

Riggs, A. (2016). **Children's Inferences about the Scope of Social Information**

Abstract

Inferring the scope (i.e., level of generality) of social information is a substantial inductive challenge for young children. Prior research demonstrates that children are sensitive to a number of direct cues that adults may use to indicate scope. In the present research, I investigate the cognitive mechanisms underlying children's ability to form scope inferences independently and, in turn, how those inferences affect their generalization, memory and adoption of social behavior. In the studies reported in Chapter 2, I investigated whether 4- to 8-year-old children form scope inferences by tracking two types of statistical evidence that, when integrated, are diagnostic of the scope of a behavior. Both age groups integrated frequency evidence and negative evidence to make appropriate scope inferences, though 4- and 5- year-olds required a more supportive task to generalize behaviors across social groups. These results suggest that statistical reasoning informs children's scope inferences. In Chapter 3, I examined whether 4- to 8-year-old children differentially encode social learning episodes that apply at different levels of scope. I found that children differentially encoded specific, individuating features, but not category-level features of targets. Additionally, children's memory patterns were systematically related to their generalization, suggesting that memory may facilitate scope inferences. In Chapter 4, I investigated how middle-school students' scope inferences about a novel problem-solving strategy affect whether they adopt that strategy and transfer it to new problems. Students were most likely to transfer a strategy that was not associated with a specific person than a strategy that was associated with a person. Mediation analyses revealed that this effect was contingent on students' inferences about the scope of the strategy. Taken together, these studies provide new insight into the learning mechanisms supporting children's inferences about the generality of social information.