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WHY IS THERE SO LITTLE CUMULATIVE CULTURE IN GREAT APES?

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Although great apes show clear evidence for culture, very little of this culture is actually cumulative, leaving most cultural customs within the innovative reach of clever individuals, unlike the situation in humans. Given that culture is such a powerful adaptation, this is puzzling. Here, we systematically examine the possible explanations. First, great apes may show particular deficits. Thus, they may lack the required social learning abilities, but we now know this is unlikely. Alternatively, they may lack the required innovations, because they are too reluctant to innovate under natural conditions, or too conservative (i.e. unwilling to consider other, potentially superior, options to existing customs). We present recent observational and experimental data on wild and captive orangutans and captive chimpanzees that support this proposition. The second, non-exclusive proposition is that our ancestors became cooperative breeders, which made them more prosocial, leading to more effective social transition (through teaching) and probably more innovation. Current information on cooperative breeders generally supports this idea. We suggest that these motivational, rather than cognitive, changes paved the way for truly cumulative culture.

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