Roles guide rapid inferences about agent knowledge and behavior

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Abstract

The ability to predict and understand other people's actions is critical for real-world social behavior. Here we hypothesized that representations of social roles (e.g., cashier, mechanic, doctor) enable people to build rapid expectations about what others know and how they might act. Using a self-paced reading paradigm and a variety of everyday roles, we show that the mere mention of a role (e.g., "mechanic") supports real time expectations about what the person will do (e.g., in the mechanic case, take your car keys but not your cellphone) and the knowledge they might possess (e.g., in the mechanic case, having private information about your car). Moreover, people reported more surprisal when the events deviated from role expectations, and they were more likely to misremember what happened. Our results suggest that roles are a powerful route for social understanding that has been previously understudied in social cognition.

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