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Authors

Hemmatian, Babak

Sloman, Steven

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Explaining without Information: The Role of Label Entrenchment

Babak Hemmatian

Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, United States

Steven Sloman

Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, United States

Abstract

In categorical explanation a category label is used to explain an associated property. We show that label entrenchment, whether a label is commonly used by ones community, affects the judged quality of a categorical explanation whether the explanation offers substantive information or not. In Experiments 1 and 2, explanations using unentrenched labels are rated as less comprehensive and less natural independent of causal or featural information, even when the label is merely a name for the explanandum. Experiments 3 and 4 replicate the effect with unentrenched labels coined by groups of expert discoverers and rule out explanations like familiarity and communicative principles. Most participants in Experiments 3 and 4 could not report the impact of entrenchment on their judgments. We argue that reliance on entrenchment arose because the community often has useful information. Common use of labels as conduits for this knowledge induces reliance on community cues even when uninformative.