



# The positive outcomes of ‘Socially Sharing Negative Emotions’ in workteams: A conceptual exploration



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## ABSTRACT

In this conceptual paper, we argue that Socially Sharing Negative Emotions (SSNE) could lead to positive outcomes beyond an individual level. SSNE is an intentional verbal communication where both a sharer, who experienced the original affective event, and team members, who noticed the emotional distress of a potential sharer, could be an initiator. Although SSNE has received little attention in the literature to date, it is a relatively common and beneficial process in the workplace. The goal of this paper is therefore to explore *how/when* SSNE can be effective for members of a team. ‘How’ SSNE could be functional will be examined by looking at the overall process of SSNE, and the question of ‘when’ will be explored in line with boundary conditions influencing the effectiveness of SSNE. We specify testable propositions to guide future research and consider boundary conditions for such SSNE to occur. As many boundary conditions could be time constrained, the main SSNE context taken into consideration in this paper is a newly formed team. Our exploration of SSNE highlights positive functions of negative emotions which contribute outcomes at an inter-personal and/or a group level where SSNE takes place.

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The experience of work is saturated with emotions (cf. *Affective Events Theory* (AET): Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Emotions arise as the result of specific appraisals (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991) in that events estimated as favorable elicit positive affective states, while events estimated as unfavorable tend to elicit negative affective states (Lazarus, 1991). As the emotions tend to linger, being exposed to an emotional condition motivates many people to seek social contact (e.g. Fitness, 2000; Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006; Rimé, Philippot, Boca, & Mesquita, 1992). In the past two decades, there has been increased emphasis on the value of understanding emotional processes in the workplace (e.g., Bono, Foldes, Vinson, & Muros, 2007); however, most of this research has dealt with non-verbal affective communication (e.g. facial and behavioral expression): *Emotional Labor* (EL; Hochschild, 1983); *Emotional Display* (ED; Grandey, 2000); *Emotional Contagion* (EC; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994); *Crossover* (Westman, 2001).

Our study takes a different direction: we explore the effects of the intentional exchange of verbal communication during *Socially Sharing Emotions* (SSE). SSE occurs when individuals openly communicate about the circumstances of affective events and the

accompanying feelings (Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech, & Philippot, 1998) and this has been observed in individuals of both sexes, all ages, and across cultures (cf. Pennebaker, Zech, & Rimé, 2001). We suggest that understanding its impact on employees’ behaviors and attitudes has important implications, both for enriching theory as well as informing practice, as we expect that SSE would create social integration between participants resulting from social contacts. This is the process explored further in this paper.

We hold that, in the course of typical workdays, when people socially share emotions, *Socially Sharing Negative Emotions* (SSNE) and *Socially Sharing Positive Emotions* (SSPE) are likely to take place concurrently. At the same time, in developing the conceptual frameworks in this paper, we acknowledge the different causes and action tendencies of positive and negative emotions (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991) and pay particular attention to SSNE. Our focus on SSNE stems from the fact that while it has been widely accepted that positive emotions foster social integration (cf. Fischer & Manstead, 2008), the positive effects of negative emotions have been considerably less studied. For example, although the notion of capitalization (Langston, 1994) has well captured the merits of SSPE, especially for a sharer, the effects of shared negative emotions between interactants, are not as clear. Some argue that shared

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negative feelings inhibit social integration (Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008), whereas others argue that such effect may depend on the fact whether negative feelings emerge from within the group itself (Fischer & Manstead, 2008).

Therefore, while we adapt the functional approach of SSNE (cf. Keltner & Haidt, 1999), the goal of this paper is to explore *how/when* SSNE could be effective for members of a team and, more specifically, a newly formed team. 'How' SSNE could be functional will be examined by looking at the overall process of SSNE, and the question of 'when' will be explored in line with boundary conditions influencing the effectiveness of SSNE. We will adapt theories of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and motivation (i.e. need theory: Maslow, 1943) to explain behaviors such as SSNE. These theories are useful because they support the idea of satisfying the need for social contact and making sense of situations, especially when the situations are adverse or uncertain and cause negative emotions. One of main reasons that we focus on a newly formed team is because many of the boundary conditions influencing the dynamics of SSNE may be time-sensitive. In addition, a newly formed team tends to go through more episodes of negative emotions because team members are not familiar with each other's behavior and expectations. These initial emotional experiences tend to linger and influence the evolution of team over time (Yang, 2014). As such, while there are different dynamics between a new team and an extant team, it is quite common in today's ever-changing business environment to form new teams, such as specific project-based teams for example.

This paper attempts to offer several important contributions. We join in a recent research stream that looks at potentially positive consequences arising from negative emotions (i.e. Lindebaum & Fielden, 2011), and complements asymmetric negative views on negative emotions during interpersonal interactions (cf. Fitness, 2000). We also extend our understanding in coping and reappraisal beyond intrapsychic emotional process and action of a sharer (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Lazarus, 1991), to the interpersonal social exchange and the active role of interactants (e.g. team members). Moreover, this paper contributes to the discussion on positive functions of being authentic with one's emotions (be they positive or negative) during social contacts at work.

This article proceeds as follows. First, we discuss the concept of SSE and SSNE in detail, starting by defining SSNE and then differentiating it from other emotional concepts. We then look at roles of both a sharer and team members and illustrate processes that occur during SSNE. We also explain how the process of SSNE could lead to social integration. We also consider boundary conditions that influence the overall process of SSNE. As the process of critical theoretical review unfolds in the paper, we develop a set of empirically testable propositions concerning SSNE at work. We also acknowledge that team tenure may play a role in the process and we situate our discussion of SSNE effects on social integration within the context of a new team, while arguing that, in more mature teams, other factors including team climate would influence more the degree to which SSNE takes place.

## 1. Socially Sharing Negative Emotions

We define SSNE at work as 'an intentional exchange of verbal communication of negative emotions and emotion-eliciting events between two or more participants who adopt their roles as an initiator or respondents'. This definition: 1) focuses on the *intentional* use of SSNE, 2) encompasses a broad *range* of emotions rather than discrete negative emotions (cf. Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991), being comparable with research of SSPE (i.e. capitalization), and 3) specifies *active* engagements of participants.

An initiator could be either a sharer who went through affective

events at first hand or team members who noticed and asked about the emotional state of a (potential) sharer, following the emotional display of the sharer. Respondents respond to the initiation of SS(N)E by engaging in communication. For example, SSE could take place when an individual (the initiator) starts talking to his colleagues about his frustration with his failed contract with a client. SS(N)E could also occur when a team member (the initiator) asks his/her colleague how he is doing noticing that his/her colleague looks despondent. In both situations, when interactants (the colleagues or the (potential) sharer) answer to the initiation by socially sharing their understanding, reinterpretations and feelings of the original event, they become respondents of SS(N)E.

As SSE is a purposeful exchange between participants, the role of team members as respondents become quite important for the successful SSE (Rimé, 1995). The notion of *capitalization* (Langston, 1994) illustrates how an initiator of SSPE amplifies the original 'positive emotions' by approaching and sharing emotions. The degree of capitalization (i.e. the success) depends on how respondents react to the initiator, in that the more reactive the respondents is in terms of giving social supports, the higher capitalization occurs during SSPE (Reis et al., 2010). *Social comparison theory* (Festinger, 1954) posits that people acquire information for evaluating beliefs, abilities, and experiences from others, especially others whose response is deemed relevant. Team members make for ideal respondents at work because they are exposed to and are aware of the organizational environment (cf. Meisiek, 2002) and studies show that employees are likely to share their affective experiences at work (e.g. Fitness, 2000; McCance, Nye, Wang, Jones, & Chiu, 2013). Therefore, team members are important during SSE, not only in amplifying the original positive emotions during SSPE, but also in *mitigating* the original negative emotions during SSNE, which is one of main purposes of SSNE in the first place (the point will be discussed further in this paper).

Support seeking behaviors, in the service of *emotion focused coping* (EFC: Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), may explain the motivation of a sharer of SSNE. In addition, motivational theory, especially Maslow's need theory, may explain why the sharer would initiate SSNE. According to need theory, there is a hierarchy of needs ranging from physiological to self-actualization needs. Here, both safety needs and social needs, as lower level and also partly basic needs, may relate to the behavior of SSNE. First of all, SSNE may satisfy the social need of having friendly and supportive co-workers, especially given the vulnerable status of the individual. Moreover, the main causes of negative emotions could be a threat to safety (e.g. identity, dignity, respect, etc.). While a fight or flight response is both a physiological (Walter, 1932) and a psychological reaction to a threat to survival (which is associated with negative emotions), SSNE is an attempt to fight or overcome, which could satisfy the safety need.

In a similar vein, SSNE is similar to *sensemaking*, which is the process by which people give meaning to experience (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is a social activity in that plausible stories are preserved, retained or shared (Maitlis, 2005). At the same time, sensemaking "occurs in the service of maintaining a consistent positive self-conception." (Weick, 1995, p23) and participants of SSNE share an evolving product of conversations, which may concern developing and maintaining identity (Currie & Brown, 2003). Sensemaking, via communication and discussions with team members, offers opportunities to gain a different perspective of troublesome episodes, to lessen the associated emotional arousal, to replenish one's self-worth, and other resources (Pennebaker, 1990). On the other hand, empathetic reaction to a person in distress (cf. Parkinson, 1997) could explain when team members as observers at first, become initiators of SSNE (e.g. by reacting to emotional display).

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