CHAPTER EIGHT

I. Imitation

Many animals exhibit imitative behaviors (“Monkey see, monkey do”), and people are no exception (R. W. Byrne & Russon, 1998). Infants as young as two days old have been found to mimic adults’ facial expressions (Meltzoff & Moore, 1993). Later in life, we smile when others smile, yawn when others yawn, and cough when others cough (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994; Neumann & Strack, 2000). Laughter is also contagious. Comedy shows on television almost always have a laugh track, because people tend to laugh more when other people are laughing too.

A. Behavioral Mimicry

Mimicking another person’s behavior is sometimes intentional. “Imitation,” as the saying goes, “is the sincerest form of flattery,” and we can exploit this effect for personal gain. If we are trying to impress a date or curry favor with a boss, we can increase our odds of success by subtly copying that person’s movements or imitating his or her facial expressions or tone of voice. We might think people don’t benefit by engaging in such behaviors, but they do. Waitresses, for example, receive higher tips when they imitate their customers (van Baaren, Holland, Steenaert, & van Knippenberg, 2003).

Imitation can also occur automatically, without awareness or motive. When we interact with another person, we may unintentionally find ourselves mimicking his or her movements, speech patterns, and expressions. Chartrand and Bargh (1999) provided an experimental demonstration of this effect. They had participants interact separately with two confederates. One of the confederates rubbed his or her face while talking but did not shake his or her foot. The other confederate exhibited the opposite behavior pattern. Figure 8.1 shows that participants mimicked the confederate’s behavior. They touched their face more often when interacting with a face-touching confederate, and shook their foot more often when interacting with a foot-shaking confederate.

FIGURE 8.1

Behavioral Mimicry during a Social Interaction

Without being aware that they were doing so, participants imitated the behavior of a confederate during a social interaction.

Source: Chartrand and Bargh (1999).