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Stream B: Cultural Change and Evolutionary Theory

Title: Moving Minds Together: Culture, Cognition and the Maori Haka

Abstract: Cultural learning has been recognised as a key factor in our species' evolutionary success (Donald, 1991; Tomasello, 1999; Sterelny, 2003; 2012). The ability to invent, innovate, and impart acquired knowledge across communities and over generations is an integral part of the human evolutionary story. Cultural practices that support such processes thus present important lines of enquiry; particularly the kind that convey cognitive and epistemic benefit to their carriers. In this paper, I will examine the Maori Haka – a ritual form of dance and song - as an example of a particularly potent kind of cultural practice. I will consider how the practice of haka cultivates and transmits numerous forms of knowledge within and across generations, while it also supports and enhances group bonding and social cohesion. Recent empirical studies on synchronous actions have provided evidence in support of the claim that such actions can foster group bonding, enhance group solidarity, and increase cooperation (Mogan, Fischer & Bulbulia, 2017). In working through the case study of the Maori haka, I will describe several ways in which the practice can provide insight into some underappreciated areas of interest in cultural learning and cognitive evolution.

Bio: McArthur Mingon is a graduate student in Cognitive Science at Macquarie University. He studies culture and cognition, with particular interest in cultural learning and collaborative practices, as well as embodied and distributed cognition. Under the supervision of John Sutton, McArthur's PhD thesis will explore cognitive, affective and epistemic aspects of the Maori Haka.