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Inherence bias in explanation increases with age and cognitive impairment

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Abstract

People tend to explain events using inherent more than extrinsic factors, a phenomenon known as the inherence bias. This bias is hypothesized to be more pronounced when cognitive resources are scarce. Here, we tested an important prediction of this account: namely, that aging and cognitive impairment should increase the inherence bias in explanation. Participants were shown vignettes of surprising scientific discoveries, and were asked to generate and evaluate explanations for those events. Our results indicate that as age increased, participants were more likely to generate inherent explanations, though age did not lead participants to endorse more inherent explanations when generation was not required. Older adults with Mild Cognitive Impairment generated a similar proportion of inherent explanations as healthy adults on average, though they did not do so increasingly with age. These findings suggest that cognitive deficits due to aging can have downstream effects on how we engage in complex reasoning.