Evaluation of an environmental enrichment device used for laboratory rabbits

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ABSTRACT. Improving the housing conditions of individually caged laboratory rabbits using environmental enrichment devices is a source of concern in the scientific community and is encouraged in the guidelines of the local and international laboratory animal associations and national regulations. In this report, we inform on the results of an investigation whose aim was to evaluate the use of a commercially available shelter as an enrichment device for six individually caged rabbits (mean body weight 2.5 Kg) during their resting period. After an acclimatization period of five days in an animal room, a commercially available enrichment device, the *Rabbit Hut*® (BioServ, New Jersey, USA), was introduced into every cage. After a 3-day familiarization period, the interactions of the rabbits with the device were video recorded for 12 hours during the light phase (06:00 – 18:00) on five consecutive days. Each rabbit’s interaction with the device was monitored and analyzed from the video recordings. We found that the rabbits used the enrichment device in different ways, which included passing through the device, staying under the device, gnawing the device, pulling and dragging the device using their teeth, and playing with the device. We also found that the rabbits mainly interacted with the device during the first two hours (06:00 – 08:00) and last four hours (14:00 – 18:00) of each 12-hour observation period of the 5-day investigation. Although the *Rabbit Hut*® is marketed as an environmental enrichment item that could be used as a shelter for individually caged laboratory rabbits, our analysis of the interactions of individually caged rabbits with the *Rabbit Hut*® suggests that it may not provide adequate stimulation or enrichment for these animals.
INTRODUCTION

The behavior of a single-housed rabbit in a laboratory cage is influenced by specific environmental parameters, such as cage size and design (Lockley, 1961; Batchelor, 1991; Gibb, 1993), the quantity and availability of food, the rabbit’s age (Katsarou et al., 2011; Krohn et al., 1999), and the availability of objects and social contacts (Lidfors, 1997; Harris, 2001; Hansen and Berthelsen, 2000). In contrast to wild rabbits whose environment is free of any limitations, laboratory rabbits, which are usually housed in a barren cage system, may display stereotypic behaviors, such as gnawing of the metal bars of their cage and over-grooming due to stress (Morton et al., 1993; Love, 1994).

Environmental enrichment is defined as any modification in the environment of captive animals that improves their physical and psychological well-being by providing stimuli that meet their species-specific needs (Baumans, 2005). Several types of environmental enrichment for laboratory rabbits exist (Morton et al., 1993). A commonly used type of enrichment for rabbits is different food types, such as cereals or carrots, which may be provided in varying quantities (Krohn et al., Lidfords, 1997; Harris et al, 2001). Objects, such as wooden sticks, hay, or toys, can also be used to enrich a rabbit cage (Morton et al, 1993; Huls et al., 1991), and when used, only one object should be used when studying its effects on the caged rabbit’s behavioral patterns (Lidfords, 1997).

Although it is fundamental to good animal husbandry that the caging environment should meet the needs of a caged animal and standard laboratory cages need to be enriched, not all enrichments or changes to husbandry benefit caged animals. Accordingly, it is proposed that enrichment devices or protocols should be validated in order to show that laboratory rabbits with the device has generated new questions about the usefulness of the device and its benefit for the rabbits.

Keywords: caging, environmental enrichment, laboratory rabbit, shelter
(a) they are beneficial to the animals, (b) they do not cause any unexpected adverse effects on the animals, and (c) the enrichment does not jeopardize the experimental outcomes (Baumans et al., 2006). Hence, the aim of the present investigation was to evaluate the use of a commercially available shelter, as an enrichment device for individually caged rabbits during their resting period (light phase). The study parameters that were evaluated in the caged laboratory rabbits were the type and the frequency of their behavioral interactions with the device.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was performed in the animal facility of the Center for Experimental Surgery of the Biomedical Research Foundation of the Academy of Athens. The facility is registered as a “breeding” and “experimental” facility according to the Greek Presidential Decree 160/91 (Governmental Gazette, A, 64), which harmonizes national legislation with the European Directive 86/609 on the protection of animals used for scientific purposes (European Union, 1986).

Animals

The investigation comprised six male New Zealand White rabbits (body weight 2.5 (mean) ± 0.173 Kg (standard deviation (SD))) which were purchased from a conventional rabbit farm (Farma Trompetas, Megara, Attiki, Greece) and reported to be free of Pasteurella multocida, Salmonella spp., Treponema cuniculi, Encephalitozoon cuniculi, and Eimeria spp.

Husbandry

The six rabbits were housed and maintained in accordance with the European Commission Recommendations for the accommodation and care of animals used for experimental and other scientific purposes (European Commission, 2007).

Each rabbit was housed individually in a single cage (67 cm (width) x 67 cm (length) x 47 cm (height)) in a stainless steel rabbit cage rack (Tecniplast, Buguggiate, Italy) in a room at a room temperature of 21 ± 2°C, a relative humidity of 50 ± 5%, and with a 12:12 hour light:dark cycle in which the light period was set between 06:00 and 18:00. Each cage comprised a perforated plastic floor (no bedding material was included) and walls with metal bars in the front. The rabbits were fed ad libitum with a prepackaged certified fiber rabbit chow (12C, Pezzulo, Italy), and had unlimited access to water via an automatic watering system.

Environmental enrichment device

The environmental enrichment item that was evaluated in this investigation was a commercially available device, called Rabbit Hut™ (BioServ, New Jersey, USA). The device (279.4 mm (width) x 254 mm (height) x 304.8 mm (length)) is used as a shelter, is fabricated from high-temperature resistant and red transparent polycarbonate, and weighs 745 grams so that the rabbits can move it while playing with it (Fig. 1).

Video recordings of the rabbit’s behavior

Video recordings of each rabbit’s behavior during the light period were made for five consecutive days using an MSI StarCam Flip Webcam which was connected to a computer (NB200-13T, Toshiba). Since rabbits are less active during the light period than during the dark period (Gunn and Morton, 1995), a computerized closed circuit television surveillance camera system with motion detection capabilities (Cam Wizard) was used to capture the video feed from the webcam.

The video recordings were reviewed to transform the rabbit’s interactions with the device and behavior into quantitative data. For this purpose, the...
number of times that the rabbit interacted with the device in a particular way was recorded during each 12-hour observation period for five consecutive days. Each type of interaction was then transformed and the transformed data were plotted in order to determine the frequency of occurrence of each interaction of each rabbit with the device.

Experimental design and data collection

Following a 5-day acclimation period of the rabbits in the animal facility, Rabbit Hut™ was introduced into each cage and the rabbits were given three days to become familiar with the device. No recordings of the rabbit’s behavior and interactions with the device were made during the 3-day familiarization phase. At the end of the familiarization period, video recordings of each rabbit’s interactions with the device were made for each 12-hour observation period for five consecutive days. The data were summarized using descriptive statistics (mean, SD, median, range, and 95% confidence intervals) using a computerized statistical software package (SPSS version 13.0, Chicago, Illinois, USA).

RESULTS

The main interactions between the rabbits and the device that were observed during the 5-day recording period were (a) passing through the device, (b) staying under the device, (c) gnawing the device, and (d) pulling and dragging the device using their teeth. The rabbits also played with device by pushing the shelter with their feet, sniffing the shelter, turning the shelter upside down, or sitting inside the shelter after turning it upside down, and these playful interactions were classified as “other interactions”.

During the 5-day observation period, we registered 1,625 interactions with the shelter of which 401 (25%) were passing through the device, 274 (17%) were staying under the device, 273 (17%) were gnawing the device, 247 (15%) were pulling and dragging the device using their teeth, and 430 (26%) were playful or other interactions with it (Fig. 2).

Passing through the device

Passing through the device was a frequently observed behavioral interaction of the rabbits during the first two hours (06:00 – 08:00) and last four hours (14:00 – 18:00) of each 12-hour observation period of the 5-day investigation (Fig. 3).

Staying under the device

Staying under the device was observed during the first two hours (06:00 – 08:00) and last four hours (14:00-18:00) of each 12-hour observation period of the 5-day investigation (Fig. 4).
Gnawing the device
Gnawing the device was observed during the first two hours (06:00 – 08:00) and last four hours (14:00-18:00) of each 12-hour observation period of the 5-day investigation (Fig. 5).

Pulling and dragging the device
Increased pulling and dragging of the device by the rabbits was observed every day during the first two hours of the observation (06:00 – 08:00) and the last three hours (15:00-18:00) of each 12-hour observation period during the 5-day investigation (Fig. 6).

Other interactions with the device
Other or playful interactions between the rabbits and the device were observed during the first two hours (06:00 – 08:00) and last four hours (14:00-18:00) of each 12-hour observation period during the 5-day investigation (Fig. 7).
DISCUSSION

Although rabbits are social animals and group housing is recommended, there are still circumstances where rabbits are housed individually with restricted or *ad libitum* amounts of food and water. Single housing of social animals can influence the expression of normal behavior, and in many cases, can be detrimental to their psychological wellbeing (Brooks et al., 1993). During the last decades, increasing trends on the use of environmental enrichment for improving the caging conditions of captive animals have been reported. Environmental enrichment is very important for an individually caged rabbit only for the validity of the scientific outcome. It is also important because it can protect them from boredom and safeguard their well-being and their right to live a life as similar as possible to that of their wild counterparts (Whary et al., 1993; Lidfords, 1997; Harris et al., 2001).

The validation of enrichment devices is very important and is recommended by the FELASA Working Group on Standardization of Enrichment (Baumans et al., 2006). Accordingly, the aim of our investigation was to monitor, evaluate, and if possible explain the interaction of individually caged rabbits with an enrichment device, *Rabbit Hut™*, which is marketed as a hiding place and a shelter. Hence, it was decided to monitor the rabbits during their resting period (light cycle), and the data which we present in this report are the preliminary results of an environmental enrichment project that we are conducting in our Institution.

According to our results, we found that most interactions with the shelter occurred early in the morning when the lights in the room in which the rabbits were housed were turned on and late in the afternoon before the lights were turned off. “Passing through” was a frequent interaction of the rabbits with the device, and we interpreted this interaction as an expression of the rabbit’s exploratory need. We surmise that this device probably simulates objects in the wild, such as rocks, shafts, and nests, which are necessary for the survival of wild rabbits and helps them to be active and efficient.

Another frequently observed interaction was “staying under” the device in order to rest, hide, or sleep. It has been previously reported that rabbits do not use a nest box when it is used as an enrichment device or as a place for rest or sleep (Hansen and Berthelsen, 2000; Batchelor 1991) but only as a hiding place. Moreover, Whary et al. (1993) reported that rabbits use a shelter when placed in a cage as an enrichment device as a resting place for only 3% of the time during the day.

We found that “gnawing” the device was another common interaction of the rabbits with the device. We interpreted this interaction as an indicator of curiosity because the rabbits perceived the device as something new, stimulated their interest, and were willing to explore it. This interaction could also be interpreted as an indicator of stereotypy and frustration because gnawing at cage furniture and cage bars is thought to be common behavioral problem of captive animals (Morton et al., 1993; Love, 1994). Additionally, the “pulling and dragging” of the shelter by the rabbits using their teeth or the legs could also be considered to be an expression of the rabbit’s exploratory need.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although the *Rabbit Hut™* is marketed as an environmental enrichment item that could be used as a shelter for individually caged laboratory rabbits, our analysis of the interactions of individually caged laboratory rabbits with the device has generated new questions about the usefulness of the device and its benefit for the rabbits. Thus, further investigations, which should also include the measurement of physiological parameters, are now needed to better explain and clarify whether some of the expressed interactions indicate usefulness, curiosity, interest, or frustration with the device.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors of this article declare that they do not have any conflicting interests.
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