

Emotional Contagion

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Introduction and overview

Introduction

For over a decade, Richard L. Rapson and I (Elaine Hatfield) have worked together as therapists. Often, as we talk through the sessions over dinner, we are struck by how easy it is to catch the rhythms of our clients' feelings from moment to moment and, in consequence, how profoundly our moods can shift from hour to hour.

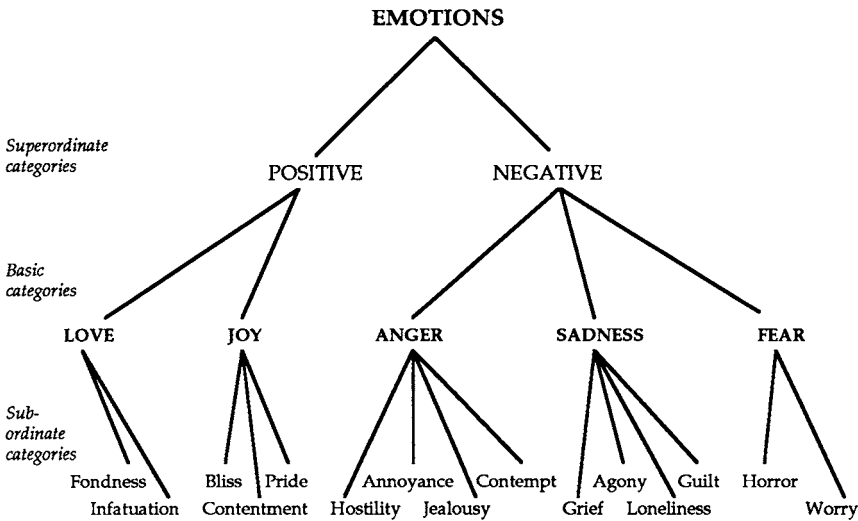
One day, for example, Dick complained irritably at the end of a session: "I really felt out on a limb today. I kept hoping you'd come in and say something, but you just left me hanging there. What was going on?" I was startled. He had been brilliant during the hour, and I had not been able to think of a thing to add; in fact, I had felt out of *my* depth and ill at ease the whole time. As we replayed the session, we realized that both of us had felt on the spot, anxious, and incompetent. The cause of our anxiety soon became clear. We had been so focused on our own responsibilities and feelings that we had missed how anxious our client had been. We had been taken in by her calm, cool cover-up. Later, she admitted that she had been afraid the whole hour that we would ask her about her drug use and discover that she had returned to her abusive, drug-dealing husband.

Generally, it is fairly easy to recognize that you are tracking a client's emotion. You quickly learn to recognize the flash of anger that you feel at clients who are seething with hidden anger at you and the rest of the world. Then there is the dead, sleepy feeling you get when talking . . . ever so slowly . . . to a depressed client. I am so prone to the deadening effects of the depressed that it is hard to keep even a minimal conversation going with them; I keep finding myself sinking off into sleep.

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Dick and I were a bit slower to recognize that we experienced the same emotional contagion in private, personal encounters as well. The clear recognition of how pervasive such automatic emotional resonances are, and the resolution to discover more about this fascinating process, came from a single incident. One of my colleagues at the University of Hawaii, a world-famous scholar and scientist, is arrogant, hard driving, and successful. Although we were close friends and political allies, every time I talked with him I came away from the conversation feeling that I had said something stupid and had bored him. I felt awkward, uncomfortable, and ill at ease, and resolved after each encounter to try harder the next time. After three years of working as a therapist I suddenly realized, in the midst of a particularly painful conversation, what was going on. Here, too, I had been blinded by focusing overmuch on what *I* was doing wrong. I had come up with attributions that dealt entirely with my own contribution to the continuing fiasco, but been oblivious to what was going on with him! In a social interaction, focusing *only* on oneself or *only* on the other can be equally blinding. The most information can be gained by alternately checking one's own reactions and observing one's partners, and now and then moving to a different level of analysis to focus on what is going on in the interaction. As I stepped back and analytically began to assess what *my colleague* was feeling and saying, I realized that he was acutely anxious. I soon observed that although he was a big bear of a man, dominant and forceful, he was *always* ill at ease in conversation. Brief expressions of anxiety crossed his face, his voice rose, he twitched, shifting his weight nervously from foot to foot. The next time we met, I reminded myself that I did not need to focus on being witty and charming, and would do better to spend my energy subtly calming and reassuring my anxious friend. This worked much better; we both settled down.

Once sensitive to the pervasiveness of contagion, Dick and I became fascinated with the topic. How could we have made such self-centered and erroneous attributions of our own feelings for so long? How could we have missed the pervasiveness of primitive emotional contagion? Why hadn't we learned to monitor our own feelings long ago to figure out what others were feeling? How did this contagion work? We set out to explore the process of emotional contagion.



Intro Figure 1. An emotion hierarchy. *Source:* Fischer et al. (1990), p. 90.

Definitions

Let us begin by defining *emotion* and *primitive emotional contagion*. Emotion differs from attention and memory in that, minimally, emotional stimuli (1) are categorized as being either positive or negative, and (2) predispose people to bivalent behavior (e.g., approach or withdrawal) toward the stimuli. Kurt Fischer, Phillip Shaver, and Peter Carnochan (1990) additionally argue that emotions are

organized, meaningful, generally adaptive action systems [They] are complex functional wholes including appraisals or appreciations, patterned physiological processes, action tendencies, subjective feelings, expressions, and instrumental behaviors. . . . None of these features is necessary for a particular instance of emotion. Emotions fit into families, within which all members share a family resemblance but no universal set of features. (pp. 84–5)

They propose the emotion hierarchy shown in Intro Figure 1.

There is still disagreement as to what, precisely, constitutes an emotion family (Ekman, 1992; Izard, 1992; Ortony & Turner, 1990;

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Panksepp, in press). Most theorists, however, probably would agree that emotional “packages” comprise many components, including conscious awareness; facial, vocal, and postural expression; neurophysiological and autonomic nervous system activity; and instrumental behaviors. Different portions of the brain process the various aspects of emotion (Gazzaniga, 1985; Lewicki, 1986; MacLean, 1975; Panksepp, 1986, Papez, 1937).

There’s no limit to how complicated things can get, on account of one thing always leading to another.

– E. B. White

Early theorists focused on the question of sequence: Which comes first, the cognitive, somatovisceral, or behavioral aspects of emotion? Recent theorists have moved away from linear, undetermined reasoning and have decided, instead, that “it depends”: Emotional stimuli may well trigger the conversant awareness, somatovisceral, and behavioral aspects of emotion almost simultaneously; which appears first depends on the person and the situation. Thus, theorists are increasingly asking how each of the emotional components acts on and is acted upon by the others (Berscheid, 1983; Candland, 1977; Carlson & Hatfield, 1992). James Laird and Charles Bresler (1992) summarize the position this way:

All components of the emotional episode are ordinarily generated, more or less independently, by some central mechanism, but activation of any one may increase activity of any other. Their interactive effects might arise because of the way the organism is built . . . or because of classical conditioning, produced by the long history of paired occurrence of emotional responses. (p. 49, orig. MS)

Our definition of emotion, then, stresses the importance of all the elements of the emotional “package” in shaping emotional experience/behavior.

Emotional contagion, we believe, is best conceptualized as a multiply determined family of psychophysiological, behavioral, and social phenomena. Because emotional contagion can be produced by innate stimulus features (e.g., a mother’s nurturing expressions and actions toward an infant), acquired stimulus features, and/or mental simulations or emotional imagery, we say it is *multiply determined*.

Because it can manifest as responses that are either similar (e.g., as when smiles elicit smiles) or complementary (e.g., as when a fist raised in anger causes a timid person to shrink back in fear, a process sometimes called *countercontagion*), it represents a *family* of phenomena. Emotional contagion is also a *multilevel phenomenon*: The precipitating stimuli arise from one individual, act upon (i.e., are perceived and interpreted by) one or more other individuals, and yield corresponding or complementary emotions (conversant awareness; facial, vocal, and postural expression; neurophysiological and autonomic nervous system activity; and gross emotional behavioral responses) in these individuals. Thus, an important consequence of emotional contagion is an attentional, emotional, and behavioral synchrony that has the same adaptive utility (and drawbacks) for social entities (dyads, groups) as has emotion for the individual.

The focus in this text is on rudimentary or *primitive emotional contagion* – that which is relatively automatic, unintentional, uncontrollable, and largely inaccessible to conversant awareness. This is defined as

the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person and, consequently, to converge emotionally. (Hatfield et al., 1992, pp. 153–154)

Organization of the text

In chapters 1 and 2, we discuss three mechanisms that we believe account for emotional contagion in general, and for primitive emotional contagion in particular. We also review evidence for the process that we believe generates primitive emotional contagion: In chapter 1 we show that people do tend automatically to mimic or synchronize with the facial expressions, vocal expressions, postures, and movements of those around them; in chapter 2, that people tend to experience emotions consistent with the facial, vocal, and postural expressions they adopt.

In chapter 3, we review the evidence from a variety of disciplines, including animal research, developmental psychology, clinical psychology, and social psychology, that such emotional contagion is pervasive. We also examine the performing arts and the historical

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record. The kinds of people who are most able to “infect” others with their own emotions are profiled in chapter 4; those most susceptible to *catching* emotions from others are highlighted in chapter 5, as are the types of situations that foster emotional contagion.

Emotional contagion may well be important in personal relationships: It fosters behavioral synchrony and the tracking of the feelings of others moment to moment, even when individuals are not explicitly attending to this information. In chapter 6 we end by reviewing the implications of our research and outlining some of the broad research questions future researchers might profitably explore over the next decade.

Elaine Hatfield