A primatological perspective on human cultural origins

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Abstract

Humans are one of the most successful species in the planet as we inhabit almost every ecosystem on earth. This success has been attributed to our cultural proficiency, which allows us to store in the collective minds of our populations complex knowledge that no single individual could innovate on its own. In this way, we acquire most of our behavioural repertoire from experts in our communities and, contrary to any other species, we build upon this collectively-stored information to create novel solutions to face ever-more-challenging problems. This ratcheting of behavioural complexity has led to our culture being coined cumulative. The fact that not even our closest living relatives, the great apes, possess this type of culture begs the question of when did cumulative culture evolve in our lineage. In this piece, I discuss how the field of experimental primate archaeology has contributed to this question by describing several stone-tool experiments conducted with great apes.

Keywords

Cumulative culture, stone tools, great apes, primate archaeology, human origins

Biographical note

I am a currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Ecology and Evolution at the University of Lausanne (Switzerland) studying social insect and primate societies. After completing my studies at the Universities of Valencia (Spain), Oslo (Norway) and Linköping (Sweden) I conducted a PhD in cognitive archaeology at the University of Tübingen (Germany) examining the suitability of great apes as cognitive models of early hominin technological behaviours.