

What Gives a Diagnostic Label Value? Common Use Over Informativeness

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Abstract

A labels entrenchment, its degree of use by members of a community, affects its perceived explanatory value even if the label provides no substantive information (Hemmatian & Sloman, 2018). Here we show that entrenched psychiatric and non-psychiatric diagnostic labels are seen by laypersons and mental health professionals as better explanations even if circular. This preference is not attributable to conversational norms, reflectiveness or attentiveness, and the recipients unfamiliarity with the label. In Experiment 1, whether a label provided novel symptom information had no impact on laypersons' responses, while its entrenchment enhanced ratings of explanation quality. The effect persisted in Experiment 2 for incoherent random categories and regardless of provided mechanistic information. The entrenchment manipulation induced causal beliefs about the category even when respondents were informed that no causal relation exists. We replicate the effect in Experiment 3 with mental health professionals despite a marked tendency to find all uninformative explanations unsatisfactory.