

MIMETIC

Authored by
mohammad looti

November 1, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *MIMETIC*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=63414>

MIMETIC

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology (Developmental and Social), **Sociology**, **Anthropology**, **Philosophy**, **Literary Theory**

1. Core Definition of Mimetic Action

The term **mimetic**, derived from the Greek word *mimesis* (imitation), describes the umbrella process by which an individual replicates or copies the behavior, actions, or characteristics of another individual or entity. In the context of behavioral science, **mimetic action** is foundational to social interaction and learning, often serving as a primary mechanism for the acquisition of complex skills, cultural norms, and linguistic abilities. This process is not restricted to conscious, deliberate copying; it encompasses a wide range of phenomena from unconscious physiological synchronization (such as yawning or mirroring posture) to sophisticated observational learning utilized for cognitive and motor development. The fundamental drive toward imitation is deeply rooted in primate and human development, providing an essential pathway for rapidly internalizing successful strategies observed in kin or group members, thereby ensuring continuity and efficiency in social groups.

While simple repetition might be involved, true **mimetic learning** typically implies a deeper cognitive process involving the identification of intentionality and the goals behind the observed actions. For instance, in developmental psychology, a young child does not merely replicate the physical movements of a parent operating a complex tool; rather, the child attempts to reproduce the desired outcome and the overall sequence of actions necessary to achieve that outcome. This focus on reproducing goals distinguishes true imitation from mere stimulus enhancement or localized copying. The initial source content highlights this function, noting that a young chimpanzee copies its parents' actions in order to learn them, illustrating the crucial role of mimetics in vertical cultural transmission across species lines.

Furthermore, the psychological application of mimetics extends beyond purely instrumental learning into the realm of social bonding and relationship formation. The source content explicitly states that the process of mimicking is understood as a method for forming relationships. This perspective emphasizes the role of behavioral synchronization--often subtle and unconscious--in fostering empathy, trust, and group cohesion. When individuals mirror each other's expressions, vocal tones, or subtle gestures, it often signals affiliation and attentiveness, reinforcing social bonds and facilitating smoother communication. This deep-seated propensity for mirroring suggests that **mimetics** are not merely a learning tool but a fundamental component of human sociality and emotional regulation.

2. Etymology and Historical Development (Mimesis)

The concept underlying **mimetic** behavior, known broadly as **mimesis**, possesses a profound and lengthy history within Western philosophy, originating in Ancient Greece. The term initially meant imitation, representation, or sometimes specifically ritual performance. Its earliest systematic articulation is found in the works of Plato, who viewed mimesis primarily through an ontological and epistemological lens. Plato considered artistic imitation (such as poetry or painting) to be a secondary, imperfect copy of the physical world, which itself was an imperfect copy of the ultimate, true Forms. Consequently, Plato often critiqued mimesis as misleading or potentially dangerous because it moved the observer further away from truth and reason, appealing instead to base emotions.

In contrast, Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, redefined mimesis as a natural and beneficial human impulse. For Aristotle, imitation was not merely copying, but rather a creative act of representation that allowed humans to learn, understand, and derive pleasure from viewing fictional or dramatic portrayals of life. He argued that tragedy, for example, achieves its purpose (catharsis) through a structured, lifelike representation (mimesis) of serious action. This positive reinterpretation cemented mimesis as a central concept in aesthetics, literary theory, and rhetoric, defining the relationship between art and reality for centuries.

In the modern era, the understanding of mimetics bifurcated. On one hand, philosophical and literary studies continued to explore mimesis as representation--the relationship between text, art, and the world. On the other hand, the emerging fields of psychology and ethology adopted the term **mimetic action** to describe concrete, observable behavioral processes like imitation, mirroring, and social learning. This shift refocused the term from abstract representation to functional behavior, linking its study intrinsically to developmental processes in both human and animal cognition, moving from metaphysical concerns to empirical investigation.

3. Mimetic Learning in Developmental Psychology

Within developmental psychology, **mimetic learning** is identified as one of the most critical mechanisms for cultural transmission and cognitive development during early childhood. Children are highly attuned to social cues and rely extensively on observing and replicating the behaviors of competent models, typically parents, caregivers, and peers. This learning strategy allows for the rapid acquisition of language, motor skills, social protocols, and complex tool use without requiring tedious trial-and-error experimentation. Studies often differentiate between *emulation* (copying results) and *imitation* (copying methods), with true mimetic learning typically encompassing the latter, more sophisticated process.

A key theoretical framework that incorporates mimetics is Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (later Social Cognitive Theory). Bandura posited that learning occurs through observation,

imitation, and modeling, a process heavily reliant on cognitive factors such as attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. According to this model, children observe a behavior (e.g., aggression or cooperation), store a symbolic representation of it, and then reproduce the behavior if they anticipate a positive reinforcement or outcome. This demonstrates how **mimetic behavior** acts as a bridge between purely environmental conditioning and internal cognitive processing.

The capacity for accurate and complex imitation is considered a hallmark of advanced cognition. Researchers often investigate the neurological basis of mimetics, focusing on the discovery and function of mirror neurons. These specialized neurons fire both when an individual performs an action and when the individual observes another performing the same action. The mirror neuron system is theorized to be central to processes like empathy, motor skill learning, and understanding the intentions of others, providing a neurological substrate for the pervasive nature of **mimetic responses** in social settings.

4. The Theory of Mimetic Desire (René Girard)

A highly influential and distinct application of the term **mimetic** comes from the work of French philosopher and literary theorist René Girard. Girard's theory of **Mimetic Desire** fundamentally redefines imitation not merely as a learning process, but as the core dynamic driving human relationships, culture, and conflict. According to Girard, human desire is never spontaneous or autonomous; rather, it is always mediated. We do not desire an object directly; we desire it because someone else (the mediator or model) desires it first.

Girard identifies two main types of mimetic desire. The first, *external mediation*, occurs when the model is distant or clearly separated from the subject (e.g., desiring a celebrity's lifestyle). This relationship is generally stable. The second, and more crucial, is *internal mediation*, where the model and the subject are close contemporaries competing for the same object. As the desire for the object increases in both parties, the model transforms into a rival, leading to increasing tension and eventual conflict. This escalation of competitive imitation is what Girard calls the **mimetic crisis**.

The profound impact of Girard's theory lies in its explanation of violence and cultural structure. He argues that unchecked mimetic rivalry threatens the existence of the community. Societies resolve this crisis through the mechanism of the **scapegoat**--a random victim upon whom all mimetic hostility is projected and resolved through a communal act of violence. The resulting peace reinforces the belief that the scapegoat was truly guilty, thus founding early religious and social structures based on collective violence and subsequent ritualized mimesis of that founding act.

5. Mimetic Action in Cultural Anthropology and Sociology

In anthropology and sociology, **mimetic behavior** is crucial for understanding cultural stability and

change. Cultural norms, rituals, and practices are transmitted vertically (parent to child) and horizontally (peer to peer) through pervasive imitation. This transmission mechanism ensures that complex behavioral patterns specific to a group--such as specific farming techniques, ceremonial dances, or dialectical nuances--are accurately passed down across generations, giving rise to unique cultural identities.

Sociologically, the concept of mimetics is also integrated into studies of group behavior, conformity, and trends. Phenomena such as stock market bubbles, fashion cycles, and mass hysteria often rely on strong **mimetic cascades**, where individuals act not based on independent assessment, but on the observation and imitation of the actions of others. The pressure to conform, or to adopt behaviors that signal status or belonging, provides powerful social motivation for continuous mimetic engagement, demonstrating how deeply ingrained the need to copy and be copied is within human collectives.

6. Criticisms and Limitations of Mimetic Theories

Despite the explanatory power of **mimetic theories** across disciplines, they face several important criticisms. In psychology, a major debate revolves around the precise mechanism of imitation versus other forms of social learning, such as goal emulation or affordance learning. Critics argue that attributing complex learned behavior solely to "mimetic action" often oversimplifies the cognitive processes involved, neglecting the role of executive function, working memory, and planning that must accompany simple copying. Furthermore, it is challenging to isolate pure imitation in research settings, as motivation and context significantly influence whether an observed behavior is adopted.

Regarding Girard's theory of Mimetic Desire, common criticisms focus on its sweeping scope and its perceived reductionism, particularly its claim that all desire originates mimetically and that all culture is founded on scapegoating violence. Critics from sociological perspectives argue that Girard underestimates the role of structural factors (like economic inequality or political power) in generating conflict, suggesting that violence arises from material causes rather than purely internal, relational processes of desire. Additionally, some philosophical critiques question the historical universality of the scapegoating mechanism as the sole origin of religion and culture.

In aesthetics, the classical critique of mimesis often returns to Plato's worry: that imitation can degrade truth. Modern critics sometimes contend that focusing too heavily on mimesis (representation) in art ignores the non-representational aspects, such as abstract forms, emotional expression, or pure creative novelty that does not seek to copy reality but rather to construct new realities. Nonetheless, the pervasive nature of imitation and representation ensures that **mimetic analysis** remains a vital tool for understanding both individual behavior and the complex dynamics of cultural development.

Further Reading

[Mimesis - Wikipedia](#)

[Plato's Aesthetics \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

[René Girard's Mimetic Theory \(Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

[Social Learning Theory \(Albert Bandura\)](#)

ARABPSYCHOLOGY.COM