

## PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS RELATED TO SUSCEPTIBILITY TO BEHAVIORAL CONTAGION

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The concept of behavioral contagion first introduced by Le Ban (1895) has been employed to explain the spread of mood, attitude, and behavior from 1 person to another or from 1 person to a whole group, or even from 1 group of persons to another group. Social scientists since then have also suggested that certain behaviors are inherently more “infectious” than others, especially those that are associated with incidents of “mass phenomena”. It has also been suggested that a “contagious process” underlies the apparently immediate spread of behavior that sometimes occurs in group situations such as in crowds or other gatherings.

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Recently, however, the term “behavioral contagion” has been used to convey the same meaning associated with behaviors in crowds and crowd-like situations, with some explanations of how such behaviors occur. For instance, Wheeler (1966) gave a description of the considerations that must be fulfilled before we can say that “behavior contagion” occurs. He gave, as an example, a situation in which an individual is not sure whether or not to perform an act. If another person then performs that action and the former person then acts in the same way as the latter, then “behavioral contagion” is said to have occurred. Thus in such circumstances, according to Wheeler, another person’s behavior reduces an individual’s own restraint from such act.

It appears, then, that behavioral contagion is a kind of spontaneous, unsolicited and uncritical imitation of another’s behavior. This occurs when (a) the follower and the initiator are in a similar situation or mood; (b) the initiator’s behavior encourages the follower to review his condition and to change it; (c) the initiator’s behavior, if copied, would assist the follower to resolve a conflict by reducing restraints; and (d) the initiator is assumed to be a positive reference individual. From the above it is reasonable to suggest that restraint reduction is a necessary condition for the occurrence of behavior contagion. However, restraints are not invariably reduced when there is a coincidence of behavior of the initiator and that of the follower. Many other factors may influence the imitation of the initiator’s behavior by the follower. One such factor is the personality of the follower. Personality characteristics are surely among the factors determining an individual’s acceptance of a particular group as a reference group or the acceptance of another individual as a reference individual.

A number of empirical studies have been conducted to examine the relationship between susceptibility to persuasion and certain personality traits. One of the earliest of these studies was the relationship between susceptibility to influence and the level of

intelligence. (Intelligence is one of the cognitive traits of personality.) For instance, Murphy et al. (1937) found that studies on the relationship between level of intelligence and susceptibility to persuasion which were reported up to 1937 showed almost a zero correlation. Of late, Smith et al. (1964) have found no relationship between intelligence and conformity situations and susceptibility to influence. The general conclusion that could be drawn from these studies is that there is little, if any, correlation between general intelligence and resistance to persuasion. The inconclusiveness of the results could be due to the fact that personality traits were used instead of personality types, as personality traits are generally unitary rather than composite. For instance, an individual could be described as aggressive, intelligent, and of low self-esteem. Thus by studying the relationship between susceptibility and the above traits the same individual would be susceptible to persuasion on one occasion and resistant on another, depending on the particular trait we study at any one time. It is therefore suggested that it is better to adopt a much more unifying and composite scheme of classifying personality factors; that is, a "type approach of personality".

The attempt to classify human beings according to types has a fairly long history. Jung (1923) has classified human beings into two categories: extrovert and introvert. The modern trend in personality typology is to neglect the notion of introverts and extroverts as two separate personality categories in favor of the trend in which one would assign each person a position on the introversion-extroversion continuum.

Eysenck and Eysenck (1963), who have done a lot of work on personality typology, have recently described a typical extrovert in a way similar to the description given by Jung (1923). A typical extrovert is described as one who is sociable, likes parties, has many friends, needs to have people to talk to, and does not like reading or studying by himself. He craves excitement, takes chances, often sticks his neck out, acts on the spur of the moment, and is generally an impulsive individual. He is fond of practical jokes, always has a ready answer, and generally likes change; he is carefree, optimistic, and likes to "laugh and be merry". He prefers to keep moving and doing things, tends to be aggressive, and loses his temper quickly.

The typical introvert, on the other hand, is described as one who is a quiet, retiring sort of person, introspective, fond of books rather than people; he is reserved and distant except with intimate friends. He tends to plan ahead, "looks before he leaps", and distrusts the impulse of the moment. He does not like excitement, takes matters of everyday life with proper seriousness, and likes a well-ordered mode of life. He keeps his feelings under close control, seldom behaves in an aggressive manner, and does not lose his temper easily. He is reliable, somewhat pessimistic, and places great value on ethical standards.

Given the set of conditions, as mentioned above, under which behavioral contagion occurs, it could be argued that extroverts will be more susceptible to contagion than introverts, especially when the two types of people are in a similar and unstructured situation of social interactions. Homans (1961) has suggested that an interaction between people invokes an exchange of costs and rewards by the participants. People in an exchange relationship with one another will expect that their rewards, costs, and investments should be proportional respectively. If this expectation is violated, thereby creating injustice, those to whose disadvantage injustice operates will attempt

to redress injustice. One way of redressing injustice, especially in our experimental setup, is by behavioral responses. Extroverts, being generally more impulsive than introverts, are likely to show more behavioral responses in redressing injustice than introverts. Formally stated, our hypothesis was that in an unstructured situation where injustice exists, extroverts would show greater behavioral responses than introverts.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 64 males from a Nigerian university, aged between 19 and 24 years ( $M = 22.6$ ). They completed form B of the Eysenck Personality Inventory (EPI) (1964), and returned for another session of the experiment one week later.

### PROCEDURE

As soon as the EPI forms were completed, the extroversion/introversion statements on the inventory were scored. Participants who scored four or more points above the mean of the standardization group for the normal population (Eysenck, 1964) were regarded as extroverts, and those who scored four or more points below the mean were introverts. The reported mean score of the standardization group of normal participants for form B of the EPI was 14.148 ( $SD = 3.920$ ).

Participants were randomly assigned to two conditions: control or experimental. Each condition contained four extroverts and four introverts; in all, there were four control groups and four experimental groups.

At the start of each session, participants were taken to a normal room in the university where chairs and tables were arranged in a horseshoe formation. Participants were told to occupy any chair of their choice. After they had taken up their seats, they were each given a pile of sheets containing dotted outlines of six different geometric figures, and five pencils. Participants were told that the experiment was designed to investigate deterioration in perceptual ability when performing a task at a very high speed. They were asked to join the dots on the sheets of paper by straight lines in such a way that the dots would form geometric figures, and the lines would not cross. Participants were instructed not to stop work under any condition until the experimenter asked them to.

In the control group, all the participants continued with their work until the end of the session. In the experimental group, on the other hand, a collaborator who was coached to behave in a predetermined way by stopping work at some intervals was introduced. After the experiments, participants were debriefed and explanations were offered about the tricks played on them and why the tricks were thought necessary.

### COLLECTION OF DATA

Data included in this study were the numbers of geometric figures completed by participants. Figures which were drawn without joined dots were excluded from the data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before we consider whether or not our hypothesis is supported, it must be established that in the control condition, where there was no collaborator, there was no

difference in behavioral responses between the extroverts and introverts. Table 1 gives the mean scores of the subjects and the standard deviation. By the use of Mann-Whitney U Test, there is no statistical difference between the scores of the extroverts and introverts ( $p = 0.343$ ).

**TABLE 1**  
**SCORES OF PARTICIPANTS**

	E Mean Scores	SD	I Mean Scores	SD
Control group	578	197	520	203
Experimental group	431	20	511	112

The general hypothesis in this study was that extroverted participants are more likely to be more susceptible to behavioral contagion than introverted participants. A Mann-Whitney U Test comparing the scores of the extroverts with those of introverts showed that the differences between their scores reached statistical significance at the 0.01 level ( $p = 0.014$ ). Thus our hypothesis was supported.

With respect to the general nature of contagion, we found that extroverts are more susceptible to contagion than introverts. This finding may well be due to the fact that contagion in our experimental design involved breaking of rules; and, according to Eysenck's account of socialization, extroverts break rules more than introverts. However, contagion need not be restricted to rule-breaking or any other misbehavior. In fact, our finding is still relevant to the general nature of contagion. We have defined contagion as the spontaneous, uncritical, and unsolicited imitation of another person's behavior; and since extroverts have been described as impulsive, sociable and carefree, and introverts, on the other hand, have been described as reserved and introspective, it is sound to suggest that extroverts would "contage" more than introverts.

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