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Choices are treated as probabilistic when the outcome is unknown

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Abstract

We examined how people consider information about probability and choices when inferring preferences. Participants (N=652) read stories about an agent who chose between two locations with opposite proportions of toys. The choice was between two open trays of toys or between two probabilistic toy machines. When the agent only chose which location to go to, participants judged the agent preferred the majority toy in the chosen location, regardless of whether the choice was between trays or machines (Experiments 1&2). However, judgments differed across these conditions when participants learned the agent ended up with a minority toy (Experiment 3). When the agent chose this toy from a tray, participants judged the agent preferred it to majority toys; when the agent received this toy from a machine, they judged the agent preferred majority toys. These findings show that when the outcome of a choice is unknown, determinative choices are treated as probabilistic.