

95. Hatfield, E. and Rapson, R. L. (2009). Contagion. In David Sander & Klaus Scherer (Eds.) *Oxford companion to the affective sciences*. (p. 99). New York: Oxford University Press.

Contagion

Contagion has been defined as: “The spread of an attitude, doctrine, idea, mood, emotion, or activity from one person-to-another or throughout a group. Scientists may speak of “a contagion of mirth,” or describe “hysterical contagion” in groups—when one person imagines that, say, their workplace is infested with parasites, and suddenly, the entire factory is falling ill from this imaginary malady.

Emotional contagion has been defined as:

“The tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person's and, consequently, to converge emotionally” (Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson 1994, p. 5). The *Emotional Contagion Scale* was designed to assess people's susceptibility to “catching” joy and happiness, love, fear and anxiety, anger, and sadness and depression, as well as emotions in general.

Theoretically, contagion can occur in several ways. Early investigators proposed that conscious reasoning, analysis, and imagination accounted for the phenomenon. More recently, social psychologists have assumed that primitive emotional contagion is a far more subtle, automatic, and ubiquitous process than theorists once thought. Neuroscientists, for example, have discovered that the same neurons (mirror neurons) may fire when primates

merely *observe* another perform an action as when they themselves perform that same action. They propose that these brain structures may account for emotional contagion (see Iacoboni 2005.)

Many scientists argue that that the process of emotional contagion consists of three stages: Mimicry→Feedback→Contagion. People tend: (a) to mimic the facial expressions, vocal expressions, postures, and instrumental behaviors of those around them. (b) As people mimic their companions' fleeting facial, vocal, and postural expressions, they often come to *feel* pale reflections of their companions' actual emotions. (c) By attending to this stream of tiny moment-to-moment reactions, people can and do “feel themselves into” the emotional lives of others. It is this tripartite process that accounts for the ubiquitous process of emotional contagion.

References

Hatfield, E., Cacioppo, J., & Rapson, R. (1994). *Emotional contagion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Iacoboni, M. (2005). Understanding others: Imitation, language, and empathy. In S. Hurley & N. Chater (eds). *Perspectives on Imitation: From neuroscience to social science. Volume 1: Mechanisms of imitation and imitation in animals*, pp. 77-101, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

State of the Art Readings

Hatfield, E., Rapson, R. L., and Le, Y. L. (2007). Emotional contagion and empathy. In J. Decety and W. Ickes (Eds.) *The social neuroscience of empathy*. Boston, MA: MIT Press.