



Diversity of Imitation Mechanisms

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Imitation, the ability to vicariously learn and replicate others' responses, is a foundational social cognitive skill with significant variation. This variation is associated with the development of uniquely human skills such as theory of mind, culture and aspects of language (vocabulary, semantics), but what underlies this variation? One possibility is that individual differences in imitation performance co-occur with age-related changes in individual learning including changes in executive functions. This has led some to suggest that the mechanisms supporting imitation and individual learning are the same. Here, I will present evidence that humans possess at least two distinct imitation mechanisms—cognitive, motor-spatial—that are domain-specific. Importantly, the development of these imitation mechanisms is independent of the development of individual learning processes. Finally, I will argue that at least one of these mechanisms—motor-spatial imitation—is uniquely human and may explain why only human cultures are cumulative and evolve over time.

Dr. Francys Subiaul was born in Cuba and raised in Miami, Florida. He received his Ph.D. in Anthropology from Columbia University and is an Associate Professor in the Departments of Speech & Hearing Science, Anthropology, GW Institute for Neuroscience, and the Mind-Brain Institute at The George Washington University. He currently is the director of the Social Cognition Lab which investigates social intelligence in human and nonhuman primates. Specifically, his research and academic interests focus on the development and evolution of observational and imitation learning (i.e., social learning).