

Introduction

- Mealtimes provide an avenue for socialization around food, and these interactions are influenced by routines, rituals, and behaviors (Fielding-Singh, 2017).
- Parental feeding practices can impact a child's health. Coercive practices undermine children's healthy eating behaviors, while autonomy-supportive practices contribute to and reinforce healthy eating behaviors in children (Holub & Nelson, 2022; Frankel et al., 2014).
- Mothers often take on primary responsibility for meal-related tasks and duties, and most research has been focused on maternal feeding practices (Fielding-Singh, 2017).
- Research exploring the ways in which fathers exert control or support to children during meals is scant, but fathers likely play a distinctive role during family meals (Jansen et al., 2020; Saltzman et al., 2019; Vaughn et al., 2016).

The Current Study

- The goal of this study was to examine how fathers are involved during family mealtime, specifically, how they use coercive, autonomy-supportive, or structure-related practices during meals.
 - Hypothesis-Mothers will take a more active and vocal role during mealtime compared to fathers through autonomy supportive, coercive control, and mealtime structure.

Methods

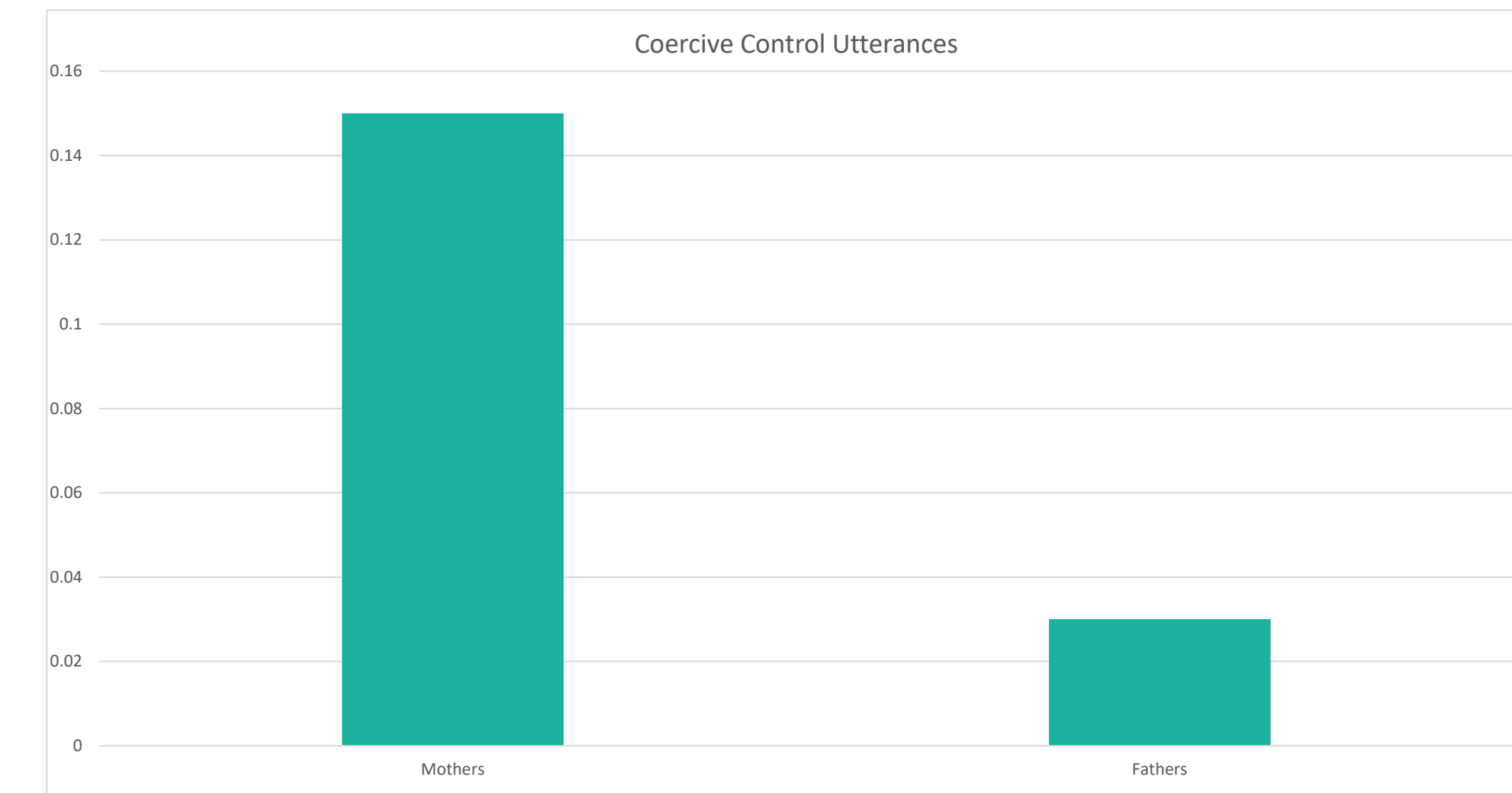
Participants

- Sample transcripts from the mealtimes of four families with preschool-aged children were coded.
 - Pre-school children: 2 boys, 2 girls
 - Child age = 59.25 months (Range = 50-71 months)
 - Ethnicity- 100% Hispanic
 - *M* family income = \$66,000 (Range \$2,000-\$120,000)
 - Paternal Education - 3 high school, 1 college; Maternal Education - 2 some college, 2 college graduates

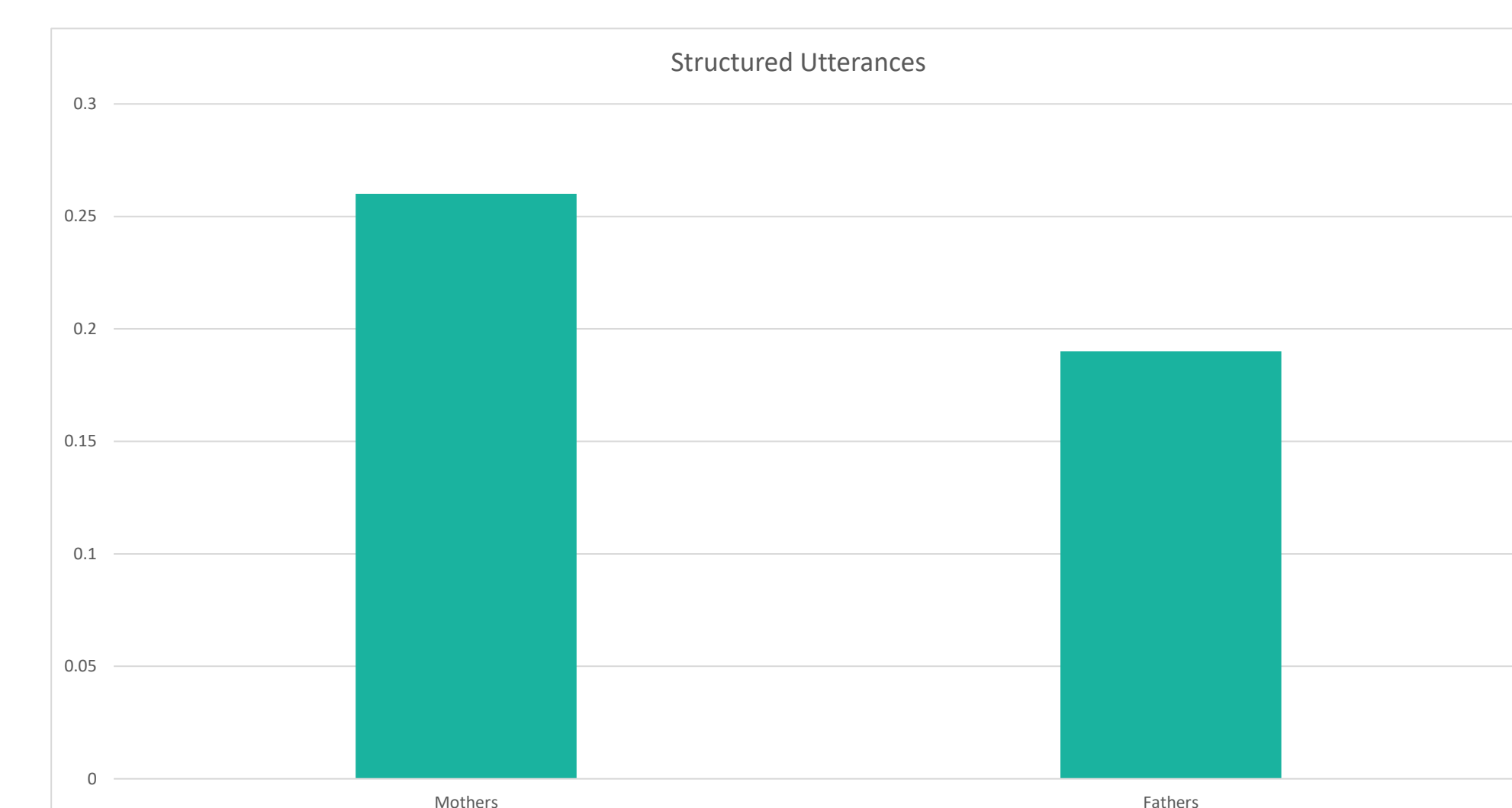
Procedure

- Two raters coded transcripts from unobtrusive LENA recordings to assess Hispanic mothers' and fathers' coercive, autonomy-supportive, or structure-related feeding practices during breakfast, lunch, or dinner.
- Codes were developed based on previous coding manuals along with a theoretical framework for food-related parenting practices (Vaughn et al., 2016) and resolved through discussion.
 - Coercive- parent's pressure, intrusiveness, and dominance in relation to children's feelings and thoughts, as well as their behaviors in the food domain
 - Autonomy-Supportive- food parenting practices that enhance a child's independence and autonomy in making healthy choices about food
 - Structure- parent's organization of children's environment to facilitate children's competence

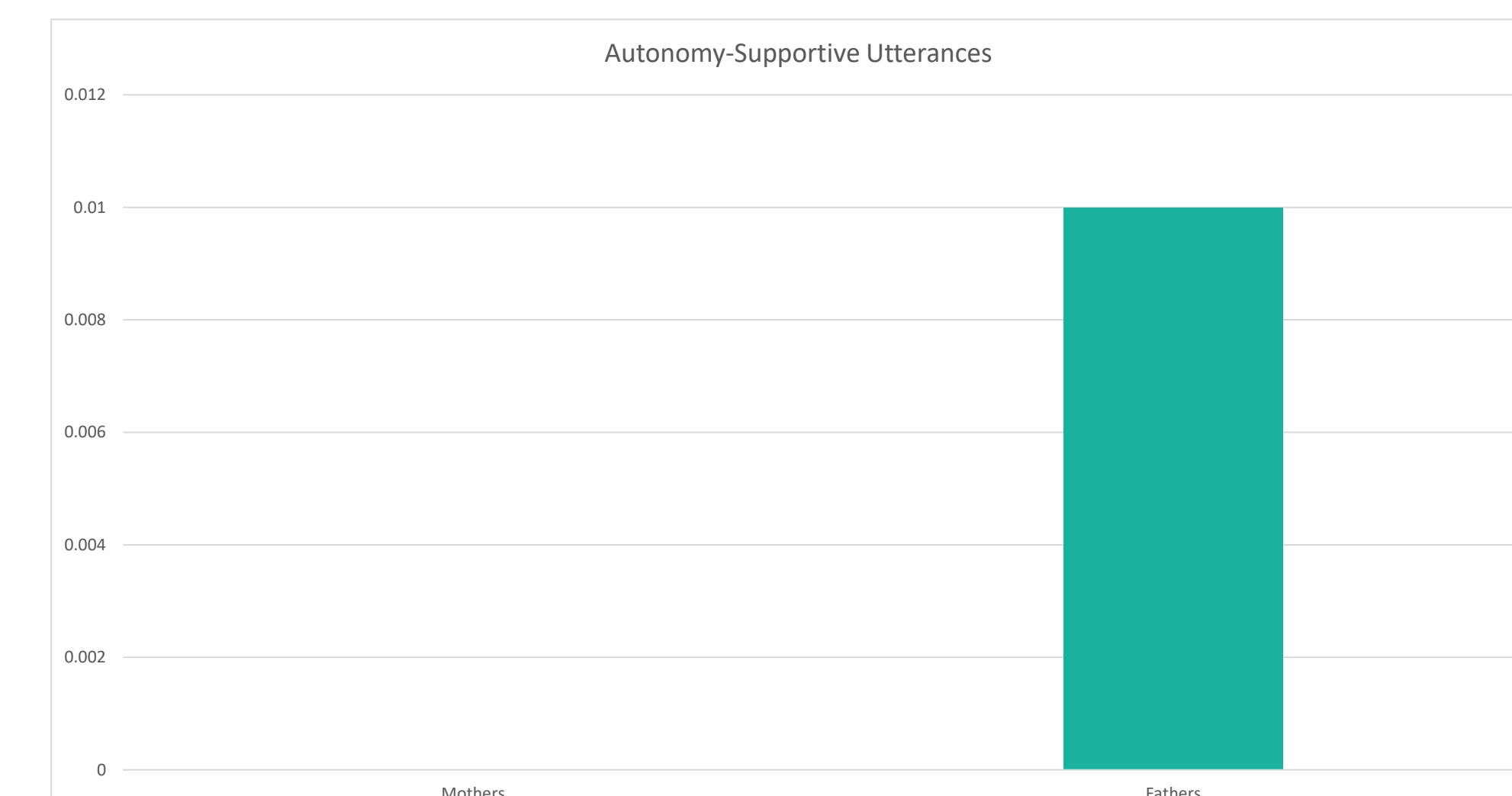
Results



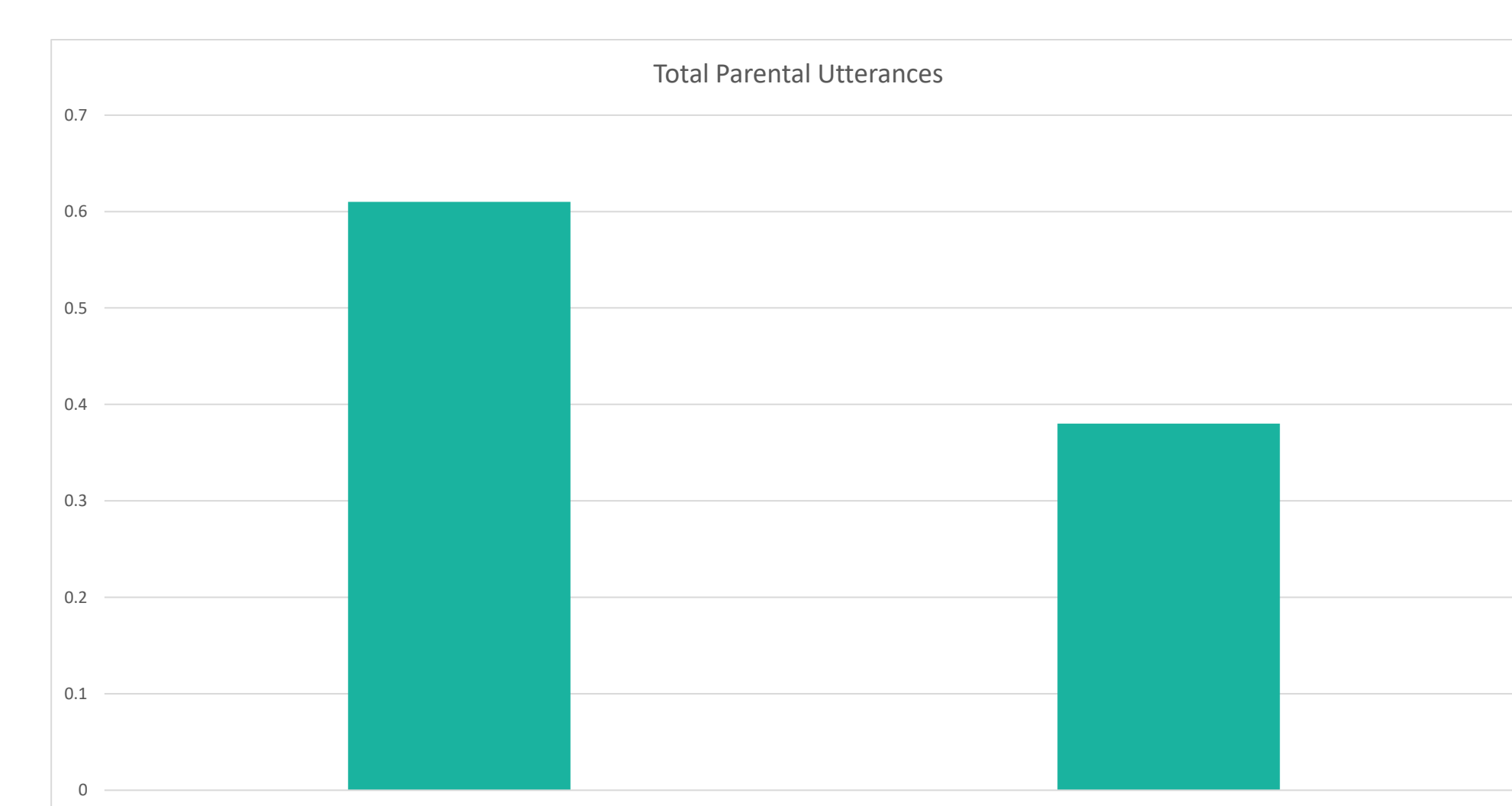
Mothers used more coercive control during meals than fathers, $t(3) = 2.83, p = .07$.



There were no significant differences in the use of structured feeding practices among mothers and fathers, $t(3) = 1.12, p = .35$.



No mothers used autonomy-supportive practices, while only two fathers infrequently engaged in these practices, $t(3) = -1.32, p = .28$.



There were no significant differences in the number of utterances among mothers and fathers $t(3) = 1.98, p = .14$.

Discussion

We investigated how parents, particularly Hispanic fathers, use coercive, autonomy supportive, or structure-related practices during mealtime. It was hypothesized that mothers would take on a more active and vocal role compared to fathers, as mothers are often the primary caregiver during meals (McPhie et al, 2014).

- **Mothers used more coercive control during meals than fathers.** Utterances including “here have this,” “here have it again,” “open your mouth,” and “eat this,” which characterizes a parent-centered approach in the feeding domain, can negatively impact a child's ideas about food and eating.
 - The frequency of coercive practices by mothers may be the result of anxiety or stress mothers may experience wanting to ensure their children receive adequate nutrition (Norton et al, 2021). Mothers may feel an innate need to provide food for their children, and from a societal perspective, “good mothers” feed their children (Daniels, 2019). This is a pressure fathers are not burdened with.
 - Societal roles and role strain might also account for the differences in these findings (Elliott et al., 2015).

- **Mothers and fathers engaged in similar amounts of structured-related practices during meals.** “Do you want _” utterances were common among mothers and fathers and appeared to be a strategy to guide the child's behavior, shape the mealtime atmosphere, and advance the meal.
 - Structure-related utterances regarding safety (i.e., “it's hot,”) were used more by mothers, while one father engaged in playful structured comments (i.e., “milk day”) to create a light environment.
 - The use of structure-related practices by mothers and fathers is a responsive feeding strategy that supports the child during meals (Taylor et al., 2017).
 - Future research should examine more closely food coparenting and what happens when parents do not successfully work as a team (Holub & Nelson, 2022).

- **No autonomy supportive feeding practices were used by mothers, while two fathers did sporadically engage in those practices.**
 - Utterances that offer information or an explanation about food items (i.e., “it's called ketchup”), or aim to encourage a child's capacity to self-regulate food intake (i.e., “are you hungry,” “how come”) fall under the autonomy supportive construct (Vaughn et al., 2016; Daniels, 2019).
 - Parents can help children develop a sense of ownership of parent-backed norms and routines through autonomy support (Pasquale & Rivolta, 2018). Autonomy support can also help children develop healthy habits, as it teaches them how to make healthy food and eating choices without parental guidance.

Discussion Cont.

- Perhaps the reason why so little autonomy supportive practices are used is because they require more effort, time, and resources compared to coercive control practices (Pasquale & Rivolta, 2018). Given mothers' primary role as feeders, it is not surprising that they did not have the time or energy to engage in these behaviors.
- **Strengths, Limitations, and Future Work**
 - A major strength of the study is the use of naturalistic data obtained through LENA technology to code parental mealtime practices. To our knowledge, this is one of few studies to use LENA to examine coercive control, autonomy supportive, or structure-related feeding practices of mothers and fathers during mealtimes.
 - Limitations include:
 - A small convenience sample was used to collect data making it difficult to generalize the study to a broader population.
 - Translated transcripts were used, therefore tone and intonation of parent utterances was not considered during the coding process. Future research might compare codes from translated recordings to codes from video observations.
 - Future research studies should include larger, more diverse samples and dive deeper into how parents work together to coordinate meals while using these feeding practices. Additionally, future studies could focus on interventions and programs to promote the use of more autonomy supportive strategies and behaviors in parents.

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