



Article

The Adultcentrism Scale: A Potential Contributor to Advancing Children's Participation Rights in Nordic Contexts

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Abstract: The question that the authors of this article are collectively concerned with is as follows: how is it possible to protect children without disempowering them? To this end, the authors work to change adultcentric scholarly and social norms that justify rationales that marginalize children. The article begins with a theoretical overview of childism, in its transformative sense, with special attention to how childism relates to intersectional analyses. In doing so, age is highlighted as an axis of marginalization with reference to adultcentrism. After that, the centrality of analyzing and problematizing adultism in educational research and practice is discussed. The discussion is followed by a presentation of the published results of 'The Adultcentrism Scale' research tool developed at the University of Bergamo and the University of LUMSA-Rome. The research tool is used to evaluate the presence of adultcentric bias in adults in relation to children and can be helpful to understanding the psychological dimensions of educational relationships. Finally, the conclusion offers suggestions for how the research tool might be a useful example to raise awareness of adultcentric bias, promoting reflections that can lead to age-inclusive transformations. Overall, then, the article initiates a pertinent dialogue for advancing children's participation rights in Nordic research and society.

Keywords: childism; adultcentrism; bias; children's right to participation; the Adultcentrism Scale



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1. Introduction

The Convention on the Rights of the Child ([UN General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989](#)) is one of the key legal frameworks for Nordic countries on which to base national laws and policies concerning the lifeworlds of children. The CRC indicates the need for society to abandon adultcentric perspectives and to adopt a rights-based framework ([Abood 2009](#); [Lansdown 2005](#)). In some contexts, as in the context of Nordic countries, this might translate into shifts in practices that adopt child-centered psychology and pedagogy in response to adultcentric biases. While this is a reasonable interpretation of the implications of ratifying the CRC, this article aligns with authors who claim that even 'child-centered' approaches can be founded on the assumption of 'a universal child' who progresses through predetermined stages of development ([Burman 2017](#); [Cannella 1997](#)). The assumption may be understood through the Norwegian term 'barnsyn', which refers to the view any person, regardless of their chronological age, has of those persons categorized as 'children'. How one views children is inextricably bound with the way one views adults, and refers to asymmetrical power relations—which is why the CRC requires that adults fulfil their duty to ensure that children's rights to protection, participation and provision are met. In practice, though, acts that intend to protect and provide might contribute to disempowering children.

The aim of the authors' shared scholarly preoccupation is to contribute to the development of rights-based approaches in theory and practice that take into account *both* the child *and* the adult as persons. In other words, the authors recognize both children and adults as human beings with individual specificities, and furthermore acknowledge adults' (e.g., parents' and teachers') vital role of guiding and directing, needing continuous adjustments of the equilibrium between this role and children's evolving abilities in order to permit them a partial or full assumption of responsibility and to exercise their rights (Lansdown 2005). Such an orientation, then, is compatible with the childist pedagogical attitude of 'letting children teach' and 'learning from children' (Biswas 2021). The aim of the authors' shared scholarly preoccupation is neither to minimize adults' importance, nor to overturn the asymmetry of power. The question that the authors of this article are collectively concerned with is as follows: how is it possible to protect children without disempowering them? To this end, the authors work to change adultcentric scholarly and social norms that justify rationales that marginalize children.

So far, the authors have developed their research separately: for example, by creating and testing The Adultcentrism Scale which, as far as the authors know, has introduced the possibility of 'mapping' adultcentric bias in the field of educational psychology, and by advancing a broader theoretical development of the childist lens in the humanities and social sciences through the international research program called The Childism Institute. This article thus represents a movement towards theoretically consolidating these complementary research directions to offers ideas that might carry the potential to advancing children's participation rights in the Nordic context. The pertinence of the proposed directions lies in that the Nordic region appears to be a counter-intuitive context to study adultcentrism and make appropriate social interventions in. Nordic countries enjoy a reputation of being at the forefront of advancements in children's rights. At the same time, the considerable absence of an awareness and recognition of concepts related to age-based bias and marginalization, such as adultcentrism, in Nordic research and governance is curious.

The awareness and recognition of concepts such as adultcentrism and adultcentric bias are necessary for individual and collective reflections that can lead to transformation towards more age-inclusive societies.

The article begins with a theoretical overview of childism, in its transformative sense, with special attention to how childism relates to intersectional analyses. In doing so, age is highlighted as an axis of marginalization with reference to adultcentrism. After that, the centrality of analyzing and problematizing adultism in educational research and practice is discussed. The discussion is followed by the presentation of published results of a research tool called the 'The Adultcentrism Scale', developed at the University of Bergamo and the University of LUMSA-Rome. The research tool is used to evaluate the presence of adultcentric bias in adults in relation to children, and it can be helpful to understanding psychological dimensions of educational relationships. Finally, the conclusion offers suggestions for which areas the research tool might be adapted to for advancing children's participation rights in the Nordic context.

For a calibration of the reader's expectations, it is important to flag what this article does not seek to achieve in the following sections. The article neither suggests that the scale should be administrated in the Nordic context in the same way it has been in its original context (Italy), nor does it provide concrete examples of where and how it should be applied. By way of an example, the scale is seen as a potential contributor insofar as it points to one possible direction to stimulate dialogues on how an increased awareness of adultcentric bias can be facilitated in Nordic research and society; on behalf of this, a validation of the scale in Nordic languages could prove useful for future research. The example of this scale and its potential as a contributor needs to be understood within the larger theoretical context of childism and its critical relation to adultcentrism.

2. Theoretical Intersections with Childism as a Transformative Lens

Childism, in its transformative sense, is fundamentally for the recognition, social justice and inclusion of all humans. The theoretical ethicist John Wall describes the epistemological trajectory of this scholarly and social movement in his article 'From Childhood Studies to Childism' (Wall 2019) by analogy with feminism to deconstruct the history of adultism and contribute to the reconstruction of new imaginations of social norms. In other words, childist theoretical interventions broaden the social understanding of and attitudes towards childhood, which are historically rooted in the domination of children by adults, thereby expanding shared understanding of what constitutes human inclusion.

The lens has been applied and developed in various fields, for example, human rights and social justice (Elkins 2013), political theory (Mattheis 2020), globalization (Josefsson and Wall 2020), sustainability studies (Biswas 2023), citizenship (Sundhall 2017; Wall 2008, 2016, 2019, 2022), playwork (Newstead 2018), education (Franck 2017; Biswas and Mattheis 2022), ethical theory (Ott 2019; Rubio 2013; Wall 2010), literary studies (Wadsworth 2015), Judaic studies (Parker 2019), girlhood studies (Mandrona 2016), feminist studies (Zehavi 2018), post-human studies (Mattheis 2022) and philosophy (Biswas et al. 2023; Saal 2023). The recent Special Issue editorial from the journal *Children & Society* entitled 'Childist Theory in the Humanities and Social Sciences' (Biswas and Wall 2023) provides an overview of how childism contributes to age-inclusive developments across various areas of research and methodologies relevant for educational sciences.

Theoretical synergies emerging out of the Childism Institute, an independent, international research program co-hosted by the University of Rutgers Camden, the University of Stavanger and the University of Roskilde, reveal that while there are many possible childist approaches (Biswas et al. 2023), the shared assumption and commitment is a critical stance towards adultism, developmentalism and ageism¹ to promote recognition, social justice and inclusion for all marginalized groups. David Kennedy and Hanne Warming (in Biswas et al. 2023) assert that children's lived experiences, critiques and actions constitute an essential resource for identification and understanding of ethics of adultism and ageism.

This recognition does not automatically lead to granting epistemic authority to children, unlike first-wave standpoint feminism does for adult women. Rather, childism dissolves the dichotomy of 'independent adults' and 'dependent young children' by emphasizing mutual ontological dependency on various levels as fundamental to human existence. In doing so, epistemic authority becomes inherently relational and interdependent, maintaining a critical stance towards power relations, particularly those reproduced through adult-child binaries.

Indeed, from a historical point of view, a number of historians of education have based their studies on the emergence of the school form and the construction of the idea of childhood: the school becomes a means for adults to dominate children (Ariès 1960)². More recently, studies by Elsa Roland (2017) have sought to establish a veritable genealogy of childhood, in other words, to identify all the continuities and discontinuities in the relationships of subjugation of children by adults through the institution of schooling, from the fourteenth to the twentieth century in Western Europe.

More specifically, from the sixteenth century onwards, Foucault himself spotted a correlation between the colonization of colonized peoples and the colonization of young people through educational institutions (Foucault 2003). This already shows an intersection between the relationships of subjugation of age and race, and the correlation between the idea of childhood and the subaltern. Voices such as Shulamith Firestone (1970), Bell Hooks (1994), Audré Lorde (1997) and Peter Gstettner (1981) invite us to analyze age and race, but also class and gender, together. In particular, Gstettner, in his almost forgotten text, shows the relationship between the new pedagogical and psychological sciences of childhood in the history of colonialism and the ethnology and anthropology born of colonization (Gstettner 1981, p. 15). Twenty years later, similar reflections were also found in two studies in the United States by early childhood educators, Cannella and Viruru (2004). As

with the concepts of racism, sexism and homophobia, the concept of ‘ageism’ seems to be encountering difficulties specific to its recognition as a social relationship of domination.

It is also impossible to think about these ageist relations of domination without inscribing them and linking them to intersectional relations of class, gender and race on the basis of specific historical and social situations. While in Europe, from the sixteenth century onwards, bourgeois children began to be the focus of attention, throughout the nineteenth century, proletarian children continued to participate massively in the capitalist production apparatus. Similarly, as Plumelle-Urbe (2012) shows, in the colonies, the children of plantation masters, who were taught from birth to dominate slaves and for whom they would not hesitate to kill a servant who let them cry, were not subjected to the same historical processes of domination and subjugation as the children of slaves.

As Elsa Roland pointed out in her genealogy of childhood (Roland 2017), from the childhood of the bourgeoisie to street children, from holy children to child witches, from families to schools or foundling hospitals, from slave children to “mixed-race” children or “wild” children, there is no single history of childhood but a multiplicity of genealogies that have yet to be written, perhaps drawing inspiration from the many feminist studies that have been producing their genealogies since the 1970s (Roland 2017).

The parallels and conceptual inspirations with feminism, post-colonial theory, intersectionality and related theories that deconstruct and take a critical stand toward naturalized power relations are pertinent to the state of the art: for example, the situatedness of knowledge in feminist theory (Haraway 1988), the generational order concept similar to the concept of gender order (Cornell 1996) as well as the concept of doing generations like doing gender (West and Zimmerman 1987). Furthermore, a similar approach to childism known as ‘child as method’ (Burman 2018, 2023) extends post-colonial approaches such as ‘Asia as method’ (Chen 2010) and ‘border as method’ (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). More complex ontologies characteristic of childism (Wall, in Biswas et al. 2023) and childism’s ‘troubling of subjectivity’ (Murriss, in Biswas et al. 2023) share parallels with philosophical and conceptual movements away from liberalism and the dependency–independency dichotomies in order to expand deeply interdependent and relational ontologies (e.g., Yuval-Davis 1999; Barad 1996; Haraway 2008).

Childism’s distinct feature is its special attendance to adultism, ageism and developmentalism, to constructions of childhood and the ‘figure of the child’ as well as children’s lived experiences and acts. This distinct focus is a hidden spot in feminist and post-colonial studies beyond critical childhood studies (Rosen and Twamley 2018), as well as in the broader social sciences and humanities (Huijsmans 2016; Wall 2019). Childist scholarship notes that older people and children are positioned into conflict with each other in ways that most often disadvantage children (Sundhall 2017; Wall 2019; Barajas 2022).

Florio et al. (2020) from the University of Bergamo and LUMSA University have specifically argued for the centrality of analyzing and problematizing adultcentrism in educational research and practice. Their pioneering contribution was to develop the first adultcentrism scale to analyze adultcentric bias in psychological dimensions of the educational relationship (Florio et al. 2020)—presented later in Section 3.

3. The Centrality of Analyzing and Problematizing Adultcentrism in Educational Research and Practice

Florio et al. (2020) work out analytical demarcations of closely related terms such as adultism, ageism and adultcentrism. Ageism indicates the discrimination of one group towards other age groups, mainly referring to prejudices against older individuals (Butler 1969; Haydon 2012; Macnicol 2006; Nelson 2004). Adultism indicates “all those behaviors and attitudes which flow from the assumption that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people in myriad ways without their agreement” (Bell 1995, p. 35). In some contributions, the terms “adultcentrism” and “adultism” have been used as synonyms (Abood 2009; Fletcher 2013; LeFrançois 2014). Florio et al. (2020) place adultcentrism at a paradigmatic level; therefore, a specific “methodology” derives

from it. Such a methodology seems to be assimilable to “adultism”, which appears to represent the pragmatic level of adultcentrism. Adultism, defined as the power that adults have and exert over children (Flasher 1978) and the “systematic subordination of younger people as a targeted group” (DeJong and Love 2015, p. 490), then designates specific attitudes, behaviors, practical repercussions and outcomes of an adultcentric paradigm, especially those that are more detrimental, unrespectful and oppressive and that amplify the configuration of a position of dominance for adults and of subservience for youths (Bell 1995, pp. 1–7; Checkoway 1996; Fletcher and Vavrus 2006; Rodríguez Tramolao 2013; Liebel and Meade 2023).

Since the last two decades of the twentieth century, adultism, ageism and adultcentrism have been researched in different fields of study, such as psychology, psychotherapy, pedagogy, sociology, welfare policies and biology (Bianchi 2002; Foti 2004; Furioso 2000; Goode 1986; Mackay 2003; Minelli 2003; Pedrocco Biancardi and Talevi 2010; Petr 2003). Critiques of developmental psychology (Burman 2017) particularly, exposing intersections of ethnocentrism and adultism in Vygotsky and Piaget’s work (Matusov and Hayes 2000), have been valuable contributions towards the possibility of understanding the historical oppression of children as described in leading psychological theories that education research and practice continue to rely on. The detrimental consequences of a solely adult perspective (Du Bois 1903; Mackay 2003) and the need to take “children seriously as sociological subjects” (Waksler 1986, p. 71), since “the principal obstruction to our clear vision of the nature of the child is our own adulthood” (Du Bois 1903, p. 16), have been pointed out by various scholars. David A. Goode is credited to have coined the expression “adultcentric” (Goode 1986, p. 84), who, like contemporary authors, defines it as an implicit perspective intertwined with different aspects of society that imposes a specific image of the child and influences socialization and education practices, sociological understandings of children, research practices and childcare policies (Matusov and Hayes 2000; Petr 2003).

Goode (1986) understands the functioning of adultcentrism in analogy to ethnocentrism because they both function subtly and their negative consequences are miscommunication, inaccurate judgments, misuse of power, undermining strengths and competences, etc. (Petr 1992, 2003). An ethnocentric view of things implies one’s own group is considered the center of everything, and all others are evaluated with reference to it (Sumner 1906). With a similar logic, adultcentrism is a paradigm of thought that places adults at the center as a yardstick to evaluate children and young people against. Moreover, members of an ethnocentric group project their values onto other groups’ social systems due to the belief that it is the nature of things to be organized in line with their own assumptions (Catton 1960). But childhood studies and related fields have been showing that children’s cultures exist as well, and are different from those of adults, with distinct priorities, transmission of skills, knowledge and characteristics (Corsaro 2003; Goode 1986; Mackay 1974, 2003; Opie and Opie 1991; Petr 1992, 2003).

Toby Rollo (2018) uses a similar logic to develop his political theory to expand decolonial theory to examine the overlap of adultism and coloniality/racism, as presented earlier in this proposal. Adultcentrism and adultism have also been useful for expanding the intersectional scope of other analyses. For example, Annette Hellman et al. (2014) have argued that norms about age intersect with gender and consequently create social positions about incompetent and competent children. Their ethnographic research in Swedish preschool led to an analysis of the relationship between gender, incompetence and notions of ‘the baby’. The Girlhood Studies Collective, based at the University of Rutgers, hosted a conference on 29–31 March 2023 entitled ‘The Girl in Theory: Toward a critical girlhood studies Symposium’. This international conference presented a number of works looking at the intersection of age, race and gender in the construction of childhood, in particular of girlhood, based on the history of the school institution as a device of young girls’ subjugation (Jacobino 2023).

These theoretical developments in research about adultcentrism are relevant for childist research which relies on knowledge that deconstructs the problem of an adult-centered

perspective for transformative developments. In this context, The Adultcentrism Scale is a particularly noteworthy research tool, possibly the first of its kind in psychology and educational research.

4. The Adultcentrism Scale

The Adultcentrism Scale is a research tool in the form of a questionnaire developed to measure and analyze adultcentric bias. The questionnaire was initially administered to 326 university students in Italy during the pilot study phase. In the pilot study, Exploratory Factor Analysis (with Maximum Likelihood approach and Oblimin Rotation) was conducted, and it revealed three factors: 'Child as an empty box', 'Child without agency' and 'Competent Child'. The pilot version of the scale was then tested with Confirmatory Factor Analysis, considering the responses of 910 parents of primary-school-age children³.

The three factors revealed by the study seemed to show high consistency with the literature on adultcentrism and adultism. According to Petr (2003), seen historically, today's society is the least adultcentric. Petr's claim is in part supported by the fact that parents' responses in the study revealed a higher tendency for parents to lean towards the 'Competent Child' factor as compared to the 'Child as an empty box' and 'Child without agency' factors.

The precise average response to each factor separately based on both the pilot and the main study revealed that 'Child as an empty box' had the highest average response, followed by 'Child without agency', whereas 'Competent Child' had the lowest average response.

The first factor of the scale, 'Child as an empty box', reflects an adultcentric vision of the child as incomplete and lacking in moral status, rationality, skills or knowledge (Cannella 1997; DeJong and Love 2015; Goode 1986; Grotberg 1977; Lansdown 2005; Mackay 2003; Mayall 2000; Moss and Petrie 2005; Waksler 1986), that is, an 'empty box' that needs to receive knowledge and expertise from adults.

The second factor, 'Child without agency', refers to a conception of human nature that understands the human and environment relationship through a control–controlled opposition (Burrell and Morgan 1979). From an adultcentric perspective, the environment exerts control on children through socialization, cultural demands and family context because children do not have an active part in controlling the environment. Scholars from diverse fields have made this visible through analytical descriptions of social constructions of the child as passive and incompetent, that is, de-empowered and without agency in the world (Lansdown 2005; Mackay 1974; Matusov and Hayes 2000; Nguyen 2010).

The third factor, 'Competent child', presents a lower average response. Adultcentric bias in this case surfaces through the status of children as passive recipients of a developmental process contributing to a perception of children as mainly incompetent and in need of adults' wisdom and expertise. Thus, adultcentric bias in this case induces the asymmetry of power in the relationship and reinforces the conviction that adults have the moral duty to control younger people (Delgado and Staples 2008; Lansdown 2005; Nguyen 2010; Pedrocco Biancardi 2002; Rodríguez Tramolao 2013). In practice, consequently, the duty of adults to protect children within the CRC framework can be interpreted as a moral duty to control—which the CRC does not explicitly prescribe.

These results indicated the value of reflecting on adultcentrism as a significant variety of binary thinking that dichotomizes perceptions of differences between 'adults' and 'children'. As a form of binary thinking, adultcentrism risks promoting dualistic oppositions in child–adult relationships. Furthermore, it is pertinent to notice that the third factor ('Competent Child') had evident reliability issues only with the sample of the main study with parents of primary school children. Adultcentric bias was acceptable with the more reliable samples of university students with a mean age of 20 years, who presumably did not have their own children. Thus, overall, one of the conclusions of the study was that there seemed to be an agreement with scholars who claim that an adultcentric view seems to increase with age, thus supporting the idea of belonging to an 'adult culture' (Bell 1995,

pp. 1–7; DeJong and Love 2015; Duarte Quapper 2012, 2015; Goode 1986). The bias also seemed to be more present in fathers.

Furthermore, it was noteworthy that university students who participated in the pilot study showed a tendency towards the ‘Child as an empty box’ factor, whereas parents showed a higher tendency towards the ‘Competent child’ factor. A possible explanation for the tendency could be that being a parent, in the specific social context of the study, led to focusing more on a child’s resources than on cultural or social lacks. At the same time, the results also pointed towards the possibility that adultcentrism tends to decrease if a higher educational level is achieved. This suggests that refining knowledge, and presumably cultivating critical thinking capacities, contributes to diverging from culturally transmitted adultcentric paradigms.

In a more recent work, Florio et al. (2022) show the results of Adultcentrism Scale’s administration to a sample of 294 primary school teachers. Based on this sample’s responses, the scale has been further adapted in a mono-dimensional version (ADT, Adultcentrism Scale for Teachers), and the authors discussed psychometric proprieties of the ADT in relation to the specific sample. Moreover, in this occasion, ADT was explored in relation to legitimized, culturally specific educational practices aimed at ‘disciplining’ children; the authors of this work highlighted that a certain degree of adultcentrism seems to be a natural perspective of the adult, specifying that there is no need to blame the attitude toward the paradigm itself: it is its acknowledgment that permits to deepen the understanding of a cultural context which deems as acceptable subtle detrimental disciplinary practices.

Whether similar research developments could be relevant in the Nordic context will jointly depend on exploring the potential of adapting The Adultcentrism Scale to the Nordic context, supplemented by interdisciplinary understandings of contemporary Nordic practices of disciplining and controlling children.

5. A Potential Contributor to Advancing Children’s Participation Rights in Nordic Contexts

The first set of results of the Adultcentrism Scale has some limitations and further studies on different groups of adult subjects can help improve the instrument’s structure and reliability. Theoretical work to deepen scholarly understandings of the construct itself will also be helpful. Studies for the validation of the instrument in Nordic languages could also be useful to explore the possible differences in scores on Adultcentrism Scale in various settings that concern the lives of children.

The results of the pilot and first administration of the research tool show the value of detecting adultcentric biases in large-scale studies. For the Nordic context, which shows a long-standing commitment to implementing the CRC, further development and administration of the instrument might be useful to understand the presence of adultcentric perspectives in various research and social welfare contexts. In the developmental clinical research context, one potential direction could be to assess whether lower levels of adultcentrism relate to better child–adult relationships and better outcomes for children. Other areas where the quality of child–adult relationships is a key theme, e.g., schools and related agencies and family counselling, may also benefit from further developing and administering the tool. Since the results have pointed towards the possibility that adultcentrism tends to decrease if a higher educational level is achieved, integrating the tool into higher-education curricula for qualifying professionals who will work with children is also a potential area of development.

Adultcentrism appears to be a useful construct in the contexts of teaching, child advocacy, educational and medical settings because starting to reflect on this psychological dimension can contribute to designing transformative interventions that aim to improve the quality of child–adult relationships. These transformative interventions need to go beyond ‘child-centered’ psychology and pedagogy as a way to cope with adultcentric bias. ‘Child-centered’ psychology and pedagogy can also be founded on assumptions of a ‘universal child’ who progresses through predetermined stages of development (Burman

2017; Cannella 1997). Here, there is potential for developing an adultcentrism scale to evaluate theories used in higher education contexts and in practice. Consequently, there is potential for making transformative interventions in scholarship concerning children's lives, too.

As a final note, readers are left with a reminder that childist transformations in adultcentric society and scholarship do not mean turning child–adult power asymmetries around. The transformations come as a result of awareness of biases and how they influence relationships intended to 'protect', but might end up controlling and marginalizing a group based on chronological age.

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Notes

- ¹ Since the 1970s, the definition of ageism has taken on different connotations. On the one hand, 'ageism' can be understood as both discrimination by one group against other age groups, but above all, prejudice against the elderly in particular (see Florio et al. 2020). On the other hand, it could be understood as any power relation based on age (Roland 2017). If we speak more precisely about adultism, we are interested in the relationship between those considered 'adults' and those considered 'subordinates' (e.g., children, the colonized, women, etc.): the adult is then the *savant*, the human, the colonizer and the child the *non-savant*, the subhuman, the colonized (Roland 2017). The age category is thus conceived both as a social category, in terms of discrimination and prejudice, and as a relationship of domination. This distancing makes the reflection on 'age' more complex and opens up childism to interdisciplinary dialogue.
- ² It is important to underline that Ariès was heavily criticized by the scientific community of historians and historians of education. Some of his work on the production of childhood (in particular, his vision of childhood in the Middle Ages) was invalidated or made more complex (see Becchi and Julia 1998; Gros 2010). Other authors underline methodological gaps in his work by emphasizing his "present-centred approach, with its corollary of scissors and paste methods" (Wilson 1980, p. 153). It seems interesting to consider Ariès's work as a family historian, while remaining vigilant by integrating its complexities.
- ³ For more details concerning the research design and psychometric proprieties of the scale, please refer to (Florio et al. 2020).

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