Perspectives on Imitation: From Neuroscience to Social Science

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8.10 Imitating Violence
Susan Brison on Kinsbourn

According to Marcel Kinsbourne (in vol. 2, ch. 7), imitation is a form of entrainment, or "adopting shared rhythms of behavior" (p. 167), which is "more innately compelling than reasoned argument in inducing two, or many [persons], to adopt the same point of view" (p. 172). As a philosopher interested in theories of freedom of expression (Brison, 1998a,b) and in the effects of violence on the self (Brison, 2002), I find this view both refreshing and disturbing. It is refreshing in contrast with the overly rationalist, indeed Cartesian, view of free-speech theorists who assume that we are all rational, autonomous, and conscious information processors and decision makers. It is disturbing because if it is true, it indicates that we are naturally more prone to imitate media violence than free-speech theorists and public policy makers have so far been willing to acknowledge.

On April 4, 2002, I drove to the Grafton County courthouse in North Haverhill, New Hampshire, to attend the sentencing hearings of Robert Tulloch and James Parker, the two teenage boys who had pleaded guilty to the murders of my friends and colleagues, Half and Susanne Zantop. We heard, from the assistant attorney general, about the gruesome stabbings and about the state's case against the defendants. One of the things we learned was that the boys possessed—and had enjoyed playing for hours on end—a particularly violent and realistic interactive video game in which the player stabs his victims and watches them as they bleed to death.

That afternoon, I picked up my 7-year-old son from school and noticed that his school librarian had sent home a recent article from a local Vermont paper, the Times-Argus, entitled "Video game violence: harmful to society or just harmless fun?" It began with a quote from Electronic Gaming Monthly: "If you've ever wanted to run through a crowded mall while mowing down innocent shoppers with an M-16, or take a grenade launcher to storefronts and parked cars, [State of Emergency] is your game. [It] offers violent, vicarious thrills that are socially unacceptable, brazenly immoral and a helluva lot of fun."

What are the effects on children of violent video games and other forms of media violence as entertainment? What are their effects on adults? No one supposes that every child or adult who plays with or watches violent entertainment goes on to commit criminal acts, or even becomes more likely to do so. And many violent criminals (most of them, presumably, at least until very recently) have had no exposure to such violent enter-

tainment. But this does not mean that there is *no* probabilistic causal connection between exposure to such media and the commission of violent crimes (just as the fact that not all smokers get lung cancer and some people who get lung cancer never smoked does not indicate the absence of a causal connection between smoking and lung cancer).

Not only are violent interactive video games cause for concern, given the desensitizing and disinhibiting effects they may have on those who play them, but there is evidence that even passive viewing of representations of violence can, in some contexts, have disinhibiting effects on some viewers' tendencies to imitate what they see. Kinsbourne's chapter indicates that the phenomenon of imitation is more pervasive and complex—and more central to human behavior—than we previously realized. His research suggests that the human drive to imitate others' behavior can undermine our autonomous decision-making processes—a finding that has important implications for a defense of free speech based on the view that citizens, as autonomous agents, have a right to unfettered freedom of expression and to unrestricted access to others' speech.

Even if media violence can be shown to have harmful societal effects, that finding by itself is not enough to warrant the governmental restriction of such speech, in the United States, anyway, since the free speech principle embedded in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution indicates that even *harmful* speech is worthy of special protection against government interference. As I have argued (Brison, 1998a), if speech is harmless, then there is no need to give it special protection, since a background assumption of our constitutional democracy is a general principle of liberty stating that the government may justifiably interfere with individual liberties only to prevent people from harming others.

What can be the reason for protecting even harmful speech? Numerous defenses of a special free-speech principle have been given, including the argument from truth, the argument from democracy, and the argument from autonomy. All of them presuppose that speech (which, under First Amendment doctrine, includes such things as graphically realistic violent films and video games) has no (or merely negligible) effects that are not under the conscious control of the audience. So, even if it can be shown that watching violent films and video games leads to an increased tendency to violence in the viewers, it is argued that the *viewers*, not the media, are entirely responsible for the violence because they consciously and autonomously choose to be influenced by what they see (and what they do, in the case of interactive video games). The violence is considered to be entirely due to the mental intermediation of the viewer—a conscious intervention

that is assumed to break the chain of causality from the viewing of violent scenes to the committing of violent acts.

As Susan Hurley has argued, however, the research by Kinsbourne and others suggests that the imitation of others' behavior, including others' violent acts, is not always a consciously mediated process that is under the autonomous control of the viewers or imitators.[4] It might be argued that if we consider violent media to be even partially responsible for the violent behavior perpetrated by its consumers, then we must consider the perpetrators *not* responsible. In conversation, the assistant attorney general in the Zantop killings case told me that had the case gone to trial, the killers' frequent playing of this particular violent video game would have been used as evidence, not by the prosecution, but by the *defense*, as part of an insanity plea, in an attempt to show that the killers were not responsible for their actions. However, it does not follow from the claim that violent media cause people to be violent that the perpetrators are not 100% responsible for their violent acts. Two or more people can each be 100% responsible for the same crime, as in the case of multiple snipers who simultaneously fire many shots, fatally wounding their victim. If people are entrained, to use Kinsbourne's term, in violent behavior by their ever-greater exposure to increasingly violent media in our society, then we, as citizens, have to start taking responsibility for the violence that results.

4. Susan L. Hurley makes this argument in her excellent article "Imitation, media violence, and freedom of speech" (2004).

II   Imitation and Culture

19.1   Not Waving but Drowning
Susan Brison on Dijksterhuis

Dijksterhuis claims that imitation of others' behavior "constitutes the 'social glue' that makes us successful social animals" and that imitation is "default social behavior," something we do automatically and frequently (vol. 2, ch. 9, p. 208). The research of Meltzoff and Moore (1977, 1997) is taken to support the claim that our capacity to imitate is innate, and the discovery of mirror neurons that discharge both when an action is perceived and when it is performed (Gallese et al., 1996; Rizzolatti et al., 1996a) is taken to provide the neurological explanation for this capacity.

The claim that in social perception we imitate what we perceive sounds straightforward enough. But *what* do we perceive? According to Dijksterhuis, we perceive three different classes of things, distinguished by three different methods by which we perceive them:

1. behaviors (or actions) "that can be observed literally and directly," including "facial expressions, postures, gestures, and ... tone of voice" (p. 212).
2. traits that we perceive indirectly but automatically through inferences based on the observed behavior of others; and
3. stereotypes, or representations that are automatically activated because of the (perceived?) social group membership of the person(s) observed.

The perception of traits and stereotypes, while considered to be automatic (which I take to mean that they are not under the conscious control of the perceiver), is viewed as decidedly more complex than the simple perception of actions. However, the perception of actions is not as simple as Dijksterhuis suggests, and it is not clear that a strictly "literal" perception of an action is possible. Actions have meanings, just as words have meanings, and they are all subject to interpretation. Two (or more) actions

can function as something like homonyms (they look exactly the same, but they have different meanings), as illustrated in the spare, evocative title of Stevie Smith's poem "Not Waving, but Drowning." In social perceptions, we frequently need to rely on inferences (about the inner states of the person observed, about the context) in order to know what behavior it is that we are perceiving—and in order to imitate it. If I wave back at a drowning person, have I imitated her? Perhaps, in a sense, but certainly not in a way that facilitates affiliation or empathy. In waving back, I am doing something similar to what I perceive her doing, but I am also doing something (disastrously) different. Suppose I realize that she's drowning and I either don't care or actually want her to drown and so I "wave back." This is now a different action and one in which I am intentionally *not* imitating the person I perceive to be drowning. In all of these cases, the drowning person and I are doing, physically, the same thing in flailing our arms, but we are performing actions with very different meanings—meanings that are not automatically or directly apparent to an observer.

Not only gestures, but also facial expressions, postures, and vocal inflections require contextualized interpretation. I am told that I look like I am frowning when I am not frowning, but concentrating. When I tell my husband, who is hunched over with his arms tightly crossed, that he looks clenched, he says he's not clenching, but freezing. Sometimes, when my son is on the verge of melting down, I think he is crying when in fact he is laughing (and vice versa).

One could imagine the case of a long-married couple whose facial expressions have come to resemble each other's, but not because they were experiencing the same emotions and literally imitating each other. One could develop the facial lines of a scowl as a result of a lifetime of "imitating" a myopic partner who was not scowling but squinting. Would it be correct to call what led to this facial resemblance "imitation"? Not if imitation implies empathy, as Dijksterhuis maintains. Just as actions, including gestures and expressions, are *intentional* only under some descriptions and not others, it seems actions are *imitative* only under some descriptions and not others. It is not clear to me how the research on mirror neurons might account for this.

None of this, however, undermines Dijksterhuis' main thesis that imitation functions as social glue, but it does suggest that the imitation of even simple behaviors is not as simple and automatic as he claims. What Dijksterhuis calls "the low road to imitation"—"literally and directly" observing an action and then imitating it (p. 212)—does not seem to be a busy

thoroughfare, or even the road less traveled, but rather one that does not exist at all. What Dijksterhuis calls "the high road to imitation"—the complex, contextualized, and meaning-laden process by which we perceive and imitate "much more than what can be literally perceived" (p. 212) may be the only road there is.

19.2 The Imitation Superhighway
Harry Litman on Dijksterhuis

Dijksterhuis' chapter is surely one of the more provocative and synthetic (in the sense of bringing together different strains of thought) in this volume. At the Royaumont conference on imitation, the view was advanced, more or less axiomatically, that we could not function if we went around imitating everyone. Professor Dijksterhuis' chapter argues otherwise, suggesting that we not only can, but generally do, function in this way. Dijksterhuis marshals extensive evidence that imitation on many levels is our default mode of functioning and that it operates automatically unless it is countermanded.

As I read his chapter, Dijksterhuis' "high road" extends very well beyond discrete motor behaviors to "various forms of interpersonal behavior, intellectual performance, and attitudes" (vol. 2, ch. 9, p. 217). Thus, a slowed gait might arise from any of the following: seeing another's slow gait; seeing another's slow behavior other than a gait; seeing someone whom one knows to be a slow person; seeing a member of a slow group, such as the elderly (whether or not the observed group member in fact exhibits the trait stereotypically associated with the group); seeing or thinking of the word "slow"; thinking of words such as "molasses" that are associated with slowness; thinking of words that are associated with groups that are slow (for example, "geriatric" or "bingo," which are associated with the elderly); and subliminal associations with slowness. And that is just for one sort of behavior and one kind of priming input. As Dijksterhuis asserts in section 9.6 (p. 217), "relevant research has shown by now that imitation can make us slow, fast, smart, stupid, good at math, bad at math, helpful, rude, polite, long-winded, hostile, aggressive, cooperative, competitive, conforming, nonconforming, conservative, forgetful, careful, careless, neat, and sloppy." In other words, it affects our entire psychological functioning. We thus have the ideomotor idea writ enormous, applied not only to essentially all perception of the outside world, but also to all levels, conscious and subconscious, of human thought, feeling, and motivation. This is a high road with many, many lanes.