

## Cultural Evolution

### **Abstract**

What gave rise to the mosaic of cultural expressions across the globe? Why did distinct cultural expressions emerge and persist across regions, and why are some societies more culturally diverse than others? What determined the adaptive capacity of societies to novel ecological niches? This research develops a unified theory of cultural evolution that captures the fundamental forces governing cultural adaptation over the course of human existence. The theory centers on three forces: vertical transmission, through which cultural traits evolve across generations toward environmentally compatible forms; horizontal diffusion, through which traits spread among contemporaneous individuals; and evolutionary selection, through which the prevalence of cultural traits reflects their fitness. Nesting these forces within a unified analytical framework, the theory derives an evolutionary law of motion for the direction, dynamics, and persistence of cultural change. Consistent with the predictions of the theory, the empirical analysis identifies the roots of variation in cultural diversity across the globe and documents, within each cultural domain, the association between prehistoric population diversity and observed cultural diversity across both traditional and contemporary populations.