



The evolution of concepts about agents

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A widely accepted view holds that human infants' perception begins with several 'core' systems of conceptual knowledge, each specialized for representing and reasoning about objects, quantities, and social agents. How did this style of thinking evolve? Here we propose that the origin of human concepts concerning agents can be found in the social categories of many animals. Concepts about agents begin with the concept of an individual. Individual recognition is widespread, multi-modal, and cannot be reduced to or defined in terms of any single sensory attribute. Many primates also classify individuals into groups – families, dominance hierarchies, mating pairs. These, too, cannot be reduced to a few sensory attributes but are based instead on the relations among their members. The perception of such relations includes attributions of motives and implicit theories of causality.

The formation of social concepts is adaptive because it helps individuals establish and maintain strong, persistent social bonds that are correlated with reduced stress, higher infant survival, and greater longevity.