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Affordances in the wild: Anthropological Contributions to Embodied Cognitive Science

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Abstract

The usual approach to studying affordances is in controlled laboratory situations. While recognizing the value of controlled experimentation, I argue for the benefits of additionally considering affordances “in the wild,” i.e., in the context of real-world activity. As an example, I describe ethnographic observation about the introduction of cellphones in rural Uganda in the early 2000s, highlighting the unexpected, innovative uses that emerged in that unique context. This case, I suggest, illustrates the constitutive role of material, sociocultural constraints in the perception and realization of affordances which often go unacknowledged in experimental laboratory research. Theoretically, the case raises questions about the definition of affordances, in particular how narrowly or broadly to conceptualize their spatiotemporal dimensionality. And methodologically, it poses the question of how anthropology can contribute to embodied cognitive science and, more broadly, how experimental and observational approaches can help one another to further our understanding of psychological phenomena.