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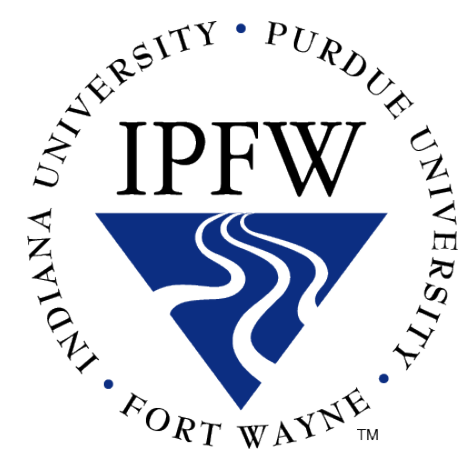


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Parental Depressive Symptoms Predict More Punitive Reactions

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Introduction

The manner in which parents react to their children's display of negative emotions (e.g., sadness, fear, distress and anxiety) may have important implications for their children's social and emotional functioning (e.g., Dunsmore & Halberstedt, 1997). Sensitive responding, for example, has been associated with a broad range of positive developmental outcomes, including emotional perspective-taking, more friendships and reduced conflict within friendships (Eisenberg, et al., 1999; Leerkes, et al., 2004)

However, while children's display of negative emotions elicits empathetic concern and sensitive responding in many adults (Leerkes, et al., 2004; Wiesenfeld, et al., 1984; Zeifman, 2003), others find the negative emotions to be highly aversive, anxiety arousing and personally distressing (Frodi & Lamb, 1980). The feelings of distress and anxiety in such individuals are typically not reactions associated with empathy for the distressed child, but rather more selfish reactions in response to the negative stimulation (Davis, 1983). These self-focused responses serve to motivate these individuals to reduce their own anxiety or distress by either withdrawing from the aversive stimulation or by responding harshly and insensitively to the crying or distressed child (Cassidy, 1994; Dix, 1991; Leerkes & Crockenberg, 2006; Martin, Clements, & Crnic, 2002).

Hypothesis: higher levels of parental depressive symptoms and anxiety would predict more personal distress and, in turn, more punitive reactions to children's negative emotions.

Methods

Participants:

Participants included 73 undergraduate students who were parents of children under the age of sixteen.

Procedures:

Participants completed an online survey including a demographic questionnaire and the following measures:

Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) consists of a 20-item self-report scale designed to measure depressive symptoms in the general population. (Radloff, 1977)

Methods

State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI): consists of 20 items that assess state anxiety (e.g., "I am tense; I feel calm.") and 20 items that assess trait anxiety (e.g., "I lack self-confidence; I am a steady person.") (Spielberger, et al., 1983)

Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI): consists of several scales designed to assess 'Personal Distress' (e.g., "Being in a tense emotional situation scares me"), 'Perspective-Taking' (e.g., "I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look like from their perspective"), and 'Empathic Concern' (e.g., "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me"). (Davis, 1983)

Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale (CCNES): consists of six subscales that measure parents' perceptions of their own reactivity to their young children's negative emotions in distressful situations. (Fabes, Eisenberg, & Bernzweig, 1990)

Results

As expected, depressive moods and anxiety were both positively associated with reports of more personal distress ($r=.33, p=.02$; $r=.36, p<.001$, respectively), and more negative reactions to children's emotions, including punitive responses ($r=.20, p=.10$; $r=.28, p=.003$; See Table 1). In addition, reports of personal distress predicted more punitive parenting in response to children's negative emotions ($r=.45, p<.001$). Mediation analyses revealed that personal distress served to mediate the relations between depression and punitive reactions ($R^2=.19, F(2,31)=3.54, p=.04, (95\% CI: [0.0001 to 0.0365])$), and state/trait anxiety and negative reactions ($R^2=.22, F(2, 74)=10.52 p<.001, (95\% CI: [0.0025 - 0.0138])$).

Table 1

	STAI	Personal Distress	Punitive Reactions	Distress Reactions	Emotion-Focused	Problem-Focused	Minimize Emotions
CES-D	.45***	.33*	.20+	.16	.17	.01	.26*
STAI	-----	.35***	.28**	.34***	-.19*	-.26**	.20*
Personal Distress	-----	-----	.45***	.44***	-.01	-.16	.38***

Note: + $p=.10$, * $p<.05$, ** $p<.005$, *** $p<.001$

Results

Figure 1

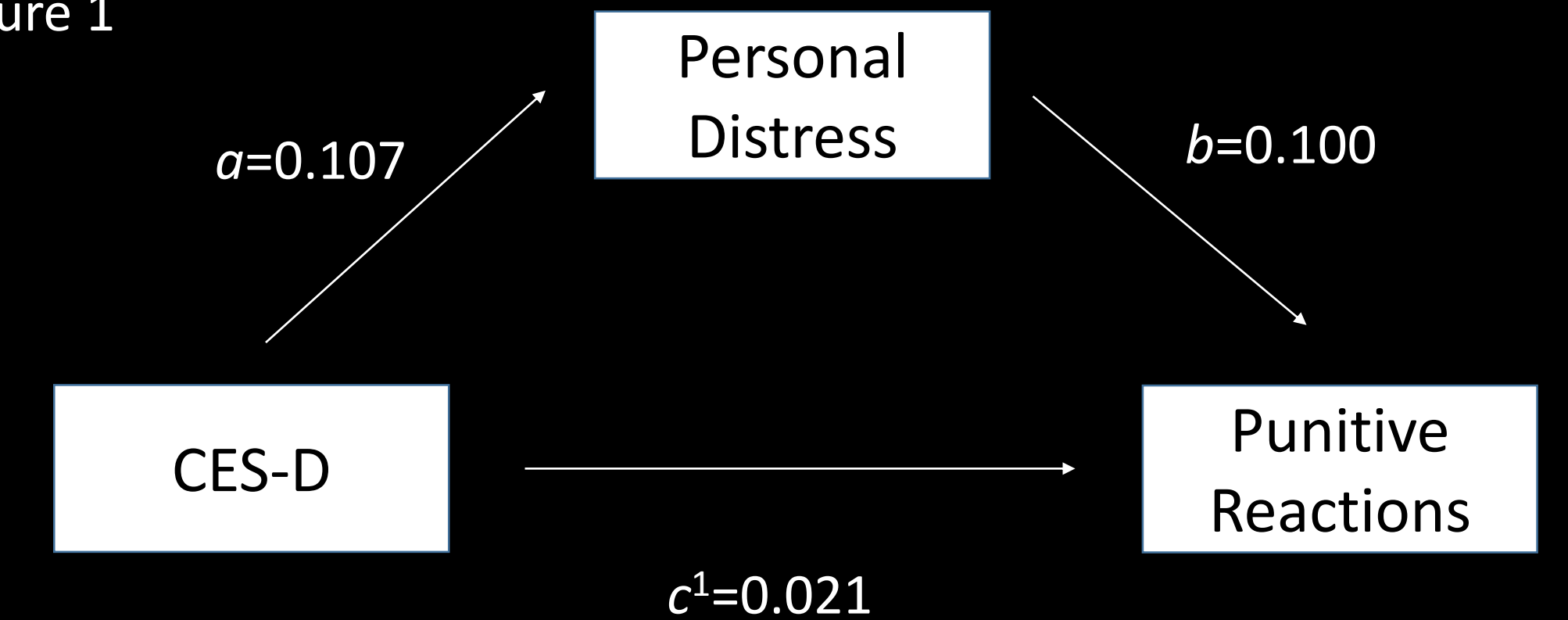
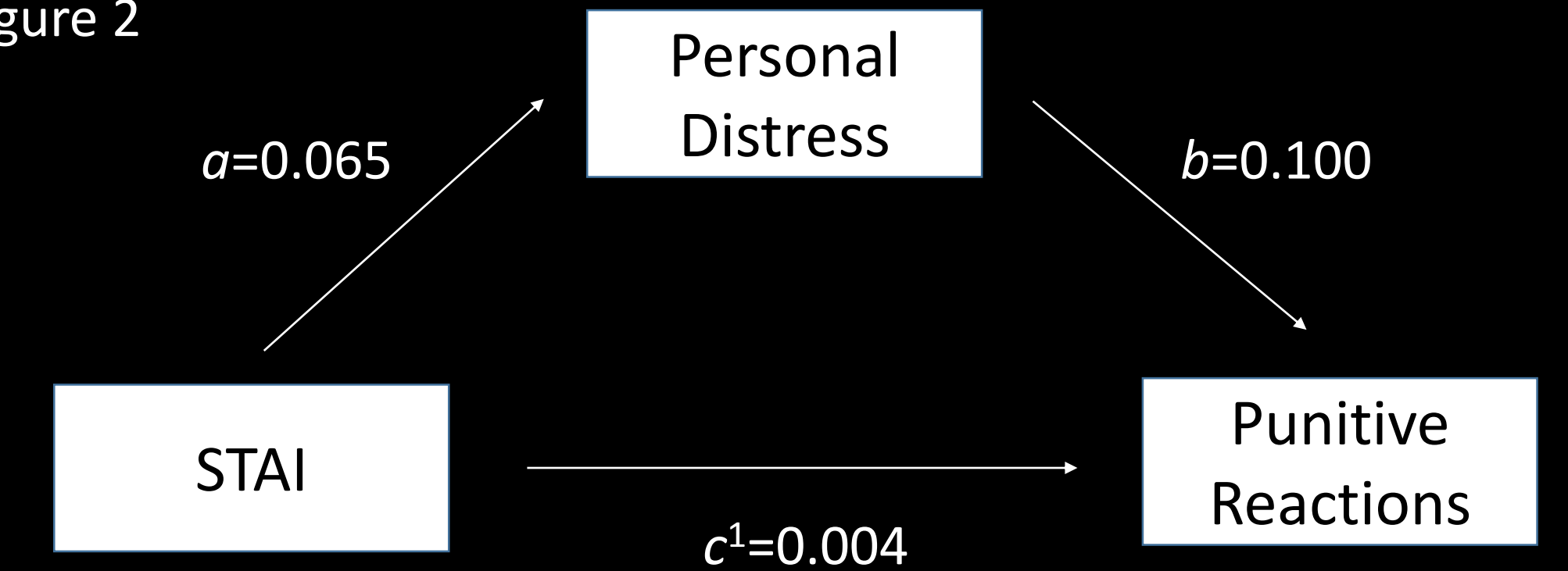


Figure 2



Conclusion

As expected, the relations between parents' negative emotions (e.g., depression and anxiety) and their tendency to use more punitive reactions towards their children received empirical support. Parents who reported more symptoms of depression used more punitive reactions towards their children, and this relationship was mediated by higher levels of personal distress. Similarly, parents who reported higher levels of anxiety also used more punitive reactions towards their children, and this relationship was also mediated by higher levels of personal distress. Consistent with previous research (Cassidy, 1994; Dix, 1991; Leerkes & Crockenberg, 2006; Martin, Clements, & Crnic, 2002), the current findings suggest that parents who experience higher levels of anxiety and depression look to reduce their negative emotions in a self-focused, punitive way when reacting to their distressed children. These findings have important implications for research on intervention techniques designed to improve depressed and anxious parents' responses to their children's negative emotions.