Conforming to Classroom Aggression Norms: A Longitudinal Assessment of the Contributions of Empathy and Moral Disengagement

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Why study aggressive behavior?

- Robust predictor of adjustment difficulties for children and adolescents[4-6]

- Important to understand how aggressive behavior develops
  - Harsh parenting, experiences of high distress, peer influence[7-9]
 - Peer influence may be particularly important in late childhood[10, 11]

[4]Bierman et al., 2013; [5]Temcheff et al., 2011; [6]Wasserman et al., 2003, [7]Lansford, 2018; [8]Ribeaud & Eisner, 2010; [9]Tremblay et al., 2004; [10]Farrell et al., 2017; [11]Elsaesser et al., 2013

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The role of classroom behavioral norms

- Norms can represent the perception, expectation, or presence of behaviors[14,15]

- Injunctive norms represent socially approved expectations for peers' behavior, often based upon popular peers[16-18]

[14]Cialdini et al., 1991; [15]Crick & Dodge, 1994; [16]Killen & Smetana, 2015, [17]Stoltz et al., 2016, [18]Laninga-Wijnen et al., 2017

The present study
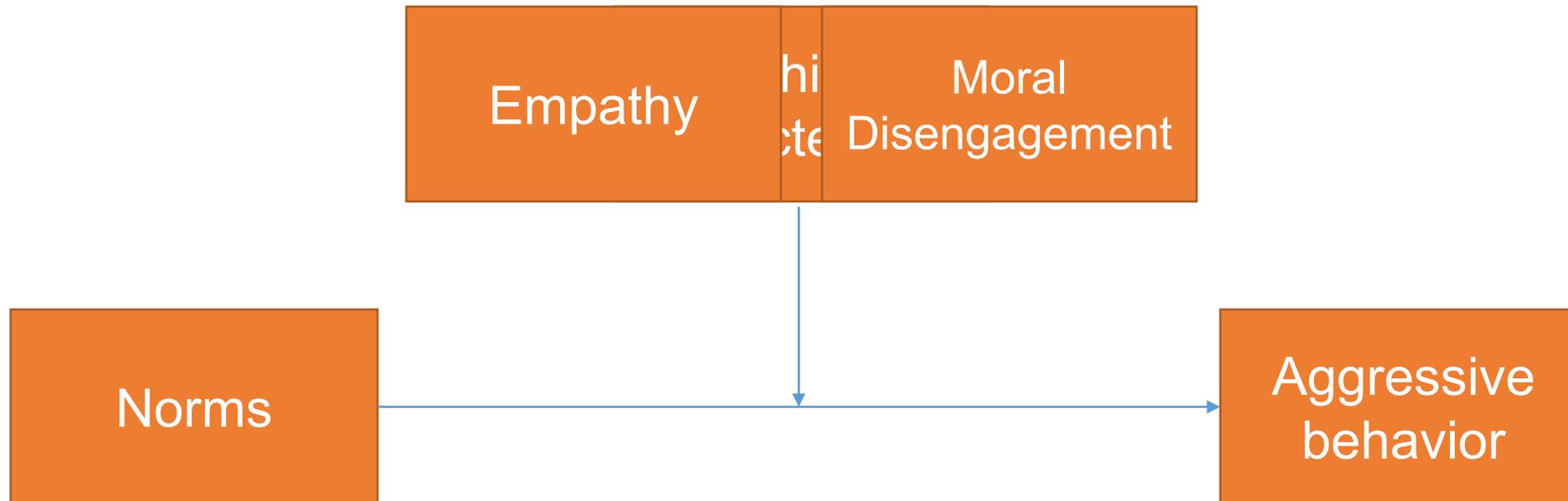
[19]Crick & Dodge, 1996; [20]Lockwood et al., 2013; [21]Gini et al., 2014; [22]Hymel & Perren, 2015; [23]Lovett & Sheffield, 2007; [24]White-Ajmani, 2014

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The present study

- Empathy and moral disengagement will moderate the relation between injunctive norms for aggression and children's aggressive behavior over the course of a school year

Methods: Participants

- 1466 children from fourth and fifth grade classrooms
- M_{age} = 10.1, *SD* = .67
- 48.6% female
- 55.1% White, 36.1% Black, 4.1% Hispanic/Latinx, 4.7% other

Methods: Measures

Construct	Reporter	Measure	Items	Scale/Rating System	T1 Alpha
Aggressive behavior	Teacher	Children's Social Behavior Scale	15	1 (*Never true*) – 5 (*Always true*)	**.96**
		Reactive-Proactive Aggression Questionnaire	12	1 (*Never*) – 5 (*All the time*)	**.94**
Aggressive behavior	Peers	Single items	3	1 (*Not at all*) – 3 (*A lot*)	**.85**
Popularity	Peers	Single item	1	1 (*Not at all*) – 3 (*A lot*)	-
Empathy	Self	Empathy Index Questionnaire	7	1 (*Not very true of me*) – 5 (*Very true of me*)	**.85**
Moral disengagement	Self	Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement	32	1 (*Strongly Disagree*) – 5 (*Strongly Agree*)	**.87**

[25]Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; [26]Raine et al., 2006; [27]Troop-Gordon & Ranney, 2014; [28]Bryant, 1982; [29]Bandura et al., 1996

Methods: Procedure

- Data were collected from two cohorts of schools across two academic years (2017-2018, 2018-2019)
- 13 schools, 91 classroom teachers
  - 71.9% of children
- Fall, winter, and spring data collection

Methods: Analysis

- Three-level multigroup latent growth curve analyses
- Examining the effect of classroom-level norms and child-level empathy/moral disengagement on
  - Initial levels of aggressive behavior
  - Change in aggressive behavior over the school year
- Cross-level moderating effect of empathy and moral disengagement
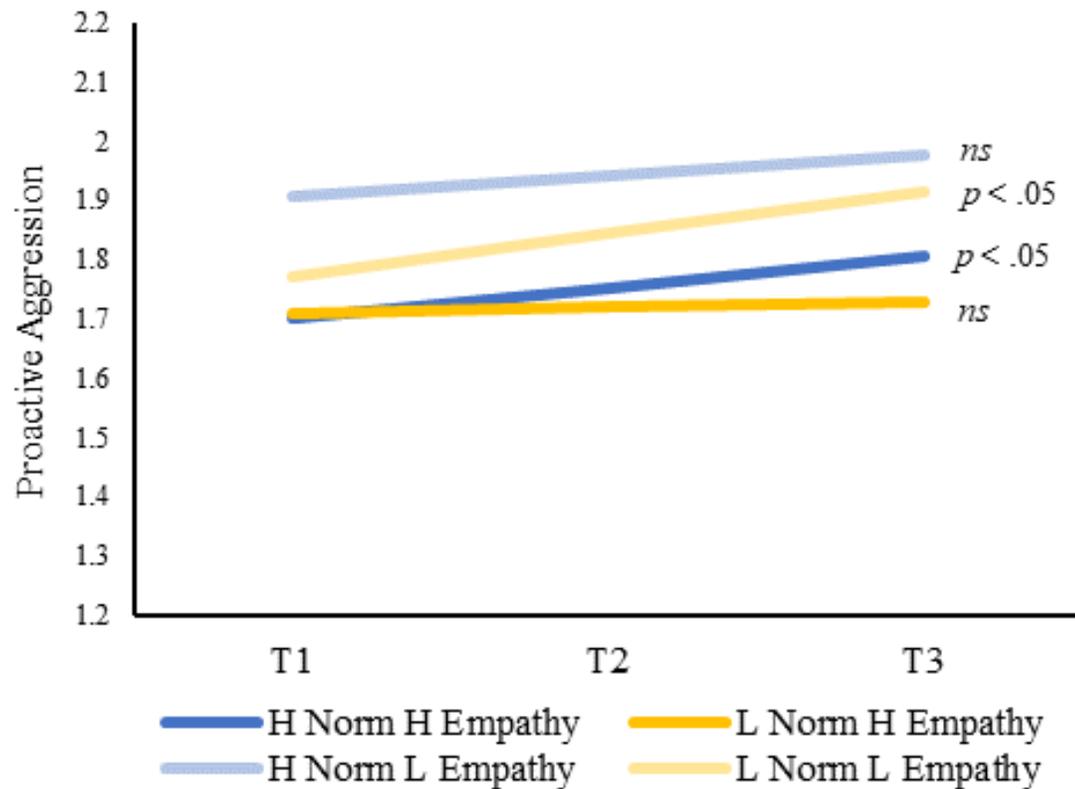
Methods: Analysis
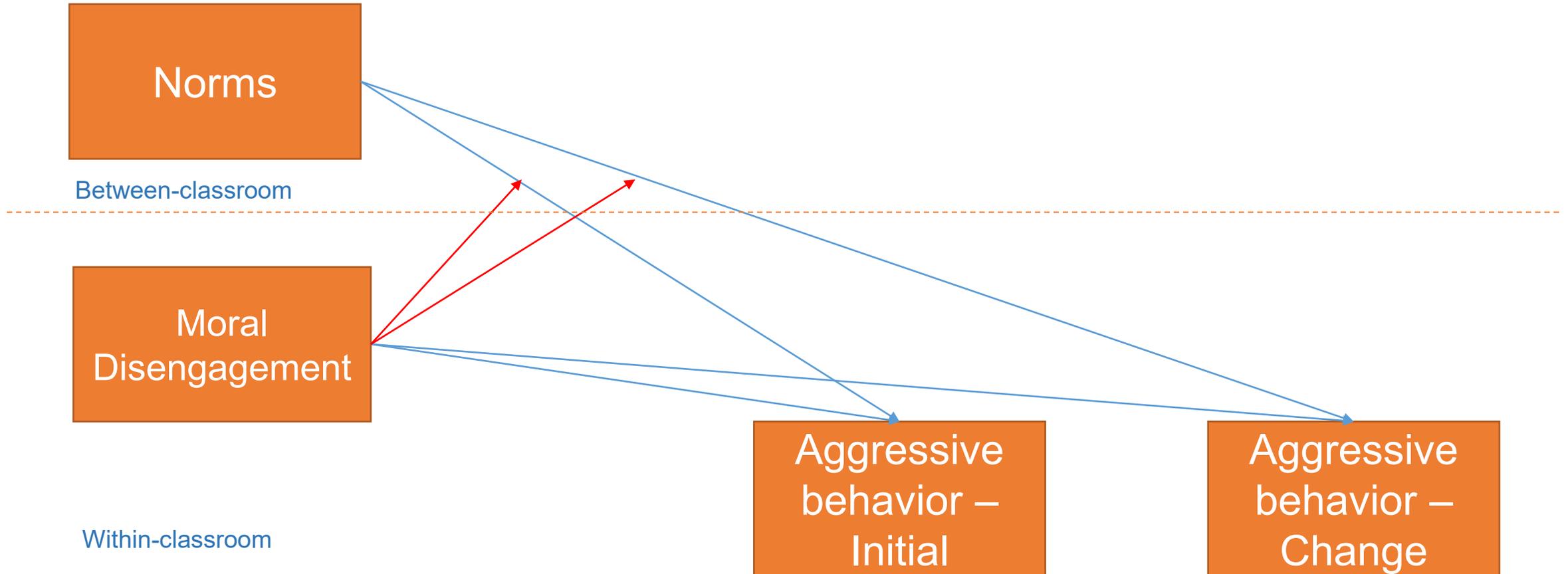
Results: Direct Effects

- Moral disengagement and empathy predict initial levels of aggressive behavior (all types) but not change in behavior

- Classroom injunctive norms for aggression did not predict initial levels or changes in aggressive behavior on their own

Results: Interaction Effects

Growth in Proactive Aggression: Boys

Growth in Proactive Aggression: Girls

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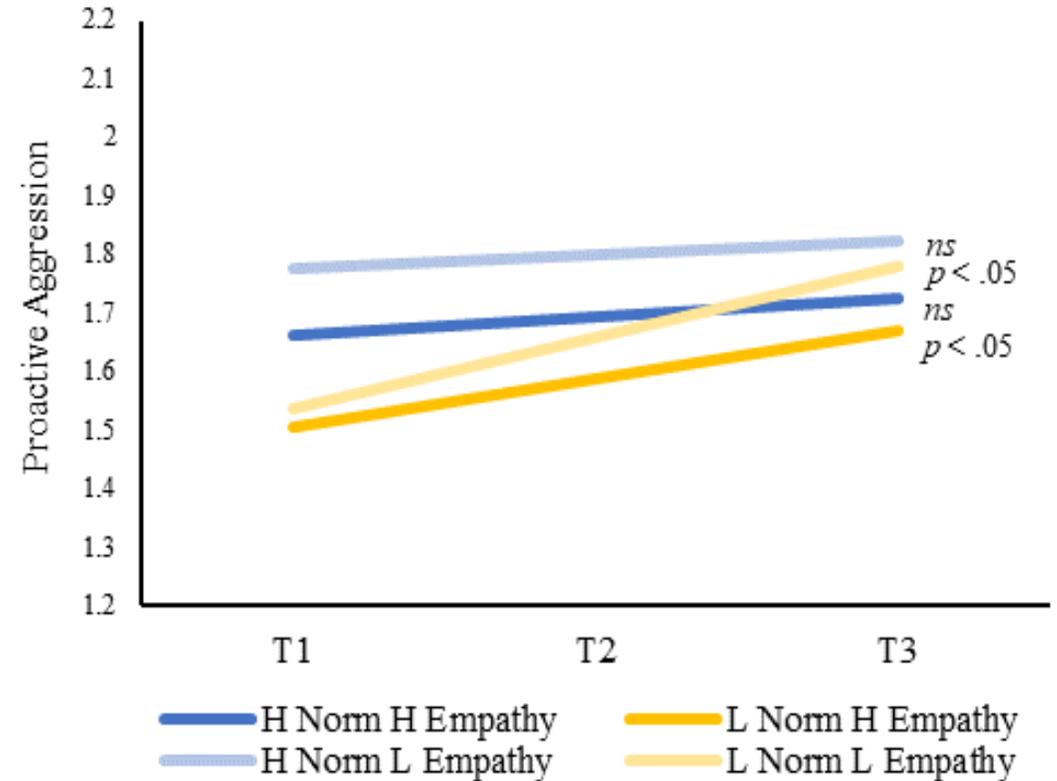
Results: Interaction Effects

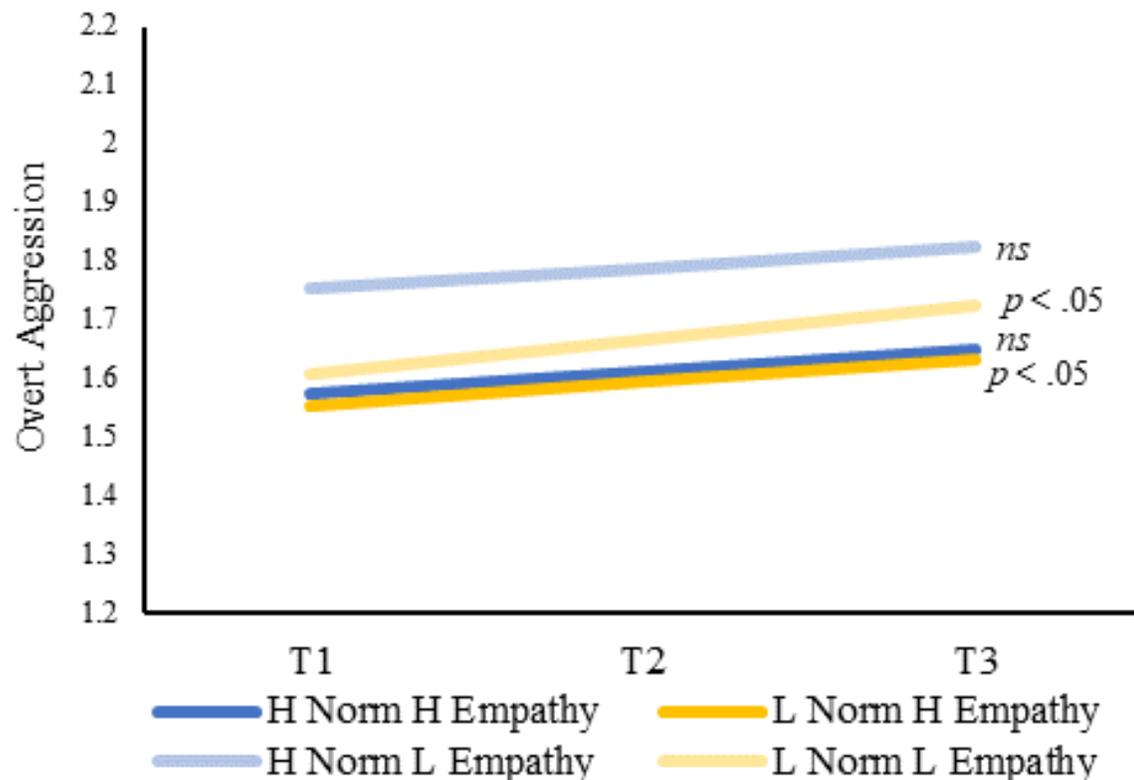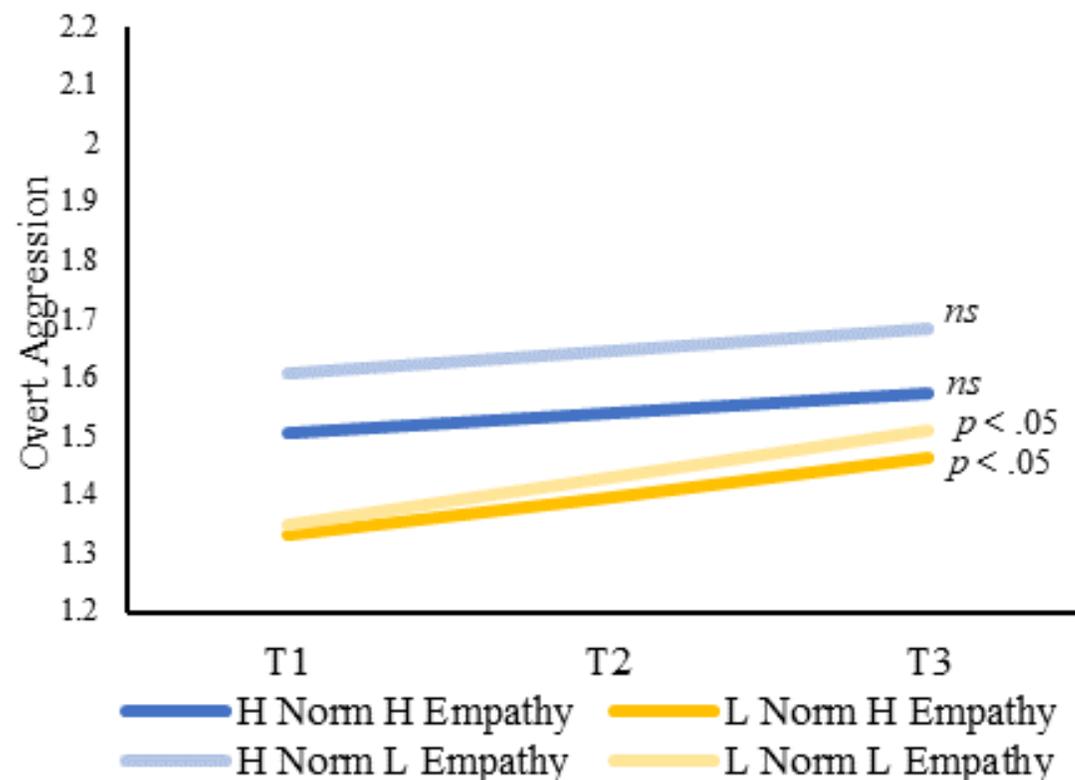**Growth in Overt Aggression: Boys**

Growth in Overt Aggression: Girls

Results: Interaction Effects

Growth in Relational Aggression: Boys
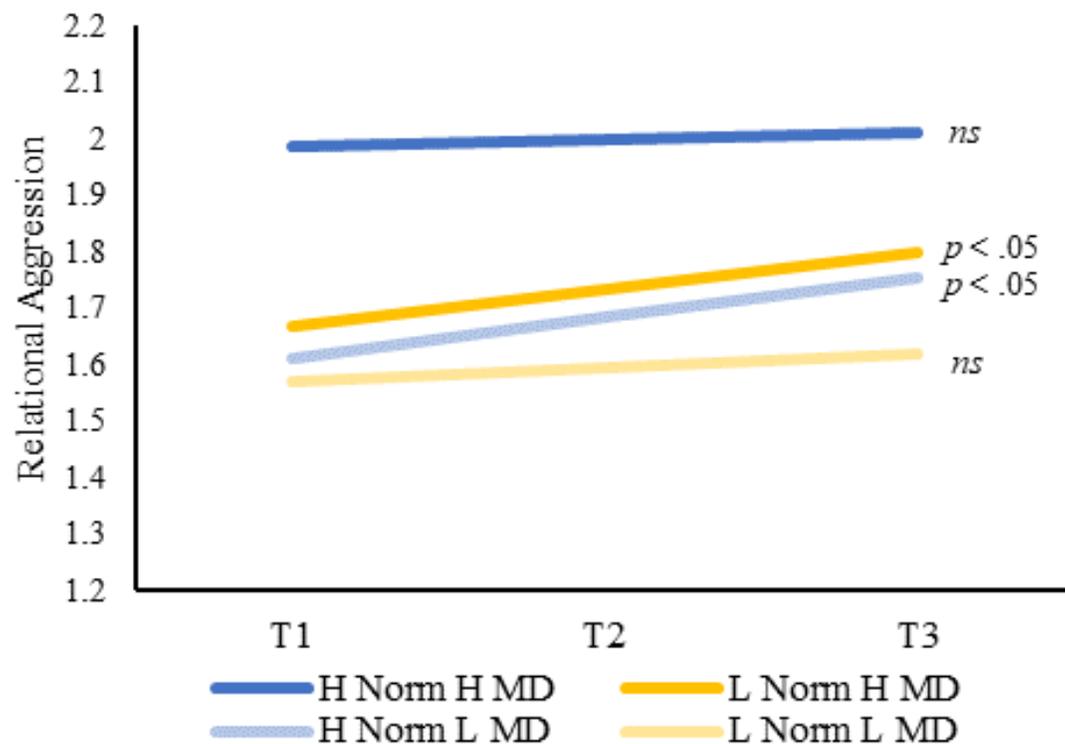
Growth in Relational Aggression: Girls
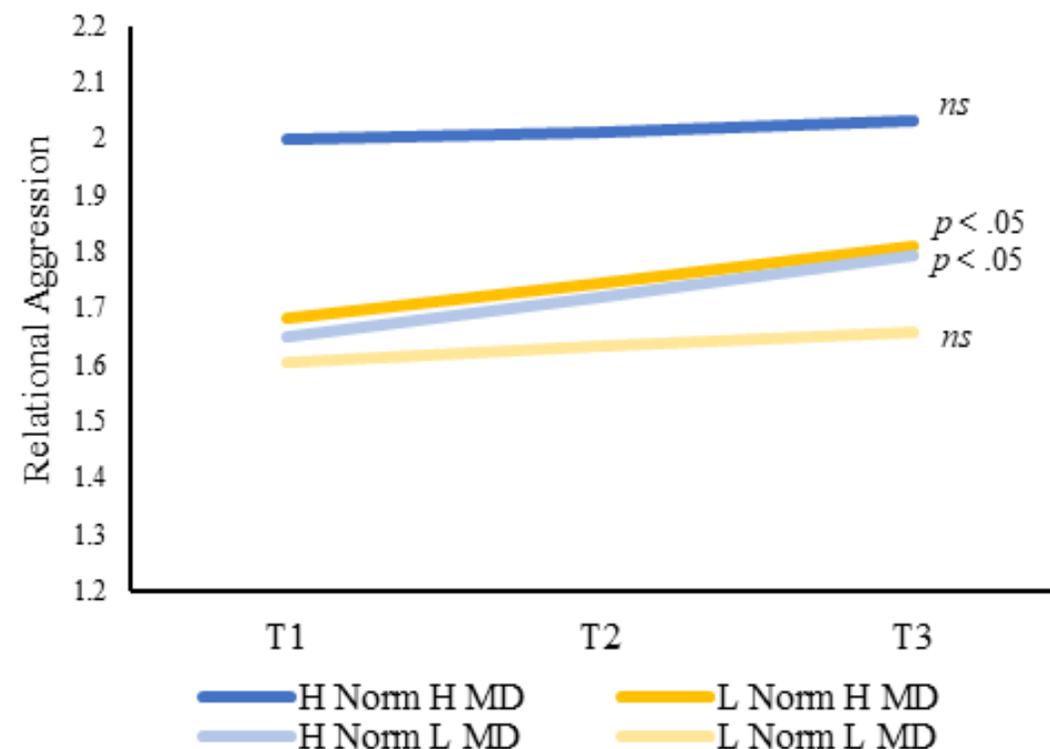
Results: Summary

- Interactions between the injunctive norm for aggression and either empathy or MD were found for teacher-reported, but not peer-reported, aggression.

- Although exact findings varied as a function of aggression type, teachers in classrooms with a higher positive association between aggression and popularity reported higher levels of aggression for youth with low levels of empathy or high levels of MD.

Why does this matter?

- These findings advance the literature by demonstrating that individual characteristics may make youth more or less likely to conform to classroom aggression norms.

- Factors contributing to resistance to detrimental norms may be key targets of intervention seeking to reduce youth aggression.

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Thank you!