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Sarah F. Brosnan
Georgia State University

Audrey E. Parrish
Georgia State University

Michael J. Beran
Georgia State University

Timothy Flemming
Georgia State University

Lisa Heimbauer
Georgia State University

See next page for additional authors

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Comments

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Authors

Sarah F. Brosnan, Audrey E. Parrish, Michael J. Beran, Timothy Flemming, Lisa Heimbauer, Catherine F. Talbot, Susan P. Lambeth, Steven J. Schapiro, and Bart J. Wilson

Responses to the Assurance game in monkeys, apes, and humans using equivalent procedures

Sarah F. Brosnan^{a,b,c,d,1}, Audrey Parrish^{a,b}, Michael J. Beran^{a,b,1}, Timothy Flemming^{a,b}, Lisa Heimbauer^{a,b}, Catherine F. Talbot^{a,b}, Susan P. Lambeth^d, Steven J. Schapiro^d, and Bart J. Wilson^{e,1}

^aLanguage Research Center, ^bDepartment of Psychology, and ^cNeuroscience Institute, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA 30302; ^dMichale E. Keeling Center for Comparative Medicine and Research, University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, Bastrop, TX 78602; and ^eEconomic Science Institute, Chapman University, Orange, CA 92866

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There is great interest in the evolution of economic behavior. In typical studies, species are asked to play one of a series of economic games, derived from game theory, and their responses are compared. The advantage of this approach is the relative level of consistency and control that emerges from the games themselves; however, in the typical experiment, procedures and conditions differ widely, particularly between humans and other species. Thus, in the current study, we investigated how three primate species, capuchin monkeys, chimpanzees, and humans, played the Assurance (or Stag Hunt) game using procedures that were, to the best of our ability, the same across species, particularly with respect to training and pretesting. Our goal was to determine what, if any, differences existed in the ways in which these species made decisions in this game. We hypothesized differences along phylogenetic lines, which we found. However, the species were more similar than might be expected. In particular, humans who played using “nonhuman primate-friendly” rules did not behave as is typical. Thus, we find evidence for similarity in decision-making processes across the order *Primates*. These results indicate that such comparative studies are possible and, moreover, that in any comparison rating species’ relative abilities, extreme care must be taken in ensuring that one species does not have an advantage over the others due to methodological procedures.

cooperation | coordination | comparative behavior | evolution of behavior

Recent advances in the study of economic decision making have fundamentally altered how we view the science of economics. Beginning with experimental economics (1) and continuing in more recently emerging fields such as neuroeconomics (2, 3), there has been a much more scientific approach to understanding how humans make decisions in economic contexts. Most recently, there has emerged an interest in understanding the evolution of human decision making, primarily as studied using a comparative approach. Although studies of rats and pigeons emerged many decades ago, a recent surge with additional species has provided even more data relevant to social scientists interested in decision making.

Although game theory has been used independently in behavioral ecology for decades (4), it is only recently that human economic games have been used extensively to address decision-making behavior (5, 6) and underlying neural activity (7). There are certainly reasons to think that humans and other primates might be similar in their decision-making abilities. Other primates are our closest living relatives—we share a common ancestor with chimpanzees within approximately the last 6 million y (8)—so there is a high likelihood of homology. Even though this does not mean identical decision making, it implies similarity in the underlying structures. Nonhuman primates also show many of the same cognitive skills, and even biases (9, 10), as humans. Alternately, though, humans are distinct from other primates, and even a few million years is sufficient for substantial evolutionary divergence. In fact, despite the use of nonhuman primate models as a means of understanding human cognitive evolution, some

studies have indicated differences between us (6, 11), and there remains a sense that humans are the exceptional primate (12, 13).

An often overlooked aspect of this debate, however, is inconsistent methodology. At the most basic level, procedural differences, such as in timing, reward, and experimental environment, may make a difference in outcomes and imply species differences that do not necessarily exist (14). More critically, there are typically fundamental differences in procedure and format that advantage humans. Humans can be verbally instructed on constraints, rules, and contingencies; presented with payoff matrices; and given pretests to verify understanding. Animals cannot. Instead, they must be trained, and investigators must infer when individuals across species possess an apparently equivalent understanding of the task. Given the differences in procedure, however, this cannot be assumed any more than can evolutionary homology. Thus, the purpose of our study was to provide a comparison that was as procedurally similar as possible across three species frequently used in studies of cooperation. Our goal was to create as fair a playing field for this cross-species assessment as possible and to see whether previously reported differences remained.

Different disciplines define cooperation differently, so it is important to clarify what we mean in this case. We define cooperation as a situation in which two individuals can increase their immediate payoffs by working together. This definition emphasizes the behaviors of the individuals involved, as measured by their decisions and the pair’s outcomes. Thus, our focus is on what the individual gains from the behavior (i.e., the proximate payoff to their decision making), rather than whether the individual understands their behavior (i.e., the cognitive or neural mechanisms underlying their decision). This evolutionary perspective differs from both psychology and economics, which tend to have a more mechanistic focus. However, it allows for a direct comparison without assuming cognitive complexity that may not be required (15), or reliance on self-report, which may be unreliable (16).

Of course, testing multiple species with additional paradigms is not sufficient; it is also critical that all species have some ability in the chosen task. Otherwise, apparent differences in ability may instead be due to differences in aptitude to the specific task. Even among closely related species, differences in ecology may lead to selection for quite different skills (17). We tested capuchin monkeys, chimpanzees, and humans, three species that show a strong tendency to cooperate across multiple domains and have demonstrated an ability to extrapolate these skills to

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¹To whom correspondence may be addressed. E-mail: sbrosnan@gsu.edu, mjberan@yahoo.com, or bartwilson@gmail.com.

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results, this option was pursued in only one group of chimpanzees (see below for details).

Capuchin monkeys. Capuchin monkeys lived at the LRC in two multimale, multifemale social groups of five to eight individuals with offspring present (subjects included two male and two female subjects from one group and three male and one female from the other).

Chimpanzees, MD Anderson Cancer Center. Subjects included 20 chimpanzees housed in social groups at the Michale E. Keeling Center for Comparative Medicine and Research of the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center (MDA). There were two changes to the protocol from the capuchins. First, the chimpanzees could not be separated, so to keep them from stealing each other's tokens, we used T-shaped PVC pipes that could be placed through the mesh of the caging but were held in place by the top of the T. Second, we used two experimenters, one for each ape, as it was difficult for one experimenter to interact with both subjects simultaneously. The experimenters simultaneously provided each chimpanzee with one of each token and, after both subjects had returned their tokens, the experimenters simultaneously held them both up and proceeded to give the appropriate rewards. Neither experimenter was aware of what token the other chimpanzee returned to the other experimenter, and therefore the potential for cuing a given response was minimized.

Chimpanzees, Language Research Center. We tested four additional chimpanzees (two male, two female) that lived at the LRC. The experimental procedure at the LRC was identical to that at MDA, except that the chimpanzees were separated into different cages for testing. There was additional testing for two pairs that chose the payoff-dominant outcome (*Stag-Stag*). For the first test, we added a partition to block their view of the other's choice (all other procedures were identical). This partition extended only up to the chimpanzees' shoulder height, so that they could identify each other, and extended ~18 inches in front of the caging, to eliminate the possibility that they saw what the experimenter accepted. Because the T-shaped tokens could not be moved in such a way that their partner could see them, the game was functionally simultaneous. The second test was identical to the barrier procedure but used two new tokens, a purple token (*Stag*) and a green token (*Hare*), to see whether they could extrapolate their behavior to novel tokens used in the same game. This allowed us to verify that any consistencies in behavior between the original and barrier tests were due to active choices rather than established preferences for one or the other token.

Humans. Fifty-two undergraduate subjects were recruited from the general student body at Chapman University. Subjects were randomly recruited via an e-mail system and paid \$7 for showing up on time, plus what they earned in the experiment. Each subject had participated in at least one economic experiment before this session so that they had experience with receiving actual payment for their decisions in this laboratory. This was necessary for a direct comparison, as all nonhuman primates had previous experience making decisions during experiments to receive food rewards. Accumulated coins and dollar bills were converted into large bills at the conclusion of the experiment. No subject participated in more than one pairing.

Upon hearing the limited instructions listed above, the humans were seated in desk chairs next to one another in front of a 4-ft circular table. On the table was a T-shaped partition that horizontally separated the experimenter from the subjects and prevented direct eye contact. The partition also vertically split the table into two halves, one for each subject. The partition separating the subjects did not extend to the edge of the table (it stopped ~4 in from the edge) so that they could comfortably make eye contact with each other (as could the nonhuman primates). Subjects could have leaned around to watch each other submit their token, but video analysis revealed that none did so.

The barrier separating the subjects from the experimenter had a 2 in \times 5.5 in slot at the bottom of each side through which the experimenter slid the two tokens (one red and one blue poker chip) at the beginning of each trial. The experimenter also passed their earnings through this slot at the end of each trial. At the top, the partition also included a 1 in \times 5 in slot for each subject, outlined in green, through which they could submit tokens. The experimenter held a ceramic bowl under each slot to collect the tokens, which allowed the subjects to hear whether their counterpart had made a decision. After receiving a single token from each subject, the experimenter held up the tokens above the barrier, with each token in front of the subject who submitted it. He then put down the tokens, held up the appropriate payoff (quarter or dollar bill), or raised an open hand on that side if there was nothing, and then slid the token and payoff to the respective subject through the bottom slot of the barrier. If a subject slid two tokens through the green slot, the experimenter returned them both through the bottom slot (with no comment from the experimenter) until the subject returned a single token. If a subject slid money through the slot, it was

immediately returned to the subject through the bottom slot. During no session did a subject try to talk to the experimenter. Due to the constraints of subject recruitment, humans received only a single session, so they were given 40 trials.

Statistics. Pairs' outcomes were compared with chance using χ^2 tests, including the Yates continuity correction for observations less than 40 (28). In cases in which there were fewer than five occurrences within a cell, the Fisher test was used instead, and when there were no occurrences in multiple cells, proportions were reported in lieu of statistics. In all cases, the unit of analysis was the pair. Note that these statistics are intended to determine whether that pair's behavior differed from chance, not whether these results generalize to the species as a whole.

In addition to comparing overall outcomes, we examined changes in individuals' behavior that may have indicated a nonrandom strategy in making decisions (28). To do this, we first examined individuals' choices using the binomial (proportions) test, to see whether there was an overall preference for either *Stag* or *Hare* choices. Second, we used the nonparametric runs test, which determines whether the distribution of a series of binary events is random. A run is defined as a sequence within a series in which one of the two alternatives occurs on consecutive trials. The null hypothesis is that the series is generated randomly, that is, there are neither too few nor too many runs. Finally, we used the nonparametric change-point test to determine whether there was a change in the binomial process that generates a series of binary events. Note that the test does not assume a priori when a change occurred. The null hypothesis is that there is no change at any point in the sequence. All statistics were two-tailed and significance was at the $P < 0.05$ level.

Results

Capuchin Monkeys. Among the six capuchin pairs, only one (16%) chose *Stag-Stag* more often than by chance ($\chi^2 = 4.57$, $df = 1$, $P < 0.05$) (Table 1). We also considered the possibility that the capuchins would perform better given extended opportunities to participate (although five of the eight individuals participated in more than one pair). Thus, we ran two pairs for additional sessions. After a total of 32 sessions, one of these pairs matched each other's choice but showed no preference for *Stag-Stag* or *Hare-Hare* (last 10 sessions: $\chi^2 = 5.38$, $df = 1$, $P < 0.05$).

Individual capuchins made nonrandom choices. One monkey preferred to return the *Stag* token (binomial test, $P = 0.024$), five showed more or fewer runs than anticipated (all $P \leq 0.002$), and two changed their decision-making strategy during game play (change-point test, $P < 0.05$). Among individuals tested in multiple pairings, some changed their behavior between partners. Two monkeys showed nonrandom behavior (as measured by the runs test) with one partner but not the other.

Chimpanzees, MD Anderson. Eight of the 10 pairs' choices deviated from chance. Six pairs "matched," with both partners choosing the

Table 1. Frequencies of different strategies across species

	No strategy	Matching	Risk-dominant	Payoff-dominant
Capuchin (6)	5 (4)	0 (1)	0 (0)	1 (1)
MDA chimp (10)	2 (4)	8 (6)	0 (0)	0 (0)
LRC chimp (4)	2 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (3)
LRC barrier (2)	1	0	0	1
LRC novel (2)	0	0	0	2
Human (26)	8*	3	10	5

Numbers in parentheses beside species indicate the number of pairs tested. LRC chimpanzees participated in three conditions (see *Methods* for details). Some nonhuman primates participated in greater than 10 sessions. For an equal comparison, results are reported from only the first 10 sessions first, and results considering all sessions tested are indicated in parentheses. Matching for the MDA chimps includes two pairs that matched against their partner's play.

*This includes two pairs who played the payoff-dominant strategy on 29 trials of 40. These two pairs are not included in the payoff-dominant column.

same token (all $\chi^2 > 27.69$, $df = 1$, all $P < 0.001$). However, none of these pairs preferentially chose either the *Stag-Stag* or the *Hare-Hare* options, despite extensive experience with both payoffs. Both of the remaining pairs were more likely to choose the option opposite to what their partner chose (e.g., *Stag-Hare* or *Hare-Stag*: $\chi^2 = 6.25$, $df = 1$, $P < 0.05$; $\chi^2 = 183.05$, $df = 1$, $P < 0.001$).

The above analyses were done using the entire dataset of 20 sessions. To more directly compare the chimpanzees with the capuchin monkeys, we repeated the analysis using only the first 10 sessions each pair completed (partners did not switch). Five of the six pairs that matched across 20 sessions were doing so already in the first 10 sessions (all $\chi^2 > 4.39$, $df = 1$, $P < 0.05$). Of the two subjects that chose oppositely from their partner, one did so in the first 10 sessions ($\chi^2 = 17.25$, $df = 1$, $P < 0.001$). Remaining analyses were done on all 20 sessions to include as much data as possible.

The matching outcomes seen in six pairs could emerge in two contexts. First, one partner may have “understood” the task and matched (or not) their partner’s choice. Second, both individuals may have understood the need to match, but failed to recognize that one outcome provided higher payoffs than the other. Thus, we investigated the frequency with which one individual spontaneously made the first choice among all 10 pairs (we decided to record these data after commencing the study, so we have data on all 20 sessions for 6 pairs and the last 15, 14, 11, and 10 sessions, respectively, for the remaining pairs). In 6 of the 10 pairs, one individual was more likely to make the first move than the other (binomial tests, all $P \leq 0.003$). In four of these cases, the pair matched and in one case the pair played oppositely. Looking at it another way, among the pairs that matched, in four of them (66.7%) one subject typically went first. Among the pairs that chose oppositely, in one of them (50%) one subject typically went first. Finally, among the two pairs that showed no consistent response, in one pair (50%) one of them typically went first. Thus, there is no evidence that a spontaneous consistent order to sequential play affected outcomes.

Only 4 subjects of the 20 showed a preference for one token over the other (binomial test, all $P < 0.05$). These four apes either matched ($n = 3$) or played oppositely ($n = 1$) to their partner. All 20 chimpanzees showed more runs than anticipated (runs test, all $P < 0.001$). Five of the 20 chimpanzees switched strategies more than 500 times in 600 trials, possibly indicating a side bias. No chimpanzee changed their decision-making strategy during the game (change-point test, all subjects nonsignificant).

Language Research Center. Four pairs of subjects were initially tested. Of these, two pairs preferentially chose the *Stag-Stag* option ($\chi^2 = 23.79$, $df = 1$, $P < 0.001$; 97% preference for *Stag-Stag*, no statistic calculated due to empty cells). Of the remaining two pairs, one failed to settle on a strategy ($\chi^2 = 0.16$, $df = 1$, $P > 0.05$). The other preferred *Stag* ($\chi^2 = 24.61$, $df = 1$, $P < 0.001$), but due to the female choosing *Stag* predominantly while the male chose randomly. Thus, we performed additional testing only on the two pairs that showed a robust preference for the *Stag-Stag* option.

To test whether the subjects understood the game or were visually matching their partners, we erected a barrier between the individuals so that they could not see their partner’s choice (Methods). One pair continued choosing the payoff-dominant outcome (99% preference for *Stag-Stag*), whereas the other did not ($\chi^2 = 0.05$, $df = 1$, $P > 0.05$), although the male in the latter pair chose *Stag* more than *Hare* (binomial test, $P < 0.001$). However, when novel tokens were introduced, both pairs were more likely to play *Stag-Stag* than any other option ($\chi^2 = 78.2$, $df = 1$, $P < 0.001$; $\chi^2 = 62.6$, $df = 1$, $P < 0.05$), although again in the latter pair this appeared to emerge primarily because of the male’s preference for *Stag* ($P < 0.001$).

Considering their individual behavior, in the pair that always chose the payoff-dominant outcome, both chimpanzees preferred

Stag (binomial test, both $P < 0.001$) and showed fewer runs than anticipated, likely because of their preference for *Stag*. However, both showed more runs than anticipated on the novel token test ($P = 0.002$) and one did so on the barrier test ($P = 0.002$), possibly because they were new situations. Both also showed a change in strategy in the novel token test (both $P < 0.05$), the test for which they initially showed the most *Hare* choices.

Because these four chimpanzees played in multiple pairings, we were also able to investigate whether their behavior changed with different individuals. Only one chimpanzee, the one that showed the least evidence for nonrandom behavior, did not alter his behavior. The two individuals that showed the most evidence of understanding changed strategy in all conditions with their other partners but only in the novel token condition with each other. The remaining female showed a change in behavior with one partner but not the other.

Humans. Among human subjects, 5 of the 26 pairs matched *Stag-Stag* on 75% or more of the trials (e.g., ≥ 30 of the 40 trials; an additional 2 pairs matched on 29 of 40 trials). Ten matched *Hare-Hare*, and 3 matched their partner, with an equal number of *Stag-Stag* and *Hare-Hare* choices. Intriguingly, 8 of the 26 pairs (31%) never matched *Stag-Stag* a single time, and all of these pairs preferentially matched *Hare-Hare*. Only one pair never matched *Hare-Hare*. Thus, humans who found *Hare-Hare* were less likely to explore alternate possibilities.

Of the 52 participants, all but 7 showed significant preferences for one token over the other over the course of the 20 trials (binomial test, all $P < 0.05$). Twenty participants more often chose the *Hare* option, whereas 25 more often chose *Stag*. For the seven participants who showed no preference, four participants showed more or fewer runs than anticipated ($P < 0.05$; two additional subjects showed a nonsignificant trend in this direction, $P \leq 0.10$). Twenty subjects showed no change in the decision-making process (change-point test, $P > 0.05$). Fourteen of these preferred the *Stag* option throughout (thus 56% of those who preferred *Stag* did so from the beginning), whereas three chose *Hare* throughout. In the final three cases, the subjects never settled on a strategy. Thus, the majority of subjects (49 of 52) showed nonrandom behavior.

Discussion

We found that although there were differences in the degree to which each species could achieve payoff-dominant outcomes, there was continuity in behavior across species. Specifically, there was a phylogenetic ordering with respect to the primates’ decision outcomes, with more efficient, payoff-dominant outcomes achieved more frequently in human pairs than in those of other primate species, and with chimpanzees doing so more frequently than capuchins. However, when procedures were equalized, only a subset of humans achieved these efficient outcomes, and pairs of both other species did so as well. Thus, when tested in similar conditions, other primates reached similar behavioral outcomes to humans more often than might have been expected based on the typical normal-form economic experiment. Consequently, we found support for both of our predictions, and potentially evidence of evolutionary continuity in decision making.

Considering this in more detail, the capuchin monkeys, which are phylogenetically most distant from humans, showed the least structured behavior. Only one pair chose *Stag-Stag* more often than chance, and only five of the eight subjects demonstrated behavior that indicated nonrandom choice behavior. Note, too, that despite statistical significance, the pair that achieved the payoff-dominant outcome did so less frequently than the chimpanzees and humans who found the same outcome. Chimpanzees were intermediate, and the most frequent strategy was unanticipated. Although only two pairs of chimpanzees consistently reached the payoff-dominant outcome (see below for

more details), the majority matched their partner. This strategy led to rewards for each individual on each trial, yet *Hare-Hare* was not as efficient as *Stag-Stag*. It is not clear why they did not alter their behavior. However, the fact that the dominant strategy seemed positional (they showed a side bias in their choices, a common behavior in primates) may indicate that despite finding a solution, they did not attend to the interaction in the same way as did the humans. Finally, despite being the species for which the highest frequency of pairs achieved the payoff-dominant outcome, even among humans fewer than 20% of pairs did so (this increases to 27% if two borderline pairs are included). An additional 38% of pairs achieved the risk-dominant outcome (*Hare-Hare*), and 12% matched their partner. It is worth reiterating that despite humans' success compared with the other primates, a nontrivial proportion of the pairs *failed* to achieve the payoff-dominant outcome. This underscores the difficulty of finding outcomes when the typical human procedures (instructions, payoff matrices, pretests for understanding) are absent, common handicaps for nonhuman species. Nonetheless, even when the field is leveled, humans are more likely than other primates to achieve these most efficient outcomes.

With respect to the chimpanzees, it is interesting, although not diagnostic with only a single pair, that the pairs that achieved the most efficient outcome even in a functionally simultaneous design (e.g., the barrier condition) with novel tokens had a substantially different rearing history. They were cognitively enriched from infancy and are accustomed to these kinds of interactive tasks. The one that subjectively seemed to understand it first had previous experience exchanging with a partner to obtain tools (29), and this particular pair was the most successful in a recent barter task requiring them to exchange tokens with each other (30). It may be that previous experiences had led this pair to expect that interaction with the partner and the experimenter could provide rewards. These chimpanzees also may be more like humans in how they perceive these kinds of tasks, for instance understanding it as an opportunity for rewards in a way the others do not, or perhaps even enhancing their interest in the task. Thus, some chimpanzees can achieve maximizing outcomes in economic games that are equivalent to those of humans, yet they may require specialized background experience to do so (31). Such variation also reinforces the need, whenever possible, to test a large number of primates with varied backgrounds (e.g., multifacility collaborations) to fully unearth the extent of their abilities and the extent of intraspecific variation within each species.

Although in most cases subjects played only with one other individual, in several cases with chimpanzees and capuchin monkeys we were able to re-pair individuals with more than one partner. Interestingly, in some of these cases, we found differences in behavior among different partners. Among capuchins, two of the three individuals tested with multiple partners behaved differently with different partners, and three of the four LRC chimpanzees did the same. These data do not allow us to determine which feature was important in changing the primates' behavior (e.g., relationships, the different distribution of choices among different partners), but the fact that they were present indicates sensitivity to the changing conditions created by playing with a new partner. Although similar data are not available for humans, we anticipate that this would also be the case with them.

What leads to the underlying similarity in decision outcomes between humans and other species? A first hypothesis is that there is similarity in the underlying decision-making architecture across the primates. This would indicate that, whereas humans may possess additional traits that allow more complex problems to be solved, such as narrative language, these additions support, but do not fundamentally alter, our basic primate decision structures. In fact, although all three species have large brain-to-body ratios and cooperate extensively in both natural and laboratory conditions, the species' ecologies are consistent with our

results. Humans live in an environment with ample opportunities to coordinate, particularly among out-group members, which might have led to selection on enhanced tendencies to do so beyond that seen in other species. Chimpanzees also coordinate to a greater degree than capuchins, for instance taking complementary roles in group hunts (32). These ecological differences may have increased selection pressure differentially across species, leading to differences in degree, if not kind, in decision making. The similarity of the cognitively enriched chimpanzees, whose rearing history and behavior were both similar to humans', supports the contention that underlying processes may be similar, and are affected by early experience.

However, there are alternative explanations. In particular, this hypothesis fails to explain humans' unexpectedly low level of success in the current game. This is difficult to explain by motivation, as rewards were quite high (approximately \$0.50–\$2 per min). In interpreting our results, we note that our procedures differed nontrivially from the traditional study of strategic behavior of humans in the laboratory. Providing common information on all of the payoff contingencies is simply not feasible for nonhuman primates, but the human cognitive ability to internalize the interdependency of the payoffs may be key for distinguishing human performance in this game from nonhuman primate performance. Future research is needed to compare results from the "primate format" with those that more closely follow traditional normal-form game format.

Having considered the similarities, it is interesting to speculate on the differences in behavior among the three primates. Although we equalized many aspects of the experimental design, we were not able to do so for all factors. One of these may have influenced results. We were able to test all individuals, including humans, in a setting in which only that pair and the experimenter were present. Moreover, all had previous experience in the laboratory in which they were tested, all rewards were paid out in the actual currency (cash or fruit) by the experimenter on a trial-by-trial basis, no pairings were anonymous, and all subjects of all species lived day-to-day in multimale, multifemale social groups. Nonetheless, only humans were tested with strangers (unfamiliar primates do not peacefully interact) and humans used a partition that blocked their view of their partner's choice. Although we do not know whether the primates made use of their ability to see their partner's rewards, they may have done so (excepting the LRC chimpanzees tested with the barrier). Finally, contrary to most such comparisons, this game was designed for nonhumans and adapted to humans, which may have made the task unusual for humans. All of these differences should have made the task more difficult for humans, if anything minimizing the difference between humans and other primates.

Differences in behavior may reflect less about strategic decision making and more about how each species comes to understand the nature of the task. Although humans faced challenges in this particular task, nonhuman primates, too, may need different procedures or additional time and experience to come to understand the contingencies of the task. Thus, as with the humans, their responses may say more about their ability to understand the experimental procedure (or the underlying structure of the task) than whether they can coordinate responses to maximize reward. Also, species may reach the same functional outcome using different mechanisms. For instance, the simplest explanation for matching behavior when partners can see each other's responses is visual matching, which would functionally result in successful coordination and, hence, reward maximization. However, humans and some chimpanzees matched without observing their partner's outcomes. Moreover, the fact that humans can use more advanced understanding of the tasks does not necessarily mean that they do so. These differences should be investigated through replication, particularly those involving different formats (e.g., on computerized tasks, for which all species have shown comparable

