



Short Communication

Impact of verbal mimicry on children's fruit consumption



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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that mimicking someone is a way for solicitors to be perceived more positively and to increase compliance with a helping request. The effect of mimicking on children and on compliance with a request for change in food consumption, however, has never been examined. Nine- and 11-year-old children ($N = 57$) were either mimicked or not by an instructor at the beginning of an interaction. Then, the children were asked to eat a piece of fruit in their afternoon snack for at least 1 week and to try not to eat candy or drink soda for at least 1 week. The results show that children who were mimicked by the instructor consumed more fruit in their afternoon snack and they did so for a longer period of time. Children who were mimicked also asked their parents to buy fruit, and they wanted to continue eating fruit in their afternoon snack. These changes in their fruit consumption were confirmed by their mother ($N = 25$). These results suggest that mimicry can influence child behavior and could be used to promote changes in eating behavior.

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1. Introduction

In most western countries, childhood obesity has increased considerably over the last four decades. In the United States, the rate of obesity prevalence among children from 6 to 11 years of age has increased from 4% in 1971 to 19% in 2012 (Dabrowska, 2014). In France, where this study was conducted, the prevalence of childhood and adolescent excess weight increased fivefold in half a century, from nearly 3% in 1965 to 16% now (Charles, 2007). It is well-known that obesity corresponds to an excessive increase of fat accumulation in the body, to such an extent that it may bring serious health problems. For children, as for adults, obesity is due to a sustained positive energy balance (i.e. calorie or energy intake exceeds expenditure). The reasons for obesity are multiple and intricate, and depend on complex nutritional, genetic, metabolic, psychological, and social influences (Poulain, 2000).

During the last decade, as excess weight became a national public health problem in France, the French National Health and Nutrition Program (PNNS) sought to promote new eating behaviors in children. The main goal of the PNNS was to induce children to increase their physical activities and to change some of their food habits and in particular, to increase their fruit and vegetable consumption and to decrease candy and soda consumption. In this study, congruent with one of the recommendations of the PNNS,

we tested a social influence technique in order to change children's perception and behaviors concerning fruit consumption on the one hand and to decrease their candy and soda consumption on the other. We sought to evaluate the effect of mimicry on compliance with requests for change in children's food habits.

2. Mimicry as a social influence tool in social interaction

Mimicry, also called "the chameleon effect" (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999), refers to the imitation of people's facial expressions, postures, and mannerisms, but also of their verbal messages and expressions. Research on this topic has focused on how mimickers are perceived by the individuals being mimicked and how mimicry could influence the behavior of the persons who are mimicked.

Several studies have consistently shown that individuals perceive people who mimic them positively. In the seminal experimental work on this topic, Maurer and Tindall (1983) asked a counselor to mimic a client's arm and leg positions and reported that mimicry enhanced the client's opinion of the counselor's level of empathy far more than in a control condition where the counselor was instructed not to mimic the client. Chartrand and Bargh (1999) observed that participants who were mimicked by a confederate reported liking that confederate more than those participants who were not mimicked. In a selling field situation, Jacob, Guéguen, Martin, and Boulbry (2011) reported that salespeople who were instructed to mimic some of the verbal expressions and nonverbal behavior of their customers during the sales process were evaluated by the customers as being more pleasant,

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friendly, and competent. During speed-dating sessions, Guéguen (2009) instructed women to mimic or not the verbal content of the messages sent by the men with whom they were interacting for 10 min. It was found that men who were mimicked evaluated women more positively than those who were not mimicked.

If mimicry has been correlated with greater liking and a greater feeling of affiliation towards the mimickers, studies have also shown that mimicry influences people's behavior toward the mimicker. Van Baaren, Holland, Steenaert, and van Knippenberg (2003) instructed a waitress in a restaurant to repeat exactly the order given by the patrons, or not. They then observed an increase in the size of the tips left by the customers to the mimicking waitress. Similarly, Van Baaren, Holland, Kawakami, and van Knippenberg (2004) reported that participants who had previously been mimicked by a confederate offered help more often when the confederate "accidentally" dropped pens on the floor. In other studies, when an explicit request for help was addressed (e.g. asking a student participant for written feedback about a student-confederate's essay or asking for directions in the street), more compliance with the request was observed when the participants had previously been mimicked by the confederate (Fischer-Lokou, Martin, Guéguen, & Lamy, 2011; Guéguen, Martin, & Meineri, 2011; Kulesza, Dolinski, Huisman, & Majewski, 2014). In a business situation, Jacob et al. (2011) reported that customers in a store complied more readily with the sales clerk's suggestions during the sales process after being mimicked. Similarly, Kulesza, Szymowska, Jarman, and Dolinski (2014) observed that female customers in a cosmetics shop spent more money when a female sales clerk mimicked them.

Preference for a product is also influenced by mimicry. Tanner, Ferraro, Chartrand, Bettman, and van Baaren (2008) instructed a confederate to mirror participants' mannerisms while the latter were tasting a new beverage; those participants who were mimicked consumed more of the tested product and expressed more likelihood of buying it than those who were not mimicked during the presentation of the product. Research has also shown that behavioral mimicry can facilitate the outcome of business negotiations. It has been demonstrated that mimicry facilitates a negotiator's ability to uncover underlying compatible interests and increases the likelihood of closing a deal in a negotiation where a prima facie solution was not possible (Fischer-Lokou, Guéguen, Lamy, Martin, & Bullock, 2014; Maddux, Mullen, & Galinsky, 2008).

3. Purpose of the study and hypothesis

The reviewed literature on mimicry has indicated that mimicking people's verbal and nonverbal behavior led them to perceive the mimicker more positively and to comply more readily with a request addressed by the mimicker.

Several objectives were pursued in this study. First, we wanted to examine whether mimicry had an effect on children. All the studies reported above used adult mimickers and adult participants, and to our knowledge, the chameleon effect has never been examined with children. Second, and most importantly, whereas research has shown that mimicry increases immediate compliance with a request addressed by a mimicker, the long-term effect of mimicking has never been studied. We wondered whether mimicry would also increase people's motivation to comply with a request over a long period of time. Third, we observed that the effect of mimicry on people's health behavior has never been examined in previous studies. Hence, we wished to investigate the effect of adult mimicry on children when asking children to adopt the two important recommendations of the PNNS in the fight against childhood obesity, namely increasing fruit and vegetable consumption on the one hand and decreasing candy

and soda consumption on the other. These three aspects of the effect of mimicry were examined in this study in which 9- to 11-year-old children were either mimicked or not by an instructor in the first part of their interaction. Then, children were asked to increase their fruit consumption and to reduce their candy and soda consumption for at least 1 week. It was hypothesized that mimicry would enhance the children's compliance with the instructor's request.

4. Methods

4.1. Participants

Our study was conducted with 58 children enrolled in CM1 and CM2 classes (corresponding to Years 5 and 6 in the United Kingdom, Grades 4 and 5 in the United States). There were almost as many boys ($N = 30$) as girls ($N = 28$) in each experimental condition. We chose to exclude one child from the statistical analysis because his interview lasted nearly 30 min (15 min longer than the other interviews), and we consequently chose to ignore the questionnaire completed by this child. We also asked their parents to complete a questionnaire. However, nearly half of the questionnaires were either not delivered or misidentified by the teacher. A total of 29 parents received a questionnaire, but only 25 completed and returned it.

4.2. Procedure

A between participants design was used in this experiment whereby we manipulated two different experimental conditions (mimicry/no mimicry) and we evaluated how the experimental conditions influenced eating behavior and judgment.

This study was approved by the ethical comity of our laboratory. Before beginning the experiment, three female students in social and educational sciences, chosen to act as instructors, were carefully trained and observed while participating in a pretest performed in a school that was not the one chosen for the experiment. In the selected school, children were randomly distributed into two groups. Each child was interviewed for about 15 min; the instructors and the children were alone in a separate room near the children's classroom. The experiment was presented as a study on children's food tastes, preferences, and habits. This topic was used because it is easy, non-problematic, and generally leads children to respond willingly to an interviewer's questions.

The interview process was broken down into three stages. During the first stage, the instructor told the children that she was trying to understand what they ate in the school canteen or at home and what they liked or disliked. There were a number of questions concerning the children's food consumption habits (e.g. the names of their favorite vegetables, the names of their least favorite meals, their preferred afternoon snack). This step was a pretext to manipulate the experimental conditions. In this study, we used the method of mimicry employed by Van Baaren et al. (2003), which involved repeating literally what the participant said to the experimenter. In our study, the instructor was instructed to either mimic the children's responses throughout the interview or not at all. In the mimicry condition, the instructor was instructed to mimic verbal behavior by literally repeating some of the words, verbal expressions, or statements used by the children. For example, if a child said, "Yuck... I don't like spinach at the canteen" or "I love oranges," the interviewer was instructed to repeat these words when noting down the response. The instructor was also instructed to mimic the tone of the children's verbal response. In the non-mimicry condition, she simply said, "Okay. I note this" with a neutral tone and wrote the response on a form.

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