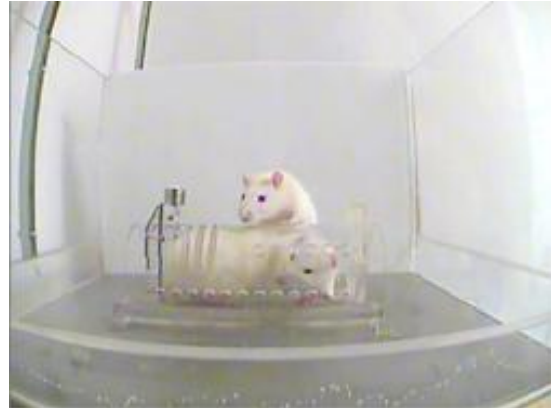


EMPATHETIC RATS

It is common for people to dismiss the notion that non-human species have character traits similar to our own, but animal experts have long noted examples of complex behaviors that indicate otherwise. Now, a University of Chicago study reveals that a species we humans have traditionally looked down on does indeed possess feelings that some people thought were exclusive to homo sapiens and other primates.

Psychologists left one rat in a see-through cage that could only be opened from the outside. A second rat was left loose outside the cage. The free rat was observed at first circling the cage, but then he tried to dig under it and bite through it. Finally, he figured out how to release the latch to open the cage and free his fellow.



“It’s very obvious that it is intentional,” says study co-author Inbal Ben-Ami Bartal. “They walk right up to the door and open the door.”

After each instance of release, both rats engaged in excited running around. To prove that opening the cage was not simply an act of curiosity, the scientists also put free rats near an empty cage. These subjects were not as interested in the mechanism. The numbers tell the story: 23 out of 30 rats who saw the trapped rat learned how to open the cage, but only 5 of the 40 rats who saw an empty cage bothered to work the mechanism. Interestingly, rats reacted to the presence of a “trapped” stuffed animal exactly as they did to the sight of an empty cage. They were not fooled by a fake rat!

Rewards were not given to those rats who saved a trapped rat, thus self-interest played no part in their actions. Even more significantly, chocolate chips – a favorite treat – were offered as an alternative to altruism. The free rat was shown two cages, one with a trapped rat in it and the other with chocolate chips ready to eat. The psychologists found that the rats were equally likely to free their fellow rodent as they were to open the cage with the chocolate. In fact, the rescuer rats also shared the coveted chocolate with their companion in at least half of the instances.

This series of experiments certainly seems to show that even the “lowly” rat will behave with empathy for their fellows. One further observation was that female rats displayed more empathy than males, with all 6 females in the study freeing the trapped individual, while 17 of the 24 males did so.

Now that science has shown that pro-social empathy is not limited to humans and primates, perhaps we can at last rid ourselves of old prejudices that consign other animals to an inferior, non-cognizant status. Knowing that we are not the only possessors of finer feelings, and that animals are not unthinking beasts, the next step surely should be to reconsider the ethics of animal testing, especially with all of the good alternatives that exist. Scientists will tell you that what works for mice will not work for rats. How different humans are from rodents and yet companies are still testing on rodents to see how humans can be affected by products. Isn’t it time to move away from this flawed model?

Read the whole story at:

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