

# Mimetic Learning

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*Mimetic learning, learning by imitation, constitutes one of the most important forms of learning. Mimetic learning does not, however, just denote mere imitation or copying: Rather, it is a process by which the act of relating to other persons and worlds in a mimetic way leads to an enhancement of one's own world view, action, and behaviour. Mimetic learning is productive; it is related to the body, and it establishes a connection between the individual and the world as well as other persons; it creates practical knowledge, which is what makes it constitutive of social, artistic, and practical action. Mimetic learning is cultural learning, and as such it is crucial to teaching and education (Wulf, 2004; 2005).*

## MIMETIC LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Initially, mimetic processes are mainly directed towards other people. Through them, infants and small children relate to the persons they live with: parents, older siblings, other relatives and acquaintances. The children attempt to make themselves similar to these persons, e.g. by answering a smile with a smile. However, by using their already acquired abilities, they also produce the corresponding reaction in adults. In these early processes of exchange, small children also learn emotions, among other things. They learn to create them in themselves in relation to others, and to evoke them in others. Their brain develops in this exchange with their environment, i.e. some of its possibilities are developed while others are neglected. The cultural conditions of this early life are inscribed in children's brains and bodies. If they haven't learned seeing, hearing, feeling or speaking at an early age, they won't be able to do so at a later point.

Recent research on primates has demonstrated that although elementary forms of mimetic learning can also be observed in other primates, human beings are particularly prone to learn mimetically. This insight doesn't come as a surprise to scholars in cultural studies. Even Aristotle already viewed the ability to learn mimetically, as well as human delight in mimetic processes, as a specifically human gift. During the last few years, developmental and cognitive psychologists, using insights on the social behaviour of primates and comparing it to human behaviour, have succeeded in discovering some characteristics of human learning at this early age, most specifically the distinctive character of mimetic learning in human infants and small children.

Michael Tomasello (1999, p. 161) summarizes these abilities in small children: "they identify with other persons; perceive other persons as intentional

agents like the self; engage with other persons in joint attentional activities; understand many of the causal relations that hold among physical objects and events in the world; understand the communicative intentions that other persons express in gestures, linguistic symbols, and constructions; and construct linguistically based object categories and event schemas." These abilities enable small children to take part in cultural processes. They can participate in the performance of the practices and skills of the social group they live with, thereby appropriating its cultural knowledge. The abilities described here point to the crucial importance role models have for mimetic learning processes in small children. Their ability to identify with other persons, to perceive them as intentional agents, and to engage in joint attentional activities, is tied to their mimetic desire to emulate adults, and to make themselves similar to or become like them. This desire to become similar to their elders motivates children to comprehend causal relations between physical objects in the world, to understand the communicative intentions other persons express in gestures, symbols and constructions, and to establish object categories and event schemas like them. At the age of nine months, infants have already achieved these abilities, which lie in human mimetic possibilities, and which primates have no command of at any stage of their lives.

## MIMETIC LEARNING: EDUCATION BY IMITATION IN ANTIQUITY

As far as we know today, the idea of mimesis originated in Sicily. "Mimesis" there referred to the way the "mimos" staged a farce. It was derived from everyday popular culture, from scenes staged at the celebrations of the rich, and designed to entertain them. The stagings and performances developed in this context were frequently crude and disrespectful. Thus, the concept of mimesis originally refers to performative cultural practices and has connotations distinctively sensory and related to physical movements. During the 5th century BC, the term "mimesis" is used on a larger scale in Ionia and Attica. Even in pre-Platonic times, three nuances of its meaning can be distinguished, which even today still describe crucial aspects of mimetic learning. Mimetic behaviour here refers, first, to the direct imitation of animals and persons by speech, song and dancing, then, to the imitation of human actions, and finally, to the material recreation of images of persons or things (Else, 1958: 79). In Platonic times, the word is already commonly used to denote processes of imitation, emulation, representation and expression.

It is in the third book of Plato's "Republic" that the concept of mimesis is first extended to education. According to the views developed there, education principally works by mimesis. Mimetic processes are ascribed an extraordinary power. This view is based on the strong human disposition for mimesis, which, especially in early childhood, is what makes motor, sensual, linguistic,

mental, social and personal development possible. In Plato's opinion, children and adolescents experience and acquire social behaviour in their contacts with other people and in the experience they gain of other people's behaviour. Plato therefore emphasizes the importance music, and mimetically dealing with music, has for the development of the soul's ability to experience. He distinguishes different types of music, to which he ascribes diverse effects on young people's "souls".

According to the views developed in the "Republic", young people's educational development and learning is made possible by their mimetic desire, which "forces" them to become similar to role models. By choosing the right role models, human shortcomings are to be overcome, and improvement is achieved. What is controversial about this view, though, is its radical nature, its way of determining young people's lives and experiences on the basis of a normative anthropology and a normative theory of education.

Aristotle contradicted this Platonic view. Although he was as convinced as Plato of the power of mimetic processes, he drew different conclusions from this: The inadequate and the incorrigible should not be excluded from the domain of experience; rather, they had to be confronted and dealt with, so that one could "immunize" oneself against their contagion. Not to avoid negative examples, but rather to confront them is an effective protection against their power. Otherwise, young persons remain susceptible to and defenceless against negative influences. It is only in dealing with negative role models that resistance to them and personal strength can develop. Today, similar considerations still play a role in political education. According to this view, steadfast political opinions do not develop by avoiding different opinions, but by critically dealing with them. The same is true of the opinions and values conveyed in other areas of education. Today, this position is supported by psychoanalytic knowledge, which has emphasized the negative consequences avoidance and rejection have in psychogenesis.

Because of the lasting effects of processes of mimetic learning, Plato calls for strict control of the influence their objects and contents have on the imagination, and Aristotle demands that their effects must be dealt with intensively. Since Plato we have known that it is not just ideas, attitudes, and values, but also social forms of living and acting which are learned by way of mimetic processes. Due to the different preconditions young people start out with, however, what emerges is not simply a copy of an example; the mimetic process leads to a difference which ensures the autonomy and creative character of its results. The role model appropriated in the mimetic act is, therefore, not simply a reproduction of external similarities; it is a construction on the part of the person who behaves mimetically – a construction which leaves room for difference, particularity and creativity.

#### MIMETIC LEARNING: APPROPRIATION OF THE WORLD AND THE CONSTITUTION OF THE SUBJECT

Walter Benjamin's autobiography *Berlin Childhood around 1900* provides a good example for processes of mimetic learning which involve appropriation of the world. The author describes the ways in which he, in childhood, related to places, rooms, streets, houses, objects and events, and how he made them part of his inner world of images, thereby individually "appropriating" them. Benjamin's memoirs show how the child experiences the world mimetically: Like a magician he establishes similarities between himself and the outside world; mimetically he discovers streets, squares and the various rooms of his home. His magic interpretation of the world, which views the world of things as something that is animated and responds to the child, is established in processes of making himself and the objects similar or alike: the child "reads" the world and "creates" correspondences in the process.

For instance, he becomes a "windmill" by stretching out his arms and rotating them, while producing the necessary wind with his mouth. In this way, he broadens his experience: The child understands how the wind drives the mill; he learns something of the power of wind and of the power of human use of the forces of nature. In mimetically transforming himself into a "windmill", he experiences the possibility to exercise – at least in play – power over nature. In becoming a "windmill" with his body, the child begins to make himself familiar with machinery, and with the human body as machine. At the same time he experiences his body as a means of representation and expression. Thus, he does not just gain concrete means of representation and expression – he also discovers he can make use of his body for a clearly defined purpose, and obtain social recognition by doing so. Such mimetic processes are accompanied by symbolic interpretations, so that thinking and speaking are also developed in them.

In this childhood world it is not just images but also sounds and noises as well as smells and the experience of touch, which play an important role. These non-visual impressions frequently make the images transcend into the unknown and the unconscious. Thus, the "intoxicating sound of the air" is referred to; the hum of the gas burner becomes the voice of the "little hunchback" whispering adjulatory words over the threshold of the century; and the world of visible and tangible things ends in the echo of the telephone, in its "nocturnal noises", in the invisible, the in-discernible, the anonymous.

By mimetic processes, some images and sounds of early childhood settle in the "deeper ego", from which they may be optically or acoustically recalled to consciousness. The act of remembering mimetically refers to the remembered material, which is thereby represented in a specific way, depending on the situation. Memories differ in the intensity and significance they acquire in the

moment of remembering. The difference between various acts of remembering which refer to the same event can be seen as a difference in the way it is constructed by memory and represented mimetically.

According to Benjamin, children's mimetic ability to relate to the world, to make themselves similar to it, and to read it, is incorporated into language and writing. The "mimetic gift", once the "basis for clairvoyance", creates for itself in this process in language and writing the "most perfect archive of non-sensuous similarity." In this perspective, the language children learn is "the highest application of the mimetic faculty – a medium into which the earlier perceptual capacity for recognizing the similar had, without residue, entered to such an extent that language now represents the medium in which objects encounter and come into relation with one another. No longer directly, as they once did in the mind of the augur or priest, but in their essences, in their most transient and delicate substances, even in their aromas." (Benjamin, 1999: 697f.) Being and becoming similar are factors which are essential for children's development, and gradually establish their relationship to the world, to themselves, and to language.

With the help of these processes, children place themselves inside the structural and power relations which are expressed in the symbolically encoded world, and which they are only able to distance themselves from, to criticize or to change at a later stage. With the help of their mimetic abilities, children acquire the meaning of objects and forms of representation and action. A mimetic movement serves as a bridge between children and the outside world. Their relationship to the Other – which is not to be incorporated but which they must make themselves similar to – is central to mimetic activity. This movement includes a pause in activity, a moment of passivity characteristic of the "mimetic impulse".

Mimetically encountering the world is a process which involves all the senses, the sensitivity of which is developed as a result. Having had the possibility to mimetically experience the world as a child constitutes a prerequisite for the quality of adults' later sensory and emotional sensitivity. This is especially true of the development of their aesthetic sensitivity and their ability to experience empathy, pity, affection, and love. Their mimetic abilities allow them to comprehend others' emotions without reifying them or hardening themselves against them.

#### **MIMETIC LEARNING: SOCIAL ACTION AND PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE**

The ability to act socially is acquired mimetically in cultural learning processes. This has been shown by a large amount of research conducted during the last few years. The culturally variable human abilities of play, of the exchange of gifts, and of ritual action, are developed by means of mimetic processes. To be

able to act "correctly" under given circumstances, people need practical knowledge gained in sensual and corporeal mimetic processes of learning which take place in the corresponding fields of action. The characteristics of social action in a given culture, too, can only be grasped by approaching them mimetically. Practical knowledge and social action are to a large extent the result of cultural and historical conditions.

Social actions may provisionally be described as mimetic if, as gestures, they refer to other gestures; if they can be understood as a corporeal performance or staging; and if they are autonomous actions, comprehensible on their own accord, and related to other actions or worlds. Therefore, actions like mental consideration, decisions, reflexive or routine behaviour as well as unique actions and rule violations are all non-mimetic.

Wherever somebody's actions refer to a pre-existing social practice, and create a social practice in themselves, a mimetic relationship is established between them. This is the case when a social practice is performed, when one acts according to a social model, and when one expresses certain social conceptions with the help of the body. As we have already seen, these actions are not simply imitative. Mimetic actions are by no means only reproductions faithfully copying an example. Rather, in social practices which are performed mimetically, something entirely new is created.

In contrast to processes of mimicry, which involve a mere adaptation to pre-existing conditions, mimetic processes simultaneously create similarity to and difference from the situations or persons they refer to. By "making themselves similar" to previously experienced situations and culturally formed worlds, subjects acquire the ability to find their way around a certain social field. By taking part in the practices of other persons' lives, they expand their own world and create new possibilities of action and experience for themselves. Receptivity and activity coexist here; in this process, the pre-existing world and the individuality of those who mimetically relate to it are entwined with each other. People re-create previously experienced situations or the external world, and appropriate them in this process of redoubling. It is only in dealing with the earlier situation or the outside world that they develop their own individuality. Only in this process, a person's previously unrecognized energy can take the form of individual desires and needs. Dealing with the outside world and forming the self are both part of the same system. The external and the internal world are constantly becoming similar to each other, and each can only be experienced in relation to the other. Similarities and correspondences of the external and the internal are developed. People make themselves similar to the external world and are changed in the process; this transformation alters their perception of the external world and of themselves.

The acquisition of practical knowledge in mimetic processes is not necessarily founded on similarity. When mimetic knowledge is acquired with reference to a pre-existing world of social action, or rather performative staging, only a comparison of both worlds will determine which is the mimetic point of reference. However, the starting point of a mimetic act can also be the desire to establish a magical contact. A mimetic reference is even necessary for the distinction of this kind of action from pre-existing social practices. It is only thus that the options of accepting, differing from, or rejecting pre-existing social actions are established.

In mimetic processes of learning, pre-existing social actions are repeated. In this case, reference is not established by theoretical thinking, but aesthetically, with the help of the senses; the second social action departs from the first in that it neither addresses it directly nor changes it, but simply repeats it; the mimetic action here is of an indicating and representing character; its performance produces its own aesthetic qualities. Mimetic processes refer to social worlds of human creation, which can be either factual or imaginary.

The dynamic nature of social actions results from the fact that the knowledge necessary for their staging is practical knowledge. As such, it is less subjected to rational control than analytical knowledge would be. This is also the case because practical ritual knowledge is not a reflective kind of knowledge, nor one which is aware of itself. It will only become so during conflicts and crises in which the actions resulting from this knowledge have to be justified. As long as the social practice is not questioned, however, the practical knowledge behind it remains, as it were, half-conscious. Like the knowledge which constitutes a habitus, it consists of images, concepts, and forms of action, which can be used in the scenic corporeal performance of social action without reflecting on their appropriateness. They simply are known and used for the staging of social practice.

Physical movements, too, with the help of which scenes of social action are arranged, form part of practical knowledge. When physical movements are subjected to discipline and control, a disciplined and controlled practical knowledge emerges, which – stored in the memory of the body – makes possible the staging of corresponding forms of symbolic scenic action. This practical knowledge refers to the forms of social action and representation belonging to a certain culture. Therefore, even though it is far-reaching, it is nonetheless limited in its historically and culturally determined extent.

In mimetic processes, an imitative act of changing and organizing pre-existing worlds takes place. This is where the innovative potential of mimetic acts lies. Social practices are mimetic if they refer to other actions and if they themselves can be understood as social arrangements which form social practices for themselves, in addition to referring to other actions. Social actions are

only made possible by the emergence of practical knowledge taking place in the course of mimetic processes. The practical knowledge relevant to social actions is corporeal and ludic as well as historically and culturally determined; it emerges in face-to-face-situations, and is semantically ambiguous; it has imaginary components, cannot be reduced to intentionality, contains a surplus of meaning, and can be observed in the social stagings and representations of religion, politics, and everyday life.

#### MIMETIC LEARNING: ENCULTURATION BY MAKING ONESELF SIMILAR AND BY DIFFERENCE

Finally, a couple of propositions on the significance of mimetic processes of learning for the development of societies, for the production of cultural knowledge, and for the education of subjects, will be presented.

1) The use of the term “mimesis”, differing in this from imitation and simulation, adheres to the idea of an outside, to which one can come close and make oneself similar, but into which the subject cannot “dissolve”, a difference to which therefore necessarily remains. This outside, which subjects attempt to approach, may be another person, some part of their environment, or an invented imaginary world. In each case, the subject approaches an outside world. In using the senses and the imagination to convert this outside into internal images, into the internal production of sounds, and internal worlds of touch, smell and taste, it produces vivid experience, which is tied to the ineluctable physicality of the subject.

2) Mimetic processes of learning, forming an integral part of one’s physicality, begin at a very early stage. They take place before the split into self and other and before the subject-object-division, and they are an important factor in psycho-, socio-, and personal genesis. They extend into the preconscious. Being entwined with the earliest processes of physical constitution – birth, weaning and desire – they produce lasting effects.

3) Even before the emergence of thought and language, we experience the world, ourselves and the Other mimetically. Mimetic processes are linked to the activity of the senses. It is especially for the learning of motor skills that mimetic abilities play an important role. However, language acquisition, too, would be impossible without them. In early childhood, children experience the world by way of mimetic forms of life.

4) Sexual desire is awakened and developed in mimetic processes. There, sexual difference is experienced, and sexual identity is learned and acquired.

Desire mimetically relates to another desire; it is infected and infecting; the dynamics it develops is often contrary to the intentions of the subject. Existing ideas are modified, and new ones are tried out. Again and again, new conceptions and experiments are related to. Many of these processes take place unconsciously.

**5)** Mimetic processes support the subject's polycentricity. They approach layers of physicality, sensuality and desire controlled by forces different from those which operate in consciousness. Aggression, violence and destructive impulses, which are also awakened and learned in mimetic processes, are among these. They will be particularly effective in the context of groups and masses, where the subject's centre of control and responsibility is replaced by the authority of the group or mass, which, by means of an ecstatic infection, makes destructive actions possible, of which individual subjects would not be capable on their own.

**6)** In mimetic processes, children, adolescents, and adults learn the values, attitudes, and norms embodied in the institutions of the family, the school and the firm. As the discussion about the "heimlichen Lehrplan" ("hidden curriculum"; Zinnecker, 1975) has demonstrated, the values actually at work in an institution may contradict the way it consciously sees itself. The analysis of institutions, critique of ideology, institutional consultation, and institutional change can raise awareness of these contradictions, and help to find a way of resolving them.

**7)** Analogous observations can be made about the educative and socializing effects individuals have. These work much more than it is commonly assumed by means of mimetic processes. Here, too, there is a discrepancy between the way teachers see themselves and the effects their actual behaviour has. Often, the unconscious and unwanted effects which may be imparted via the teachers' and educators' personalities have a lasting influence on children and adolescents. Especially the ways individual teachers feel, think and judge is experienced and learned through mimetic processes. In these processes, adaptation and rejection will play a different role in each case, the consequences of which are therefore difficult to assess. Partly, this difficulty in judging the effects of educators' behaviour results from the fact that the same behaviour in a teacher or educator will be assessed differently by persons in different phases of their lives.

**8)** The mimetic appropriation of places, rooms, and objects is of crucial importance for the development of the subject. From early childhood on, sub-

jects relate mimetically to the surrounding world, which is experienced as "animated". In this process of making themselves similar or alike to this world, children extend themselves into it, accord it a place in their own internal imaginary worlds, and educate themselves in the process. As this world is always historically and culturally determined, its objects being endowed with meaning, and therefore symbolically encoded, these mimetic processes also lead to children's and adolescents' enculturation.

**9)** Objects as well as institutions, imaginary characters and practical actions are embedded in the power relations at work in a given society, and these power relations are conveyed in the process of making oneself similar or alike. They are learned and experienced by means of mimetic processes, though normally without at first being understood. To comprehend what is experienced mimetically, analysis and reflection are necessary. In most cases things will only then be judged and evaluated appropriately. Mimetic processes represent an important condition for the emergence of vivid experience, but for it to develop, analysis and reflection are indispensable.

**10)** Mimetic processes are ambivalent; an impulse of becoming similar inheres them, which can also take place independent of the value the world they refer to has. Therefore, the subject can also make itself similar to something obsolete and lifeless, which can interrupt or misdirect its inner development. Mimesis can degenerate into simulation and mimicry. However, it can also lead to an extension of the subject into the surrounding world, and forge a link to the outside world and to new learning experiences. The mimetic approach to the outside world is characteristically non-violent. The mimetic process is not about forming or changing the world. Rather, it is about development and education resulting from the encounter with the world.

**11)** Through mimetic processes, a non-instrumental approach to other people can be acquired. Mimetic action leaves the Other as he or she is, without trying to change them. It comprises an openness towards the unfamiliar, accepting its existence, approaching it, but not trying to resolve the difference. The mimetic impulse towards the Other accepts its non-identity; it accepts ambiguity in favour of the Other's otherness, which could only be made unambiguous by reducing it to the same, to the known. The acceptance of ambiguity ensures the richness of experience and the otherness of the unfamiliar.

**12)** In the mimetic movement, learning takes place by interpreting, by means of a symbolically generated world, the prior world, which has itself already been interpreted. A world which has already been read is subjected to a re-rea-

ding. This is the case even with repetitions or simple reproductions: The repetition of a gesture creates meanings different from those of its first performance. It isolates an object or an event from its normal context, establishing a perspective of reception which differs from that in which the prior world is perceived. Both isolation and a change of perspective are characteristics of aesthetic processes which are derived from the close relationship existing between mimesis and aesthetics. Mimetic re-interpretation is a new kind of perception, a “seeing as” (Wittgenstein). Mimetic action involves the intention to show the symbolically generated world in such a way that it is regarded as a certain kind of world.

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