

Ad Hoc Cognition

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Abstract: If concepts, categories, and word meanings are stable, how can people use them so flexibly? Here we explore a possible answer: maybe this stability is an illusion. Perhaps all concepts, categories, and word meanings (CC&Ms) are constructed ad hoc, each time we use them. On this proposal, all words are infinitely polysemous, all communication is 'good enough', and no idea is ever the same twice. The details of people's ad hoc CC&Ms are determined by the way retrieval cues interact with the physical, social, and linguistic context. We argue that even the most stable-seeming CC&Ms are instantiated via the same processes as those that are more obviously ad hoc, and vary (a) from one microsecond to the next within a given instantiation, (b) from one instantiation to the next within an individual, and (c) from person to person and group to group as a function of people's experiential history.