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Emotional Contagion

Elaine Hatfield and Richard L. Rapson

University of Hawai'i

Emotional contagion has been defined as “The tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person and, consequently, to converge emotionally” (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993, p. 5). *The Emotional Contagion Scale* is designed to measure the extent to which men and women tend to catch expressions of joy, love, anger, fear, and sadness in others.

Theoretically, emotions can be caught in a variety of ways. Some researchers have argued that conscious reasoning, analysis, and imagination account for the phenomenon. Others contend that people must *learn* to share others' emotions. Most, however, assume that emotional contagion is an even more primitive process—that it happens automatically, outside of conscious awareness.

The process of emotional contagion is thought to operate like this:

Proposition 1: In conversation, people automatically and continuously mimic and synchronize their facial expressions, voices, postures, movements, and instrumental behaviors with those of others.

Proposition 2: Subjective emotional experience is affected, moment-to-moment by the feedback from such mimicry/synchrony.

Theoretically, emotional experience could be influenced by (1) the central nervous system commands that direct such mimicry/synchrony in the first place; (2) the afferent feedback from such facial, verbal, or postural mimicry/synchrony; or (3) conscious self-perception processes, wherein individuals draw inferences about their own emotional states on the basis of the emotional expressions and behaviors evoked in them by the emotional states of others.

Proposition 3: Consequently, people tend, from moment-to-moment, to “catch” others' emotions.

Researchers have collected considerable evidence in support of these propositions.

Proposition 1

Researchers have found evidence that people do tend to imitate the facial expressions, postures, voices, and instrumental behaviors of others.

Social-psychophysiologists find that people are capable of mimicking others' emotional expressions (as measured by electromyographic [EMG] procedures) with surprising speed and accuracy. When people observe happy facial expressions, they show increased muscular activity over the *zygomaticus major* (cheek) muscle region. When they observe angry facial expressions, they show increased muscular activity over the *corrugator supercilli* (brow) muscle region.

Such mimicry begins almost at birth. Developmental psychologists find that 10-week-old infants imitate their mothers' facial expressions of happiness, sadness, and anger. Mothers mimic their infants' expressions of emotion as well.

There also is voluminous evidence that people mimic and synchronize their vocal utterances. Communication researchers find that there is interspeaker influence on utterance durations, speech rate, latencies of response, and a host of other speech characteristics. People also tend to mimic and synchronize their postures and movements with others.

Proposition 2

Researchers have found that emotions are tempered to some extent by somatic and skeletal feedback.

Researchers interested in testing the facial feedback hypothesis have employed a variety of strategies for inducing people to adopt various emotional expressions. Sometimes they simply ask them to fake an emotional expression. Sometimes they ask them to exaggerate or to hide any emotional reactions they may have. Sometimes they try to trick them into adopting various facial expressions. Sometimes they try to arrange things so they will unconsciously mimic others' emotional and facial expressions.

In all cases, however, scientists have found that people's subjective emotional experiences *are* affected by feedback from the facial expressions they adopt.

Scientists have assembled an impressive array of evidence supporting the proposition that people's subjective emotional experiences are affected, moment-to-moment, by feedback from facial, vocal, postural, and movement mimicry.

Proposition 3

Researchers from a variety of disciplines provide evidence that emotional contagion exists. The majority of work has come from animal researchers, child psychologists interested in primitive emotional contagion, empathy, and sympathy; clinicians exploring the process of transference and counter-transference; social psychologists, and historians.

Individual Differences

Do people differ in the capacity to share the joy, love, sadness, fear, and anger of others? It seems that they do. Theorists have proposed a variety of characteristics that may increase individuals' susceptibility to emotional contagion. Scientists contend that people are more likely to catch others' emotions if they are attentive to others' feelings, if they feel closely linked to others, if they are skilled at reading facial expressions, voices, and gestures; if they tend to mimic others' facial, vocal, and postural expressions; if they are sensitive to their own emotions, and if they are emotionally expressive. Conversely, people who rarely attend to others, who construe themselves as distinct and unique from others, who are unable to read others' emotions, who fail to mimic, or whose subjective emotional experiences are unaltered by peripheral feedback should be fairly resistant to contagion.

Researchers also propose that people should be most vulnerable to contagion in certain kinds of *relationships*. Caretakers and infants should be especially prone to share one another's emotions. Men and women ought to be more likely to catch one another's emotions when they are passionately or companionately in love and when they possess similar attitudes and beliefs. People who have power over others should be resistant to contagion. Those they control should be more vulnerable to soaking up emotions.

As yet, however, there is only sparse evidence in favor of these reasonable sounding hypotheses.

Implications

Cognitive psychologists have discovered that people are able to use multiple means to gain information about others' cognitive and emotional states. Conscious analytic skills can assist people in figuring out what makes other people "tick." But if people pay careful attention to the emotions they experience in the company of others, they may well gain an extra edge into "feeling themselves into" others' cognitive and emotional states, as well.

There is evidence that both what people think and what they feel may provide valuable, and different, information about others. In one study, for example, researchers found that people's conscious assessments of what others must be feeling were heavily influenced by what the others *claimed* to feel. People's own emotions, however, were more influenced by the others' nonverbal clues as to what the others were *really* feeling.

References

Hatfield, E., Cacioppo, J. T., & Rapson, R. L. (1993). *Emotional contagion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.