

# Why does parent gender matter? An exploration of effects of gender vs. effects of parenthood in adult-child interactions

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## Background

- Parent behaviors during parent-child interactions predict child development across domains, including specific skills (e.g., math and vocabulary development).<sup>1,2,3</sup>
- Differences between fathers and mothers remain understudied
  - Some studies report differences in the way fathers and mothers interact with their children (e.g., during book reading).<sup>4</sup>
- It remains unknown whether differences in engagement-style between mothers and fathers are due to parental gender or differential experiences.

**The current study examines differences in adult child interactions between three groups: female non-parent, male non-parent, and female parents.**

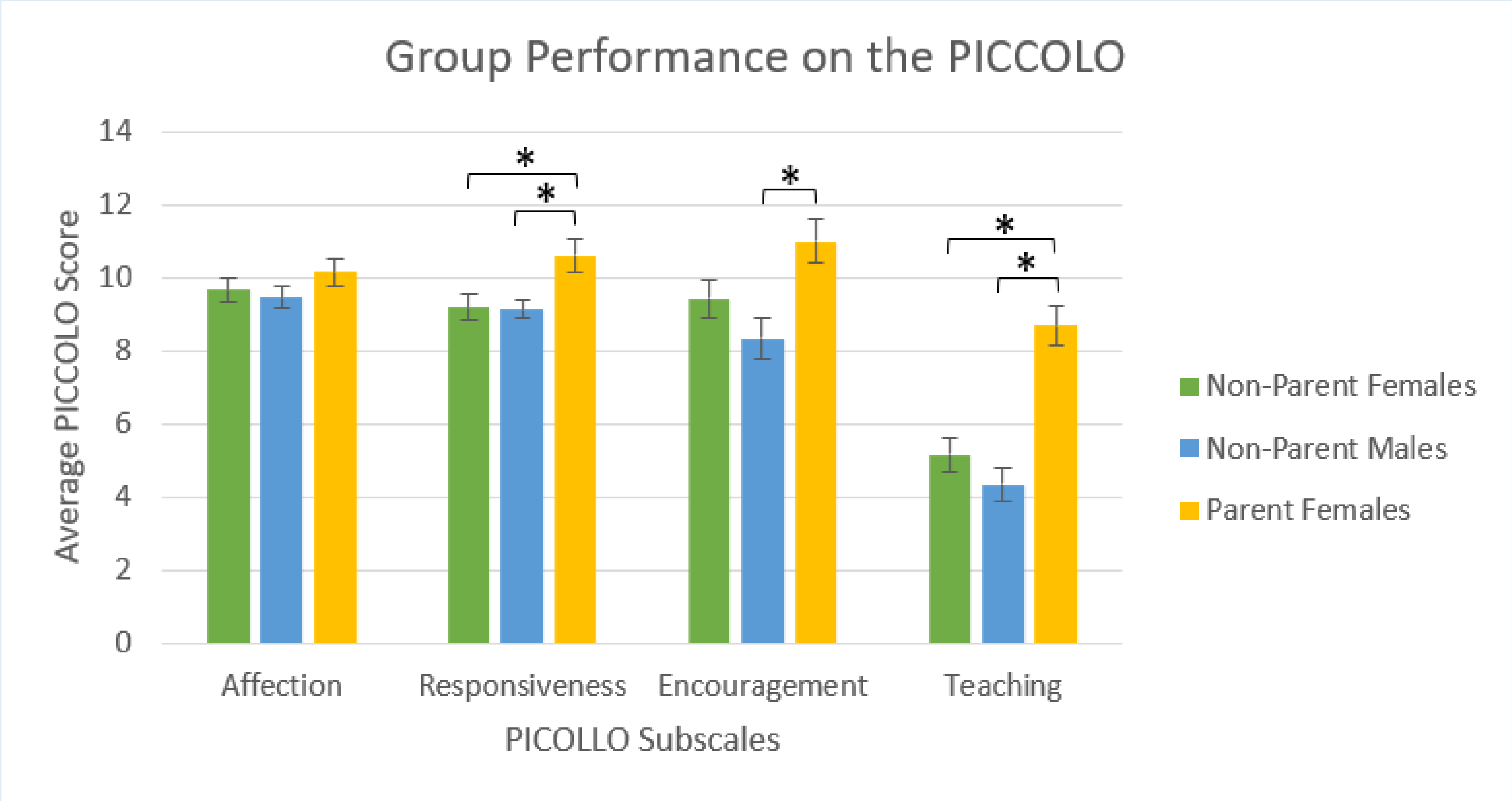
**Our goal is to determine if differences in parent-child interactions are explained by baseline gender differences in how adult males and females interact with children.**

## Method

- 111 total adult participants
- 85 adult non-parents (49% female) played with non-familial child aged 15-18 months-old. Child's gender was manipulated by being dressed in blue or pink
- 26 adult female parents were recorded playing with their own child aged 15-18 months in the same space
- Participants completed a self-report measure on gender-related perceptions with 3 subdomains:
  - **Experience** with children
  - **Perception** of gender roles
  - **Interests** in traditionally gendered activities
- All adult-child interactions were videotaped and coded using the Parent Interactions with Children: Checklist of Observations Linked to Outcomes (PICCOLO)<sup>5</sup>
- The PICCOLO is further divided into four sub-domains: Affection, Responsiveness, Encouragement, and Teaching

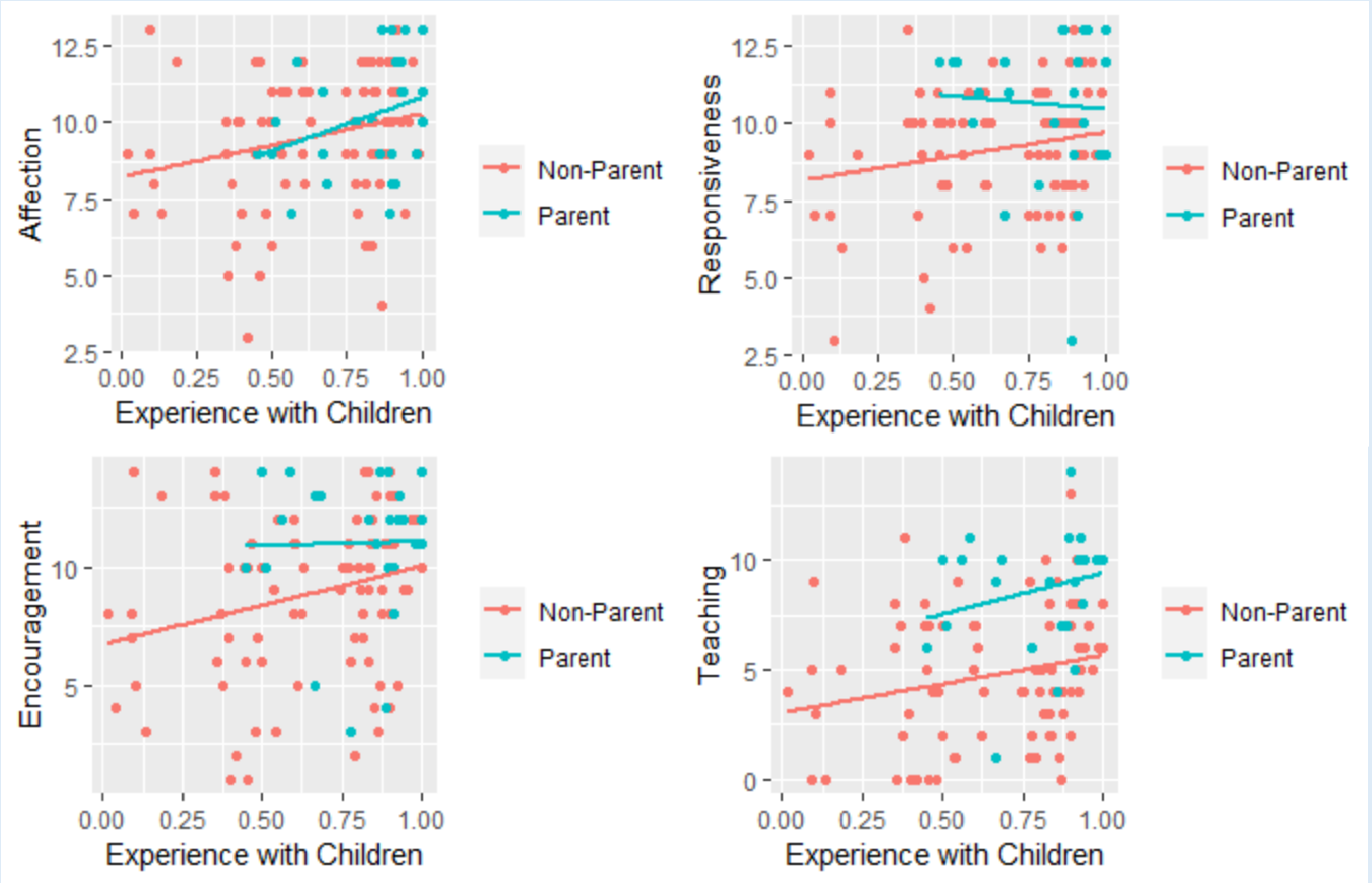


# Adult gender does **not** explain differences between mother and father interaction styles.



Instead,

# Unique parental experiences result in quantitatively different interaction styles with children.



## Discussion

- Parents are more responsive and use more teaching strategies compared to non-parents
  - Even after controlling for child gender
- Parents increasingly use teaching strategies as they gain experience
- Neither responsiveness nor teaching strategies were impacted by a parent's gender role perceptions
- Non-parent interactions with children were not influenced by gender role perceptions or by the participant's gender.
- Together, these results suggest that parenting experiences, and not parent gender, may explain differences in mother and father interaction styles.

## Future Directions

- A major limitation of this study is the lack of a sample of parent males (fathers). Unfortunately, our research was interrupted by Covid-19.
- Future research should explore whether fathers and other caregivers differ from mothers in strategies used during parent-child interactions.
- Planned future research will also explore how teaching strategies in non-parent and parent adults align with types of participant speech during adult-child interactions, which have previously been shown to differ by adult gender.<sup>5</sup>

## References

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