

Psychologists warn therapists to use caution when mirroring patient actions or words

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Mirroring one's actions or using their own words has been known to establish and strengthen social relationships. In fact, many of us do this unintentionally when we wish to bond with someone or feel that we

belong.

This method—also referred to as [mimicry](#)—has long also been used in psychotherapy to get closer to patients and better understand their feelings, in addition to relieving [negative emotions](#), including anxiety and depression, where these may also have been triggered by a feeling of guilt.

However, a recent research study from Poland, published by the research team of Paweł Muniak and Prof Dr. Wojciech Kulesza at the SWPS University in Warsaw, [published](#) in the open-access journal *Social Psychological Bulletin*, reported quite surprising findings relevant to previous assumptions and their practical implementations. After a series of surveys, it turned out that when mimicked, most of the participants felt even more guilt.

Traditionally, guilt has been a topic of great interest to social psychologists. According to psychology, guilt is when people believe they have violated an internalized moral or ethical norm and, as a result, feel responsible for their actions. In turn, this emotion has been known to negatively affect a person's well-being, as it leads to conditions such as anxiety, depression and self-punishment, while also decreasing motivation and self-esteem.

Even though guilt is considered to be of double nature, as it may also motivate a person to take responsibility, make amends, repair damages and prevent errors in the future, the team points out that its negative outcomes are still of major concern among psychotherapists looking to help their patients. This is how the team decided to study mimicking—or what some like to call "the social glue"—in the context of feelings of guilt, and explore further its potential applications in practice.

Thus, the research team conducted a series of six surveys. In three of the

surveys they would instill a feeling of guilt in the participants by leading them to believe they have made an error while filling out the questionnaire, thus causing the experimenters to lose their work. In the other three surveys, the researchers had the participants recall a real-life situation where they had experienced a feeling of guilt.

Then, the participants would participate in what they believed to be a separate study, where they would be interviewed about an unrelated topic, namely, the education system in Poland. During these interviews, the participants would either have their actions mimicked or not, whereas in some studies, they would have only their actions copied by the interviewer; in others—only their words; and in yet another, they would be mirrored both verbally and non-verbally. At the end, the researchers checked whether the feeling of guilt had increased or decreased after the interview.

Interestingly, while the researchers expected that the participants who were mimicked would experience relief of their guilt because of the social bonding mechanism at play, they found the contrary: The participants whose actions or words were replicated by the interviewer demonstrated significantly increased feelings of guilt afterwards.

However, in the groups where the interviewers would emulate the participants both verbally and non-verbally, there was small to no effect on the feelings of guilt. Here, the scientists assume, the participants might have experienced too much mimicry: a phenomenon that—according to previous research—might easily backfire.

While the researchers acknowledge that their actual results did not confirm their original theory, and that it might be exactly because of the social bonding mechanism of mimicry that the participants experienced amplified feelings of guilt, as they were motivated to make amends for their actions and strengthen their social relationship, the research team

point out an important implication of their findings for the practice of psychotherapists.

"Tips for therapists emphasize the [positive outcomes](#) associated with the use of mimicry in therapeutic processes. However, the results of this study suggest that the situation is more complex than initially thought," they say.

"On the one hand, utilizing mimicry during psychological care may allow professional personnel to gain a deeper insight into the client's problem and establish stronger rapport. On the other hand, this study revealed that mimicry can also intensify feelings of [guilt](#). Therefore, therapists may need to carefully consider the potential benefits and drawbacks of using mimicry in therapy and adapt their approach accordingly."

More information: Paweł Muniak et al, The impact of mimicry behavior on guilt, *Social Psychological Bulletin* (2024). [DOI: 10.32872/spb.12697](#)

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