

TALK

CARING FOR THE DEAD: EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSES TO INFANT DEATH IN WILD CAPUCHINS

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ABSTRACT

Understanding nonhuman primates' responses to death offers insights into the evolutionary origins of grief and attachment. While death perception remains poorly understood in animals, evidence shows that some species display consistent behavioral patterns following the loss of conspecifics. Among nonhuman primates, the most common behaviors related to the death of a group member include carrying and taking care of the deceased individual. Here, we describe and quantify a likely case of infanticide in a wild group of *Sapajus xanthosternos* (a critically endangered capuchin species), followed by the prolonged carrying and caretaking of the deceased infant by a primiparous mother. The mother maintained physical contact with the corpse for 90% of the observation period and exhibited grooming and protective behaviors despite her visible locomotion impairments. Other group members, especially adult females and juveniles, showed interest in the corpse, suggesting a broader social awareness of death within the group. By comparing this case with reports in capuchins, we explore whether these behaviors (1) reflect disrupted affective bonds, (2) indicate a delayed recognition of irreversible state change, or (3) serve communicative or social functions. This represents the first documented thanatological response in *S. xanthosternos*, advancing comparative thanatology by demonstrating grief-like behaviors in a neotropical primate. The gradual behavioral shift observed—from intensive care to eventual abandonment—may indicate a form of cognitive and emotional processing akin to mourning. These findings illustrate the value of naturalistic observation in understanding the evolutionary roots of emotion, attachment, and social cognition.