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POSTER

TOO MANY LICE? NEGATIVITY BIAS SKEWS ESTIMATES OF PARASITE LOAD

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ABSTRACT

Cultural transmission plays a central role in how humans acquire knowledge and form judgments, especially when social information from others is available. In this study, we investigate how people use such information when making numerical estimates, specifically in tasks where previous participants' guesses are shown alongside each question.

We focus on whether the content of a question – particularly if it involves parasites or disgust-inducing topics – affects how people estimate quantities. Participants are asked to respond to a range of questions, from neutral ones (e.g. fruit production or geography trivia) to more aversive ones (e.g. how many lice might be present on an infested human head, or how many eggs a parasite lays during its lifetime).

We hypothesize that such questions may elicit a systematic shift toward higher estimates, possibly due to increased caution or affect-driven cognitive biases. This would be consistent with error management theory that posits that it is safer to overestimate potential threats than to underestimate them.

Preliminary results indicate a possible overestimation bias, which stands out compared to the baseline set by neutral questions. For example, the number of adult lice on infested human head typically ranges between 10 - 15, players consistently estimate this number to be between 200 - 500 and even selecting away 50% of worst tips each generation can do very little about it.

The results may offer insight into how emotionally loaded information affects reasoning and social transmission.