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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 44(44)

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Publication Date

2022

Peer reviewed

People Have Systematically Different Intuitions about Ownership even in Seemingly Simple Cases

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Abstract

Ownership is pervasive across human societies but invisible to the naked eye, and so people need to infer who owns what. Given its ubiquity, one might expect that people's intuitive theories of ownership would converge. Yet, ownership disputes are common, raising the question of whether these intuitions might actually vary across people. We explored this question using a set of simple, parametrically varied object-transfer events where participants determined how much two agents owned an object. Participants showed strong consensus about ownership in some events, but opposing intuitions in others. Subject-level analyses suggest that these disagreements reflect two overarching intuitive theories, one where intentions are central to ownership, and another where physical possession is prioritized. Our results suggest that people have stable but different intuitive theories of ownership, which stem from their beliefs about the relationship between mental states and possession.