Interpretations of Infant Crying: Evidence for Positive Parental Distortions

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Persistent crying has often been cited as a predictor of child abuse. However, only a small percentage of persistent criers is abused. It is likely that parental interpretations of aversive behaviors, rather than the simple amount of crying, is a major factor in abuse (Murray, 1979). Experts view early crying as unintentional and reflective of physiological states (Barr, 2000), but parents typically ascribe intentionality to their infant's behavior from birth (Gustafson & Deconti, 1990). One purpose of this study was to explore parental perceptions of intentionality to better understand beliefs that may mediate caregiving strategies.

Middle-class parents of 8 healthy newborns (4 female, 4 male) agreed to participate in a grounded theory study of infant crying. Parents were interviewed three times when their infants were between 2 weeks and 3 months of age. Parents also completed 24-hour diaries of crying, sleeping, and feeding patterns before each interview. Interviews included open-ended questions regarding crying and other communicative behavior. Transcripts of interviews were coded using NVivo software for analyzing qualitative data. When the babies were 3 months of age, parents completed the Carey Infant Temperament Scale (1968) and the Feldman and Resnick (1996) Infant Intentionality Interview.
Analyses suggested that the infants could be clustered into two groups: infants who were relatively more demanding compared with infants who were relatively more rewarding. Excessive crying (total crying and fussing for 3 or more hours in a 24-hour period) did not differentiate between the two groups. Rather, the more demanding babies had high cry-to-fuss ratios and parents frequently described these babies as having colic/gas pains or fits of frantic crying, suggesting that parents had difficulty soothing their babies (Maldonado-Duran & Sauceda-Garcia, 1996; St. James-Roberts, 1998). These babies were also more likely to have difficult ratings on the temperament scale. Babies who were more rewarding were likely to have easy temperaments and had low cry-to-fuss ratios. Parents of rewarding babies also commented frequently on playful behaviors, smiling, and positive mood.

Parents of the more rewarding babies had high beliefs in intentionality based on both parental interviews and questionnaire data. They were also more likely to comment that their babies had positive intentions rather than negative intentions, and to make positive attributions rather than negative attributions. In contrast, parents of demanding babies had lower beliefs in the intentionality of their babies' behavior and they were less likely to make attributions (either positive or negative) than parents of rewarding babies.
These data are consistent with a positivity bias in parental perceptions (Miller, 1995), suggesting that parents are likely to be optimists and to attribute intentionality to good behaviors. By contrast, problem behaviors are more likely to be viewed as transitory characteristics of situational origin, rather than intentional or dispositional. This positivity bias may be a protective factor in buffering demanding infants from abuse in a low risk sample. However, it is hypothesized that parents under stress may view their infants' aversive behaviors as intentional and manipulative. Thus, demanding babies in a sample at risk for abuse may not be protected by the positive parental distortions observed in this study.

References


Research Questions

One purpose of this study was to explore parental perceptions of intentionality because these beliefs may mediate caregiving strategies. For example, parents may be more likely to make punitive responses, or to ignore crying, if they believe they are being intentionally manipulated by this behavior. Of interest is also the question of whether variations in temperament or levels of crying affect parental perceptions of intentionality. We expected that problem crying and difficult temperament would predict stronger beliefs in intentionality by parents. The specific questions addressed were:

• How does problem crying behavior relate to temperament?
• How does problem crying behavior relate to beliefs in intentionality?
• Are parents of difficult infants more or less likely than parents of easier babies to view their behavior as intentional?
Method

Parents of 8 healthy newborns (4 female, 4 male) participated in a qualitative study of infant crying and other communicative behavior.

Parents were interviewed 3 times when their infants were 2 weeks - 3 months of age. 24-hour diaries of crying and feeding served as a stimulus for discussion. 20 diaries were completed. Open-ended questions were asked about crying (e.g. “How do you know why s/he is crying? Besides crying, what other ways does your baby communicate?”). Audiotapes of 21 interviews were transcribed (averaging 13,398 characters per interview) and coded using NVIVO software for qualitative analysis. At 3 months, parents completed the Carey Infant Temperament Scale and the Feldman and Resnick Intentionality Questionnaire.
• Diary (D) Measures

  Excessive crying?: coded yes if cried or fussed for 3 hours in the preceding 24-hour period

  Cry to Fuss Ratio: coded as high if the number of minutes crying exceeded the number of minutes fussing

• Temperament

  Easy: infants meeting the criteria for easy based on dimensions of rhythmicity, adaptability, positive mood, etc. (N=4)

  Difficult/intermediate: infants not meeting the criteria for easy (e.g. difficult, intermediate, slow to warm up) (N=4)

• Infant Intentionality Questionnaire (Q)

  Intentionality: coded as high if the average rating was above the scale mid-point

  Negative to Positive Ratio: coded as high if the average of the negative items (e.g. “some infants are spiteful”) exceeded the positive items (e.g. “your infant tries to help you”)
• Parental Narratives (N)

Transcripts were coded for the number of characters of conversation pertaining to the following topics:

**Colic:** any mention of colic or gas

**Frantic Crying:** descriptions of crying that appeared to be unsoothable, i.e. “he goes crazy and freaks out hollering”

**Play, Smile, Happy:** any mention of these positive behaviors or states in the transcripts

**Positive Intentionality:** statements suggesting positive intent, i.e. “she wants us to come and get her”

**Negative Intentionality:** statements suggesting negative intent, i.e. “he kicked and pushed the bottle away”

**Positive Attributions:** statements suggesting positive traits, i.e. “he is easy going”

**Negative attributions:** statements suggesting negative traits, i.e. “she’s a fussy baby”
Results

Figure 1a: Difficult temperament was not related to excessive crying but rather to having a high ratio of crying to fussing. This suggests that although difficult infants did not cry a lot, they were likely to be less consolable when they did cry.

Figure 1b: When infants had more crying than fussing, (high cry-fuss ratio), parents were more likely to view their behavior as unintentional, contrary to expectations.
Figure 1a. Diary Data (2 weeks - 3 months) and Temperament (3 months)

Excessive Crying? (D)

Difficult/Intermediate:
- Yes: 38%
- No: 62%

Easy:
- Yes: 33%
- No: 67%

High Cry to Fuss Ratio? (D)

Difficult/Intermediate:
- Yes: 38%
- No: 62%

Easy:
- Yes: 11%
- No: 89%
Figure 1b. Diary Data (2 weeks - 3 months) and Intentionality (3 months)
Results (cont’d)

**Figure 2a:** In the interviews, parents rating their infants as easy were more likely to make positive statements about intentionality and attributions, whereas parents of difficult infants were more likely to make negative statements about intentionality and made few attributions, either positive or negative.

**Figure 2b:** Parents of difficult infants were more likely to mention colic and frantic crying episodes and less likely to mention positive behaviors or states (playing, smiling, happy mood).
Figure 2a. Parental Narratives (2 weeks - 3 months) and Temperament (3 months)
Figure 2b. Parental Narratives (2 weeks - 3 months) and Temperament (3 months)
Results (cont’d)

**Figure 3:** Parents with low beliefs in intentionality were more likely than parents with high beliefs in intentionality to mention problem crying behaviors (colic, frantic crying) and less likely to mention more rewarding behaviors such as playing and smiling.

**Figure 4:** Parents of more difficult babies had lower beliefs overall in the intentionality of their baby’s behavior.

**Figure 5:** Babies in the study appeared to cluster into two groups: those that were demanding and those that were rewarding to care for.
Figure 3. Parental Narratives (2 weeks to 3 months) and Intentionality Scores (Q) (3 months)
Figure 4. Intentionality and Temperament (3 months)
Figure 5. Summary of Findings

**Demandingness** | **Rewardingness**
---|---

**Diary Data (2 weeks to 3 months)**
- High Cry-fuss Ratio on Diary
- Frantic Crying
- Colic-gas

**Parental Narratives (2 weeks to 3 months)**
- Play
- Happening
- Smiling

**Parental Questionnaires (3 months)**
- Low Beliefs in Intentionality (but with a high ratio of negative to positive intentionality)
- Difficult or Intermediate Temperament
- High Beliefs in Intentionality (mostly positive)
- Easy Temperament

**Statements about Negative Intentionality**

**Statements about Positive Intentionality**

**Few Attributions (Positive or Negative)**
Conclusions

The infants in this study clustered into two groups, those who were more demanding and those who were more rewarding to care for based on diary measures, temperament ratings, and spontaneous comments during interviews. Demanding babies did not cry excessively but appeared to have problems with affect regulation.

Although parents of demanding babies were more likely to make statements about negative intentions, questionnaire results suggested that these parents had low beliefs in the intentionality of their babies’ behavior overall. In addition, they were reluctant to make attributions that were negative or positive during the interviews.
These findings are reminiscent of studies that suggest that there is a positivity bias in the perception of negative behaviors by parents. Parents tend to be optimistic and to want to view negative behaviors as due to transitory or situational factors, while positive behaviors are viewed as internal, stable, and intentional.

Positive parental distortions may buffer demanding infants in a low risk sample such as this one. Whether or not such a positivity bias exists in a more stressed, high risk sample is a question for future research.