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P16. Neophilia in successfully ageing dogs

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Engagement by novelty and higher cognitive performance in old age appears connected in humans. Dogs are attracted towards novel objects over familiar ones. Using a simple setup, we investigated whether this phenomenon is also observable in senior dogs.

We tested N=106 adult dogs (age 8.87 ± 3.10 years, range 2-15 years), free from overt medical conditions and sensory impairment. During a one-minute long presentation phase, dogs were encouraged to investigate two identical objects. Afterwards, they left the room for a short break, during which one of the objects was switched for a novel one. Upon returning for the test phase, dogs were released without any specific command.

Dogs approached the novel objects sooner (Wald χ^2 (1 N=212) = 7.45, P=0.006). Age influenced both the latency (Wald χ^2 (1 N=212) = 6.37, P=0.012) and duration of manipulation of the objects (Wald χ^2 (1 N=106) = 4.00, P=0.045).

The results show that neophilia, even after a very brief presentation and a short break is detectable, but the effect became less pronounced with increasing age, maybe due to the decreased exploration of older dogs in general. Future studies need to determine 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.

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