Neophilia in Successfully Ageing Dogs: Preliminary Results

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Introduction

Engaging with novel objects and higher cognitive performance in old age appears connected in humans (Daffner et al., 2007). Based on previous results (Kaulfuß & Mills, 2008) dogs are attracted towards novel objects over familiar ones. Using a simple setup, we investigated whether this phenomenon is also observable in senior dogs.

Material and Methods

We tested dogs over eight years of age (n=44), free from overt medical conditions and sensory impairment. During a one-minute long presentation phase, dogs were encouraged to investigate two identical objects. Afterwards, the dogs left the room for five minutes, during which one of the objects was replaced with for a novel object. Upon returning for the test phase, dogs were released without any specific command, and the dogs' first contact with the objects was recorded.

Results

Twenty-eight dogs manipulated at least one of the objects during this phase (the remaining dogs were passive or oriented toward the humans). Dogs contacted the novel object more frequently than the familiar object (Wilcoxon signed-rank test: $z=-2.197$, $p<0.05$).

Conclusion

Neophilia was evident in normally ageing dogs, even after a very brief presentation and a short break. Our simple protocol could be included in the evaluation of cognitive state of dogs in the veterinary practice; multiple trials can be carried out within minutes, and without pre-training. Future studies should investigate whether the loss of ability to detect novel objects may be an indication of pathological cognitive decline in senior dogs, as it is in humans.

References:

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