

IS IT MORE BLESSED TO GIVE THAN TO TAKE? “SHARING” OF FOOD IN GREAT APES

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A range of studies explores the patterns of food-sharing in numerous nonhuman primate species in regard to costs and benefits, the kind of items shared and the characteristics of the individuals involved (e.g., de Waal, 1989, Fruth & Hohmann, 2000, Stevens, 2003, Ueno & Matsuzawa, 2004, Wolovich et al., 2006). However, definitions of the term “sharing” vary considerably and thus a comparison across species is often problematic. Thus, the aim of this study was to systematically compare all four great ape species in a captive setting in regard to (1) types and frequency of food transfer, (2) characteristics of the two interacting individuals, and (3) kind of food transferred. Ad libitum observations were conducted in addition to an experimental study focusing on mother-infant interactions. Results show that the types of food transfers differ between species with orangutans showing the highest rate of interactions as well as the highest number of individuals interacting in this context. Tolerated theft was by far the most frequent type of food transfer, which was restricted to mother-infant dyads in gorillas and bonobos, but occurred in a variety of other dyads in chimpanzees and orangutans. Active offering of food as well as harassment with subsequent food transfer were only observed in orangutans and chimpanzees. Results are discussed in regard to species differences in terms of the varying tolerance when another individual took the food and the frequent use of food - “sharing” as a tool to negotiate the relationship within a particular dyad.

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