

Empathy-related Responding and Its Relations to Socioemotional Development

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PECERA, Seoul, 2013

**Empathy often is assumed to be a moral
emotion and of broad relevance to the
quality of human functioning**

- for centuries, a minority of philosophers (e.g., Hume, Blum), and more recently, many psychologists, have assumed that empathy and related emotional reactions motivate caring behaviors
- however, in 1982 meta-analysis, Underwood & Moore found no relation between empathy & prosocial behavior such as helping/sharing

Goal of this presentation:

- **argue that empathy-related reactions do play a crucial role in socioemotional & moral development**
 - **critical to make important conceptual distinctions**
- **examine relation of self-regulation to empathy-related responding**
- **briefly discuss the socialization of empathy-related responding**

Problems with the early research on empathy-related responses

- **methodological problems with the measure of empathy commonly used with children**
 - **e.g., short, non-evocative stories and often switching quickly between emotions**
- **often a lack of conceptual differentiation within the construct**

▪ **empathy**--an affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another's emotional state or condition, and is similar to what the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel

▪ **sympathy**--an emotional response stemming from the apprehension of another's emotional state or condition, which is not the same as the other's state or condition but consists of feelings of sorrow or concern for the other

▪ **personal distress**--a self-focused, aversive affective reaction to the apprehension of another's emotional state (e.g., discomfort, anxiety)

prosocial behavior--
voluntary behavior
intended to benefit
another

▪ **altruistic behavior**--
those prosocial
behaviors motivated
by other-oriented or
moral concerns or
emotion rather than
concrete or social
rewards or the
desire to reduce
one's own aversive
affective states



Importance of conceptual differentiation between various modes of empathy-related responding

- **Sympathy----->altruism (Batson) (& perhaps moral values)**
- **Personal distress----->avoidance of needy individuals (if easy to escape); egoistic, not moral, emotion**

Dan Batson's work

- **in experimental studies, Batson found that situational sympathy was related to adults' prosocial behavior whereas personal distress tended to be negatively (or less) related**
- **his methods were not optimal for use with children**
- **he generally did not focus on individual differences in empathy/sympathy**

Measures of Empathy-Related Responding

Self-report

Facial reactions

Physiological reactions

Heart rate deceleration

- marker of sympathetic concern

Heart rate acceleration

- marker of personal distress

High skin conductance

- marker of personal distress

Also facial distress, concerned attention, & sadness, and self-reported reactions

Validation studies

- children and adults exhibited facial concerned attention (or empathic sadness) in sympathy-inducing contexts and, to a lesser degree, facial distress in situations believed to elicit personal distress
- HR & SC were higher in the vicarious distress condition than in the sympathy (or baseline) condition
- self-reports of emotion in evocative contexts were somewhat consistent with the emotional context, even for younger children's (albeit less so)
 - e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1988a, 1988b, *DP*, 1991, *CD*, 1991, *JPSP*)

- used these measures to assess children's responses to empathy-inducing stimuli (e.g., films)
- children later had an opportunity to help the children in the film or similar children
- in general, markers of sympathy were positively related to prosocial behavior whereas markers of personal distress were negatively related (or unrelated)

Prosocial behavior predicted by:

- heart rate deceleration
- lower skin conductance
- facial sadness or concerned attention
- low facial distress (more for kids than adults)
- self-reported sadness/sympathy or low happiness (more so for older children and adults than young children)
- e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1989, *JPSP*; 1991, *MPQ*; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990, 1998)

Sympathy/empathy may account for the emergence of a prosocial personality

change in mother-reported empathy across age 24 to 54 months predicted teacher-reported prosocial behavior at 72/84 months of age (Taylor, Eisenberg, et al., in press, *Emotion*)

In another longitudinal study,

- **observed prosocial behaviors in 4-5 year olds**
 - spontaneous (without a request)
 - compliant (with request)
 - sharing (giving up an object or space; higher cost)
 - helping (low cost act of assistance)
 - Eisenberg-Berg & Hand, 1979, *CD*
- **only spontaneous sharing was related to references to others' needs in prosocial moral reasoning**
- **compliant prosocial behaviors were related to preschoolers' nonassertiveness and proneness to personal distress**
 - e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1981, *DP*; Eisenberg et al., 1988, *PSPB*; Eisenberg et al., *MPQ*)

Relations of prosocial behavior to prosocial dispositions over time

- **prosocial constructs assessed every 2 yr. from 9-10 years old to 31-32**
- **obtained behavioral prosocial measures & self- and mother-reported helping in adolescence; self-reported sympathy/empathy in late childhood to adulthood; self- & friend-reported prosocial dispositions in adulthood**
- **spontaneous sharing behavior in preschool was related to these prosocial measures, often at multiple assessments**
 - Eisenberg et al., 1999, *CD*; 2002, *JPSP*, *submitted*

Preschool spontaneous sharing related to:

- **costly donating or helping in preadolescence and adolescence**
- **self-reported helping/prosociality in mid-adolescence and early adulthood (until 27-32)**
- **mothers' reports of helpfulness in mid- to late-adolescence**
- **sympathy at numerous assessments**
- **perspective taking in late adolescence & early adulthood**
- **friend-reported sympathy in the 20s-30s**
- ***not* related to self-reported personal distress, low-cost helping, and adult friends' reports of perspective taking**

- **relatively few relations between the other types of prosocial behavior and later prosocial responding**
- **but preschoolers higher in compliant sharing reported being prosocial in adolescence/adulthood, were high in self-reported sympathy and in moral reasoning in the mid-20s, and were marginally higher in internalized and stereotypic prosocial moral reasoning (but lower in needs-oriented reasoning) in the late 20s to early 30s (Eisenberg et al., 2002, *JPSP, in press, DP*)**

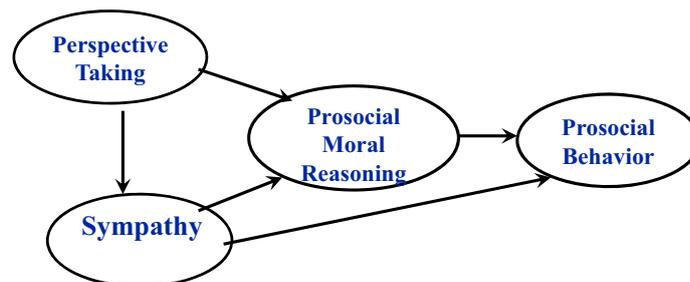
Empathy-related responding also may contribute to the development of prosocial moral reasoning

- cognitive developmental theorists (e.g., Kohlberg) have claimed that cognition (e.g., perspective taking, abstract reasoning) promotes advances in moral reasoning and in the quality of moral behavior
- Hoffman: sympathy/empathy stimulates the development of internalized moral reasoning reflecting concern for others' welfare
- Eisenberg: situational sympathy primes the use of preexisting other-oriented moral cognitions

- an association between empathy-related vicarious responding and moral reasoning is likely to be especially evident in children's prosocial moral reasoning (in contrast to justice-oriented, Kohlbergian moral reasoning)
- prosocial moral reasoning
 - reasoning about moral dilemmas in which one person's needs or desires conflict with those of others in a context in which the role of formal prohibitions, authorities' dictates, and formal obligations is minimal (Eisenberg-Berg, 1979, *CD*)

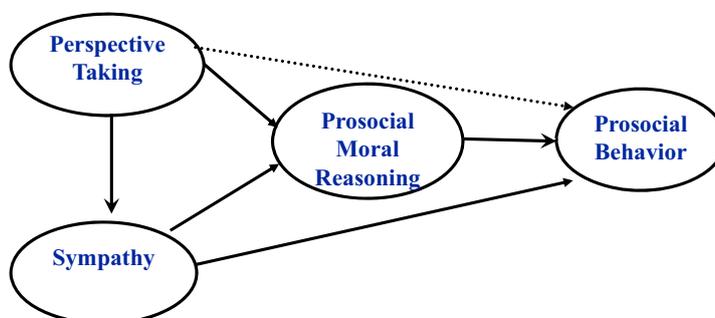
Evidence of links between sympathy & moral reasoning

- a relation between adults' reported sympathy when resolving moral conflicts and their care-related moral reasoning and ratings of the importance of moral dilemmas
 - Skoe et al., 2002, *PSPB*
- relations between sympathy and higher level prosocial moral reasoning in adolescence and adulthood in longitudinal and concurrent analyses
 - similar relations found for preschoolers and for Brazilian adolescents
 - Eisenberg, Zhou, & Koller, 2001, *CD*
- prosocial moral reasoning statistically mediates the relations of sympathy and perspective taking to prosocial behavior



The best fitting model

Eisenberg, Zhou, & Koller, 2001



No direct effects of cognitive perspective taking on prosocial behavior!! (think about psychopaths)

Links with maladjustment & social competence

- Feshbach and others have suggested that empathy plays an important function in the reduction or inhibition of aggressive or antisocial actions
- deficits in empathy and remorse are common in individuals with antisocial personality disorders
 - e.g., work of Blair, Frick, Strayer
- sympathy related to prosocial behavior, so should enhance social competence
 - Eisenberg & Miller, 1987, *PB*



Meta-analyses

- questionnaire measures of empathy/sympathy were negatively related to aggression/externalizing behaviors (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988)
- no relations when empathy/sympathy was assessed with facial/gestural reactions or self-reports in reaction to experimental stimuli
 - problems with early measures of empathy & failure to differentiate between empathy with positive and negative emotions
- Eisenberg & Miller (1987) found a weak, positive relation between empathy & social competence, but measures of empathy were undifferentiated

In a longitudinal study

- in mid-elementary school, children's facial empathy in response to negative emotion slides (but not self-reported reactions) was negatively related to adults' reports of children's externalizing problems
- 2 years later, facial empathy to negative slides and reported empathy with both positive and negative slides were related to social skills and lower levels of externalizing problems
- in SEM, empathy with the negative slides had stronger unique relations with social skills and maladjustment
 - Zhou, Eisenberg, et al., 2002, *CD*

Other evidence

- **teacher- and self-reports of elementary school children's dispositional sympathy related to numerous measures of maladjustment (e.g., externalizing) & socially appropriate behavior assessed concurrently and up to 6 years prior (Eisenberg et al., 1996, 1998, *DP*)**
- **found similar relations between Indonesian 3rd graders' sympathy and adjustment and popularity (Eisenberg, Liew, & Pidada, 2001, *Emotion*)**

Children's aggression may be positively related to their personal distress

- **mothers' reports of children's aggressive coping were positively associated with markers of boys' (but not girls') personal distress (i.e., heart rate acceleration and facial distress) when reacting to a crying infant (Fabes, Eisenberg, Karbon, Troyer, et al., *CD*, 1994)**

- these results (and others) demonstrate relations of sympathy (and sometimes empathy) with moral reasoning, low levels of externalizing problems (which harm others), and with socially appropriate and skilled behavior
- likely partly due to the other-orientation inherent in sympathy
- but also may be that regulation affects both sympathy & moral functioning

Is sympathy related to self-regulation?

Hypothesized:

- empathic overarousal involving negative emotion → aversive emotional state → self-focused personal distress
- individuals unable to maintain their emotional reactions within a tolerable range are expected to experience personal distress
- people who maintain their vicarious arousal at a moderate level are likely to experience sympathy
 - e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1996, *DP*; 1994, *JPSP*

Predictions: relations of EC to sympathy/personal distress

- processes involved in the regulation of emotion (e.g., effortful control; EC) relate in a positive, linear manner to sympathy
- low levels of regulatory capacities (especially those involved in modulating emotional arousal) are associated with personal distress
- self-regulatory capacities and emotionality interact when predicting sympathy

Emotion-related self-regulation

processes used to manage and change if, when, and how (e.g., how intensely) one experiences emotions and emotion-related motivational and physiological states, as well as how emotions are expressed behaviorally

- Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2004, *CD*
- involves temperamental effortful control (EC)
 - "the efficiency of executive attention, including the ability to inhibit a dominant response and/or to activate a subdominant response, to plan, and to detect errors" (Rothbart & Bates, 2006)

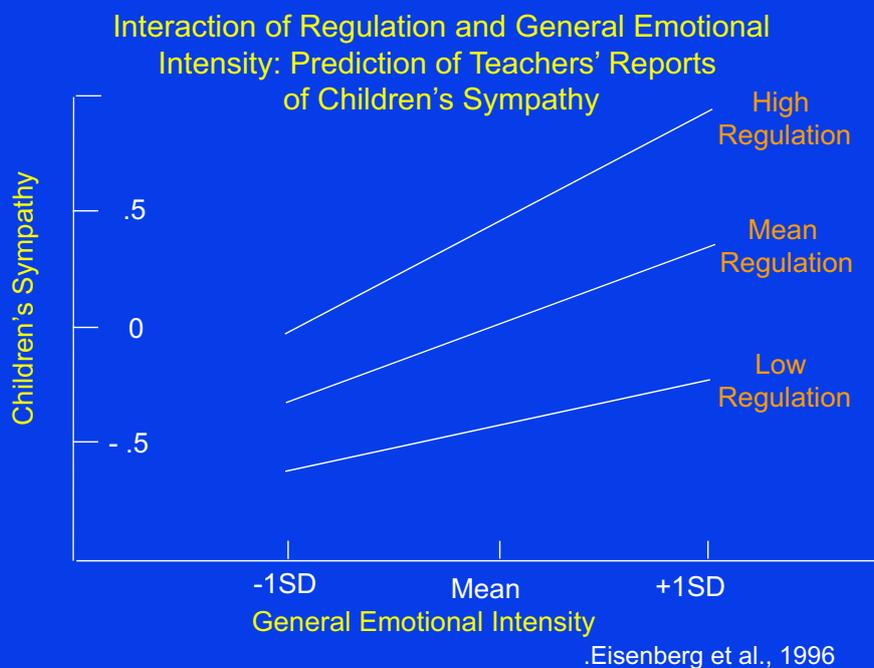
- in addition to managing emotional arousal, the executive attention involved in self-regulation is likely to be involved in integrating information, planning, & executing other mental activities that help interpret information about another & contribute to feeling competent to deal with negative vicarious emotion
- self-regulation may contribute to the ability to enact sympathy-based prosocial behavior when there is a cost to the self

In studies with college students and/or elderly, we found:

- personal distress was negatively related to self-reported regulation and to friends' reports of students' coping
- sympathy was positively related to regulation in zero-order correlations or when the effects of negative emotional intensity were controlled
 - Eisenberg et al., 1994, *JPSP*; 1996, *J. of Personality*; Okun et al., 2000, *PID*

Longitudinal study of school children

- children's dispositional sympathy related to adults' reports of children's regulation, within time and across 2 to 4 years
- physiological arousal when exposed to others in distress negatively related to boys' sympathy
- respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA) related to boys' sympathy
- for children moderate or relatively high in regulation, sympathy increased with the level of general emotional intensity
 - Eisenberg et al., 1996, *DP*; 1998, *DP*; Murphy et al., 2004, *SD*



Additional studies

- 4.5- to 7-year olds' reported sympathy in response to an empathy-inducing film & their self-reported dispositional sympathy were positively related to parent- and teacher-reported effortful control
 - children's reported personal distress reactions to the film were negatively related to adult-reported effortful control (Valiente et al., 2004, *DP*)
- in Indonesia, found a positive relation between school-children's adult-reported sympathy & their regulation (Eisenberg, Liew, & Pidada, 2001, *Emotion*; 2004, *DP*)

In a study starting at age 4.5-7 years

- adults' reports of regulation predicted sympathy up to 8 years later, even across reporters, especially for boys
- persistence and sitting still when asked (measures of regulation) often related to concurrent or future child sympathy (Eisenberg, Michalik, et al., 2007, *Cognitive Dev*)
- so regulatory mechanisms may be involved in links between sympathy and positive developmental outcomes

Origins of empathy

- some hereditary basis of empathy, but socialization also seems to play a role
- e.g., warm & supportive parents expected to have children prone to sympathy (due to modeling, secure attachment, help learning to manage emotions, etc.)



Sample findings

- parents' observed warmth/positive affect, encouragement, and low negative affect while doing a puzzle with child were related to their children's self-reported empathy/ sympathy (Spinrad et al., 1999, *JME*)
- Swiss children high and stable in self-reported sympathy from age 6-9 reported greater maternal support than those low and increasing or low and stable in sympathy (Malti, Eisenberg, et al., in press, *SD*)

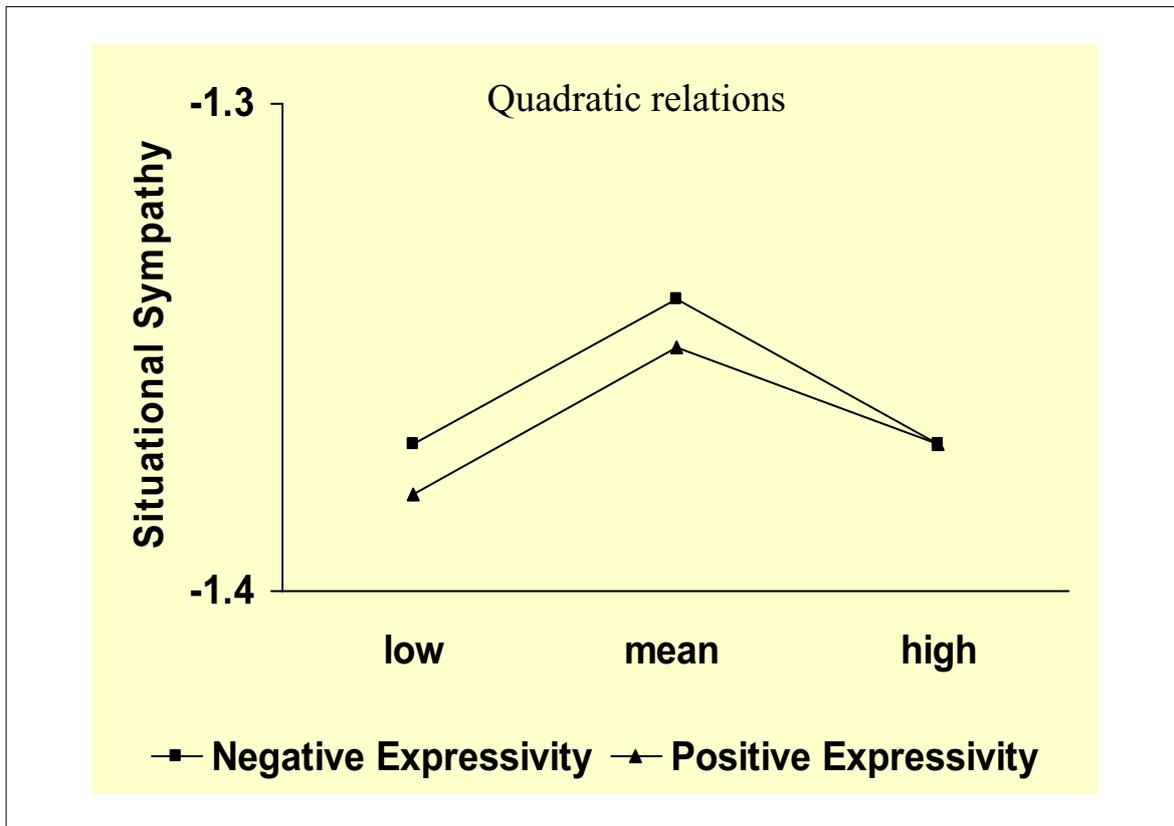


Parenting that helps children manage their emotions is related to sympathy

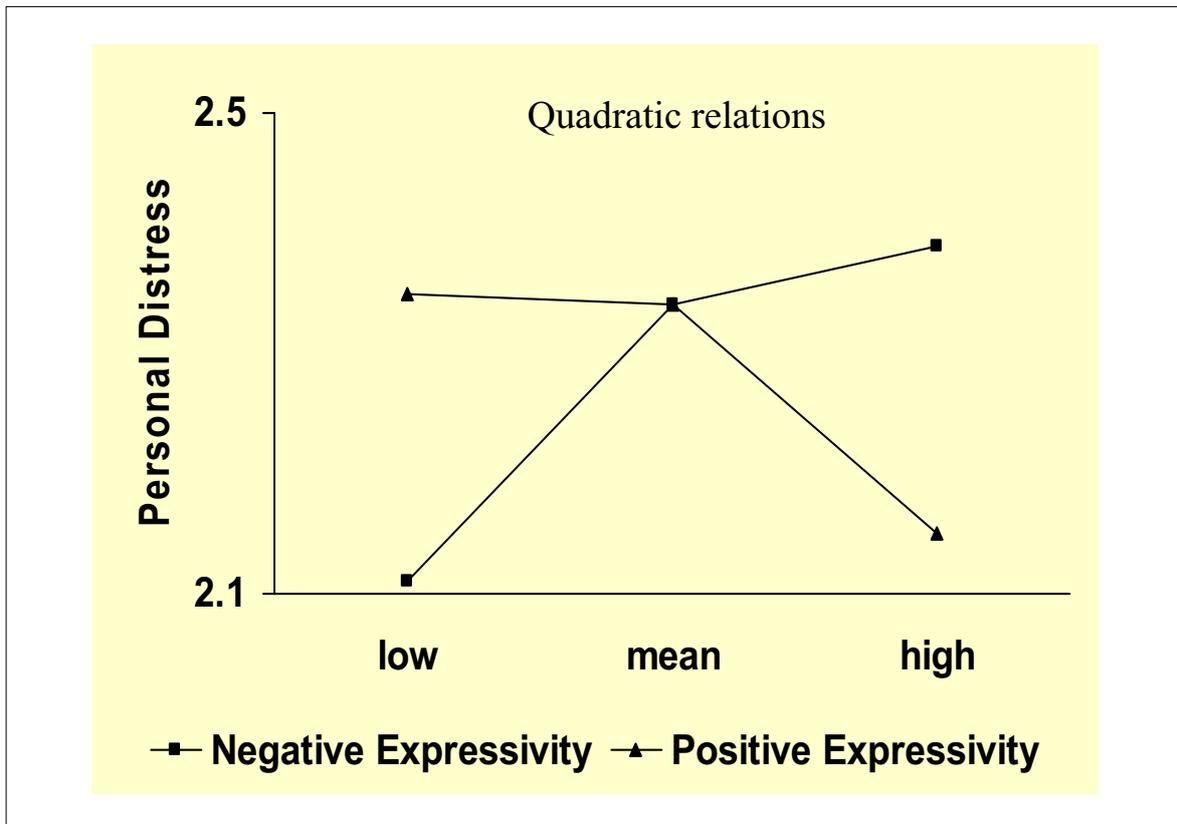
- **parental emphasis on the use of instrumental problem solving to deal with emotions related to boys' comforting behavior and markers of boys' sympathy (low skin conductance; high reported sympathy/sadness) in response to empathy-inducing video (Eisenberg et al., 1991, 1996, *CD*)**
- **mothers' reported encouragement of child to express his/her own negative emotion at 18 months predicted child empathy at 24 months (Taylor et al., in press, *Emotion*)**

Emotion-related parenting practices/behaviors that evoke moderate emotional arousal from children may foster sympathy rather than personal distress. In one study of young school children (about 5-7 years):

- **sympathy: children's self-reported reactions to an evocative films & parents' reports of children's dispositional sympathy**
- **parenting: reported and observed parental positive or negative expressivity**
- **sympathy related to moderate levels of both parental positive and negative expressivity**
 - **young children learn from parental expressivity but may be overaroused if it is too intense**



- **personal distress especially related to high parental negative expressivity and to low parental positive expressivity (Valiente, Eisenberg, et al., 2004, DP)**



Some potential effects of parental emotion socialization on sympathy may be mediated by children's regulation

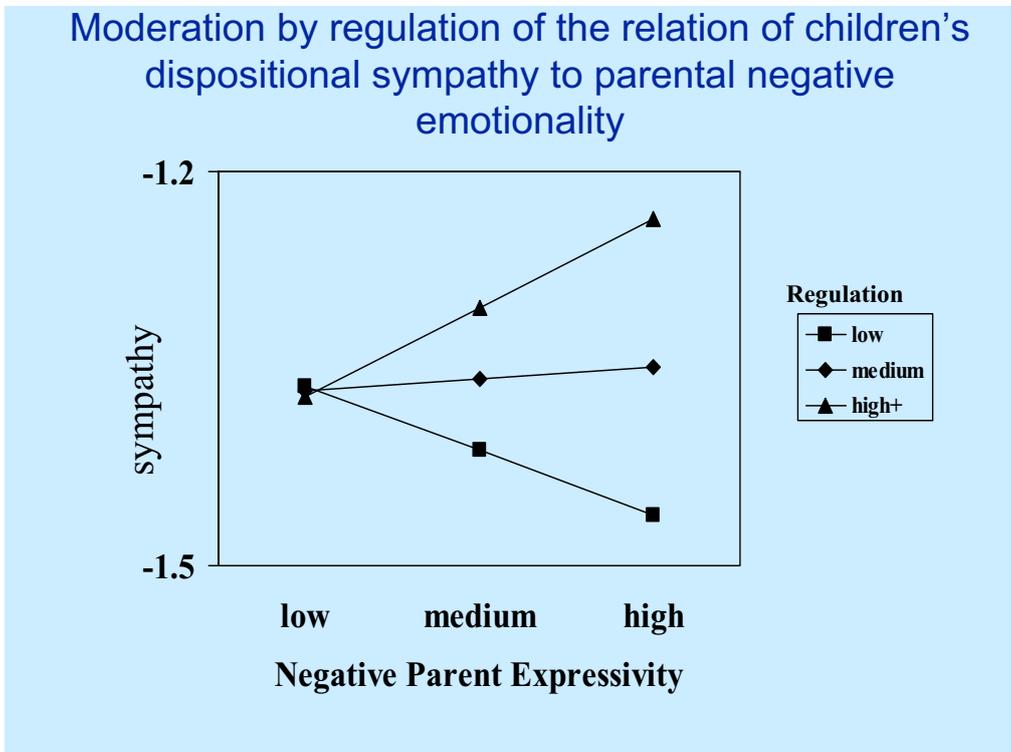
- in sample of Indonesian children, found evidence that parental negative expressivity → low regulation → low sympathy (mediation)

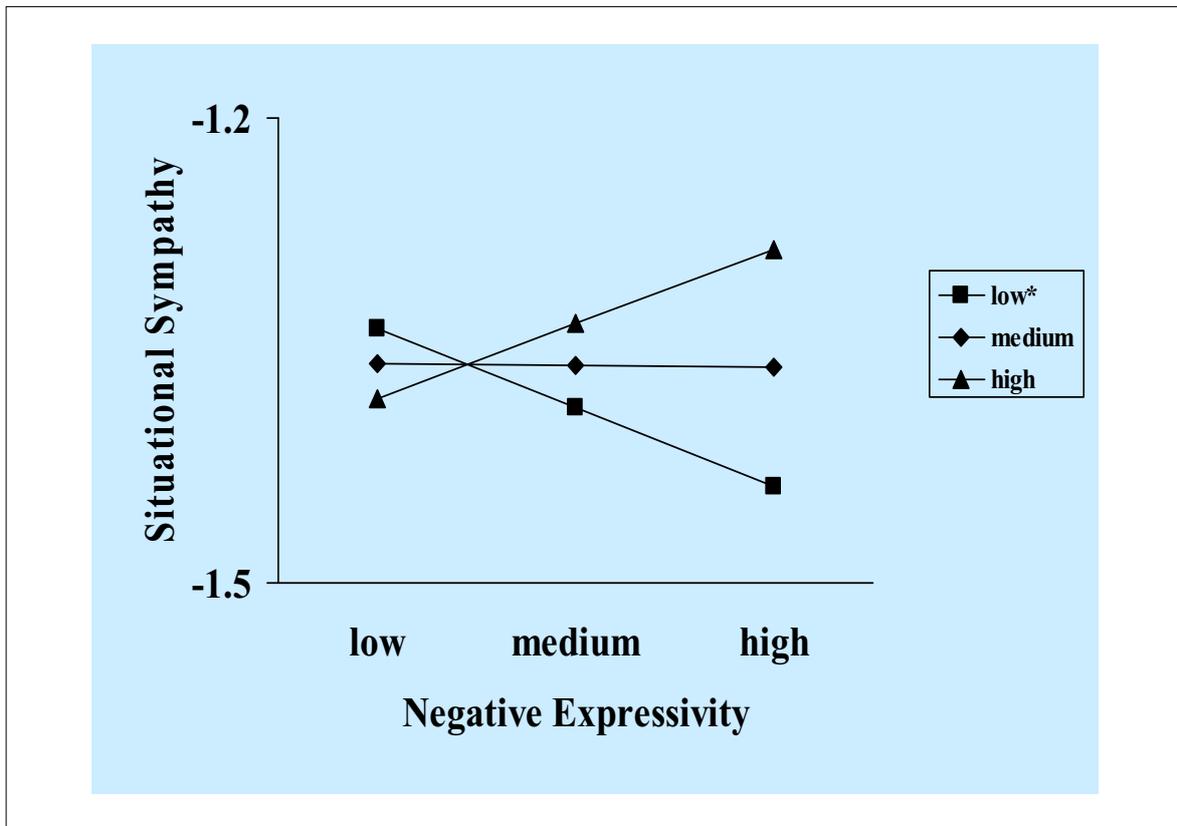


Regulation moderates the relation of parental socialization to child outcomes by child characteristics

- found that children's regulation and parental expressivity interacted when predicting children's dispositional and situational sympathy
 - e.g., there was a positive relation of sympathy with parental negative expressivity for young school children high in regulation and a negative relation for less regulated children

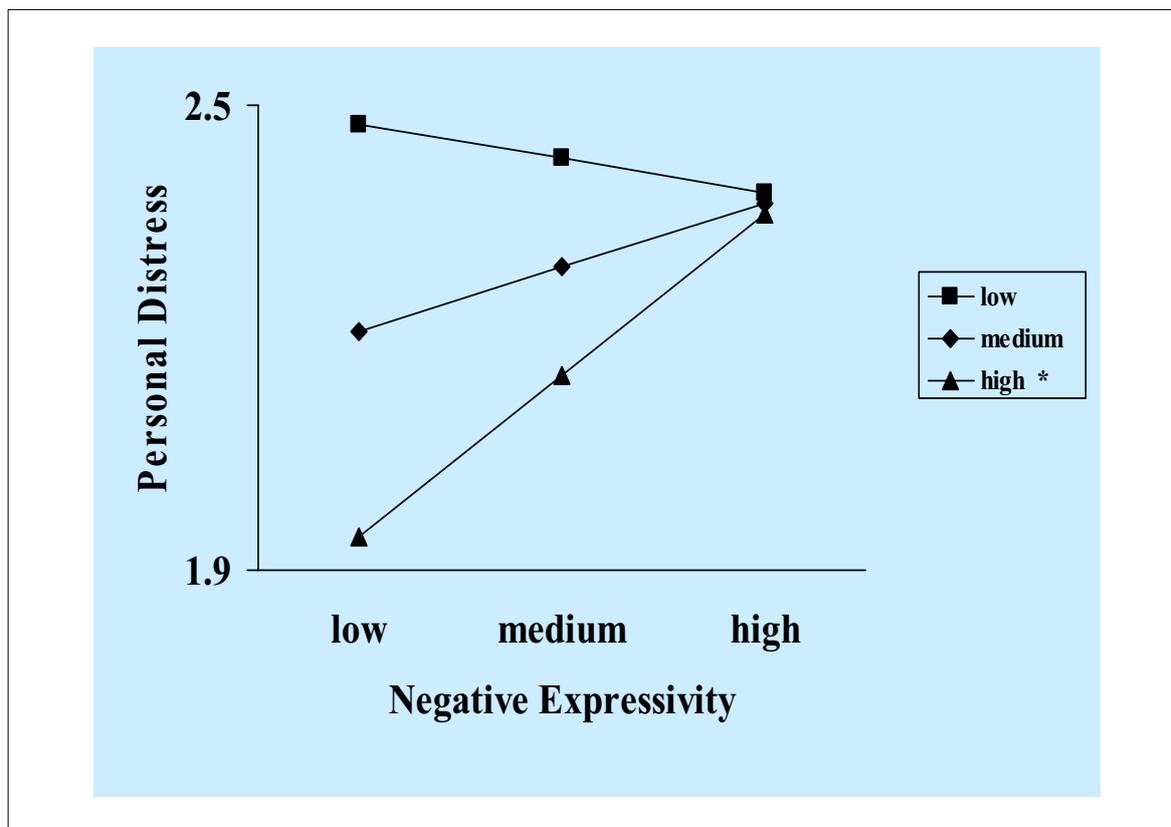
Valiente, Eisenberg, et al., 2004, *DP*





Moderation of the relation of parental negative expressivity to personal distress by children's regulation

- unregulated children are high in personal distress regardless of their parents' expression of negative emotion; regulated children are high in personal distress only if their parents express high levels of negative emotion



Parental reactions & expressivity likely affected by children's regulation and emotionality: 2-way street

- kindergartners were viewed by mothers as more emotionally reactive than 2nd graders
- mothers displayed more positive versus negative emotion when telling emotional stories to kindergartners than 2nd graders, particularly if children were viewed as reactive
- mothers seemed to attempt to modulate the level of negative emotion experienced by more vulnerable children
- maternal use of positive emotion was related to kindergartners' helpfulness

- mothers who viewed 2nd graders as emotionally reactive were less involved and warm when telling the stories
- with older reactive children, mothers may have "backed off" from socialization efforts that actively involve children with distressing emotion
- maternal attempts to direct their child's attention to the story material, when combined with warmth, were related to 2nd graders' high prosocial behavior and sympathy, and low personal distress
 - such maternal behavior may affect children's attention and highlight others' emotions (Fabes, Eisenberg, et al., 1994, *DP*)

Conclusions

- empathy & sympathy likely contribute to moral behavior & moral reasoning, as well to adjustment and social competence
- regulatory processes with a partly biological origin are related to empathy-related responding
- parenting/teaching practices that foster sympathy are likely to increase moral/prosocial behavior, moral reasoning, & low levels of externalizing, aggressive problems

Collaborators

- Tracy Spinrad
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