

Relations between Empathy, Emotion Regulation, and Prosocial Behavior during Early Childhood

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Background

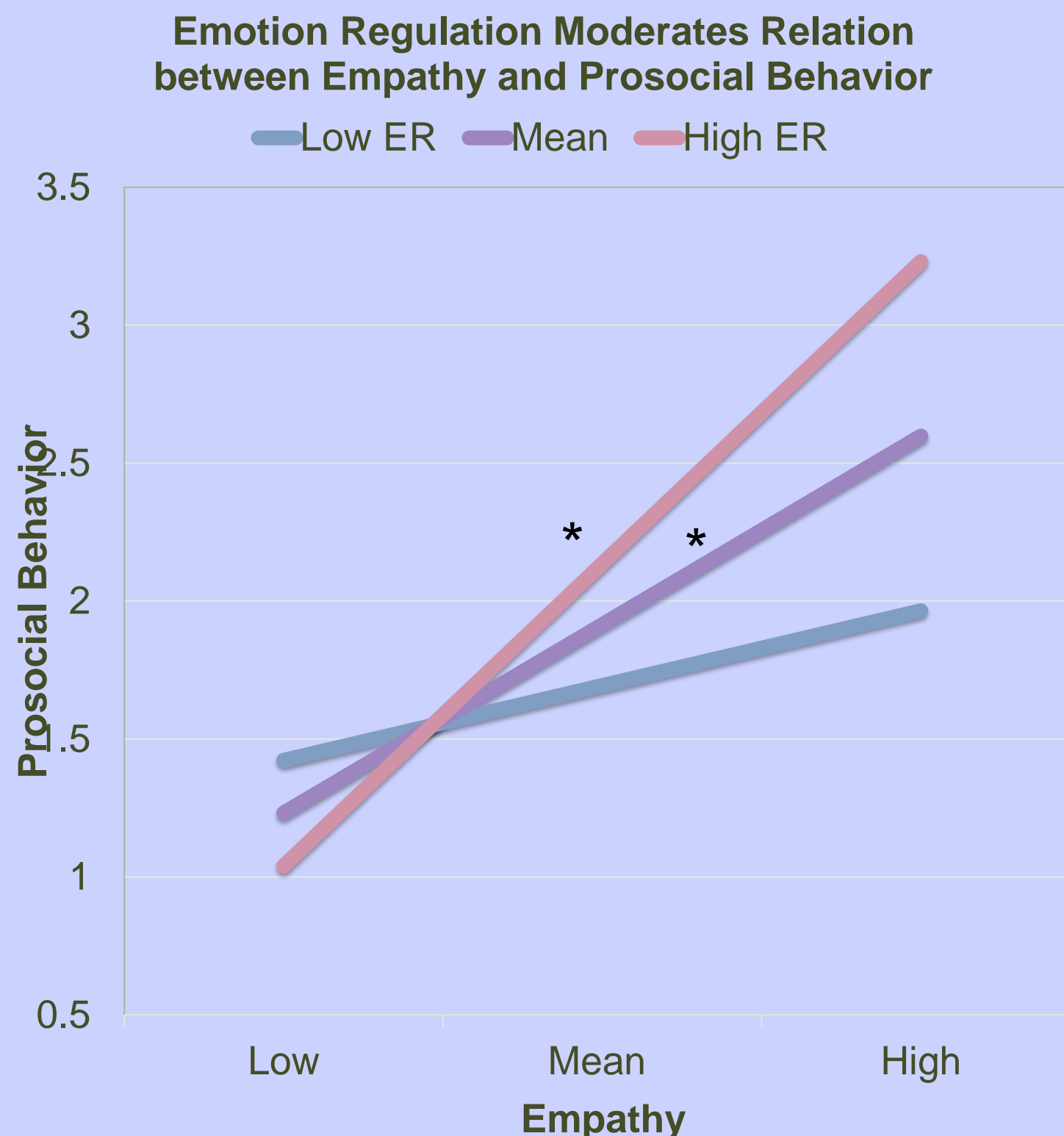
- Motivation of prosocial behavior still unclear—may involve empathetic concern for others (see Paulus, 2014)
- Emotion regulation also believed to be involved in prosocial responding (see Eisenberg et al., 2015)
- ER moderates relation between empathy and prosocial behavior in adult sample (Lockwood et al., 2014)
- Does this relation function similarly in early childhood?

Method

- Trained research assistants reliably observed children’s social behavior at school over a period of several weeks; prosocial behaviors were among variables collected
- Empathy reported by research assistants after conclusion of observations using a teacher report of internalization and empathy (Hawley & Geldof, 2012) ($\alpha=.78$)
- Emotion regulation reported by children’s classroom teachers using the Emotion Regulation Checklist (Shields & Cicchetti, 1997) ($\alpha=.78$)

Results

- A hierarchical regression model was run to test the study aims which controlled for children’s age and gender. Emotion regulation moderated the relation between empathy and prosocial behavior (see table)
- An investigation of the simple slopes revealed empathy related to prosocial behavior at mean ($\beta=.50, p<.001$) and high ($\beta=.80, p<.001$), but not low ($\beta=.20, p=.28$), levels of emotion regulation



Note. ER=Emotion Regulation; *= $p<.001$

Table 1. Hierarchical regression model

	β	F, ΔF	$R^2, \Delta R^2$
Model 1: Prosocial Behavior			
Step 1		(4, 122)=4.58, $p=.002$.13
Gender	.172		
Age	-.013		
Empathy-RA	.488*		
Emotion Regulation-TR	.336		
Step 2		(1, 121)=5.41, $p=.022$.04
Empathy x ER	.588**		

Note. At Step 2, F and R^2 represent change in F and R^2 from Step 1. * $p=.001$, ** $p=.022$

Conclusions

- Empathy was related to observed prosocial behavior in preschool children
- Emotion regulation moderated the association between empathy and prosocial behavior such that this effect was found only at mean and high levels of ER
- Results were consistent with prior findings from studies with older samples, indicating that these variables interact similarly across development

Notes

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