

Emotional Contagion

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Emotional contagion is the tendency to catch and feel emotions that are similar to and influenced by those of others. One view developed by John Cacioppo of the underlying mechanism is that it represents a tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person and, consequently, to converge emotionally. A broader definition of the phenomenon was suggested by Sigal G. Barsade--"a process in which a person or group influences the emotions or behavior of another person or group through the conscious or unconscious induction of emotion states and behavioral attitudes".

Research

Emotional contagion may be involved in mob psychology crowd behaviors, like collective fear, disgust, or moral outrage, but also emotional interactions in smaller groups such as work negotiation, teaching and persuasion/propaganda contexts. It is also the phenomenon when a person (especially a child) appears distressed because another person is distressed, or happy because they are happy. The ability to transfer moods appears to be innate in humans. Emotional contagion and empathy have an interesting relationship; for without an ability to differentiate between personal and pre-personal experience (see individuation), they appear the same. In *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm explores the autonomy necessary for empathy which is not found in contagion. Fromm extolled the virtues of humans taking independent action and using reason to establish moral values rather than adhering to authoritarian moral values. Recognizing emotions and acknowledging their cause can be one way to avoid emotional contagion. Transfers of emotions have been studied in different situations and settings. Social and physiological causes are the two largest areas of research.

In addition to the social contexts discussed above, emotional contagion is a concept that has been studied within organizations. Schrock, Leaf, and Rohr (2008) discuss that organizations, like societies, have emotion cultures that consist of languages, rituals, and meaning systems, including rules about the feelings workers should, and should not, feel and display. They state that the concept of emotion culture is quite similar to the notion of "emotion climate" (p. 46), which has also been synonymously referred to as morale, organizational morale, and corporate morale. Furthermore, Worline, Wrzesniewski, and Rafaeli (2002) make mention that organizations have an overall "emotional capability" (p. 318), while McColl-Kennedy and Smith (2006) examine the concept of "emotional contagion" (p. 255) specifically in customer interactions. These terms are arguably all attempting to describe a similar phenomenon; each term is different from one another in subtle and somewhat indistinguishable ways. Future research might consider where and how the meanings of these terms intersect, as well as how they differ.

Implicit emotional contagion

Unlike cognitive contagion, emotional contagion is less conscious and more automatic. It relies mainly on non-verbal communication, although it has been demonstrated that emotional contagion can, and does, occur via telecommunication. For example, people interacting through E-mails and "chats" are affected by the other's emotions, without being able to perceive the non-verbal cues.

One view, proposed by Hatfield and colleagues, describes the emotional contagion process as a primitive, automatic and unconscious behavior. According to them, it takes place through a series of steps. When a receiver is interacting with a sender, he perceives the emotional expressions of the sender. The receiver automatically mimics those emotional expressions. Through the process of afferent feedback, these new expressions are translated into feeling the emotions the sender feels, thus leading to emotional convergence. Another view, emanating from social comparison theories, sees emotional contagion as demanding more cognitive effort and being more conscious. According to this view, people engage in social comparison to see if their emotional reaction is congruent with the persons around them. In this case, the recipient uses the emotion as a type of social information to understand how he or she should be feeling.

People respond differentially to positive and negative stimuli, and negative events tend to elicit stronger and quicker emotional, behavioral, and cognitive responses than neutral or positive events. Thus, unpleasant emotions are more likely to lead to mood contagion than are pleasant emotions. Another variable that needs to be taken into account is the energy level at which the emotion is displayed. As higher energy causes more attention to it, the prediction is that the same emotional valence (pleasant or unpleasant) expressed with high energy will lead to more contagion than if expressed with low energy.

Explicit emotional contagion

Contrary to the automatic infection of feelings described above, there are times when others' emotions are being manipulated by a person or a group in order to achieve something. This can be a result of intentional affective influence by a leader or team member. Suppose this person wants to convince the others in something, he may do so by sweeping them in his enthusiasm. In such a case, his positive emotions are an act with a purpose of "contaminating" the others' feelings. A different kind of intentional mood contagion is by giving the group a reward, or treat, in order to alleviate their feelings.

In the organizational psychology literature, a growing body of research is dedicated to the aspects of emotional labor. In short, it deals with the need to manage emotions so that they are consistent with organizational or occupational display rules, regardless of whether they are discrepant with internal feelings. In regard to emotional contagion, in work settings that require a certain display of emotions, one finds himself obligated to display, and consequently feel, these emotions. In a process where surface acting develops into deep acting, emotional contagion is the byproduct of

intentional affective impression management.

Factors influencing group contagion

There are several factors which determine the rate and extent of emotional convergence in a group. Some of these are: membership stability, mood-regulation norms, task interdependence and social interdependence.

Besides these event-structure properties, there are personal properties of the group's members, such as openness to receive and transmit feelings, demographic characteristics and dispositional affect, that influence the intensity of emotional contagion.

Evolutionary point of view

A somewhat different explanation of the emotional contagion phenomenon is provided by evolutionary theorists: "Given that emotions function to help humans adapt to social situations it makes sense that one person's emotion would affect another's. Just as herd animals would benefit from rapidly passing messages about risk and reward, emotional contagion seems to be adaptive for humans to function in groups. This system can enable a rapid communication of opportunity and risk, mediate a group interaction, and help humans attend to social rules and norms such as maintaining harmonious interaction with a powerful ally".

Consequences in organizations and workplaces

Intragroup emotional contagion

Many organizations and workplaces are currently encouraging team-work. This is a move driven by studies conducted by organizational psychologists that highlight the benefits of work-teams. Also, putting people together as a group and expecting everything to pass quietly is being naïve. Emotions come into play and a "group emotion" (Emotional transmission) is formed.

The group's emotional state has an influence on factors such as cohesiveness, moral, rapport and the team's performance. For this reason, organizations need to take into account the factors that shape the emotional state of the work-teams, in order to harness the beneficial sides and avoid the detrimental sides of the group's emotion. Managers and team leaders should be even more cautious with their behavior, since their emotional influence is greater than that of a "regular" team member. It has been shown that leaders are more emotionally "contagious" than others.

Employee-customer emotional contagion

The interaction between service employees and customers is considered an essential part of both customers' assessments of service quality and their relationship with the service provider. Positive affective displays in service interactions are positively associated with important customer outcomes, such as intention to return and to recommend the store to a friend. It is the interest of organizations that their customers be happy, since a happy customer is a satisfied one. Research has shown that the emotional state of the customer is directly influenced by the emotions displayed by the employee/service provider via emotional contagion. But, this influence is dependent on the degree of authenticity of the employee's emotional display, such that if the employee is only surface-acting, the contagion of the customer is poor, in which case the beneficial effects stated above will not occur.

Married couples

Robert Levenson, Ph.D., researches human psychophysiology. Levenson uses longitudinal studies of married couples' physiological responses. He measures how empathy requires a calm and receptive emotional environment for the couple to be in physiological sync. When an emotional hijacking is taking place (anger or argument) empathy declines and the cognitions of the spouse are blocked. Dr. Ed Diener maintains that genetics influences our positive and negative dispositions. David Lykken offers an emotional set point theory he backs up with habitability studies of twins.

Children

Psychologist Elaine Hatfield theorizes emotional contagions as a two-step process: Step 1: We imitate people, if someone smiles at you, you smile back. Step 2: Changes in mood through faking it. If you smile you feel happy, if you frown you feel bad. Mimicry seems to be one foundation of emotional movement between people. Hour old infants are wired to mimic a person's facial gestures. When you smile, the baby will smile.

Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D., uses synchrony games to build children's learning that "your actions matter and can control outcomes". When a baby bangs on a table the adult bangs on the table, replicating the action. This is one way emotional learning can be validated by an adult.

Neurological mechanisms

Vittorio Gallese posits that mirror neurons are responsible for intentional attunement in relation to others. Gallese and colleagues at the University of Parma found a class of neurons in the premotor cortex that discharge when macaque monkeys execute goal-related hand movements or when they watch others doing the same action. One class of these neurons fires with action execution

and observation, and with sound production of the same action. Research in humans shows an activation of the premotor cortex and parietal area of the brain for action perception and execution. Gallese continues his dialogue to say humans understand emotions through a simulated shared body state. The observers' neural activation enables a direct experiential understanding. "Unmediated resonance" is a similar theory by Goldman and Sripada (2004). Empathy can be a product of the functional mechanism in our brain that creates embodied simulation. The other we see or hear becomes the "other self" in our minds. Other researchers have shown that observing someone else's emotions recruits brain regions involved in (a) experiencing similar emotions and (b) produce similar facial expressions. This combination of activations indicates that the observer activates (a) a representation of the emotional feeling of the other individual which would lead to emotional contagion and (b) a motor representation of the observed facial expression that could lead to facial mimicry. In the brain, understanding and sharing other individuals' emotions would thus be a combination of emotional contagion and facial mimicry. Importantly, more empathic individuals activate the brain regions involved in their own emotions more strongly while witnessing the emotions of other individuals.

Amygdala

The amygdala is the part of the brain mechanism that underlies empathy and allows for emotional attunement and creates the pathway for emotional contagions. The basal areas including the brain stem form a tight loop of biological connectedness, re-creating in one person the physiological state of the other. Howard Friedman, a psychologist at the University of California at Irvine thinks this is why some people can move and inspire others. The use of facial expressions, voices, gestures and body movements transmit emotions to an audience from a speaker.

Insulation and inoculation

The concept of insulating oneself from emotional contagion is called emotional detachment. Alexithymic conditions may be one avenue people use to avoid emotional contagions. Primary alexithymia has a distinct neurological basis and a physical cause, such as genetic abnormality, disrupted biological development or traumatic brain injury (an example would be stroke). Secondary alexithymia results from psychological influences such as sociocultural conditioning, neurotic retroflection or defense against trauma. Secondary is often seen in post-traumatic stress patients. Secondary alexithymia is presumed to be more transient than primary alexithymia and hence more likely to respond to therapy or training.

Howard Gardner has developed his multiple intelligence theory to include:

interpersonal intelligence, which is concerned with the capacity to understand the intentions, motivations and desires of other people. It allows people to work effectively with others. Educators,

salespeople, religious and political leaders and counselors all need a well-developed interpersonal intelligence.

intrapersonal intelligence, which entails the capacity to understand oneself, to appreciate one's feelings, fears and motivations. In Howard Gardner's view it involves having an effective working model of us, and to be able to use such information to regulate our lives.

The use of interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence can create an atmosphere of growth for individuals.

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