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Toward positive parenting: Exploring the relationship between empathy and gratitude and parental attitudes

W kierunku pozytywnego rodzicielstwa:
Badanie związku między empatią i wdzięcznością
a postawami rodzicielskimi

Abstract

Background: Despite many studies on parental attitudes, the extent to which parents' emotional resources of parents, such as empathy and gratitude, are associated with parental behaviours and attitudes towards children remains unclear.

Purpose: The aim of the study was to examine the relationship between the emotional disposition to being grateful and empathetic in parents and their positive parenting attitudes as emotional warmth, autonomy support, and democratic attitude. In addition, the relationship between empathy, gratitude, and negative attitudes such as punitive, permissive discipline and anxious intrusiveness was assessed.

Methodology: A sample of 712 Polish parents of children aged between six months and twelve years completed the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, the Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test, and the Parental Behaviours and Dimensions Questionnaire. *Results:* The two proposed structural equation models (SEM) confirmed that empathy and gratitude are predictors of positive and negative parenting dimensions. In addition, gratitude plays a mediating role between different dimensions of empathy and parenting behaviours. Emotional empathy, personal distress and simple appreciation are the most significant factors for positive parental attitudes. Punitive and permissive attitudes are associated with empathy, but not with gratitude. In contrast, anxious intrusiveness is associated with both empathy and gratitude.

Conclusions: These findings contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between parents' emotional resources and their parental behaviours. The results suggest that parents should enhance the experience of empathy and gratitude in their daily lives, as these emotions strengthen positive parental behaviours and weaken negative parenting.

Keywords: empathy; gratitude; parental attitudes; Structural Equation Modelling (SEM).

Abstrakt

Wprowadzenie: Pomimo wielu badań dotyczących postaw rodzicielskich, zakres w jakim zasoby emocjonalne rodziców takie jak empatia i wdzięczność wiążą się z zachowaniami i postawami rodzicielskimi wobec dzieci pozostaje niejasny.

Cel: Celem badania była ocena związku między obecnością emocjonalnej dyspozycji do bycia empatycznym i wdzięcznym a pozytywnymi postawami rodzicielskimi, takimi jak ciepło emocjonalne, wsparcie autonomii i postawa demokratyczna. Ponadto, oceniono również związek między empatią i wdzięcznością a negatywnymi postawami rodziców, takimi jak postawa autorytarna, pobłażliwa oraz lękowo-ochraniająca.

Metodologia: Próba 712 polskich rodziców dzieci w wieku od 0,6 do 12 lat wypełniła Wskaźnik Reaktywności Interpersonalnej, Test Wdzięczności, Urazy i Doceniania oraz Kwestionariusz Zachowań i Wymiarów Rodzicielskich.

Wyniki: Dwa zaproponowane modele równań strukturalnych (SEM) potwierdziły, że empatia i wdzięczność są predyktorami pozytywnych i negatywnych wymiarów rodzicielskich. Dodatkowo, wdzięczność pełni pośredniczącą rolę między różnymi wymiarami empatii a zachowaniami rodziców. Największe znaczenie dla postaw pozytywnych rodziców ma empatia emocjonalna, osobisty dystress emocjonalny oraz docenianie prostych przyjemności. Autorytarna oraz pobłażliwa postawa wiążą się z empatią, ale nie z wdzięcznością. Postawa lękowego ochraniańia wiąże się natomiast zarówno z empatią jak i wdzięcznością.

Wnioski: Wyniki te przyczyniają się do lepszego zrozumienia związku pomiędzy emocjonalnymi zasobami rodziców a ich zachowaniami wobec dzieci. Odkrycia te sugerują, że rodzice powinni wzmacniać doświadczanie empatii i wdzięczności w codziennym życiu, ponieważ emocje te wzmacniają pozytywne zachowania rodziców a osłabiają negatywne rodzicielstwo.

Słowa kluczowe: empatia; wdzięczność; postawy rodzicielskie; modelowanie równań strukturalnych (SEM).

Introduction

Many researchers agree that the social changes that have taken place in recent decades have had a significant impact on modern parenting behaviour (Reid *et al.*, 2015, p. 1). Changes in family structure and composition, less time spent with children, and a focus on meeting material needs at the expense of children's emotional needs are making parenting increasingly ineffective (Reid *et al.*, 2015, pp. 1–2). Parents look to the internet or television programmes for ready-made parenting solutions and advice, which often offer many conflicting opinions on parenting. As a result, there is increasing ambiguity about the behaviours that define good parenting.

Furthermore, despite a large body of scientific literature on parenting attitudes and behaviours and their importance for children's development, there is still a paucity of research analysing individual factors that support positive parenting, such as parents' emotional resources. In particular, the role of parents' empathy and gratitude in shaping their parenting attitudes remains under-explored. The present study aims to fill this gap by investigating how these emotional dispositions are related to parents' positive and negative attitudes towards their children.

As there are numerous of conceptualisations of parenting attitudes, dimensions and behaviours in the scientific literature, in this research draws on the conceptualisation of modern parenting attitudes (Reid *et al.*, 2015, pp. 12–17; Lasota and Mróz, 2023, pp. 122–123), based on D. Baumrind's (1971, pp. 22–24) classic theory of parenting styles.

Positive parenting is based on authoritative attitudes and behaviours (e.g. emotional warmth and involvement, democratic participation of the child in the family, good communication with the child and support for the child's autonomy) (Baumrind, 2005, p. 67; Bornstein and Zlotnik, 2008, p. 498; Reid *et al.*, 2015, p. 16; Liu and Wang, 2021, p. 2). The other extreme is authoritarian parenting (verbal hostility towards the child, corporal punishment, directives, excessive control) (Bornstein and Zlotnik, 2008, p. 498); or a permissive attitude (lack of control, lack of rules, ignoring misbehaviour, absolute acceptance of all children's behaviours) (Konopka *et al.*, 2018, p. 926). It is also necessary to mention a very common attitude of parents in recent years, especially of the youngest children, the anxious and intrusive, overprotective attitude, which is not clearly treated as a negative attitude because, on the one hand, it results from the parents' anxiety and intrusiveness and, on the other hand, it indicates a high level of parental involvement in ensuring the child's sense of security and happiness (Reid *et al.*, 2015, p. 14; Lasota and Mróz, 2023, p. 137).

Parental attitudes have a huge impact on the mental health of children in the family, so it seems necessary to look scientifically for factors in the family (both in children and parents) that strengthen positive parenting and weaken negative parental behaviours towards children in everyday life.

1. Empathy and Parental Attitudes

Empathy is most often described as a fundamental human personality trait. The term refers to the psychological processes that allow a person to take another's perspective, identify with them, and experience their feelings and emotions (Davis, 1983, p. 113; Chen *et al.*, 2020, p. 3). Empathy is thought to protect against emotional and behavioural problems (Decety *et al.*, 2016, p. 7). It includes both affective elements, such as empathic care, and cognitive elements, such as the ability to take another person's perspective (Davis, 1983, p. 115). Additionally, empathy plays a key role in developing and maintaining relationships with others and serves as a precursor to pro-social and moral behaviour (Decety *et al.*, 2016, p. 4).

As parents play a key role in parent-child interactions, their ability to be empathetic affects both their own mental health and their children's development (Jacobs *et al.*, 2015, p. 2346). Recent research indicates that parents of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties are characterised by a lower level of cognitive empathy (perspective taking and online simulation abilities) than parents of healthy children. Furthermore, parents' cognitive empathy is positively related to children's social competence (Meng *et al.*, 2020, p. 95), as well as to children's attachment security and perception of parental warmth (Stern, Borelli and Smiley, 2015, pp. 14–15). Highly empathetic mothers have high parental efficacy because they can respond appropriately to children's needs; indeed, as Goleman (1995, p. 122) notes, the better an individual recognises and understands their own feelings, the better they can read those of others. Moreover, higher levels of empathy in fathers have been associated with a greater likelihood of responding positively to frustration in their children (Ziv, Golbez and Shapira, 2020, p. 18). Recent studies show that paternal attitudes are predictors of both empathy and aggression of adolescents (Lasota and Kobylarczyk, 2020, pp. 57–58). Parental empathy involves sensitivity to children, their condition, and needs, and the ability to respond appropriately, and difficulties in experiencing parental compassion often manifest as abuse and neglect. High levels of parental empathy can protect against overly aggressive behaviour towards children or an inability to recognise basic needs in the family.

The effect of parental socialisation, parenting styles and attitudes on empathy development in children has been the subject of numerous studies (van der Mark, Bakermans-Kranenburg and van Ijzendoorn, 2002, pp. 364–375; Cornell and Frick, 2007, pp. 307–315). Positive parenting behaviours are beneficial for the development of empathy in children (da Cunha Motta *et al.*, 2006, p. 532; Wagers and Kiel, 2019, pp. 392–399), and parenting practices have been associated with empathy even in toddlers (Wagers and Kiel, 2019, pp. 398–399). Parents and caregivers who demonstrate an authoritative style are often warm, sensitive, and supportive, and this can serve as a model for empathic behaviour and emotional sharing in their charges. An authoritative parenting style, characterised by both high parental responsiveness and control over child behaviour, is conducive to the development of empathy in children (Guo and Feng, 2017, p. 9).

As suggested by the above findings, some researchers have acknowledged the existence of a potential relationship between parental empathy and children's emotional and social competence. It has also been proposed that there may be a relationship between parental attitudes and children's and parents' levels of empathy; for example, Bi and Keller (2021, pp. 10371–10392) indicate that parental empathy in the parent-child relationship is negatively correlated with parental psychological control. Despite these findings, still relatively few studies have focused on the relationship between positive sources such as parental empathy or gratitude and parental attitudes and behaviours towards children.

2. Gratitude and Parental Behaviours

Gratitude is associated with an individual's emotional, cognitive, and behavioural functioning (Watkins *et al.*, 2003, pp. 446–449). It is an adaptive psychological trait that people exhibit in their daily lives (Yildirim and Alanazi, 2018, p. 22). It has been conceptualised as a disposition, an emotional state, an attitude, a habit, and a trait (McCullough *et al.*, 2001, pp. 249–253; McCullough, Emmons and Tsang, 2002, pp. 112–113; Watkins *et al.*, 2003, p. 432). In a broader sense, gratitude can be seen as a life orientation based on the perception and appreciation of positive aspects in one's life. This appreciation can relate to other people, things or situations around us and can be associated with a sense of abundance (Watkins *et al.*, 2003, pp. 432–433; Tomaszek and Lasota, 2018, p. 251).

Gratitude, like altruism (Bowles and Gintis, 2004, pp. 25–27), seems to be a key element of reciprocity in interpersonal relationships. It has been iden-

tified with several positive emotions that have beneficial consequences for mental state and personal and social development (Fredrickson, 2001, pp. 3–5). For example, dispositional gratitude appears to be one of the strongest predictors of many indicators of well-being, such as life satisfaction, vitality, and optimism (McCullough, Emmons and Tsang, 2002, pp. 115–119; Valikhani *et al.*, 2019, p. 41), as well as the building and strengthening of social bonds (McCullough *et al.*, 2001, pp. 250–251; McCullough and Tsang, 2004, pp. 123–124). Gratitude is linked to adaptive psychological outcomes, increased hope, positive emotions, optimistic thoughts and improved physical and emotional well-being (Watkins, Uher and Pichinevskiy, 2015, pp. 5–6; Liao and Weng, 2018, pp. 384–385). Furthermore, Wood, Froh and Geraghty (2010, pp. 891–903) propose a life orientation conception of gratitude, in which gratitude is seen as a life orientation for noticing and appreciating the positive in the world. This includes the gratitude that comes from helping others, but also the general habit of appreciating the positive in life.

Being grateful has many benefits for human mental development and subjective well-being (Lyubomirsky, 2007, pp. 95–105). The disposition to be grateful is based on the ability to empathise and promotes reciprocity and pro-social behaviour; as such, individuals who are more grateful are more likely to engage in pro-social activities (McCullough, Emmons and Tsang, 2002, p. 119; Tsang, 2006, p. 139; Ma, Tunney and Ferguson, 2017, pp. 601–635). The existing literature shows that gratitude in adults is part of a larger network of correlated adaptive personality traits (Wood, Froh and Geraghty, 2010, p. 893; Rothenberg *et al.*, 2017, pp.106–120). Personality traits such as agreeableness, openness, and extraversion have all been strongly correlated with a grateful disposition (McCullough, Emmons and Tsang, 2002, p. 118). Research also suggest that experience of gratitude is a pleasant emotion and is usually accompanied by other positive emotions (Kristiana, Hyoschamina and Fatimah, 2018, p. 611). Moreover, people who feel grateful more often tend to be more resistant to stressful situations (Wood *et al.*, 2008, p. 867) and have higher levels of resilience (Lasota, Tomaszek and Bosacki, 2022, p. 6851).

Despite the growing body of research on the relationship between gratitude and other aspects of human life, there is little evidence on the links between parental attitudes and gratitude. Experimental studies have found that gratitude can reduce maternal stress in early childhood (Kristiana, Hyoschamina and Fatimah, 2018, pp. 612–614) and that maternal gratitude is correlated with life satisfaction and hope (Hoy, 2011, pp. 89–90). Furthermore, maternal gratitude also appears to be positively related to children's gratitude

and life satisfaction (Hoy, 2011, pp. 85–88). Additionally, parents with positive parental attitudes also have a positive effect on children's development (Kristiana, Hyoschamina and Fatimah, 2018, p. 613). Research has confirmed that grateful parents raise grateful children. Rothenberg *et al.* (2017, pp. 112–115) suggest that parental gratitude is associated with child gratitude, as grateful parents are more likely to prioritise the development of gratitude as a socialisation goal and are more likely to engage in parenting practices that promote gratitude in their children. Their findings confirm the existence of a positive relationship between parental and child gratitude, but also that both forms of gratitude are positively correlated with parental personality traits such as extraversion and agreeableness.

3. The Purpose of the Study

Despite the extensive literature on parenting attitudes, and the relationship between parental attitudes and positive and negative aspects of child development, very little research has examined the factors that might support positive parenting by mothers and fathers (Goeke-Morey and Cummings, 2007, pp. 221–224; Meyer *et al.*, 2014, pp. 164–171; Ziv, Golbez and Shapira, 2020, pp. 3–20). The present study bridges this gap by examining the relationship between emotional attributes and parental attitudes. It proposes two models of the relationship between empathy and gratitude and positive attitudes (emotional warmth, democratic discipline and autonomy support) and negative attitudes (permissive discipline, punitive discipline and anxious intrusiveness) among Polish parents. The models assume that empathy and gratitude are directly related to positive and negative parental behaviours, and that dimensions of empathy are indirectly related to parental behaviours via different dimensions of gratitude. Six hypotheses were formulated: H_1 . The dimensions of empathy are associated with positive parental attitudes; H_2 . The dimensions of gratitude are associated with positive parental attitudes; H_3 . Gratitude dimensions mediate the relationship between empathy dimensions and positive parental attitudes; H_4 . The dimensions of empathy are linked to negative parental attitudes; H_5 . The dimensions of gratitude are linked to negative parental attitudes; H_6 . Gratitude dimensions mediate the relationship between empathy dimensions and negative parental attitudes.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Participants and Procedure

This study used a cross-sectional design with an online survey methodology. A quantitative approach was used to collect data from Polish parents. A total of 712 parents (aged between 21 and 50) with at least one child (aged between six months and 12 years) participated in the study. Data were collected using a snowball sampling technique. In this way, results were collected from parents from all over Poland, with different levels of education and different places of residence, in order to make the group as representative as possible. The survey was divided into two parts: the three scales of measurement and a survey of demographic variables, as shown in Table 1. Before completing the questionnaires, participants were asked to give their voluntary consent to participate in this study.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

| Variables | | M, SD | Min, Max |
|--------------------------------|------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Age of parents | | M = 34.6, SD = 3.1 | Min = 21 y, Max. = 50 y |
| Age of children | | M = 6.1, SD = 3.1 | Min = 0.6 y, Max = 12 y |
| | | Frequency (N = 712) | Percentage (%) |
| Gender of parents | Mothers | 567 | 80 |
| | Fathers | 145 | 20 |
| Gender of children | Girls | 394 | 55 |
| | Boys | 318 | 45 |
| Education of Mothers / Fathers | Higher | 300/65 | 53/45 |
| | Secondary | 165/55 | 29/38 |
| | Vocational | 102/22 | 18/15 |
| | Primary | 0/3 | 0/2 |
| Place of residence | Large city | 246 | 34.5 |
| | Small town | 235 | 33.0 |
| | Village | 231 | 32.5 |

Source: Author's research.

The procedure was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Institute of Psychology of the NEC University in Krakow and conformed with the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from the subjects involved in the study.

4.2. Measurement

Empathy was measured using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis, 1980, pp. 10–11). This scale measures two dimensions: cognitive empathy and affective empathy. The IRI has four subscales: perspective taking (PT) (the ability to take the perspective of others), empathic concern (EC) (other-oriented feelings of sympathy and concern), personal distress (PD) (self-oriented feelings of personal anxiety and discomfort), and fantasy (F) (imagining the feelings and actions of fictional characters in books or films). Individuals rate 28 items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from A ‘Does not describe me well’ to E ‘Describes me very well’. In this study, Cronbach’s α was 0.72 for the total scale. In this study, the PT scale was used to measure cognitive empathy, the EC to measure affective empathy, and the PD to measure personal distress.

Gratitude was measured using The Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Scale (GRAT)–short form (Thomas and Watkins, 2003, p. 1) in Polish adaptation (Tomaszek and Lasota, 2019, pp. 86–87). It is a 16-item scale designed to measure an individual’s dispositional gratitude. The questionnaire consists of 16 statements arranged in three subscales: lack of a sense of deprivation (LOSD), simple appreciation (SA), and appreciation for others (AO). Participants rate each item on a nine-point Likert scale (1 ‘I strongly disagree’ to 9 ‘I strongly agree with the statement’). In this study, Cronbach’s α was 0.79 for the total scale.

Parental attitudes – The Polish version (Lasota, 2018, p. 1) of the Parenting Behaviours and Dimensions Questionnaire (PBDQ) (Reid *et al.*, 2015, p. 10) was used to assess parenting dimensions and behaviours. It is a self-report measure of parenting behaviours and consists of 33 items scored on a five-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 to 5 (never – always). The PBDQ consists of six factors, three positive: emotional warmth, autonomy support, and democratic discipline, and three negative: permissive discipline, punitive discipline and anxious intrusiveness. In this study, the reliability analysis showed a high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.81$, $\omega = 0.85$).

4.3. Statistical Analyses

The data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS version 28 software and AMOS 28 with likelihood estimation. The normality of distributions was verified using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Levene’s test was used to check the homogeneity of variance. Pearson’s correlation coefficient was used to determine the relationships between variables. Finally, Structural Equation Mod-

elling (SEM) was used to establish the role of gratitude between empathy and parental attitudes. The basic purpose of SEM is to determine whether a hypothesised model explains the relationships observed between variables in the sample data. Once a model is specified, the model fit is assessed by determining the extent to which the covariance values in the sample data resemble those implied by the specified model, as well as by the standardised parameter estimates for each hypothesised causal path.

5. Results

The first step was to check the descriptive statistics of empathy, gratitude, and parental attitudes. Table 2 shows the statistics for three dimensions of empathy, three dimensions of gratitude, and six parental attitudes.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for empathy, gratitude, and parental attitudes

| | Variables | M | SD | Skew. | Kurt. |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------|-----------|--------------|--------------|
| Empathy | Perspective Taking (PT) | 2.50 | 0.62 | -0.17 | -0.02 |
| | Empatic Concern (EC) | 2.68 | 0.64 | -0.08 | -0.25 |
| | Personal Distress (PD) | 1.96 | 0.73 | -0.19 | 0.01 |
| | Empathy (PT+EC) | 2.59 | 0.53 | -0.14 | -0.02 |
| Gratitude | Lack of Sense of Deprivation (LOSD) | 5.33 | 1.29 | -0.27 | -0.33 |
| | Simple Appreciation (SA) | 7.55 | 1.40 | -1.39 | 2.03 |
| | Appreciation for Others (AO) | 6.58 | 1.68 | -0.74 | 0.26 |
| | Gratitude (LOSD+SA+AO) | 6.47 | .96 | -0.70 | 0.51 |
| Parental attitudes | Emotional Warmth (EW) | 5.20 | 0.66 | -1.70 | 3.82 |
| | Autonomy Support (AS) | 4.88 | 0.68 | -0.77 | 1.02 |
| | Democratic Discipline (DD) | 5.01 | 0.80 | -0.99 | 1.02 |
| | Punitive Discipline (PD) | 2.39 | 0.90 | 0.62 | -0.35 |
| | Anxious Intrusiveness (AI) | 4.39 | 0.82 | -0.37 | -0.28 |
| | Permissive Discipline (PerD) | 2.78 | 0.85 | 0.45 | 0.20 |

Note: M – Mean, SD – Standard Deviation, Skew-Skewness, Kurt-Kurtosis.
Source: Author's research.

In most cases, the distributions of scores for both empathy and gratitude and for most positive attitudes are left skewed. Emotional warmth and appreciation of simple pleasures (SA) demonstrate the most negative skewness and the most leptokurtic kurtosis.

5.1. The Link Between Empathy, Gratitude and Parental Dimensions

The next step was to examine the relationship between empathy, gratitude, and six parental attitudes.

Table 3. Correlations between empathy, gratitude, and parental attitudes

| | PT | EC | PD | EMP | LOSD | SA | AO | GRAT |
|------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|--------|
| EW | .20** | .32** | -.08* | .31** | -.01 | .42** | .18** | .30** |
| PD | -.18** | -.05 | .30** | -.14** | -.07* | -.10* | -.03 | -.10** |
| AI | .07 | .25** | .13** | .19** | -.16** | .18** | .12** | .07 |
| AS | .24** | .25** | -.17** | .29** | .07 | .30** | .13** | .26** |
| PerD | -.17** | -.11** | .22** | -.16** | -.08* | -.10** | .01 | -.09* |
| DD | .31** | .29** | -.13** | .35** | .00 | .41** | .18** | .30** |

Note: EW – Emotional Warmth, PD – Punitive Discipline, AI – Anxious Intrusiveness, AS – Autonomy Support, PerD – Permissive Discipline, DD – Democratic Discipline, GRAT – Gratitude (LOSD+SA+AO), EMP – Empathy (PT+EC); * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Source: Author's research.

The correlation results in Table 3 confirm that parental attitudes are associated with both the empathy and gratitude of the parents. Positive attitudes, such as emotional warmth, democratic attitude or autonomy support, demonstrate moderate positive correlations with cognitive and affective empathy, as well as with two dimensions of gratitude: SA and AO. No correlation was found between positive parental attitudes and the lack of a sense of deprivation (LOSD). In addition, personal distress was negatively correlated with positive parental attitudes, but positively with negative parental attitudes and is most strongly associated with punitive discipline.

The negative parental attitudes, i.e. permissive and punitive discipline, are negatively correlated with the level of gratitude. They are also negatively related to perspective taking and empathic concern. Anxious intrusiveness is negatively associated with the lack of deprivation, but positively with the other dimensions of gratitude and empathy (except perspective taking).

Additional correlations between empathy and gratitude were found in the relationship between LOSD and perspective taking ($r = .09$, $p < .05$) and personal distress ($r = -.15$, $p < .00$). Simple appreciation correlates at a similar level with PT and EC ($r = .34$, $p < .00$), and with overall empathy ($r = .40$, $p < .00$). This dimension of gratitude is also positively related to the age of the parent ($r = .17$, $p < .00$) and the age of the child ($r = .12$, $p < .01$). Appreciation of others positively correlates with total empathy ($r = .27$, $p < .00$) and its dimensions: per-

spective taking, affective empathy (EC) and personal distress ($r = .25$, $r = .21$, $r = .12$, $p < .00$ respectively). Total gratitude is positively related to total empathy ($r = .37$, $p < .00$), and its dimensions: PT ($r = .34$, $p < .00$) and EC ($r = .28$, $p < .00$). The overall gratitude score is also positively related to the age of the parent ($r = .12$, $p < .00$), i.e. older parents tend to be more grateful.

5.2. Goodness of fit of proposed models

Various ways of assessing the fit of the data to the model have been proposed. For example, Bagozzi and Yi (1988, p. 82) believe that three indicators of goodness are sufficient: the preliminary fit criteria, the overall model fit, and the fit of the internal structure of the model. Hair *et al.* (2014, pp. 640–644) state that not all criteria are necessary to know the fit of a particular model and suggest using at least χ^2 , df, p-value, an absolute index such as RMSEA or SRMR, and an index of goodness of fit such as CFI or GFI. In this study, two structural models (Table 4) were tested using maximum likelihood estimation (MLE): one model for positive parental attitudes and another for negative parental disciplines. Because positive attitudes are interrelated and often co-occur, it was decided to include in the model a latent variable that is the result of three positive attitudes: EW, AS and DD. This could not be done for negative attitudes, as an authoritarian attitude is the opposite of a permissive attitude. Moreover, Anxious Intrusiveness should not be considered a negative attitude, especially in the case of parents of the youngest children (Lasota and Mróz, 2023, p. 137). Therefore, it was justified to create a model with observed variables. Referring to the indicators of the goodness of fit of the data to the model described above, both models were found to fit the data well (Hu and Bentler, 1998, pp. 446–449; Bagozzi and Yi, 2012, pp. 28–29).

Table 4. Goodness of fit indices for models

| Model | χ^2 | p | df | TLI | CFI | GFI | AGFI | RMSEA |
|------------------------------|----------|-------|----|------|------|------|------|-------|
| 1. Positive Attitudes | 77.0 | <.000 | 27 | 0.94 | 0.97 | 0.98 | 0.96 | 0.051 |
| 2. Negative Attitudes | 42.8 | <.003 | 21 | 0.94 | 0.97 | 0.99 | 0.97 | 0.038 |

Source: Author's research.

Generally, models 1 and 2, based on data from 712 parents, gave a good fit and identified some direct and indirect pathways through which parental attitudes were predicted. Indirect effects were calculated within a Structural

Equation Modelling using the Bootstrap estimation method. 5000 usable bootstrap samples were obtained.

The first model (Figure 1) explains the level of positive parental attitudes based on the two predictors: level of empathy and gratitude of 712 parents of children up to 12 years of age. It describes the direct and indirect paths between the dimensions of empathy, gratitude, and positive attitudes. A detailed analysis of the direct and indirect effects of all variables showed that parental empathy and gratitude best explain emotional warmth (26%) followed by democratic discipline (22% of the total variation) and autonomy support (15%).

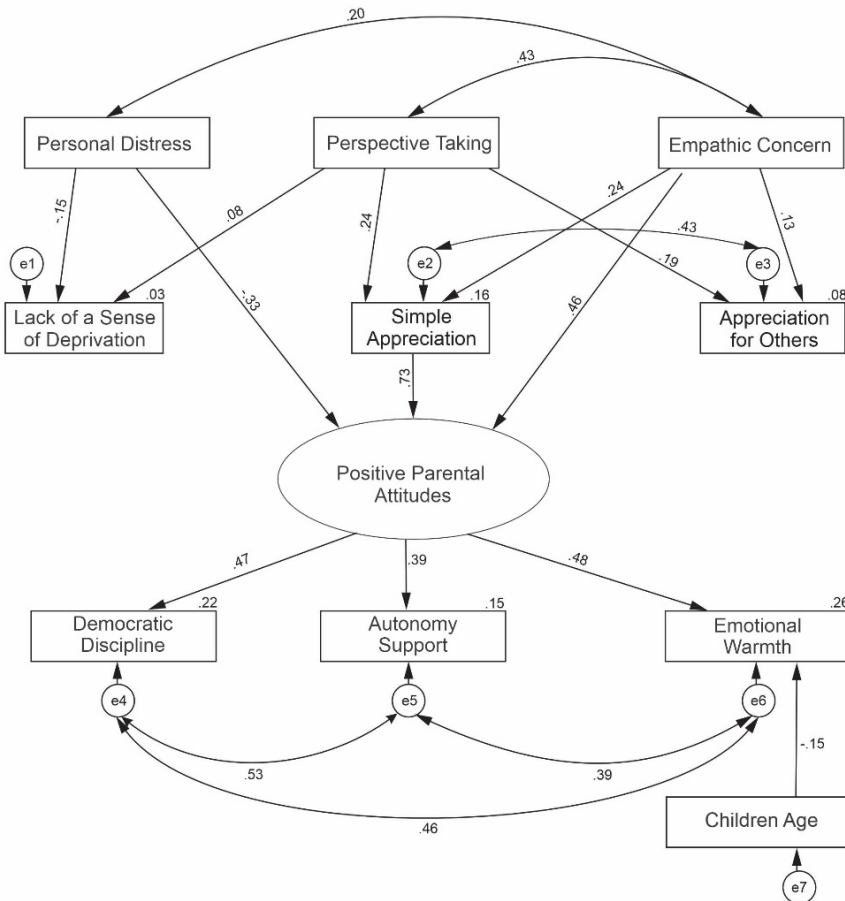


Figure 1. The full model of empathy, gratitude and positive parental attitudes
 Note: Values indicate standardised coefficients; $p < .001$.
 Source: Author's research.

The results revealed that personal distress is significantly negatively related to lack of sense of deprivation. Perspective taking is positively related to all three dimensions of gratitude. Empathic concern is a positive predictor of simple appreciation and appreciation of others, but not of LOSD. Moreover, empathic concern has the strongest positive effect, directly and indirectly via simple appreciation, on the parental positive dimensions. Perspective taking is only indirectly related to positive attitudes via simple appreciation. Personal distress has a significant negative direct effect on positive attitudes. In addition, the results showed that the child's age is related to the parent's emotional warmth. The younger the child, the more emotional warmth in the parents' attitudes. Detailed results of the total and indirect effects are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Standardised effects of empathy and gratitude on positive parental attitudes

| | | EC | PT | PD | SA | Posit. Att. | Children Age |
|---------------------|--------------------|--|--|---|--|--|---|
| Total effect | SA | $\beta = .24$, SE = .04, [.16; .31] | $\beta = .24$ SE = .03, [.17; .31] | | | | |
| | Posit. Att. | $\beta = .63$ SE = .06, [.51; .74] | $\beta = .18$ SE = .03, [.12; .23] | $\beta = -.33$ SE = .07, [-.46; -.20] | $\beta = .73$ SE = .05, [.62; .83] | | |
| | EW | $\beta = .30$ SE = .04, [.24; .37] | $\beta = .08$ SE = .02, [.06; .12] | $\beta = -.16$ SE = .03, [-.22; -.10] | $\beta = .35$ SE = .04, [.27; .43] | $\beta = .48$ SE = .04, [.41; .56] | $\beta = -.15$ SE = .03, [-.21; -.09] |
| | AS | $\beta = .24$ SE = .03, [.18; .31] | $\beta = .07$ SE = .01, [.05; .09] | $\beta = -.13$ SE = .03, [-.19; -.07] | $\beta = .28$ SE = .03, [.22; .34] | $\beta = .38$ SE = .04, [.32; .45] | |
| | DD | $\beta = .30$ SE = .03, [.23; .36] | $\beta = .08$ SE = .02, [.06; .11] | $\beta = -.15$ SE = .03, [-.22; -.09] | $\beta = .34$ SE = .04, [.27; .42] | $\beta = .47$ SE = .04, [.40; .54] | |
| | AO | $\beta = .13$ SE = .04, [.06; .21] | $\beta = .19$ SE = .04, [.12; .26] | | | | |
| | LOSD | | $\beta = .08$ SE = .04, [.01; .15] | $\beta = -.15$ SE = .04, [-.22; -.07] | | | |

| | | | | | | | |
|------------------------|--------------------|--|--|---|--|--|---|
| Direct effect | Posit. Att. | $\beta = .46$ SE = .07, [.32; .59] | | $\beta = -.33$ SE = .07, [-.46; -.20] | $\beta = .73$ SE = .05, [.62; .83] | | |
| | EW | | | | | $\beta = .48$ SE = .04, [.41; .56] | $\beta = -.15$ SE = .03, [-.21; -.09] |
| | AS | | | | | $\beta = .38$ SE = .04, [.32; .45] | |
| | DD | | | | | $\beta = .47$ SE = .04, [.40; .54] | |
| Indirect effect | Posit. Att. | $\beta = .17$ SE = .03, [.11; .24] | $\beta = .18$ SE = .03, [.12; .23] | | | | |
| | EW | $\beta = .31$ SE = .04, [.24; .37] | $\beta = .09$ SE = .02, [.06; .12] | $\beta = -.16$ SE = .03, [-.22; -.10] | $\beta = .35$ SE = .04, [.27; .43] | | |
| | AS | $\beta = .24$ SE = .03, [.18; .31] | $\beta = .07$ SE = .01, [.05; .09] | $\beta = -.13$ SE = .03, [-.19; -.07] | $\beta = .28$ SE = .04, [.22; .34] | | |
| | DD | $\beta = .30$ SE = .03, [.23; .36] | $\beta = .08$ SE = .02, [.06; .11] | $\beta = -.15$ SE = .03, [-.22; -.09] | $\beta = .34$ SE = .04, [.27; .42] | | |

Note: The 95% confidence intervals for bootstrap are given in square brackets. For SA, AO and LOSD the direct effect has the same values as the total effect.

Source: Author's research.

Model 2 (Fig. 2) illustrates the relationship between the dimensions of empathy, gratitude, and negative attitudes that parents display towards their children. A detailed SEM analysis showed that personal distress and child age (positively) and perspective taking (negatively) had the strongest direct relationships with punitive attitude. The level of empathy (especially PD and PT) and the age of the child (the older the children, the more frequent the parents' attitude) explained 13% of the variation in authoritarian attitude. Gratitude had no significant direct or indirect relationship with parent's harsh upbringing of their children.

A similar relationship was discovered for the permissive attitude. The permissive attitude is directly explained by empathy, but gratitude does not mediate this relationship. PT, EC, and child age directly negatively and PD positively explain permissive discipline among Polish parents. The total percentage of variance explained for permissive discipline by these variables was 9%.

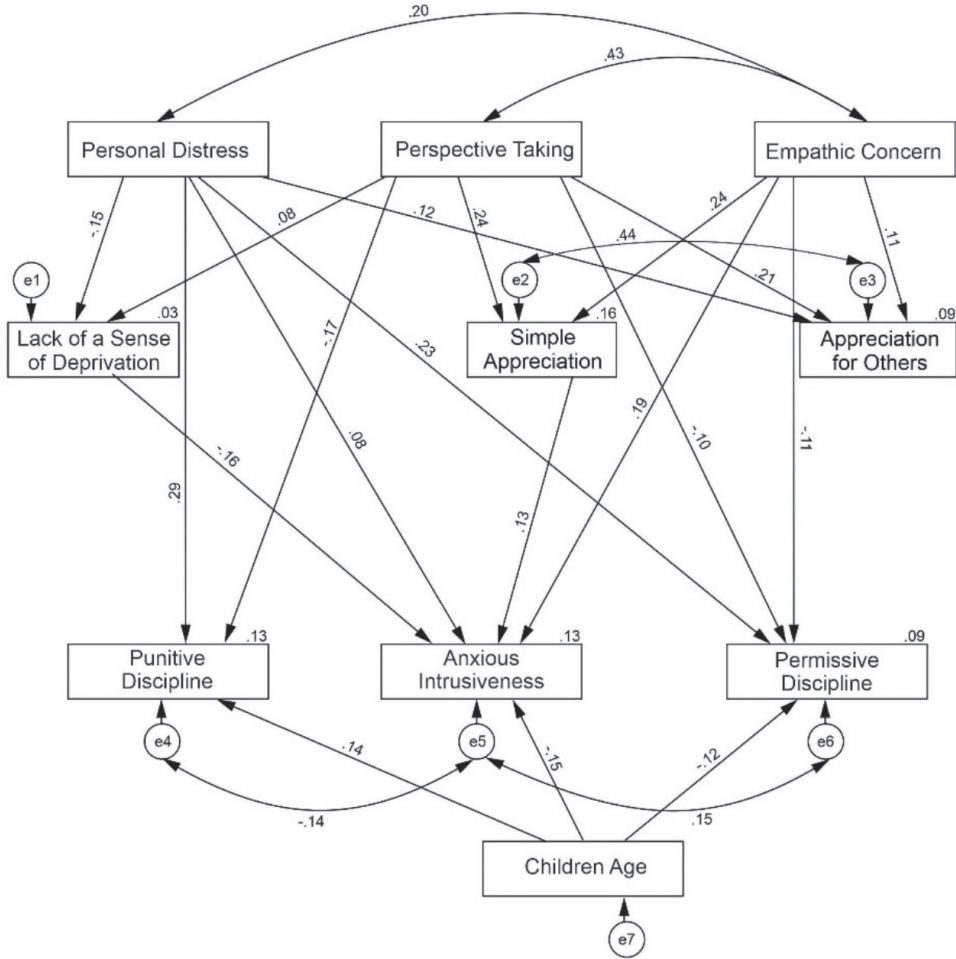


Figure 2. The full model of empathy, gratitude, and negative parental attitudes
 Note: The lines indicate statistically significant paths $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.
 Source: Author’s research.

Anxious intrusiveness appears to have a direct positive relationship with two dimensions of empathy: empathic concern and personal distress, and one dimension of gratitude: simple appreciation. A negative significant relationship was also found between AI and lack of a sense of deprivation and child age. According to the mediation analysis, empathic concern was significantly indirectly related to anxious intrusiveness via simple appreciation. Perspective taking, although not directly related to AI, has an indirect effect on this attitude via LOSD and SA. Personal distress has a weak positive direct relationship

with AI and an indirect relationship via LOSD. The total percentage of variance explained by these variables in Polish parents' anxious intrusiveness was 13%. The standardised total, direct and indirect effects are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Standardised total and indirect effect of empathy and gratitude on negative parental attitudes

| | | EC | PT | PD | LOSD | SA | Children Age |
|---------------------|-------------|---|---|---|---|--|---|
| Total Effect | SA | $\beta = .24$, SE = .04, [.16; .31] | $\beta = .24$ SE = .03, [.17; .31] | | | | |
| | LOSD | | $\beta = .08$ SE = .04, [.01; .15] | $\beta = -.15$ SE = .04, [-.22; -.07] | | | |
| | AO | $\beta = .11$ SE = .04, [.03; .19] | $\beta = .21$ SE = .04, [.13; .28] | $\beta = .12$ SE = .04, [.05; .19] | | | |
| | PD | | $\beta = -.17$ SE = .04, [-.24; -.11] | $\beta = .29$ SE = .03, [.22; .35] | | | $\beta = .14$ SE = .04, [.07; .21] |
| | AI | $\beta = .22$ SE = .034, [.15; .29] | $\beta = .02$ SE = .01, [-.01; .04] | $\beta = .10$ SE = .04, [.03; .17] | $\beta = -.16$ SE = .03, [-.23; -.09] | $\beta = .13$ SE = .04, [.06; .21] | $\beta = -.15$ SE = .04, [-.22; -.09] |
| | PerD | $\beta = -.11$ SE = .04, [-.18; -.03] | $\beta = -.10$ SE = .04, [-.18; -.02] | $\beta = .23$ SE = .03, [.17; .30] | | | $\beta = -.12$ SE = .04, [-.19; -.05] |
| DE | AI | $\beta = .19$ SE = .04, [.11; .27] | | $\beta = .08$ SE = .04, [.01; .15] | $\beta = -.16$ SE = .03, [-.23; -.09] | $\beta = .13$ SE = .04, [.06; .21] | $\beta = -.15$ SE = .04, [-.22; -.09] |
| IE | AI | $\beta = .03$ SE = .01, [.01; .06] | $\beta = .02$ SE = .01, [-.01; .04] | $\beta = .02$ SE = .01, [.01; .04] | | | |

Note: The 95% confidence intervals for bootstrap are given in square brackets. For SA, AO, LOSD, PD and PerD the direct effect has the same values as the total effect. DE – direct effect, IE – indirect effect.

Source: Author's research.

6. Discussion

This study examined the relationship between empathy, gratitude, and positive and negative parental attitudes using SEM analysis. The present findings suggest that the intensity of parental behaviour towards their children may be due to their level of empathy and gratitude. Empathetic and grateful parents are more likely to present attitudes such as emotional warmth, democratic discipline, and autonomy support, and less likely to demonstrate negative attitudes such as permissive or punitive discipline. It should also be emphasised that effective parenting is essential for a children's social, emotional, cognitive and physical development (Phillips, Connors and Curtner-Smith, 2017, p. 10).

With regard to the hypotheses, it should be noted that most of the hypotheses were partially supported. The first hypothesis regarding a direct relationship between empathy and positive attitudes was confirmed partially. It appeared that empathic concern and personal distress were direct predictors of attitudes, whereas perspective taking was only indirectly related to positive attitudes. The second and third hypotheses were also confirmed partially. Only simple appreciation was directly related to emotional warmth, autonomy support and democratic discipline. Simple appreciation was also a significant mediator in the relationship between cognitive and affective empathy and positive parental attitudes.

The results of this study indicate that, of the variables tested, experiencing gratitude, especially appreciating simple pleasures, has the greatest importance for the intensifying positive parental behaviour towards children. Affective empathy (EC) is also of great importance for positive attitudes. More empathetic parents tend to show more warmth, love, and acceptance towards their children. Moreover, the parents' ability to take the perspective of others and empathise with them is positively related to the appreciation of simple pleasures in daily life. Numerous studies (Eisenberg and Valiente, 2002, pp. 117–123; Plopa, 2008, pp. 45–62; Power, 2013, pp. S14–S19) confirm that parenting style characterised by warmth, support, communication, and involvement are associated with positive child development.

The detailed analysis of our results confirmed that the different dimensions of empathy are directly related to different attitudes in parents. Affective empathy seems to be most strongly associated with emotional warmth followed by democratic discipline and autonomy support, whereas personal distress weakens all positive parental dimensions. These findings are in line with previous studies (Meng *et al.*, 2020, pp. 92 and 96). It has been found

that parents who are better able to recognise their children's current emotional experiences are able to provide sensitive and flexible care and support, resulting in fewer emotional and behavioural problems in childhood (Meng *et al.*, 2020, p. 96). Our findings also indicate that gratitude plays a significant role in explaining positive parental attitudes. Appreciating simple pleasures in everyday life strengthens all three positive attitudes in parents. Empathic concern and simple appreciation were found to be the strongest predictors of positive parental attitudes, while personal distress was a negative predictor. Parental cognitive empathy is not as important as affective empathy. Children need parental warmth and love for good parenting. On the other hand, parents' coping with their own negative emotions and low levels of personal distress also contribute to better attitudes and behaviour towards children.

The next three hypotheses assuming a relationship between empathy, gratitude, and negative parental attitudes were also partially supported. Cognitive empathy was not directly related to anxious intrusiveness, and emotional empathy was not a predictor of punitive discipline. Appreciation of others was not a significant predictor or mediator of the relationship between empathy and negative parental attitudes. The other two dimensions of gratitude (SA and LOSD) were found to be mediators between empathy and anxious intrusiveness.

The SEM model of negative attitudes showed that both punitive and permissive parents were characterised by a high level of personal distress and a low level of cognitive empathy. These parents find it difficult to take another person's perspective, and are also unable to cope with personal anxiety and discomfort in response to distress in others. This is consistent with previous research (Bi and Keller, 2021, pp. 10371–10392) suggesting that parental empathy is negatively correlated with parental psychological control. Furthermore, difficulties in emotion regulation may lead parents to experience more negative emotions and secondarily contribute to behavioural problems in their children (Meng *et al.*, 2020, p. 96). These negative parental behaviours are not significantly directly associated with the level of parental gratitude.

Anxious intrusiveness is reinforced by the level of affective empathy and appreciation of simple pleasures, as well as a lack of sense of abundance and personal distress. This attitude was more prevalent among parents of young children; these parents were more likely to feel anxious, to protect their children, to often relieve their children, and to limit their independence; in addition, they may feel tired from caring for their children all day and lack time for themselves, and thus have a low level of LOSD. As the two dimensions of grat-

itude appeared to play a mediating role in the relationship between empathy and anxiety-protective attitudes, these findings support previous findings (Lasota and Mróz, 2023, p. 137) that this attitude among Polish parents has a positive direction and its characteristics are more similar to those of positive attitudes than negative ones. Furthermore, present findings confirm that the age of the child is also a significant factor in parenting practices and behaviour. Parents of younger children seem to be more likely to be permissive or over-protective, while parents of older children are more likely to use punitive discipline.

7. Conclusions

The results of these studies show that empathy and gratitude are related to positive and negative parental attitudes. In addition, empathy is related to positive parental attitudes both directly and indirectly through gratitude, especially through simple appreciation, which reinforces parents' positive attitudes towards children. The present findings recommend that parents should use positive parenting dimensions more often and avoid extremely negative ones; they should also strengthen the experience of empathy and gratitude in everyday life. The ability to experience and express empathy and gratitude begins in childhood but continues throughout life (Freitas *et al.*, 2021, p. 3868). Increased gratitude promotes the strengthening of internal resources that serve as the basis for an optimistic world view and pro-social tendencies (De-Wall *et al.*, 2012, p. 233). Parents' experience of empathy and gratitude not only supports the development of empathy and gratitude in their children but also contributes to healthier and better parenting.

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