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# Deprivation of direct adult contact during development affects social representation in a songbird

Short title: social cognition development in birds

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1 Abstract

2 Social cognition involves a wide array of skills which are built largely through interactions with  
3 conspecifics and therefore depend upon early social experience. Motivation for social stimuli  
4 is a key feature of social behaviour and an operant conditioning task showed that isolated wild-  
5 caught adult starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) are highly motivated to access pictures of other  
6 starlings. Here we show that hand-raised adult starlings maintained in groups of peers  
7 throughout development but without any contact with adult models were not or only poorly  
8 motivated to access pictures of conspecifics. Moreover, they did not prefer pictures of starlings  
9 to pictures of landscapes, unlike birds wild-caught as adults. These results raise questions about  
10 the role of social experience during development, particularly with adult models, in the  
11 development of social motivation and of social representation in general.

12

13 Keywords: social deprivation, social motivation, social representation, social cognition, adult  
14 influences, operant conditioning

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## 22 **Introduction**

23 Social cognition refers to abilities such as perception, learning or memory that enable  
24 individuals to organize interactions with conspecifics (Frith, 2008). Adults' cognitive traits are  
25 influenced by conditions experienced during early development (Nettle et al., 2015). The  
26 importance of bi-directional interactions between social environment and cognitive  
27 performance is well known (Boogert et al., 2018). Social skills develop from experiential  
28 learning with other individuals (Hesse & Thünken, 2014). Social deprivation during  
29 development is thus associated with a wide range of long-term defects such as increased  
30 aggressiveness (Tóth et al., 2008; Halperin & Dunham, 1993), social withdrawal (Bouet et al.,  
31 2010), or anxiety (Ros-Simo & Valverde, 2012). In particular, the presence of parents is  
32 important: juvenile cichlid fish are less aggressive when reared with their parents (Taborsky &  
33 Oliveira, 2012), mother-deprived pullets fail to develop typical linear hierarchical order (Perré  
34 et al., 2002). Other studies show that social experience with adults (parents and non-parents)  
35 during development is crucial for the development of social behaviour and skills such as  
36 aggression regulation (elephants *Loxodonta Africana*: Slotow et al., 2000; campbell's monkeys  
37 *Cercopithecus campbelli campbelli*: Lemasson et al., 2005; horses, *Equus caballus* Bourjade et  
38 al., 2008; 2009), social cohesion (horses: Henry et al., 2012), learning and discrimination  
39 abilities (elephants: McComb et al., 2001), communication skills (birds and mammals:  
40 Snowdon & Hausberger, 1997; birdsong and humans: Goldstein et al., 2003; humans: Kuhl et  
41 al., 2003; canaries *serinus canaria*: Lehongre et al., 2006; European starlings: Poirier et al.,  
42 2004, Bertin et al., 2007; 2009; humans: Caskey et al., 2011) or multisensory representation of  
43 social familiarity (elephants: McComb et al. 2001; starlings: George et al., 2012). One of the  
44 foundations of social groups is the motivation of their members to aggregate, come together  
45 and interact with one another (Ward & Webster, 2016). Bees' social motivation is influenced  
46 by the early social environment (Hewlett et al., 2018). However, it is not yet clear whether

47 vertebrates' motivation for social behaviour is influenced by prior social experience (Templer  
48 et al., 2018). The concept of prosociality has provided an additional framework for  
49 developmental studies on social behaviour and skills (e.g. Kaplan 2020). The evolutionary roots  
50 of prosociality as a “voluntary behaviour that benefits another” are still largely unknown,  
51 especially as it has been mostly studied in primates (Marshall-Pescini et al. 2016), but evidence  
52 or premises have also been found in birds (Kaplan 2020). Social motivation and the tendency  
53 to have long lasting social bonds may be important underlying features (Cronin, 2012).  
54 European starlings, like ravens, form lasting social bonds (“friendships”) outside the breeding  
55 season, that may also influence mating choices (Boucherie et al. 2018, Hausberger et al. 1995,  
56 Henry et al. 2013; Teitelbaum et al 2017). In starlings, social bonds are reflected in shared  
57 songs, i.e. social mimicry, also considered as a premise for prosociality. Kaplan (2020) suggests  
58 that social bonding might precede the expressions of prosocial behaviour. She proposes that the  
59 juvenile period is crucial in the development of such social skills, especially the phase when  
60 juveniles, although independent for feeding, are still in close contact with their parents. Very  
61 few studies have however been performed on these precise aspects and most studies on social  
62 deprivation have used paradigms of social isolation that confound the need for social contact  
63 (which may trigger an increased motivation for access to social stimuli) and the lack of certain  
64 specific social influences which may decrease social motivation in a same species (e.g. horses:  
65 Christensen et al. 2002; Bourjade et al. 2008).

66 At a time when there is a need for expanding animal models on the processes of the development  
67 of social skills (Marshall-Pescini et al. 2016, Kaplan 2020), and to understand how altered  
68 social skills impact social functioning (Contreras-Huerta, 2020), European starlings appear as  
69 a particularly interesting species, given their propensity to develop lasting social bonds, song  
70 sharing and intermodal social representations (e.g. Henry et al. 2013, George et al. 2011).  
71 Moreover, wild-caught adult European starlings, are when isolated, highly motivated to trigger

72 sensors that enable them to see pictures of conspecifics (Perret et al., 2015), demonstrating the  
73 intrinsic rewarding value of social stimuli for social vertebrates (Borland et al., 2017). However,  
74 the absence of adults during starlings' development induces alterations of the auditory and  
75 multisensory representations of conspecifics (George et al., 2012; Cousillas et al., 2006; 2008)  
76 and of their reactions to a mirror image (Henry et al., 2008).

77 Here we hypothesized that the social motivation and representation of starlings raised without  
78 experience with adults would be altered. On one hand, we expected adult birds deprived of  
79 experience with adults to be less socially motivated, i.e. to “work” less for access to a social  
80 stimulus when in isolation than normal adults. On the other hand, since earlier studies showed  
81 alterations of social representations in such birds, we also expected them to show less  
82 differential motivation for social versus non-social stimuli than adults with a normal ontogeny.  
83 In order to answer these questions, we used, in hand-raised male starlings maintained in groups  
84 of same-age peers until adulthood without any contact with adults, a conditioning paradigm  
85 where access to visual stimuli was the reinforcer (described in Perret et al. 2015) 1) to test the  
86 motivation for social stimuli, and 2) the differences in motivation between social and non-social  
87 stimuli. By raising the birds in groups of peers, we avoided the confounding effect of social  
88 isolation to concentrate on the importance of adult presence *per se*. We compared these results  
89 to those obtained with birds wild-caught as adults (i.e. with a normal ontogeny), tested in the  
90 same conditions and at the same time (published in Perret et al. 2015): during the tests, the birds  
91 were placed in individual cages where they had to put their beak into a sensor to have visual  
92 access, on a computer screen placed inside the cage, to a picture of either unfamiliar  
93 conspecifics or landscapes.

94

## 95 **METHODS**

96 **Ethics.** All the experimental procedures were performed in accordance with the European  
97 Communities Council Directive of 24 November 1986 (86/609/EEC) and approved by the  
98 departmental direction of veterinary services of Ille-et-Vilaine (licence number 35-238-15 and  
99 licence number 35-119).

100

## 101 **Subjects**

102 Eleven experimental (i.e. socially deprived) male starlings were this study's subjects which  
103 were tested at the same time as 10 "control" male birds wild-caught as adults. The experiments  
104 took place in April-May 2011, when the experimental birds were 2 years old (i.e. as adults).  
105 Therefore, both groups had spent at least 2 years in captive conditions. However, since the data  
106 on the control birds have been published earlier (Perret et al 2015), the comparisons are made  
107 here between the hand-raised birds and the published data.

108 The experimental birds were collected in nests (seven different broods, therefore one or two  
109 males per nest) in the wild when 1 week old (April 2009) in Rennes (France). They were hand-  
110 reared as a group with 8 female siblings and fed commercial pellets mixed with water for one  
111 month, until independence. They were then housed in an indoor aviary (2.1x1.05x2m),  
112 equipped with perches, where they were kept together with neither visual nor auditory contact  
113 with adult conspecifics. Once adult (2 years old), the eleven males were moved to individual  
114 test cages (60x39x65cm) placed in a soundproof chamber (sound attenuation of 35dB). Since  
115 isolation can stress starlings, we checked daily that they expressed typical behaviours using  
116 continuous video-recordings. Birds did not lose weight between the first and last day of the  
117 experiment. At the end of the study, after a maximum of 9 days in the experimental cages, the  
118 birds were returned to the indoor aviary and were kept for future studies. The control birds had

119 been captured in 2006, kept in an outdoor aviary in a large mixed group on Rennes University  
120 Campus and then placed in an indoor aviary 2 years before the beginning of the experiment.

121 Artificial light was adjusted weekly to the natural photoperiod. This light covered the  
122 solar spectrum from near-infrared to near-UV and was flicker-free (Osram T8 L18W/865  
123 Lumilux cool daylight). Food (commercial pellets) and water were provided ad libitum. No  
124 food restriction of any kind was used throughout the whole study.

125

## 126 **Visual Stimuli**

127 Our methods were based upon Perret et al. (2005). Six colour pictures (1024 x 768  
128 pixels) were used: 3 of three unknown adult male starlings and 3 of three different semi-urban  
129 landscapes (Figure 1a). To avoid possible biases due to sex preferences, the unknown starlings  
130 on pictures were individuals of the same sex as the test subject. The pictures were life-sized  
131 side views (on average 17 cm from beak to tail) of starlings with their yellow beak closed. These  
132 pictures were cut and pasted on a uniform neutral grey background (Gimp 2.6). The landscape  
133 pictures contained no animals, humans, cars or buildings. According to a 0:1 scale, the mean  
134 ratio of light: dark was 0.72 for the social stimuli (i.e. pictures of starlings) and 0.42 for the  
135 non-social stimuli (i.e. landscape pictures). The mean contrast was 0.25 for the social stimuli  
136 and 0.37 for the non-social stimuli. The order of presentation of the three pictures was  
137 randomized.

138

## 139 **Apparatus (see Perret et al. 2015)**

140 Each experimental cage (60x39x65cm) was equipped with a 15"LCD colour screen  
141 (NEC AccuSync LCD52VM) and was inside a sound-proof chamber to prevent external



142 interferences. The screen was attached to one end of the cage and protected by a transparent  
143 acrylic glass pane (37.5x62.5cm). Two water dispensers and two food dispensers (providing  
144 food and water ad libitum) were placed at the other end of the cage. Two perches were placed  
145 parallel to the screen (at 15 and 35 cm from it respectively). The perch farthest from the screen  
146 was equipped at each extremity with an optical sensor that enabled the birds to trigger the  
147 stimuli. Starlings' bills are adapted to probing into the soil to find food. This feeding technique  
148 is termed "prying" or "open-bill probing" (Feare, 1984). We took this natural behaviour into  
149 account to develop an apparatus that starlings could use spontaneously. When starlings put their  
150 beak in a hole it cut an infrared beam between an IR emitter and an IR detector and thus  
151 triggered the display of a visual stimulus on the screen for nine seconds (see Protocol below).  
152 The sensors were connected to a computer (Dell Inspiron Mini 10 PP19S or Asus Eee PC  
153 T91MT) that controlled the display of stimuli and recorded every beak insertion into the  
154 sensors. When a starling inserted its beak into a sensor either during the 9-second display of a  
155 stimulus or during a refractory period of one second after the display, no other display was  
156 triggered. However, this beak insertion was recorded. When starlings were not being tested they  
157 did not have access to the sensors (Figure 1a). None of the starlings had ever experienced this  
158 apparatus previously.

159

## 160 **Experimental procedure (see Perret et al. 2015)**

161 After a 2-day habituation period in the experimental cage to avoid biases due to novelty,  
162 birds were subjected to two 30-minute familiarization sessions (one in the morning from 10:15  
163 am to 10:45 am; one in the early afternoon from 2:20 pm to 2:50 pm; GMT+2) with the visual  
164 stimuli that would be used during the experiment. The birds did not have access to the sensors  
165 during this familiarization phase. During each session, each of the six pictures was displayed

166 on the screen for 9 seconds and appeared only once. Time intervals between two pictures (while  
167 the screen displayed a neutral grey background) varied randomly from 2 to 6 minutes (five-time  
168 intervals: 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 minutes). At the end of this familiarisation phase, each bird had seen  
169 each stimulus twice.

170 The day following the familiarization sessions, starlings were given access to the sensors  
171 seven hours a day, from 11:00 am to 06:00 pm (local time: GMT +2). Recordings began as soon  
172 as a starling triggered the display of a stimulus spontaneously by inserting its beak into an  
173 optical sensor. One starling had not triggered any stimulus after two days in the test cage. The  
174 sensors of this starling were then baited with a small quantity of highly appetizing extra food  
175 (insectivorous universal preparation), which came in addition to the commercial pellets. This  
176 was sufficient to induce this starling to start using the sensors and to keep using them without  
177 bait. The subjects were kept in their test cage for six consecutive days starting from the day  
178 they first triggered the stimulus display. This test period is within the range of durations used  
179 in other operant conditioning studies of birds (2-40 days) (Adret, 1993; Collins; 1999; Okanoya  
180 et al., 2000; Appeltants et al., 2005). The six days were divided into 2x2 days of stimulation  
181 and 2 days with no stimulation. During the first two days of the stimulation phase, one sensor  
182 triggered the display of a landscape picture and the other the display of a picture of a conspecific  
183 (configuration 1), and the association sensor/picture-type was then reversed (configuration 2)  
184 for the next two days (Figure 1b). We used these two configurations to avoid biases due to a  
185 preference for one side (right or left). The first configuration was determined randomly and  
186 counterbalanced across subjects. When the display of a stimulus was triggered the picture was  
187 displayed for nine seconds and another second was necessary before a new stimulus could be  
188 displayed (refractory period). When no stimulus was displayed, the screen displayed a uniform  
189 grey, the same as the grey background of the stimuli. The stimulation phase was followed by  
190 two days without stimulation. During these two days, starlings still had access to the sensors

191 for seven hours a day but the sensors no longer triggered a display of a stimulus and the screen  
192 displayed continuously the same uniform grey picture as during the stimulation phase. The  
193 computer kept recording every beak insertion into the sensors during this phase.

194

## 195 **Data collection and analysis**

196 The daily numbers of beak insertions (including the total number of beak insertions  
197 during the display of a stimulus and during the refractory period; see above) were used to  
198 compare the stimulation and non-stimulation phases. The numbers of effective triggers (that is  
199 excluding beak insertions during the display of a stimulus on the screen or during the refractory  
200 period) were used to compare: 1) the four days of stimulation with both stimuli, and 2) the two  
201 types of stimuli (pictures of conspecifics / landscape pictures).

202 Non-parametric statistical analyses were used on individual absolute values, with an  
203 acceptance level of  $p < 0.05$  (Statistica 10 for Windows, StatSoft Inc.). Friedman analyses of  
204 variance by ranks were used to compare the four days of stimulation across subjects. Wilcoxon  
205 signed-rank tests were used to compare the data of the stimulation and non-stimulation phases  
206 and the data for the two types of stimuli (pictures of conspecifics / landscape pictures) across  
207 subjects. Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) tests were used to compare data for the two types of stimuli (pictures  
208 of conspecifics / landscape pictures) for each subject. All statistical tests were two-tailed and  
209 unless otherwise indicated, data are presented as mean  $\pm$  standard error of the mean (SEM) and  
210 median when appropriate.

211 Data on birds wild-caught as adults had already been published (Perret et al. 2015), but we  
212 conducted nevertheless direct statistical comparisons between both groups of birds.

213

214 **RESULTS**

215 Six of the eleven hand-raised starlings involved in the experiment inserted their beak  
216 into the sensors spontaneously, on average  $180 \pm 71$  times during the four days. Five starlings  
217 did not complete the four days of stimulation and stopped using the sensors or used only one  
218 sensor, either the left or the right one. Four of these starlings made a choice on at least one day:  
219 two preferred the image of a conspecific and two preferred the landscape image. However, to  
220 improve accuracy, we kept only the data of the six motivated individuals for further analyses.  
221 Despite their high motivation, their rate of beak insertions was only half that of wild-caught  
222 starlings in the same experimental situation ( $367 \pm 105$  versus  $180 \pm 71$ , although this difference  
223 did not reach statistical significance, due to high individual differences in both groups (Mann-  
224 Whitney,  $U=13$ ,  $N_{1wca}=7$ ,  $N_{2hr}=6$ ,  $p=0.11$ ) (see Perret et al., 2015). Individual variability was  
225 high: for example, one starling (B3) inserted its beak into the sensors 48 times during the four  
226 days ( $X=12 \pm 7.6$  per day) whereas another one (B2) inserted its beak into the sensors up to 235  
227 times during a single day (with an average of  $129.25 \pm 101.4$  per day). These beak insertions  
228 nevertheless indicated a real motivation to see pictures because they were significantly less  
229 frequent during the non-stimulation phase ( $13 \pm 4$  times per day, median: 13,0) than during the  
230 stimulation phase ( $95 \pm 35$  times per day, median: 60,5) (Wilcoxon test:  $z=2.201$ ,  $N=6$ ,  $p=0.03$ )  
231 (Figure 2a). This showed that the subjects found the visual stimuli rewarding. Moreover, the  
232 numbers of triggers did not change significantly across the four-day period, whatever the  
233 stimulus, which showed that there was no loss of interest with time (Friedman analysis of  
234 variance:  $\chi^2=1.8$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $N=6$ ,  $p=0.61$ ). Fifty-five percent of all the starlings therefore appeared  
235 to be genuinely motivated by and interested in the pictures.

236

237

238 During the stimulation phase, four of the six starlings expressed an active choice between the  
239 two types of stimuli (Figure 2b). However, this choice varied from one starling to another. Two  
240 of the six starlings triggered the landscape pictures significantly more often than the pictures of  
241 conspecifics (B1:  $\chi^2=35.35$ ,  $ddl=1$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; B5:  $\chi^2=25.63$ ,  $ddl=1$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) whereas two other  
242 starlings triggered the pictures of conspecifics significantly more often than the landscape  
243 pictures (B4:  $\chi^2=115.5$ ,  $ddl=1$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; B6:  $\chi^2=21.6$ ,  $ddl=1$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). The other two starlings  
244 showed no preference for one type of stimulus (B2:  $\chi^2=2.65$ ,  $ddl=1$ ,  $p=0.1$ ; B3:  $\chi^2=0.08$ ,  $ddl=1$ ,  
245  $p=0.77$ ). As a group, hand-reared male starlings thus triggered the pictures of conspecifics as  
246 frequently as they triggered the landscape pictures ( $97 \pm 42$  times for the pictures of  
247 conspecifics;  $83 \pm 36$  times for the pictures of landscapes) (Wilcoxon test:  $z=0.105$ ,  $N=6$ ,  
248  $p=0.92$ ) (Figure 2b). Moreover, these hand-reared triggered statistically less a picture of a  
249 conspecific than birds wild-caught as adults, tested with the exact same experimental design  
250 (Mann-Whitney,  $U=9$ ,  $N1=7$ ,  $N2=6$ ,  $p=0.05$ ) whereas no difference could be evidenced when  
251 considering landscape picture (Mann-Whitney,  $U=15$ ,  $N1=7$ ,  $N2=6$ ,  $p=0.18$ ). These results  
252 indicated that a picture of a conspecific did not have the same value for both groups of birds.

## 253 **DISCUSSION**

254 Although raised in a social environment with peers, male isolated adult starlings that had been  
255 deprived of social experience with adults during their development appeared to be less  
256 motivated to “work” to see a picture of a conspecific than starlings wild-caught as adults who  
257 had had a normal ontogeny. They triggered starling pictures half as frequently as birds wild-  
258 caught as adults (see Perret et al. 2015). In addition, they did not show, at the group level, a  
259 greater motivation to see conspecific compared to landscape pictures. Moreover, only half of  
260 the experimental birds showed a consistent motivation to trigger the display of a picture,  
261 whereas all birds wild-caught as adults had previously proved to be motivated (Perret et al.,  
262 2015). Thus, while birds that developed in the wild seemed to have a natural yearning for social

263 stimulation, starlings raised without any contact with adults appeared to either consider pictures  
264 as mere “visual enrichments”, regardless of their content, or they did not bother to work to see  
265 them. Pictures of conspecifics did not appear here as a social reward. Therefore, the absence of  
266 experience with adults during development appears to lead to altered social motivation and  
267 representation.

268 There are some limitations to the study: 1) the hand-reared birds were somewhat younger  
269 (although adult) than the control birds, although there is no evidence, to our knowledge, that  
270 social motivation increases with age in adults, 2) the ideal control group would have consisted  
271 in birds bred in captivity and raised by parents, so as to have the same captive environment as  
272 the experimental birds all along. However, European starlings are very difficult to breed in  
273 captivity (the young often die in the nest) and therefore this option would have been too  
274 hazardous. At least, birds caught as adults have had experience with their parents during  
275 development which was the main point.

276 Beyond these limitations, our results converge with other studies showing that  
277 experience with adults during development is necessary to develop appropriate social cognition  
278 and that the absence of social contact with adults affects social abilities (Hesse & Thünken,  
279 2014; Arnold & Taborsky, 2010). It was already known that the presence of adults during  
280 development is important for social functioning such as the regulation of aggression and  
281 appropriate dominance hierarchy structuring (Slotow et al., 2000; Bourjade et al., 2008, 2009,  
282 Perré et al. 2002). A recent study on a crab species (*Neohelice granulata*) demonstrated that  
283 social isolation has a negative effect on long term memory retention of both aversive or  
284 appetitive tasks (Santos et al, 2021). However, here we show that even the social motivation  
285 for conspecific cues can be affected, although the birds had been raised in a group and were  
286 isolated at the time of testing. This finding confirms the importance of the early social  
287 environment, from bees (Hewlett et al., 2018), to vertebrates (Templer et al., 2018), including

288 birds (Kaplan 2020; Teitelbaum et al, 2017), for developing social motivation. Social  
289 motivation is a prerequisite for the evolution of prosociality, and its first steps such as social  
290 bonding. Kaplan (2020) proposed that the juvenile stages, and especially those when the young  
291 are still in contact with parents, are especially crucial for developing social attachment. The  
292 present results add to earlier findings in starlings showing that adult-deprivation during  
293 development induce deficits in brain processing of social information (Cousillas et al. 2004,  
294 2006, George et al. 2010, 2012) and to the still too limited literature in birds (Marshall-Pescini  
295 et al; 2016). Starlings' motivation to see pictures of other starlings is a promising tool for  
296 studying the social rewards that knit communities together (Weiler, 2015), further  
297 investigations could include testing further the possible premises of prosociality in this  
298 promising species.

299         Social bonding, an important feature of starlings' social life, is also based on social  
300 representation. Young horses and starlings raised without adults do not show the clear bonding  
301 shown by normal adults and present a rather loose social organization (Bourjade et al. 2008),  
302 which also affects starlings' song sharing pattern (Bertin et al. 2007). Interactions with adults,  
303 by promoting selective attention (Kuhl et al., 2003; Bertin et al., 2007, 2009; Chen et al., 2016),  
304 could help refine adult characteristics through perceptual tuning (Olmstead & Kuhlmeier, 2015)  
305 and help orienting responses towards appropriate partners (Kaplan 2020). Our results clearly  
306 indicate that the capacity of considering conspecifics as suitable partners depends on early  
307 social experience. This experimental design will allow however to test if the social valence of  
308 an individual in the picture modifies the birds' reaction (Cronin, 2012) and also to test for  
309 possible hormonal mechanisms of complex social behaviour (Duque et al, 2018, 2020).

310

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316

317 **Ethical statement.** The experiments were performed in France (licence number 35-238-15 and  
318 licence number 35-119 issued by the departmental direction of veterinary services of Ille-et-  
319 Vilaine). The licences issued by local veterinary services do not specify that the birds should  
320 be released. They certify that our captive starlings are regularly checked to make sure that they  
321 are disease free and that the experiments are performed in accordance with the European  
322 Communities Council Directive of 24 November 1986 (86/609/EEC).

323

324 **Data accessibility:** Data are available from the Figshare repository:  
325 <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.12453695.v1>

326 **Authors' contribution.** LH, HC, MH and IG conceived, designed and supervised the  
327 experiments. AP and MC designed and performed the experiments. AP analysed the data. AP,  
328 LH, MH and IG wrote the paper.

329 **Competing interest.** The authors declare no competing interests.

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335

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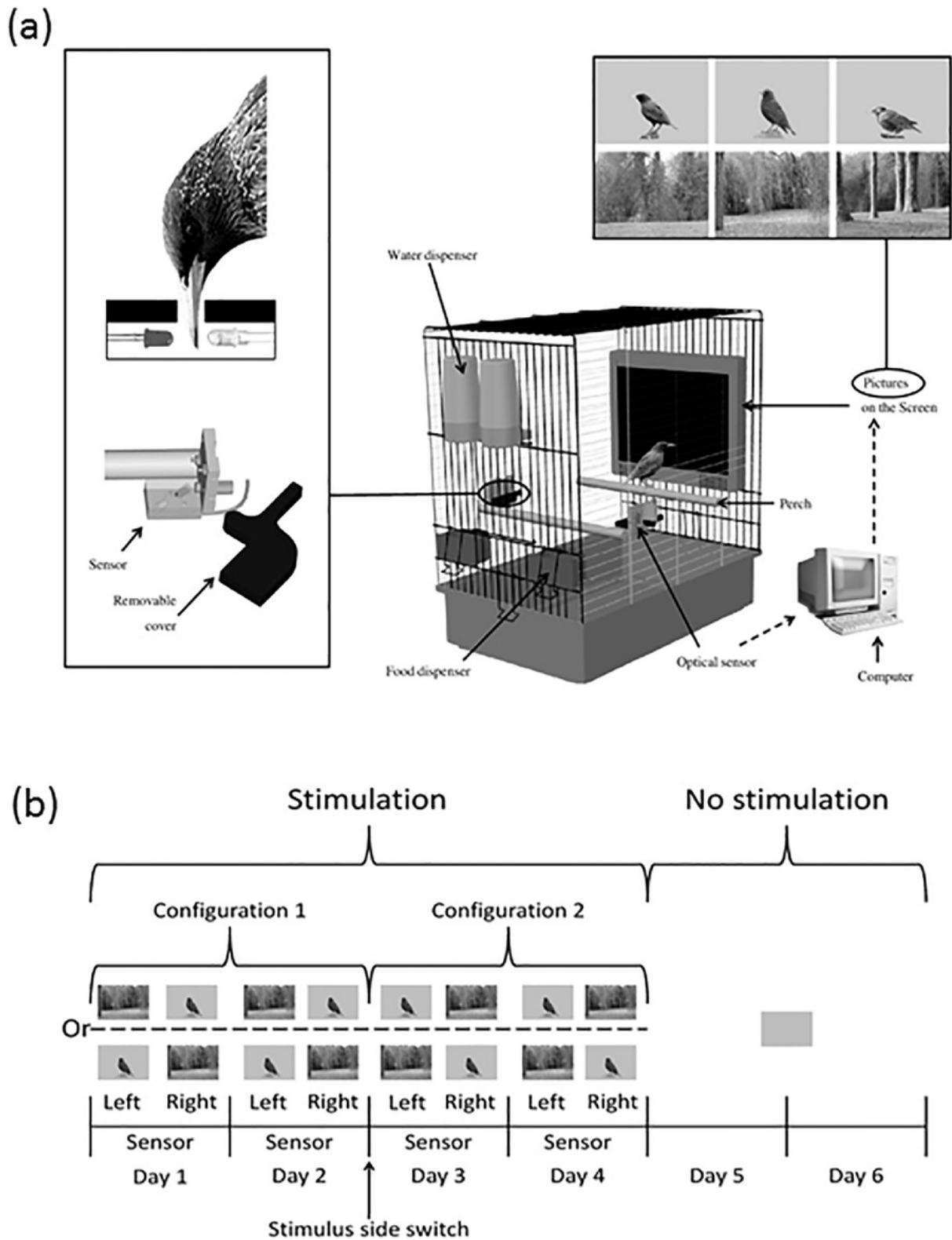
502

503 **Figure captions**

504 **Figure 1.** Experimental apparatus and protocol. (a) Picture displays are triggered by beak  
505 insertions into optical sensors controlled by a computer (see text for more details). Inset on the  
506 left shows a magnified view of one sensor and illustrates how a starling can trigger the visual  
507 stimuli by inserting its beak into the sensor. Inset in the top right-hand corner shows the two  
508 types of pictures that were used as visual stimuli with, from top to bottom, social stimuli  
509 (pictures of unknown male starlings) and non-social stimuli (landscape pictures). Although the  
510 pictures are presented here in black and white, they were displayed in colour during the  
511 experiments. The uniform grey background of the starlings' pictures was the same as the  
512 uniform grey that was displayed continuously between triggers and during the non-stimulation  
513 phase (see Perret et al. 2015). (b) Protocol: Configuration 1 (2 days): either landscape pictures  
514 were triggered by the left sensor and pictures of conspecifics were triggered by the right sensor  
515 or the reverse; Configuration 2 (2 days): the previous configuration was reversed.

516 **Figure 2.** (a) Daily numbers of beak insertions into the sensors during the stimulation and non-  
517 stimulation phases. (b) Numbers of triggers of pictures of conspecifics and landscape pictures.  
518 Open symbols connected by lines: individual values. Open circles with error bars: mean +/-  
519 SEM obtained across starlings. \*:  $p < 0.05$  (Wilcoxon test on individual values). B: bird.

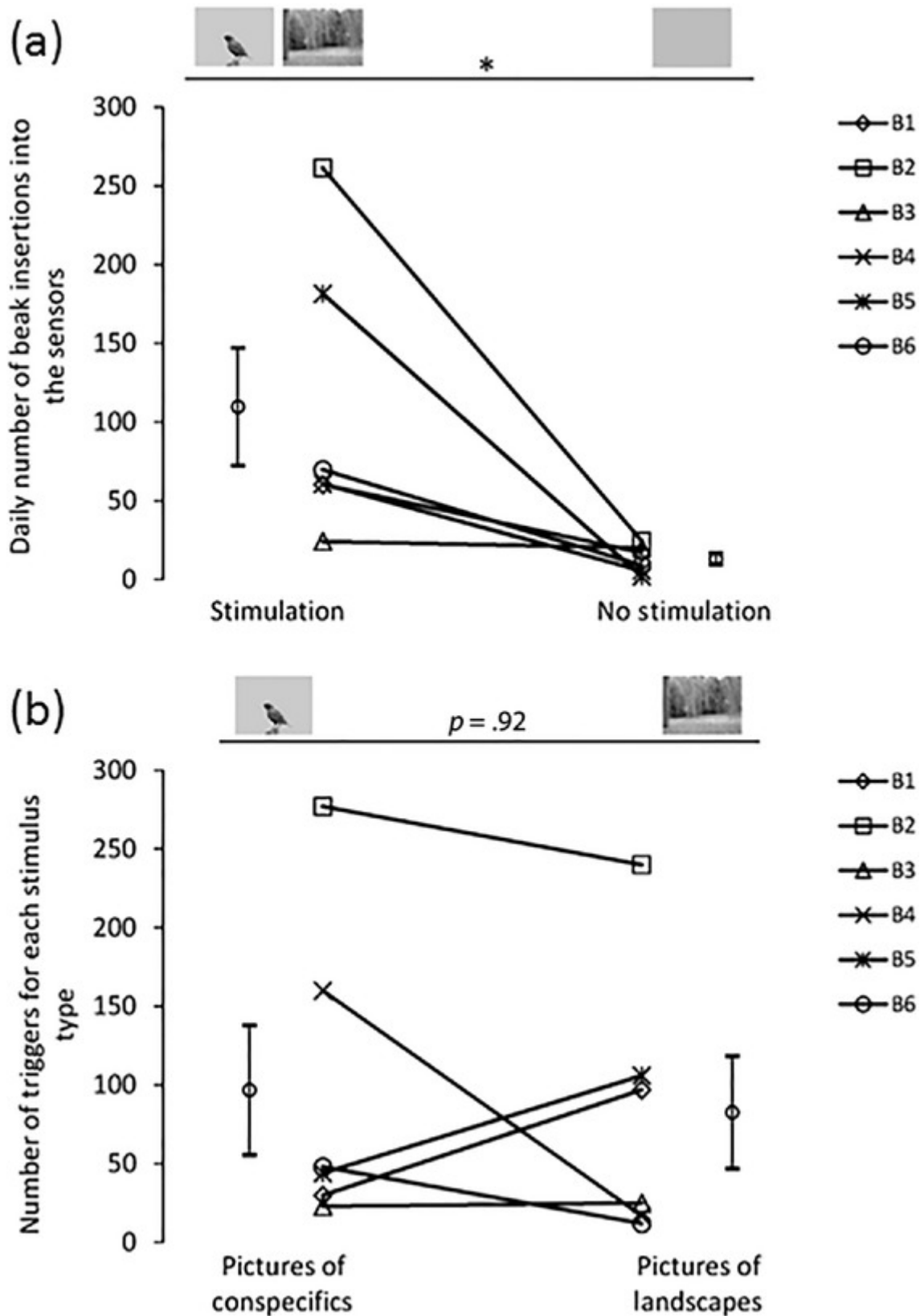




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**FIGURE 2**

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