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Enculturing cognition: integrating material culture in human cognitive evolution

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Abstract

Debates about human cognitive evolution include the uniqueness, antiquity, and foundations of the modern mind. Widely accepted models often pose progressive cognitive stages ascribed to particular species from apes to humans, placing the emergence of fundamental aspects of modern human cognition late in evolution. Given that recent archaeological discoveries suggest that many traits traditionally used to define *H. sapiens* mentality (i.e. symbolism, language) are older and likely shared with archaic hominins (e.g. Neanderthals), how can we identify truly distinctive aspects of cognition in phylogeny? Topical studies are demonstrating how different facets of material culture (e.g. tool use, tool production, skill learning) can shape the mind. Considering this, models of hominin cognition based on material culture can provide more accurate and testable accounts that need not appeal to progressistic criteria. This way, material culture studies can bridge the current chasm between the archaeological and fossil records and theories of cognitive evolution.