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Consistency of maternal cognitions and principles across the first five months following preterm and term deliveries



A. Winstanley^{a,b,*}, R.G. Sperotto^b, D.L. Putnick^c, S. Cherian^d,
M.H. Bornstein^c, M. Gattis^{b,*}

^a Department of Psychology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

^b School of Psychology, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

^c Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, USA

^d Department of Child Health, University Hospital of Wales, Cardiff, UK

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ABSTRACT

The aims of this study were to examine and compare the development of parenting cognitions and principles in mothers following preterm and term deliveries. Parenting cognitions about child development, including thinking that is restricted to single causes and single outcomes (categorical thinking) and thinking that takes into account multiple perspectives (perspectivist thinking), have been shown to relate to child outcomes. Parenting principles about using routines (structure) or infant cues (attunement) to guide daily caregiving have been shown to relate to caregiving practices. We investigated the continuity and stability of parenting cognitions and principles in the days following birth to 5 months postpartum for mothers of infants born term and preterm. All parenting cognitions were stable across time. Categorical thinking increased at a group level across time in mothers of preterm, but not term, infants. Perspectivist thinking increased at a group level for first-time mothers (regardless of birth status) and tended to be lower in mothers of preterm infants. Structure at birth did not predict later structure (and so was unstable) in mothers of preterm, but not term, infants and neither group changed in mean level across time. Attunement was consistent across time in both groups of mothers. These results indicate that prematurity has multiple, diverse effects on parenting beliefs, which may in turn influence maternal behavior and child outcomes.

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1. Consistency of maternal cognitions and principles across the first five months following preterm and term deliveries

A large literature documents the importance of parenting beliefs about infants and caregiving (Bornstein, 2015; Bornstein et al., 2007; Dichtelmiller et al., 1992; Goodnow, 1988; Miller, 1988; Miller-Loncar, Landry, Smith, & Swank, 2000; Moorman & Pomerantz, 2008; Pomerantz & Dong, 2006). However, few studies have examined the parenting beliefs of parents of preterm infants, despite preterm deliveries occurring in around 12–13% of live births in the United States and around 5–9% in Europe and other developed countries (Goldenberg, Culhane, Iams, & Romero, 2008). This gap in the literature is significant because infants born prematurely may be at risk due to early non-optimal caregiving environments (e.g., Clark, Woodward,

* Corresponding author at: Merideth Gattis, School of Psychology, Cardiff University, Park Place, Cardiff, CF10 3AT, UK. Tel: +44(0)29 2087 0034.
E-mail addresses: avw30@cam.ac.uk (A. Winstanley), gattism@cardiff.ac.uk (M. Gattis).

Horwood, & Moor, 2008; Feldman & Eidelman, 2006; Forcada-Guex, Pierrehumbert, Borghini, Moessinger, & Muller-Nix, 2006). The current study compared two types of maternal beliefs–cognitions about child development and principles of caregiving–in comparable mothers of term and preterm infants and did so across two time points during infancy. Therefore, this study was able to examine both the nature, as well as the effect, of prematurity on the developmental trajectories of parenting cognitions and principles.

1.1. *Continuity and stability*

One aim of developmental research is to understand how constructs develop across time (Bates & Novosad, 2006; Wohlwill, 1970). In this study, we focused on two approaches to measure the development of parenting cognitions and principles: continuity and stability (Bornstein, 2002). Continuity is defined as consistency in group mean level performance across time. A continuous construct is one in which group means do not differ from one time point to a later time point, whereas changes in mean group performance across time would demonstrate that a construct is discontinuous. Individual differences have a complementary focus on variation around the mean. Stability in individual variation is defined as consistency in the relative rank or standing of individuals within a group across time. A stable construct is one on which some individuals rank at relatively high levels at one point in time and again display at relatively high levels at a later point in time, whereas other individuals display lower levels at both times. An unstable construct is one in which individuals do not maintain their rank order across time.

Studying the continuity and stability of variables provides both a descriptive and explanatory account of development. Continuity and stability not only tell us about individual differences but also about the developmental origins, nature, and future of constructs (Bornstein & Putnick, 2012). Stability and continuity are mainstay concepts in developmental science and represent statistically and theoretically independent spheres of development (Bornstein & Bornstein, 2008). Developmental scientists are not only interested in how constructs manifest themselves but also in group and individual development across time and, therefore, in continuity and stability.

1.2. *Parenting cognitions and principles*

We chose to study the continuity and stability of both maternal cognitions and principles because parenting is multi-dimensional, modular, and specific (Bornstein, 2002, 2006). That is, different parental behaviors and beliefs serve different functions, have different developmental trajectories, and have different effects on children, with different domains not necessarily related. We selected the cognitions and principles described below based on their documented relations with parenting behavior and practices as well as child outcomes that may be particularly important for preterm infants (see Section 1.3).

First, we studied the complexity of mothers' thinking about development. Specifically, we focused on two levels of reasoning – *categorical* and *perspectivist thinking* – as well as an additional summary variable that reflects the balance between these two levels – *complexity of thought* (Sameroff & Feil, 1985). *Perspectivist thinking* reflects flexible reasoning that involves multiple perspectives and takes into account reciprocal influences and transactional perspectives on development, and is therefore more complex. *Categorical thinking* reflects reasoning that attributes behavior to a single cause and views the child as an extension of parents without individual needs and is therefore less complex. These two levels of complexity of thought describe the broader context of how mothers conceive of children and the parenting role (Miller-Loncar et al., 2000).

A parent's ability to think complexly has been shown to relate to both parental behavior and child outcomes. Parents who think more complexly about child development show more sensitive and responsive parenting behaviors (Landry, Garner, Swank, & Baldwin, 1996; Miller-Loncar et al., 2000; Pratt, Hunsberger, Pancer, Roth, & Santolipo, 1993). The preterm and term infants of these parents, in turn, show higher levels of social responsiveness during childhood (Miller-Loncar et al., 2000). However, parents who rely on lower levels of thinking, who have fewer conceptual resources and perspectives to draw on, tend to show a more rigid and authoritarian behavioral style (Deković & Gerris, 1992).

Second, we measured parenting principles of caregiving, which are specific personal codes that guide caregiving during infancy (Winstanley & Gattis, 2013) rather than the general level parents can think about development (as described above). Caregiving principles reflect how parents make decisions about infant care. Specifically, we focused on two principles: *structure* and *attunement*. *Structure* reflects mothers' support of schedules and routines to guide their infants' day-to-day lives. *Attunement* reflects mothers' attention to and reliance on their infants' cues to guide daily caregiving. These two caregiving principles are independent, and therefore some parents support attunement and oppose structure (or vice versa), whereas others support or oppose both principles. *Structure* and *attunement* are related to parenting practices. For example, attunement is positively related to bed-sharing, breastfeeding, and holding in parents of infants under 18 months (Winstanley & Gattis, 2013).

1.3. *Prematurity*

There are several reasons to hypothesize that complexity of thought and caregiving principles could be important to understanding the social environment of infants following prematurity. First, the behaviors that have been documented in interactions between mothers and their preterm infants are the same as those that are related to lower perspectivist

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