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The Crying-Baby Phenomenon:
A Personal Construct Perspective

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of
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ABSTRACT

The major objective of the present study was to investigate the use of the 'personal profile method' as a means of providing support for mothers who report that their infants cry a great deal. The method was developed within the framework of Kelly's Personal Construct Theory and was adapted from the Repertory Grid Technique.

A mother who had reported infant crying is called 'cry-hassled' in this study. The personal profile method highlights those areas a cry-hassled mother perceives as concerns and uses the identification of the concerns as a means of providing her with assistance when she is dealing with infant crying.

A secondary objective was to examine three features that might contribute to a mother becoming cry-hassled. These were the mother's report of her pregnancy and delivery, what she had expected it would be like caring for her infant at home, and if she felt she knew what her infant's cries meant.

Seven cry-hassled mothers completed a personal profile each week with two further data sources (infant profiles and diary forms) for a minimum period of 4 weeks. During the development of the personal profile procedures, two broad categories of elicited elements (called concerns because of their negative ratings) were defined. These were designated general and local concerns according to the extent of their negative ratings.

The data from the first study demonstrated that the infant's crying was a concern for each cry-hassled mother, and as such was classified as the priority concern. Two further types of concern which emerged were primary concerns (items that the mother perceived even more negatively than infant crying), and auxiliary concerns (items that the mother perceived in a way similar to her most negative concerns). The primary and auxiliary concerns are useful concepts in that they appear to assist in identifying ways in which a mother can lessen her feelings of concern about infant crying, and so have a greater sense of control.

The secondary study objective was investigated by examining the information from each of the cry-hassled mothers about her pregnancy and confinement, her expectations about being at home with her infant, and her understanding of the infant's cries, together with information from seven mothers who had not reported their infants as crying excessively.

The results indicated that a mother who reports her infant as crying may have unrealistic expectations of her infant's behaviour, that she may lack experience through insufficient contact with other infants, and finally, a cry-hassled mother may understand her infant's cries at a time later than a mother who has not expressed concern about infant crying.

An analysis of the findings from both study objectives reveals the 'Crying-Baby Phenomenon', namely, cry-hassled mothers who appear to perceive crying as a stable/internal characteristic of the infant rather than the crying being something the infant does on some specific occasions. In personal construct terms, it appears the personal profile method may help a mother to shift from a pre-emptive mode of construing her infant to a propositional mode.

A number of people have made a special contribution with their guidance during the the time the study has been carried out. As well, the encouragement and interest that others have shown in so many ways has not only ensured the completion of the thesis, but has enriched my own understanding of peoples' generosity and willingness to be supportive without any expectation for themselves.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
LIST OF TABLES	ix
LIST OF FIGURES	x
CHAPTER ONE: STUDY PURPOSE AND REVIEW	1
Purpose of the Study	1
Infant and Maternal Contributions to the Mother-Infant Relationship	2
Infant Crying: A Characteristic of Difficult Temperament	6
Mothers and Stress from Infant Crying	12
Providing Support for Mothers with Crying Infants	17
The Ethics and Justification of Providing Support	19
Criteria for Support Methods used with Mothers	26
Summary	28
CHAPTER TWO: PERSONAL PROFILES - A METHOD FOR SUPPORT	29
Theoretical Background	30
Assumptions Underlying the Personal Profile Method	31
The Personal Profile Method and Repertory Grid	37
Description of the Personal Profile Method:	39
Eliciting the elements	39
Eliciting the constructs	41
Completing the matrix	43
Analysing the matrix	45
Interpretation of results	46
Practical Implications	50
Summary	51
CHAPTER THREE: METHOD	52
Participants	52
Instruments:	52
Personal profile method	52

Infant profile forms	53
Diary forms	54
Cry-hassled mothers' evaluations	54
Procedures:	55
Locating cry-hassled mothers	55
Identifying cry-hassled mothers	55
Contacting cry-hassled mothers	56
Cry-hassled mother interviews	56
Follow-up Information for Participants	58
 CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS	 59
Section I: A Personal Profile Example	60
Items profile	60
Constructs profile	63
Section II: Comparison of the Personal Profiles	64
Items	64
Constructs	66
Items as concerns	67
Section III: Case-Study Results	69
Participant A	69
Participant B	74
Participant C	81
Participant D	83
Participant E	87
Participant F	92
Participant G	95
Section IV: Primary and Auxiliary Concerns	99
Summary	104
 CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION	 105
Using the Personal Profile Method:	105
A clustered personal profile	106
A comparative analysis of items as concerns	108
How the mothers felt	111
Mothers' Perceptions of the Crying	112
Providing Support with the Personal Profile Method	116
Summary	121
 CHAPTER SIX: THE SECONDARY STUDY	 123
Introduction:	123
Pre/postnatal experiences	125
Maternal expectations	127
Method:	128
Participants	128
Procedures	129
Results:	131
Pre/postnatal experiences	131

	Cry-hassled and nonhassled mothers' expectations	135
	Understanding the infant's cries	135
	Discussion	138
	Summary	144
CHAPTER SEVEN:	GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	146
	The Personal Profile Method	146
	The Crying Baby Phenomenon	152
	Conclusions	i55
REFERENCE NOTE		157
REFERENCES		158
APPENDIX A	Infant Profile Forms	169
APPENDIX B	Diary Forms	170
APPENDIX C	Evaluation of Methods Used	171
APPENDIX D	Letter to Area Advisors	172
APPENDIX E	Information for Area Advisors	173
APPENDIX F	Information for Potential Participants	175
APPENDIX G	Fundamental Postulate and Corollaries	176
GLOSSARY	Terms and Definitions used in the Personal Profile Method	178

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE		Page
1	Participants' Background Information: Cry-Hassled Mothers	53
2	Items, Constructs, and Ratings First Personal Profile: Participant A	61
3	Categories of Items: First Personal Profiles	65
4	Cry-Hassled Mothers' Disorientation Constructs	67
5	Summary of Priority Concern Context and Time of Alleviation	68
6	Personal Profile Items as Concerns: Participant A	70
7	Personal Profile Items as Concerns: Participant B	76
8	Personal Profile Items as Concerns: Participant C	83
9	Personal Profile Items as Concerns: Participant D	84
10	Personal Profile Items as Concerns: Participant E	87
11	Personal Profile Items as Concerns: Participant F	94
12	Personal Profile Items as Concerns: Participant G	98
13	Priority, Primary, and Auxiliary Concerns: All Participants	103
14	Participants' Background Information: Cry-Hassled and Nonhassled Mothers	130
15	Cry-Hassled Mothers' Reported Pre/postnatal History	132
16	Nonhassled Mothers' Reported Pre/postnatal History	133
17	Additional Participant Information	134
18	Participants' Reported Expectations Concerning their Infants	136
19	Understanding the Infants' Cries	137

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE	Page
1 First clustered items: Participant A	62
2 First clustered constructs: Participant A	62
3 First three clustered items: Participant A	72
4 Infant crying as the priority concern in the personal profiles: Participant A	73
5 Cry bout data from the diary forms: Participant A	73
6 Infant profile grumpy/grizzly/crying dimension: Participant A	75
7 Cry bout data from the diary forms: Participant A	75
8 First clustered items: Participant B	77
9 First clustered constructs: Participant B	77
10 Infant crying as the priority concern in the personal profiles: Participant B	79
11 Cry bout data from the diary forms: Participant B	79
12 Infant profile grumpy/grizzly/crying dimension: Participant B	80
13 Cry bout data from the diary forms: Participant B	80
14 Infant crying as the priority concern in the personal profiles: Participant C	82
15 Infant profile grumpy/grizzly/crying dimension: Participant C	82
16 First clustered items: Participant D	85
17 Infant crying as the priority concern in the personal profiles: Participant D	86
18 Infant profile grumpy/grizzly/crying dimension: Participant D	86
19 First two clustered items: Participant E	89
20 Infant crying as the priority concern in the personal profiles: Participant E	90
21 Cry bout data from the diary forms: Participant E	90

22	Infant profile grumpy/grizzly/crying dimension: Participant E	91
23	Cry bout data from the diary forms: Participant E	91
24	First three clustered items: Participant F	93
25	Infant crying as the priority concern in the personal profiles: Participant F	96
26	Cry bout data from the diary forms: Participant F	96
27	Infant profile grumpy/grizzly/crying dimension: Participant F	97
28	Cry bout data from the diary forms: Participant F	97
29	First clustered items: Participant G	98
30	Infant crying as the priority concern in the personal profiles: Participant G	100
31	Cry bout data from the diary forms: Participant G	100
32	Infant profile grumpy/grizzly/crying dimension: Participant G	101
33	Cry bout data from the diary forms: Participant G	101
34	Features contributing to the Crying-Baby Phenomenon	154