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Does Mimicking Others Change Your Self-View?

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REPLICATIONS AND REFINEMENTS

Does Mimicking Others Change Your Self-View?

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ABSTRACT. Does mimicking affect the way you think about yourself in relation to other people? In the present study, we instructed participants to either mimic or not mimic the expressions of their interaction partner. After a 3-minute interaction, participants' self-view in relation to others was measured. Results revealed that mimickers defined themselves more in relation to others than nonmimickers. Thus, mimicking others, compared to not mimicking others, changes your self-view.

Keywords: mimicry, nonverbal behavior, prosocial, self-construal

PEOPLE MIMIC EACH OTHER'S behaviors, expressions, and postures. When emotional expressions of others are mimicked, the feedback of these activated muscles leads to experiencing the corresponding emotions (e.g., Hess, Kappas, McHugo, Lanzetta & Kleck, 1992). As a result, one *feels* the same emotions as the mimicked person, which leads to *behaving* more empathically (Stel, Van Baaren, & Vonk, 2008). Thus, mimicking makes you feel and act more empathic to others. But, does it also affect the way you think about yourself in relation to other people?

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Some people define themselves in relation to others (interdependent self-construal), whereas other people define themselves by their individual attributes or skills (independent self-construal). People who are being mimicked become more other-oriented in terms of their self-construal (Ashton-James, Van Baaren, Chartrand, Decety, & Karremans, 2007). It was argued that mimicked should become more other-oriented because being mimicked and interdependence have parallel consequences: Both increase the perception of affiliation and foster prosocial behaviors. This argument can be applied for mimickers as well: mimicking increases affiliation and prosocial behaviors (e.g., Stel, Van Baaren, et al., 2008). As interdependence also increases affiliation and prosocial behaviors (e.g., Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005), mimicking others and interdependence may be related. To date, this remains uninvestigated. In the present study we aimed to alleviate this deficit. We expected that mimickers define themselves more in terms of being related to others than nonmimickers.

Method

Participants and Design

Thirty-nine (23 female; age range: 17-28 years; mean age: 20.33 years) students at Leiden University participated for payment (€4). We used a two group (mimicking vs. no mimicking) between-participants design.

Procedure

Participants' interaction partner first watched a 5-minute fragment of Sophie's choice. In the mean time, half of the participants received instructions to imitate their interaction partners' facial expressions; the other half received instructions not to imitate.

Subsequently, in a 3-minute interaction, participants' interaction partner told the participant what was displayed on the video and how it made them feel; the participant could ask questions and either did or did not imitate their interaction partner. We have no reason to believe that participants did not carry out the instructions: Previous studies have shown that the instructions to mimic or not to mimic led to respectively more or less mimicry (Stel, Van Baaren, et al., 2008).

After the interaction, they each went to a different room. Then, self-construal was measured by asking participants to write down 20 statements, describing the self, starting with "I" (Twenty Statement Test of Kuhn & McPartland, 1954). Statements were coded as independent if it described a personal attribute (trait, ability, physical descriptor, or attitude) and as interdependent if it described a social role or relationship. The interrater reliability of two independent coders was .89.

Results

A single factor (mimicking vs. no mimicking) univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on the number of interdependent statements revealed that participants instructed to mimic reported more interdependent statements ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.86$) than participants instructed not to mimic ($M = 1.47$, $SD = 1.31$), $F(1, 37) = 6.09$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .14$.

Furthermore, an ANOVA on the number of independent statements showed that mimickers reported less independent statements ($M = 15.90$, $SD = 2.90$) than nonmimickers ($M = 17.58$, $SD = 1.87$), $F(1, 37) = 4.57$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .11$. There was no difference for statements not qualified as either interdependent or independent, $F < 1$ (overall $M = 1.03$, $SD = 2.61$).

Discussion

The present study demonstrated that mimicking, compared to not mimicking, another person's movements makes you view yourself as being more related to others in general.

A shortcoming of the present study is that we do not know whether the obtained results are due to mimicking increasing interdependence or to not mimicking decreasing interdependence. We expect that a control condition (i.e., a condition without instructions) would obtain similar results as the instructed mimicry condition. This is expected because without instructions, people engage in spontaneous mimicry (e.g., Dimberg, 1990). Furthermore, previous studies demonstrated that effects of spontaneous mimicry are equal to that of instructed mimicry (e.g., Stel, van den Heuvel, & Smeets, 2008).

Our results extend findings of Ashton-James et al. (2007) by demonstrating that as mimicees, mimickers defined themselves more in relation to others compared to nonmimickers. Moreover, in addition to findings that mimickers feel and act more empathic to others (e.g., Stel, Van Baaren, et al., 2008), we demonstrated that mimicking others, compared to not mimicking others, affects how we view ourselves in relation to other people.

AUTHOR NOTES

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