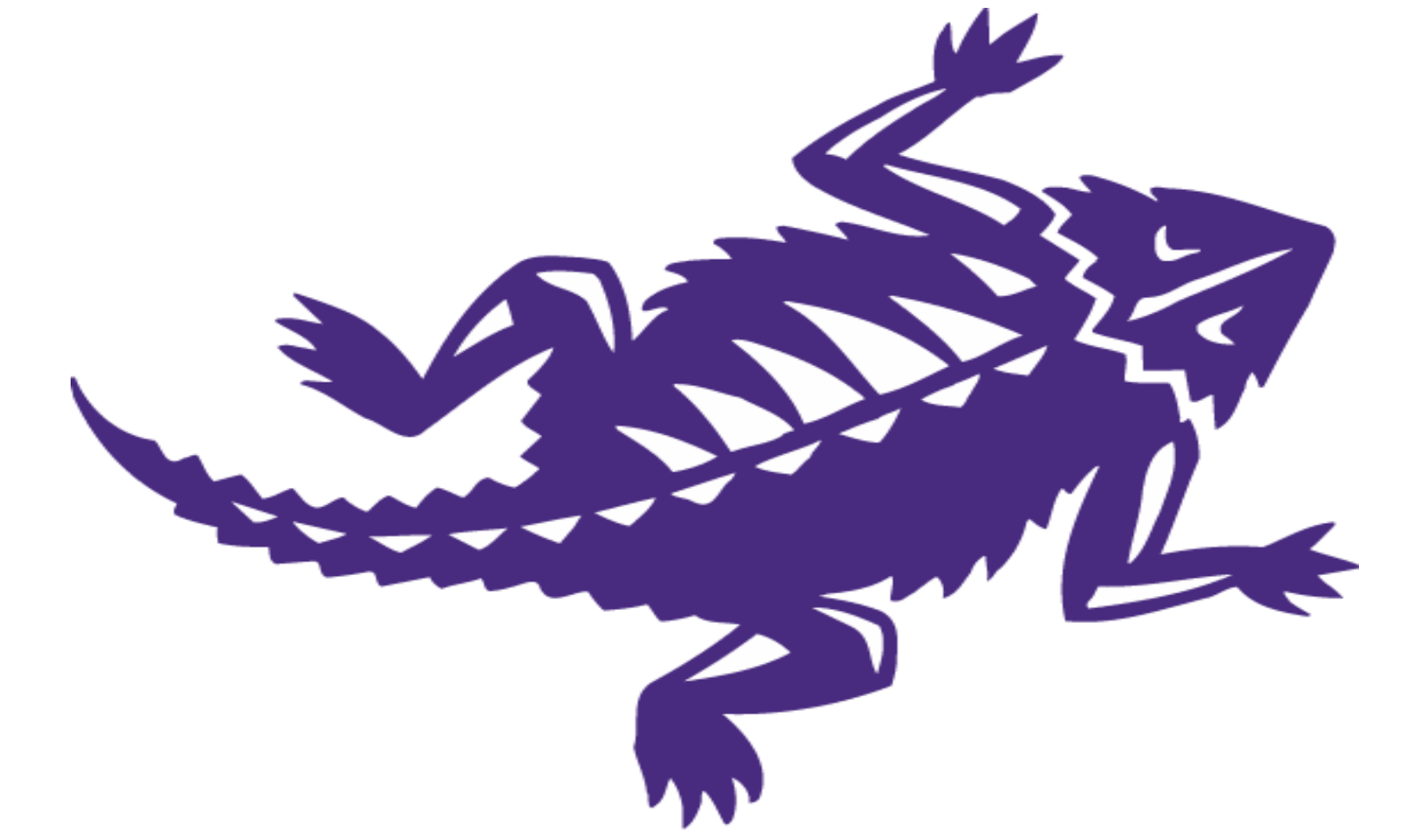




The Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health and Marital Functioning in Mothers and Fathers of Autistic Children



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Introduction

Mothers and fathers of autistic children face many mental health and relationship challenges compared to parents of neurotypical children, including higher levels of stress (e.g., Benson, 2006; Weitlauf et al., 2014), more marital dysfunction (e.g., Shtayermman et al., 2013; Sim et al., 2016), and increased likelihood of divorce (e.g., Hartley, 2010; Shtayermman, 2013).

The mounting uncertainty that accompanied the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt significantly by families with children with autism, who often live on a routine schedule in order to support their child's needs. The sudden closure of schools and transitioning to online services at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic may have exacerbated the already elevated stress levels of parents and may have negatively impacted various aspects of home life (Marchetti et al., 2020). Overall, increased stress within the family system can result in decreased well-being for all members within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cassinat et al., 2021).

The purpose of this study was to compare differences in marital functioning and psychological distress in mothers and fathers of autistic children at multiple points throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the mental health and marital functioning in mothers and fathers of autistic children were compared to pre-pandemic population norms.

Method

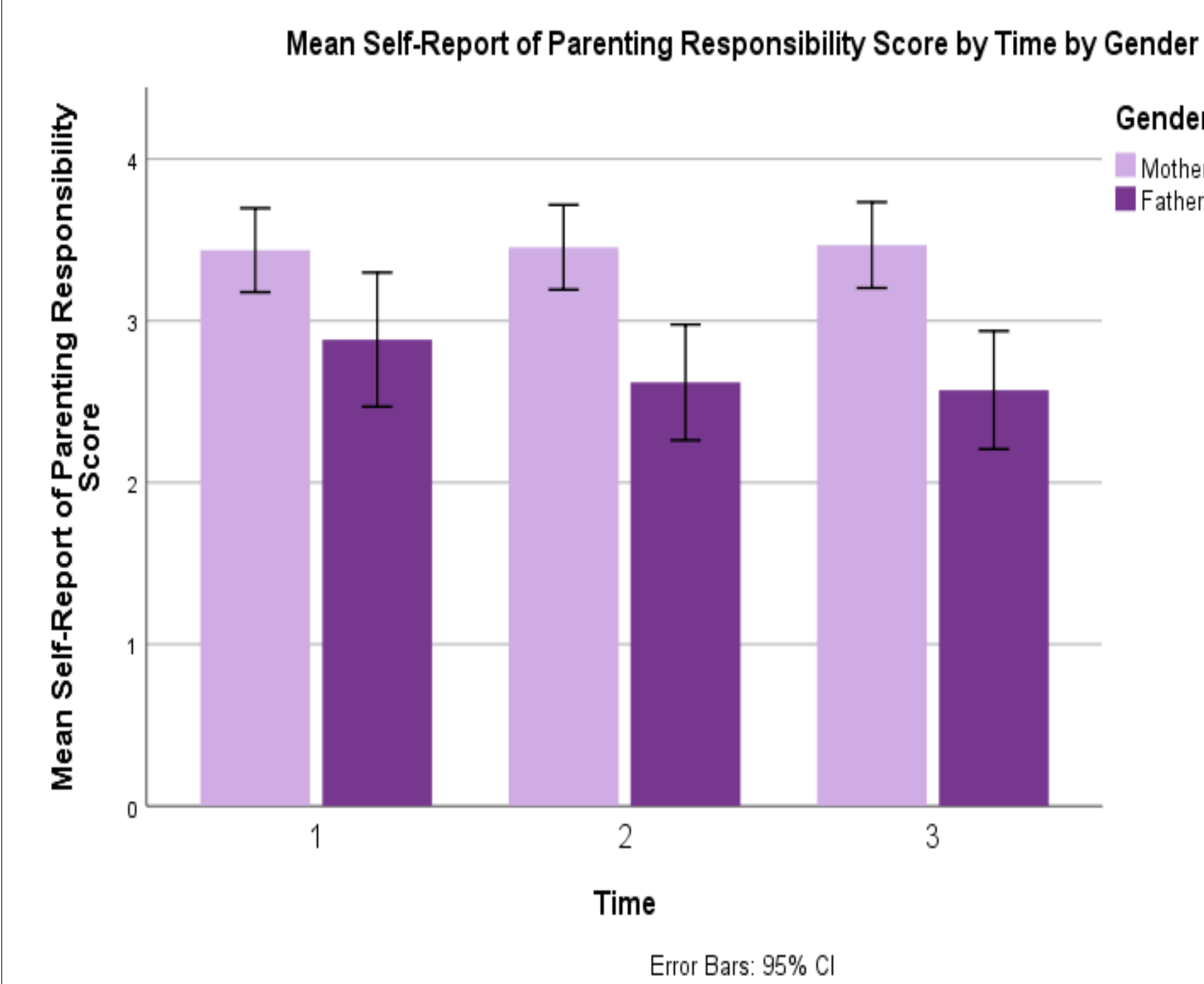
Participants

Mothers and fathers of autistic children who were part of a larger longitudinal study participated in a supplemental study examining the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. To qualify for the main study, parents had to be married or living together for a year, have an autistic child that lived with them 50% of the time, and be able to read and speak English. From the original sample of 119 couples, 94 mothers and 58 fathers answered surveys about their mental health (anxiety, stress, dysphoria) and marital functioning at three time points (April, July, and October 2020) after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

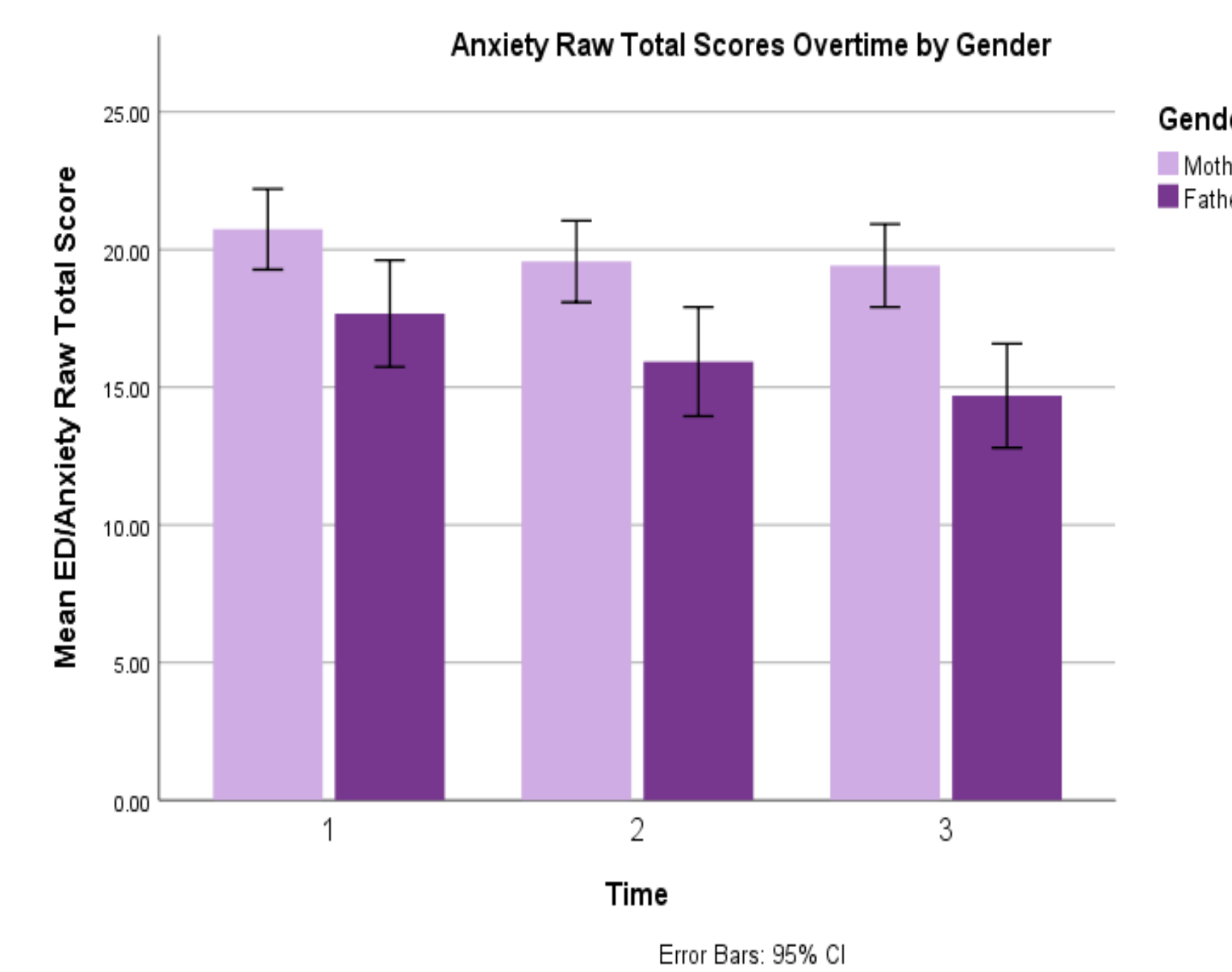
Measures

- The Couple Satisfaction Index (CSI) measured marital satisfaction
- NIH Toolbox Perceived Stress Fixed Form Age 18+ measured participant stress.
- NIH PROMIS Toolbox Emotional Distress/Anxiety Short Form was used to evaluate participant anxiety.
- Dysphoria was reported based on questions from the dysphoria subset of the Inventory of Anxiety and Dysphoria Symptoms (IDAS).

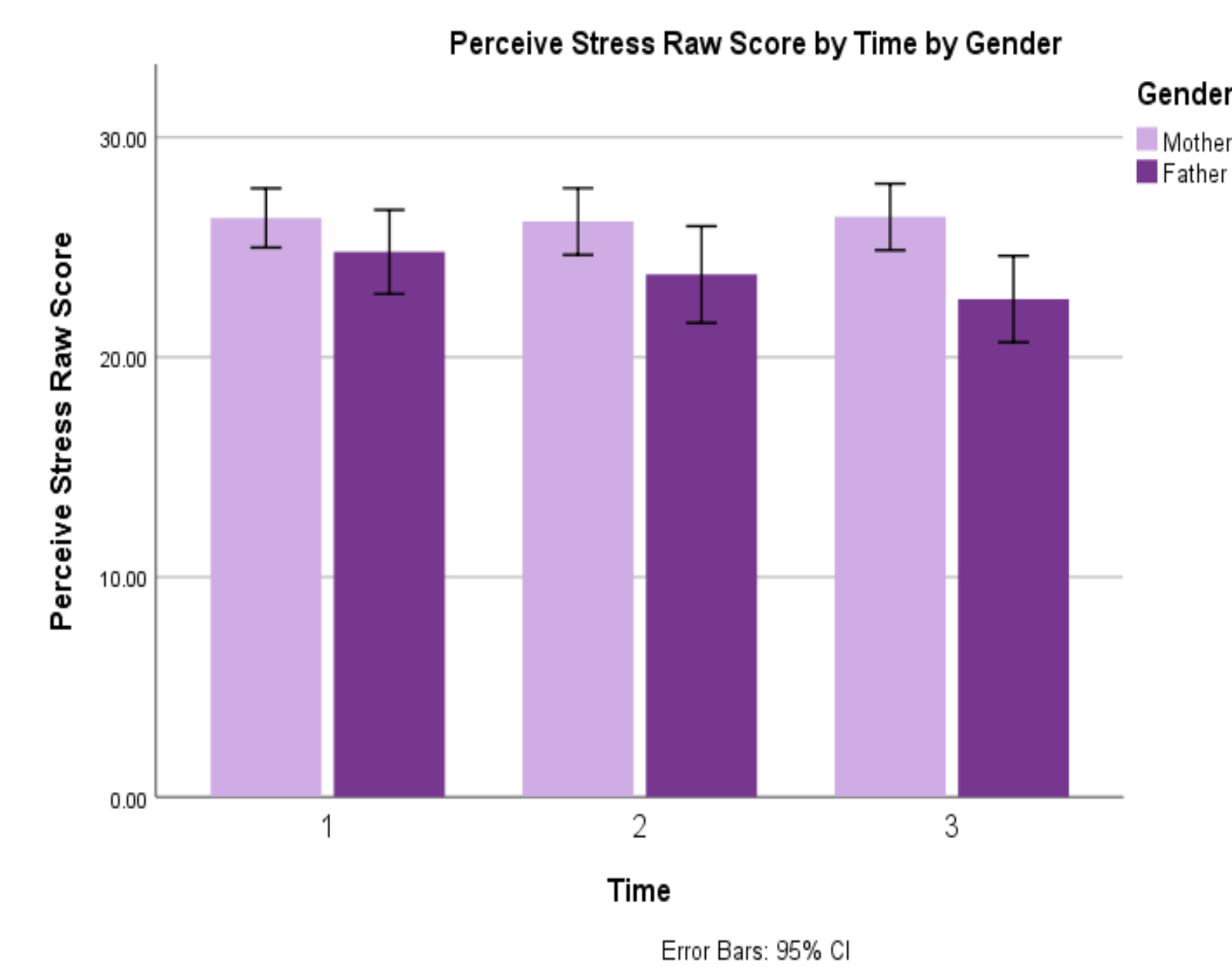
Results



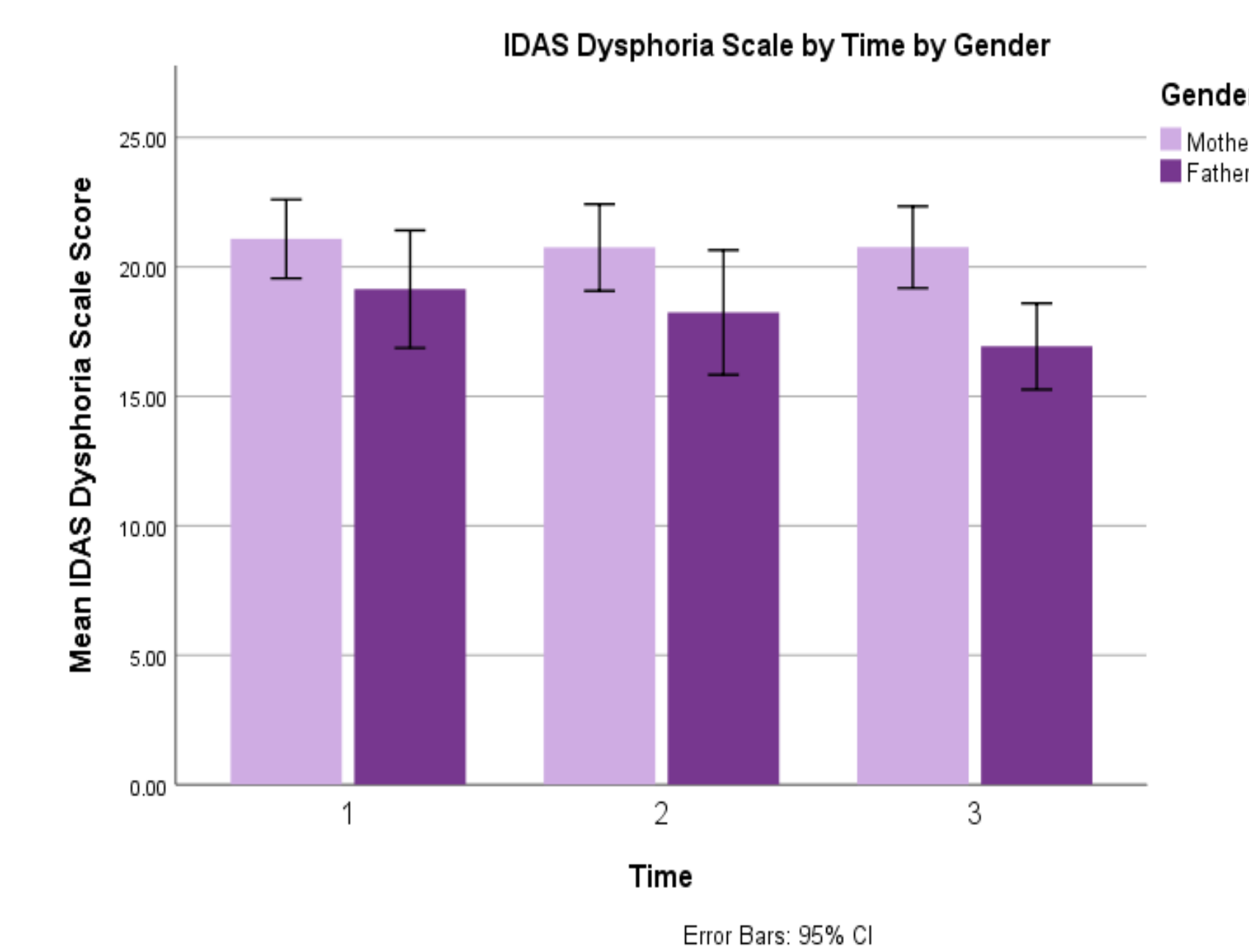
Mothers reported significantly more feelings of increased parenting responsibility due to the COVID-19 pandemic than fathers at all time points.



Mothers indicated higher levels of anxiety than fathers at all time points. Fathers' anxiety was significantly higher in April than in July or October 2020.



Mothers reported high levels of stress at all time points. Fathers' stress was significantly lower than mothers' in October 2020.



Mothers felt more dysphoria in October 2020. Fathers scored consistently low on the dysphoria scale at all time points.

Discussion

A series of independent *t*-tests examined the differences between mothers' and fathers' reported levels of mental health, marital functioning, and child symptom severity. At all timepoints, mothers' parenting responsibilities and anxiety levels were significantly higher than fathers', $p_s \leq .043$. Mothers' levels of stress and dysphoria were significantly higher in October 2020 than fathers', $p_s \leq .012$. Compared to pre-pandemic population norms, mothers reported significantly higher stress at all timepoints ($p_s \leq .006$), while fathers only reported significantly higher levels of anxiety in April 2020 ($p \leq .001$). Fathers also reported lower levels of dysphoria compared to population norms at all timepoints ($p_s \leq .016$).

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, mothers of autistic children appeared to have more negative outcomes compared to fathers of autistic children. Mothers reported more parenting responsibilities compared to fathers, as well as higher rates of stress. In October 2020 when school districts re-opened, mothers reported higher levels of stress and dysphoria compared to fathers. Further, compared to pre-pandemic populations, parents of autistic children reported more stress and fathers reported reduced dysphoria. Overall, parents of autistic children appeared to face negative outcomes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and displayed higher rates of stress and dysphoria than parents at pre-pandemic populations. However, any conclusions generated from data reported by fathers are limited based on the reduced sample size.

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