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THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION

Summary

A group of scientists from the United States have revealed that macaques - a type of Old World monkey - can doubt themselves. Just like powerful people.

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National Editorial

Last Updated: Feb 22, 2011

The Saturday Night Live character Stuart Smalley may be one of television assured humans. Mr Smalley's "Daily Affirmation" comedy skit pokes fun at question being "good enough" or "smart enough"; it's satirical confidence b from a guy in silly sweaters.

American television may make a mockery of self-doubt, but it turns out that Smalley does not suffer from uncertainty on his own.

A group of scientists from the United States have revealed that macaques - Old World monkey - can doubt themselves, too.

Using a computer simulator researchers taught the primates to guess at the a pixelated screen. When the monkeys answered correctly they were reward food. Wrong answers brought no food, and a delay in play.

If the monkeys did not know the answer, however, they could choose to "pe than guess incorrectly. This brought no food but no delay either, meaning l before the next correct answer.

Researchers reason that the monkey's ability to question itself proves that humans, "know when they don't know". This skill, says David Smith of the S University of New York at Buffalo, is "one of the most important facets of hu reflective mind".

Self-doubt is not usually so rewarding. But monkeys everywhere should tak confidence can indeed be learnt. Al Franken, who played the sweater-wear psychologist on TV, certainly knew this. Today, he's in the US Senate, whe monkey's gift of being able to admit ignorance can often be in short supply.

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