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Laughing matters: Infant humor in the context of parental affect



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ABSTRACT

Smiling and laughing appear very early during the first year of life, but little is known about how infants come to appraise a stimulus as humorous. This short-term longitudinal study explored infant humor perception from 5 to 7 months of age as a function of parental affect during an absurd event. Using a within-participants design, parents alternated smiling/laughing with emotional neutrality while acting absurdly toward their infants. Group comparisons showed that infants ($N = 37$) at all ages smiled at the event regardless of parental affect but did so significantly longer at 5 and 6 months, and more often and sooner at 7 months, when parents provided humor cues. Similarly, sequential analyses revealed that after gazing at the event, 7-month-olds were more likely to smile at it only when parents provided humor cues and were comparatively more likely to look away when parents were neutral. Thus, starting at 5 months of age, parental affect influenced infants' affect toward an absurd event, an effect that was magnified at 7 months. These results are discussed in the context of emotional contagion, regulation, and the emergence of social referencing.

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Introduction

Infants smile and laugh early during the first half of the first year of life (Wolff, 1963), long before they speak toward the end of the first year (Harris, 2004), but little is known about how or why they come to perceive events as humorous. Our research has been exploring infant humor perception as it emerges in the social–emotional context of infants' interactions with parents. Several lines of research have shown that during the first year of life, infants are sensitive to parental affect such as maternal depression (Tronick, 1989) and fear (Sorce, Emde, Campos, & Klinnert, 1985), but very few studies have examined whether similar processes are at work in humor perception (Mireault et al., 2014). This study investigated whether young infants detect absurdity independently or are influenced by parental affective cues to perceive an absurd event as amusing.

Although smiling and laughter are not exclusive to humor perception, they are the best behavioral metric available to researchers studying humor, which generally refers to the perception or creation of amusement (Davies, 1998). Humor is a surprisingly serious topic with a wide range of developmental implications. Humor involves fairly complex cognitive processes (Rothbart, 1973), in particular the ability to recognize and resolve incongruity (Loizou, 2005; Sroufe & Wunsch, 1972; Veale, 2004). For example, during the second half of the first year of life, infants will laugh at the incongruous use of familiar objects such as putting a cloth in one's mouth (Sroufe & Wunsch, 1972) or putting a book on one's head (Mireault et al., 2014), suggesting that despite limited life experience they have expectations for how such objects are typically used. Reddy (1991) observed infants as young as 8 months use humorous teasing such as offering an object to a parent and then withdrawing it and engaging a caregiver by using "fake" laughter. These simple acts of deception, when originating from an infant, suggest the possibility of an early, at least rudimentary, component of theory of mind, one important implication of infant humor perception (Hoicka & Akhtar, 2011; Hoicka, Jutsum, & Gattis, 2008).

Humor in young children can also serve as an indicator of atypical development (Reddy, 2008; Reddy, Williams, & Vaughan, 2002). For example, children with autism are more likely to exhibit "solitary laughter," meaning that they laugh when alone in response to stimuli that do not typically evoke laughter in others, rarely laugh in response to others' laughter unless attempting to echo the sound, and rarely attempt to intentionally make others laugh (Reddy et al., 2002). Because humor may promote qualities that are associated with relationship satisfaction among adults, including shared pleasurable affect, emotional intimacy, trust, and empathy, some research has suggested that infant humor may be related to attachment (Mireault, Sparrow, Poutre, Perdue, & Macke, 2012).

Although not ignoring the role of learning principles in the development of humor, most humor researchers agree that humor perception is too complex a process to be explained by reinforcement. The competing theories of infant humor involve primarily cognitive processes (Rothbart, 1973), although Reddy (1991) proposed that humor is fundamentally social. Reinforcement may have more of a role in humor creation than perception. For example, when infants create humor, initially unintentionally, parents' smiles and laughs serve as likely reinforcers (Mireault, Poutre, et al., 2012). However, infants continue to attempt novel humorous behaviors, suggesting that reinforcement alone does not account for their actions.

Wolff's (1963) descriptive study documented the emergence of smiling and laughter during the first year of life and resulted in a developmental timetable starting with social smiling (5–9 weeks) and progressing to laughter in response to physical stimulation (3 months), social games (5 months), and visual events (7–9 months). Reddy (2001, 2008) added her observation that infants begin intentionally creating humor (9–11 months) using nonverbal absurd behavior. Reddy (2001, 2008) reported that by 9 months of age, infants will attempt to make others laugh using odd faces (e.g., puckered face, squash head into neck), noises (e.g., shrieks, squawks), absurd actions (e.g., patting mother on head, holding up smelly feet), profane or aggressive actions (e.g., showing belly button, knocking over others' constructions), mocking (e.g., imitating snoring), odd self-decoration (e.g., putting cup on head), or regressive behaviors (e.g., blowing food out of mouth). These nonverbal attempts at humor tend to have universal appeal and are similar to those employed by adult clowns, hence Reddy's (2001) use of the term "clowning."

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