

University of Pennsylvania Libraries

NOTICE WARNING CONCERNING COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

The copyright law of the United States (title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specific conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law.

This notice is posted in compliance with Title 37 C.F.R., Chapter II, Part 201.14

Eastern Connecticut State University
J. Eugene Smith Library



ILLiad TN: 152982

Borrower: RAPID:PAU

Lending String:

Patron:

Journal Title: Invisible influence : the hidden forces that shape behavior /

Volume: Issue:

Month/Year: Pages: All of chapter 1

Article Author:

Article Title: Chapter 1: Monkey See, Monkey Do

Imprint:

ILL Number: -24012357



Call #: HM1176 .B47 2017

Location: EASTERN Stacks
Available

Shipping Address:
NEW: Van Pelt

Email:

 **EASTERN**
CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY
J. Eugene Smith Library
<http://www.easternct.edu/library>

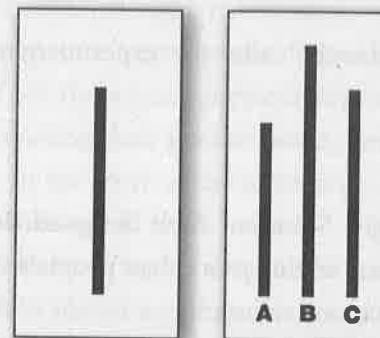
ill@easternct.edu

1. Monkey See, Monkey Do

What could be easier than matching the length of two lines?

Imagine you were asked to participate in a basic vision test. In front of you is a pair of cards. On the left card is a line. And on the right card are three comparison lines, A, B, and C.

Your job is simple. Just pick the line on the right that is the same length as the target line on the left card. Decide whether line A, line B, or line C is the same length as the target line. Should be easy, right?



Now let's add one more wrinkle. Rather than doing the experiment alone, you participate with a group of your peers.

You show up at a nondescript building on a university campus, and walk up a flight of stairs to room B7. You see that six other people are already seated around three sides of a square table, so you grab the last remaining chair, the second from the end.

The experimenter gives the instructions. He reiterates that your job is to pick the line on the right that is most similar in length to the one on the left. The group will do a number of trials just like the one above. As the group is small, and the number of trials relatively few, he'll call on each person in turn to announce their choice, which he'll record on a special form.

The experimenter points to the person on the left side of the table and asks him to start. This first participant has red hair, is wearing a grey collared shirt, and seems to be around twenty-five years old. He looks at the same lines you saw on the last page and, without missing a beat, reports his judgment: "Line B," he says. The next participant seems a little older, maybe around twenty-seven, and is dressed more casually. But he reports the same answer. "B," he says. The third person also says B, as does the fourth, and the fifth, and then it gets to you.

"What's your answer?" asks the experimenter. Which line would you pick?

When psychologist Solomon Asch designed this line length study in 1951, he was testing more than people's vision. He was hoping to prove someone wrong.

A few years earlier another psychologist, Muzafer Sherif, had conducted a similar study and found surprising results.¹ Sherif was interested in how norms form—how groups of people come to agree on common ways of seeing the world.

To study this question, he put people in an unusual situation. In a dark room, Sherif displayed a small pinpoint of light on the wall. He asked people to stare at the light and not move their eyes for as long as possible. Then he asked them to report how far the point of light moved.

The point of light was immobile. It didn't move at all.

But for individuals in the room, the light seemed to shift ever so slightly. Gazing at a small dot of light in an otherwise dark room is tougher than it sounds. After staring in the darkness for a while, our eyes fatigue and move involuntarily. This tendency causes the point of light to seem as though it moves even though it doesn't.

Sherif studied this phenomenon, called the autokinetic effect, because he wanted to see how people might rely on others when they were uncertain.

First he put people in the room alone, by themselves. Each person picked a number based on how far they thought the light moved. Some people thought two inches, others thought six inches. Different people's estimates varied widely.

Then, Sherif put those same people into groups.

Rather than making their guesses alone, two or three participants would be in the room at the same time, each making estimates that the others could hear.

People didn't have to agree; they could guess whatever they wanted. But when placed together, what was once a discordant

mix of differing views soon became a symphony of similarity. In the presence of their peers, the guesses converged. One participant might have said two inches when she was by herself, while another might have said six inches. But when placed together they soon came to a common estimate. The person who said two inches increased her estimate (to something like three and a half inches) and the person who said six inches decreased his estimate (to something like four inches).

People's estimates conformed to those around them.

This conformity happened even though people were unaware it occurred. When Sherif asked participants whether they were influenced by the judgments of others, most people said no.

And social influence was so strong that it persisted even when people went back to making judgments by themselves. After the group trials, Sherif split people up and had them return to making guesses alone. But people continued to give the answers that they had settled on with the group, even after the group was gone. People who had increased their estimates when others were in the room (from two to four inches, for instance) tended to keep guessing that larger number even when they were by themselves.

The group's influence stuck.

Sherif's findings were controversial. Do people just do whatever others are doing? Are we mindless automatons who simply follow others' every action? Notions of independence and free thought seemed at stake.

But Solomon Asch wasn't convinced.

Asch thought conformity was simply a result of the situation Sherif used. Guessing how far a point of light moved wasn't like

asking people whether they like Coke or Pepsi or whether they want butter or cream cheese on their bagel. It was a judgment most people had never made, or even thought of making. Further, the right answer was far from obvious. It wasn't an easy question. It was a hard one.

In sum, the situation was ripe with uncertainty. And when people feel uncertain, relying on others makes sense. Others' opinions provide information. And particularly when people feel unsure, why not take that information into account? When we don't know what to do, listening to others' opinions, and shifting ours based on them, is a reasonable thing to do.

To test whether people conformed because the answer was uncertain, Asch devised a different experiment. Rather than putting people in a situation where the answer was unclear, he wanted to see what they would do when the answer was obvious. When people could easily tell the correct answer right away and thus would have no need to rely on others.

The line-length task was a perfect choice. Even those with poor eyesight could tell the correct answer. They might have to squint a little, but it was right there in front of them. There was no need to rely on anyone else.

Asch thought that when the answer was clear, conformity would be reduced. Drastically. To provide an even stronger test, Asch rigged the group's responses.

There was always one real participant, but Asch filled the rest of the room with actors. Each actor gave predetermined responses. Sometimes they gave the right answer, picking the line on the right that was the same as the one on the left. But on other preselected trials, all of them gave the same wrong answer, saying "Line B," for example, when the answer was clearly line C.

Asch used the line task because he assumed it would reduce

conformity. Real participants could see the right answer, so it shouldn't matter that others gave the wrong response. People should act independently and go with what they saw. Maybe a couple participants would waver once in a while, but for the most part people should give the right answer.

They didn't.

Not even close.

Conformity was rampant. Around 75 percent of participants conformed to the group at least once. And while most people didn't conform on every trial, on average, people conformed a third of the time.

Even though people's own eyes told them the correct answer, they went along with the group. Even when they could clearly tell that the group was incorrect.

Solomon Asch was wrong and Sherif was right. Even when the answer is clear, people still imitate others.²

THE POWER OF CONFORMITY

Imagine a hot day. Really hot. So sweltering that the birds won't even sing. You're parched, so you drop into a local fast-food restaurant to grab a cold drink. You walk up to the counter and the clerk asks what you'd like.

What generic term would you use if you wanted a sweetened carbonated beverage? What would you say to the clerk? If you had to fill in the blank "I'd like a _____, please," how would you do it?

People's answers depend a lot on where they grew up. New Yorkers, Philadelphians, or people from the northeastern United States would ask for a "soda." But Minnesotans, Midwesterners, people who grew up in the Great Plains region of the country

would probably ask for a "pop." And people from Atlanta, New Orleans, and much of the South would ask for a "Coke." Even if they wanted a Sprite.

(For fun, try ordering a Coke next time you're in the South. The clerk will ask you what kind, and then you can tell them a Sprite, Dr Pepper, root beer, or even a regular Coke.)^{*}

Where we grow up, and the norms and practices of people around us, shape everything from the language we use to the behaviors we engage in. Kids adopt their parents' religious beliefs and college students adopt their roommates' study habits. Whether making simple decisions, like which brand to buy, or more consequential ones, like which career path to pursue, we tend to do as others around us do.

The tendency to imitate is so fundamental that even animals do it.

Vervets are small, cute monkeys found mostly in South Africa. Similar in size to a small dog, they have light-grey bodies, black faces, and a fringe of white around their stomachs. The monkeys live in groups of ten to seventy individuals, with males striking out on their own and changing groups once they reach sexual maturity.

* Or imagine you're at the office, chatting with some coworkers. You're about to grab lunch, but the rest of your office mates are on deadline and can't go with you. Being the polite person you are, you ask the group whether you can get them something. How would you address the group—that is, what word(s) would you use to address a group of two or more people? How would you fill in the blank: Would _____ like me to get you anything? The answer seems even easier. But again, it depends on the people around you. People from the West or Northeast tend to say "you guys." People from the South tend to say "y'all." People from Kentucky tend to say "you all." Some people from Philadelphia or Boston might even say "youse," as in "Youse guys want something from the store?"

Scientists often study vervets because of their humanlike characteristics. The monkeys display hypertension, anxiety, and even social and abusive alcohol consumption. Like humans, most prefer drinking in the afternoon, rather than morning, but heavy drinkers will drink even in the morning and some will even drink until they pass out.

In one clever study, researchers conditioned wild vervets to avoid certain foods.³ Scientists gave the monkeys two trays of corn, one containing pink corn and the other blue corn. For one group of monkeys, the scientists soaked the pink corn in a bitter, repulsive liquid. For another group of monkeys, the researchers flipped the colors—blue tasted bad and pink normal.

Gradually, the monkeys learned to avoid whichever color tasted bad. The first group of monkeys avoided the pink corn while the other group avoided the blue. Just like soda in the Northeast and pop in the Midwest, local norms had been created.

But the scientists weren't just trying to condition the monkeys, they were interested in social influence. What would happen to new, untrained monkeys who joined each group?

To see what would happen, the researchers took the colored corn away and waited a few months until new baby monkeys were born. Then, they placed trays of pink and blue corn in front of the monkeys. Except this time they removed the bad taste. Now the pink corn and the blue corn both tasted fine.

Which would the baby monkeys choose?

Pink and blue corn were just as tasty, so the baby monkeys should have gone after both. But they didn't. Even though the infants weren't around when one color of corn tasted bitter, they imitated the other members of their group. If their mothers avoided the blue corn, they did the same. Some babies even

sat on the avoided color to eat the other, ignoring it as potential food.

Conformity was so strong that monkeys who switched groups also switched colors. Some older male monkeys happened to change groups during the study. Some moved from the Pink Avoiders to the Blue Avoiders, and vice versa. And as a result, these monkeys also changed their food preferences. Switchers adopted the local norm, eating whichever color was customary among their new group.

We might have grown up calling carbonated fizzy beverages "soda," but move to a different region of the country and our language starts to shift. A couple years surrounded by people calling it "Coke" and we might find ourselves doing the same. Monkey see, monkey do.

WHY PEOPLE CONFORM

A few years ago, I flew to San Francisco for a consulting project. If you've been to the Bay Area, you know that on any given day the climate can be quite variable. Summers tend not to be that hot and winters don't get terribly cold. But on any particular day, it's hard to know what you're going to get. San Francisco can easily be 70 degrees in November and 50 degrees in July. Indeed, a famous quote about the city—commonly (but erroneously) attributed to Mark Twain—is that "the coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco."

My trip happened to take place in November. Since I was traveling from the East Coast, I'd brought my heavy winter coat. But as I got ready to go out that first morning in San Francisco, I faced a dilemma: Should I wear my coat or not? I checked the weather report, which suggested the temperature would be

somewhere in the high 50s to low 60s, but I still wasn't sure. That sounded right on the margin between warm and cold. How to decide?

Rather than just guessing myself, I used a time-tested trick: I looked out the window to see what other people were wearing.

When we're not sure about the right thing to do, we look to others to help us figure it out. Imagine looking for a parking spot. After driving around for what seems like forever, you find a whole side of a street free of cars. Success! But excitement quickly turns to concern: *If no one else parked here, maybe I shouldn't, either. There might be street cleaning or some special event that makes parking there illegal.*

If there are even a couple other cars parked on the street, though, the concern disappears. You feel more confident you've found a legitimate spot.

Trying to sort out which dog food to buy or which preschool to send your child to? Knowing what others have done provides insight into what might be best for you. Talking to other dog owners who have similar breeds will help you figure out the right food option for your dog's size and energy level. Talking to other parents will help you figure out which schools have a good student-teacher ratio and provide the right mix of learning and play.

Just as people relied on others to help them figure out how much the light moved in the dark room, we often rely on others to provide a useful source of information that helps us make better decisions.

Using others as information sources saves us time and effort. Rather than giving Fido a new brand of food every week, or spending days reading up on the minutiae of all the preschools in the area, others provide a useful shortcut. A heuristic that

simplifies decision making. If other people do it, choose it, or like it, it must be good.

But as the experiment about the length of lines demonstrates, imitation is about more than just information. Even when we know the answer, others' behavior can still have an impact. And the reason is social pressure.

Think about going out to dinner at a nice restaurant with a group of colleagues from work. Business has been great recently, so the boss takes everyone out to celebrate. Some New American place that puts nouveau touches on old favorites. Everything from lobster mac and cheese to un-sloppy Joes made with ahi tuna instead of pork. The appetizers were good, the entrées stellar, and everyone is enjoying a fun evening of drinks and conversation.

Then the time comes to order coffee and dessert. This restaurant is known for their sweets. The key lime pie looks great, but so does the double chocolate cake. Tough choice! You decide to let someone else order first while you mull over the options.

But then something funny happens. No one else wants dessert.

Your first colleague begs off, saying she's too full, and a second colleague says no because he's trying to lose weight. Then, one by one, each person around the table declines.

The waiter gets to you. "Dessert?" he asks.

This situation is a lot like Asch's line-length study. You know what you want—to order dessert, the chocolate cake *and* the key lime pie—just like you knew which line was the correct one. So it's not like other people provide any useful information that helps you make a better decision. But even so, you still feel as though you should pass.

Most people like being liked. We want to be accepted or at least not excluded. If not by everyone, then at least by the people we care about. Anyone who has ever been picked last for a basketball game or left off the invite list to a wedding knows that being left out doesn't feel good.

The same is true for ordering dessert. Sure, you could be the only one to order a tasty treat. There's no law that says you can't eat dessert alone. And yet you feel weird about being the only one ordering. Like people will think you're selfish, or that you'll stand out in a bad way.

So in most cases, people go along. They skip dessert because everyone else passed. Just to be part of the group.

But in addition to information and social pressure there's also one more reason people conform.

CHAMELEONS AND THE SCIENCE OF MIMICRY

Sometimes I look in the mirror and see someone else's face staring back at me.

Most people look like a mix of their parents. Their father's nose and their mom's eyes. Their dad's jawline and their mother's hair.

When I look in the mirror, though—particularly when I've just gotten a haircut—I see my brother. Only five years apart, we look a lot alike. Similar facial structure, similar mouth. My hair is curlier and lighter than his, but we have a lot of the same features.

Genes obviously play a big role. If two people have the same parents, much of their genetic makeup is similar. Depending on which characteristics are expressed, siblings can end up looking like mirror images.

Genetics aren't the only reason siblings look similar, though, because married couples actually resemble one another as well.

Even though spouses aren't related, their faces look alike. Compare two married people with two people selected at random and the married people look more similar.

Part of this similarity is driven by assortative mating. People tend to marry others of similar ages, nationalities, and racial backgrounds. Swedes tend to marry Swedes, twenty-year-olds tend to marry twenty-year olds, and South Africans tend to marry South Africans. Birds of a feather flock together, as they say.

Further, people tend to like others that look like them. If you have an oval face or prominent cheekbones, you tend to find other people with oval faces or prominent cheekbones more attractive. Just like the idea of mere exposure we talked about previously.

All this pushes people toward marrying others that look at least a little like them.

But that's not the end of the story. Because over time, partners' similarity heightens even more. Couples may have started out looking vaguely similar, but as the years go by, the resemblance gets even stronger. It's like two faces morphing into one. By their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, married people look more and more like proverbial peas in a pod.

And while one could attribute this to age, or shared environment, even controlling for these factors, married people still look more similar than one might expect.

Instead, there is a more subtle mechanism at play.⁴ When we feel happy, sad, or any number of other emotions, our faces contort to match our feelings. We smile when we're happy, frown when we're sad, and knit our eyebrows when we're angry.

While any particular emotional expression is fleeting, years of repeated expressions leave their mark on our faces. Crow's-feet, or the tiny wrinkles that form on the outside corners of the eyes, are often called laugh lines because of their association with

smiling. It's like folding a piece of paper. The more times you fold it, the deeper the creases become.

But our emotions are not independent. We tend to mimic, or imitate, the emotional expressions of those around us. If your friend laughs while telling a joke, you'll probably laugh as well. And if they share a sad story, your face registers sadness too.

Emotional mimicry is particularly prevalent among married couples. Partners spend a lot of time looking at, and listening to, one another. Hearing what happened at work or empathizing over how frustrating it must have been that the store closed early.

As a result, partners don't just share space and food, they share emotions. They laugh together, cry together, and even get angry together. We might get laugh lines from telling lots of jokes, but our partners are getting those same lines from listening. Years of making the same expressions, at the same time, leave small, but similar, traces on our faces.* Mimicry has made us look similar.

Chameleons are amazing creatures. Unlike most animals, whose eyes move in concert, a chameleon's eyes move independently, allowing them to see almost 360 degrees. Chameleons' tongues are equally impressive. They can be twice a chameleon's body length and when catching prey, lash out at almost 15 miles per hour.

What chameleons are most known for, though, is their ability to change color. To shift their body coloration in response to their environment.⁵

* Couples who look more alike over time also report having better marriages. Sharing worries and concerns and repeatedly empathizing with each other boosts satisfaction. But years of subtly mimicking each other has not only made them happier, it's made them look more similar as well.

Humans actually do something similar. We may not change our skin color, but we mimic the facial expressions, gestures, actions, and even language of the people around us.⁶

We smile when others smile, wince when we see others in pain, and say "ya'll" when talking to a friend from Texas. If we happen to be sitting in a meeting where someone touches their face or crosses their legs, we're more likely to touch our face or cross our legs as well. All without realizing that we're doing it.

Mimicry starts almost from the day we're born. Two-day-old babies cry in response to another baby's crying⁷ and mimic the emotional expressions of their caregivers. Seeing someone stick out their tongue leads young kids to do the same.

And all this imitation happens nonconsciously. We don't deliberately lean back in our chair if someone else does the same, and we don't try to speak with a Texas drawl just because a friend does.

But even though we may not realize it, we are constantly and automatically imitating the actions of those around us. Subtly moving, posturing, and acting in ways that mirror our interaction partners. And they are doing the same for us.

The neurological underpinnings of mimicry would never have been discovered, though, if it weren't for an ice cream cone.

One hot day in Parma, Italy, a macaque monkey sat in his cage in the corner of a neuroscience laboratory, waiting for researchers to come back from lunch. The monkey was hooked up to a big machine and thin electrodes ran from its brain, registering neural activity. The electrodes focused on the premotor cortex, a region involved in planning and initiating movement. In particular, an area related to actions involving the hands and mouth.

Every time the monkey moved its hands, or mouth, tiny related brain cells would fire, and a sound would register on a monitor.⁸ When the monkey raised its hand, the monitor went *bliip, bliip*. When the monkey reached out to bring something to its mouth: *bliip, bliip . . . bliip*. The sound echoed through the lab.

So far, the study was going pretty much as expected. Premotor neurons were firing whenever the monkey engaged in various movements. With every action, a loud *bliip* emanated from the machine. The scientists left the equipment on and went to grab a bite to eat.

One of the graduate students returned eating an ice cream cone. He held the cone out in front of him, almost like a microphone.

The monkey looked on with interest. Gazing longingly at the cone.

But then something unusual happened. As the student raised the cone to his lips, the monitor went off. *Bliip, bliip*, it sounded.

But the monkey wasn't moving.

The grad student walked closer and again moved the ice cream toward his mouth. *Bliip, bliip*, screamed out the monitor. If the monkey was immobile, why were brain regions associated with planning and initiating movement firing?

Turns out that the same cells that fired when the monkey took an action were also firing when the monkey observed *someone else* take that action.

The cells fired when the monkey moved its hand to its mouth, but also when the monkey merely observed the grad student move the ice cream cone toward his lips. Later tests showed that the cells fired when the monkey picked up a banana, but they also fired when the monkey watched someone else pick up a banana.

The cells even fired for sounds. When the monkey cracked open a peanut but also when it heard someone else crack open a

peanut. Observing someone doing something led the monkey's brain to simulate that same action itself. The Italian scientists had discovered what we know today as "mirror neurons."

Since that initial discovery, researchers have found mirror neurons in humans as well. Watching someone else engage in an action activates the same cortical region as engaging in that action. Watch others grab an object, and the motor-evoked potentials, or signal that a muscle is ready to move, is similar to grasping that object ourselves.⁹

Others can thus prime us for action. Observing others do something can activate our mind in ways that make it easier for us to do the same thing. See someone sit up straight in a meeting? Watch someone grab candy from a bowl? We may find ourselves doing the same thing because their actions primed ours. Our minds, and muscles, have been directed down a course of imitation.*

* Mirror neurons may have evolved to facilitate knowledge acquisition. Infants are faced with the daunting task of learning hundreds of new things. From smiling and moving limbs to eventually walking and talking. It's as if you've been plopped down at the controls of a spacecraft and suddenly been asked to pilot the thing. Everything is unknown.

Mirror neurons help accelerate learning. Rather than having to figure out how to produce a smile by yourself, watching someone else do it should encourage that action. It should ready the region of the brain that controls an infant's facial muscles to take the necessary steps to produce a smile. And in so doing, make it easier for the infant to do the same.

Learning may also generate mirror neurons in the first place. Before learning, there may be little connection between different sensory neurons coding various actions and the motor neurons responsible for those actions. But through self-observation, or situations in which an adult makes the same expression as an infant, the activation of sensory neurons that observe a behavior and the motor neurons that produce it may become correlated. The simultaneous activation then increases the connection and eventually leads a mirror neuron to form. Neurons that fire together, wire together.

That we're hardwired to imitate is interesting in itself, but behavioral mimicry also has important consequences. Sure, we mimic others, but what happens when others mimic us?

Jake hated negotiating. He hated it so much that he would rather pay full price for a new car than have to haggle. Bargaining for a price on eBay's Make an Offer was enough to give him a small panic attack. Whether sorting out salary requirements at his last job or hashing out the details of a supplier contract, negotiating was something Jake would rather skip. It felt forced, confrontational, and argumentative.

Yet there he was, late one Tuesday afternoon, locked in a tense negotiation over, of all things, a gas station.

Jake had been given the role of service station owner and was facing off against Susan in an MBA class exercise on negotiation. His job was to sell his gas station at a good price.

The owner and his wife had been working eighteen-hour days the past five years to save enough money to realize their life dream: to sail around the world. They'd leave from Los Angeles, and spend two years winding through dozens of places they'd only read about in books. They'd already put a down payment on a beautiful old boat and had started fitting it out for the trip.

The only hitch was the station. They needed money to finance the trip, so would have to sell it. Jake, in his role as the station owner, was trying to unload the station fast. He had to sell it soon, but, to pay for the trip, he had to clear a certain price.

Susan sat across the table.

She had been given the role of representing Texoil, a large oil

and gas company interested in buying the station. The company was in the midst of a strategic expansion and was acquiring independent service stations just like Jake's.

Jake started the negotiation by talking about how great the station was. That it had little competition and would be a perfect investment opportunity. Plus, property values had increased over the last decade, and it would cost Texoil much more to build a comparable station from scratch.

Susan flattered Jake by talking about the valued history of the station, but countered that it would require a significant capital investment from Texoil to update. New pumps and a brand-new mechanics area. Texoil could only offer so much for the station.

As negotiators often do, each focused on the facts that made their side look good. They led with why the price should favor their position, and hid information that would hurt their cause.

Eventually, they started tossing out numbers.

Susan offered \$410,000. Jake politely declined, and came back with \$650,000. Susan budged up a little. Jake countered by lowering his number slightly.

Thirty minutes later, they still hadn't reached a solution.

Negotiation exercises like this one are designed to make students better negotiators. By acting out a real bargaining situation, students get experience feeling out their opponent, deciding how much private information to release, and learning how to close a deal.

But at first glance, this negotiation seemed like a cruel joke. There was no zone of possible agreement.

In negotiations, the zone of possible agreement is a range where both the buyer and seller would be happier reaching a deal than walking away. If you're willing to sell your house for anything above \$1 million, and a buyer is willing to buy it for anything below \$1.2 million, then there is a reasonable range of potential agreement: \$200,000. Any offer between \$1 million and \$1.2 million and the two of you have a deal.

Sure, each of you would like to grab as much of that surplus as possible. As the seller, you'd rather sell it for \$1.2 million. You get an extra \$200,000 to buy a new car, send your kids to college, or get that Velvet Elvis painting you've always wanted. And the buyer, of course, would rather only pay \$1 million. They'd prefer to keep that \$200,000 for themselves and put that Velvet Elvis painting up in their own living room. But regardless of how much of the surplus each of you keeps, both of you would rather make a deal within that range than walk away.

In other cases, the zone of possible agreement is much smaller. If you're willing to accept anything over \$1 million for your house, and the buyer is only willing to pay up to \$1 million, then the bargaining range is pretty tight. The buyer can bluster all they want. They can offer \$800,000, \$900,000, or even \$999,000. But unless they go to the top of their range, the two of you won't reach a deal. No Velvet Elvis for either of you.

As a result, the smaller the bargaining zone, the tougher the negotiation. When there's a large zone, each side can be coy. You can start off at a place that works best for you, but there's still a good shot that a deal can be reached. Tighten that range, though, and reaching an agreement becomes tougher. Each side has to be willing to go further to appease the other. As a result, deals often don't get done.

The Texoil negotiation seemed even worse. It looked like

there was no overlap. The most Texoil had authorized Susan to pay for the station was less than the amount Jake thought he could accept. Either side could go as far to the edge as they were allowed to go and still not reach a deal. It seemed like an exercise in futility.

Fortunately there was a catch.

While the money didn't seem to line up, the underlying interests of the parties were compatible. Sure, Texoil wanted to purchase the station, but they also needed a good manager to run it in the future. And the seller, who had been a great station manager the past five years, wanted to get rid of the station but he also wanted a steady job when he came back from the round-the-world cruise. There was hope.

If both parties could recognize these common interests, and creatively structure a deal, agreement could be reached. They'd have to think beyond just the price of the station itself, though, and incorporate other dimensions. The buyer could offer the high end of their range for the station, but also guarantee the owner a steady job managing the station when he came back from the trip. This arrangement would give the station owner enough money to cover the trip and ensure that he had a job waiting when he returned.

Reaching agreement wasn't impossible. But it required that the parties trust each other enough to reveal otherwise private information. Jake's manager had to reveal that he was selling the station to go on vacation. And Susan's Texoil representative had to reveal that she needed someone to run the station. The seller had to trust the buyer and vice versa.

But trust is the last thing most people feel in a one-off negotiation. Each side is consumed with extracting the most value from the other: how to give up the least information so they can keep

the most value for themselves. Saying he was going on vacation might weaken his bargaining position, so people in Jake's position tend not to share.

How could Susan get Jake to trust her? What could she do to win him over and get him to reveal valuable, private information?

Turns out a simple trick led negotiators like Jake and Susan to be five times as successful. Five times as likely to close the deal, even when all seemed lost.¹⁰

That trick?

Mimicking their negotiation partner.

Researchers wondered whether behavioral mimicry might help the buyer win the seller's trust. They had pairs of Jakes and Susans engage in the same negotiation. But for half the participants, they instructed the buyer to subtly mimic the mannerisms of their negotiation partner. If the seller rubbed their face, the buyer did as well. If the seller leaned back or forward on their chair, the buyer did the same. Not blatantly, but discreetly enough that the other person wouldn't notice.

This might seem silly. After all, why should someone rubbing their face or leaning back in their chair change whether people reach a deal?

But it did. People who mimicked their partner were five times as likely to find a successful outcome. While almost no one who didn't mimic found an acceptable agreement, people who subtly imitated their counterpart reached a deal two-thirds of the time.

Mimicry facilitates social interactions because it generates rapport. Like a social glue, mimicry binds us and bonds us together. Rather than "us versus them," when someone behaves the same

way we do, we start to see ourselves as more interconnected. Closer and more interdependent. All without even realizing it.

If someone acts like us, or behaves similarly, we may infer that we have things in common or are part of the same tribe. Part of this may be driven by the association between similarity and kinship. Because we tend to imitate those around us, seeing someone doing the same thing we're doing may serve as a non-conscious signal that we are connected in some way. If someone has the same accent or loves the same brand we feel an affinity or bond. These connections, in turn, lead to greater liking, and smoother interactions.

As a result, mimicry has all sorts of interpersonal consequences.¹¹ Speed daters whose linguistic styles better mimicked one another were three times more likely to want to see each other again. Existing couples with matching linguistics styles were 50 percent more likely to still be dating three months later.

Mimicry also shapes professional success. In negotiations, mimicry not only helped people reach deals, it enabled negotiators to create value and claim more of that value for themselves. In interviews, mimicry led interviewees to feel more comfortable and perform better. And in a retail context, mimicking increased persuasion.

In fact, the only time we don't mimic others is when we don't want to affiliate with them. People who are satisfied in their current romantic relationship, for example, were less likely to mimic attractive members of the opposite sex. Only when we *don't* want to connect with others do we break from this default tendency.*

* Mimicry is such a standard part of how people interact that lack of imitation makes people feel rejected. When people are told to avoid doing the same thing as their interaction partner, that partner feels a greater need to belong and their hormones spike.

By now it's clear that people often do the same thing as others. But might this penchant for imitation help shape what becomes popular?

WHAT IMITATION CAN TEACH US ABOUT BLOCKBUSTERS

At the beginning, all you see is a foot, slowly tapping against the aluminum leg of a school desk. Then a pencil, drumming on a textbook. And finally, a girl's bored face, head resting on her chin, waiting. Waiting for the clock to strike three p.m.

The seconds slowly drag by: 2:59 and 57 seconds . . . 2:59 and 58 seconds. Each tick blending with the sound of the pencil tapping on the book. The camera pans to students glancing at the clock. When will class be over? Even the teacher can't wait.

Finally, the ringing of the bell breaks the standoff. The students grab their backpacks, jump out of their seats, and flood into the halls.

A quick four-count beat and then it starts. "Oh baby, baby . . ." a raspy voice intones. *Bum, bum bum bum bum* follows the beat. "Oh baby, baby . . ."

The camera zooms in on a teenager with dirty-blond hair tied in pigtails with pink bows at the end. She's dressed as a Catholic school girl, but more like the Halloween costume than ones in real life. Pressed white dress shirt tied off at her midriff, short black shirt, and tall black stockings. She sashays her hips, and as students pour into the hallways, she and a group of her peers break out into a coordinated dance number.

"Oh baby, baby, how was I supposed to know . . . ?"

And with that, in early fall 1998, the world met one Britney Jean Spears.

" . . . Baby One More Time" was more than just an introduction. It was a breakthrough hit. The song broke international sales records and is one of the best-selling singles of all time. *Billboard* magazine named it the best music video of the 1990s and it was voted the third most influential video in the history of pop music. Britney's album, of the same name, went fourteen times platinum in the United States and sold over 30 million units worldwide. It's the best-selling album by a teenage solo artist, and one of the best-selling albums of all time.

All in all, not a bad start.

But . . . *Baby One More Time* was merely a precursor of things to come. Her second album, *Oops! . . . I Did It Again*, became the fastest-selling female album ever. Her third album debuted as number one on the *Billboard* Top 200.

Whether you like her music or not, Britney Spears is one of the most famous pop icons of the early twenty-first century. In addition to a Grammy, Britney won nine *Billboard* music awards, six MTV Video Music Awards, and was given a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Her tours have grossed over \$400 Million, and she is the only artist in history to have both a number one album and a number one single in each of the three decades of her career.

Not too shabby.

But just for a second, let's go back to before all that. Before the tours, before the millions of albums, and before her personal life took a turn for the weird. (Remember Kevin Federline?) Even before . . . *Baby One More Time*.

Imagine for a second that we could rerun the world. That we could go back in time and start things anew.

Would Britney still be popular? Would the Princess of Pop still have hit it big?

It's hard to argue with success. After all, Britney wasn't just some one-hit wonder. With over 100 million albums sold, she is one of the best-selling music artists of all time. There must be something about her that made her so successful, right?

Britney had all the telltale signs of someone who would one day be a star. She started dancing at age three. She won talent shows and appeared in commercials at the same age most of us were still learning basic math. She was even cast in *The All New Mickey Mouse Club*, the showcase of teen stardom that launched the likes of Justin Timberlake and Christina Aguilera. Who could have a pedigree like that and not be successful?

When we look at superstars like Britney Spears, we assume that they are profoundly special. That they have some intrinsic talent or inherent quality that led them to hit it big.

If you ask people in the industry why Britney was so successful, they'll say something similar. That Britney had a unique sound. Sure, maybe she wasn't the best singer ever, but she had something going for her. That, combined with snappy dance moves and the right blend of innocence and sex appeal, made her the perfect pop artist. She became a megastar because of those qualities. If you ran the world again, those same qualities would still make her a hit.

Her success was inevitable.

We make similar assumptions about hit movies, books, and other blockbusters. Why did the *Harry Potter* books sell over 450 million copies? They must be great books. "It has all the makings of a classic," some papers gushed. The "engaging stories" are something "we're wired to respond to," argued others. Books that sell that many copies must just be higher quality

than the competition. More interesting. Better written. More appealing.

But could these successes be more random than we think?

If artists such as Britney Spears are just better on some dimension, experts should be able to tell. Sure, Britney's music might not be the best technically, but maybe she has the right pop sound to make a hit. So while the critics might belittle her, hit makers know a knockout when they hear it. Industry executives should be able to tell in advance that she would be a superstar.

Same with *Harry Potter*. It's no Chaucer, but when J. K. Rowling shopped *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* around to publishers in the mid-1990s, they should have jumped out of their seats to publish it. Just like an oenophile can tell the difference between a decent cabernet and great one, someone who has spent ten years publishing books should be able to separate the wheat from the chaff. Maybe everyday Joes and Janes wouldn't be able to tell, but experts could.

Yet they didn't.

Rowling's original manuscript was rejected by the first twelve publishers who saw it. It was too long, they said. Children's books don't make any money. *Don't quit your day job*, they advised.

And it's not just J. K. Rowling. *Gone with the Wind* was rejected thirty-eight times before it was published. Elvis was told he should go back to driving trucks. Walt Disney was fired early on because he "lacked imagination and had no good ideas."

Harry Potter barely even got published. It wasn't until a publisher happened to give the manuscript to his daughter that something changed. The girl nagged her father over and over for months about how great the book was until he made

Rowling an offer. And made her a multimillionaire in the process.

If hits have an inherent quality that separates them from failures, they should be predictable. Maybe not to you, or to me, but at least to industry experts. To people whose job it is to be able to tell the good stuff from the bad.

But what does it mean that even experts get it wrong?

This question vexed Princeton sociologist Matthew Salganik as he was working on his dissertation. Hit books, songs, and movies are so much more successful than their peers that we tend to see them as qualitatively different.

But if the best are distinctly better than the rest, why do experts have so much trouble identifying them? Why did so many publishers pass up the opportunity to sign J. K. Rowling?

To find out, Salganik and his colleagues set up a simple experiment. They designed a website where people could listen to music and download it for free. No famous songs or well-known bands, just unknown songs from unknown artists. Local acts that were just starting out, or groups that had just put together their first demo. Bands with names like Go Mordecai, Shipwreck Union, and 52 Metro.

The songs were organized in a list, one after the other. People could click on any song, listen to it, and, if they liked it, download it. Song order was shuffled for each listener to ensure that each song received equal attention. More than fourteen thousand people participated.

In addition to the names of the bands and the songs, some people were given information about what previous listeners liked. For each song, they could see how many other people had

downloaded it. If 150 people had downloaded "Lockdown" by 52 Metro, for example, the number 150 appeared next to the song.

And just like a best-seller list, for these "social influence" participants the songs were ordered by popularity. The most downloaded song appeared at the top of the list, the next most downloaded second, and so on. The download numbers and song order automatically updated each time a listener downloaded a new song. Then Salganik examined which songs people downloaded.

Simply providing information about others' choices had a big impact. Suddenly people tended to follow their peers. Just like watching a point of light in a dark room, people listened to and downloaded songs that prior listeners had liked.

Popularity became concentrated. The gap between the most and less popular songs increased. Popular songs became more popular and less popular songs got even less attention. The songs stayed the same, but social influence led the best to do better and the worst to do worse.

But Salganik wasn't finished. It was neat to see how people's tendency to imitate others influenced popularity, but that still didn't resolve the prior puzzle. Sure, certain songs or books might be more popular than others, but why couldn't experts armed with market research predict those successes in advance?

To find out, Salganik added one more detail.

It's impossible to rerun the real world. No one can stop time, go back, and see what would happen if things started anew. So instead of rerunning the same world, Salganik created eight different ones. Eight separate worlds, or distinct groups, that looked identical—at least initially.

This decision was key.

The beauty of a good experiment is control. In this case, each of the eight worlds started the same. Everyone had access to the same information. All songs started with zero downloads, and because people were randomly assigned to each world, even the participants in the different worlds were indistinguishable. So while some people might like punk music, and others might like rap, on average there were an equivalent number of people with each preference in each world. On every dimension possible, then, the worlds started the same.

But while they started the same, each world evolved independently. It was almost as if eight different versions of earth were separately spinning next to one another.

If success were driven by quality alone, each world should end up looking the same. Better songs should be more popular, worse songs should be less popular, and the songs that are popular in one world should be popular in all of them. If 52 Metro's "Lockdown" was the most downloaded song in one world, it should be close to the top of the list in others. On average, preferences across the groups should be the same.

But they weren't.

Song popularity varied widely from one world to the next. 52 Metro's "Lockdown" was the most popular song in one world. In another, one of the least popular. Fortieth out of forty-eight. Almost dead last.

Same song, indistinguishable groups of participants, completely different levels of success. Same initial conditions, different final outcomes.

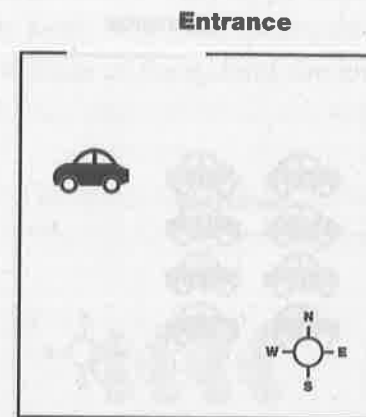
Why was success so variable?

The reason was social influence. There weren't more punk

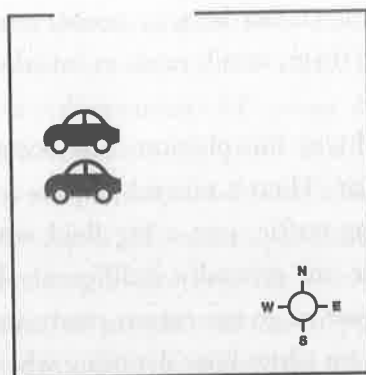
lovers in the world where 52 Metro was popular than in the world where it wasn't. But because people tend to follow those who came before them, small, random initial differences snowballed.

To understand why this phenomenon occurs, imagine parking at a county fair. There's no real parking lot per se, or even someone directing traffic, just a big field where people leave their cars. People are generally indifferent about where they park, they just want to go eat cotton candy and ride the Ferris wheel. There are no white lines denoting where individual cars should go, so the first family that drives in can park wherever they want.

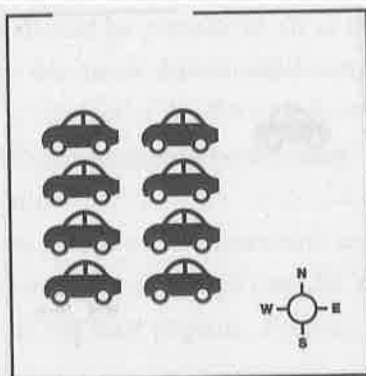
The first car that drives up happens to be driven by the West family. They slightly prefer facing west when they park, so they drive in, turn right, and park their car facing west:



Then the second family shows up. This family, the Souths, prefer parking facing south rather than west. But their preference is not that strong, and given that the first car is parked facing west, they pull up next to them and face west as well:

Entrance

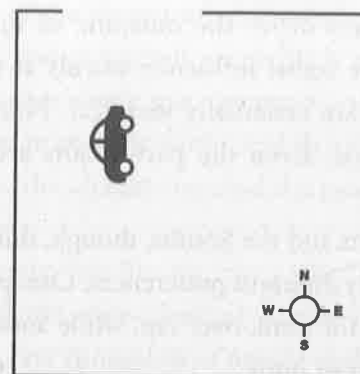
Soon, more and more cars show up. While the people in each might have a slight preference here and there, they follow the cars ahead of them until the parking lot ends up looking like this:

Entrance

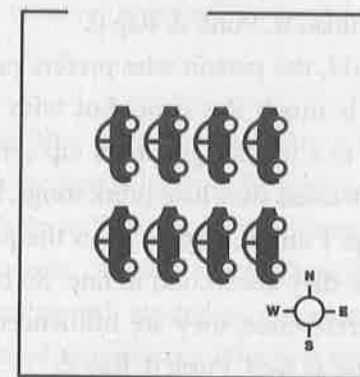
Makes perfect sense.

But what if, rather than the West family showing up first, the South family had shown up first instead? What if the Souths had been the first to park in the lot?

Instead of parking facing west, given the Souths' slight preference for facing south, they go ahead and park that way:

Entrance

The Wests show up next. They would have slightly preferred to face west, but given a car is already facing south, they go ahead and do the same. More and more cars show up, all following the cars in front of them, until the lot ends up looking like this:

Entrance

Same eight cars, same overall parking preferences of people in the lot, but completely different outcome. Everyone is facing south rather than west. Just because of the preferences of who-ever happened to park first.

This same process drove the outcome of the music study. Imagine two of the social influence worlds at the start of the experiment. They are essentially identical. None of the songs have any downloads. Even the participants are the same, on average.

Just like the Wests and the Souths, though, different individuals may have slightly different preferences. One person may have a slight preference for punk over rap, while another has a slight preference for rap over punk.

And the *order* in which these two people express their preferences varies. In one world, the person who likes punk happens to go first. They listen to a few songs, find a punk song they like, and download it. Score one for the punk song, zero for the rap song. Then, when the second listener comes along, they use the first listeners' choice as a guide. The punk song has more downloads, so it gets more attention. The second listener has a slight preference for rap, but they like punk and the song seems pretty good, so they download it. Punk 2, Rap 0.

In the other world, the person who prefers rap happens to go first. The process is much the same, but with a different outcome. They listen to a few songs, find a rap song they like, and download it. Not because they hate punk songs, but, on the margin, they prefer rap. Punk 0, Rap 1. Then the punk liker comes along, but this time they are second in line. So rather than going with their slight preference, they are influenced by others, and download a rap song as well. Punk 0, Rap 2.

Soon, those two once-identical worlds start to look a little

different. One world has a punk rock song on top of the list and the other has a rap song.

Again, one person liking a song isn't enough to entirely change someone else's preferences. But it's enough to tip the scales. Songs at the top of the list got more attention, were more likely to be listened to, and as a result, more likely to be downloaded. Which made it more likely that the punk rock song would be downloaded again in the first world, and that the rap song would be downloaded in the second one. And the process repeated with the next listener.

Slowly, but surely, just like the cars parked in the field, social influence pushed the once-identical worlds in different directions. Magnified over thousands of people making choices, it led to vastly different outcomes.

The implications are both simple and shocking. Rather than being driven by quality, hits might sometimes just be driven by luck and the herd. If we reran the world again, Britney Spears (and J. K. Rowling, for that matter) might never have been popular. Britney's video happened to land at the right time, some people liked it, and, because of that, others jumped on the bandwagon. But she might not be any better than thousands of aspiring musicians we've never heard of.

Does this mean that anything could be a hit? That terrible books and movies are just as likely to be popular as good ones?

Not exactly. Even in Salganik's experiment, quality was still correlated with success. "Better" songs, those downloaded more in the independent world, tended to get more downloads and "worse" songs tended to get fewer. The best songs never did terribly, and the worst songs never did extremely well.

But there was still a lot of variation. And what that means is that quality alone is not always enough.

There are thousands of books, movies, and songs vying for collective attention. And no one has the time to read every book jacket or listen to every sample clip. Most people don't have the bandwidth to check out even a small percentage of the options.

So we use others as a helpful shortcut. A filter. If a book is on the best-seller list, we're more likely to skim the description. If a song is already popular, we're more likely to give it a listen. Following others saves us time and effort and (hopefully) leads us to something we're more likely to enjoy.

Does that mean we'll like *all* those books or songs ourselves? Not necessarily. But we're more likely to check them out and give them a try. And given the thousands of competing options out there, this increased attention is enough to give those items a boost.

Knowing others liked something also encourages people to give it the benefit of the doubt. Appearing on the best-seller list provides an air of credibility.¹² If that many people bought it, it must be good.

J. K. Rowling unintentionally tested these ideas when she released a book under a pseudonym. After her success with *Harry Potter*, Rowling decided to write a detective novel called *The Cuckoo's Calling*. While Potter brought Rowling notoriety, reviewers were critical of later books in the series, and Rowling worried her fame would bias response to the new novel. She wanted to let the writing speak for itself. So she released *The Cuckoo's Calling* as Robert Galbraith. A combination of Robert F. Kennedy and her childhood fantasy name Ella Galbraith.

Robert Galbraith's novel had mixed success. Almost every person who read *The Cuckoo's Calling* liked it. They called it "inspired" and "an engaging read."

Unfortunately, however, there just weren't that many of them. Readers were few and far between. *The Cuckoo's Calling* was released with little fanfare and sold only 1,500 hardcover copies in the first three months of being on sale.

Then one day the book surged from 4,709th to become the best-selling book on Amazon. Soon, hundreds of thousands of copies had been sold.

Had people realized Robert Galbraith's genius? No. Had careful inspection of the writing of *The Cuckoo's Calling* revealed it to be a literary masterpiece? No again.

Someone had simply unmasked Rowling as the book's actual author.

Without J. K. Rowling, *The Cuckoo's Calling* was merely one of the thousands of well-written detective novels competing for attention. With J. K. Rowling, it had a 450-million-copy seal of approval that made potential readers take a look. After all, how could millions of people be wrong?

PUTTING SOCIAL INFLUENCE TO WORK

These findings about the science of imitation have a number of important implications.

When trying to persuade others or convince them to do something, we tend to default to rewards or punishments. The employee of the month gets \$100 and their name up on the wall. Kids are told to eat their vegetables or they won't get ice cream for desert.

But while rewards and punishments are effective in the short term, they often undermine what they set out to achieve.

Imagine you were stuck on an alien planet and they serve two things for dinner: Zagwarts and Gallblats. You've never heard of either, and both look a little weird, but you're famished, so you have to eat something.

Before you get a chance to pick one, your host says that before you eat your Zagwarts, you have to eat your Gallblats.

Which one do you think tastes better? Zagwarts or Gallblats?

Kids make similar inferences about ice cream and vegetables. They like ice cream, and while they might not love vegetables, the ice cream reward undermines any otherwise positive feelings they might have had. After all, if vegetables were good in the first place, why would they need a reward to eat them?

An ice cream reward sends a subtle signal that vegetables aren't worth eating on their own. That kids need to be paid (in ice cream) to eat them. And when parents stop paying, kids will stop eating. Whenever they get the opportunity to make their own food choices, vegetables will be tossed to the side. The same goes for employees. They start to infer that the only reason to be on time and give good service is because they'll get paid more, not because they care about their job.

Using social influence is more effective. Just like monkeys with the red and blue corn, people mimic others' choices and actions. If their parents can't seem to get enough broccoli, kids will follow suit.

Unfortunately, many parents signal to their kids that vegetables are not tasty. Parents don't put many vegetables on their own plate, and eat the chicken or steak or whatever else is being served first. And if their parents aren't eating vegetables, why would kids want to?

But if broccoli is the first thing on their parents' plate, and the first thing their parents eat, kids will do the same. Even better if

there's a mock argument over which parent gets to eat the last piece. The more kids see their parents eating something—and liking it—the more likely they'll be to do the same.

Mimicry is also a helpful tool.

Imagine you're out to lunch one sunny spring day with a couple of colleagues from work. You're sitting outside at a local pub, and after scanning the menu for a few minutes you know exactly what you're going to get.

The waiter comes by, asks you what you'd like, and the order rolls off your tongue: "The Brussels Burger, medium, with bacon and cheddar, and a side salad."

"Okay," he says, "the Brussels Burger, medium, with bacon and cheddar, and a side salad, correct?"

"Yes," you reply, excitedly. You can already hear your stomach rumbling.

Notice what happened? Probably not.

Yet the same thing happens to each of us dozens, if not hundreds, of times each day. The waiter didn't just take your order, he mimicked you. He could have just said "ok" or "coming right up!" But he didn't. He repeated your order back to you, word-for-word, copying saying the exact thing you said.

Seem trivial? Maybe.

But research shows that this mimicry just increased the waiter's tip by 70 percent.

Whether trying to win a contract, get someone to do something, or just have people like us, subtly mimicking their language and mannerisms is an easy place to start. Even something as simple as mimicking their greeting style (e.g., "Hey," "Hi," or "Hello") in e-mails increases affiliation.

By understanding why people imitate, we can also learn to be less susceptible to influence ourselves.

Group decisions often suffer from something called groupthink, where conformity and the desire for intragroup harmony lead groups to make worse decisions. Watch a focus group share opinions or a committee decide who to hire, and whoever goes first has a big impact on the outcome. Just as how songs became popular due to the preferences of the first few listeners, the direction of the discussion or vote depends on the opinion of whoever happens to lead off. Group members who were on the fence tend to conform, and unless someone has strong objections, they tend to keep their opposition to themselves. Without much of a peep, the group quietly goes one way when they could have just as easily gone the opposite. Groupthink has been blamed for everything from the space shuttle *Challenger* disaster to the Cuban missile crisis.

People talk about the wisdom of crowds, but crowds are only wise when the group has access to everyone's individual information. Aggregating these pieces can lead to better decisions than any person could have made alone. But if everyone just follows everyone else, or keeps their information to themselves, the value of the group is lost.

Consequently, eliciting everyone's idiosyncratic information is vital. So how do we do that? How do we encourage opposing voices to speak up?

Turns out that even one dissenting voice can be enough. If just one prior person in Asch's line experiment gave the correct answer, it was enough to free participants up to give the correct answer themselves. It didn't need to be half the room, just one coconspirator. We don't need to be in the majority to feel comfortable expressing our opinions, we just need to feel like we aren't alone.

Interestingly, the other minority voice doesn't even have to

have the *same* opinion. Even a dissenter giving the other incorrect answer (line A rather than line B) was enough to free people up to give the correct answer (line C) themselves. Just having another dissenting voice, even if it didn't agree, made people feel more comfortable in expressing their own personal opinion.

That dissenting voice changed the nature of the discussion. No longer was it right versus wrong, or with the group versus against it. Now the answer was a matter of opinion. And if it's clear that there are different opinions, everyone feels much more comfortable sharing theirs.

To encourage dissenting views, some managers explicitly give one person the job of constantly voicing an opposing perspective. Not only does it encourage people who hold that particular perspective to speak up, it encourages other alternative viewpoints as well.

Privacy also has a powerful effect. "Monkey see, monkey do" nicely describes imitation, but the "Monkey see" part is more important than we often realize. If people can't see, or observe what others are doing, there is no way for those others to influence them. If one monkey never saw whether other monkeys ate the red or blue corn, there'd be no way for the other monkeys' choices to influence theirs. Social influence only works when other people's opinions or behaviors are observable.*

Consequently, one way to break the influence of influence is

* This also holds with our own choices. If we want to avoid people influencing our decisions, keeping them private helps. This is why expecting parents often keep their baby's name a secret until the child is born. It avoids the hassle of some uncle linking the name to a little known fungal disease and having to start all over again.

to make choices or opinions private. Using written ballots rather than a show of hands at meetings encourages independence and helps avoid groupthink. Using anonymous ballots makes people feel even freer to speak their mind. Even asking people to write down their preliminary opinion before the meeting can help. It's a small action, but having a written record before interacting with others makes it harder to stray from one's convictions, and increases the chance that diverse viewpoints will be heard.

These same general principles can be used to influence others. One opinion sometimes gets lost in a jumble of voices, but shrink the size of the group and that one voice carries more weight. Rather than trying to sway a whole room, it's much easier to build consensus by going around to each person individually beforehand. By starting with others who agree, it's possible to build a small coalition that can later help win over those who are on the fence.

Going first is also an easy way to shape the discussion. While not everyone may agree, it provides a gravitational attraction, encouraging neutral others to glom on.

These ideas also suggest that the huge lines for Cronuts, Japanese cheesecakes, or whatever else happens to be the food du jour probably aren't worth it. There are almost certainly nearby places that are equally good but don't require a fifty-minute wait.

When searching for cheesesteaks in Philadelphia, tourists are always told to go to Pat's or Geno's. These famous South Philly spots serve thinly sliced rib eye steak on long rolls with provolone, American cheese, or even Cheez Wiz for those so inclined. Late at night or on the weekend, queues out front of these institutions can reach epic proportions.

But are these places really that much better than anything else?

Unlikely. In fact, it's not even clear they are the best.

What they are, though, is prominent. Some number of years ago, through whatever combination of quality and luck, they edged out their peers in being recommended to out-of-towners. And because people who went told their friends, who told their friends, and so on, a small initial difference quickly became magnified, just like in the music experiment.

Nothing draws a crowd like a crowd.

So before spending half the day at Disney World waiting in line for Space Mountain, or camping out overnight to get a new product, we'd be wise to consider the available alternatives. Vacations can sometimes feel like attempting to re-create a highlight reel. Waiting in line at famous site after famous site, fighting the clamoring throng to get that quintessential photo of a bridge or palace. If that's enjoyable, great, but if not, maybe take a peek around the corner. There's probably an equally good place that's not as crowded.

Finally, these findings illustrate the range of things, from trivial to profound, that are shaped by others. We tend to think that we are at the locus of our choices. Our preferences, our predilections, our internal likes and dislikes. But from the food we pick to the language we use to the products that become popular, others have a surprising impact. Ask someone whether their negotiation succeeded because their counterpart mimicked them, and they'd laugh at you like you're crazy. But that influence still shaped success.

It's clear that other people influence our behavior, often without our awareness. But does that influence always lead us to do the same thing? Or might it sometimes lead us to do something different?