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Knowing Not: A Study of Metacognition

How do you know that you do not know? Research suggests that when one makes a "don't know" judgment, the judgment is based on how much we are able to retrieve from memory, or more accurately, how little we are able to retrieve. The current research examines a more detailed mechanism for the "don't know" judgment, including how much one is able to retrieve, but also knowledge of how large the category is and the item-to-category ratio. Participants first learned the sizes and names of nonsense categories, and also a variable number of items that belonged to those categories. Once the information was fully learned, they were given trials where a category was presented along with an item that did or did not belong to the category, and their task was to say "yes", "no" or that they "don't know". Reaction times for saying that they "don't know" were of interest. Results contribute to our understanding of the mechanism of how it is that we know not, and also, the definition of familiarity.