

Sex differences in copying behaviour

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As a social species it might be expected that zebra finches would copy food choices of more experienced conspecifics. Copying has previously been tested by presenting observers with two demonstrator birds that differ in some way (e.g., sex, leg-band colour), each feeding on a different colour food. However, using this paradigm, if the observer exhibits a preference, it remains unclear whether the observer is copying the choice of one individual or avoiding the choice of the other. Therefore we presented the observer bird with only one demonstrator eating from only one of two coloured food hoppers. We tested both same-sex and opposite-sex dyads and found evidence of copying in only one experimental group: females observing males. Next we tested an independent group of birds for food hopper preference in the absence of demonstration and found no systematic preferences. Lastly, we tested whether observers relied more on location cues or on stimulus cues (i.e., hopper colour) to guide their behaviour. Here we found that female observers tended to use colour cues more than location cues provided by male demonstrators. This sex specificity of social learning may be associated with females more usually paying attention to male cues in a mate-choice context.