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.

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