The Many Faces of Emotional Contagion:  
An Affective Process Theory of Affective Linkage

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Emotional contagion—which consists of emotions being linked across people—has captured psychologists’ attention, and yet little is known about its mechanisms. An early treatment of the question that has been highly influential focused on primitive mimicry (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). Later accounts emphasized (a) social comparison, whereby people compare their feelings with compatriots’, (b) emotional interpretation, where others’ expressive displays serve as information, and (c) empathy, or imagining another person’s feelings. This presentation introduces a new framework called affective process theory (APT), which unifies these mechanisms and identifies others. Using a rule-governed theoretical process, APT reveals ten distinct mechanisms that connect people’s affective states. Relevant to the debate about emotion spread as contagion vs. social appraisal, analysis using APT demonstrates that the direct interpersonal spread of emotion from one individual to the next is only one of many mechanisms for emotion spread. Indeed, several mechanisms involve no interpersonal contact, and actors may not even know that the other party exists. The mechanisms associated with social appraisal are more prominent and likely to be more common in daily life. The 10 mechanisms identified by APT fall into three types. Convergent linkage occurs when individuals share the same vantage point and interpretations of emotionally evocative stimuli. Divergent linkage occurs with a shared vantage point but different interpretations. Complementary linkage occurs when the other person is itself the stimulus. APT integrates past findings on moderating factors such as social closeness and cooperation. These moderating factors share the common feature of suggesting whether the source and recipient of emotional linkage are experiencing emotionally evocative stimuli from the same vs. different vantage point.