

IMITATION OF A DISABLED INDIVIDUAL'S ACTIONS IN WILD CHIMPANZEES

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We report the first evidence for imitation of a functionless behaviour in wild great apes. To date there is limited evidence for imitation in wild apes; observational methods make it often impossible to identify the original model for imitation, or indeed discover whether the behaviour might have developed as a part of the individual's natural repertoire. In humans, the clearest observational evidence for imitation comes from the copying of behaviour that has no function for the copier; as when right-handed children taught by a left-handed teacher acquire the hooked position, despite remaining right-handed. Does imitation of functionless behaviour ever occur in wild great apes? The Sonso chimpanzee community in Uganda suffers from a high level of manual disability that has led to idiosyncratic behavioural strategies (e.g. walking adaptations, Reynolds, 2005; food processing techniques, Stokes & Byrne, 2001), most marked in Tinka, the only individual with near-total paralysis of both hands. Here we document the use of Tinka's highly specific self-grooming technique in a number of healthy, juvenile, individuals; whose ranges closely overlap with the range of Tinka. We suggest that the only possible explanation for the acquisition of this functionless behaviour by these healthy individuals is copying Tinka's behaviour by imitation.

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