paternal RF could lead fathers to be more aware of their child's mental state. In addition, it would be worth deepening the role of RF in the relationship between fathers and preterm children: Due to the vulnerability of the prematurity condition, the father–child relationship could benefit from promoting and improving paternal RF. These programs could enhance father–child interactions and increase parental satisfaction and efficacy, which, in turn, could improve emotion recognition skills (Luyten, Mayes, et al., 2017). In the context of infant caregiving, RF-based programs could help parents look beyond behaviors to consider the child's inner world and inhibit detrimental interactions (Barlow et al., 2021). These target programs enhance parental negative emotion regulation, remaining focused on the infant's needs; on the other hand, when the child is distressed, parents with an adequate level of child-focused RF remain relatively calm (Schultheis et al., 2019), and this, in turn, helps the infant to become regulated. A potential fathers' child-focused RF program could consist of a set of activities extracted from efficient programs. For instance, following the family mind program (Adkins et al., 2018), informing fathers about risk and protective factors affecting parenting and the importance of the quality of the attachment bond could enhance their child-focused RF; in addition, fathers could benefit from being informed about the sensitivity and responsiveness in parenting and, thus, the importance of RF in the father–child relationship. Activities involving experiential group exercises that progress from general mentalizing activities to more specific tasks involving mentalizing the child could be promoted. Afterward, following the Reflective Fostering Programme (Midgley et al., 2019), videotapes could be proposed for fathers to reflect on daily situations when the recognition of mental states is mandatory. Lastly, fathers could be involved directly in theraplay activities and/or role-playing of daily routine (e.g., baby massage, physical play) to understand and interpret their child's needs: Activities of mirroring of emotional states and verbalizing experience through handouts and worksheets (according to New Beginning program; Baradon et al., 2017) could be used.

Limitations

Our study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inferences, and longitudinal studies are needed to better understand the role of fathers' child-focused RF

dimensions on parental competence and emotion recognition. The snowball sampling method used to recruit this specific population (i.e., Italian fathers) may limit sample diversity and heterogeneity, affecting the generalizability of the results. The measure used for assessing fathers' emotion recognition is based on subjective perceptions of children's emotions, which may also constrain the findings. Lastly, the potential role served by the child's characteristics (e.g., temperament, birth order, etc.) has not been explored.

Conclusion

In this preliminary study, new insights into fathering emerged from mediation analyses involving child-focused RF. Fathers' RF, specifically certainty and interest and curiosity about their child's mental states, was associated with their ability to recognize their child's emotions, thereby enhancing their sensitivity. In addition, fathers' sense of competence may buffer against extreme ends of the RF continuum (hyper- or hypo-mentalization). The findings suggest that maintaining awareness of the child's mental state influences perceptions of parenting competence and sensitivity. This highlights the potential for coaching programs based on RF to support at-risk parents. In conclusion, by integrating psychological insights into family interactions, this research enriches the field of family science by offering new perspectives on how these processes shape family relationships, particularly in underinvestigated populations, for example, fathers of preschool children. Our work not only contributes to the understanding of parental RF but also suggests how the explored processes may influence the quality of family relationships, providing new directions for interventions to improve overall family well-being.

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