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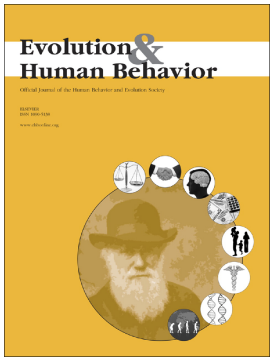

Spontaneous categorization along competence in partner and leader evaluations

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Spontaneous categorization along competence in partner and leader evaluations

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Abstract

Successful cooperation requires a partner both willing and capable of contributing to a joint endeavour. Accordingly, partner choice psychology should include mechanisms to distinguish between people with good and bad intentions, and between people who are competent and incompetent. While it is well established that intentions influence partner choice, the literature offers mixed evidence concerning people's ability to gauge competence in social interactions. Theoretical accounts in leadership-followership psychology and food-sharing imply that partner competence can influence the estimated future benefits from cooperation. The available empirical evidence, however, is limited to leadership evaluations in the political science literature. This paper thus investigates if people have dedicated cognitive mechanisms, which have evolved to categorize potential social partners on competence. It looks at competence both in regular social partnerships and leader-follower relations. In a series of four experiments relying on the memory confusion protocol, it demonstrates that people spontaneously distinguish between competent and incompetent social partners. This mental categorization is present equally in partner and leader evaluations. These results have interesting implications for partner choice literature and evolutionary leadership theories.

Keywords: cooperation, reciprocity, competence, food-sharing, partner choice, leader preference

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