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Introduction

Maternal mind-mindedness (MM)

Mothers' tendency to use appropriate mental state language to describe their child's internal states¹

Associated with:

- child cooperation²
- understanding of discrepant desires³

Discrepant desires

Understanding that two persons may have different desires about the same object

- Early developing aspect of Theory of Mind
- Appears in toddlerhood⁴
- Children's ToM predicts later prosocial behaviors⁵

Link to prosocial behaviors

- Both MM and ToM are associated with later prosocial behaviors
- Understanding desires, intentions, or feelings of others is needed to act in a prosocial way

Higher MM → Facilitates ToM development → Promotes prosocial tendencies

Aim of research

- Investigate the potential mediating role of ToM between MM and children's prosocial behaviors

Method

Participants

73 children (30 boys) and their parents participated in three assessments at the ages of

- 12 months (T1; $M = 12.58$)
- 2 years (T2; $M = 25.82$)
- and 7 years (T3; $M = 85.23$)

Measures

Maternal mind-mindedness (T1)

- 10-minute free-play mother-infant interaction
- Frequency of appropriate mind-related comments addressed to the child⁶

Theory of mind (T2)

- Discrepant desires task⁴
- Does the child give the experimenter his/her own preferred book or the experimenter's preferred book?

Prosocial behaviors (T3)

- Mother and father reports
- 10-item Social Competence subscale of the Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation⁷
- Assesses children's prosocial tendencies, social integration, and cooperation

Statistical analyses

- A simple mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro in SPSS⁸

Results

- Higher MM in infancy → better understanding of others' desires (*a*)
- Higher ToM at age 2 → more prosocial behaviors at school age (*b*)
- Significant mediation:
 - Indirect effect (*ab*) has a bias-corrected bootstrapped 95% confidence interval above zero (0.002 to 0.173)
- No remaining direct effect of maternal MM on children's prosocial behaviors (*c'*)

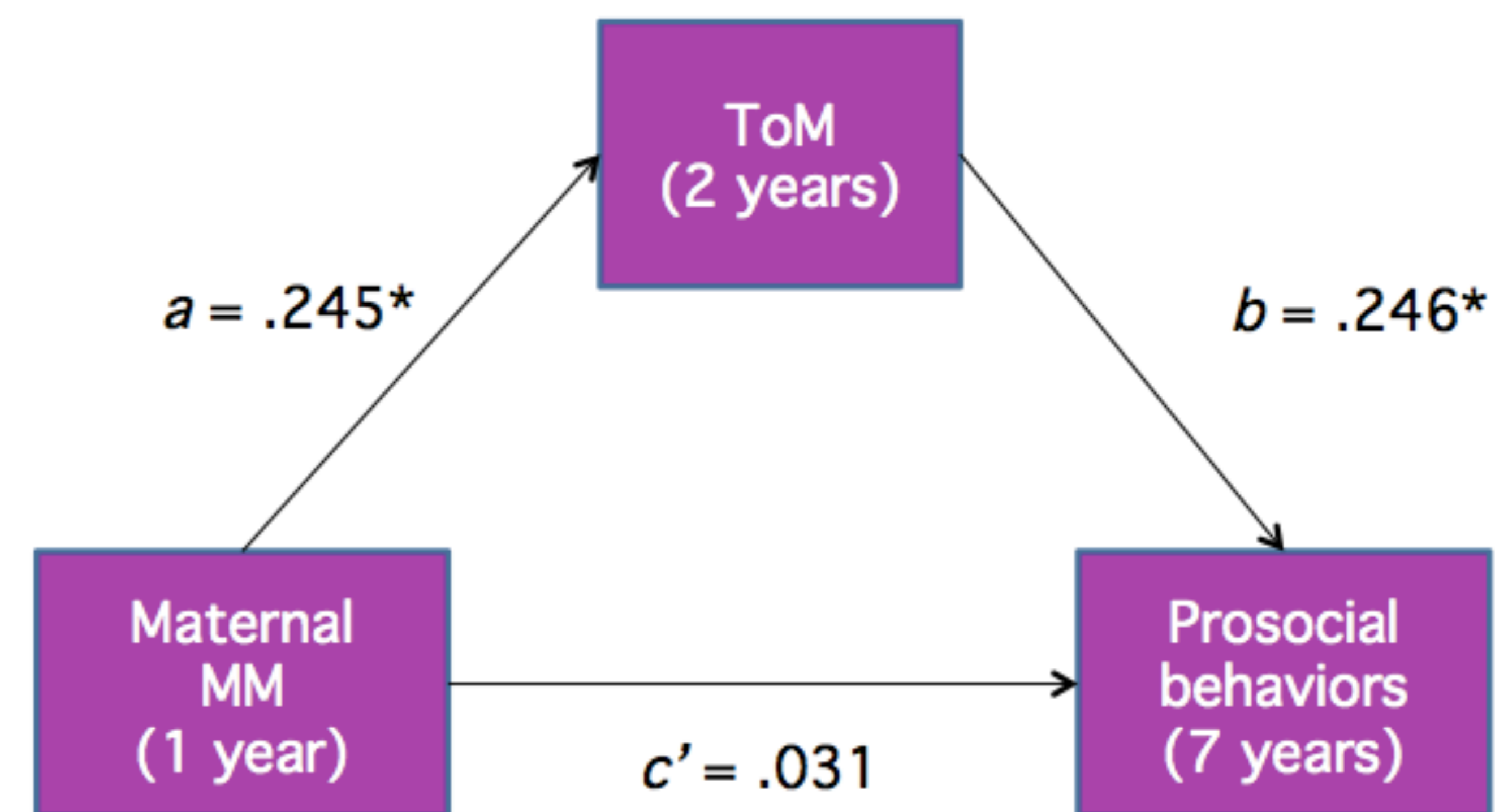


Figure 1. Mediation of the link between maternal mind-mindedness and children's prosocial behavior, through children's understanding of discrepant desires. * $p < .05$.

Discussion

- Relation between maternal MM and children's prosocial behaviors → fully mediated by children's intermediate ToM
- Parental mental state talk in infancy helps children develop their ToM in toddlerhood
- Better understanding of others' perspectives → important cognitive tool to act in a prosocial way

Significance

- Encourage and teach parents to use mental-state talk with their child may enhance child prosocial behaviors

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