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A Cross-Cultural Description of Strategies Used by Parents During Everyday Conflicts with their Young Children

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Abstract

Real parent-child interaction where the parent says, in effect, "No, this interaction cannot proceed as it is," is the focus of this description. For example, parents may want their 2 year olds to stay out of the grass where fire ants lurk, not play with the can opener, learn that a wasp is a type of bug, or understand that wet diapers need to be changed. If children protest in any way, interchanges are coded as discordant. The first finding is that African American families from Alabama are significantly more verbal than European American families. The second finding is that there are both striking cultural differences in the types of strategies parents use to mark conflict and at the same time remarkable parallels.

Introduction

Recent work has highlighted the frequency of conflict that occurs every day between parents and toddlers (e.g., Dix, 1991; Eisenberg, 1992), peaking at around 30 months of age (Kuczynski, Kochanska, Radke-Yarrow, & Girnius-Brown, 2009). Laible and Thompson (2002) identified characteristics of "high quality conflict," such as discussion of emotions and consequences of actions, due to its presumed relationship to children's perspective-taking, conflict resolution, and moral understanding. By contrast, mother-child conflict has been shown to occur more often, with poorer quality, in mother-child pairs with insecure attachment (Laible, Panfile, & Makariev, 2008), and to be associated with negative discipline and aggression in early childhood (Alink et al., 2009), and even mental disorder, or domestic violence issues (e.g., Huang, O'Brien Caughy, Lee, Miller, & Genevro, 2009).

We adopt a different perspective, namely that mother-child conflict is a normal part of everyday life, and is therefore likely to vary in culturally-mediated ways across groups and contexts (cf. Briggs, 1992). The purpose of this study is to examine cultural variability as an important factor in the understanding of parent-child conflict. To that end, our specific interest is the identification of particular verbal strategies used by parents of working-class European American and African American children to notify their children that what they are doing needs to change.

Method

Design
•Ethnographic approach, descriptive intent, and longitudinal sampling
•Naturalistic observation; 2nd ½ hour transcribed verbatim of up to six samples per child

Participants
•12 families from rural European American working-class community in Indiana (IND) and 9 families from rural African American working-class community in Alabama (ALA)
•Children between ages of 1 ½ and 3 ½ years
•Met qualifications for free- or reduced-lunch (all but 2 ALA families)
•Samples divided into Younger (20-32 mos) and Older (34-42 mos)

Table 1
Participants from Indiana and Alabama

Child *	Age of Sample (in months)								
Betsy	--	--	--	26	--	--	--	36	--
Billy	--	22	24	--	--	30	--	36	--
Chrissie	--	--	24	--	28	--	--	--	--
Charity	--	--	24	--	28	--	34	36	42
Derek	--	--	24	--	--	30	--	--	--
David	--	--	24	--	28	30	--	--	--
Evan	20	--	24	--	28	--	--	36	--
Janet	--	--	24	--	28	--	--	36	--
Kerry	--	--	24	--	28		--	36	--
Ronald	--	--	--	26	--	--	--	--	--
Scott	--	--	24	--	--	--	--	--	--
West	--	--	24	--	--	--	--	--	--

Child *	Age of Sample (in									
Alicia	2	2	2	–	3	–	3	–	–	4
Daphne	–	–	2	3	3	–	3	–	4	4
Lamont	2	2	2	–	3	3	–	3	–	–
Roland	2	2	2	–	–	3	–	3	–	4
Sebrina	2	2	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Markus	2	–	–	–	3	–	–	–	–	–
Shameki	–	–	2	3	3	–	3	3	–	4
Stillman	2	–	2	–	–		3			
Tahleah	2	–	–	–	3	–	–	3	–	4

* Children assigned pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality

Procedures of grounded theory
•Categories based in the data themselves (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)
•Trustworthiness sought through recursive analysis of episodes (Ely, 1991)
•Thick and rich description (Geertz, 1972)

Definition of "discordant" utterance
- Defined as any speech act that communicated "No, this interaction cannot proceed as it going"—approached inductively (c.f., L. Sperry, D. Sperry, & Hamil, 2008)
- Averaged 85% intercoder reliability identifying discordant utterance
- Averaged 83% intercoder reliability identifying type of discordant utterance

Types of "discordant" utterances
- Seventeen speech act types of discordant utterances identified (see Results)

•Range from Orders, Urges, and Prohibitions (common in both communities) to Promises, Criticisms, and Warnings (much less common)

Results

Table 2
Types of Saying "No" Common in Alabama and Uncommon in Indiana

ALABAMA (across 22 hours of interaction)				
Rates per Hour	REPEATED REQUEST			
Younger Children	28 (374)	8 (108)	15 (199)	8 (102)
Older Children	17 (145)	14 (117)	11 (89)	4 (36)
Total Rate	24 (519)	10 (225)	13 (288)	6 (138)
INDIANA (across 16 hours of interaction)				
Younger Children	2 (22)	1 (14)	1 (10)	1 (11)
Older Children	2 (8)	0 (1)	1 (3)	1 (5)
Total Rate	2 (30)	1 (15)	1 (13)	1 (16)

Results (continued)

Table 3
Types of Saying "No" About as Common in Alabama and Indiana

ALABAMA (across 22 hours of interaction)				
Rates per Hour				
Younger Children	49 (660)	53 (710)	28 (382)	2 (31)
Older Children	43 (365)	38 (325)	25 (209)	3 (23)
Total Rate	47 (1025)	47 (1035)	27 (591)	2 (54)
INDIANA (across 16 hours of interaction)				
Younger Children	51 (613)	29 (349)	17 (199)	2 (18)
Older Children	19 (77)	14 (55)	7 (29)	3 (10)
Total Rate	43 (690)	25 (404)	14 (228)	2 (28)

Table 4
Types of Saying "No" More Than Twice as Common in Alabama Than in Indiana

ALABAMA (across 22 hours of interaction)						
Rates per Hour		DENIAL/			3rd PERSON	
Younger Children	25 (331)	16 (216)	12 (162)	10 (135)	6 (87)	5 (69)
Older Children	21 (181)	18 (156)	7 (57)	12 (102)	8 (65)	3 (24)
Total Rate	23 (512)	17 (372)	10 (219)	11 (237)	7 (152)	4 (93)
INDIANA (across 16 hours of interaction)						
Younger Children	10 (119)	4 (48)	4 (53)	5 (61)	3 (31)	1 (14)
Older Children	8 (33)	7 (26)	1 (3)	3 (13)	2 (8)	1 (5)
Total Rate	10 (152)	5 (74)	4 (56)	5 (74)	2 (39)	1 (19)

Interpretations

- African American parents in Alabama were more than twice as likely to use verbal strategies to modify their children's behavior than were European American parents in Indiana (overall, the rate of comments during conflict was 253 per hour in Alabama versus 124 per hour in Indiana)

- Parents in Alabama used some speech acts that almost never occurred in Indiana, namely *repeated requests*, *provocations* or teases, *interruptions*, and *threats.*
For example, 24-month-old Alicia and her mother were examining pictures on the coffee table. Alicia got interested in her mother's lipstick in her purse. To distract her, her mother said, **M:Betty lipstick?/ A:Betty lipstick/ M:What color Betty got on?/ (setting picture up on sofa, pointing at Betty's sweater)** ***What color Betty got on?/*** (italicized utterance coded as a repeated request; see Table 2)

- Parents in both groups *ordered* them to do or say things, *urged* their children to respond, *prohibited* them from doing or saying things, and occasionally made *promises* to distract them from a momentary conflict (see Table 3)

- Parents in Indiana used one speech act that did not emerge from the original inductive analysis in Alabama, namely *explanations,* that is, trying to tell an upset child a reason for the parent's request (e.g., **M is trying to settle 24-month-old Derek beside her on the couch: Here's your tractor/ You're goin' fall down that crack/ You are fallin' down that crack/** ***The couch is broke/*** **Oops, sorry, sorry/** (puts Derek in her lap) **Here put your legs down/** ***The couch is broke right there/ (points at crack in couch) Okay?/*** **You're being a little grumpy/ Just a little/)** (italicized utterances coded as explanations)

Discussion

This study derives from a broader investigation into parent-child conflict as a central mechanism of socialization (e.g., L. Sperry, D. Sperry, & Hamil, 2008). Past descriptions of children's episodes of saying "no" have shown that 2-year-olds themselves say "no" by crying, saying "no," or nonverbally seeking redress (e.g., L. Sperry, Bigelow, Lantto, Phelps, & Ko, 2006). As described in this study, their caregivers use much more elaborate verbal means for telling their 2 year olds to stop doing what they are doing or to start doing what they are not doing. By 3 1/2 years of age, children begin to adopt these more sophisticated verbal strategies for communicating their desires, becoming able to use teasing, sarcasm, and shame. In these two different communities, the rural Alabama African American community and the rural Indiana European American community, the most frequent reason for saying no was to get someone to do or not do something. Conflicts were occasionally about getting or not getting an object in Indiana, but almost never about objects in Alabama. Sperry, Floress, Gile, Renn, & E. Sperry, 2007).

The results of the present cross-cultural look at parents' strategies suggest that there is considerable variation between these two communities. First, the variation in general level of talkativeness is noticeable and has been demonstrated not just for ways of saying "no" as in this description but for all vocabulary directed toward the child (D. Sperry & L. Sperry, 2011). In fact, the two communities appear to form two distinct distributions of talkativeness. Across samples within families, rates of talkativeness are steady, and nearly every Alabama family talked more than nearly every Indiana family.

Second, Alabama families use a variety of speech acts that are extremely uncommon among the Indiana families, namely, repeated requests, provocations, threats, and interruptions. This result provides some of the first evidence of the developmental precursors to the type of sophisticated verbal parlaying described by Heath (1983) and Vernon-Feagans (1996). In addition, Alabama families are more likely to challenge or contradict their 2 year olds, criticize them directly and indirectly to other persons in the room, and offer protests, such as "I don't know how to put this toy together" as a way of refusing to comply with the child's request. In general, they treat their 2 year olds as full-fledged conversational partners.

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