Research Spotlight

The Line Game

One of the groups in Dr. Stephanie Siler’s Research Methods course is studying whether young children are more likely to conform and change their answer to an ambiguous matching question if they are told that others present in the room gave a different answer, in contrast to whether the alternative answer was given by people who are not present, but whose photos were shown. Previous research has suggested a couple of things. One is that younger children are less likely to conform than older children, and another is that adults acting in a “child” position (not as an authority figure) lead children to be more independent. These findings prompted these undergraduates to assess the effect adult presence has on younger children’s conformity. In the task, a child is asked which line (A, B, or C, for example) is most similar to the target line (“line 1”). The sample lines (A, B, C) vary in length, width, color, or format (dashed, dotted, solid, etc.), but every line has exactly two characteristics in common with the target line (see below). After choosing an answer, children in the “presence” condition are told that the two other researchers in the room made a different choice from the child’s, and children in the “non-presence” condition are told that two other adults whose photos are shown but who are not present in the room made a different choice. Children are then asked again which line is most similar to one target line, just to see if the child will switch to a different answer. After making the second choice, children are asked to explain their choice to assess their rationalization of their answer on this ambiguous task, and give researchers further insight into why the children may or may not have conformed with the adult answer. Conformity is an important area of study, especially in children, because it tells us what factors may make children reconsider their own views. This type of information is used in legal cases involving children as well as in other fields in which child reliability may be necessary. Determining whether presence of the adult with a different viewpoint influences children may help adults develop a method of teaching that will encourage children to be more independent and less prone or more resistant to conforming to group or authority expectations.

Five additional groups of students in Dr. Siler’s class are studying other interesting topics, including 1) testing whether providing subgoals for challenging tasks will increase kindergartners’ persistence in solving them, 2) determining whether demonstration and feedback during practice will improve 4 and 5 year olds’ performance on a 3-dimensional mental rotation task, 3) testing whether gender and/or sibling status influences 3, 4, and 5-year-old children’s responses to stories in which there is a conflict, such as how to share one toy, between characters who appear to be of equal status vs. differential status, 4) determining whether gender-biased theming of letter and number games (e.g., color and image type) impacts 4 and 5 year olds’ preferences when given choices of which to play, compared to games with similar content but gender neutral themes, and 5) testing whether 3 and 5-year-old children are able to integrate another’s perspective into their decisions about which toys to offer for sharing.