Conceptualizing agency:
Folkpsychological and folkcommunicative perspectives on plants

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Abstract. The present research addresses cultural variation in concepts of agency. Across two experiments, we investigate how Indigenous Ngöbe of Panama and US college students interpret and reason about nonhuman agency, focusing on plants as a critical test case for differentiating between cultural perspectives on this domain. In Experiment 1, participants predicted goal-directed actions for various nonhuman kinds and then judged their capacities for intentional agency, replicating methods from Opfer & Gelman (2001). Ngöbe and US participants alike predicted that plants can engage in goal-directed action, but Ngöbe were more likely to attribute intentional agency capacities to plants, placing plants and animals under a common framework rather than separate domains. Experiment 2 extends these findings with a novel paradigm involving action predictions and capacity attributions linked to plant social agency (communication, kin altruism). Ngöbe were more likely than US participants to predict that plants can engage in social behaviors and also attributed more social agency capacities to plants. The Ngöbe view supports sophisticated inferences about plant behavior that align with recent findings from botanical sciences. We consider these findings in light of current theories based on cultural variability in (over)extensions of universal folkpsychology, and offer an alternative account based on a cultural framework of folkcommunication that infers agency on the basis of relational interactions rather than having a mind.

Keywords: agency concepts; culture; folkpsychology; folkcommunication; folkbiology; Indigenous ecological knowledge