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Let's talk structure: the positive consequences of structural representations

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Abstract

How should we represent social categories? Essentialism, which posits an internal category essence, has negative consequences such as group-based generalization and intolerance of nonconformity. Structural representations, which consider categories as situated in a larger context, could be more constructive. When considering a neutral context, adults who learned a structural (food availability) cause for a novel group's diet, versus a biological (allergies, digestion) or cultural (taboo) cause, generalized in a context-sensitive manner, considered nonconformity to be more possible and acceptable, and suggested intervening on the structural context rather than the group to change the property. When considering social stratification, adults who learned a structural (discrimination) cause for a novel group working a low-status job, versus a biological (physically well-suited) or cultural (traditions/values) cause, showed more context-sensitive generalization, considered the present disparity to be more unacceptable, and suggested more structural interventions. Structural representations may consequently be a more constructive alternative to essentialism.