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SOCIAL LEARNING AND CONFORMITY IN ORANGUTANS (PONGO PYGMAEUS x ABELII)

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Social learning and transmission of behaviors are the cornerstones of cultural development in social-living primates. While recent research has shown that apes may adopt new and enduring customs, little is known about the social pressures that cause apes to conform to these norms. Humans are quite notable in their ability to reject an established method of accomplishing a task, in exchange for a different method to accomplish the same task. Whether or not other species, such as orangutans, are capable of modifying their behavior in order to do as others do is the basis of this study. The subjects were five adult orangutans (ages 12-32) housed at the National Zoo. The five orangutans were socialized as two male-female pairs, with one unrelated female (Batang, age 12) who was allowed to choose which pair she would spend her days with. A foraging panel with two different solutions for collecting food (lift or slide) was presented to each of the two pairs of orangutans, but only one method was demonstrated to each pair. While separated from both groups, Batang was trained on both methods for foraging; only one method was available each day. After equal experience with both methods, Batang spent 5 days of testing with the "Slide pair" followed by 5 days with the "Lift pair". Batang modified her behavior depending on the group she was foraging with, using slide with the "slide pair" and lift with the "lift pair". This is the first evidence for conformity to social norms in orangutans.

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