Upward Emotional Contagion via Electronic Communication: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Emotional contagion processes, which underlie the transfer of affect between individuals, have been shown to influence group and leadership outcomes (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011; Barsade, 2002; Sy, Côté & Saavedra, 2005). The majority of emotional contagion studies within leadership research, however, are conceptualized predominantly from leader-centric perspectives. These studies are based on the assumption that leaders, relative to followers, have a greater likelihood of influencing follower affect. Leadership is thus seen as a process whereby leaders "do" something to followers (Glasø & Einarsen, 2006). Dasborough, Ashkanasy, Tee & Tse (2009), however, suggest that followers can also influence leader affect and leadership outcomes via emotional contagion. Tee, Ashkanasy & Paulsen (2013)'s study illustrates this possibility, parallel to an early study by Hsee, Hatfield, Carlson & Chemtob (1990) in showing that individuals with greater positional power were more likely to be influenced by their subordinates feelings – not vice versa as initially hypothesized. These findings suggest that leaders can also be influenced by the emotions of their followers.

While non-verbal cues are primary sources on which individuals infer the emotions of others (Hatfield, Cacioppo & Rapson, 1994; George, 2000), Belkin (2009) suggests the possibility of emotional contagion occurring in the absence of such cues. Indeed, emotions have been shown to be shared amongst parties interacting within electronic communication contexts (Friedman, et al., 2004; van Kleef, De Dreu & Manstead, 2004). Support for Belkin's (2009) claims are also provided by Chesin, Rafaeli and Bos (2011), who show happiness and anger spreading across team members via text-based communication. Further, the absence of non-verbal emotion cues is characteristic in most forms of communication commonly found in organizations (de Cremer, 2006). There is a tendency, nonetheless, of recipients, to infer emotional content from these messages, which may subsequently influence the emotional state of the recipient. These two streams of research suggest that it is plausible for emotional contagion processes to occur via electronic communication, and that followers can influence their leaders

via such forms of communication. We examine these claims in two studies, adopting a sequential exploratory mixed-methods approach.

Study 1: Laboratory Experiment. One hundred and twenty-eight (128) undergraduate psychology students (37 males and 91 females, averaging 21.3 years of age) from a private Malaysian university participated in this study. Upward emotional contagion was induced by administration of feedback via email. Participants assumed the role of leaders applying for a position of a lab coordinator (i.e. leader) who completed a series of tasks in a computer laboratory setting. They were told that they would be assessed by the laboratory research team (i.e. followers) on whether they would be suitable candidates for the leadership position. Leaders completed a leadership decision-making task and were subsequently provided feedback via a series of emails from followers, worded in a manner designed to elicit positive, negative or neutral (i.e. without affective content) affective responses from leaders. We hypothesized that leaders will report more positive (negative) mood depending on followers' positive (negative) mood expressed through their email messages. PANAS scales (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988) were used as measures of mood and were reliable at $\alpha \geq .87$ for this study.

Results. Significant mean differences between the pre- and post-manipulation conditions were found for the three conditions. Leaders in the positive mood condition reported a significant increase of .14 in positive mood between the pre and post-test scores [$t(31) = 8.84$], $p < .00$) and also revealed that leader reports of positive mood were significantly higher compared to the negative and neutral mood conditions [F (3, 124) =7E+032], $p < .00$. Leaders in the negative mood condition reported a significant increase of .18 in negative mood between their pre and post-test scores [$t(31) = 3.68$], $p < .01$, and that their self-report of negative mood were significantly higher than the other two conditions [F (3, 124) = 24.12], $p < .00$).

Study 2: Interviews. Interviewees were six managers (2 females and 4 males, aged between 30-50 years) from six different private organizations who led divisional teams within their organization. Managers were asked about incidents in which their subordinates expressed explicit emotion over email. Interviews were based on the critical incident method, were conducted face to face, and guided by a series of semi-structured interview questions. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes, transcription of the interviews averaged 8 pages of single-spaced text.

Results. Analysis of the textual data via content analysis revealed three central themes: (1) awareness that content of email messages can influence affect of leaders, (2) differentiating between implied and intentional emotional content in emails is important for leaders and (3) appropriateness of emails as a mode of communication between leaders and followers varies depending on situational demands. Leaders indicated awareness of, and acknowledged that email content was capable of influencing their emotions. Acknowledgement of the emotional impact of email messages also led leaders to highlight the importance of separating implied and intentional content in their emails, and this was done to reappraise and regulate one's emotions in response to followers' email messages. In effect, reappraising the content of followers' negative emails helped leaders avoid being overwhelmed by the emotional content of followers' email, thereby limiting their influence on leader performance. Finally, leaders also mentioned that email messages may not be entirely appropriate for all matters, showing a preference to meet face-to-face for matters for relationally-focused leadership roles.

General Discussion. Results from the two studies provide some evidence for the influence of follower affect on leader affect via emotional contagion within an electronic communication context. These findings reflect the nature of organizational leadership and leader-follower communication, suggesting that emotional contagion processes in contemporary organizations can occur via an electronic communications medium. These two studies also provide empirical evidence for emotion cycles across multiple levels of an organization (Dasborough et al., 2009; Hareli & Rafaeli, 2009), and highlight the need to better manage the emotional content of email communications in sustaining a healthy work climate.

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