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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 42(0)

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Publication Date

2020

Peer reviewed

Generalizations about the functions of agents

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Abstract

Studies show that people begin to associate objects with functions early in development (Atran, 1995; Carey, 1985; Csibra & Gergely, 1998; Keil, 1992). They can describe generalizations about the functions of objects by producing teleological generic language, i.e., statements that express generalities about the purposes of objects. A recent study shows that people accept teleological generics about body parts such as eyes are for seeing but reject statements such as eyes are for blinking. Nevertheless, little is known about whether people associate living, volitional agents with functions. In a series of experiments, we show that they do: they accept statements of the form "horses are for riding" but not "horses are for neighing". The studies show further that people appear to have normative expectations about the functions of agents, e.g., they accept statements such as "all normal horses are for riding" and "horses are supposed to be for riding". The result corroborates Korman and Khemlani's (2018, 2020) proposal that people mentally represent principled connections, i.e., privileged conceptual links, between kinds and their functional properties.