Assessing the Value of Choice as a Reinforcer and Implications for Enhancing Primate Welfare

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It has been purported that enhancing nonhuman animal welfare for animals in captivity can be attained by providing individuals increased opportunities to exert choice and control over their environments. However, very little empirical evidence exists that shows direct welfare benefits of choice. Additionally, studies that have investigated the effects of choice-making opportunities on individuals across several taxa have used varying methodologies, and as a result, yielded inconsistent results. There is, therefore, a pressing need to develop an experimental framework that objectively measures the potential impacts of choice on welfare. Here the results of a study aimed at measuring whether there is inherent value in access to choice is presented. The method presented is for a quantitative approach to providing choices for captive primates by utilizing a concurrent chain procedure in which preference for conditions in a terminal link is measured by the relative rate of responding in the initial link. It is hypothesized that, if the act of choosing is intrinsically reinforcing, then individuals should show a preference for a “choice” condition over a “no choice” condition, even when the consequences of each are equal. The results provide insights into effective methods for assessing the benefits of choice and implications for its use as a measure of enhanced welfare.

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