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The effect of trait labels on the perception of clinical disorders

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Abstract

Syntactic cues can lead people to infer trait-like qualities about novel agents (Gelman & Heyman, 1999). When an agent is described with a novel label, for instance, as a carrot-eater, children and adults are more likely to think that the agent has an enduring trait compared to an agent described as eating carrots all the time. Although novel labels may influence peoples trait inferences in this way, it is less clear this effect would hold for more familiar, real-life descriptions. Here, we examined whether linguistic cues (i.e., noun vs. verb forms) influence peoples beliefs about lasting stability of symptoms associated with clinical disorders. Specifically, we examined whether describing a person as, for instance, having depression vs. feeling extremely depressed, would affect participants inferences about the stability of that persons depression. We observed no effect of syntactic form on trait inferences. We discuss the implications of this work for psychological science.