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Risk is Preferred at Lower Causal Depth

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Abstract

Risk and uncertainty are inherent in life, and how people perceive, respond to, and manage both are topics of great academic interest. One critical insight is that people distinguish between types of uncertainty (see, e.g., Fox & Lkmen, 2011) and, consequently, may respond to objectively equally probabilistic events differently (e.g., with more polarized predictions of those events outcomes). The current work identifies another way in which risk (a specific form of uncertainty) is differentiated: on the basis of causal depth (Sloman, Love, & Ahn, 1998). Specifically, in contexts where an uncertain outcome (e.g., win/lose) is determined by a causal chain, people tend to prefer for the uncertainty to arise at lower causal depth within the chain (i.e., at later causal stages). This occurs even though the causal depth at which the uncertainty arises makes no difference in the overall probability that the causal chain will generate one outcome or another.