



From what is to what might be in moral development research

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Presentation to the conference, *Moral Development: Children's Values,
Moral Emotions and Behaviors*, July 2018, Jerusalem.

From what is to what might be in moral development research ...

- increasing breadth in how “moral development” is conceptualized and studied
- growing attention to the biological foundations of moral affect and behavior
- a much-needed focus on early development
- renewed attention to the unique influences of peer experiences on moral agency
- new portrayals of the role of emotion
- the need for a new life-span theory of moral development?

What is moral development?

What are we seeking to explain?

- compliance, cooperation, and the internalization of authority-based expectations (conscience)
- the construction of moral understanding and its impact on behavior
- distributive justice in peer contexts (e.g., equality, equity, need), especially in relation to ingroup-outgroup distinctions
- instrumental helping, sharing, comforting: prosocial behavior
- values (moral, conventional, personal) and their behavioral influence

What are the common, and distinct, developmental foundations for these diverse forms of moral development?

Do we expect them to share common variance?

What is missing?

The biology of moral development

- heritability of differences in prosociality
- mirror neurons
- oxytocinergic and related neurohormonal systems most often implicated in social bonding
- VMPFC and other prefrontal systems involved in decisionmaking and executive functions
- amygdala and other emotion-related systems
- dopaminergic and other systems related to anticipated reward
- serotonin and harm aversion

How can researchers model the *neural networks* that are involved in different forms of empathy, different forms of prosocial behavior, and other forms of moral conduct? How will this change our thinking about biological influences?

How can researchers characterize the effects of individual experience on the development and functioning of these networks?

Importance of early experience

Babies help unlock the origins of morality

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The Moral Life of Babies

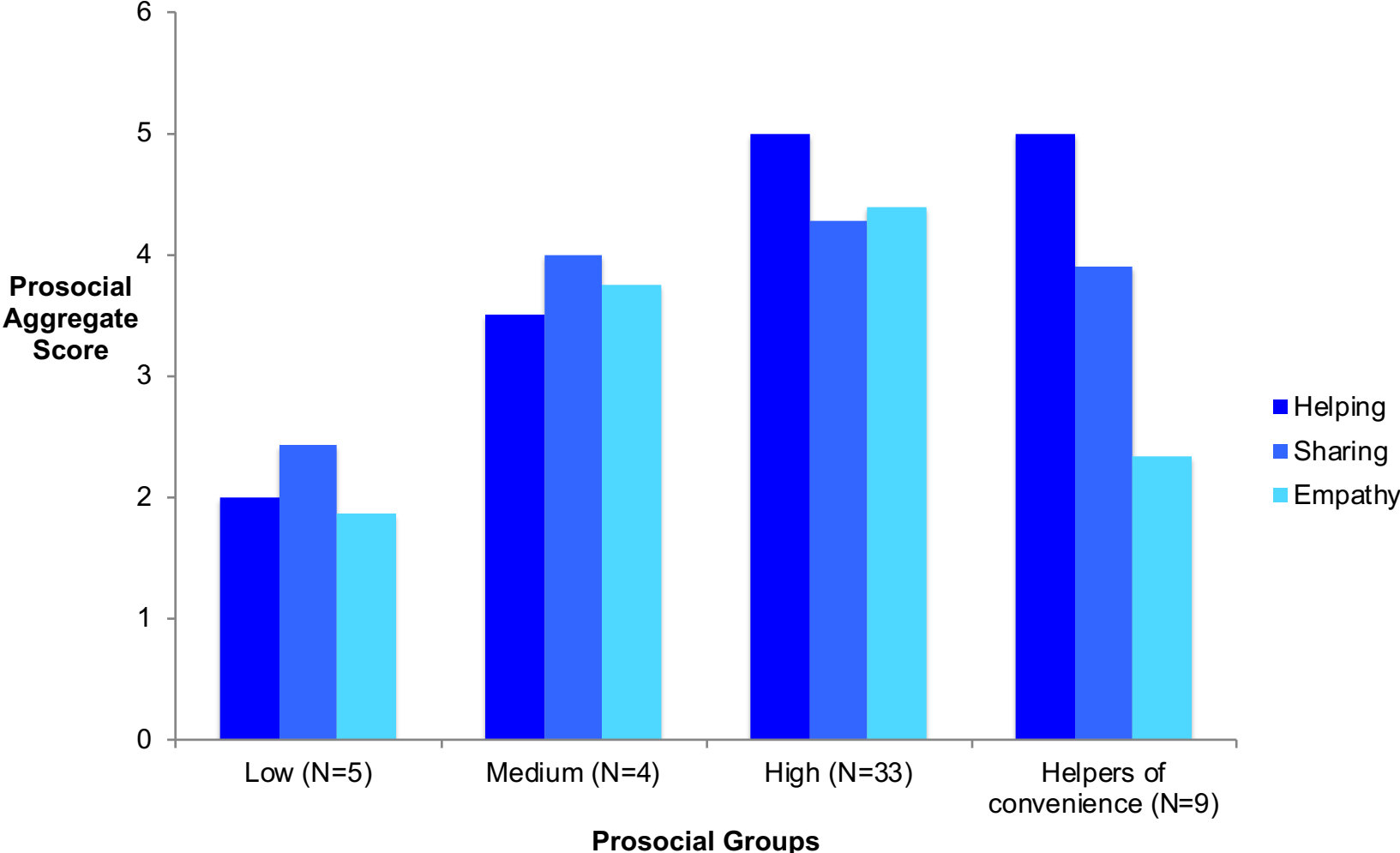


Importance of early experience

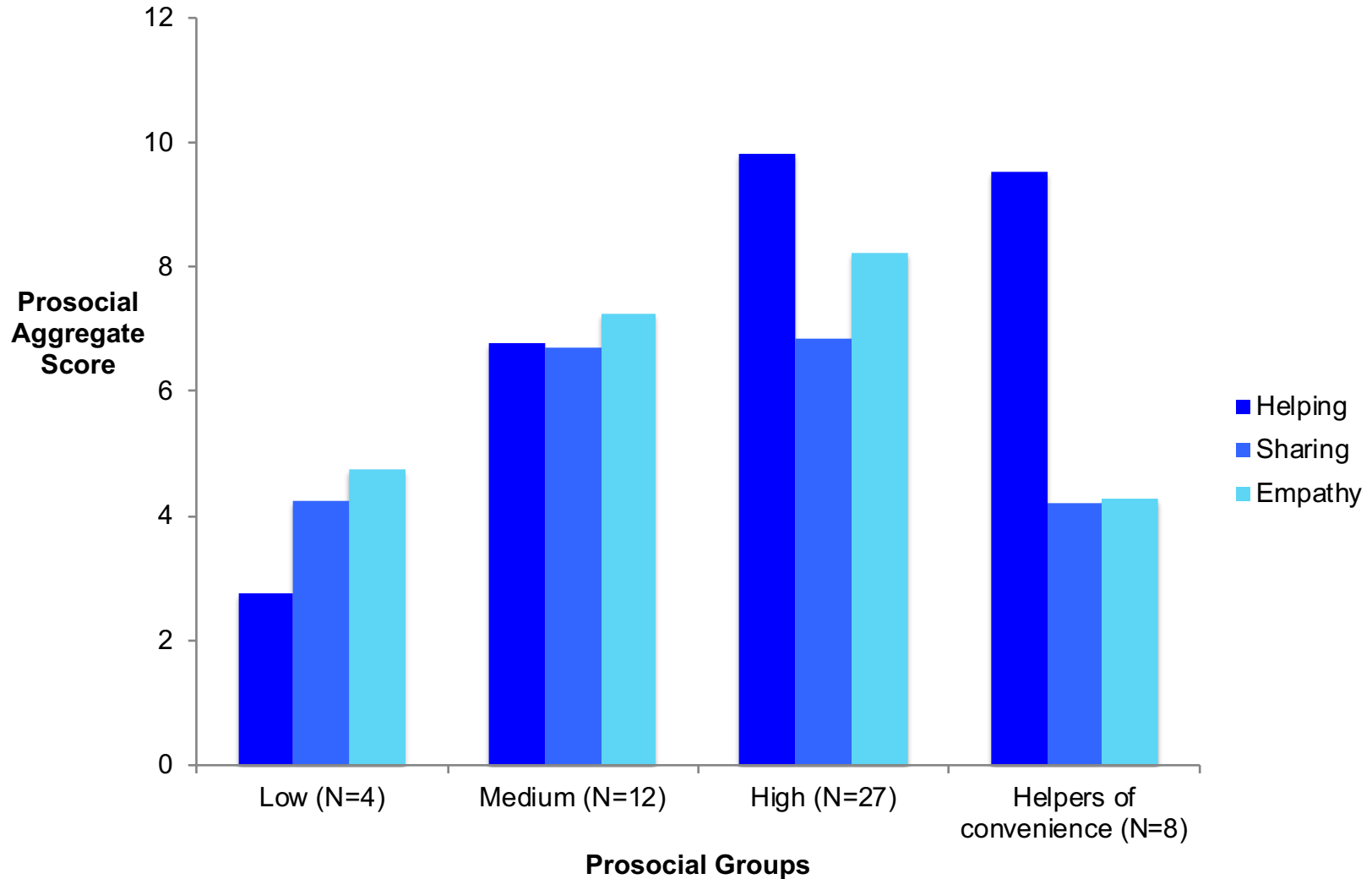
- early relationships, and social learning
 - “This immaturity of human infants results in bringing forth a social environment in which infants develop because they require adults to look after them. This immaturity results in a social cradle in which infants develop.”
(*A relational systems approach to moral development*, Carpenter et al., 2013)
 - Developing foundations for cooperative capacity may derive from early experiences of reciprocity, turn-taking, responsiveness, and a sensitivity to facilitating social relations.
- early capacity for empathy and emotional resonance
- social scaffolding of cooperation, shared participation, and social assistance
- early origins of differences in morally-relevant motivation

What are the normative early social experiences relevant to the developmental constituents of moral appraisals and behavior?

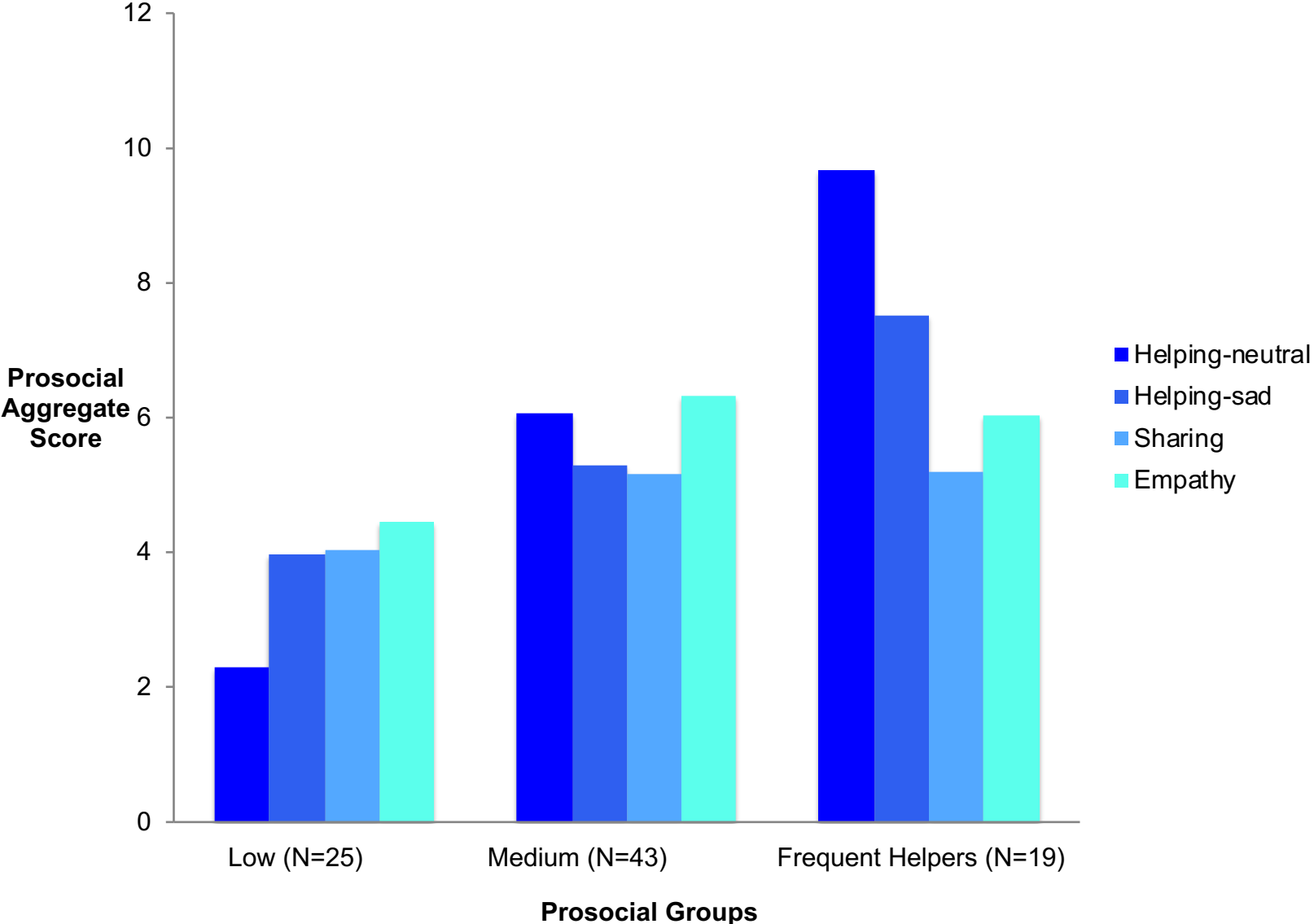
Do preschoolers show reliable differences in prosocial responding at age 4½ ?



Prosocial groups at 6 years of age



Are there reliable individual differences in prosocial responding by toddlers?



How consistent are prosocial groups at 4½ and 6?

T1 Groups	T2 Groups				Frequent Helpers	Total
	High	Moderate	Low			
High	19	8	2		4	33
Moderate	1	2	0		1	4
Low	2	0	2		1	5
Frequent helpers	5	2	0		2	9
Total	27	12	4		8	51

Schachner, A. C. W., Newton, E. K., Thompson, R. A., & Goodman-Wilson, M. (2018). Becoming prosocial: The reliability of individual differences in early prosocial behavior. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 43*, 42-51.

Peer experiences and moral agency

- early and growing sensitivity to ingroup-outgroup differentiation and a bias favoring ingroup and avoiding outgroup members.
- distributive justice: resources distributed equally, equitably, according to need, power, or social responsibility: What is fair?
- developing normative judgments for sharing
- group vs. individual orientation among peers
- social justice

The moral world is both authority-oriented and “a society of equals.” Do peer experiences prepare children for the latter (and parent-child relationships for the former), or is the developmental construction of morality more complex?

New portrayals of the role of emotion

(beyond shame and guilt)

- early sensitivity to others' emotions – empathy and emotional resonance – occur in the context of causal attributions for another's distress and understanding of intentionality and goals
- empathic distress and empathic *happiness* as motivators of prosocial behavior
- sharing in the anticipation of happiness that results
- developmental and individual differences in the identification of harm-related emotions in others (e.g., fear) and derivative moral judgments
- parent socialization influences: empathy and emotional regulation

Are emotional responses an early foundation
of moral self-awareness in young children?

What is missing?

How do we understand the development of *moral character* as it is related to:

- the development of the “moral self” in early childhood
- the commitment to self-chosen moral values in later childhood and adolescence
- the emergence of moral identity in adolescence
- process of family socialization by which moral schemas become readily accessible in everyday experience
- adult life commitments



Is attachment theory
a moral development theory?



no

but consider ...

- securely-attached children show greater emotion understanding and empathy
- securely-attached children are more advanced in conscience development
- securely-attached children show greater social competence with peers, including better social problem-solving and conflict avoidance
- securely-attached children are higher in prosocial motivation

in addition ...

- early sensitive, responsive care predicts young children's prosocial behavior toward peers and strangers and empathy toward mother or a stranger
- mothers of securely-attached children talk about others' emotions in a richer, more descriptively elaborative manner, and more accurately perceive and interpret their child's emotions
- a "mutually responsive orientation" between mothers and young children is associated with greater conscience development and children's greater distress at wrongdoing
- secure attachment enhances the influence of other parenting practices (such as noncoercive discipline) that contribute to an emergent moral sense



What would we ask of a 21st-century life-span moral development theory?

- a combination of constructivist and a neo-Vygotskian orientations
- recognition of the unique developmental achievements characteristic of each period of moral growth
- appreciation of the importance of *both* heteronomous influences on moral development *and* constituted experiences of moral agency
- a central role for moral affect as a catalyst for moral motivation and moral responsibility, and as a prompt for moral self-awareness
- a biopsychosocial perspective that recognizes the significance of neurobiological influences on the development of social bonding, self-regulation, and other constituents of moral behavior and thinking
- recognition of the importance of self-system processes for the development of moral motivation and moral character.

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