

I can, automatically, become just like you

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No one likes to be excluded from a group: exclusion can decrease mood, reduce self-esteem and feelings of belonging, and even ultimately lead to negative behavior (e.g., the shootings at Virginia Tech). As a result, we often try to fit in with others in both conscious and automatic ways.

Psychologists Jessica L. Lakin of Drew University, Tanya L. Chartrand of Duke University, and Robert M. Arkin of The Ohio State University studied people's tendency to copy automatically the behaviors of others in order to find out how this mimicry can be used as an affiliation strategy.

In one experiment, participants played an online ball-tossing game with three other computer players, and were either excluded or included in the game. After reporting their enjoyment of the game and what they thought of the other players, participants were asked to describe a photograph to a female confederate who constantly moved her foot, but not enough so that it was consciously noticed by the participant. The researchers hypothesized that participants in the excluded condition would move their foot more to match the confederate.

In the next experiment, the procedure was kept mostly the same. This time, however, all of the participants were female. They were excluded from either a group of males or females during the ball-tossing game and interacted with either a male or female confederate during the photo description task. Participants were also questioned more thoroughly on how they felt after the game, such as how much they felt they belonged to the group. The researchers predicted that if the female participants

were ostracized by females and later interacted with a female confederate, then they would mimic the confederate more than other participants.

The results, appearing in the August issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, provided strong support for the researchers' hypotheses. In the first experiment, participants who had been excluded from the game mimicked the confederate during the second task more than other participants. In the second experiment, participants excluded by members of their own sex mimicked a confederate of the same sex more than participants in other conditions. There was also an inverse relationship between feelings of belonging and nonconscious mimicry.

The study suggests that although nonconscious mimicry is an automatic action, it is still influenced by a variety of factors, such as situation and the target of the affiliation.

"People whose need to belong is threatened do not necessarily mimic the first person they see; they take into account aspects of the situation and act accordingly, all unconsciously," the authors conclude.

"Conceptualized this way, automatic mimicry is certainly a useful addition to the human behavioral repertoire."

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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