LEMURS LIKE TO CHIT-CHAT TOO

Ringtailed lemurs, just like humans, reserve conversation for those they feel more connected with.

MADELEINE THOMASDEC 18, 2015

(Photo: Edwin Butter/Shutterstock)

For some people, there is no more crippling fear than the art of making small talk. But perhaps casual banter isn't so scary after all, especially when

you think of it as an evolutionary tool inherited with our best interests at heart: to bring us closer together in the wild.

New research from Princeton University suggests humans' need for small talk may have evolved from our primate ancestors, who use call and response to bond with each other. According to the findings—published this month in *Animal Behaviour*—ringtailed lemurs reserve conversation for those they feel more connected with, just as humans do.

Throughout the study, the researchers studied the vocalizations and grooming networks of four ringtailed lemur groups living at Duke University's Lemur Center and on St. Catherine's Island in Georgia. Lemurs who groomed each other—already a selective bonding activity among primates—chit-chatted more often together, which continued strengthening their bond. Additionally, when recorded vocalizations of individual lemurs were played back to the entire group, lemurs only responded to the calls of the other lemurs they shared the closest bonds with.

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"[T]heir vocal exchanges displayed even higher levels of social selectivity," the researchers write. "Instead of exchanging vocalizations with each group

member they groomed, lemurs reserved their vocal responses mainly for the group members whom they had frequently groomed."

According to the study, such findings could help improve our understanding of how primate vocalizations evolved into human speech. Theories suggest speech evolved to replace grooming as a bonding experience. As primate groups grew in size and grooming became too time-consuming to accomplish among the entire group, speech developed as a more efficient means to communicate and express intimacy.

"Talking is a social lubricant, not necessarily done to convey information, but to establish familiarity," Asif Ghazanfar, one of the study's authors, said in a press release. "I think these vocalizations are equivalent to the chit-chat that we do. People think that conversations are like exchanging mini-lectures full of information. But most of the time we have conversations and forget them when we're done because they're performing a purely social function."

The researchers found that lemurs with the closest bonds also used call and response to keep tabs on the other while separated, like when foraging for food. In other words, we may have evolved to keep our friendships alive—whether you happen to be a lemur whose cohort is off searching for food, or a human with a pal just a phone call away.

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