

When Negative Parenting Becomes More or Less Stressful: The Moderating Roles of Parental Empathy in Vietnamese Adolescents

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Negative parenting is associated with adolescent maladjustment but less is known about its relation to stress symptoms specifically and the parental processes that may alter this association. This study examined whether negative parenting was associated with adolescent stress symptoms and whether parental cognitive empathy and affective dissonance moderated this association in Vietnam. Participants were 457 parent-adolescent dyads. Adolescents ($M_{\text{age}} = 13.20$ years, $SD = 0.82$; 53.8% girls) reported stress symptoms, whereas parents ($M_{\text{age}} = 42.60$ years, $SD = 4.06$; 86.7% mothers) reported negative parenting and empathy-related characteristics. Across models, negative parenting was positively associated with adolescent stress. Cognitive empathy attenuated this association, whereas affective dissonance strengthened it. These findings suggest that the association between negative parenting and adolescent stress depends partly on parents' emotional orientation toward the child and highlight parental empathy-related processes as relevant to adolescent stress in Vietnam.

Keywords: negative parenting; adolescent stress symptoms; cognitive empathy; affective dissonance; Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a developmental period in which stress becomes especially salient because biological maturation, academic demands, changing peer dynamics and increasing expectations for self-regulation converge within a relatively short span of time (Grant et al., 2003; Kapur, 2015; Zhang & Qin, 2023). Early adolescents must manage more complex social evaluation, greater school pressure and heightened sensitivity to interpersonal feedback while their regulatory capacities are still

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developing. Under these conditions, persistent stress is not merely a transient emotional state, rather it is a meaningful indicator of psychological maladjustment that can compromise cognitive functioning, emotion regulation and broader mental health functioning (Greenberg, 2008; Tsai et al., 2020).

Among the proximal influences on adolescent stress, parenting remains especially important because parents can structure both the emotional climate of the family and the interpersonal conditions under which adolescents learn to interpret and manage challenge (Pinquart, 2017). Research has consistently shown that negative parenting is associated with internalizing difficulties across development (Pinquart, 2017), suggesting that such parenting may contribute to adolescents' stress experiences (Clayborne et al., 2021). Yet very little research has examined the association so far

The present study focuses on negative parenting, conceptualized as a broader pattern of parenting that includes psychologically controlling behavior, negative disciplinary responses and harsh punishment. Negative parenting can communicate that mistakes, disagreement or emotional expression may elicit domination, criticism or punishment rather than understanding and guidance (Barber, 1996; Van Leeuwen & Vermulst, 2004). Attachment theory provides one basis for expecting negative parenting to be associated with adolescent stress. Through repeated interactions with caregivers, adolescents develop internal working models regarding whether close others are emotionally available, predictable and safe (Bowlby, 1979). Parenting that is chronically intrusive, punitive or emotionally invalidating is likely to weaken that sense of security. When adolescents cannot rely on parental responses as fair, containing or supportive, everyday family interactions may be experienced as threatening rather than regulating. This process should increase hypervigilance, emotional tension and difficulty downregulating distress, all of which are central to stress symptoms. In this sense, negative parenting is consequential not simply because it is undesirable behaviorally but because it alters adolescents' relational expectations in ways that heighten stress reactivity (Barber et al., 2012; Clayborne et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2007; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010).

Social learning theory complements this account by clarifying how parents shape adolescents' responses to challenge through modeling and repeated interaction (Bandura, 1969). Parents do not only impose rules but they also model how emotional tension is interpreted and managed. When parents respond to conflict with hostility, rigid control or emotional withdrawal, adolescents may learn that interpersonal stress is managed through coercion, defensiveness or suppression rather than reflective regulation (Palmer et al., 2020). Over time, such interactions may bias adolescents toward heightened arousal and maladaptive coping when facing demands at home or beyond the family. Conversely, parents who respond with understanding, perspective-taking and emotionally constructive behavior may promote more adaptive appraisals of stressors and better emotion regulation (Morris et al., 2007). Negative parenting may therefore increase adolescent stress both by creating a threatening

relational climate and by repeatedly exposing adolescents to maladaptive models of emotional responding.

Even so, the effect of negative parenting is unlikely to be uniform across families. A crucial limitation of existing research is that it often treats parenting as if its implications were fixed, when in fact the meaning of parental behavior depends partly on the broader relational context in which it occurs (van der Bruggen et al., 2010). This is where parental empathy becomes theoretically important. Empathy is not simply a desirable parental characteristic. Rather, it may shape how adolescents interpret parental behavior and how stressful that behavior becomes.

A particularly relevant dimension is parental cognitive empathy, defined as the capacity to understand the child's perspective and emotional state without necessarily sharing the child's affective experience (Cuff et al., 2016). In the parenting context, cognitive empathy should facilitate more accurate interpretation of adolescent behavior, greater sensitivity to developmental needs and more calibrated responses during conflict (Perez-Albeniz & de Paül, 2003). Even when parents engage in negative practices, higher cognitive empathy may reduce the extent to which those practices are experienced as arbitrary, rejecting or humiliating. Parents who can take the adolescent's perspective may be more likely to explain rules, contextualize discipline and maintain emotional attunement even when setting boundaries. Empirical work has linked parental empathy to more supportive parenting and more favorable developmental outcomes (Ojo et al., 2021; Stern et al., 2015). Thus, cognitive empathy may not eliminate the harmful association between negative parenting and adolescent stress but it may weaken that association by softening adolescents' appraisals of interpersonal threat and invalidation (Stern et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2022).

By contrast, affective dissonance reflects an emotionally discordant orientation toward the child and should intensify rather than buffer the consequences of negative parenting. Conceptually, affective dissonance is not merely the absence of empathy. It reflects a more hostile or emotionally mismatched response pattern in which the child's distress is not met with concern and may even be met with contempt, irritation or pleasure in the child's discomfort (Vachon & Lynam, 2016). Under these conditions, negative parenting is likely to carry stronger meanings of rejection and humiliation. Accordingly, when negative parenting co-occurs with higher affective dissonance, adolescents should be more likely to experience parental behavior as threatening and invalidating, thereby showing higher stress symptoms. Distinguishing cognitive empathy from affective dissonance is therefore essential because the two dimensions are unlikely to function symmetrically: one should attenuate risk, whereas the other should amplify it.

These questions may be particularly important in Vietnam. Adolescent mental health has become an increasingly salient concern in Vietnam and negative parenting has been identified as an important family-based risk factor (Amstadter et al., 2011; La et al., 2020). Parenting in Vietnam is shaped by sociocultural expectations concerning academic achievement, respect for parental authority and family obligation (Mestechkina et al., 2014). Within such contexts, strictness or control may

sometimes be viewed by parents as responsible caregiving rather than as maladaptive behavior. That cultural pattern does not imply that negative parenting is harmless. Rather, it suggests that the psychological meaning of such parenting may depend even more heavily on the relational cues that accompany it. Research in Vietnam has documented associations between controlling or harsh parenting and children's emotional and mental health difficulties (Do, 2023; Tran et al., 2017). However, less is known about the mechanisms through which negative parenting becomes linked to stress-related outcomes and especially whether empathy-related parental processes alter the magnitude of that association. The Vietnamese context is therefore relevant not because the proposed mechanisms are unique to Vietnam but because it provides a context in which the tension between parental authority and empathic attunement is especially salient.

Grounded in attachment theory and social learning theory, the study seeks to clarify not only whether negative parenting is associated with adolescent stress but also under what parental emotional conditions that association becomes weaker or stronger. Accordingly, we proposed the following hypotheses: H1: Negative parenting will be positively associated with adolescents' stress symptoms. H2a: Parental cognitive empathy will moderate this association such that the positive association between negative parenting and adolescent stress will be weaker at higher levels of cognitive empathy. H2b: Parental affective dissonance will moderate this association such that the positive association between negative parenting and adolescent stress will be stronger at higher levels of affective dissonance.

METHOD

Participants

The study used a cross-sectional dyadic survey design involving 457 parent-adolescent dyads from Vietnam. Each dyad comprised one lower secondary school student and one parent, allowing adolescent stress symptoms and parent-reported parenting processes to be assessed from different informants. This design reduced mono-informant bias in the estimation of associations between parenting-related variables and adolescent stress, although all measures remained self-reported.

Adolescents had a mean age of 13.20 years ($SD = 0.82$) and 53.8% were girls. In terms of grade level, 0.7% were in Grade 6, 26.3% in Grade 7, 46.2% in Grade 8 and 26.5% in Grade 9. Most adolescents lived with both biological parents (73.3%), whereas smaller proportions lived only with their mother (2.6%), only with their father (0.2%) with their mother and stepfather (0.4%) or with their father and stepmother (0.2%).

The participating parents had a mean age of 42.60 years ($SD = 4.06$) and most were mothers (86.7%). Regarding educational attainment, 4.4% had completed high school, 6.1% held a college degree, 60.2% held a university degree and 28.0% had postgraduate education. Because the parent sample was predominantly maternal, the findings should be interpreted primarily as reflecting maternal or mother-dominant reports of parenting and empathy.

Design and Procedure

Data were collected through collaboration with lower secondary schools. After school administrators granted permission for recruitment,

information about the study was distributed to students and their parents. Parents provided written informed consent and adolescents provided assent before participation.

Adolescents completed the stress measure during school hours under the supervision of trained research assistants. Parents completed measures of negative parenting and parental empathy through a secure online questionnaire. The two members of each dyad completed their measures separately to preserve response independence. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time without penalty and that their responses would remain confidential and be used only for research purposes. The study protocol was approved by the relevant institutional ethics committee and was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research with human participants.

Measures

Negative Parenting

Negative parenting was operationalized as a composite construct reflecting a broader pattern of adverse parental regulation. Consistent with prior work conceptualizing coercive and intrusive negative parenting practices (Vu et al., 2024), the construct was indexed by three specific forms of negative parenting: psychological control, negative discipline and harsh punishment. Psychological control was assessed with the 7-item Psychological Control Scale (PCS; Barber, 1996). A sample item is “*I change the subject whenever my child has something to say*”. Negative discipline (4 items) and harsh punishment (5 items) were assessed using subscales from the Parenting Behavior Scale–Short Form (PBS-S; Van Leeuwen & Vermulst, 2004). Sample items include “*When my child has been disobedient, I give him/her a chore as punishment*” for negative discipline and “*I spank my child when he/she is disobedient or naughty*” for harsh punishment. Parents rated all items on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always).

Items from the three subscales were summed to create a composite negative parenting score, with higher scores indicating more frequent engagement in psychologically controlling, negatively disciplinary and harsh punitive parenting practices. The PCS and PBS-S have previously been validated in a Vietnamese parent sample (Van Heel et al., 2019). The composite scale showed good internal consistency in the present sample (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .85$).

Adolescent Stress Symptoms

Adolescents’ stress symptoms were measured using the Stress subscale of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales–21 (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). The subscale includes 7 items assessing tension, irritability, overarousal and difficulty relaxing. A sample item is “*I found it difficult to relax*”. Adolescents rated each item on a 4-point scale from 0 (*did not apply to me at all*) to 3 (*applied to me very much or most of the time*). Scores were summed, with higher scores indicating higher levels of stress symptoms. The adolescent version of the DASS-21 has been validated in Vietnamese samples (Le et al., 2017). Internal consistency in the present study was acceptable (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .74$).

Parental Empathy

Parental empathy was assessed using two subscales from the Affective and Cognitive Measure of Empathy (ACME; Vachon & Lynam, 2016) adapted for the parenting context. The study focused on cognitive empathy and affective dissonance because these dimensions were expected to play distinct moderating roles in the association between negative parenting and adolescent stress. In prior work, the ACME was translated into Vietnamese using standard translation and back-translation procedures and its psychometric properties were evaluated in Vietnamese parent samples (Beaton et al., 2000; Sousa & Rojjanasirirat, 2011). Confirmatory factor analyses across two independent parent samples supported a partially replicated three-factor structure comprising Cognitive Empathy (8 items), Affective Dissonance (3 items), and Affective Resonance (6 items), with acceptable fit in the initial sample ($N = 412$; $CFI = .923$, $RMSEA = .056$, $SRMR = .063$) and comparable fit in the replication sample ($N = 550$; $CFI = .936$, $RMSEA = .053$, $SRMR = .059$).

In the present study, cognitive empathy was assessed with 8 items (e.g., “*I can tell when my child is afraid*”) and affective dissonance with 3 items (e.g., “*I get a kick out of making my child feel stupid*”). Higher scores indicated greater cognitive empathy and affective dissonance, respectively. Internal consistency was good for cognitive empathy (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .88$) and modest for affective dissonance (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .61$).

Data Analytic Strategy

Descriptive statistics were first calculated for all study variables. Because several variables showed non-normal distributions, bivariate associations were examined using Spearman rank-order correlations. Correlation magnitudes were interpreted using Cohen’s (2013) conventional benchmarks, with coefficients around .10 treated as small, around .30 as moderate and .50 or greater as large.

To test the hypotheses, two separate moderation models (e.g., Model A and Model B) were estimated using a regression-based conditional process approach equivalent to PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes, 2022). In both models, negative parenting was specified as the predictor and adolescent stress symptoms as the outcome. The models differed only in the moderator entered. In Model A, parental cognitive empathy was specified as the moderator. In Model B, parental affective dissonance was specified as the moderator. Child age and child gender were included as covariates in both models to account for basic demographic variation in adolescent stress symptoms.

Prior to analysis, continuous predictor and moderator variables were mean-centered to facilitate interpretation of lower order coefficients and reduce nonessential multicollinearity in the interaction terms. For each model, the main effects of negative parenting and the moderator, as well as the interaction term between them, were estimated. A statistically significant interaction coefficient was interpreted as evidence that the association between negative parenting and adolescent stress varied as a function of parental empathy-related processes.

Because several variables showed non-normal distributions, bivariate associations were examined using Spearman rank-order correlations. For the moderation analyses, OLS regression was retained because normality of the observed predictor and moderator variables is not an assumption of linear regression; rather, distributional assumptions relevant to conventional inference concern the regression errors (Schmidt & Finan, 2018). OLS also provided a direct framework for estimating the hypothesized interaction and conditional effects (Hayes, 2022). To obtain more robust inference and reduce reliance on normal-theory assumptions, bias-corrected 95% bootstrap confidence intervals were estimated based on 10,000 resamples.

Significant interactions were probed using simple slopes analyses at low (-1 SD), mean and high ($+1$ SD) levels of the moderator. In addition, the Johnson–Neyman technique was used to determine the range of moderator values over which the conditional association between negative parenting and adolescent stress remained statistically significant. Analyses were conducted on cases with complete data for the variables included in each model.

All analyses were conducted in R.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics and bivariate associations for the study variables are presented in Table 1. Negative parenting and adolescent stress symptoms both showed positively skewed distributions, whereas cognitive empathy was negatively skewed. Affective dissonance was particularly skewed and kurtotic, indicating that strongly discordant affective responses were relatively infrequent in the sample. Given these distributional characteristics, rank-order correlations were used for preliminary analyses.

Spearman correlations indicated that negative parenting was positively associated with adolescents' stress symptoms ($r = .40, p < .001$), suggesting a moderate positive association. Negative parenting was weakly and negatively associated with cognitive empathy ($r = -.10, p < .05$) and weakly and positively associated with affective dissonance ($r = .10, p < .10$). Cognitive empathy was negatively associated with adolescent stress symptoms ($r = -.27, p < .001$), whereas affective dissonance was positively associated with adolescent stress symptoms ($r = .15, p < .01$). Cognitive empathy and affective dissonance were modestly negatively correlated ($r = -.16, p < .01$).

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables (N = 457)

	Mean (SD)	Min–Max	Skew	Kurtosis	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Neg.parent	27.73 (6.97)	16–73	1.55	6.10	–	.10	-.10	.40***
2. Aff.diss	3.23 (0.96)	3–15	6.82	61.40		–	-.16**	.15**
3. Cog.emp	32.47 (6.32)	8–40	-1.11	1.43			–	-.27***
4. Strs.Symp	1.95 (2.18)	0–13	1.76	3.79				–

Note. Neg.parent = negative parenting; Aff.diss = affective dissonance; Cog.emp = cognitive empathy; Strs.Symp = Stress Symptoms

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

Moderation by Parental Cognitive Empathy

The first moderation model examined whether parental cognitive empathy moderated the association between negative parenting and adolescents' stress symptoms, controlling for child age and gender. Analyses were based on 448 dyads with complete data. The overall model was significant ($F(5, 442) = 21.77, p < .001$) and explained 19.8% of the variance in adolescent stress symptoms ($R^2 = .198$).

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, negative parenting was positively associated with adolescents' stress symptoms ($b = 0.107, SE = 0.014, t = 7.54, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.079, 0.134]$). Cognitive empathy showed a significant negative main effect ($b = -0.082, SE = 0.015, t = -5.54, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.111, -0.053]$), indicating that higher levels of parental cognitive empathy were associated with lower adolescent stress symptoms. Neither child age nor child gender was significantly associated with stress symptoms in this model.

Consistent with Hypothesis 2a, the interaction between negative parenting and cognitive empathy was significant ($b = -0.005, SE = 0.002, t = -2.81, p < .01, 95\% \text{ bootstrap CI } [-0.009, -0.002]$). The interaction accounted for an additional 1.4% of the variance in stress symptoms ($\Delta R^2 = .014, \Delta F(1, 442) = 7.92, p < .01$). Thus, cognitive empathy moderated the association between negative parenting and adolescent stress, although the incremental effect size was modest.

Simple slopes analyses indicated that the association between negative parenting and stress symptoms was significant at low (-1 SD), average and high ($+1 \text{ SD}$) levels of cognitive empathy. Specifically, the slope was strongest when cognitive empathy was low ($b = 0.140, SE = 0.017, p < .001$), weaker at the mean ($b = 0.107, SE = 0.014, p < .001$) and weakest when cognitive empathy was high ($b = 0.073, SE = 0.020, p < .001$). Johnson–Neyman analyses further indicated that the conditional effect of negative parenting on stress symptoms remained significant across the full observed range of cognitive empathy. Accordingly, higher parental cognitive empathy attenuated but did not eliminate, the positive association between negative parenting and adolescent stress. Figure 2 illustrates this interaction.

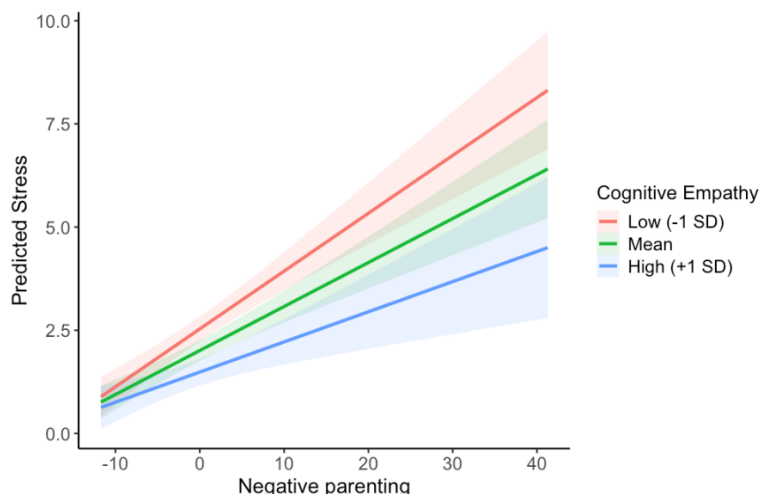


Figure 2. Moderating Role of Parental Cognitive Empathy

Moderation by Parental Affective Dissonance

The second moderation model examined whether parental affective dissonance moderated the association between negative parenting and adolescents' stress symptoms, again controlling for child age and gender. This analysis was also based on 448 dyads with complete data. The model was significant ($F(5, 442) = 16.39, p < .001$), explaining 15.6% of the variance in adolescent stress symptoms ($R^2 = .156$).

Negative parenting remained a significant positive predictor of adolescent stress symptoms ($b = 0.114, SE = 0.014, t = 7.98, p < .001, 95\% CI [0.086, 0.142]$). In contrast, the main effect of affective dissonance was not statistically significant ($b = 0.162, SE = 0.105, t = 1.55, p = .122$). Neither child age nor child gender was significantly associated with stress symptoms in this model.

Consistent with Hypothesis 2b, the interaction between negative parenting and affective dissonance was significant ($b = 0.027, SE = 0.012, t = 2.21, p < .05, 95\% \text{ bootstrap CI } [0.003, 0.051]$). This interaction explained an additional 0.9% of the variance in adolescent stress symptoms ($\Delta R^2 = .009, \Delta F(1, 442) = 4.88, p < .05$). Thus, affective dissonance amplified the association between negative parenting and adolescent stress, although, again, the incremental effect size was small.

Simple slopes analyses showed that the positive association between negative parenting and stress symptoms was significant across low, average and high levels of affective dissonance but became stronger as affective dissonance increased. At the minimum observed level of affective dissonance, the slope was $b = 0.108 (SE = 0.015, p < .001)$. At the mean, the slope was $b = 0.114 (SE = 0.014, p < .001)$. At high levels of affective dissonance (+1 *SD*), the slope increased to $b = 0.140 (SE = 0.018, p < .001)$. Johnson–Neyman analyses indicated that the conditional effect of negative parenting on stress symptoms remained significant across the observed range of affective dissonance. Thus, greater parental affective dissonance intensified but did not create, the association between negative parenting and adolescent stress. Figure 3 depicts this interaction.

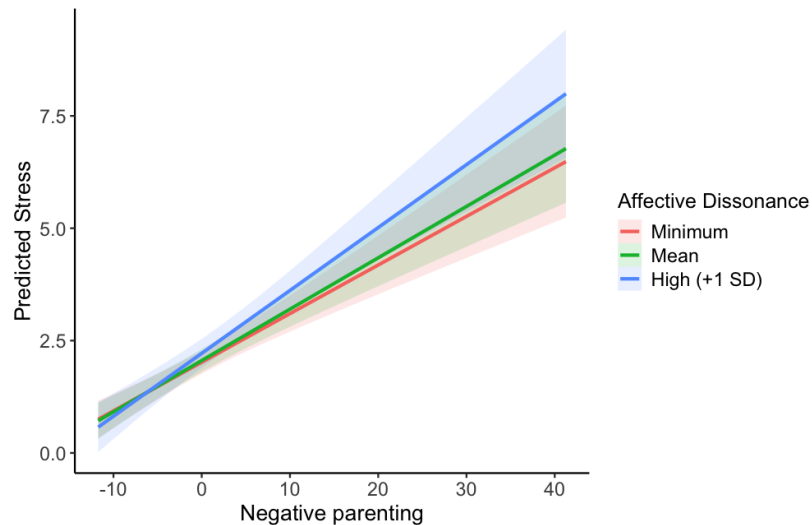


Figure 3. Moderating Role of Parental Affective Dissonance

Across both models (e.g., Model A and Model B), negative parenting was consistently associated with higher adolescent stress symptoms. The moderation analyses clarified that this association varied in magnitude as a function of parental empathy-related processes. Higher parental cognitive empathy weakened the positive association between negative parenting and adolescent stress, whereas higher parental affective dissonance strengthened it. In both cases, however, negative parenting remained significantly related to adolescent stress across the observed range of the moderator. These findings therefore support a pattern of attenuation and amplification, not full protection.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined whether negative parenting was associated with adolescents' stress symptoms and whether this association varied as a function of parental empathy-related processes in a Vietnamese context. Three main findings emerged. First, negative parenting was consistently associated with higher levels of adolescent stress symptoms. Second, parental cognitive empathy attenuated this association, such that the relation between negative parenting and stress was weaker at higher levels of cognitive empathy. Third, parental affective dissonance amplified the association, such that the relation between negative parenting and stress was stronger when parents reported more emotionally discordant responses toward the child. Taken together, these findings suggest that negative parenting is associated with adolescent stress not in a uniform relational vacuum but within an emotional context shaped by how far parents understand versus invalidate the adolescent's internal experience.

The finding that negative parenting was positively associated with adolescent stress is consistent with prior work linking adverse parenting to internalizing difficulties and extends that literature by focusing specifically on stress symptoms rather than broader distress constructs (Barber et al., 2005; Clayborne et al., 2021; Dujardin et al., 2016; Pinquart, 2017). This interpretation is consistent with attachment theory. From an attachment perspective, repeated exposure to coercive,

intrusive or punitive parenting may weaken adolescents' sense that the parent is a reliable source of emotional security (Bowlby, 1979). When parental responses are experienced as controlling, harsh or invalidating, adolescents may come to anticipate family interactions as potential sources of tension rather than comfort. Such expectations should increase hyperarousal, vigilance and difficulty relaxing, all of which are central features of stress symptoms. The present findings therefore support the view that negative parenting is associated with stress not simply because it reflects poor parenting in a general sense but because it may alter adolescents' appraisals of the parent-child relationship in ways that heighten emotional strain (Morris et al., 2007).

Social learning theory offers a complementary explanation. Parents are important models of how emotional tension is interpreted and managed (Bandura, 1969). When parents repeatedly respond to conflict or noncompliance through domination, punitive control or emotional invalidation, adolescents may learn that stressful interpersonal situations are governed by coercion rather than reflective regulation (Bandura, 1969). Over time, this may strengthen maladaptive patterns of stress appraisal and response. In this sense, the positive association between negative parenting and adolescent stress may reflect both the immediate emotional impact of adverse parenting and repeated exposure to dysregulated interpersonal models within the family environment.

Beyond this main effect, the findings indicate that parental cognitive empathy plays a modest but meaningful buffering role. Higher cognitive empathy weakened the positive association between negative parenting and adolescent stress, even though the association remained significant across the observed range of the moderator. This pattern suggests that parents' ability to understand the adolescent's perspective may reduce the degree to which negative parenting is experienced as threatening, arbitrary or rejecting. Parents who are cognitively empathic may still engage in controlling or punitive practices but those practices may be enacted in ways that are more predictable, more contextualized or less humiliating. From the adolescent's standpoint, the parent's capacity for perspective-taking may therefore soften the stress-inducing meaning of negative parenting, even if it does not fully offset its harmful association. This interpretation is consistent with prior work linking parental empathy to more supportive parenting and more favorable child outcomes (Ojo et al., 2021; Stern et al., 2015).

This interpretation provides additional empirical supports for both theoretical frameworks guiding the study. Attachment theory would suggest that even under adverse parenting conditions, parental understanding may preserve some degree of relational security by signaling that the adolescent's emotional experience is at least recognized (Morris et al., 2007). Social learning theory would further suggest that cognitively empathic parents may model more reflective engagement with emotion, thereby reducing the extent to which family conflict becomes a chronic source of dysregulated stress (Bandura, 1969; Ojo et al., 2021). The present findings are therefore more consistent with a partial buffering account than with a fully protective one. Cognitive empathy appears to alter the magnitude of the negative parenting-stress association, not to

neutralize it. That distinction is important both theoretically and practically.

A different pattern emerged for affective dissonance. Although affective dissonance did not show a significant main effect in the adjusted model, it significantly strengthened the positive association between negative parenting and adolescent stress. This pattern suggests that emotionally discordant parental responding may function less as a general predictor of adolescent stress and more as a conditional risk factor that intensifies the harmful relational meaning of negative parenting (Lobo et al., 2021; Morgül, 2025). When negative parenting co-occurs with affective dissonance, adolescents may be especially likely to interpret parental behavior as contemptuous, humiliating or emotionally rejecting. Under those conditions, coercive or punitive parenting should become more stressful because it is embedded in a relational climate that lacks emotional concern and may communicate active invalidation. This interpretation is also consistent with work suggesting that low empathic attunement heightens adolescents' perceptions of threat, rejection and emotional invalidation (Soenens et al., 2007).

This distinction between cognitive empathy and affective dissonance is theoretically important (Vachon & Lynam, 2016). The two constructs should not be treated as opposite ends of a single continuum. Cognitive empathy reflects understanding the child's emotional perspective, whereas affective dissonance reflects an emotionally misaligned or antagonistic stance toward the child. Their differential moderation patterns support this distinction. One attenuated the association between negative parenting and stress, whereas the other amplified it. That asymmetry strengthens the argument that the emotional meaning of parenting behavior depends not only on what parents do but also on how they are emotionally oriented toward the child while doing it. In substantive terms, negative parenting appears most harmful when paired with emotional discord and somewhat less harmful when accompanied by parental understanding.

The findings are also relevant to understanding family processes in Vietnam. Parenting in Vietnam is shaped by norms emphasizing educational attainment, respect for parental authority and family obligation (Mestechkina et al., 2014). Within such a context, strictness and control may often be framed by parents as expressions of responsibility rather than hostility. The present findings do not contradict that cultural reality but they suggest that the adolescent impact of negative parenting may depend partly on the emotional signals that accompany it. Even where authority-based parenting is culturally normative, adolescents may experience coercive parenting as less stress-inducing when it occurs in the context of parental understanding and as more stress-inducing when it is embedded in emotional invalidation. The contribution of the study, therefore, is not to argue that the observed mechanisms are unique to Vietnam but to show that they are meaningful within a sociocultural context in which parental authority and empathic attunement may coexist in tension.

At the same time, the results should be interpreted with appropriate caution. Although both interaction effects were statistically significant, their incremental contributions were small. Thus, parental

empathy-related processes appear to modify rather than substantially alter the association between negative parenting and adolescent stress. Small effects may still be theoretically informative, particularly when they are consistent with theoretically specified processes and their substantive importance should not be judged solely by conventional numerical thresholds (Funder & Ozer, 2019). Nevertheless, the modest effect sizes observed here provide limited evidence of practical significance and should not be taken to imply that changing parental empathy would produce meaningful reductions in adolescent stress. Rather, the findings identify cognitive empathy and affective dissonance as potentially relevant relational processes whose practical importance requires further examination in longitudinal and intervention research.

The findings have potential rather than direct intervention implications, particularly given the small moderation effects and the cross-sectional design, which precludes causal conclusions about whether changes in parenting or empathy would lead to changes in adolescent stress (Wang & Cheng, 2020). Reducing harsh, punitive, or psychologically controlling parenting remains a more direct focus for parenting interventions, consistent with evidence linking parenting practices to internalizing difficulties and showing that parent-focused interventions can improve youth internalizing outcomes (Pinquart, 2017; Yap et al., 2016). Parental perspective-taking and emotional attunement may represent complementary targets for future intervention research, given evidence regarding the developmental relevance of parental empathy and the potential benefits of attachment- and emotion-focused parenting interventions (Jugovac et al., 2022; Stern et al., 2015). However, the present study does not establish that increasing cognitive empathy or reducing affective dissonance would produce meaningful reductions in adolescent stress. Intervention studies are therefore needed to determine whether modifying these empathy-related processes leads to practically significant changes in adolescent outcomes. In contexts such as Vietnam, where parental authority and family obligation remain important aspects of parenting (Mestechkina et al., 2014), such research could examine whether empathy-focused components can make parental authority more emotionally attuned and less stress-inducing without framing intervention as a rejection of parental authority.

Finally, child age and gender were not significantly associated with adolescent stress in either moderation model. The absence of an age effect may partly reflect the restricted developmental range of the sample, which consisted primarily of early adolescents and therefore provided limited age variability. The nonsignificant gender effect suggests that, after accounting for negative parenting and parental empathy-related processes, stress symptoms did not differ substantially by gender in this sample. Because these variables were included as covariates rather than focal predictors, these null associations should be interpreted cautiously.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design precludes conclusions about temporal ordering or causality. Although the analyses were framed in terms of parenting predicting adolescent stress, reciprocal processes are also plausible. Adolescents with elevated stress symptoms may evoke harsher or more

dysregulated parenting responses over time, making transactional longitudinal designs especially important for future research (Ivanova et al., 2022). Second, although the dyadic design reduced shared method variance by separating informants across key constructs, the study still relied on self-report measures. Parents may have underreported negative parenting or affective dissonance and adolescents' reports of stress may have been influenced by broader contextual factors not assessed here (Paulhus & Vazire, 2007). Third, the parent sample consisted predominantly of mothers, which limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized across paternal and maternal caregiving contexts. Fourth, affective dissonance showed only modest internal consistency in the present sample, which warrants caution in interpreting the precision of that moderation effect. Fourth, affective dissonance was assessed with only three items and showed modest internal consistency in the present sample. This coefficient should be interpreted in light of both the brevity and distributional characteristics of the measure. Coefficient alpha is sensitive to the number of items (Cortina, 1993; Schmitt, 1996), and substantial skew can reduce inter-item correlations and, consequently, alpha, particularly when scales contain few items (Greer et al., 2006). In the present sample, affective dissonance showed a pronounced floor effect, with responses concentrated near the lower end of the scale and relatively few participants reporting elevated levels. This concentration resulted in limited variability across much of the affective-dissonance continuum. Such range restriction can reduce statistical power to detect interaction effects in moderated regression (Aguinis & Stone-Romero, 1997), while the small number of observations at higher levels of affective dissonance may also reduce the precision of estimates in that part of the distribution. At the same time, the observed interaction was in the theoretically expected direction, with higher affective dissonance strengthening the positive association between negative parenting and adolescent stress. This consistency with the hypothesized pattern lends support to the substantive interpretation of the finding, but it does not eliminate the psychometric and distributional limitations. Accordingly, given the small magnitude of the interaction, the affective-dissonance moderation effect should be interpreted cautiously and replicated in future research using more comprehensive and reliable measurement and samples showing greater variability in affective dissonance.

Despite these limitations, the study makes several contributions. It extends the parenting literature by treating adolescent stress symptoms as a focal outcome, not merely a subsidiary feature of internalizing distress. It also advances a more relational account of parenting effects by showing that the association between negative parenting and adolescent stress depends partly on parental empathy-related processes. Most importantly, it suggests that the emotional meaning of negative parenting matters. Coercive and punitive parenting appears especially detrimental when embedded in emotional discord and somewhat less detrimental when accompanied by parental understanding. This emphasis on relational meaning moves beyond a simple catalog of harmful parenting behaviors and offers a more mechanism-oriented framework for understanding why adolescents may respond differently to similar parenting practices.

The findings also have practical implications, although those implications should be framed cautiously given the noncausal design. Interventions aimed at reducing adolescent stress may benefit not only from targeting harsh, punitive or psychologically controlling parenting behaviors but also from strengthening parents' perspective-taking and emotional attunement (Lobo et al., 2021). In contexts such as Vietnam, where parental authority may remain highly valued, empathy-focused parenting support may be especially useful if it is framed not as a rejection of parental authority but as a means of making authority more emotionally attuned and less stress-inducing for adolescents. Such an approach may be more culturally acceptable than interventions that simply urge parents to be less controlling without addressing the relational processes through which control is communicated and interpreted.

CONCLUSION

The present study showed that negative parenting, conceptualized as a broader pattern of coercive and invalidating parental regulation, was positively associated with adolescent stress symptoms in a Vietnamese sample. This association was weaker when parents reported higher cognitive empathy and stronger when parents reported higher affective dissonance. The findings therefore suggest that parental empathy-related processes do not erase the adverse association between negative parenting and stress but they do shape its intensity. Understanding adolescent stress in family contexts may thus require attention not only to whether parents engage in negative parenting but also to whether such parenting is embedded in parental empathy.

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