

FAST MOVING FRONTS - 2009

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Sigal Barsade talks with *ScienceWatch.com* and answers a few questions about this month's Fast Moving Front in the field of Economics & Business.



Article: The ripple effect: Emotional contagion and its influence on group behavior

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SW: Why do you think your paper is highly cited?

This article addressed the question: "Do moods transfer from person to person in a group setting, and how does this contagion of mood then influence individual and group level outcomes?" This paper is likely highly cited because of the novelty of the research question, and because this construct of group-level emotional contagion offers the ability to construct a more complete model of group dynamics.

With regard to its novel questions, first, the article examines a unique kind of information group members share among themselves— affective information, by way of the process of emotional contagion.

Past group research had focused almost exclusively on the transfer of cognitive structures, such as ideas and attitudes, from one person to another through processes such as social information processing or social cognition. While recognizing that group members share cognitions is important to understanding the complexities of group dynamics, it does not provide a complete understanding of group dynamics. Adding emotional contagion helps to complete the picture.

Second, the research question I examined was novel in its expansion of the construct of emotional contagion itself to the group level. By drawing from the psychology, group dynamics, and organizational behavior literatures, I built a theoretical case for the viability and mechanics of emotional contagion in a group setting. To the date of the article, the processes of emotion contagion had been studied almost exclusively in a dyadic context, and no studies had theorized or empirically examined the processes of group emotional contagion and its subsequent influence on group processes in a controlled group setting.

SW: Does it describe a new discovery, methodology, or synthesis of knowledge?

This article had a variety of new discoveries. First, it tested and showed that emotional contagion exists in a group, and, based on the affective circumplex model—focusing

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on the dimensions of emotional valence (positive/negative) and energy—tested the parameters of the construct. I found that positive and negative emotions were equally contagious. I also theorized and investigated whether the process of emotional contagion in groups could indeed significantly influence meaningful group outcomes.

Using both outside video coder raters as well as ratings made by group members themselves, I found robust results that positive emotional contagion led to less conflict, greater cooperation (measured also by the distribution of financial resources by the group), and greater perceived task performance.

Methodologically, having an actor (a confederate) enact the four affective conditions, allowed a unique level of control in an inherently difficult-to-capture phenomenon. In addition, multiple measures were used to track the emotional contagion.

The context of the study was a leaderless group decision-making exercise where group members took the role of a bonus allocation committee that needed to decide how to allocate money across the candidates they represented from a bonus pool. Each group member was instructed to both advocate for his or her particular candidate and do the best for the organization at large.

The entire group dynamic was taped, with video tapes focusing on individual participants, as well as on the group as a whole. These recordings enabled video-coder ratings of contagion, which, when triangulated with the participant's own self-reports, and the ratings of other group members about the participants, offered a particularly strong test of the theory, providing particularly compelling evidence that emotional contagion had occurred.

In addition, the similarity in ratings between the outside video-coder ratings and individual participants' self-reports of contagion has the benefit of demonstrating the veracity of self-ratings of emotional contagion. This finding is very helpful in offering support for future researchers to be able to validly measure emotional contagion via self-reporting in organizational settings that may not readily lend themselves to outside verification, such as observers or videotaping.

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SW: Would you summarize the significance of your paper in layman's terms?

The significance of this paper is that people have a tendency to automatically "catch" other people's emotions, including in group settings. The outcome of group positive emotional contagion is that it leads to less group conflict, more group cooperation, and more cooperative decision-making choices. The opposite is the case for group negative emotional contagion.

SW: Where do you see your research leading in the future?

My research is continuing in the field of the psychology of emotions, particularly within an organizational behavior context. Specific to emotional contagion, I am very interested in investigating "tipping mechanisms"—i.e., what ratio of positivity to negativity does it take to tip a group in one emotional direction or another?

SW: Do you foresee any social or political implications for your research?

This research has direct significance for social, political, and economic behavior. There is a huge amount of literature within psychology showing that emotions influence memory, perception, and cognition. As such, if people "catch" each other's emotions, then this can influence their decisions accordingly. This can be problematic, however, if people are not aware that the mood they are in, or the subsequent actions, originated from someone else's emotions—not their own. For this reason, making people aware of the phenomena of emotional contagion is important. For example, emotional contagion could have an influence on how economic processes operate as the anxiety/worry—or exuberance—that originates with fewer people "ripples" out via emotional contagion to a larger group of people, influencing collective behavior.

Another example could be in politics or management where a leader's ability to infect a group of people with a particular mood through emotional contagion is a potent influence technique. Also, as people are "walking mood inductors"—and receptors—emotional contagion can have a day-to-day influence in many social situations.

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