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We're all primed to adopt the culture we're born into

The human brain has been shown to come into the world primed to do certain tasks. We are prepared to adopt language, to understand shapes and movement, to expect causation, to manipulate numbers and quantities, to mimic others and favour our families. So a human brain is not, as it may appear, a blank slate.

But the thing we're not prepared for is to adopt any one culture over any other. Instead, we are primed to adopt the culture into which we are born.

Think about other types of animals for a moment. No matter where they're born, animals will grow up and behave in pretty much the same way. Take a rabbit born in Poland and a rabbit born in China. Both will end up pretty much identical in terms of behaviour. In fact, if you took a litter of baby rabbits and flew each one to a different corner of the globe, they would all grow up to behave the same way no matter where they were.

Imagine doing the same thing with a group of human infants. Send one to a Siberian village, another to a busy Buenos Aires suburb, one to a luxury high rise apartment in Dubai and another to the barren plains of Somalia. They would grow up to be totally different people. Different languages, religions, skills, beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, food preferences, you name it. If you could wind back the clock and send the same four infants to four completely different places, they would grow up to be totally different again.

It's a little disturbing to know that the opinions I currently hold are an accident of my birth. If I had been born in a different country, I would have different beliefs, I would have a totally different attitude to all sorts of things. I might like eating olives. I might not like Chinese food. I might hate music. I would definitely speak whatever language my parents and community spoke. I might never have learned to read or write and be great at herding sheep.

What would you believe if you were born somewhere else? What ideals would your parents have shared with you that you would now have adopted as your own? If you're currently a member of a group that is in conflict with another group, what would you be like if you had been born a child of your enemies? Would you still wish bad things on them or would you be more likely to wish bad things on your current group?

And even though it is entirely arbitrary, humans will show extraordinary allegiance to the culture into which they are born, to the point of being prepared to kill or die for it. We are that deeply hard-wired to belong.

In his fascinating book, *Wired for Culture - The Natural History of Human Cooperation*, Mark Pagel, head of the Evolution Laboratory at the University of Reading in the UK makes the following observation: "A wolf brought up by sheep will remain a wolf and soon turn on its benefactors, but a newborn human must be ready to join any cultural group on Earth."

But what has this got to do with organisational culture? Because our brains are so perfectly primed to adopt the culture into which we are born, they're also primed to adopt the culture of the groups we join throughout our lives. Our organisational group is, arguably, the second most important group we will join outside of our immediate family. And our livelihood also depends on it, so we bring our evolutionary super-powers of cultural adaptation to bear to ensure we find ways to belong to our organisational group.

Culture is the rules of belonging in the groups we join, whether those groups are our families, our nations or our organisations. We behave our way to belonging in all of them.



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