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Cultural Learning

Social learning and cultural transmission, in their broadest senses, are ubiquitous in the animal kingdom. But the human versions are clearly special. This can be most directly seen in the process of cumulative cultural evolution, characterized by the ratchet effect (Tomasello et al. 1993a; Boyd and Richerson 1996). When one individual in a group invents something useful, in ideal circumstances we all get it immediately. Then the stage is set for someone else to improve upon the original invention, which we all then get as well. The result is a process that, in an important sense, pools the cognitive resources of everyone in the cultural group because we all benefit from the insights of each of our groupmates. Cumulative cultural evolution via the ratchet effect is made possible by special skills of imitation and even conformity, as well as uniquely human pedagogy and instructed learning (adults, as representatives of the culture, insist that children learn). These unique cultural learning processes all derive in one way or another from processes of shared intentionality, especially those constituting the second step of collective intentionality.

Great apes have some skills of social learning, and indeed some great ape populations have established behavioral "traditions" that persist across generations. But to survive and thrive in a culture, human children must possess more powerful skills of cultural learning. Thus, human infants and toddlers do not just gather information for instrumental tasks by observing others, as do apes, but they actively conform to others, even when that means overriding what they have learned on their own. In doing so, they do not just reproduce the results of the other person's actions, as do apes, but learn *through* the other person as they take her perspective. And adults actively teach things to young children so that, beginning at around three years of age, children trust this transmitted knowledge even more than