



## What is Cultural Evolution?

The study of genetic evolution has had almost a century to mature. Yet, although culture is fundamental to what it means to be human, its study as an evolutionary process, exhibiting key Darwinian mechanisms of variation, competition and inheritance, is just beginning to flourish (Mesoudi 2011). Humanity's capacity for culture stems from our ability to construct, receive, process, integrate, and transmit information across generations.

How our cultures evolve (including how information is transmitted, how people make decisions, and the interaction of culture with our biology) is a pressing issue in a world in which our cultural activities are causing rapid, and drastic, social and physical changes. Although the social sciences and humanities have long claimed that humans are not subject to the ordered laws of nature, cultural evolution highlights that cultural history is patterned and cultural change is not random or entirely unpredictable. So, researchers of cultural evolution may leverage this understanding to enable them to predict (and potentially intervene) in key domains of great global concern currently, such as the spread of extremism and misinformation (for example, conspiracy theories or 'fake news') and in addressing issues such as climate change.

Cultural evolutionists use various forms of explanation and methods, including modelling cultural evolution as a complex adaptive system, conducting cross-cultural studies, and identifying cognitive and behavioural processes underlying cultural transmission. The study of human culture and cultural change has made great strides during the last few decades, producing novel ideas within anthropology, psychology, history and sociology as well as in computer science, evolutionary biology, neurobiology, ethology and ecology.

**These converging disciplines are all realising the urgent need to incorporate cultural evolution into models of how to ensure humanity continues to thrive in our uncertain future, and the emergent field of cultural evolution promises to synthesize these insights into a broader framework** modelling culture as an evolutionary process, similar to genetic evolution but with its own distinctive inheritance mechanisms. Indeed, the integration of methods, data and results across disciplines is a recognised 'grand challenge' for the field (Brewer et al. 2017) and, with the establishment of the [Cultural Evolution Society](#) in 2015, the time is now right to tackle it.

**The multi-disciplinarity of the field, and its explicit agenda for integration, is exactly what is exciting about cultural evolution** as it overcomes the

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inertia of traditional disciplines. Cultural evolution provides a “common language” (verbal or mathematical) to integrate explanations of the human condition across disciplines and scales of explanation, from genetic to cultural studies.

To find out more visit the [Cultural Evolution Society website](#).

## References

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