

Children found to understand difference between independent agreement and copying

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Credit: University of Nottingham

A new study has shown that children as young as eight years old know the difference between independent agreement and copying and can take into account individuals' independence when evaluating the reliability of a consensus.

The research, titled "Thinking for themselves? The effect of informant independence on children's endorsement of testimony from a consensus" has been published in *Social Development* and was carried out by Dr Shiri Einav, Assistant Professor in the School of Psychology at the University of Nottingham. This is the first study to examine children's developing ability to consider how a person's testimony may be influenced by the testimony of others and how this impacts the [reliability](#) of information provided.

For the study, children were shown videos of two groups of three actors

who answered questions about a fictional country. The three actors in each group always provided the same [answer](#); however, the responses were different across the two groups. Critically, one group's responses were independent (they responded privately), whereas the other group's responses were not (they had access to each other's answers). Across a series of trials, five to nine year-olds, and adults for comparison, had to decide which answer they thought was the right one.

Assessing reliability

Dr Einav wanted to know whether children assessing the reliability of a consensus view take into account the nature of [agreement](#) between individuals (if it arises independently or not), rather than simply whether there is agreement.

The study showed that there is a developmental shift in children's thinking, between 5 and 8 years of age: the youngest children were more likely to believe the responses of the non-independent group whereas the older children recognised that independent agreement is more reliable.

Social influence

Dr Einav says: "Agreement across a number of people can be reassuring corroboration of a claim's reliability. However, this is not necessarily the case if agreement does not arise independently, for example when people have access to each other's responses. In this case, people may agree because they're unsure of the answer and copy others or because they feel a social pressure to conform, not because they actually all think the same."

"I think it's heartening for parents to know that children as young as eight are aware of the important distinction between these two types of

agreement. As [children](#) learn more about the range of [mental states](#) and social motivations that underlie what people say and do, they can apply increasingly sophisticated critical thinking to work out the reliability of information sources."

More information: Shiri Einav. Thinking for themselves? The effect of informant independence on children's endorsement of testimony from a consensus, *Social Development* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/sode.12264](https://doi.org/10.1111/sode.12264)

Provided by University of Nottingham

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