Correspondence

Learned control of urinary reflexes in cattle to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions

Neele Dirksen1, Jan Langbein1,4, Lars Schrader1, Birger Puppe1,3, Douglas Elliffe1, Katrin Siebert1, Volker Röttgen1, and Lindsay Matthews1

Indiscriminate voiding of excreta by cattle contributes to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and soil and water contamination1,2. Emissions are higher in animal-friendly husbandry offering cattle more space3—a trade-off we call the ‘climate killer conundrum’. Voiding in a specific location (latrine) would help resolve this dilemma by allowing ready capture and treatment of excreta under more spacious farming conditions. For urination, toileting requires self-control and coordination of a complex chain of behaviors including awareness of bladder fullness, overriding of excretory reflexes, selection of a latrine and intentional relaxation of the external urethral sphincter4. Attempts to train toileting in cattle have so far been only partly successful5,6, even though their excretion and associated neurophysiological control are similar to those in species capable of toileting7. Similarly, very young infants have been considered incapable of self-initiated voiding, but they can be taught with extensive training7. Using a backward chaining, reward-based training procedure, we here show that cattle can control their micturition reflex and use a latrine for urination. Such self-control provides evidence that animals can learn to respond to and reveal internal experiences via appropriately trained operant behaviors, thereby providing another way to explore their subjective states.

In our study, 16 calves (across two cohorts, n = 8) underwent individual toilet training in a three-step backward chaining procedure (Supplemental information). In the first phase (in-latrine training), the calves were confined to a distinctive area (latrine; Data S1C) and every urination event was rewarded with food. Increases in latency of orientation to the reward as training progressed would demonstrate success in bringing micturition under control of the rewards. In-latrine training was also designed to establish the latrine as the correct voiding location.

Reliable and rapid orientation to the reward (learning) was seen in 10 of 16 calves (4/8 calves in cohort 1 vs. 6/8 in cohort 2; p = 0.608). The mean slope of the learning curves (Figure 1A) calculated from the first urination accompanied by reward orientation to the last urination was 0.73 ± 0.08 (± SE) for the calves that oriented to the reward, which was significantly steeper than that for the calves that did not reliably orientate to the reward (0.27 ± 0.03; W = 60, p = 0.001). These results support published evidence that urination behavior in cattle can be modified by rewards5,6 and demonstrated the foundation step for backward chaining of toileting in a majority of the calves.

In the next phase (toileting training), self-control of the entire toileting sequence and the degree to which the latrine had been established as the correct voiding location were evaluated. Importantly, self-initiation and self-control of voiding would demonstrate that calves have the capacity to attend and respond to cues arising from internal experiences, thus showing interoceptive awareness8. All calves continued to this phase, as even the poorer learners orientated to the reward during in-latrine training. Calves accessed the latrine from an alley through an animal-activated gate and exited the latrine after each urination (Data S1C). Urinations initiated in the latrine were rewarded, as for in-latrine training, but urinations initiated in the alley were followed immediately by an unpleasant stimulus (three-second water spray). The behavior associated with each urination event in toileting training was assigned to one of four possible sequences (Figure 1D).

The development of toileting is shown by the record of cumulative rewards for those sequences that ended with voiding in the latrine (Seq++ and Seq+) across successive urinations (Figure 1B) and can be quantified from the slopes of the curves (calculated from the first rewarded urination to the last urination). Control of urinary reflexes was learned quickly by 11/16 calves (4/8 calves in cohort 1 vs. 7/8 in cohort 2; p = 0.282; Video S1). They reliably entered the latrine to urinate as shown by a mean curve slope of 0.77 ± 0.05, i.e. 77%
of sequences included urinations in the latrine, which was numerically much greater than that for the non-learners \((W = 30, p = 0.820)\). Thus, failure by non-learners to toilet consistently cannot be attributed to fewer opportunities to learn. Rather, further training is likely required. Calves that had shown reward orientation in in-latrine training were more likely to learn in toileting training compared to calves that did not show this behavior \((p = 0.036)\). This and the steep curves for the learners suggest that learning the correct voiding location occurred at the same time as urination came under the control of reward (during in-latrine training).

In many toileting situations, self-control of voiding reflexes over extended distances is required. Thus, in the last phase (toileting+training) we evaluated toilet use when the area outside the latrine was increased by extending the lead-up alley. The cumulative rewards for toileting (Seq++ and Seq+ combined) across urinations for each calf in this phase are shown in Figure 1C.

Ten of the 11 calves that met the toileting training learning criterion continued to use the latrine consistently in toileting+training. For these 10, the mean learning slope was \(0.83 \pm 0.04\), i.e. 83% of sequences included urinations in the latrine. In addition, the slopes for these calves did not differ between the toileting and toileting+training phases \((V = 10; p = 0.155)\). Thus, toileting was maintained with the increase in alley length. Further research is needed to determine the greatest distances over which continence can be maintained in cattle.

Learning to voluntarily suppress or interrupt and reinitiate contraction of the external urethral sphincter is a key component in the pathway to learn latrine use. Calves were able to reinitiate voiding after interruption as indicated by similar durations of urination in both Seq++ and Seq+ in the latrine \((16.2 \pm 0.9\) s).

Interceptive awareness during toileting is evidenced by self-initiated latrine use, i.e. Seq++, and developed quickly. In the first half of toileting training, 29 \(\pm\) 6% of urinations were self-initiated in the latrine, increasing to 73 \(\pm\) 5% in the second half \((V = 0, p = 0.004)\), a level that was maintained in toileting+training \((72 \pm 5\%)\). Thus, our study demonstrates the ability of cattle to attend to and voluntarily control internal voiding reflexes, and adds to a growing body of evidence that involuntary as well as voluntary behaviors of animals are amenable to modification by rewards\(^1\). The demonstration of interceptive awareness in a non-human animal could further indicate that other subjective experiences or affective states that are not readily accessible but important to understanding animal well-being\(^2\) can be measured using appropriate operant conditioning procedures.

Remarkably, the calves showed a level of performance comparable to that of children and superior to that of very young children\(^7\). The success of our procedure is likely attributable to two key factors: the establishment of strong reward-based control over the reflex at the beginning of training, and the rapid development of responsiveness to internal reflex cues. The use of an unpleasant stimulus following ‘mistakes’ outside of the latrine likely also played a significant role, resulting in inhibition of voiding in the alley compared to urinations in the latrine (urination durations: Seq++ = 3.0 \(\pm\) 0.3 s; Seq+= 7.7 \(\pm\) 2.1 s; Seq− = 6.7 \(\pm\) 1.1 s; \(\chi^2 = 23.2, df = 4, p < 0.001)\).

Our findings are original and reveal a hitherto unrealized opportunity to harness the cognitive capacities of animals to help resolve pressing environmental issues without compromising animal welfare. We have shown that a majority of cattle can be trained to deposit most of their urine in a defined location, enabling the development of more effective methods to collect, treat and dispose of pure urine that is currently possible with technical solutions alone\(^8\). Modelling exercises have calculated that capture of about 80% of cattle urine in latrines could lead to a 56% reduction in ammonia emissions\(^9\). Further, by reducing contamination of the living areas, the cleanliness, hygiene and welfare of livestock can be improved whilst simultaneously reducing environmental pollution\(^10\). Hence, clever cattle can help in resolving the climate killer conundrum.

**SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION**

Supplemental information including acknowledgements, inclusion and diversity statement, methods, analysis, results, one video and one data file can be found with this article online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2021.07.011.

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