A Cross-Cultural Comparison of How Adult Versus Youth Caregivers Say "No" to Two Year Olds

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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 from Indiana. The second finding is that there are striking cultural differences in the types of strategies caregivers use to mark conflict. The third finding is that in one community, the African American families from Alabama, there are striking differences in how adult versus youth caregivers say "no" to two year olds.

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 caregiver-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 caregiver-child conflict. To that end, our specific interest is the identification of particular verbal strategies used by caregivers 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 and 9 families from rural African American working-class community in Alabama
- Children between ages of 1 ½ and 3 ½ years
- Met qualifications for free- or reduced-lunch (all but 2 ALA families)

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 months)								
Alicia	24	26	28	--	32	--	36	--	--	42
Daphne	--	--	28	30	32	--	36	--	40	42
Lamont	24	26	28	--	32	34	--	38	--	--
Roland	24	26	28	--	--	34	--	38	--	42
Sebrina	24	26	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Markus	24	--	--	--	32	--	--	--	--	--
Shamekia	--	--	28	30	32	--	36	38	--	42
Stillman	24	--	28	--	--		36			
Tahleah	24	--	--	--	32	--	--	38	--	42

* 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)
- Range from Orders, Urges, and Prohibitions (common in adult caregivers) to Repeated Requests and Third Party Criticisms common in youth caregivers)

Measure of discordant caregiver speech
- First measure is rate per hour
- Second measure is total frequency of tokens across 22 hours of interaction in Alabama and16 hours of interaction in Indiana

Results

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

ALABAMA (across 22 hours of interaction)	REPEATED REQUEST	PROVOCATION	INTERRUPTION	THREAT
Rate per Hour	24	10	13	6
Frequency of Tokens	519	225	288	138
INDIANA (across 16 hours of interaction)				
Rate per Hour	2	1	1	1
Frequency of Tokens	30	15	13	16

Results (continued)

Table 3
Commonalities Between Alabama and Indiana in Types of Saying "No"

ALABAMA (across 22 hours of interaction)	ORDER	URGE	PROHIBITION	PROMISE
Rate per Hour	47	47	27	2
Frequency of Tokens	1025	1035	591	54
INDIANA (across 16 hours of interaction)				
Rate per Hour	43	25	14	2
Frequency of Tokens	690	404	228	28

Table 4
Differences Between Alabama and Indiana in Types of Saying "No"

ALABAMA (across 22 hours of interaction)	CRITICISM	DENIAL/ CONTRADICT	WARNING	CORRECTION	3rd PERSON CRITICISM	PROTEST
Rate per Hour	23	17	10	11	7	4
Frequency of Tokens	512	372	219	237	152	93
INDIANA (across 16 hours of interaction)						
Rate per Hour	10	5	4	5	2	1
Frequency of Tokens	152	74	56	74	39	19

Table 5
Differences Between Adult and Youth Caregivers in Alabama in Pervasiveness of Use of Types of Saying "No" (measured as % transcripts with tokens of a given type)

	Adult Caregivers	Youth Caregivers
Prohibitions	24/52 = 46%	0/26 = 0
Criticisms	21/52 = 40%	3/26 = 12%
Third-Person Criticisms	4/52 = 8%	14/26 = 54%
Provocations	1/52 = 2%	9/26 = 35%
Interruptions	14/52 = 27%	3/26 = 12%

Table 6
Most Commonly Used Three Types of Saying "No" in Adult and Youth Caregivers in Alabama

Adult Caregivers Used Average of 9.7 Types per Transcript	Youth Caregivers Used Average of 4.8 Types per Transcript
Orders	Urges
Urges	Repeated Requests
Prohibitions	Third-Person Criticisms

Observations
- 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* (see Table 4)
- 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)
- There were clear differences between adult and youth caregivers in Alabama. Adults used a wider range of types of saying "no" and exclusively used *prohibitions.* By contrast, only youth tended to use *provocations* or *teases* (see Table 5)

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 (L. 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 . 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.

Third, in Alabama, adult and youth caregivers appear to occupy different niches with regard to saying "no" to two year olds.

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