



RECOGNIZE GENUINE MIMICRY AND CONTAGION

Introduction:

This section of the course focuses on the sharing of affect and behavior through mimicry, affective contagion and behavioral contagion. The following excerpts of the *Mastering Mentalization Series* chapter *Embodied Sharing of Affect and Behavior*, relate to these aspects of mentalization:

Embodied sharing of affect and behavior concerns the primitive tendency to synchronize our affect and behavior with our social environment. This sharing of affect and behavior with others is brought about through mimicry, and the associated conveyance of affect and behavior - also referred to as affective and behavioral contagion.

The sharing of experiences through mimicry, affective contagion and behavioral contagion provides a starting point for the recognition of mental states, and helps us to form connections with others. Affect and behavior are often shared subconsciously. At a subconscious level, the tendency to synchronize affect and behavior does not involve any differentiation between self and others. In other words, we experience the shared affect and behavior as though they originated within ourselves. This can lead to confusion, since we do not automatically consider the possibility that our own affects and behaviors actually originated with others. When we are not aware of this third-party influence, we miss the opportunity to gain insight into the mental states of others. On the other hand, if we are aware of this tendency, we can regulate the degree to which we are influenced by it. We are able to separate our own affects and behaviors from those of others, and mentalize more effectively about others. Let us take a look at what mimicry, affective contagion and behavioral contagion entail.



“Mimicry” is the action or skill of imitating someone or something. It covers a wide spectrum of different reactions (facial, verbal, emotional and behavioral) through which we imitate others. We mimic others predominantly through our personal interactions with them. We can, however, also mimic others as a result of looking at a picture of them. The imitative behavior of mimicry facilitates the learning of new behaviors and skills from others. Moreover, it helps to strengthen our connection with others, as it is done, for the most part, with affiliative intent. Most important, mimicry functions as a source of social information from which we can infer mental states.

“Affective contagion” is a form of social contagion involving the spontaneous embodiment of emotions and related behaviors of others. It often starts with mimicry, followed by sensory feedback via our interoceptive system that associates the most likely affect to the behavior. “Interoception” is the perception of stimuli coming from within the body such as heart palpitations, hunger, or stomach-ache. Interoceptive sensitivity, awareness and accuracy in social situations can be referred to as “social interoception” (Arnold et al., 2019). The process of social interoception has a predictive component as the gathering of social signals and cues through our sensory feedback adds significant power to our ability to infer mental states. This aspect of social interoception is described by Barrett et al. (2016) as “predictive interoceptive coding.” Unlike the temporary behavioral response associated with mimicry, the emotion, feeling, or mood elicited by affective contagion can persist even after the triggering event has passed. Moreover, the same affect can resurface if we later find ourselves in similar circumstances. With affective contagion, affects are transferred not only by direct interaction with, and observation of, other people, as is the case with mimicry, but also via third-party accounts, or triggered memories of an event. Affective states can also be transmitted by music, pictures, or movies. Affective contagion can manifest itself in two ways: first, as a “similar response” – for example, aggression by one person triggers aggression in another, and second, as a “complementary response” – for example, the display of anger by one person triggers a fearful response in another. The potential for alternate responses illustrates another key difference between mimicry and affective contagion. Like mimicry, affective contagion is so prevalent in our social environment that it provides valuable fodder for mentalizing, particularly when it comes to recognizing affective states. Affective contagion may even be superior to mimicry in facilitating emotion recognition, as it actually leads to a shared subjective state. Hatfield et al. (1994) even went so far as to propose that “to gain the best insight into another person’s affective state one might better focus on one’s own feelings than to try to infer it via reasoning.” Next, we explore behavioral contagion.



“Behavioral contagion” is the subconscious, spontaneous, unsolicited and uncritical adoption of the behavior of other people. Similar to affective contagion, it is often elicited through mimicry, and the effects can last well beyond the triggering behavior. As with affective contagion, behaviors are transferred not only by direct interaction with other people, but also via third-party accounts or depictions, or triggered memories of an event. Even putting on clothes that have a particular social meaning, such as a police officer’s uniform, can make a person behave (and feel) in a manner consistent with someone who needs to wear such attire for work. Behavioral contagion can operate as a powerful social influence. Adopting the communication style of a person you admire when addressing others is another example of behavioral contagion. Analogous to affective contagion, behavioral contagion can influence a person to display similar behavioral patterns, or complementary (opposite) behavioral patterns. For instance, dressing in a certain way may induce a similar clothing style preference in others that “infectiously” spreads through the population. Alternatively, when one party dresses in a certain way, the other party may choose to accentuate a different clothing style preference as a reaction to the other. This is an example of a complementary response. When dealing with someone we dislike, our natural inclination is to behave in a complementary way so as to socially distance ourselves from them. Behavior that we adopt through behavioral contagion often informs others about mental states that are linked to these behaviors, such as a particular belief indicated by the rituals of others that we imitate.

Why is it important to make a distinction between, mimicry, affective contagion and behavioral contagion? Mimicry, affective contagion and behavioral contagion serve different goals. Mimicry helps build rapport and smooth social interaction. Additionally, it is an essential ability for caregivers as children learn about their affective expressions through the mimicking behavior of their caregivers. Affective contagion shapes shared emotional climates. It is how moods spread in groups or relationships. You don’t just copy people’s affective expression, you actually feel what they feel. Behavioral contagion is signaling similarity and belonging, it can be used to connect with people and to socially distance by refraining from taking on the behavior of others.

The distinction between these three modes of embodied sharing of affect and behavior is important, for instance, in psychology and therapy. Therapists use mimicry intentionally to foster trust and show empathy, but they must guard against emotional contagion that could lead to burnout or problematic countertransference—a therapist’s unconscious redirection of their own feelings, unresolved issues and past experiences onto a patient. In relation to behavioral contagion, when a therapist consistently uses self-deprecating humor to defuse discomfort the client may imitate that coping style.



In leadership or teamwork, mimicry can enhance liking and cooperation, while affective contagion can spread stress or positivity through an entire group. As an example of behavioral contagion, a manager may respond to every email instantly and her team members start doing the same.

As mentioned in the excerpt, complementary reactions can occur when an “infected” individual responds to another person's emotional and behavioral expressions with a different affective and behavioral reaction. These automatic reactions can either be healthy and supportive or unhealthy and escalate the situation. A complementary response can be healthy when it helps balance or regulate another person’s emotional state—such as responding with calmness when someone expresses fear. It becomes unhealthy when the automatic reaction is negative, inauthentic, or exaggerated to the extent that it isn’t the same emotion—like responding with submissiveness to someone displaying dominance or reacting to someone’s happiness with forced excitement.

In sum, mimicry reflects a mental disposition to cooperate and establish social connection, contagion entails the involuntary absorption of the mental states of others manifested in their behavior, either as similar behavior or as a complementary response.

Below is a schematic overview of the differences between the three modes of mimicking behavior:

Mimicry	Affective contagion	Behavioral contagion
<i>Conscious or unconscious mimicking of affective expressions and nonaffective behavior of others</i>	<i>Can start with mimicry, embodiment lasts longer and can be induced through other aspects such as a person’s music selection. Complementary (opposite, inauthentic, exaggerated) behavior is possible.</i>	<i>Can start with mimicry, embodiment lasts longer and can be induced through other aspects such as a person’s music selection. Complementary (opposite, inauthentic, exaggerated) behavior is possible.</i>
To reflect the mental states of others back for instance to empathize accurately, and/or to create rapport.	Involuntary absorption of mental states of others. Can be consciously used to set the mood.	Involuntary absorption of mental states of others. At times used to indicate the wish to affiliate or socially distance from others.

Figure 1. Schematic overview different modes of mimicking behavior.



Mimicry and contagion are often confused with other behavior that appears to be similar. With regard to “**mimicry**,” there are situations where two or more people display the same emotion or behavior, but not on account of mimicry. For instance, when two or more people witness a car accident, they may experience the same emotion (distress) and act in the same way (interrupt what they were doing and focus on the accident), a “**parallel elicitation**” of affect and behavior rather than a form of mimicry.

Alternatively, a person may use the emotional or behavioral expression of another person as a guide for appropriate action in a particular social situation, a mechanism known as “**social referencing**.”

The term “**mirroring**” (the exact copying of another’s affective expression or behavior) is often used interchangeably with mimicry, but mirroring does not encompass the full breadth of mimicry. Mimicry, unlike mirroring, can include variations of the original behavior. Mimicry is sometimes purposely exaggerated and used as a form of ridicule.

In the case of “**imitation**,” the behavior is done on a conscious level and often not synchronized with the person we imitate. Another difference between mimicry and imitation lies in the motivation and intent behind why we mimic others. When we imitate others, we might copy their behavior simply to try something new. Mimicry, on the other hand, is generally applied unconsciously and immediately. Moreover, mimicry helps to strengthen our connection with others, as it is done, for the most part, with affiliative intent. Most important, mimicry functions as a source of social information from which we can infer mental states.

“**Affective**” and “**behavioral contagion**” are forms of social contagion involving the spontaneous embodiment of emotions and behaviors of others. Although not considered to be a form of mimicry, affective and behavioral contagion often start with mimicry.

Learning goals:

This exercise helps you to gain a clear understanding of the different ways that people can act in a similar fashion and to determine whether the imitative (affective) behavior is a form of mimicry, affective contagion, or behavioral contagion, and whether it is done on a conscious or subconscious level. The goals of this exercise section are:

1. **Encourage critical thinking about social behavior:** Foster thoughtful evaluation of why people behave similarly and what mechanisms drive those behaviors.



2. **Identify different types of mimicking behavior:** Enable participants to assess whether imitative behaviors occur consciously or subconsciously, and how intention influences social behavior.
3. **Differentiate types of imitative behavior:** Learn to clearly distinguish between mimicry, affective contagion, and behavioral contagion by recognizing their defining features.
4. **Promote insight into social influence:** Encourage reflection on how social environments shape individual actions, emotions and responses.

Challenges you might face during the exercises:

1. The different types of behavior listed above often look very similar on the surface. Distinguishing among them requires careful analysis of intent, emotional involvement and context, which is not always obvious.
2. You cannot directly know another person's thoughts or emotions. Determining whether behavior is driven by conscious choice or subconscious processes involves inference rather than certainty.
3. A single behavior can involve multiple processes at once (e.g., subconscious mimicry leading to emotional alignment). This overlap makes clear categorization difficult.
4. Many imitative behaviors occur automatically, without awareness. Recognizing subconscious actions—especially in oneself—can be particularly difficult.
5. People often assume shared behaviors imply shared intentions or emotions, which can lead to misinterpretation and oversimplification.
6. Social, cultural and situational factors influence how behaviors are expressed and interpreted, complicating consistent classification.



Observation exercise: Is it mimicry, affective contagion, behavioral contagion., or...

As previously mentioned, there tends to be some confusion regarding what mimicry and contagion are, and what they are not. This exercise helps you to develop a clear understanding of imitative behavior, particularly how people can display similar actions or emotions for different underlying reasons.

Read the scenarios on the following pages and decide whether the characters display a form of mimicry, affective or behavioral contagion, imitation, mirroring, parallel elicitation, or social referencing (several options are possible). The answers are given at the end of the assignment.



Scenario 1.

It is Friday night and Jan and Jill just bought tickets at their favorite movie theater. The movie they are going to watch is a comedy. The movie turns out to be exceptionally funny and together with their fellow movie goers, they constantly break out in loud laughter.

This is a form of ...

- Mimicry Behavioral Contagion Parallel Elicitation Mirroring
 Affective Contagion Social Referencing Imitation

Scenario 2.

When Mary walks through the city she suddenly finds herself in the middle of a group of protesters who are chanting cheerful but irreverent songs about politicians in connection with their cause. The melodies are well-known, though, the lyrics are somewhat different. Before Mary realizes it, she loudly chimes in with the protesters.

This is a form of ...

- Mimicry Behavioral Contagion Parallel Elicitation Mirroring
 Affective Contagion Social Referencing Imitation

Scenario 3.

After a period of job-hunting, John finally lands his dream job. He always wanted to work and live abroad and now he has been hired to go to India for a long-term assignment. He decides to move to India a couple of weeks before his assignment starts so he can become acquainted with his new living environment. After he has settled in, he sees an advertisement for a business networking event for newcomers at the Indian embassy. He signs up for the event, already feeling a little nervous at the thought of meeting new people who are so different from him. When he arrives, he immediately notices the different ways people greet each other and tries to act in a similar way as best he can.

This is a form of ...

- Mimicry Behavioral Contagion Parallel Elicitation Mirroring
 Affective Contagion Social Referencing Imitation



Scenario 4.

Susan and Jane have decided to take a city trip to Krakow in Poland. They love the city center with its beautiful old buildings. The people are very nice and accommodating. While they are touring the city, they decide to venture out into the country to visit the concentration camp Auschwitz to pay their respects to the people who lost their lives there. Although the sun is still shining brightly, and the people they pass on their way to the camp greet them in a friendly way, they find it harder and harder to smile in return and their walking pace slows down as they enter the gates of the camp.

This is a form of ...

- Mimicry
- Behavioral Contagion
- Parallel Elicitation
- Mirroring
- Affective Contagion
- Social Referencing
- Imitation

Scenario 5.

While Amy is discussing a problem at work with her supervisor, she notices that her boss is preoccupied with something else. When she asks her supervisor whether something is wrong, her supervisor turns her attention to Amy and discloses that she is in the middle of making a big investment to secure her own retirement income. Amy becomes very interested, as she has been considering what to do with a financial windfall that she had recently received from a legal settlement. She asks whether her boss can advise her on where to look for a good investment. The entire time her supervisor is sharing her thoughts and enthusiasm about her investment plan, Amy unconsciously leans back in her chair whenever her boss does so, and crosses her legs in the same direction as her supervisor. Amy even touches her chin when her boss touches hers.

This is a form of ...

- Mimicry
- Behavioral Contagion
- Parallel Elicitation
- Mirroring
- Affective Contagion
- Social Referencing
- Imitation

Scenario 6.

Lily and Oliver are siblings who didn't always see eye to eye when they were young adults. They shared a small apartment while they were attending university. At times, they just needed some space away from each other, but that was difficult to arrange so they ended up doing things together more often than they wanted to, which at times led to an unhealthy behavioral pattern. For instance, whenever Lily suggested something like going skydiving, Oliver would respond enrolling in a knitting class, wondering why he actually wanted to learn



how to knit. If Oliver decided to take a spontaneous road trip, Lily would meticulously start planning an itinerary.

This is a form of ...

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|---|--|--|---------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Mimicry | <input type="radio"/> Behavioral Contagion | <input type="radio"/> Parallel Elicitation | <input type="radio"/> Mirroring |
| <input type="radio"/> Affective Contagion | <input type="radio"/> Social Referencing | <input type="radio"/> Imitation | |
-

Scenario 7.

Whenever Mike and Lisa go out for coffee, Mike will make his beverage choice, and Lisa will copy his choice, but add an extra flavor or modify it slightly to suit her taste. When they are having a conversation Lisa takes a relaxed posture by leaning backward and stretching her legs while Mike leans against one side of his armchair and starts stretching his arms in front of his body.

This is a form of ...

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| <input type="radio"/> Affective Contagion | <input type="radio"/> Social Referencing | <input type="radio"/> Imitation | |
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Scenario 8.

Sarah was a highly trained nurse who had worked in the emergency room for a long time. Whenever someone was brought into the emergency room in a state of distress, Sarah felt a sense of calm come over her, and knew exactly how to deal with the patient's distress.

This is a form of ...

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| <input type="radio"/> Mimicry | <input type="radio"/> Behavioral Contagion | <input type="radio"/> Parallel Elicitation | <input type="radio"/> Mirroring |
| <input type="radio"/> Affective Contagion | <input type="radio"/> Social Referencing | <input type="radio"/> Imitation | |
-

Scenario 9.

In a bustling city known for its vibrant arts scene, there was a group of friends named Alex, Mia, and Leo. They shared a passion for dance and spent their evenings perfecting their moves at the local dance studio. One evening, Alex introduced a new move that wowed



everyone. Mia and Leo were immediately captivated by Alex's style and began training the move. As the music played, their synchronization grew stronger.

This is a form of ...

- Mimicry
- Behavioral Contagion
- Parallel Elicitation
- Mirroring
- Affective Contagion
- Social Referencing
- Imitation



Answers:

Scenario 1: Parallel elicitation and behavioral contagion (people are laughing because of the movie and the infectious laughing of some moviegoers).

Scenario 2: Behavioral contagion (Mary doesn't feel the same urge to protest, but she is infected by the songs that the protesters are singing).

Scenario 3: Social referencing and imitation (John consciously takes notes how others behave to make sure to behave in an appropriate way. John imitates others because he wants to blend in).

Scenario 4: Affective contagion and/or parallel elicitation (Susan and Jane are affected by the surroundings and the understanding of what happened at Auschwitz during WWII. Additionally, they have a similar reaction to passing through the gates of the concentration camp brought about by their own thoughts and memories).

Scenario 5: Mimicry and mirroring (due to Amy's interest in what her boss is telling her Amy subconsciously starts to mimic her boss. This behavior encourages her boss to continue her disclosure).

Scenario 6: Behavioral contagion (complementary) (Lily and Oliver are a little fed up with each other and to show their need for space by reacting in an opposite way toward each other to create some space. When one does something the other is "infected" by that behavior and subconsciously acts in the opposite way).

Scenario 7: Nonmirrored mimicry (Lisa and Mike behave similarly but don't copy each other's behavior as though they were looking into a mirror).

Scenario 8: Affective contagion (complementary) (Sarah is "infected" by the affective state of the patient, however, due to her training and experience she automatically feels and reacts in the opposite way).

Scenario 9: Imitation (these people are imitating each other's dance moves consciously to learn to synchronize their movements for their dance performance).



Exercise Section Self-evaluation Questions:

This exercise section helped me identify the following new insights and takeaways:

This exercise section has increased my awareness of these aspects about myself:

Through this exercise section I gained the following abilities:

