

This is the personal statement I used to apply to grad school in 2011. May it be helpful for you!

Personal Statement—Angela Johnston

Over the past two years, I have gained a wide range of experience with psychological research as I have worked on eleven different projects in four different labs. Much of my experience has been gained through three different summer research programs at Yale University in the labs of Drs. Frank Keil, Laurie Santos, and Paul Bloom. This variety of experience has provided me with the background necessary to pursue greater involvement with the area of psychology that fascinates me most: the influence that explanation and intuitive theories have on causal learning and conceptual development. I am especially excited by the prospect of continuing to explore these questions at Yale University, not only because both Dr. Frank Keil and Dr. Woo-kyoung Ahn expand on closely related research, but also because of the collaborative and self-directed nature of the psychology department.

I will be graduating with a B.A. in Psychology and a B.S. in Child Development from The University of Texas at Dallas, with an anticipated GPA of 4.0. During over 50 hours (18 semester classes) of psychology coursework and two semesters as a Teaching Assistant for Statistics for Psychology, my main focus has been on developmental research. I initially became involved with research my sophomore year when I joined Dr. Candice Mills' social cognitive development lab. After working in the lab for just four weeks, I knew I wanted to pursue developmental research further and applied for a summer internship with Dr. Frank Keil. This internship and my first semester in Dr. Mills' lab were both structured so that I worked one-on-one with a graduate student mentor. In Dr. Mills' lab, I worked to complete a project examining how children evaluate sources of information based on niceness and expertise, and in Dr. Keil's lab I developed several studies examining how children and adults evaluate explanations that vary in their generality. Due to my high level of involvement in both of these projects, I was a coauthor on the posters presented at SRCD, as well as on both manuscripts (one of which is under revised review).

Following these initial projects, I have focused on conducting my own research, collaborating more broadly, and acquiring more advanced statistical experience. To delve into my own research, I began my senior honors thesis during my junior year, examining how children evaluate sources based on niceness and previous accuracy. This semester, I received an \$800 Undergraduate Research Scholar Award to conduct a follow up study and presented the results in a poster at CDS. Having finished running 75 children in my study, I am preparing the manuscript for publication. To collaborate more broadly, I returned to Yale last summer to work in Dr. Laurie Santos' lab and in Dr. Paul Bloom's lab. In Dr. Santos' lab, I worked on projects examining unconscious priming and economic irrationality in capuchin monkeys, and in Dr. Bloom's lab, I worked with a graduate student on several projects related to intuitive dualism. Finally, to acquire more advanced statistical experience, I am taking upper level graduate statistics courses devoted to learning about multivariate statistical techniques (e.g., PCA and PLS-Correlation) and programming the analyses in the R programming language.

Although I have enjoyed gaining broad exposure to multiple lines of developmental research, I am most excited about pursuing research that explores how explanations and intuitive theories interact to influence causal learning and conceptual representation. This interest began

to develop as I collaborated with one of Dr. Keil's graduate students on a series of studies examining how children and adults evaluate scientific explanations that vary in generality. We manipulated the phrasing of biological and physical explanations so that some explanations encompassed general categories (e.g., all animals), and others were anchored to more specific cases (e.g., cats). Our findings indicate that children and adults prefer different levels of explanation depending on the domain. Specifically, children and adults seem to prefer more general explanations in physics and more specific explanations in biology.

This domain difference in explanation preferences has made me curious about the impact that folk theories in biology and physics may have on conceptual representation more generally. For instance, would children and adults be more likely to abstract general causal principles from detailed explanations about physics than they would from detailed explanations about biology? Although this is just one example of the type of question I would be interested in pursuing, I am generally interested in extending my focus beyond explanation generality to include causal learning and conceptual development more broadly. In this regard, I have become increasingly interested in recent work done by Dr. Keil and his graduate students that broadly explore these topics. In fact, some of the research being conducted in the Keil lab also relates to one of my secondary interests as well—children and adult's perception of experts. Given the close match between Dr. Keil's research interests and my own, I would be very excited to continue my work in Dr. Keil's lab as a graduate student.

Additionally, I am excited by the possibility of pursuing graduate school at Yale University because of my interest in Dr. Woo-kyoung Ahn's research. In particular, some of Dr. Ahn's recent work closely aligns with several of the research topics I would like to pursue with Dr. Keil. For instance, Dr. Ahn and her graduate students have recently demonstrated that adults tend to incorporate ambiguous information into their preexisting causal frameworks (i.e., causal assimilation), and similarly that adults interpret events differently depending on their expectations. This research relates to one of my primary areas of interest regarding the influence of intuitive theories on causal representation.

In addition to my interest in working with Drs. Keil and Ahn, I am also excited about applying to Yale University because of research being conducted by other faculty members in the department. Most notably, I would be interested in having the opportunity to continue pursuing research in Dr. Laurie Santos' lab. I see it as a particularly great benefit to Yale's psychology department that I would potentially have the opportunity to gain additional perspectives on my work through comparative research with capuchin monkeys (and possibly dogs). Moreover, I am also excited by the fact that philosophers, such as Dr. Joshua Knobe and Dr. Tamar Gendler, directly affiliate with the psychology department. Finally, during the time I spent conducting research at Yale, I was most impressed with the collaborative and self-guided nature of the graduate program. This is the type of department I think will best prepare me to one day become a successful professor of psychology.