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Money and Mimicry: When Being Mimicked Makes People Feel Threatened

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Mimicry can bond people by fostering rapport and liking (Chartrand & van Baaren, 2009). Mimicry's robustly positive effects might suggest that it aids interpersonal interactions uniformly, but we doubted such a supposition. We hypothesized that mimicry could lead to adverse interpersonal outcomes by making people feel threatened, which we tested by introducing mimicry into contexts in which people are in the presence of a vital and common component of modern life: money.

Reminders of money elicit a self-sufficient state that is characterized by two motives (Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2006; 2008). On the one hand, people reminded of money eagerly pursue personal goals and freedom. They persist longer than others on difficult tasks and hesitate to ask for help (Vohs et al., 2006). On the other hand, people reminded of money act as if they are immune to others. They desire solo (as opposed to dyadic or group) activities and feel indifferent to social exclusion (Vohs et al., 2006; Zhou, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2009).

The existence of two motives suggests that two outcomes could occur when people reminded of money are mimicked. The motivation to strive for personal freedom predicts that money-reminded people would form unfavorable impressions of a mimicker because they sense that their autonomy is being threatened (Brehm, 1966). The interpersonal distancing motivation predicts that mimicry would not affect money-reminded people because they would be unresponsive to the mimicker's behavior. Which motive would dominate? Our hypothesis centered on the fact that mimicry has a distinctly affiliative nature, such that if people resist being interdependent with others they also resist engaging in mimicry (van Baaren, Maddux, Chartrand, De Bouter, & van Knippenberg, 2003). Therefore, we predicted that money-reminded people would

perceive the affiliation intention expressed by mimicry to be a threat to their personal freedom, leading them to respond antagonistically in defense.

To test these hypotheses, we asked participants reminded of money (or not) to evaluate an interaction partner who had mimicked them (or not). Participants also completed an implicit threat measure to assess whether mimicry can elicit a sense of threat.

### *Method*

Seventy-two undergraduates (36 women) were randomly assigned to condition in a 2 (prime condition: money versus nonmoney)  $\times$  2 (mimicry condition: mimicry versus non-mimicry) between-participants design.

In the priming phase, participants completed filler questionnaires on a computer. The screen's background depicted either pictures of currency or shells (Figure S1). Next, participants and a same-sex confederate (unaware of the study's hypotheses and participants' money condition assignment) conversed for 10 minutes. Throughout the interaction, the confederate either unobtrusively mimicked participants' nonverbal behaviors (i.e., matching their postures and gestures after approximately 2 s) or did not mimic.

The confederate departed and participants completed the remainder of the experiment on a computer, starting with an implicit measure of threat (DeMarree, Wheeler, & Petty, 2005). Participants were told that a word would be flashed onscreen too quickly to perceive it, and that the next screen would display a list of words. Participants were instructed to rely on their gut feelings to select one of the words as their guess of what had been flashed. Trials began with a 2,000 ms pre-mask of Xs, followed

by subliminal presentation (17 ms) of target words (nonword letters). A 1,000 ms post-mask of Xs covered the target words. Afterwards, four words were presented and remained onscreen until participants made a selection. Half of the 12 trials contained one option that was a threat-related word. We summed the number of threat-related words that participants selected as an indicator of their feelings of threat.

Next, participants rated how much they liked the confederate (“How likable was the other person?” and “Would you like to spend more time with the other person?”  $\alpha=.91$ ) on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale. They also rated their current mood (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Mood did not vary by condition.

### *Results*

We tested the prediction that the interaction of money primes and being mimicked would decrease liking of the confederate and increase feelings of threat. A 2 (prime condition)  $\times$  2 (mimicry condition) ANOVA on the composite measure of liking showed that the interaction was indeed significant,  $F(1, 68) = 9.71, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .13$ , Figure 1. In the nonmoney prime condition, participants liked the confederate more if they had been mimicked than if they had not,  $F(1, 68) = 4.64, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .06$ . In the money prime condition, participants showed the expected reversal: they liked the confederate less after being mimicked than not being mimicked,  $F(1, 68) = 5.10, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .07$ .

A second 2  $\times$  2 ANOVA with prime and mimicry conditions as predictors on threat scores also revealed the predicted significant interaction,  $F(1, 68) = 12.18, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .15$ . In the nonmoney prime condition, mimicked participants selected fewer threat-related words ( $M=0.76, SD=0.97$ ) than non-mimicked participants ( $M=1.59, SD=1.00$ ),

$F(1, 68) = 4.99, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .07$ . Yet in the money prime condition, mimicked participants selected more threat-related words ( $M=2.42, SD=1.22$ ) than non-mimicked participants ( $M=1.47, SD=1.07$ ),  $F(1, 68) = 7.38, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .10$ .

We tested a mediated moderation model, in which prime condition moderates the effect of mimicry condition on threat scores, which directly influence liking scores. The results showed that threat scores mediated the effect of mimicry condition on liking in both the money,  $z=-2.35, p < .05$ , and nonmoney conditions,  $z=2.01, p < .05$  (details in online Supplemental Material).

### *General Discussion*

Being mimicked typically leaves people with a warm glow, but this experiment showed that mimicry can diminish liking if people have been reminded of money. Money-primed participants liked a mimicking interaction partner less than they did a non-mimicking partner, an effect that was due to enhanced feelings of threat.

These findings tested which motive involved in self-sufficiency — autonomous goal striving versus interpersonal insensitivity — dominates behavior after the idea of money has been activated. The findings take the psychology of money in a new direction by demonstrating money's ability to stimulate a longing for freedom.

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FIGURE

Figure 1: Liking of the confederate as a function of prime and mimicry conditions.

