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ESO before and after lockdown: Getting a head-start with online methodology

Bonamy R. Oliver

A few years ago, a colleague and I developed a methodology to collect parent-child interactions online, without the need for home- or lab-visits (ESO; Oliver & Pike, 2019). ESO was published three months before the first UK COVID-19 lockdown, and we had no idea how pertinent this work would be. Children's mental health is in global decline. Home, school and work boundaries are blurred. Social support is constricted. As the often heady mix of family stress and proximity continues, understanding contemporary family processes is more difficult yet more important than ever. It's not in my nature to bang my own drum, but I am driven out of my comfort zone to blatantly promote this important tool.

Predicated on a long tradition of structured-play observations, our original – now completely overtaken – rationale for designing ESO was to address two seemingly unlinked crises, one rather specific, and one far-reaching: scientific replication and climate change. First, the replication crisis rocked the world of psychology, spotlighting the need for replication, but also implicating the need to broaden the scope and depth of studies so as to be more confident in the findings. Developmental psychology is a case in point. To better understand family relationships and children's development and adjustment, we need detailed assessments of family processes in large-scale studies. Yet, because resources are limited, studies that have such detail tend to lack power, and studies that have power tend to lack nuance. Second, even if we were able to procure the substantial resources to enable detailed face-to-face assessment at scale, buzzing across the nation to conduct numerous family visits is no longer ecologically viable or ethical.

Currently a prototype, ESO is showing itself to be very flexible. Our original validation was with parents and their four-to-six-year-old children in the UK. So far, ESO has been used with children aged from three- to 12-years old. I have had conversations with both clinical and non-clinical users, discussions about alternative coding schemes, about siblings, about language elicitation, about intervention feedback, and about play therapy. The task site was accessed in nine different countries in January 2021 alone, and seventeen different countries on four continents since the beginning of 2020.

Excitingly, ESO-II is now in development, which will work on touchscreen as well as with keyboards, and will allow different stimuli to be uploaded, ensuring the task is able to adapt further according to user need. We aim to launch it in April 2021.

To my knowledge the task is the first of its kind. A joined-up, global approach to understanding families is afforded by ESO at a time when, more than ever, the importance of doing so cannot be overstated. I urge you to consider ESO for your research. Please get in touch!

Dr Bonamy R. Oliver, Associate Professor in Developmental Psychology

Email: b.oliver@ucl.ac.uk; Twitter: @bonamyoliver

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