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Are attitudes contagious? Nonverbal messages

Date: August 19, 2019

Source: Northwestern University

Summary: A new study examined whether people can acquire attitudes toward other individuals from the nonverbal signals that are directed toward them.

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If you were to meet two new people, and others seem to be more friendly toward one of those individuals, would that lead you to like that individual more than the other?

A new Northwestern University study examined whether people can acquire attitudes toward other individuals from the nonverbal signals that are directed toward them.

"This is important because often we are not explicitly thinking about the nonverbal signals that people display," said Allison Skinner, formerly a postdoctoral researcher at Northwestern University, and now an assistant professor at the University of Georgia. "So we could be picking up messages from the nonverbal signals in our environment that we are not even aware of."

The researchers found that after people watched a brief silent video of individuals interacting, they acquired attitudes toward the individuals in the video based on the nonverbal signals that were displayed toward them. This was true of the attitudes that people were explicitly aware of, but this also impacted their implicit attitudes.

"This means that people were quicker to pair the individual who received positive nonverbal signals with good things, than the individual who received negative nonverbal signals," said Skinner, lead author of the study. "This was especially interesting because most of our participants did not think that the nonverbal signals that were displayed toward the individuals in the videos influenced their attitudes. Only about 30% of people indicated that how the individuals were treated influenced their attitudes toward them."

Skinner said the fact that people often attributed their attitudes to the behavior of the recipients of nonverbal signals was eye opening.

"Even though we edited the videos so that the targets of nonverbal signals all responded in the same way -- whether they received positive or negative nonverbal signals, and only the nonverbal signals that they received varied, a substantial proportion of participants attributed their attitudes to the targets' behavior," Skinner said.

"This has important implications for how people make sense of the nonverbal messages that they are exposed to in everyday life. These findings suggest that when we see people being less friendly toward one individual relative to another, we often attribute the unfriendliness to the target. Believing that we like them less because they do not seem to be very friendly, when in fact, it is others who were not very friendly to them."

Skinner said it is possible that this research also may lay the foundation for group-based biases.

"These studies build upon prior work showing that attitudes toward racial groups can be influenced by nonverbal signals," Skinner said. "For example, white people in the U.S. who observe white people displaying negative nonverbal signals toward black people tend to go on to show more anti-black bias than those who were exposed to a positive nonverbal signals directed toward a black person."

Co-author Sylvia Perry said their findings suggests that, even in contexts in which people's attitudes toward others are relatively neutral to begin with, the nonverbal signals that they observe can create new attitudes toward unfamiliar others.

"I think this has important implications for our understanding of how we develop biases toward social groups, in general -- even from a young age," said Perry, assistant professor of psychology in the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern and a faculty fellow with the University's Institute for Policy Research.

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Materials provided by **Northwestern University**. Original written by Hilary Hurd Anyaso. *Note: Content may be edited for style and length.*

Journal Reference:

1. Allison L. Skinner, Sylvia Perry. **Are Attitudes Contagious? Exposure to Biased Nonverbal Signals Can Create Novel Social Attitudes.** *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 2019; 014616721986261 DOI: 10.1177/0146167219862616

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