

# The Origins, Development, and Nature of Argument Understanding

**Nancy L Stein (n-stein@uchicago.edu)**

Department of Psychology, University of Chicago  
5848 S. University Avenue Chicago, IL 60637 USA

**Elizabeth R. Albro**

Department of Psychology, Wheaton College  
Norton, MA USA

The early emergence and development of argumentation skill are the topics of this presentation. We argue that the mental schemas used to understand interactive arguments are influenced by the desire to maintain, dominate, or dissolve a relationship as much as they are by the desire to persuade and understand another person's position. Goals about personal relationships influence reasoning, thinking, and decision-making throughout arguments and negotiation. What appears to be illogical reasoning or irrational behavior is often quite rational and coherent, when the personal goals of the arguers are revealed. Personal goals also influence the outcomes of a negotiation and memory for what is said during the verbal interchange.

Data from three developmental studies will be presented to illustrate the relationship between personal-social goals and the content, organization, outcome and memory for an argument. We present different types of empirical evidence in support of our hypothesis, and we compare our early emergence hypothesis to the claim that argumentative skill emerges late in childhood and early adolescence. In support of our "early emergence" hypothesis, we focus on situations that are personally meaningful to young children and those that impact directly on their goals, beliefs, and well-being. We show that even the youngest children entering into an argument are able to generate and think about positive and negative reasons for pursuing different courses of action or for holding specific sets of beliefs.

We show, however, that argumentative thinking has an inherent bias that can be seen in adults' thinking as well as in young children's thinking. Arguers generally have more supporting knowledge for their own position than they do for their opponent's position. They also have more knowledge about the problematic aspects of their opponent's position than they do about their own position. Thus, they support a particular stance because they perceive more benefits accruing from their own position versus another.

We discuss the learning strategies that ameliorate this bias, both in social and in academic settings. We argue that current instructional strategies are often aimed at the wrong level of knowledge acquisition, in terms of teaching students how to write good arguments. The rhetorical concept of argument is often insensitive to the ways in which argument knowledge is stored psychologically. Most arguers, even adults, lack accurate knowledge about another's position. The focus for us, in terms of instruction and learning, has more to do with values, concerns, and beliefs underlying a position, the necessity to put each position on an equal

footing, and the willingness to consider the legitimacy of different goals.

Therefore, we discuss the cognitive and emotional effects of a mediated conflict resolution training procedure. Our mediated instruction focuses on explanations for holding positions, plans for generating new goals, and strategies for adding conditions to favored goals to make them acceptable to an opponent. The effect of participating in mediated training is an increased understanding and accuracy of the opponent's position. By increasing understanding for the other's position, the participant incorporates input from the other, thereby increasing the new words and concepts that occur in thinking and reasoning. The cognitive and language effects of mediation will be discussed and contrasted with the effects of self imposed compromises and negotiations that do not entail compromise.

## References

Stein, N.L. & Albro, E.R. (2001) The Origins and Nature of Arguments: Studies in Conflict Understanding, Emotion, and Negotiation. *Discourse Processes*.