FlashReport

The tongue-tied chameleon: The role of nonconscious mimicry in the behavioral confirmation process

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Interviewer tone was manipulated and applicant tone and performance were measured.
- Mimicry of tone of voice information occurred during a dyadic interaction.
- Performance suffered for applicants with a negative-toned interviewer.
- The effect of interviewer tone on applicant performance was mediated by tone mimicry.
- Behavioral confirmation may occur through the process of nonconscious mimicry.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The current study examines whether mimicry of negative behaviors occurs in ongoing social interactions, and whether mimicry may be a process through which one person's negative expectations lead to another person's expectancy-consistent behaviors. Using a simulated phone interview, applicant participants heard questions from an interviewer in either a neutral or negative tone of voice. Audio-recordings of applicant responses were transcribed to remove all tone information, and coders assessed applicant performance. Audio-recordings were subjected to a low-pass filter to remove recognizable words but retain vocal tone, and different coders assessed applicant tone of voice. Evidence of both behavioral mimicry and expectancy-consistent performance was found. Importantly, interviewer tone had a significant indirect effect on applicant performance through its influence on applicant tone. Nonconscious behavioral mimicry of negative behaviors occurs in social interactions, is not always associated with positive outcomes, and serves as a process through which behavioral confirmation can occur.

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People's behaviors are intertwined during social interactions. For example, nonverbal behaviors may be unwittingly imitated due to nonconscious behavioral mimicry (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999), or expectations may be communicated through nonverbal behaviors and elicit expectancy-consistent performance through behavioral confirmation (Snyder, 1992). In the current research, we propose that these processes are intimately connected. Specifically, a perceiver's negative expectancy-driven behavior may be inadvertently mimicked by a target, leading to behavioral confirmation.

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Nonconscious mimicry

Nonconscious mimicry occurs when a target inadvertently reciprocates a perceiver's behavior with an identical or similar behavior. Mimicry of neutral and positive behaviors occurs regularly (Chartrand & Lakin, 2013; Lakin, 2013), but less research has explored whether negative nonverbal behaviors are mimicked, particularly those that occur during ongoing social interactions. People mimic angry facial expressions at a muscular level when they are exposed to pictures of them (e.g., Dimberg, Thunberg, & Elmehed, 2000) and imitate a negative tone of voice when repeating text they heard in a negative tone (Neumann & Strack, 2000). However, negative facial expressions (e.g., frowns and anger expressions) are mimicked less than other facial expressions when watching videotapes (Estow, Jamieson, & Yates, 2007) or not at all in dyadic interactions (Hess & Bourgeois, 2010). People may even implicitly understand that mimicking the negative behaviors of others in social interactions is problematic (as evidenced by their negative evaluations of someone who does; Kavanagh, Suhler,

Churchland, & Winkielman, 2011). Therefore, one question the current research explores is whether people mimic negative nonverbal behaviors that occur during ongoing social interactions. Some research suggests that this might occur, but social interactions involve demands and self-presentational goals that may inhibit mimicry of negative behaviors (Johnston, 2002).

A provocative second question that is explored in this research is whether mimicry of negative behaviors in expectancy-tinged social interactions can lead to negative consequences. Mimicry of neutral and positive behaviors typically has positive consequences (e.g., Lakin, Chartrand, & Arkin, 2008; van Baaren, Holland, Kawakami, & van Knippenberg, 2004; although see Stel, van Dijk, & Olivier, 2009, and Stel et al., 2010, for counterexamples), but mimicry of expectancy-tinged negative behaviors may have adverse consequences. The goal to affiliate is a strong motivator of mimicry behavior (Lakin & Chartrand, 2003). Thus, in interactions where affiliation needs are salient (e.g., interview situations), it is possible that people will mimic their partner's behaviors even if that mimicry may not be in their best interests (see Leander, Chartrand, & Wood, 2011, for a conceptually related idea using a paradigm where participants themselves were mimicked and conformed to self-stereotypes).

Behavioral confirmation

The self-fulfilling prophecy has been demonstrated in various interactions (Neuberg, 1989; Reich, 2004; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) and may occur without perceivers' or targets' awareness or intention (Chen & Bargh, 1997; Snyder & Stukas, 2007). It occurs when perceivers form expectations about interaction partners, treat their targets in expectancy-congruent ways, and targets unwittingly behave in ways that confirm perceivers' expectations (Darley & Fazio, 1980; Miller & Turnbull, 1986).

Perceivers elicit expectancy-consistent behavior from targets by varying affective climate, effort expended, feedback, and opportunities to respond (Rosenthal, 1994, 2002). Consequently, expectancy mediation research has documented overt and subtle perceiver behaviors (step 2) that mediate the effects of perceivers' expectancies (step 1) on targets' performances (step 3). For example, negative perceiver expectancies lead to negative tone of voice (Blanck & Rosenthal, 1984), reduced warmth (Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977), and increased interpersonal distance (Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974), which in turn affect target performance.

Mediation of expectancy effects is still an active research question (Jussim & Harber, 2005). In our view, the most interesting theoretical gap may lie *between* the second and third steps of the behavioral confirmation process: the path through which perceivers' biased behaviors elicit expectancy-consistent target behaviors. There are two known processes through which this may occur, and we propose a third. First, perceivers' behaviors impose situational constraints and targets offer situationally constrained responses (Neuberg, 1989). Second, perceivers' behaviors are interpreted consciously by targets, and targets decide consciously to respond in kind (Darley & Fazio, 1980). A third possibility is that perceivers' expectancy-congruent behaviors are perceived by targets, who then unknowingly engage in identical behaviors through the automatic process of behavioral mimicry. Engagement in mimicry has not been examined as a mediator of behavioral confirmation, despite its compatibility with the commonly accepted notion that targets "unwittingly" alter their behavior in response to perceivers' behaviors.

Nonconscious behavioral mimicry as a vehicle for behavioral confirmation

When perceivers hold negative expectations for targets, the nonverbal behaviors they display reflect that negativity (Snyder & Stukas, 2007). Targets may perceive and inadvertently mimic those behaviors.

The negative behaviors displayed by the targets may then confirm the perceivers' negative expectations. Thus, mimicry may be a process through which perceivers' expectancy-congruent behaviors elicit targets' expectancy-confirming performance. This study investigates this possibility.

Specifically, we examine whether mimicry of negative behaviors occurs in a social interaction, the consequences of mimicking a negative behavior, and whether mimicry explains how perceivers' expectancy-congruent behaviors elicit expectancy-confirming behaviors from targets. In a simulated phone interview (Neuberg, 1989; Reich, 2004), participants applied for a hypothetical job. Similar to Word et al. (1974), we manipulated interviewers' expectancy-relevant behaviors rather than expectancies by asking participants scripted questions delivered in a negative or neutral tone of voice. Participants' answers were recorded and coded. Manipulation of perceivers' expectancy-relevant behaviors allowed us to control the behaviors available to be mimicked by targets, follow procedures typically used in mimicry studies, and clearly test our hypotheses about mediation.

We predicted that applicants who heard negatively toned questions would perform worse and use a more negative tone of voice than would applicants who heard neutrally toned questions. Additionally, the relationship between interviewer tone of voice and applicants' performance should be mediated by applicants' tone of voice. Applicants should shift their tone to match the interviewer's tone, and this shift should account for the effects of interviewer tone on applicants' overall interview performance.

Methods

Participants

Fifty-four undergraduates participated for course credit. To control for potential sex effects (Karremans & Verwijmeren, 2008), only women participated.

Procedure

Pilot study

To validate the tone manipulation, each recorded question was rated by 15 participants on the dimensions of enthusiastic/bored, positive/negative, and warm/cold, using 7-point scales. All items showed a similar and significant pattern. On three-item indices (Cronbach's α = .96, neutral; .98, negative), participants rated the negative-tone questions ($M = 5.02$, $SD = .86$) as more negative, more cold, and less enthusiastic than the neutral-tone questions ($M = 3.51$, $SD = .72$), $t(14) = 11.93$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.9$. Speech rate did not differ between conditions.

Main study

Participants completed a short questionnaire about job-relevant experiences in a cubicle with a computer and phone. They were asked to present this information before the interview, which would help the interviewer select questions. To motivate performance, the experimenter explained that the best applicant would receive $50 rather than being "hired." Participants then read a job description for a student manager position at a campus travel agency and prepared for 10 minutes.

An initial neutral-tone audio file prompted participants to begin their introductory speech, which served as baseline data for tone of voice and qualifications and a source to which participants could attribute the treatment they received from the interviewer. The experimenter then played the recorded questions, adding appropriate pauses, coughing, and breathing sounds to enhance realism. Participants were randomly assigned to hear the same female interviewer ask the same 11 questions in either a neutral or negative tone of voice. Following the interview, participants completed another questionnaire and were funnel debriefed.