DO PARENTS DIFFER IN THE EVALUATION OF THEIR CHILDREN’S SYmpathy AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR?

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Background and aims: Previous work found significant differences between mothers and teachers in the evaluation of children’s social-emotional development (Zuffianò et al., 2018). In this study, we evaluated whether mothers and fathers, two informants who share the same context of observation, converged in rating their children’s sympathy (Zhou et al., 2003) and prosocial behavior (PB; Goodman, 2006). We also explored whether possible discrepancies could be related to parents’ perception of the quality of communication at home (Olson & Barnes, 2004) and their levels of positivity (Caprara et al., 2012).

Method: Ninety-seven heterosexual couples (mothers M_{age} =36.64, SD= 6.28; fathers M_{age}=39.08, SD= 7.54) reported on their children’s sympathy and prosocial behaviour (50.5% girls, M_{age} = 7.85, SD=3.70).

Results: After establishing scalar measurement invariance between the two informants, Latent Different Score (LDS) analysis indicated no latent-mean level difference (mother − father) between parents’ evaluations of sympathy (Δ=.108, p=.252) and PB (Δ=.100, p=.070). Yet, the variance of Δf was statistically different (s^2=.641, and .165, p <.01 for sympathy and PB), highlighting that some children were perceived as more different than others. A conditional LDS showed a significant interaction effect of parents’ perceived quality of communication at home (b= -.616, p = .048): when both mothers and fathers perceived a high quality of communication at home they showed a higher level of agreement when rating their children’s sympathy. Finally, higher levels of mother’s positivity were associated with higher parental discrepancies in the evaluation of children’s PB.

Conclusions: Although, on average, fathers and mothers agreed in rating their children’s sympathy and PB, mothers’ positivity predicted higher evaluation of children’s’ PB compared to their fathers, thereby indicating a potential positive bias. Interestingly, a family environment characterized by high quality of communication seemed to help the two parents converge in the evaluation of their children’s emotional development.