

Learned Social Contingency in 5-Month-Old Infants

By: **Marqueline Cenatus*** | Michelle Ramos | Bethany C. Reeb-Sutherland

Contingency is an important feature of social functioning, constituting a core component of social-emotional development (Tarabulsky et al., 1996; Gergely & Watson, 1996; Reeb-Sutherland et al., 2012). The present study examined how positive social reward from a stranger can fundamentally impact social responsiveness within a solitary session by expanding vocalizations, positive/negative affect, and positive affect quality (smiling). The previous research being followed up is a social contingency paradigm which consisted of three 3-minute phases examined in 73 5-month-old infants. Results revealed a significant phase effect with vocalizations and positive affect significantly increasing during the Contingency phase compared to Habituation and Extinction. This previous research was conducted by examining behaviors on a macro-level, and is now being explored to examine the time course of contingency on a more micro-level to determine how quickly infants learn contingency between theirs and their partner's behaviors. Results indicate that, infants learn the relation between their vocal behaviors and smile quality and social reward quickly and that positive affect is learned more slowly in relation to negative affect. In addition, once the contingency is discontinued, infants' behavior extinguishes quickly. The current results suggest that infants can learn social contingencies between themselves and strangers within a very short time span at an early age which reflects the importance that basic operant conditioning skills has on the development of social behavior.

Keywords: social contingency, affect, learning, vocalization