

Diagnostic inference: No cure for correspondence bias.

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Oral Session III: Motivational influences on diagnostic reasoning

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Mental health practitioners should categorize behaviors representative of a mental health disorder as situational symptoms and not as dispositional traits (DSM-5). However, people tend to show a correspondence bias, to draw dispositional inferences from behavior, while neglecting alternative contextual explanations (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). But are able to discount (insufficiently) the role of the implied trait in the production of the behavior when a condition present in the situation could clearly induce the behavior by itself (Gilbert 2002). This correction process has been shown only with situational conditions that by themselves would never bring to mind the inferred trait. However, psychotherapy contexts may posit the case where a situational condition such as a disorder diagnosis may not only afford a competing causal account of the behavior (situational symptom), but may also activate the implied trait. This case has never been contemplated.

Three studies were conducted to explore this question. We presented trait-implicative paragraphs that also matched a disorder diagnosis (e.g., lazy – depression), and manipulated the behavior account (neutral, physical impairment, disorder diagnosis). Main dependent measures were participants' trait ratings of the implicated traits (complemented by ratings of behavioral perceived stability, control and attribution). Studies 1 and 2 show that the disorder diagnosis lead to almost no trait discount. The first two studies may be accounting by the lack of knowledge from our participants about the nature of mental disorders. Study 3 replicates this finding with clinical psychologists suggesting that expertise does not decrease the correspondence inference. Together these studies suggest that, contrary to the spirit of the DSM-5, mental health disorders are not perceived as alternative behavior explanations. When a situational explanation may also activate the trait, people neglect its explanatory role for the behavior and make correspondence inferences. Further research should explore the causal links underlying this confound.