Object Manipulation in a Captive Group of Capuchin Monkeys (Cebus nigritus)

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Source: Neotropical Primates, 16(2) : 80-81
Published By: Conservation International
URL: https://doi.org/10.1896/044.016.0211


Steklis, H. D. and King, G. E. 1978. The craniocervical position of another object (Beck 1980; Panger 2007) has been reported in wild, semi-captive and captive capuchins (Ottoni et al. 2003). Some observations on the predation of small mammals by tufted capuchin monkeys (Cebus apella) in the Sapucaia do Sul Zoological Park, state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, was observed between April and September 2008. Matilda is the individual whose tool-related behavior was reported by Bortolini & Bicca-Marques (2007).

Data collection by the behavior sampling method with continuous recording (Martin & Bateson 1993) was conducted from 08:00–08:30 to 13:00–13:30 once a week. Object manipulation was classified into banging (the act of pounding an object against a surface or another object), washing (partial or total immersion of an object in water), scrubbing (the act of rubbing an object against a surface), handling (the act of just touching or holding an object) and biting (the act of biting an object). Events of food banging, washing and scrubbing were included in the analysis, whereas those of handling and biting were not included.

Methods

A group of five capuchin monkeys (adult females Chief and Matilda, adult male Black and juvenile males Sem-topete and Trainer) living in an enclosure (7.0 x 7.7 x 2.9 m) enriched with sand, twigs, ropes and a wood-made wheel in the Sapucaia do Sul Zoological Park, state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, was observed between April and September 2008. The study was divided into two 50-h stages. In the first stage there was no supplementation of objects to the monkeys besides those normally found in the enclosure, whereas 15 pieces of branch (30 to 40 cm in length) and five stones (6 to 7 cm in diameter) were supplemented before each observation session and removed at the end of the day in the second stage. The frequency of each type of object manipulation during each stage was compared among individuals by the chi-square test and the total individual frequency of object manipulation events was compared between stages by the Student t test considering a level of significance of 0.05 using the software BioEstat 5.0 (Ayres et al. 2007).

Results

Sixty two events of object manipulation (48% banging, 26% washing, 19% handling and 6% scrubbing) were recorded during the first stage, resulting in a rate of 1.2 events per hour. Most of these events involved food items (n = 44). Supplementation with branches and stones in the second stage produced a significant increase in the frequency of object manipulation (428 events: 68% handling, 25% biting and 8% banging; t = 2.138, df = 4, p = 0.042) or a rate of 8.6 events per hour. Most of these events involved food items (n = 44). Object manipulation differed among individuals in both stages (1st: \( \chi^2 = 13.559, df = 4, p = 0.008 \); 2nd: \( \chi^2 = 210.570, df = 4, p = 0.008 \)).

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Introduction

Capuchin monkeys (Cebus spp.) exploit embedded resources by using foraging strategies that involve several levels of object manipulation, from the simple tearing apart strips of wood to get access to invertebrates to the use of stones as tools (hammer and anvil) to break and open nuts (Ottoni & Mannu 2001; Fragaszy et al. 2004; Moura & Lee 2004; Waga et al. 2006). Tool use or the use of a detached object as an extension or functional part of the body to modify the position of another object (Beck 1980; Panger 2007) has been reported in wild, semi-captive and captive capuchins (Visalberghi 1990; Fragaszy et al. 2004).

Cognitively more complex than tool use, tool making involves a modification of the physical structure of the tool to improve its efficiency, a behavior that requires an understanding of cause-and-effect (Beck 1980). Among primates, tool making has only been reported for great apes (chimpanzees, orangutans and gorillas; Boesch & Boesch 1990; Fontaine et al. 1995; van Schaik et al. 2003), including humans. Recently, however, Bortolini & Bicca-Marques (2007) observed opportunistically a putative spontaneous event of tool making by a captive adult female Cebus nigritus in the Sapucaia do Sul Zoological Park, state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. These authors state that if capuchins can make tools, the cognitive difference between them and the great apes, lineages separated for at least 30 million years, is smaller than previously thought (Bortolini & Bicca-Marques 2007).
p < 0.001; Fig. 1). Whereas adult females showed the lowest frequencies of object manipulation (43 and 18 events), juvenile males Trainer (305 events) and Sem-topete (166 events) were the most manipulative group members. No case of tool use or tool making was observed during the 100 h of observation.

Discussion

Object supplementation stimulated a significant increase in manipulation events, especially by juveniles, but was not sufficient to elicit additional events of tool making. Therefore, this 100-h study failed to corroborate the observation of Bortolini & Bicca-Marques (2007) and to reject the hypothesis that capuchins despite their high cognitive abilities are not capable of making tools (Fragaszy & Visalberghi 1989; Fragaszy et al. 2004; Ottoni et al. 2005).

Acknowledgements

We thank the staff of the Núcleo de Zoologia do Sul Zoological Park, especially biologists Renato Petry Leal and Marcelo Linck, for the permission to conduct this research, and the Pontificia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul and Brazilian National Research Council for research scholarships (DSF: BPA/PUCRS; JCBM: PQ/CNPq Proc. # 306090/2006–6).

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