



Imitation of bad examples

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"Smart people learn from their mistakes. But the real sharp ones learn from the mistakes of others" (Mull, 2006)

How would you call those who instead **imitate** mistakes?



Michael Sobolev



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Examples for imitation of bad examples

- Abnormal behavior:
 - The “Werther Effect” (copycat suicides) (Phillips, 1974; Stack, 2000)
 - Anorexics learning bad habits from other anorexics (e.g. for weight loss & self-harm)
- Organizational behavior
 - Copying failed practices of other companies (O’Neill, Pouder, & Buchholtz, 1998)
 - Hiring a person who performed miserably in another company (Haunschild and Miner, 1997)
 - Buying a book following negative book review (Berger, Sorensen, & Rasmussen, 2010)

- Negative publicity might therefore lead to *imitation* of failed practices
- Along this line, deterrence might also be counterproductive in some cases;
- When is it good to publish that a person was punished, and when it is bad?

Possible contributors

- “Copycat” behavior, either due to
 - “Blind” imitation
 - Perceived dissimilarity

- “Inspired exploration”:
 - Observing failures reveals something new about the set of strategies and *inspires* to explore *similar* strategies

In the present study:

- We used a decisions-from-experience task
Lower case 2nd (bf) led to safe outcome:
+1, or -1 with equal probability (EV=0).

Upper case 2nd (bF) implied a risk and bad choice:
95% to gain 2 ; -40 otherwise (EV=-.1).
- We manipulated initial experience with different strategies (Default-Upper case; Default-Lower case).
- We introduced the possibility of observing another's decisions
- Dependent measure: Imitation (use of upper case, bad choice)

Procedure

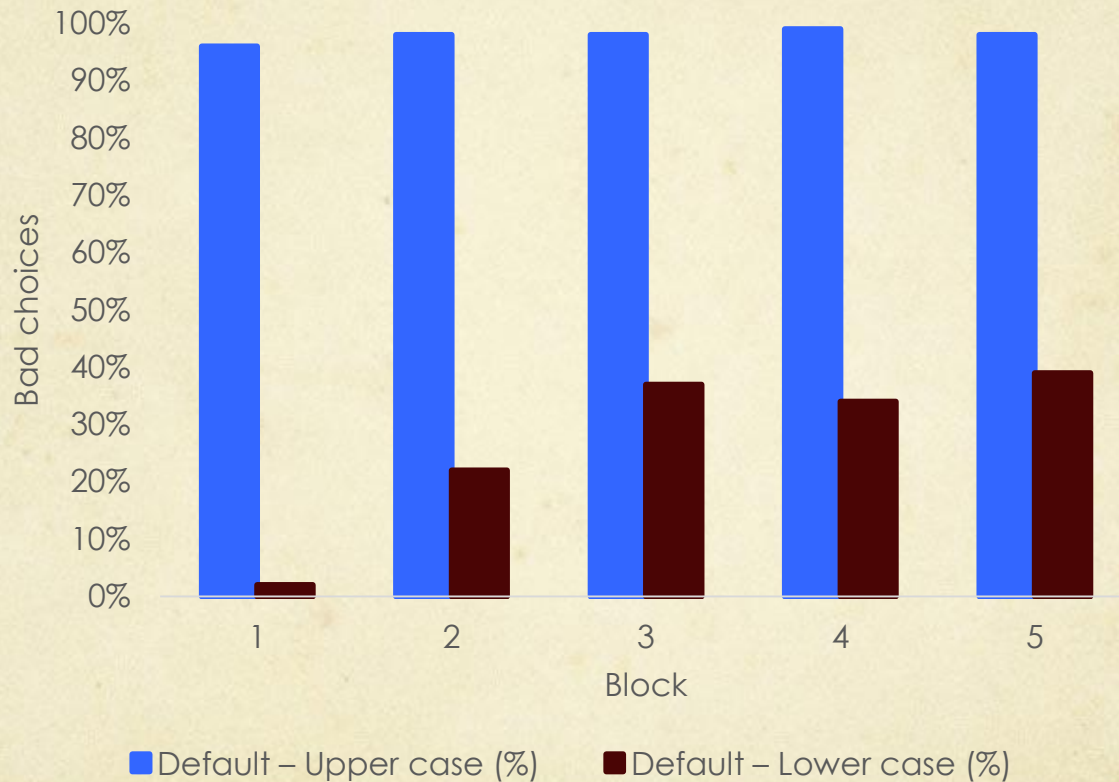
Main

Please enter one letter in each textbox.
Each combination will give you a payoff.
You can use each combination only once.

Trial: 3

**Your payoff for this trial is 2.
Please select again.**

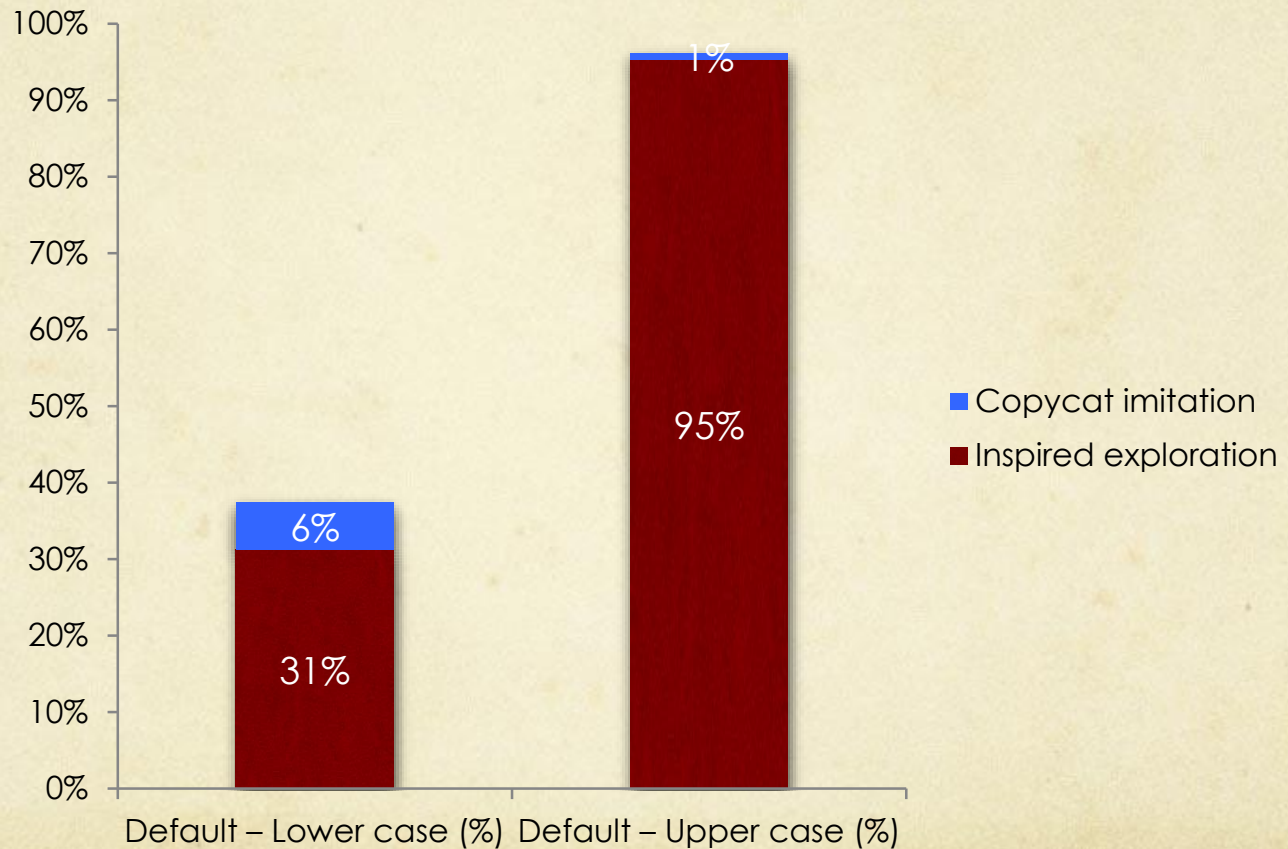
% of upper case letters (“bad choices”) as a function of experience



N=34

- In the “default-upper case” condition, 4 participants tried using lower case (“good choice”) at least once. Of these, 2 gave up quickly and returned to upper case (“bad choice”), and 2 continued trying (more than 10 trials).

Copycat imitation or Inspired exploration?



Summary

- Observation of mistakes made by others inspires exploration of **similar** strategies. This tendency can be **adaptive** in many settings, but when the set of bad strategies is large, and when most experiences with the bad strategies are reinforcing, it **impairs** choice behavior.
- Why is this important?

Future directions

- Examine the boundary conditions for imitation of bad examples
- Distinguish between two explanations for “copycat” (perfect) imitation:
 - Blind imitation
 - Perception of dissimilarity
- *Extend models of decisions from experience to captures imitation*



Thank you!

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