A Cross-Cultural Exploration of Danish and American Parent-Child Interactions, Attachment, and Toddler Temperament

Ariye Krassner, 2014

My project was inspired by my plans to study abroad in Copenhagen, Denmark this past spring, as I anticipated working in a baby lab at the University of Copenhagen. During my time in Denmark, I was able to build professional relationships by assisting developmental researchers on their study of temperament, mother-child interaction and attachment, and began collaborating with them to design a summer project that replicated some of their tasks in order to draw cross-cultural conclusions regarding early interaction patterns and emerging personality traits between Danish and American mothers and babies. In developing my protocol, I became particularly intrigued by the role of infants’ “surgency” (a broad dimension of temperament that includes tendencies toward high activity level, rapid approach, and the expression of positive affect, especially in arousing contexts) as an influence on relationship style and extended my research plan to include a thorough assessment of this temperament dimension.

The beginning of my summer was spent preparing a detailed protocol for the administration of eight tasks designed to assess different aspects of surgency, mothers’ levels of sensitivity and intrusiveness, general interaction patterns (e.g., maternal touching behaviors, reciprocity in parent-child vocal patterns) and the babies’ attachment orientation (secure or insecure). After the protocol was finalized and a detailed protocol was developed, I trained a research team to help collect and code the data, and recruited families to participate by visiting local child care centers, reviewing birth announcements in local papers and sending letters, and developing a website for interested parents. Thus far, we have conducted 38 hour-long visits and anticipate completing 6 more by the end of August. We have also begun coding child behaviors from each of our five temperament tasks. For example, for the “Arc of toys” task, a task that measures activity level and involves placing the child in the center of a standardized semi-circle of toys, my assistant and I have reached adequate levels of interrater reliability for our judgements of childrens’ intensity of movement, body position changes, and pace of play. For another task, the “Bubbles game”, which assesses the child’s levels of positive affect to a burst of soap bubbles, we are reliable for ratings of smiling, laughter, and vigor of approach.

I plan to follow-up this initial summer research in multiple ways. I have recruited a team of 4 students who will assist me in continuing to collect and code data this fall, with the goal of having complete data sets from at least 70 mother-child dyads by the end of the year. I will also be corresponding extensively with the Danish group to coordinate coding between our two labs to enable the cross-cultural comparisons. In fact, I have recently learned of the exciting possibility of one of my Danish colleagues traveling to Bowdoin in the fall to work closely with us on this endeavor. These data will form the basis of my honors project, to be completed by the end of the academic year. In addition, my advisor, Professor Putnam, and I have begun considering ways to organize the data that we have collected in order to produce between two and four submissions for next year’s meeting of the International Society on Infant Studies.

This project, which has immeasurably enhanced my academic growth and has the potential to contribute strongly to knowledge regarding the origins of personality, would not have been possible without the generous support of the Surdna Foundation. I am grateful for the opportunity they have allowed.

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