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TESTING PICTORIAL COMPETENCE IN NONHUMAN PRIMATES

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Pictures are common in the experimental study of animal cognition and have been successfully used in perceptual and conceptual tasks for decades. The principal concern has been whether animals are able to recognize objects in pictures or not. The answer is positive. But recognition does not necessarily equal seeing the picture as a depiction. There are at least three ways in which a picture can be interpreted in a discrimination or matching procedure. The first approach is to respond to invariant features in a set of pictures without actual recognition of a motif. Responding to color rather than object category is an example. The second is to apprehend a motif but not sufficiently differentiate this from reality, thus bypassing reference. A typical response in this mode is to act towards the picture as if it contained properties of the real. The third, truly pictorial, alternative is to regard pictures as being visually similar to, but differentiated from, real-world entities. Depiction thus relies on the formation of imaginary connections between pictures and referents. Few studies of pictorial competence have successfully controlled for performance in alternative modes. Animals should ideally be able to categorize truly novel depictions that are low in realism, or pictures that otherwise violate processing as a form of reality. A study of language trained bonobos at the Great Ape Trust of Iowa showing successful trial-one performance in a matching-to-sample task with never-before-seen drawings will be presented. It suggests that some great apes can view pictures as depictions.

Keywords: pictures, reference, imagination, bonobos