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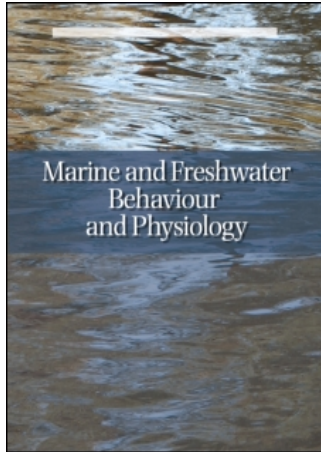
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Can hermit crabs recognize social partners by odors? And why?

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Abstract

Individual recognition, i.e., the ability of an animal to recognize the identity of a conspecific, is a key element in the social life of many vertebrates. This phenomenon has rarely been investigated in invertebrates, particularly in pre-social arthropods, and is generally poorly understood for several reasons, including (1) the disparity between what the experiments actually demonstrated and what we implicitly mean by individual recognition, (2) the limited knowledge of the sensory channels used to recognize the social partner (particularly in the case of pre-social arthropods), and (3) the general disregard for the nature of representations that an animal constructs concerning the recognized conspecific. This article aims to review what is currently known about individual recognition mediated by pheromones in the shallow-water hermit crab *Pagurus longicarpus*. Methodological biases, on one hand, and promises of future success, on the other, are pinpointed while explaining the results obtained so far. Finally, an adaptive explanation is offered that attempts to solve the observed hiatus between the “virtuosism” shown by *P. longicarpus* in the laboratory and the apparent simplistic way of shell recruitment used in the field. Individual recognition, even if its expression is very rare in nature, might be a matter of life or death for the hermit crab that makes recourse to it.

Keywords: *Individual recognition, chemical cues, aquatic environments, hermit crabs, Pagurus longicarpus*

Introduction

Individual recognition, meaning the ability of an animal to recognize the identity of a conspecific, is a key element in the social life of a multitude of species. Because of its property of assessing unique cues, it is likely to be a complex task requiring specific perception and discrimination abilities (Mateo 2004). Nevertheless, individual recognition brings considerable benefits, particularly if animals can remember and use information from previous encounters to moderate future responses toward the same individuals (Thom and Hurst 2004). It plays a relevant role in mate selection, pair bonds, territorial defense, dominance, and other social and pre-social contexts (Zayan 1994) in several vertebrates (e.g., Halpin 1980; Hojesjo et al. 1998; Bonadonna and Nevitt 2004), whereas there are

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only a few invertebrates, particularly arthropods, where this phenomenon has been investigated (Table I). More abundant on the contrary are the reports of self/nonself recognition systems. These have been described in a wide range of marine taxa (sponges, cnidaria, and tunicates; Hildemann et al. 1979) and in arthropods (references in Tsutsui 2004). Indeed, the development of mechanisms that permit kin to be distinguished from unrelated individuals is subject, particularly in eusocial insects, to strong selection pressure to direct altruistic behaviors towards relatives (cf. Hölldobler and Wilson 1990).

When individual recognition occurs, sexual partners, nest-mates, and family groups are most often found to rely on it when they interact with each other (Table I), whereas there are few reports suggesting that arthropods use it in aggressive contests.

The general lack of knowledge about this phenomenon is made even worse by the disparity between what the experiments actually demonstrated and what we implicitly mean by individual recognition (Johnston and Jernigan 1994). Indeed, the question of whether the discrimination being made is between unique, known individuals or between categories of individuals has rarely been raised (Thom and Hurst 2004). In the majority of cases, the methods employed measure differences in the response of an animal to two familiar individuals (or signals from them) compared with novel or relatively unfamiliar individuals, where for “familiar” (and “unfamiliar”) we mean here an individual that had been previously met (and not). Results of such experiments thus should document a discrimination between “heterogeneous subgroups” (Barrows et al. 1975) in the form of a “binary” individual recognition (Archawaranon et al. 1991), but do not demonstrate the ability of an animal to recognize one out of many, known individuals from “a unique set of cues”, as required by a “true” individual recognition (Beecher 1989).

The poor understanding of this phenomenon, especially in the case of pre-social arthropods, is exacerbated by both the scarce knowledge we have of the sensory channel or channels (in the case of a multimodal system of communication; Partan and Marler 2005) used to recognize the social partner and the general disregard for the nature of representations or memory that an animal constructs of the recognized conspecific.

This article aims to review what we know (and what we do not) about the phenomenon of individual recognition in pre-social aquatic arthropods, using the hermit crab *Pagurus longicarpus* Say as a model organism. The constraints posed by the adopted methodology in the ongoing research, on one hand, and the promises of future success, on the other, will be pinpointed while explaining the results obtained so far.

The long-clawed hermit crab, *P. longicarpus*

Hermit crabs are optimal model organisms to investigate mechanisms of individual recognition. The ability to recognize individuals was first suggested by Hazlett (1969) for *P. bernhardus* and, in the form of a binary individual recognition, was subsequently described in *P. longicarpus* (Gherardi and Tiedemann 2004a), a common species inhabiting shallow waters of the Atlantic coasts of North America (Williams 1984). In this experiment, the authors excluded the possibility that this species was able to recognize familiar from unfamiliar shells, rather than conspecifics (see, on the contrary, Jackson and Elwood 1989). Later, Gherardi and Atema (2005b) showed that hermit crabs recognize a social partner after a brief exposure to the stimulus animal (30 min) and that memory of the conspecific lasts for a relatively long time (between 4 and 6 d).

Binary individual recognition was assumed to be in hermit crabs a means to maintain stable hierarchical relationships, which therefore should be more properly classified as

Table I. List of arthropods where individual recognition has been investigated.

| | Species | Context | Individuals recognized | Sensory channel | Badge | Reference |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|------------------------------|
| Crustacea, Decapoda | <i>Alpheus heterochaelis</i> | Mate recognition | Sexual partners | Chemical | Undetermined | Rahman et al. 2001 |
| | <i>Gammarus shufeldtii</i> | Dominance hierarchy | Opponents | Undetermined | Undetermined | Lowe 1956 |
| | <i>Gonodactylus bredini</i> | Mate recognition | Sexual partners | Chemical | Undetermined | Caldwell 1992 |
| | <i>Gonodactylus festai</i> | Dominance hierarchy | Opponents | Chemical | Undetermined | Caldwell 1979, 1985 |
| | <i>Homarus americanus</i> | Dominance hierarchy | Opponents | Chemical | Undetermined | Karavanich and Atema 1998 |
| | <i>Hymenocera picta</i> | Mate recognition | Sexual partners | Chemical | Undetermined | Seibt and Wickler 1979 |
| | <i>Lysmata debelius</i> | Mate recognition | Sexual partners | Undetermined | Undetermined | Rufino and Jones 2001 |
| | <i>Pagurus bernhardus</i> | Dominance hierarchy | Opponents | Undetermined | Undetermined | Hazlett 1969 |
| | <i>Pagurus longicarpus</i> | Dominance hierarchy | Opponents | Chemical | Undetermined | Gherardi and Tiedemann 2004a |
| | <i>Potamon fluviatile</i> | Dominance hierarchy | Opponents | Visual | General appearance | Vannini and Gherardi 1981 |
| | <i>Stenopus hispidus</i> | Mate recognition | Sexual partners | Chemical | Undetermined | Johnson 1977 |
| | <i>Synalpheus regalis</i> | Colony | Nest-mates | Chemical | Undetermined | Duffy et al. 2002 |
| | <i>Uca capricornis</i> | Mate recognition | Sexual partners | Visual | Carapace color | Detto et al. 2006 |
| Crustacea, Isopoda | <i>Cryptocercus punctulatus</i> | Family groups | Family members | Chemical | Undetermined | Seelinger and Seelinger 1983 |
| | <i>Hemilepistus reaumuri</i> | Family groups | Family members | Chemical | Undetermined | Linsenmair 1972, 1985 |
| | <i>Hemilepistus reaumuri</i> | Mate recognition | Sexual partners | Chemical | Undetermined | Linsenmair 1985 |
| | <i>Porcellio sp.</i> | Family groups | Family members | Chemical | Undetermined | Linsenmair 1984 |
| Insecta, Hymenoptera | <i>LasioGLOSSUM zephyrym</i> | Colony | Nest-mates | Chemical | Undetermined | Bell 1974 |
| | <i>Pachycondyla villosa</i> | Colony | Founding queens | Chemical | Undetermined | D'Ettore and Heinze 2005 |
| | <i>Polistes dominulus</i> | Colony | Founding queens | Visual | Body markings | Baracchi et al. 2006 |
| | <i>Polistes fuscatus</i> | Colony | Nest-mates | Visual | Body markings | Tibbetts 2002 |

“assessment” hierarchies (Barnard and Burk 1979). Indeed, *P. longicarpus* is known to form dominance hierarchies in captivity (Allee and Douglass 1945; Winston and Jacobson 1978), but repeated contacts among a small number of individuals were shown to occur also in the field, where crabs aggregate around gastropod predation sites (Scully 1978; Rittschof 1980; Tricarico and Gherardi 2006). These small aggregations seem to persist in the same place for a relatively long time, between a few hours and 2 days (Tricarico and Gherardi 2006). All this information, taken together, suggests that social life is complex enough in this species to warrant a form of recognition.

Individual recognition is mediated by pheromones

A number of behavioral studies showed that olfaction can be used by hermit crabs in many contexts. Several species display adaptive behaviors when exposed to odors that signal shell availability (e.g., Rittschof 1980; Rittschof et al. 1992) and, as found in *P. bernhardus*, seem to recognize some pheromones released in the water by fighting conspecifics (Briffa and Williams 2006).

When offered empty gastropod shells, crabs perform a series of investigatory acts (e.g., Elwood and Stewart 1985; Jackson and Elwood 1989), during which they assess external and internal features of the shell and then make a decision on whether or not to enter it. Pheromones in the medium usually affect the investigatory responses of crabs towards shells either occupied by conspecifics (Hazlett 1996a, 1996b; Rittschof and Hazlett 1997; Hazlett 2000) or empty (Gherardi and Atema 2005a), so that shell investigation has the potential of being used as a reliable bioassay to reveal chemical detection by hermit crabs. Although this approach cannot show temporal structure or elements of directionality in the release of chemical cues, it is a noninvasive means of determining, in a simple way, whether they are used (Briffa and Williams 2006). This bioassay was first used by Hazlett (1990) to demonstrate the presence of a disturbance pheromone in the hermit crab *Calcinus laevimanus* and more recently by Gherardi and Tiedemann (2004b) to reveal the ability of *P. longicarpus* to recognize conspecifics by smell.

Specifically, Gherardi and Tiedemann (2004b) analyzed the response to a target shell exhibited by test crabs in three different contexts, where test animals could (1) see only, (2) smell only, or (3) see and smell one conspecific. Conspecifics were either known (familiar conspecifics, FC) or unknown (unfamiliar conspecifics, UC) individuals that were of the same status (dominant or subordinate) as the former opponents. As a control, the behavior of the test crabs was analyzed in the absence of any stimulus emitted by a conspecific (but in the presence of the test crab's odor alone).

The adoption of this protocol allowed the authors to explore the communicative consequences of combining signal components from visual and olfactory channels, given that previous studies (Hazlett 1982; Diaz et al. 1994; Chiussi et al. 2001) had shown that hermit crabs may make use in complex ways of chemical and visual stimuli, at least when these stimuli are associated with particular types of shells.

The results of this study confirmed the ability of this species to discriminate between familiar and unfamiliar individuals (Gherardi and Tiedemann 2004a), but also showed that only when the crabs were allowed to smell a conspecific did they exhibit responses which were stronger in the presence of unfamiliar than familiar stimuli (Figure 1): latency was longer and the approaches to the shell were more frequent in FC than in UC conditions in both the “smell only” and the “sight and smell” treatments, but not in the “sight only” treatment. However, chemical and visual stimuli from an unfamiliar individual, if presented

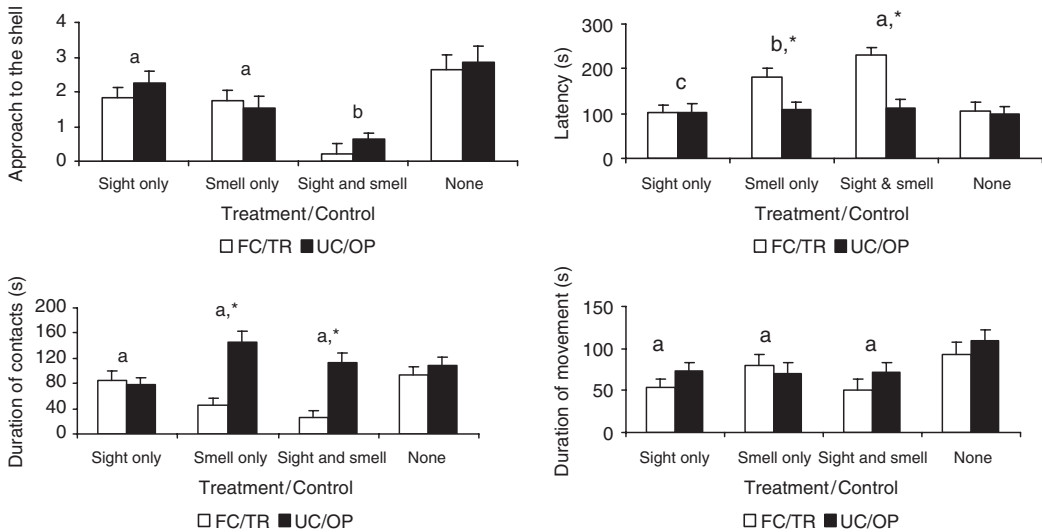


Figure 1. Sensorial channel/s used by hermit crabs to recognize familiar conspecifics (after Gherardi and Tiedemann 2004b). A test crab was offered with a target shell under three treatments, “sight only”, “smell only”, and “sight and smell”, in which it was presented to visual, chemical, and visual plus chemical stimuli, respectively, emitted by a conspecific. Conspecifics were either known individuals (familiar conspecifics, FC) or unknown individuals (unfamiliar conspecifics, UC) that were however of the same status (dominant or subordinate) as the former opponents. As a control, the test crab was placed in the absence of any stimuli. The experimental apparatus consisted of plastic bowls containing 160 cc artificial seawater (salinity: 27 ppt and temperature: 22°C) divided by a transparent (TR) or opaque (OP) sector into two compartments, one for the nontest crab and the other for the test crab (with the target shell). Treatments differed for (1) the sector which was either TR (in the “sight only” and “sight and smell” treatments) or OP (in the “smell only” treatment) and (2) the seawater in the test crab’s compartment, which was conditioned either by the test crab’s odor only (in the “sight only” treatment) or by the nontest crab’s odor (in the “smell only” and “sight and smell” treatments). In the control, seawater was conditioned by the test crab’s odor only and the sector was either TR or OP. The figure shows mean (+SE) values of four behavioral parameters recorded during 5 min of observation, compared between FC and UC. The recorded parameters were: the number of approaches to the target shell, the time passed between the test crab’s insertion into the compartment and its first approach to the target shell (latency), the time spent interacting with the target shell, and the time spent in locomotion. For each parameter, N are 40 for FC/TR and 40 for UC/OP. Letters indicate the hierarchy among treatments (after a Kruskal–Wallis one-way analysis of variance followed by a Multiple comparison test); the asterisk means a significant difference between conditions (at least, $P < 0.05$, after a Mann–Whitney ranks test).

together, sometimes elicited different responses than only its smell. In fact, only in the “sight and smell” treatment was the number of approaches to the shell significantly higher in UC than in FC conditions. Besides, crabs appeared less reactive (longer latencies and lower number of approaches to the shell) in the presence of both the smell and the sight of a conspecific than at its smell only. In summary, olfaction appears to be the dominant sensory channel in the binary discrimination of *P. longicarpus*, but the potential of its integration with visual stimuli cannot be excluded, supporting the idea that communication is multimodal (Partan and Marler 2005) also in the context of individual recognition.

Gherardi and Tiedeman’s (2004a) study also showed that individuals of *P. longicarpus* are able to discriminate the odor of a conspecific within the complex olfactory environment in

which they live, including the chemicals emitted by the shells. Also, their own odor seemed to be distinguished from the odor of either a familiar or an unfamiliar conspecific, as was apparent from the less intense responses exhibited by crabs in the control than in the treatments (Figure 1). Taken together, these results might suggest that in this species chemical recognition is more refined than a binary identification and that chemical “badges” can be the attributes of individual crabs. Gherardi and Atema (2005b) came to a similar conclusion when they found that hermit crabs are still able to classify a conspecific as familiar after having experienced 1-day interactions with other individuals. In other words, experiences with different crabs (and possibly with different odors, all familiar) are not sufficient to erase the memory of a former rival, at least after one day of separation.

Indeed, a test for a true individual recognition would involve different responses to two equally-known individuals (Johnston and Jernigan 1994). A test meeting this requirement was first used for aquatic invertebrates by Caldwell (1985), who showed that the cavity-dwelling stomatopod *Gonodactylus festae* responds differently to the odor of two familiar individuals and that this difference is based on previous experience with its opponents. Intruders rapidly entered cavities containing the odor of the residents they had previously defeated, but were hesitant to enter cavities containing the odor of the residents that had on the contrary defeated them. Similarly, by monitoring responses to a target shell exhibited by a test *P. longicarpus* in the presence of odors of four different proveniences (test crab; unfamiliar conspecifics; familiar conspecifics that won previous fights with the test crab, α ; and familiar conspecifics that lost previous fights with the test crab, γ), Gherardi et al. (2005) found that hermit crabs can chemically discriminate (1) between themselves and others and (2) between at least two familiar individuals, the winner and the loser. Because test crabs seemed not to discriminate among unfamiliar crabs with the same winning/losing experience and morphological attributes as familiar crabs, the ability to chemically recognize at least two different familiar individuals was not due to odors associated with a rank, a size class, or a shell type, but was related to the experience that test crabs have had with those previously encountered individuals.

The results of this experiment are not, however, unequivocal in proving the existence of a true individual recognition in hermit crabs. A shortcoming is that what has really been shown is that *P. longicarpus* can distinguish between the odors of “animals defeated” and “animals by which it has been defeated”, whereas its ability to discriminate between two animals that had both won and both lost would have been a better demonstration of a true individual recognition in this species. It seems difficult, if not impossible however, to develop an appropriate experimental protocol that could produce such a distinction at least using behavioral bioassays (see Thom and Hurst 2004 for a discussion of the different experimental paradigms used to assess individual recognition ability).

The odor of an individual is associated with the quality of its shell

Individual recognition is a sophisticated cognitive function. True individual recognition, in fact, requires the association of some individually distinct information with memories of past experiences (Johnston and Bullock 2001). There are several characteristics that make the task different from standard learning (Lai and Johnston 2002), as it is also evident in hermit crabs. First, *P. longicarpus* does not need to be trained over many repeated trials; rather, it shows evidence of recognition after only one or a few brief exposures to stimulus animals, less than 30 min (Gherardi and Atema 2005b). Second, hermit crabs do not require specific training but show evidence of recognition without external,

experimenter-provided reinforcement or punishment. Third, although memory for individuals can be acquired in a few minutes, it lasts for a relatively long time (about five days) without further exposure to the stimulus animal (Gherardi and Atema 2005b).

The results of previous experiments on *P. longicarpus* had suggested that, during the familiarization, the receiver might associate the odor from a social partner with one of its relevant attributes, either the rank, the size, or the quality of its shell (or with a combination of these three attributes). This hypothesis was tested by Gherardi et al. (2005) in three experiments, in which triplets of crabs that differed for a single attribute, the other being equal, were first subject to a 24-h familiarization phase. Then, the crabs with the intermediate attribute, β crabs (the receivers), were offered in random succession with the target shell in the presence of the odor of familiar α and γ crabs, which had the same size and shell quality as the receiver in a first experiment, a different size (being either larger or smaller) but the same shell quality in a second experiment, and the same size but a shell of either lower or higher quality than the receiver's in a third experiment. The results clearly illustrated that *P. longicarpus* can associate the odor from a conspecific with the quality of the shell it occupies and reacts accordingly in the presence of a target shell (Figure 2). It seems likely that during the familiarization phase individual odors became labels of shell quality; if these labels indicated a high shell quality,

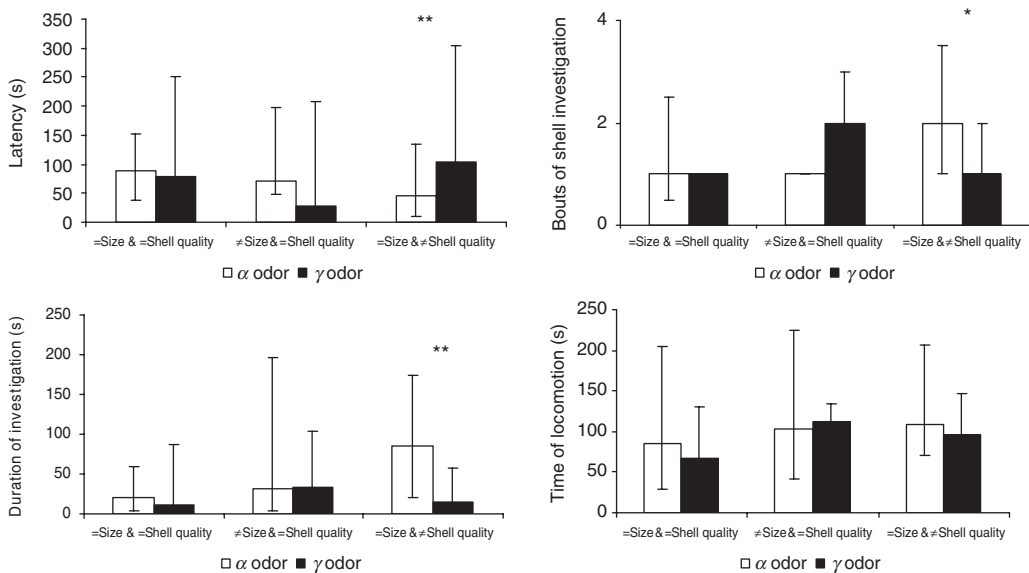


Figure 2. Association between the odor of a familiar conspecific and three of its attributes (rank, body size, and shell quality) (after Gherardi et al. 2005). The experiments consisted in monitoring the response of a test crab to a target shell as in Figure 1 in the presence of seawater conditioned by the odor of two familiar conspecifics (α and γ crabs), analyzed separately for 5 min each in random order. Three conditions were examined: same body size and same shell quality (1), different body size and same shell quality (2), and same body size and different shell quality (3). α (and γ) was the dominant (and subordinate) crab in (1), the bigger (and the smaller) crab in (2), and the crab occupying a larger-than-optimal (and a smaller-than-optimal) shell in (3). The figure shows median values (and interquartile ranges) of latency (see Figure 1), bouts of investigation of the target shell, the time spent investigating the target shell, and the time spent in locomotion. * and ** denote $P < 0.05$ and $P < 0.01$, respectively, after a Friedman two-way analysis of variance.

their detection evoked an intense shell investigation when the receivers were presented with a high quality shell; otherwise, shell investigation would have been scarce or absent. This view has been supported by a companion experiment revealing a plasticity of individual odor-shell quality association (Figure 3). Once an individual crab had switched to a shell of a different quality, responses to the offered shell were consistent with the changed association. In fact, shell investigation was strong in the presence of the odor of a former γ occupying a high quality shell and weak in the presence of a former α occupying a low quality shell.

These results are instructive in suggesting that what the odor of a familiar individual means to a hermit crab is the quality of the shell the social partner inhabits, independently of its size and rank. Hermit crabs seem to associate a type of information emitted by the social partner (e.g., chemical cues) with some experiences with it (e.g., exploration of its shell) and keep this association for a relatively long time. In other words, they seem to have a “concept” of other individuals and behave accordingly, in a very adaptive fashion, as illustrated below.

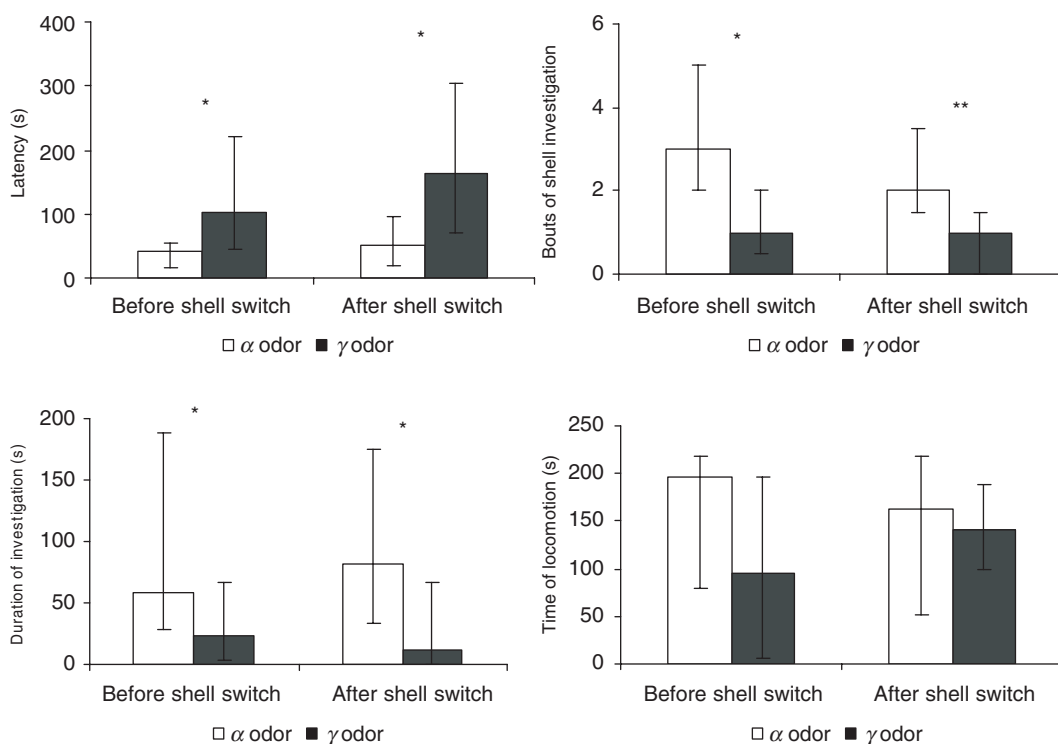


Figure 3. Plasticity of the association between the odor of a familiar conspecific and the quality of its shell (after Gherardi et al. 2005). The experiment consisted in monitoring the test crab's behavior when the familiar conspecific had been forced to occupy a shell of opposed quality with respect to the shell it occupied previously, so that the crabs occupying larger-than-optimal shells (α crabs) and smaller-than-optimal shells (γ crabs) of Figure 2 had become γ and α crabs, respectively. The figure shows median values (and interquartile ranges) of the four parameters as in Figure 2, compared before and after shell switches. In the figure, α (and γ) crabs are the individuals that were previously ranked γ (and α) crabs. * and ** denote $P < 0.05$ and $P < 0.01$, respectively, after a Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test.

It has been abundantly proven that the survival, growth, protection, and reproduction of this taxon strictly depend on the occupancy of gastropod shells of appropriate size and shape (e.g., Fotheringham 1976; Bertness 1981; Elwood et al. 1995). Empty shells (hermit crabs are unable to directly prey on living snails; see, Rutheford 1977, for an exception) are in acutely short supply in the habitat (e.g., Scully 1979). Most often, they can be found following snail death at gastropod predation sites (e.g., Rittschof 1980; Tricarico and Gherardi 2006), where hermit crabs may aggregate and form dominance hierarchies. The dominant crab obtains the first opportunity to occupy an empty shell as it is released by a predator; afterwards, the other individuals may exchange shells down the hierarchy. Therefore, these aggregations function as “shell markets” and benefit a large number of site attendants (Rittschof et al. 1992) as the result of a vacancy chain process (Chase et al. 1988). Having obtained a high quality shell, a crab generally leaves the predation site (Rittschof 1980), thus subtracting the shell from the market. It would therefore be advantageous for an individual to classify the quality of the shells inhabited by the other attendants rapidly and then to spend time combating or negotiating (Hazlett 1978) for a really good shell.

Due to water turbidity typical of many salt marsh habitats, chemical cues signaling shell quality might provide more reliable information than visual stimuli emitted by the shell itself; on the other hand, the exclusive use of tactile information from the shell would require time and energy consumption in repeated investigatory acts. Indeed, *P. longicarpus* quickly learns the chemical identity of a social partner (Gherardi and Atema 2005b), is inaccurate in discriminating shells by sight (Gherardi and Tiedeman 2004a), and often switches shells without prior investigation (Scully 1986). In this scenario, the plastic nature of the association between the individual odor of a conspecific and the quality of its shell has a clear adaptive value. Obviously, any shell exchange breaks the link between a given hermit crab and a given shell, and the aggregations of hermit crabs around gastropod predation sites are characterized by a cascade of shell switches. Therefore, the plastic response to the cues associated with high quality shells is a key factor in optimizing shell acquisition and reducing errors.

Individual recognition can increase survival and fitness

For at least three reasons, our interpretation above concerning the benefits of individual recognition to hermit crabs should be, at least in part, revised. First, as lamented by Atema and Steinbach (2007) for all crustaceans, a glaring gap in knowledge is the general lack of information about the chemical identity of pheromones. The refined behavior shown by hermit crabs suggests complexities rivaling those in social insects, but, unless the chemistry catches up with the biology, “we will remain ignorant about the true extent of chemical signaling” (Atema and Steinbach 2007).

Second, how the information on individual identity is coded depends on whether an animal benefits from advertising it (Thom and Hurst 2004). If there is no advantage to being recognized, the animal is unlikely to deliberately reveal its identity and the cue used by the conspecifics to identify it may primarily serve other signaling functions or may have no role in any type of signaling. In hermit crabs, the “signaler” seems not to benefit from being recognized (its recognition may increase the risks of being stolen of a high-quality shell), so individual recognition in this taxon does not meet the requirements of a real “communication”. It can be classified, on the contrary, as a form of “eavesdropping”

(Bradbury and Vehrencamp 1998), where the recognizing individual is detecting and using information that is not actively signaled to it by the recognized conspecific.

Third, merely demonstrating the ability to distinguish among individuals in the laboratory does not prove that individual recognition is used in the field to mediate interactions among protagonists (Caldwell 1985). To judge the role that individual recognition plays in the “real world” of a species, it is essential to understand the ecological and social variables that govern its occurrence. Such data have been in large part obtained for hermit crabs (see above). But a hiatus exists between the “virtuosism” shown by *P. longicarpus* in the laboratory and the apparent simplistic way used by this species to recruit shells in the field. After many hours of field work in a salt marsh in New England, Tricarico and Gherardi (2006) never observed shell exchanges between crabs but recorded relatively few and weak interactions between individuals. This might lead us to conclude that individual recognition is an unexpressed ability of hermit crabs under natural conditions. Alternatively, we may think that, even if a crab uses this ability once in its life and succeeds in occupying a high-quality shell as a result, both its life expectancy and its individual fitness would increase sharply. In other words, individual recognition, even if its expression can be very rare in nature, might be, for the hermit crab that uses it, a matter of life or death.

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