

Stanley Huey

Associate Professor of Psychology
USC College of Letters, Arts and Sciences

Pilot Test of an Employment-Based Intervention for Emancipating Foster Care Youth

Youth who emancipate (“age out”) from the foster care system often experience significant social problems that complicate the transition to adulthood. Particularly troubling is their high incidence of involvement with the criminal justice system. This level of involvement is linked to the high rate of unemployment among these youth, which is likely to increase over the next several years, given the severity of the current recession.

Stanley Huey will test the feasibility of implementing an employment-based intervention, the Behavioral Employment Program (BEP), for emancipating foster

youth in a challenging economic environment. Five youth who are on probation and are transitioning from foster care will receive six months of counseling, employment, and support services, and outcomes will be assessed on a weekly basis. Professor Huey will analyze weekly reports to determine whether or not delinquent behavior diminishes over time, and if so, whether or not employment is a cause. Youth will also participate in focus groups to build an understanding of what factors enhance or hinder BEP’s effectiveness. Results from this pilot study will form the basis of an expanded clinical trial.

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Stanley Huey



Toben H. Mintz

Associate Professor of Psychology and Linguistics
USC College of Letters, Arts and Sciences

Toben H. Mintz



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Infants' Sensitivity to Vowel Harmony in Segmenting Continuous Speech

A problem that infants face from the earliest stages of language acquisition is identifying sequences of sounds as words. Unlike text on the printed page, there are rarely pauses between spoken words in continuous speech, and sometimes brief silences even occur within words. Therefore, infants must often rely on information, or cues, other than the location of pauses to determine where one word ends and the next begins.

Toben H. Mintz will continue his investigation into a type of cue related to "vowel harmony." Languages with vowel

harmony impose restrictions on vowels within a word so that the vowels exhibit some form of similarity in pronunciation. Previous research shows that seven-month-old English learners are sensitive to a certain type of vowel harmony and use it to segment speech. However, because English does not have harmony patterns, their sensitivity must be innate and then lessened or lost as they learn English. Professor Mintz's research will shed light on several core questions in cognitive science involving the interplay of what is innate and what is environmental in shaping the outcome of learning.



The Origins of Object Knowledge

Where does knowledge come from? Is it the result of a genetic endowment inherited from primate ancestors, or does it emerge from experiences with the environment? For centuries, this “nature versus nurture” debate has been a central theme in the study of the mind. Although researchers have made considerable progress distinguishing between how nature and nurture determine perceptual capacities (depth, color, shape, etc.), there is considerable debate about the origins of cognitive capacities—when cognition begins, what it consists of, what causes it to emerge, how it manifests itself, and how it changes with experience.

Justin N. Wood will examine the innate mechanisms of object cognition and characterize how they change from various visual experiences. He will raise newly hatched chicks within precisely controlled environments that either do, or do not, provide experiences that could shape a particular cognitive ability. If subjects use an ability independent of their particular environment, then that ability is innate. However, if an ability requires certain types of experiences in order to develop fully, then only subjects raised in environments that provide those experiences will use the ability.

Justin N. Wood
