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How did culture change human reasoning about groups?

Abstract: While many social species are group living, linguistically or symbolically marked social groups, characterized by large repertoires of shared cultural norms and behaviors, are uniquely human. However, the evolutionary relevance and psychological underpinnings of such ethnic groups remains debated. In this talk, I will address both the cultural evolutionary processes whereby the kinds of social groups that we form diversify cross-culturally and the possibility that human cognition may have genetically evolved in response to these novel kinds of groups. First, I'll report on psychological and ethnographic research from the Quechua-Aymara border in the Peruvian altiplano that speaks to these questions. Results 1) reveal the importance of distinguishing between functionally independent intergroup phenomena such as stereotyping and cooperation, and 2) suggest that children are prone to develop essentialist beliefs about ethno-linguistic groups, even in cultural contexts where adults do not. Second, I'll discuss a meta-analysis of cross-cultural developmental work that shows how people's essentialist beliefs diversify as they age. Implications for our models of human social evolution will be discussed.
