



The emotional link: Leadership and the role of implicit and explicit emotional contagion processes across multiple organizational levels



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ABSTRACT

Emotional contagion processes influence a wide range of organizational and leadership outcomes. In this paper, I review emotional contagion research as it relates to multiple levels of analysis within an organization and discuss the extent to which this process can be managed by leaders. The review begins with an explanation of the processes underpinning the emotional contagion process, highlighting the neurological mechanisms that give rise to implicit and explicit forms of emotional contagion. In the following section, I discuss some individual differences that moderate the experience of these two forms of emotional contagion. Subsequently, I review how emotional contagion processes impact leadership outcomes at the interpersonal, group and finally, organizational levels. The purpose of the current review is threefold. The first is to refine understandings of the emotional dynamics of leadership influence from a neurological perspective, highlighting how implicit and explicit emotional contagion underpins much of leader-follower interactions. Second, the review extends on conceptualizations of emotional contagion in leadership interactions often captured at the interpersonal level, and illustrates how the process is relevant in influencing group level organizational leadership outcomes. Third, the review also highlights themes emerging from this area of research, and concludes with directions for further research. Ultimately, the review aims to show how emotional contagion processes are implicated as the 'emotional links' across multiple levels in organizations and organizational leadership.

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Introduction

More than two decades after its conception, the process of emotional contagion remains pertinent and crucial in understanding key affect-related processes in organizations. Emotional contagion, defined by Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson (1994, p.5), is the "tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures and movements with those of another person and, consequently, to converge emotionally". While conceptualized based on the authors' interactions with clients within a clinical setting, emotional contagion processes have been applied to organization contexts, notably in studies of team and leadership processes. In this paper, I review key research findings from psychological research to highlight how emotional contagion is central to many affect-related processes and theories related to organizational member interactions. These include empathy, emotional labor, charismatic leadership and social identity theory. I propose, however, that the role that emotional contagion plays in these organizational interactions can be more clearly understood by properly delineating the different organizational levels in which these processes are contained. I also propose that a better understanding of the impact of emotional contagion in organizations can be better achieved

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by differentiating between implicit and explicit emotional contagion mechanisms. To meet these goals, I begin by first reviewing several multi-level models of emotions in organizations. I then review the main themes emerging from the review of extant research on emotional contagion-related processes in organizations, and subsequently suggest directions for further research.

Multi-level models of emotion in organizations

Ashkanasy's (2003) multi-level model of emotion in organizations represents a key theoretical development in conceptualizing emotional processes across multiple levels of analysis. In this model, emotion processes are categorized as belonging to one of five levels – within-person, between-persons, interpersonal interactions, groups, and organization-wide. The model has been subsequently adapted to explain multi-level processes for specific affective processes in organizations, such as emotional labor (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011) and positive emotions in organizations (Ashkanasy & Ashton-James, 2007). Other multi-level models advancing theoretical grounds in this area also provide insights into the ephemeral nature of emotions and how they are transferred across different organizational levels. This is consistent with the notion that emotions can transcend formal organizational structures and hierarchies – a point argued by Hareli and Rafaeli's (2008) model of 'emotion cycles' within organizations, and Dasborough, Ashkanasy, Tee, and Tse's (2009) multi-level model of negative emotional contagion effects in organizations. In this review, I employ a five-level model, consisting of the (1) intrapersonal, (2) between-persons, (3) interpersonal, (4) group and (5) organizational levels. These five levels are as per Ashkanasy's (2003) multi-level model, but also incorporate ideas from various theoretical models to explain how emotional contagion processes shape organizational and leadership outcomes.

In effect, this review aims to show that emotional contagion processes are implicated in both bottom-up (micro-level, within and between-person factors) and top-down (macro-level, group and organizational processes) influences on organizational outcomes (Barsade & Gibson, 1998). In addition, I differentiate between implicit and explicit emotional contagion processes in this review. I argue for the importance of this distinction, suggesting that it is vital that scholars and practitioners delineate between emotional contagion processes that are subtle influences in leader-follower interactions, from those more explicit, deliberate processes that can be actively managed by leaders. Further, the propositions presented in this paper extend on conceptions of emotional contagion as a process constrained solely at the interpersonal level of analysis, and argues that it is a process that can be managed by leaders.

Level 1: within-persons level – underlying processes leading to emotional contagion

Motor mimicry and synchrony

The process of emotional contagion relies on two key underlying mechanisms – mimicry and synchrony, and emotional experience and feedback. Research examining these mechanisms have focused almost exclusively within the behavioral realm, with the view that mimicry of others' behavioral cues is central towards emotional convergence and synchrony (Arizmendi, 2011). This hypothesis, referred to as the mimicry-feedback hypothesis, suggests that emotional contagion is largely automatic and subconscious, and that the mimicry of an observed individuals' facial or bodily musculature results in a convergence of emotional states (Lishner, Cooter, & Zald, 2008). Mimicry, and resulting synchrony of emotional states is observed in various studies (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Dimberg, 1982; Trout & Rosenfeld, 1980). Mimicry of others' behaviors tends to result in increased liking between interacting individuals (Guéguen & Martin, 2009; McIntosh, 2006) and closeness to the interaction partner (Stel & Vonk, 2010), consistent with the influence of behavioral mimicry in meeting evolutionary-driven needs of connecting and bonding with others. These processes have also been examined prior to Hatfield et al. (1994) introduction of emotional contagion theory.

Studies of motor mimicry and synchrony mechanisms also highlight the potency of facial expressions in leading to shared emotions between individuals. Laird (1974) and Adelman and Zajonc (1989) argued that the human face represents the most dominant and accurate communicator of emotions. Indeed, Haase and Tepper (1972) showed that facial expressions communicated positive emotions one and a half times better than vocal or postural cues. Similarly, DePaolo, Rosenthal, Eisenstat, Rogers, and Finkelstein (1978) suggested that the effectiveness of communication between individuals is severely diminished in the absence of visual, facial stimuli. Wild, Erb, and Bartels (2001) and Neumann and Strack's (2000) laboratory studies showed that individuals are able to perceive others' emotional faces rapidly, suggesting that the motor mimicry mechanisms prompt largely unconscious imitations of others' emotion states through facial expressions. Hess, Philippot, and Blairy (1998) were one of the first to examine these underlying emotional contagion processes using facial electromyography (EMG). Results from their study showed that facial mimicry occurs only when affective judgments of another are required. In a subsequent study, Blairy, Herrera, and Hess (1999) showed that participants spontaneously mimic the emotional facial expressions of others, hypothesizing that spontaneous mimicry of facial cues facilitates an understanding of another's emotional states.

There have, however, been studies showing that voluntary mimicry of observed facial emotional cues are not associated with the improved ability to decode observed facial emotions. Results from the two studies above (Blairy et al., 1999; Hess et al., 1998) highlight a crucial feature of the emotional contagion process – first, that the mimicry of others' facial expressions is insufficient in leading to an understanding of another's emotional state. This subsequently raises the possibility that other processes may be needed to account for the convergence of emotions between individuals, rather than just mere mimicry. Tamietto et al. (2009), for example, showed that emotional contagion processes are not strictly based on motor mimicry, or by conscious visual recognition of another's emotion cues alone. Thus, this primitive motor mimicry system is by itself insufficient in understanding how individuals converge towards a shared emotional state. Singer and Lamm (2009) suggest that motor mimicry may not necessarily lead to emotional contagion, and likewise, emotional contagion does not depend solely on motor mimicry. A more complete depiction of the emotional

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