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The Mediation: Maternal Warmth to Children's Empathy through Maternal Responsiveness to Distress and Children's Disclosure

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Introduction

• Empathy has long been considered as a crucial contributor to (promoting) interpersonal sensitivity and social competence
• Empathy could contribute to migrant children’s mental health (Au, 2011)
• Researches highlight the importance in the family environment to promote children’s empathy:
  – Parental Warmth (Zhou et al., 2002)
  – Parental Responsiveness to Distress (Davidov et al., 2006; Grusec et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2013)
  – Parent-Child Interaction (Tong et al., 2012 and Yoo et al., 2013)
• The emotion-related parenting practices (e.g., parental expression of emotion, reactions to children's emotions) provide a pathway to understanding the process through warmth to children's empathy (Zhou et al., 2002)
• Children’s Disclosure (to parents)
  – Refers to the act of volunteering information about thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Sherman, 2010)
  – Is a special form of parent-child interaction
  – Can be viewed as an interacting process (Kerr et al., 2012)

Objective

• Investigate the link from maternal warmth to children’s empathy
• Rethink about some seemingly contradicting results in the literature
  – Zhou et al. (2002) suggested parental warmth promotes children’s empathy
  – Davidov et al. (2006) found parental responsiveness to distress rather than parental warmth predicts children’s empathy
• Key observations:
  – Zhou et al. (2002) incorporated parental expression of emotion, but not parental responsiveness to distress
  – Davidov et al. (2006) studied the unique part of warmth after controlling the effect of responsiveness to distress
  – Neither of them considered children’s disclosure
• We'll investigate the path from maternal warmth to children's empathy in the presence of maternal responsiveness to distress and children's disclosure

Methods

• Participants
  – 169 migrant children (M = 9.31, SD = .55); The survey was conducted in classroom
• Measures
  – Responsiveness to Distress: Revised Coping with Children’s Negative Emotions Questionnaire (Hughes et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2013)
  – Children’s Disclosure: Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman et al., 1985; Lai, 2009)
  – Children’s Empathy: Empathic, Prosocial Response to Another’s Distress Scale (Davidov et al., 2006; Zhang, 2012)

Results

Fig. 1: (Maternal) Responsiveness to distress completely mediates the relationship between (maternal) warmth and children's empathy.

Fig. 2: Children's disclosure (to mother) partially mediates the relationship between (maternal) warmth and empathy; The blue arrow and coefficient are for the direct path from warmth to empathy (i.e., without children's disclosure).

Fig. 3: (Maternal) Responsiveness to distress and children's disclosure (to mother) mediate the relationship between (maternal) warmth and children's empathy.

Discussion

• Reconciles previous findings in the literature
  – Responsiveness to distress overshadows maternal warmth (Fig. 1), as argued in Davidov et al., 2006
  – In the absence of responsiveness to distress, maternal warmth does exhibit influence on children’s empathy directly or via children’s disclosure which partially mediates (Fig. 2), as suggested in Zhou et al., 2002
• Significance of this work
  – Reveals more about the mechanism by which maternal warmth exerts (positive) influence on children’s empathy
  – Meets the need to study the applicability of related theories to less developed countries among early grade-school children from low SES group

Conclusion

• Warmth could predict empathy through responsiveness to distress. In fact, responsiveness to distress plays a more important role than maternal warmth in terms of fostering children’s empathy, in that it (almost) completely mediates the latter two
• Maternal warmth could affect children’s empathy directly or in the presence of, say children’s disclosure, a form of parent-child interaction
• Improving the bidirectional interaction between parent and children is beneficial

References


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