

Baby altruists?

Exploring the Early Origins of Prosocial Motivation



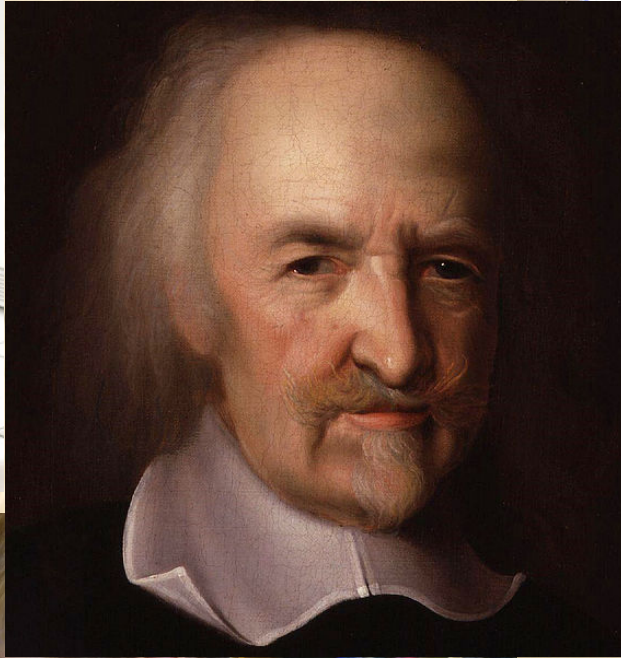
Ross A. Thompson
University of California, Davis



Presented at the Roots of Empathy Research Symposium, Toronto, May 12, 2015

Prosocial behavior

- Actions taken to benefit others, not self
- Volitional rather than obligatory
- General term for different behaviors –such as helping, sharing, empathic responding – that may have different motivational and developmental origins
- Target and cost of assistance are important
- We can see differences in prosocial motivation very early



Babies help unlock the origins of morality

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The Moral Life of Babies



The
British
Psychological
Society

British Journal of Psychology (2009), 100, 455–471
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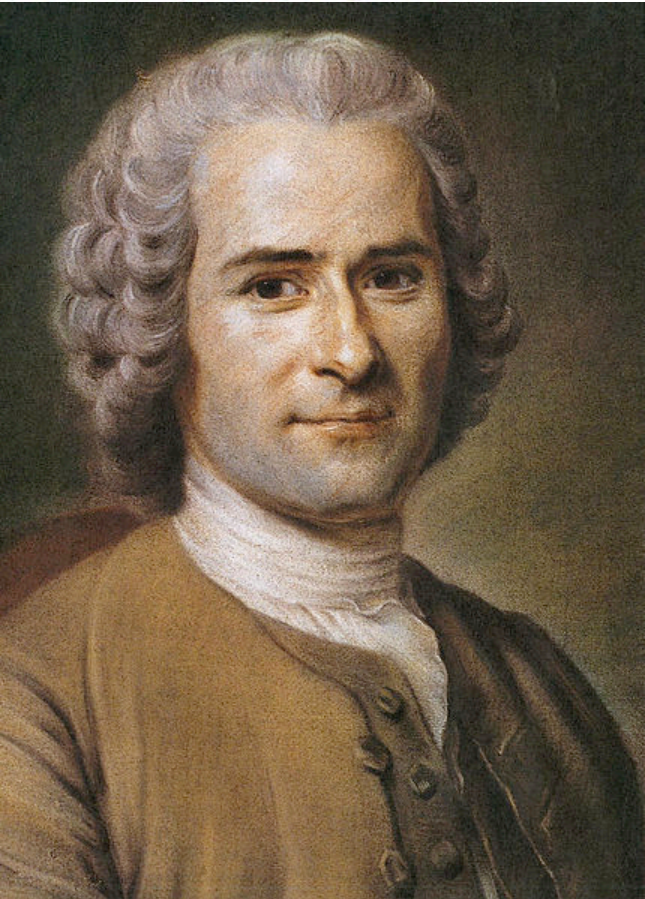
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The roots of human altruism

Felix Warneken* and Michael Tomasello

Department of Developmental and Comparative Psychology, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology

Human infants as young as 18 months, for example, by helping adults. They do this irre-
spective of whether the adults reciprocate and
undermine the theory of reciprocal altruism.
adults. Humans' need for help without concrete
reciprocity is not purely altruistic, and as a
wider range of social interactions, others become im-



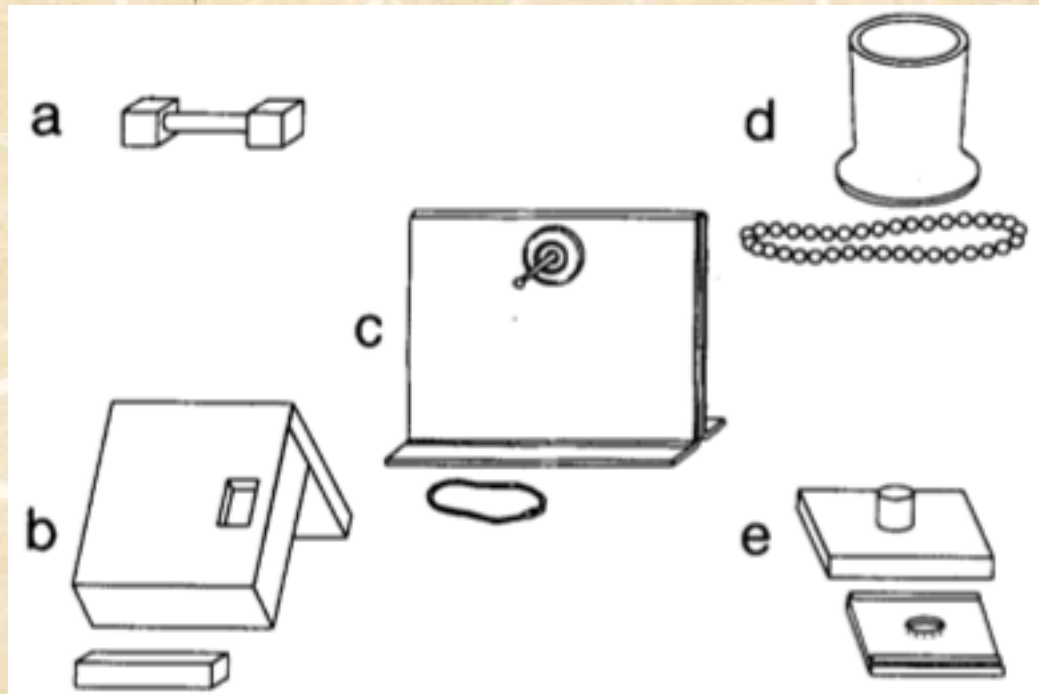
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A developmental perspective

- early-emerging social-cognitive understanding provides the basis for a primitive premoral sensibility that underlies social evaluations and motivates prosocial behavior and socially constructive actions
- these "moral primitives" develop in the context of parent-child interaction, particularly the sensitivity and warmth of care
- conversational discourse linking the child's intuitive moral sensibility to explicit social cognitive understanding is also important to the growth of sociomoral motivation

developing an early premoral awareness ...

- understanding of another's intentions and goals



developing an early premoral awareness ...

- understanding of another's intentions and goals



shared intentionality: intersubjective participation in activity involving shared mental states (pointing, collaborative problem-solving, cooperative social play)



helping



responses to helpers and hinderers

Fairness judgments of helpers and hinderers are especially clear early in the preschool years:



(3 1/2-year-olds; Baumard, Mascaro, & Chevallie, 2012)

developing an early premoral awareness ...

- understanding of another's intentions and goals
- emotion understanding
 - Emotions are an important entrée into the psychological experience of another person



developing an early premoral awareness ...

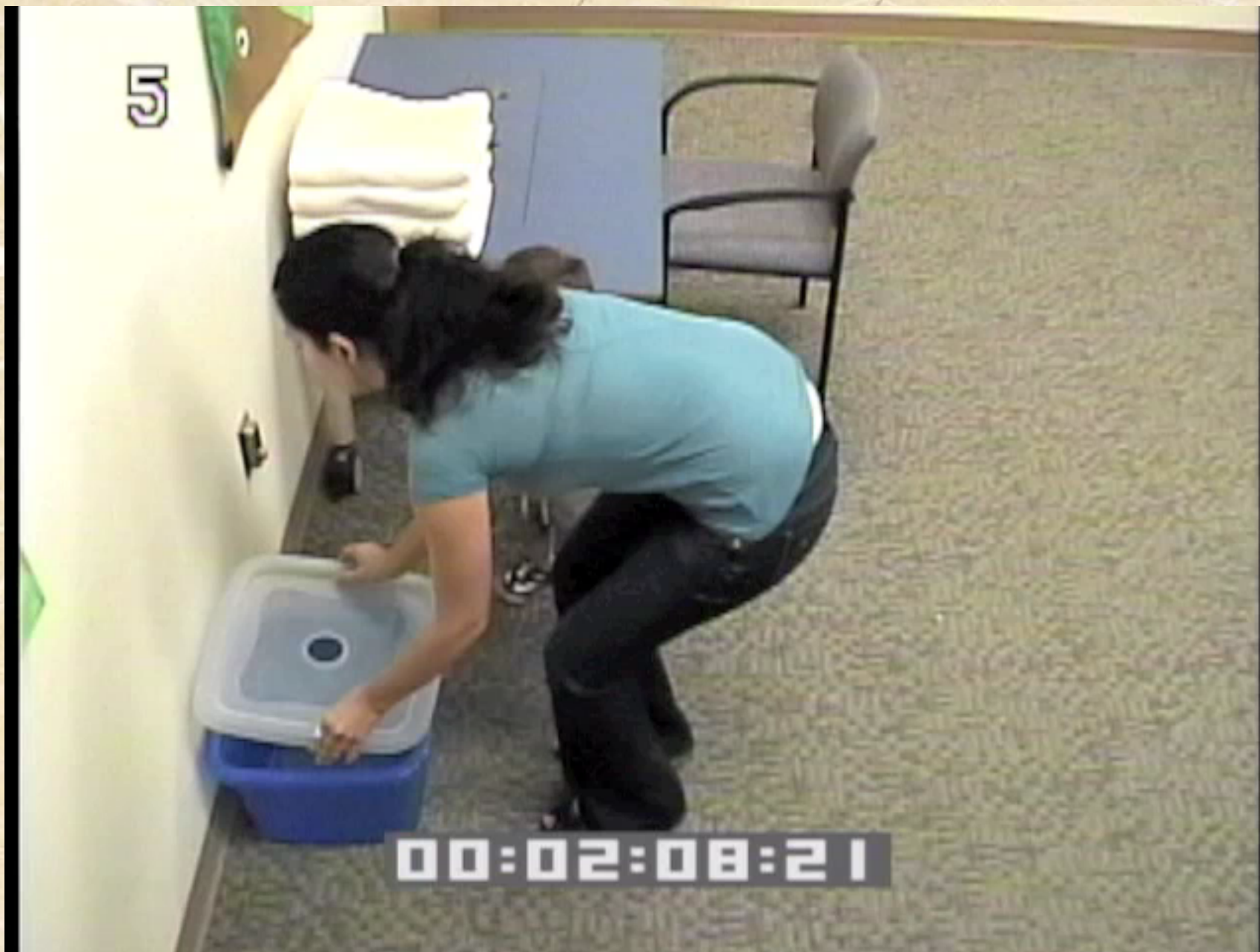
- understanding of another's intentions and goals
- emotion understanding
 - Emotions are an important entrée into the psychological experience of another person
 - There is evidence for early resonant or empathic responding to the sight or sound of another's emotions
 - **But** others' negative emotions are conceptually and motivationally complex events for young children
 - Adult guidance is necessary to help children understand others' emotional expressions and enlisting this understanding into constructive social responding

developing an early premoral awareness ...

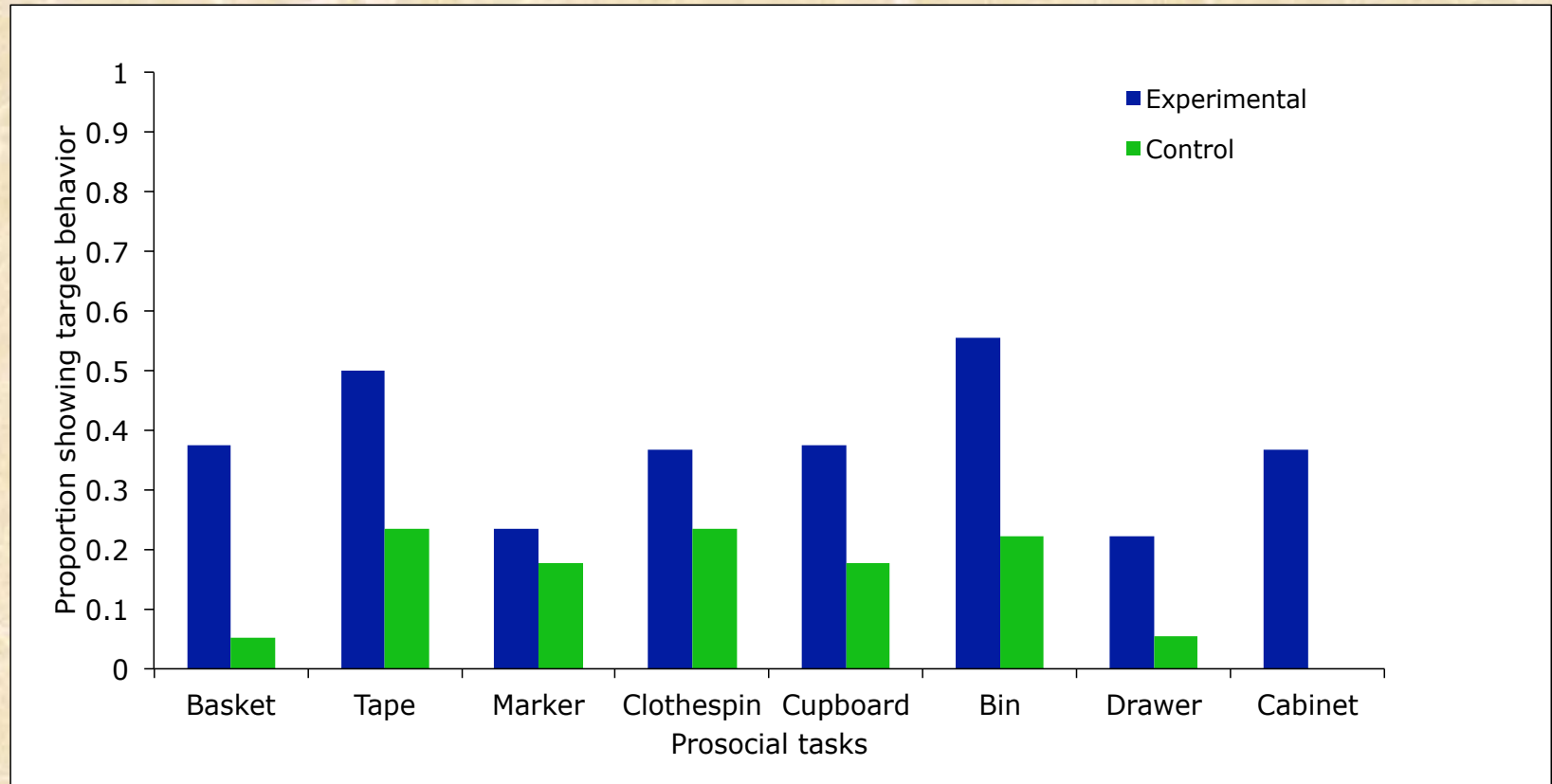
- understanding of another's intentions and goals
- emotion understanding
- self-regulation
 - developing executive functions may be important to children's ability to respond helpfully to another person, especially in a context of competing interests
 - temperamental effortful control may also be important
 - **But** the growth of self-regulation is slow and has an extended developmental course

5

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Toddler helping in experimental and control conditions



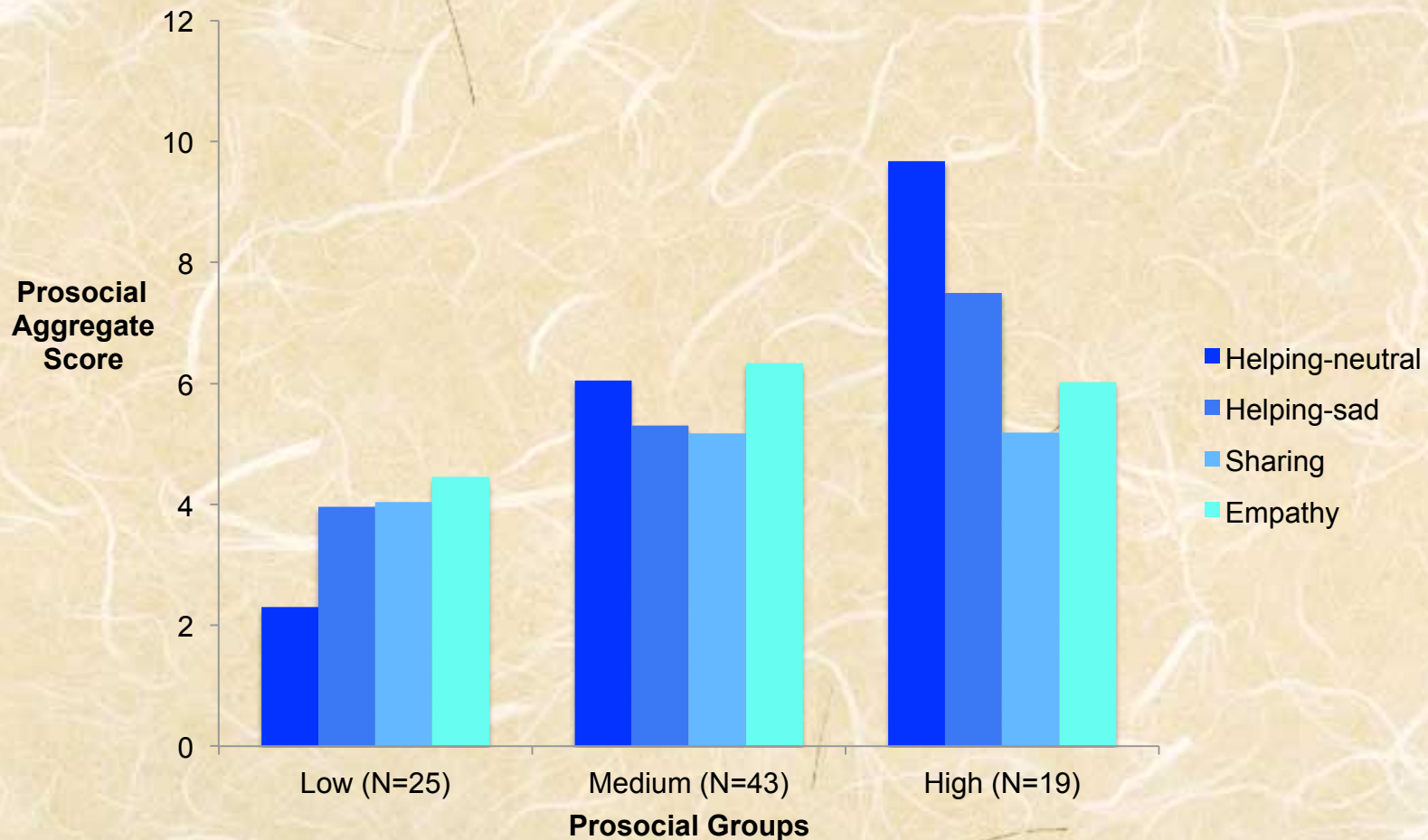
Toddlers assisted significantly more in experimental than control conditions, $F(1,35) = 14.98, p < .001$

Prosocial measures ...

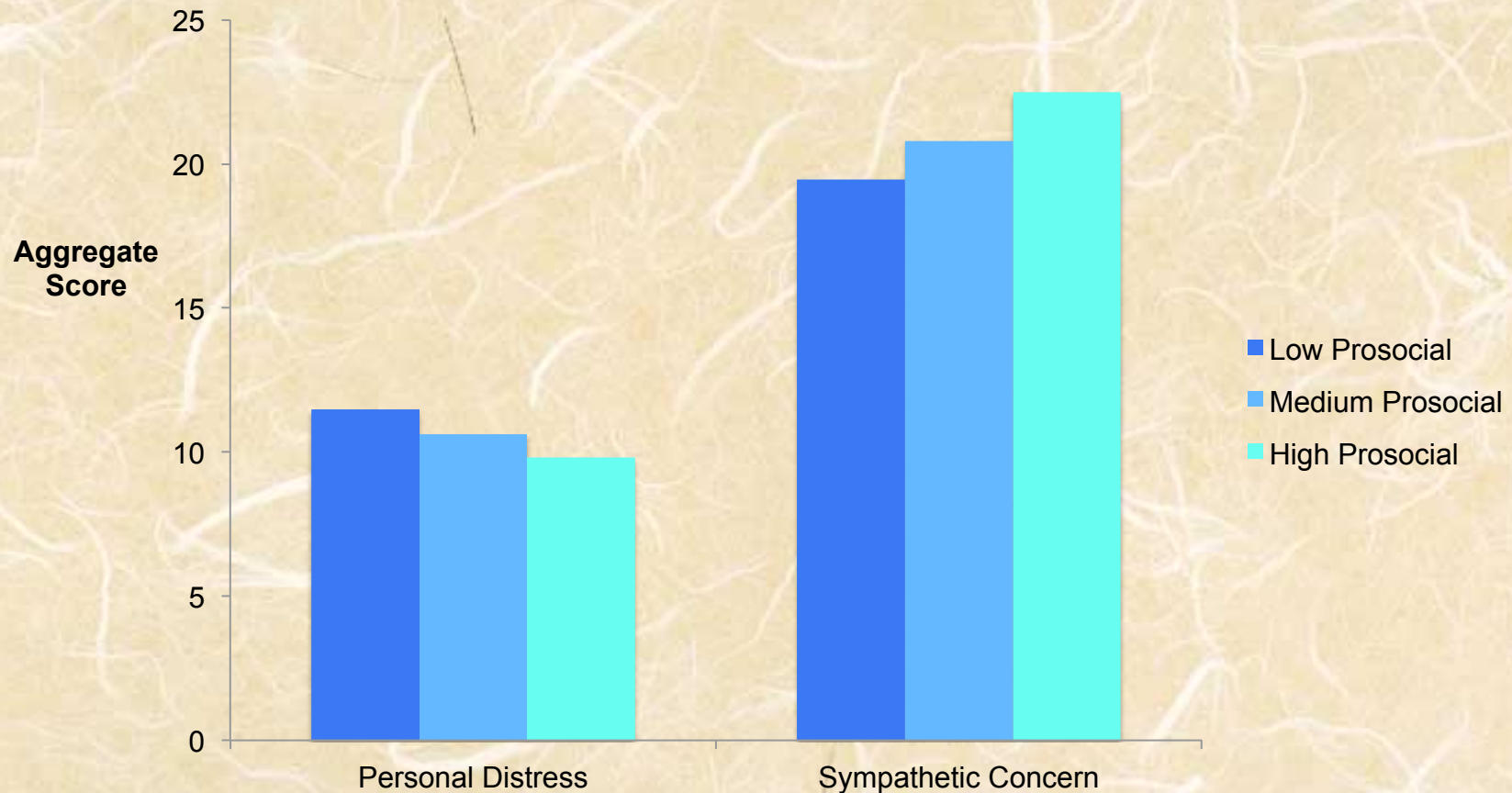
- Helping (neutral experimenter)
- Helping (sad experimenter)
- Sharing
- Empathy



Are there reliable individual differences in prosocial responding by toddlers?

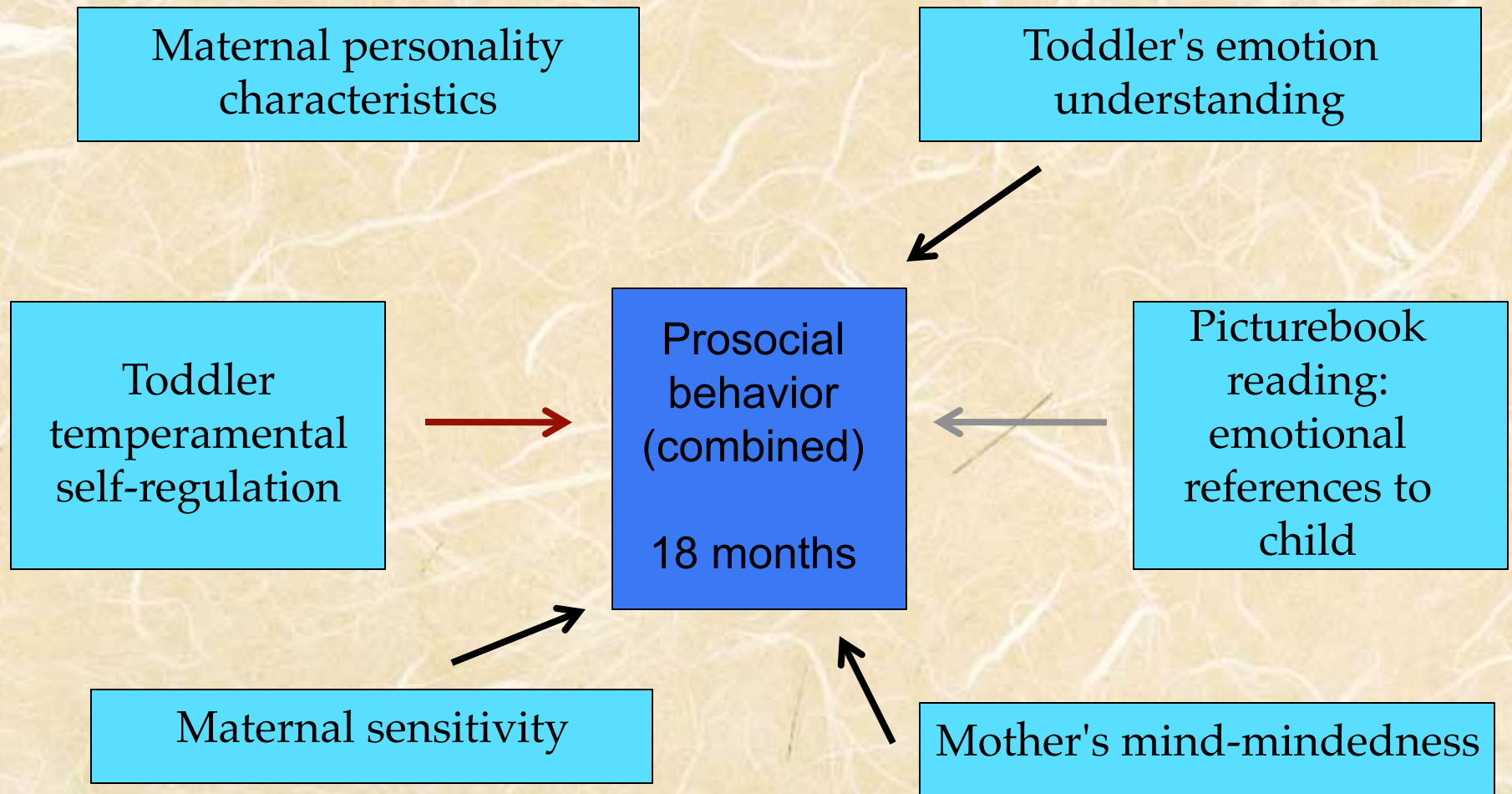


How is prosocial behavior associated with children's sympathetic concern and personal distress?



for Personal Distress: $F(2,80) = 4.78, p < .05$ for Sympathetic Concern: $F(2,75) = 8.08, p < .001$

What characteristics of children, mothers, and their relationship are associated with differences in prosocial behavior?



Interim conclusions ...

- Individual differences in early prosocial behavior are consistent across helping, sharing, and empathy tasks, suggesting that a core disposition to assist others is developing during this period
- Differences in prosocial behavior across tasks are associated with empathic concern but are negatively associated with personal distress, consistent with theoretical expectations about prosocial motivation
- Differences in prosocial behavior across tasks are associated with maternal sensitivity and the mother's more positive, psychologically-oriented approach to her child, pointing to the importance of the child's experience of care. Child's emotion understanding is also important.
- The influence of child temperament – particularly of effortful control – remains unclear in prosocial motivation

causes

**linking
events**

outcomes

**requests for
information**

**total emotion
references**

definitions

— $p < .05$

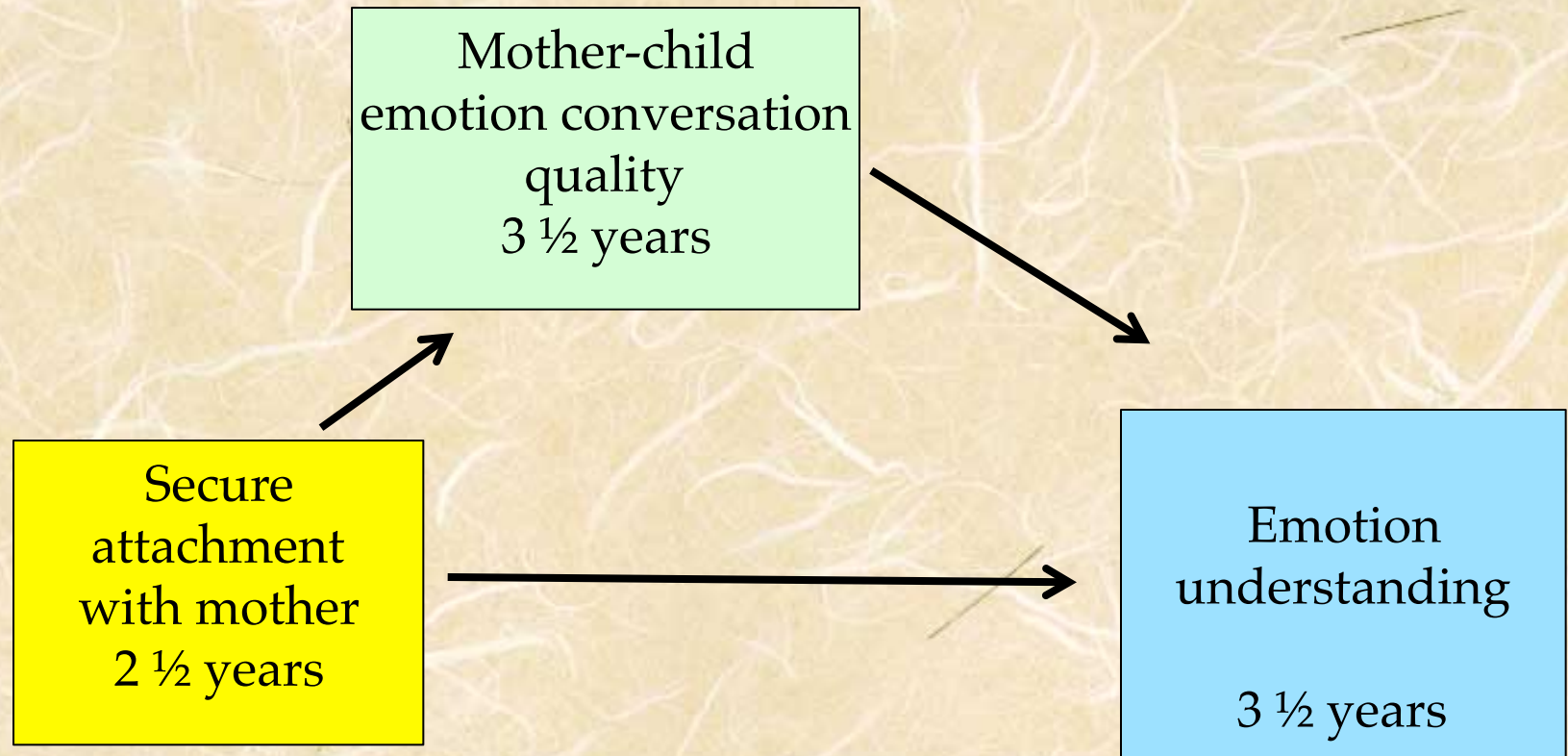
— $p < .01$

— $p < .005$

— $p < .001$



- *You didn't like that he was bouncing your guy off the game, and that made you really mad.*
- *It's hard when you feel so angry. You're going "AAAH, she's bouncing my guy off there!" Right?*
- *How did the other kids feel when you turned off the game?*
- *You know, after you stopped the game, the other guys said, "Joey wasn't really doing so bad." You thought you were losing, but you weren't.*



From Raikes, H. A., & Thompson, R. A. (2006). Family emotional climate, attachment security, and young children's emotion understanding in a high-risk sample. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 24(1), 89-104

Raikes, H. A., & Thompson, R. A. (2008). Conversations about emotion in high-risk dyads. *Attachment & Human Development*, 10(4), 359-377.

2 ½ years: Mother-child conversation elements during conflict episodes in the lab

Talking about rules

Talking about the consequences of actions

Talking about people's emotions

Moral evaluative statements ("good girl!")

Compromising or bargaining

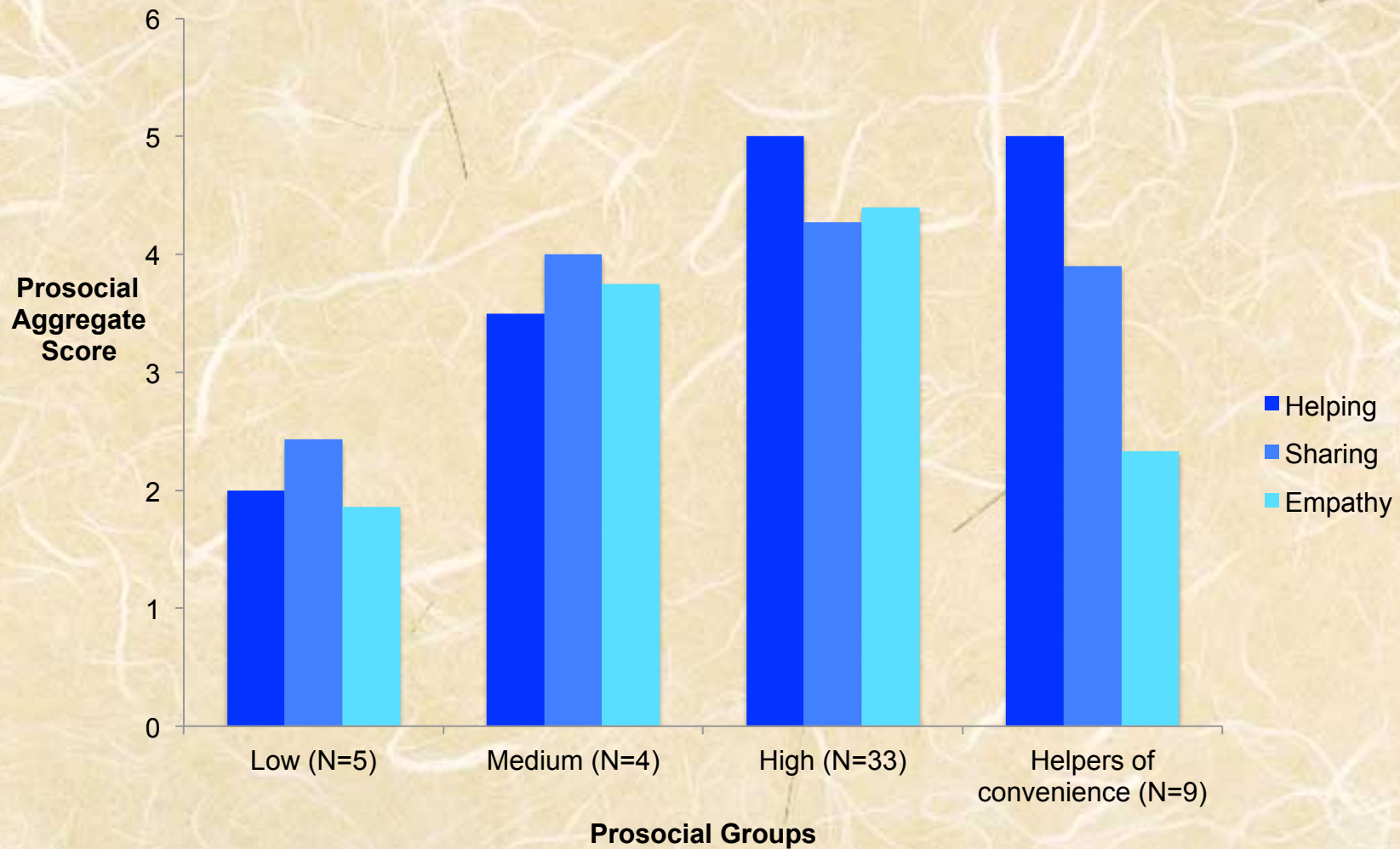
Justification and reasoning /
Low use of threats, teasing or insistence



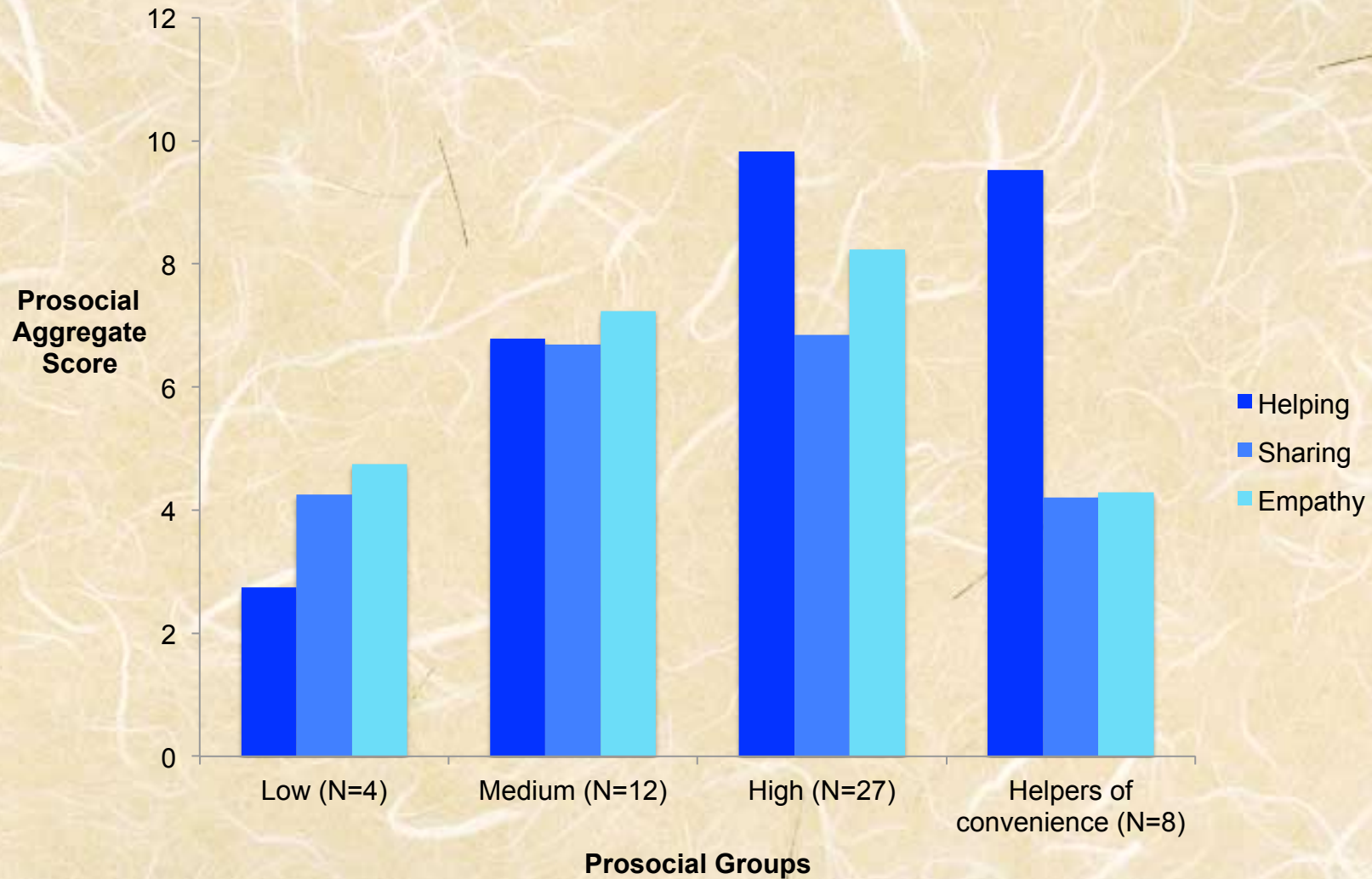
Conscience
Development
age 3



Do preschoolers show reliable differences in prosocial responding at age 4 ½ ?

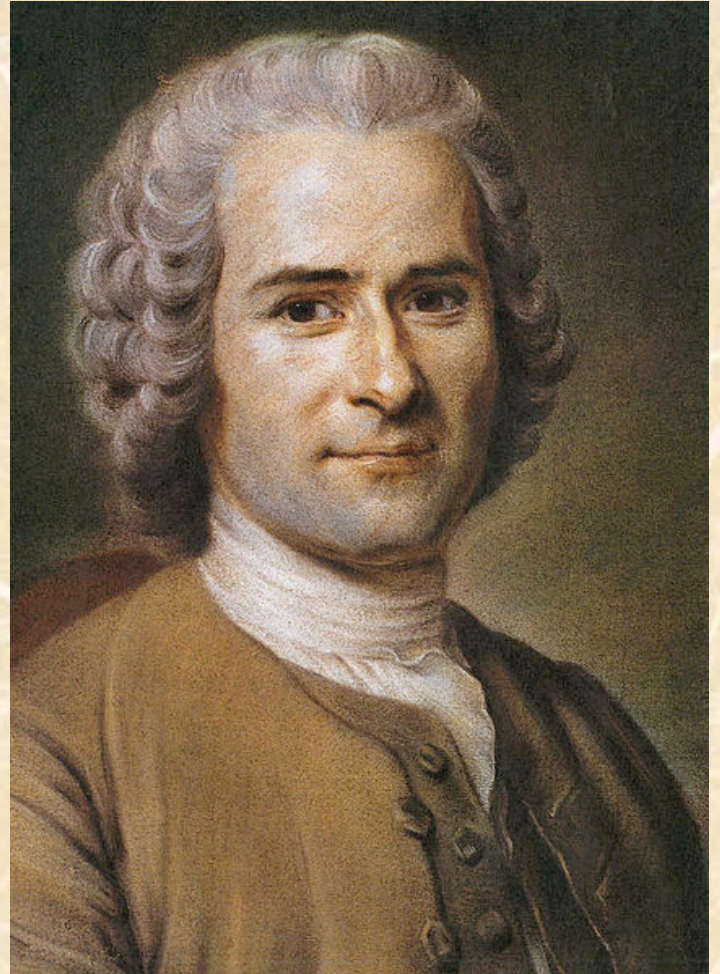
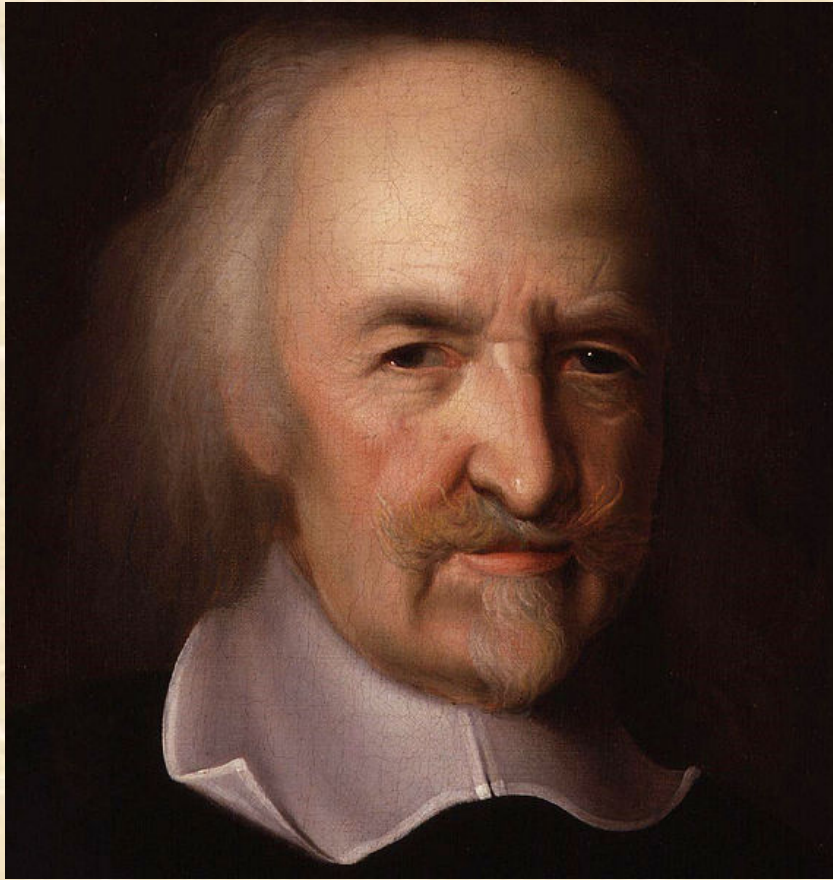


Prosocial groups at 6 years of age



Mother-child conversation about helping and not helping

- References to **emotions, needs, and desires** – of the (potential) help recipient or the child -- were frequent for each conversation type, along with positive or negative **moral evaluative** statements
- Conversations about **not helping** at age 4 ½ were shorter but were more strongly associated with prosocial behavior at age 6
- In the conversations about not helping, mothers' use of **positive moral evaluatives** (“That was nice to do”) and their references to **negative moral emotions** (e.g., "sorry") were significant predictors of prosocial behavior at age 6
- **Shared positive affect** between mothers and children at age 4 ½ was also a significant predictor of prosocial behavior at age 6
- Maternal **rule-based justifications** were never associated with children's prosocial behavior at any age



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