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Why Are You Nice? Relational and Dispositional Correlates of Adolescent Prosocial Behavior

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Introduction

Prosocial behavior is defined as voluntary behavior to help and benefit another (Padilla-Walker & Christensen, in press). Most research looking at adolescent's prosocial behavior has taken a dispositional approach, meaning adolescents help people because of their personal traits such as empathy (Krevans & Gibbs, 1996), and values (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003). In addition, the majority of research focuses on prosocial behavior toward strangers. There is also research showing that adolescents are more frequently prosocial toward friends and family than toward strangers (Padilla-Walker & Christensen, in press). Thus, recent studies have turned their attention to a relational approach of prosocial development. This approach states that adolescents are prosocial toward others with whom they have established relationships in an attempt to maintain those relationships (Eberly & Montemayor, 1999). Therefore, the current study will examine both the dispositional and relational approaches to prosocial development.

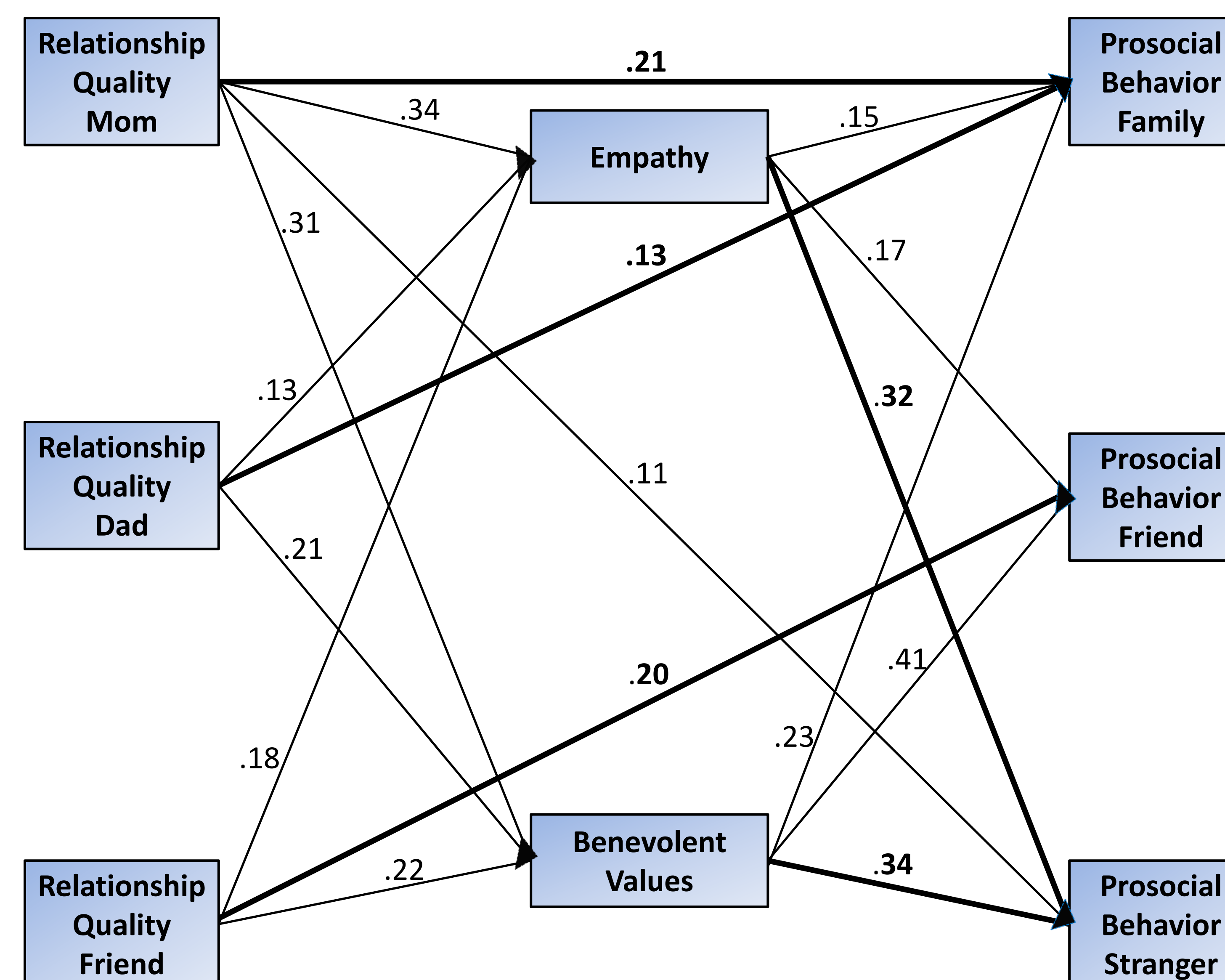
Based on existing research, we hypothesize that:

- 1) Dispositional traits will be a stronger predictor of prosocial behavior towards strangers than towards friends and family.
- 2) After controlling for dispositional traits, the relationship quality with mom and dad will still be directly related to prosocial behavior towards family.
- 3) After controlling for dispositional traits, the relationship quality with friends will still be directly related to prosocial behavior towards friends.

Methods

The sample for this study consisted of 465 families from wave three of the Flourishing Families Project, which is a longitudinal study of family life. The data were collected in Seattle during 2009. This study's sample included adolescents between the ages of 12-15 and their parents. Participants responded to detailed questionnaires with items measuring constructs such as relationship quality, empathy, benevolent values, and prosocial behavior.

Significant Pathways of Adolescent Prosocial Behavior



Note. Covariances are not shown in the figure. All paths significant at $p < .05$.

Results

The current path model was run with structure equation modeling (SEM) using Analysis of Moments Structure (AMOS) software (Arbuckle, 2007). The proposed model fit the data well, $X^2(4) = 23.771, p < .001$; CFI = .987, RMSEA = .086. (See Table 1 and Figure 1). Significant path coefficients suggested that relationship quality with mother, father, and best friend were directly related to adolescents' empathy (mother .34, father .13, best friend .18) and benevolent values (mother .31, father .21, and best friend .22). In turn adolescents' empathy and benevolent values were related to prosocial behavior toward all three targets, but were more strongly related to prosocial behavior towards strangers.

Furthermore, even after controlling for dispositional traits, relationship quality with the mother and the father were still significant direct predictors of the adolescent's prosocial behavior towards family (mother .21, father .13), and relationship quality with the best friend was a significant direct predictor of prosocial behavior towards the friend (.2).

Discussion

Results were generally consistent with the stated hypotheses. As evidenced in a relational approach to prosocial development (Eberly & Montemayor, 1999), when individuals have relationships with others they are more likely to be prosocial towards them, even after controlling for dispositional traits. Given that empathy and benevolent values were the strongest predictors of prosocial behaviors toward strangers, it is important for parents to encourage these dispositional characteristics with their children and to recognize that a quality parental relationship will not ensure prosocial behavior toward strangers. Also, given that relationship quality was related to prosocial behavior toward family and friends, it is important for parents and educators to foster quality relationships in order to encourage prosocial interactions toward friends and family. Lastly, because friend relationships, and not parental relationships, significantly predicted prosocial behavior toward friends, parents should facilitate quality friend relationships and promote empathy and benevolent values resulting in prosocial acts toward friends.

We may think that nice/kind people are prosocial toward everyone, but we learn from this study that being prosocial is dependent upon the target, and that there are differential predictors of prosocial behavior toward different individuals.

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