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When It's an Error to Mirror: The Surprising Reputational Costs of Mimicry

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Mimicry and imitation can facilitate cultural learning, maintenance of culture, and group cohesion (Churchland, 2011; Kashima, 2008; Kitayama & Cohen, 2007; Preston & de Waal, 2002; Tomasello, 1999). However, to obtain these benefits, individuals must competently select the appropriate models and actions to imitate (Gergely & Csibra, 2006; Mesoudi, 2009). Mimicry and imitation also play an important role in dyadic social interactions (Bernieri, 1988; Chartrand & van Baaren, 2009; Lakin & Chartrand, 2003). People mimic their partners' mannerisms, which increases rapport and the partners' liking of the mimickers; indeed, mimicry has been dubbed a form of "social glue" (Lakin, Jefferis, Cheng, & Chartrand, 2003). Although such dyadic mimicry is often unconscious, it is also selective and moderated by attitudes, liking, affiliation goals, and social membership; people may reduce their mimicry or even engage in antimimicry when interacting with a partner who represents an out-group, who has different goals, or whom they do not like well (Bourgeois & Hess, 2008; Likowski, Muehlberger, Seibt, Pauli, & Weyers, 2008; McIntosh, 2006; Stel et al., 2010).

Previous research has focused primarily on mimicry effects within the interacting dyad. Real-world social behavior, however, often occurs in the presence of other individuals. In that sense, mimicry is socially situated (Semin & Cacioppo, 2008). Dyadic mimicry can be observed by third-parties, and these observers can use it to form judgments about the interacting partners. As a result, such judgments may influence mimics' social reputations. With these considerations in mind, we asked whether mimicry unconsciously influences evaluations made by third-party observers. Critically, we predicted that observers would be sensitive to the appropriateness of individuals' mimicry. Our reasoning was that just as a competent learner will select the appropriate individuals and actions to imitate, a competent interaction participant will discriminate, often nondeliberatively, when to mimic and whom to mimic. Conversely, an incompetent individual may be indiscriminate or injudicious in his or her mimicry. An individual's selection of whom to mimic therefore has the potential to serve as a valuable source of information about that individual's characteristics. In particular, observers could judge people as less

competent if they mimic the wrong individual than if they do not mimic that individual. As a result, mimicry may have reputational costs that at times make not mimicking one's partner a superior social strategy.

To examine this possibility, we had subjects observe interactions in which individuals either did or did not mimic cordial or unfriendly models. We predicted that even without conscious awareness of mimicry, third-party observers would evaluate individuals who mimicked an unfriendly model as less competent than individuals who mimicked a cordial model. More important, we predicted the counterintuitive effect that mimicry would actually be costly—specifically, that people who mimicked an unfriendly model would be viewed as less competent than those who did not mimic that model.

Experiment 1

Participants were 83 University of California, San Diego (UCSD), undergraduates (60% females, 40% males; predominantly college juniors). Each subject evaluated two interviewees (always played by the same two confederates) in videotaped interviews (Fig. 1, left panel). A given subject saw the same interviewer (model) in both videos, and we manipulated the attitude of the interviewer between subjects. One group saw two videos featuring a cordial interviewer, and another group saw two videos featuring a condescending interviewer (these impressions were confirmed by pilot testing). Within subjects, we manipulated whether the interviewees mimicked the interviewer's mannerisms: One interviewee mimicked, and the other did not (confederates playing the interviewee were counterbalanced across mimicry conditions). Subjects rated the interviewees on the major dimensions of social judgment related

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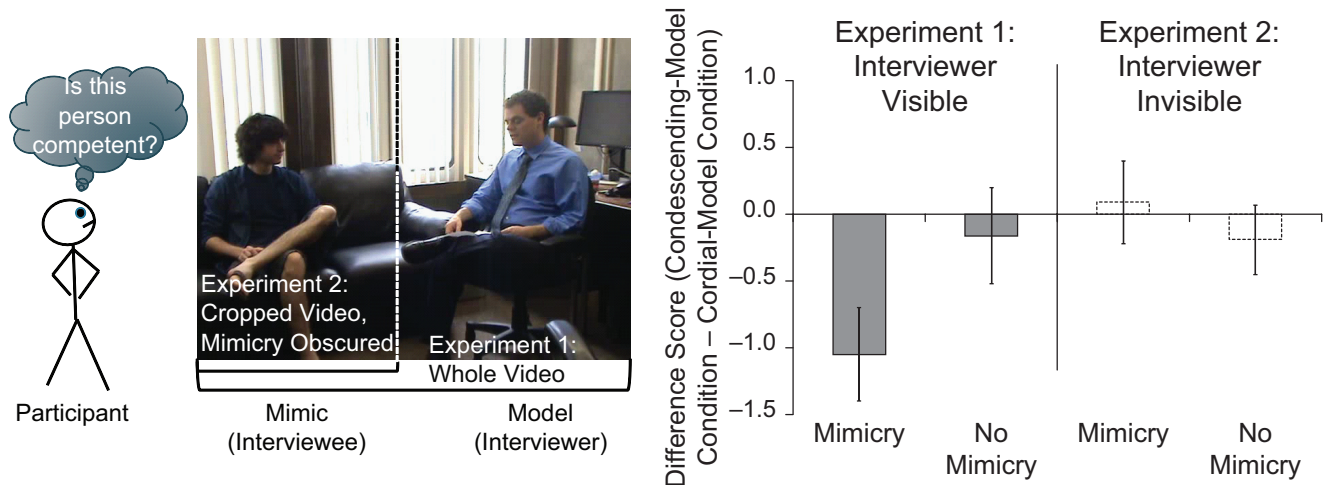


Fig. 1. Illustration of the experimental paradigm and experimental results. Subjects watched two videos, in each of which an interviewer (model) interacted with an interviewee. After each video, subjects rated the interviewee's competence, trustworthiness, and likeability. For each subject, one video showed a mimicking interviewee, and the other showed a nonmimicking interviewee. In Experiment 1, video frames were uncropped, so subjects could see the interviewer; in Experiment 2, video frames were cropped, so subjects could not see the interviewer, and mimicry was obscured. The interviewer's attitude varied between subjects; some subjects saw videos with a cordial interviewer, and other subjects saw videos with a condescending interviewer. The graph shows the difference in average competence ratings between the cordial- and condescending-model conditions as a function of whether or not the interviewee mimicked the interviewer, separately for Experiments 1 and 2. Error bars represent standard errors of the difference between conditions.

to competence and warmth (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005; Wojciszke, 2005). Specifically, using Likert-type scales from 1 through 9, participants rated the interviewees' competence (no particular aspect of competence was specified), as well as their trustworthiness and likeability, both of which have been the focus of past mimicry research. To ensure careful evaluation of the videos, we told subjects that the interviewees might later be their partners in an economic game. Postexperimental funnel debriefing revealed no awareness of the mimicry (Bargh & Chartrand, 2000).

We found the predicted two-way interaction of mimicry and model's attitude for the competence dimension only, $F(1, 81) = 4.91, p < .05$. This interaction was interpreted using simple-effects analyses. In the cordial-model condition, mimics were rated as nonsignificantly more competent than nonmimics (7.05 vs. 6.91), $t(42) < 1$. Critically, in the condescending-model condition, mimics were rated as *less* competent than nonmimics (6.00 vs. 6.75), $t(39) = 2.36, p < .05$. In addition, simple-effects analyses revealed that mimics were rated as significantly less competent in the condescending-model condition (6.00) than in the cordial-model condition (7.05; difference of -1.05 rating points), $t(81) = 3.03, p < .01$. For nonmimics, the difference in the competence ratings between the condescending-model condition (6.75) and the cordial-model condition (6.91) was nonsignificant (difference of -0.16), $t(81) = 0.44$. Figure 1 (right panel) illustrates this result by showing differences in average competence rating between the condescending-model and cordial-model conditions as a function of mimicry. As is evident in the figure, the mimic, but not the nonmimic, incurred interpersonal costs in the form of a lowered competence rating when interacting with a condescending, rather than cordial, interviewer.

Experiment 2

We wanted to ensure that the observed reputational costs were due to the actual mimicry of an inappropriate model, rather than the display of mannerisms themselves. Therefore, we repeated the experiment, but prevented the detection of mimicry by cropping the interviewer out of the videos (Fig. 1, left panel), retaining the complete sound tracks.

Participants were 147 UCSD undergraduates (75% females, 25% males; predominantly college juniors). As expected, interviewees who mimicked the interviewer received similar competence ratings in the condescending- and cordial-model conditions (6.47 vs. 6.38, respectively); the difference of 0.09 ratings points was nonsignificant. Similarly, nonmimicking interviewees received similar competence ratings in the condescending- and cordial-model conditions (7.14 vs. 7.33); the difference of -0.19 ratings points in this case was also nonsignificant. There was no interaction between model's attitude and mimicry, $F(1, 145) = 0.69, p = .41$. Difference scores (condescending-model condition minus cordial-model condition; see Fig. 1, right panel) illustrate that there were no costs of interacting with a condescending interviewer when mimicry was not visible. Notably, an analysis combining Experiments 1 and 2 yielded a three-way interaction among mimicry, model's attitude, and model's visibility, $F(1, 226) = 4.55, p < .05$.

Experiment 3

If mimicry of an unfriendly model signals lack of competence, this effect should be eliminated when the observer receives favorable information about the model. To test this prediction, we showed participants new videos portraying a cold and abrupt

interviewer (impressions were confirmed by pilot testing). In one video, the interviewer conversed with a mimicking interviewee, and in the other, he conversed with a nonmimicking interviewee. Prior to observing the videos, some participants read positive information about the interviewer—that he was engaged in humanitarian work. Among 103 participants (73% females, 27% males; predominantly college juniors) who were not given this information, the counterintuitive finding from Experiment 1 was replicated: The mimicking interviewee was rated as less competent than the nonmimic, $t(102) = 2.40, p < .05$. However, this difference disappeared among the 56 participants (66% females, 34% males; predominantly college juniors) who first read about the interviewer's humanitarian work ($t < 1$). Thus, as in Experiment 1, third-party judgments about the mimic were a function not only of mimicry per se, but also of perceptions of the model.

General Discussion

These results indicate that third-party observers make judgments about individuals' competence on the basis of their decisions concerning whether and whom to mimic. Contrary to the notion that mimicry is uniformly beneficial to the mimicker, people who mimicked an unfriendly model were rated as less competent than nonmimics. Thus, a positive reputation depends not only on the ability to mimic, but also on the ability to discriminate when *not* to mimic.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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