

# Friends aren't food: pinyon jays show context-dependent numerical cognition

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## Abstract

Animals must often discriminate different quantities of objects in their environment, from numbers of food items to conspecifics. Yet we know little about how numerical cognitive abilities compare across different object types. Based on past research, we would expect individuals to use both the numerical difference (large – small) and numerical ratio (small/large) between two numbers of objects to discriminate between them. This study investigates whether numerical difference and ratio predict preferences for two types of stimuli, food items and conspecifics in pinyon jays (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*). Subjects (N=12 for food experiment, N=20 for social experiment) chose between two food items or two group sizes for pairs of numbers between 1 and 6. In the food experiment, pinyon jays showed an overall preference for the larger option over the smaller option. Pinyon jays also chose larger numbers of items more when numerical differences were large and numerical ratios were small. However, numerical difference and ratio did not influence food choice independently. The social experiment showed different results. When choosing between groups of conspecifics, pinyon jays did not prefer the larger over smaller group sizes. Birds also did not show numerical difference or ratio effects. Therefore, pinyon jays may use different cognitive processes when deciding between numbers of food items and flock mates. While number was important for selecting food items, other factors such as flock mate identity may be more important for selecting social groups to join. Thus, the type of objects offered can drive the processes that animals use to choose among quantities.

**Keywords:** Corvid, Difference, Number, Quantity, Ratio  
Word count:

## Introduction

Many animal species have demonstrated the ability to quantify objects in their environment, including arthropods [1], fish [2–4], amphibians [5], birds [6–8], and mammals [9–12]. Quantification skills have strong adaptive value for survival and reproduction [10], playing roles in navigation, predator avoidance, territory defense, foraging, courtship, and mating [13–18]. Yet it remains unclear if the same cognitive processes apply across these different adaptive contexts.


One of the key cognitive processes proposed for quantification is the *approximate number system*, which involves the estimation of numerical quantity without relying on language or symbols [16,19]. The approximate number system is characterized by two key effects [20,21]. The *numerical distance effect* asserts that discrimination improves with increasing numerical difference between two values (i.e., mathematical difference between two numbers:  $4 - 2$  has a difference of 2). Discrimination becomes easier as the difference increases and the options become more dissimilar. The *numerical magnitude effect* asserts that discrimination worsens with increasing magnitude, which is equivalent to a decreasing numerical ratio (mathematical quotient between two numbers:  $2/4$  has a ratio of 0.5). Discrimination becomes more difficult as the numerical ratio approaches 1 and the options become more similar. Taken together, these two effects describe Weber’s Law [16], which indicates the use of approximate amounts rather than precise numbers.


Animals are sensitive to quantification across a range of object types [22,23]. Most of the tasks designed to measure numerical discrimination use food as quantifiable objects [11,12,24–26]. In line with the numerical distance effect, animals typically discriminate food quantities better when there are larger numerical differences [20,24,27,28] and smaller numerical ratios [20,29–32].

In addition to food, studies in fish have used numbers of conspecifics to assess quantification [2,33,34]. Many species prefer to be in larger groups, presumably because this dilutes their probability of being captured by predators [35,36]. Though some studies show an effect of both difference and ratio on social quantity preference [2,3], others only show an effect of ratio [33,37]. Little research has examined conspecific numerical choices in species other than fish.

The primary aim of the present study was to investigate how pinyon jays (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*) use quantity information, specifically numerical difference and ratio, to choose between different quantities of food items or conspecifics. To address this aim, we offered pinyon jays a series of choices between smaller and larger numbers of items: either food or conspecifics. Our first hypothesis posits that pinyon jays will, on average, prefer larger over smaller numbers of food items and conspecifics. Our second hypothesis

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44 posits that pinyon jays will prefer more items when the quantities have higher numerical  
45 differences and lower numerical ratios. Our third hypothesis posits that both numerical  
46 difference and ratio will influence preference independently of each other. This distinction  
47 is important because difference and ratio are highly related: as difference increases, ratio  
48 decreases. Testing these hypotheses in two different object types investigates whether the  
49 same cognitive processes generalize across adaptive contexts.

## 50 Methods

51 We conducted experiments to investigate quantification of both food and conspecifics.  
52 Each experiment was replicated with two sets of birds, where most birds experienced both  
53 the food and social experiment. Additional methods, data analysis, and visuals are available  
54 in the supplementary material.

## 55 Subjects

56 Replicate 1: Eight pinyon jays (1 female) completed all rounds of the food experiment,  
57 and 10 jays (4 female) completed all rounds of the social experiment (Table S1). A further  
58 17 jays (6 female) were used as stooge conspecifics in the social experiment. Two jays were  
59 dropped from the social experiment due to unrelated health concerns.

60 Replicate 2: Four pinyon jays (1 female) completed all rounds of the food experiment,  
61 and 10 jays (1 female) completed all rounds of the social experiment (Table S1). A further  
62 12 jays (5 female) from the colony were used as stooge conspecifics in the social experiment.

63 The jays in the food experiment were housed in pairs, while the jays in the social  
64 experiment were individually housed. The subjects were not food restricted in either ex-  
65 periment.

## 66 Food Experiment

67 **Apparatus.** The food experiment was conducted in a bird cage with three perches.  
68 The cage abutted a plastic stand with sliding trays that had dishes attached that could  
69 contain mealworms (Figure S1).

70 **Experimental Procedure.** At the beginning of each trial, the experimenter placed  
71 the appropriate number of mealworms in each of the dishes. The subject hopped forward  
72 to one of the front perches to signal choice. The experimenter then removed the opposite  
73 dish, and the subject had up to three minutes to consume the mealworms. Once the subject  
74 consumed all mealworms, the next trial began. Each bird experienced 10 repetitions for  
75 each of the 15 numerical pairs between 1 and 6 (Table S2). The side of the larger option  
76 was pseudo-randomized with no left or right runs longer than three in a row. The pairs  
77 were organized into blocks with one instance of each pair per block and order randomized  
78 within each block.

## Social Experiment

**Apparatus.** The apparatus was a Y maze where the subject entered a large chamber at the base of the maze and could choose one of two arms. Doors separated the entrance chamber from the arms, where large bird cages housed the stooge birds (Figure S2).

**Experimental Procedure.** The experimenter held the subject inside the apparatus and showed them each option for six seconds before releasing them into the entrance chamber. Once the subject crossed the threshold of one of the doors, *both* doors were gently closed. After three minutes elapsed, the handler collected the subject and returned them to their home cage.

Each subject experienced five trials (replicate 1) or ten trials (replicate 2) for each of the numerical pairs between 1 and 6 (replicate 1). For replicate 2, we used all numerical pairs between 1 and 6 except those that required more than 8 birds (due to the constraints on the number of stooge conspecifics; Table S2). The side of the larger option was pseudo-randomized with no left or right runs longer than three consecutive trials. The pairs were organized into blocks with one instance of each pair per block and pairs randomized within each block.

## Data Analysis

All data were analyzed using the same pre-registered analyses ([https://aspredicted.org/RVH\\_MNB](https://aspredicted.org/RVH_MNB)) in R version 4.2.1 [38]. To test the first hypothesis, whether pinyon jays prefer larger over smaller numbers of food items and conspecifics, we conducted frequentist and Bayesian one sample t-tests.

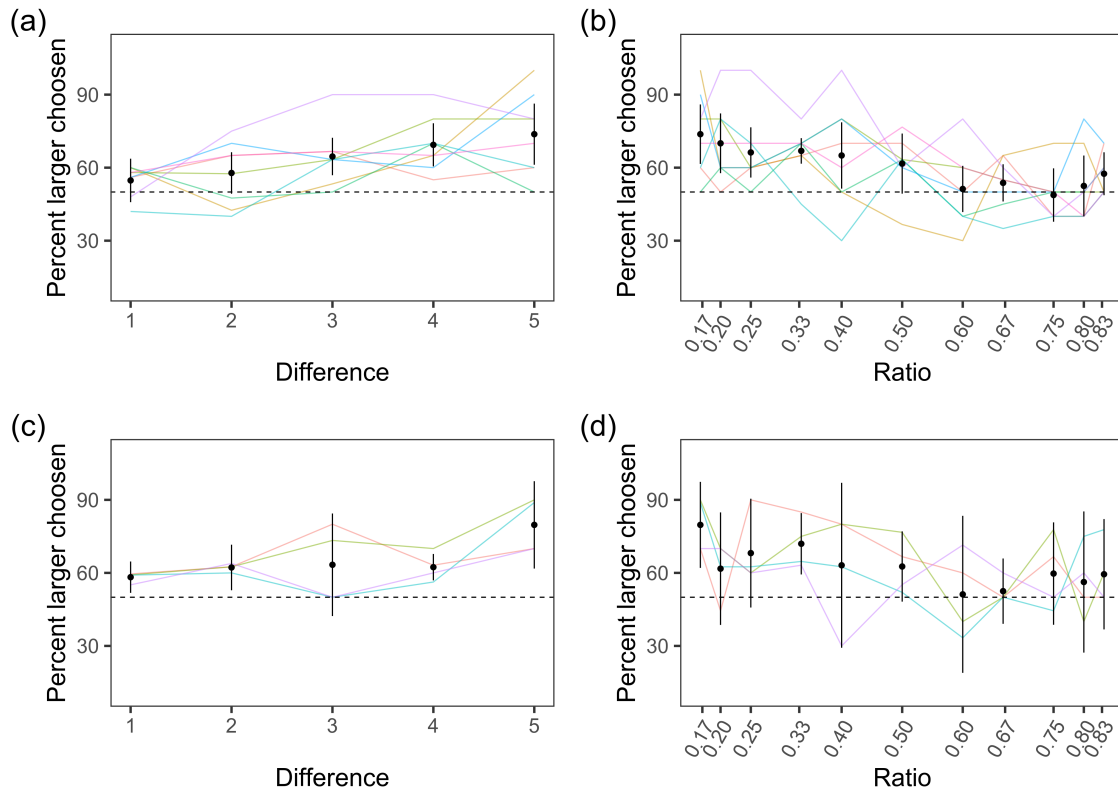
To test our second and third hypotheses, whether numerical difference and ratio predict preferences between smaller and larger options independently, we used generalized linear mixed-effects modeling. We used trial-level choices for either the larger or smaller option available in the number pair as the response variable. To investigate our hypotheses, we used model selection to compare which combination of random (subject, pair, or both) and fixed (ratio, difference, or a combination of both) effects best describe each data set (food and social)(Table S3). We draw inferences based on Bayesian statistics ( $BF_{10}$  values) where a  $BF_{10} > 3$  is sufficient evidence for the alternative hypothesis,  $BF_{10} < 1/3$  is sufficient evidence for the null hypothesis, and  $1/3 < BF_{10} < 3$  indicate neither hypothesis has evidence supporting it, suggesting the sample size is too small to draw conclusions [39].

## Results

### Food Experiment

Our first hypothesis predicted that subjects would on average choose the larger number of mealworms over the smaller number across all of the numerical pairs. One sample t-tests provided strong and moderate evidence (respectively) that preferences were above chance (50%) in both replicate 1 ( $t(7) = 4.82$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $BF_{10} = 24.28$ ) and replicate 2 ( $t(3) = 5.69$ ,  $p = .011$ ,  $BF_{10} = 6.70$ ).

117 [Need to introduce what this analysis is] For both replicates, the best-fitting  
 118 random effect structure was no random effect structure. For the fixed effect model com-  
 119 parison, the model with only the main effect of ratio best fit both data sets (Replicate 1:  
 120  $BF_{10} = 1.87 \times 10^3$ , Replicate 2:  $BF_{10} = 3.79$ ). Thus, subjects in the food experiment used  
 121 the ratio between the two numbers of mealworms to choose between options, with stronger  
 122 preferences for larger options at smaller ratios (Figure 1). The model with the main effect  
 123 of difference had extreme evidence supporting stronger preferences for larger options at  
 124 larger differences for replicate 1 but not replicate 2 (Replicate 1:  $BF_{10} = 459.68$ , Replicate  
 125 2:  $BF_{10} = 0.37$ ). Consequently, this only partially supports our second hypothesis (Figure  
 126 1). Additionally, our third hypothesis was not supported, as the interaction model with  
 127 difference and ratio did not have a  $BF_{10} > 3$  in either replication (see Tables S4 and S5 for  
 128 full results).



*Figure 1.* Food experiment difference and ratio results for both replicates. Mean preference for the larger option is shown on the y axis with the numerical difference or ratio values on the x axis. (a) Preference for larger per difference in replicate 1. (b) Preference for larger per ratio in replicate 1. (c) Preference for larger per difference in replicate 2. (d) Preference for larger per ratio in replicate 2. Dots represent mean values across subjects and trials. Error bars represent 95% within-subject confidence intervals. Lines represent individual subject data.

## Social Experiment

Hypothesis 1 predicted that subjects would choose the larger number of flock mates over the smaller. One sample t-tests provided strong evidence that our hypothesis was supported in replicate 1 ( $M = 55.33$ , 95% CI [52.34, 58.32],  $t(9) = 4.03$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $BF_{10} = 16.67$ ). However, evidence supported no difference from chance in replicate 2 ( $M = 50.19$ , 95% CI [47.06, 53.32],  $t(9) = 0.13$ ,  $p = .896$ ,  $BF_{10} = 0.31$ ).

For hypotheses 2 and 3, we again used model selection. Models with no random effect structure performed best. For fixed effects, the intercept only model best fit the data (Replicate 1:  $BF_{10} = 0.07$ , Replicate 2:  $BF_{10} = 0.06$ ), suggesting that neither ratio nor difference influenced choice. Because no model other than the intercept only had evidence suggesting that it was true, neither hypotheses 2 or 3 were supported by the data (Figure 2).

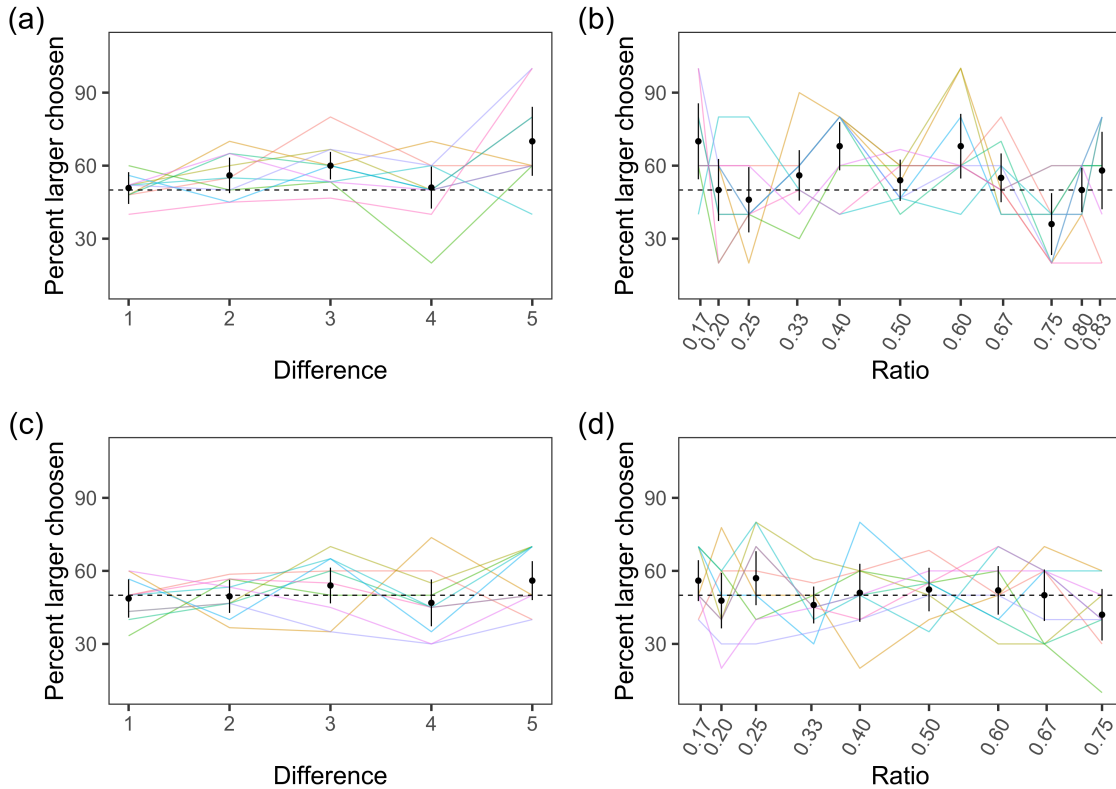


Figure 2. Social experiment difference and ratio results for both replicate 1 and 2. Mean preference for the larger option is shown on the y axis with the numerical difference or ratio values on the x axis. (a) Preference for larger per difference in replicate 1. (b) Preference for larger per ratio in replicate 1. (c) Preference for larger per difference in replicate 2. (d) Preference for larger per ratio in replicate 2. Dots represent mean values across subjects and trials. Error bars represent 95% within-subject confidence intervals. Lines represent individual subject data.

## Discussion

We examined pinyon jays' quantitative abilities in choosing between different numbers of food items and social partners. Over all numerical pairs, birds chose the larger of the two options in the food experiment but not in the social experiment, partially confirming our first hypothesis. In the food experiment, smaller numerical ratios predicted the birds' choices but only in the first replicate did larger differences predict birds' choices, partially confirming our second hypothesis. In the social experiment, neither ratio nor difference predicted choice, contradicting our second hypothesis. In both the food and social experiments, difference and ratio did not independently predict choice, contradicting our third hypothesis.

In the food experiment, our pinyon jays preferred larger over smaller quantities more as the numerical ratios decrease, which aligns with previous corvid research demonstrating a numerical magnitude effect [20,24,27]. This provides evidence for pinyon jays using the approximate number system as a mechanism for quantification. While we did find evidence for the numerical distance effect in our first replicate, it seemed to be driven completely by the ratio effect.

In the social experiment, neither ratio nor difference predicted choice, suggesting that pinyon jays do not employ a single mechanism across object types. This outcome is surprising, as previous quantification tasks with conspecifics in fish found effects of difference and ratio [2,3], suggesting that the mechanisms underlying quantification in food and social partners differ. The differences in numerical preference between food and social contexts may be due to different selective pressures. Both foraging techniques and flock size have consequences for evolutionary fitness, but they tackle different adaptive problems. Food consumption acts primarily via natural selection by enhancing survival. Flock size, however, is integral to both natural and sexual selection: natural selection in the form of predator avoidance and sexual selection in the form of mate preference. Joining a larger flock allows an animal to dilute their chances of being eaten by predators (i.e., the dilution effect) but also provides a larger pool of potential mates. For food items and predation risk, only number matters. But for mate preference or other social preferences, the identity of the partners matters.

One possible explanation for the lack of a ratio or difference effect for the social preference task is that individual identity of birds overrides the importance of number. An exploratory follow-up analysis of our data showed wide variation in preferences for groups that contained individual stooge birds (Table S6). Pinyon jays have complex, long-term bonds with other flock members and mates [40], which may make identity of group mates more important than sheer numbers. Moreover, the birds in our studies did not experience signals of predation danger during the experiment. Without pressure to dilute risk in larger groups, the birds may have ignored group size, allowing them to use other information such as social partner identity to determine choice.

Our study design does not allow us to pinpoint the exact features by which the birds make these quantitative choices. For the food preference tasks, the birds may choose larger *numbers* of food items or larger *amounts* of them. Using number involves tracking the quantity of individuated objects. However, in many cases, animals choose based on amount,

which refers to other measures or proxies of quantity such as item size, surface area, volume, perimeter, and density [5,41–43]. It is possible that our jays used, for example, surface area to choose their food items. This is a reasonable criteria because surface area may be a better proxy of total calories than absolute number. Future work is needed to tease apart which features birds use to make quantitative decisions.

## Conclusion

This research investigated how pinyon jays assess numbers of food items and specifics in preference tasks. For food items, numerical ratio predicted their choices in both replicates while numerical difference predicted choice in only the first replicate, but neither ratio nor difference predicted choices in the social experiment. Though quantity is important for selecting food items, other factors such as flock mate identity may be more important for selecting social groups to join. Thus, in quantification situations, the type of objects to be quantified may drive the cognitive processes that animals use. Furthermore, many adaptive problems beyond foraging require sensitivity to quantities, and we encourage further exploration of numerical cognition of non-food objects.

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