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Little chameleons: The development of social mimicry during early childhood



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ABSTRACT

Adults use behavioral mimicry to blend in with (or stand out from) their social environment. Adopting another's mannerisms and behaviors, or "mimicking", communicates liking and similarity between interaction partners and has been shown to serve as an implicit affiliation mechanism. Given this important social function, it is surprising that so little is known about the development of mimicry. In two studies, we investigated mimicry and its social sensitivity during early childhood. Children of 4 to 6 years (Study 1) and 3 years (Study 2) first chose a novel group based on their color preference. Following a baseline phase, children observed videos of in-group and out-group models performing behaviors that are typically mimicked in adults. Importantly, the children received neither instructions nor encouragement to copy the behaviors. Both 3-year-olds and 4- to 6-year-olds displayed behavioral mimicry. Furthermore, 4- to 6-year-olds mimicked the in-group model more than the out-group model, and this in-group bias was also evident in their explicit group preferences. Together, these studies present the first evidence for behavioral mimicry and its social sensitivity during early childhood. Placed in the context of social development, the findings provide a necessary contribution to current developmental and psychological theories on mimicry and behavior copying.

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Introduction

Just as chameleons change color to match their environment, humans adapt their behaviors to the specifics of an interaction (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999). One way this chameleon effect manifests itself is through behavioral mimicry, the copying of one another's postures, mannerisms, or behaviors. The extent to which mimicry occurs is a function of the social factors governing the interaction. Adults mimic individuals they like and, in turn, being mimicked leads to liking (Chartrand & Lakin, 2013; Lakin & Chartrand, 2013).

Correspondingly, mimicry can be used to pursue affiliation goals (Lakin & Chartrand, 2013) such as those deriving from an individual's need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In the context of social groups, people hold stronger affiliation goals for certain individuals, such as in-group members, than for others (Tajfel, 1974). Indeed, mimicry might be interpreted as communicating "I (am) like you" (Lakin, Chartrand, & Arkin, 2008), as exemplified in adult participants' mimicry of in-group but not out-group members (Yabar, Johnston, Miles, & Peace, 2006). An ostracism manipulation further demonstrates mimicry's affiliative message; being excluded by in-group members selectively increased participants' mimicry of in-group members (Lakin et al., 2008). Consequently, mimicry has been described as the social glue that bonds individuals, and hence groups, together (Lakin, Jefferis, Cheng, & Chartrand, 2003).

The importance of mimicry is also evident in its everyday presence, as shown in observational studies as well as in laboratory experiments (for a review, see Chartrand & Lakin, 2013). The automaticity of mimicry was demonstrated in a study in which participants mimicked the mannerisms of an individual they would later interact with even though they were observing her on what was known to be a one-way TV screen (Lakin & Chartrand, 2003). Likewise, in a virtual reality study, participants rated mimicking avatars as more realistic and social than non-mimicking avatars while unaware of the mimicry (Bailenson & Yee, 2005), indicating mimicry's commonplace presence in human behavior. Accordingly, deficits in mimicry have been found in several social disorders, including developmental disorders such as autism (Duffy & Chartrand, 2015; Hamilton, 2013). Taken together, one might expect social behavioral mimicry to be an essential factor in social development and, at least, an implicit indication of children's sensitivity to their social environment. Surprisingly, however, almost nothing is known about the development of mimicry in ontogeny.

Only a handful of studies have investigated behavioral mimicry during early childhood. The few studies that investigate social yawning suggest that children start mimicking yawns at around the age of 4 or 5 years (Anderson & Meno, 2003; Helt, Eigsti, Snyder, & Fein, 2010; Millen & Anderson, 2011). Importantly, however, studies often explicitly direct children's attention toward the yawns. This stands in contrast to adult studies in which the to-be-mimicked behaviors are not explicitly emphasized. Only one study has investigated children's mimicry in this way for a range of behaviors that are typically mimicked in adults (van Schaik, van Baaren, Bekkering, & Hunnius, 2013). In that study, 3-year-olds were first shown a video in which a model helped another person to get a toy or prevented the person from getting the toy. Subsequently, they observed videos in which the helper or hinderer performed typically mimicked behaviors. Results indicated that the children mimicked the models and did so equally across behavior types, including yawning and face rubbing. However, their mimicry was not affected by whether the model had helped or hindered (van Schaik et al., 2013). Thus, there is only limited evidence to suggest that young children mimic others' behaviors, and it is unknown whether their mimicry can be sensitive to social factors as is the case in adults.

To some extent, research on imitation can shed light on how social mimicry might develop. Yet, it is important to recognize that imitation differs from mimicry. Whereas imitation is often intentional and object or effect directed, mimicry involves behaviors that carry little meaning in themselves, such as bouncing one's foot, and generally occurs outside of the awareness of both the mimicker and the mimicked (Chartrand & van Baaren, 2009). As a result, the translation of findings from thorough and informative investigations of imitation development (e.g. Jones, 2007) to mimicry research is limited because often the behaviors involve exciting effects and infants are encouraged to produce the actions. Recent evidence, however, shows that young children's imitation, like mimicry in adults, is affected by wanting to communicate liking and similarity to the model and that imitation gains this social

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