

Mimicry and Prosocial Behavior

We are natural mimics. Why? The text observes that unconsciously mimicking others' behavior, postures, and voice tones helps us feel what they are feeling. In short, mimicry is part of empathy. The most empathic people mimic – and are liked – the most. Rick van Baaren and his colleagues have studied additional consequences of mimicry in an effort to learn more about its adaptive value. They wondered whether mimicry might foster prosocial behavior.

In their initial experiment, they asked research participants to react to a series of specific advertisements that were part of an ongoing marketing study. During the task, the experimenter mimicked the posture of half the participants, copying their body orientation (e.g., leaning forward), the position of their arms, and the position of their legs. The experimenter did not mimic the other half of the participants. After leaving the room to retrieve materials for the next part of the study, the experimenter returned and, upon passing a participant, “accidentally” dropped six pens that were on top of several papers. If the participants did not pick up the pens within 10 seconds, the experimenter picked them up herself. Results showed that participants in the mimicry condition were significantly more likely to help by picking up the pens.

To determine whether mimicry leads to a generally more prosocial orientation or whether it simply creates a special bond between the mimicker and the mimicked, van Baaren and his colleagues conducted a second study. The procedure was the same, except that a new experimenter entered the lab, presumably to administer the second part of the study. The first experimenter had already left the room when the second person arrived and proceeded to drop the pens. The mimicked participants were again more helpful. This finding suggests that mimicry can produce a diffuse prosocial orientation that transfers to other people.

In a third study, the researchers utilized a new dependent variable – monetary donations to CliniClowns, an organization that visited and entertained hospitalized children. Some research participants were mimicked; others were not. They were then ushered into another room by the same experimenter or by a new one. Explaining that the university was conducting research for CliniClowns, the experimenter asked the participants to complete a brief survey that included questions about the organization. Before leaving the room, she identified two padlocked boxes for placement of the questionnaires and, if the person chose, a donation to CliniClowns. (Earlier, the participants had been paid for participation in the study.) Again, the results indicated that the mimicked participants donated significantly more money in both the new- and the same-experimenter conditions.

In summary, these studies indicate that mimicry increases prosocial behavior that is not limited to the mimicker. The researchers suggest that mimicry may have general adaptive value by strengthening social bonds.

Social Exclusion and Mimicry

The text suggests that those most eager to fit in with a group are especially prone to unconscious mimicry. What about those who have experienced social exclusion? Are they more likely to mimic in an effort to meet their threatened need to belong?

Jessica Lakin and her colleagues note that social exclusion has devastating psychological, emotional, and behavioral consequences. Excluded individuals are strongly motivated to affiliate with others, even though they may have lost the resources to do so. In two studies, the research team explored whether nonconscious mimicry of other individuals might help excluded individuals address threatened belongingness needs.

In their first experiment, the researchers sought to determine whether excluded people were more likely than included people to mimic an interaction partner. Participants played online Cyberball with three confederates of the researchers. Participants in the inclusion condition received the ball as often as the other players. Those in the exclusion condition received the ball only at the beginning of the game and then were left out. Measures indicated that the manipulation successfully elicited feelings of exclusion. In a second task, both included and excluded people interacted with a female confederate, who steadily swung her foot throughout the interaction. Results indicated that excluded participants mimicked the partner more than did included participants.

In a second experiment, Lakin and her colleagues assessed whether individuals excluded by an ingroup selectively (and unconsciously) mimic a confederate who is an ingroup member more than a confederate who is an outgroup member. As the researchers explain, selective mimicry following exclusion would mean that mimicry is flexible and strategic despite the fact that it occurs without conscious awareness or intent.

In contrast to the first experiment, female participants were given information about the people who excluded them. In the “ingroup exclusion” condition, they knew that the other players were all females. In the “outgroup exclusion” condition, they knew all the other players were male. After playing Cyberball with either three males or three other females, the participants interacted with either a female (an ingroup member) or a male (an outgroup member) confederate of the experimenters. The researchers hypothesized that elevated mimicry would occur when the female participants were excluded by the ingroup (females) and the confederate in the second task was also a member of the ingroup (a female). The results clearly confirmed this hypothesis. Moreover, an independent analysis indicated that the need to belong rather than other needs, such as those for self-esteem, for meaning, or for personal control, was closely related to the increase in mimicry.

Lakin, J.L., Chartrand, T.L., & Arkin, R.M. (2008). I am too just like you: Nonconscious mimicry as an automatic behavioral response to social exclusion. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 19, 816-822.