Group Affect

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Group Affect: Its Influence on Individual and Group Outcomes

Sigal G. Barsade[1] and Donald E. Gibson[2]
[1]Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania and [2]Charles F. Dolan School of Business, Fairfield University

Abstract

We review and synthesize the research literature examining group affect and its consequences, focusing on groups who interact together to accomplish a task. We use a definition of group affect that incorporates the mutual influence of a group's affective context and affective composition (the amalgamation of group members' state and trait affect). Our focus is on the influence of group affect on individual members' behaviors and attitudes and on group-level outcomes. We call for more research in this area, including the study of more specific discrete group emotions and a broadening of the types of groups studied in this research area.

Keywords

emotion, affect, groups, group affect, group emotion, performance, teams, collective

Traditionally, affect has been examined as an individual-level phenomenon. However, recent attention has focused on group affect, with an understanding that, given the interpersonal functions of emotions (Keltner & Haidt, 1999), affect at the group level can be generated through social interaction. Indeed, such interaction can paradoxically serve to both intensify and regulate individual emotional responses (Parkinson, Fischer, & Manstead, 2005) and, as we describe here, can influence individual- and group-level outcomes.

There has been a long history of interest in the phenomenon of collective affect. In our chronicling of perspectives on group affect (Barsade & Gibson, 1998), we highlighted approaches by which groups are thought to act on and change individual members' affect and behavior through a "top-down" process. For example, early perspectives emphasized potential dangers: Group affect suggested a crowd psychology or "group mind" whereby groups had the power to shape individuals' emotions in ways that overcame their typical emotions and behaviors, causing them to behave in more extreme ways than they would on their own. Later approaches conceived of group affect more positively—for example, as potentially creating emotional ties between group members, bringing them together and helping to increase group effectiveness. Researchers also theorized that group affect was an essential aspect of group development.

We also highlighted approaches to group emotion from an affective-compositional perspective (Barsade & Gibson, 1998). This compositional perspective uses the aggregation of individual affective traits, moods, and emotions as the defining factor of group affect. In other words, it takes a "bottom-up" view, characterizing group affect as the sum of its parts.

Group emotion researchers have also expanded their focus to include the examination of the explicit and implicit mechanisms through which group emotion is shared. In their comprehensive group-affect model, Kelly and Barsade (2001) elaborated on the importance of explicit and implicit affective processes in group affect. These included emotional contagion, vicarious affect, behavioral entrainment and interaction synchrony (the tendency for group members to automatically adjust their behavior to synchronize with other members' behavior), explicit affective influence/induction, and affective impression management (managing one's surface-level affective displays to achieve one's goals), all of which transfer and create affect among group members. We call these *affective transfer processes*.

Drawing on Barsade & Gibson (1998) and Kelly & Barsade (2001), we define group affect as the affective state arising from a combination of the group's top-down components (i.e., the affective context) and its bottom-up components (i.e., the affective composition of the group) as transferred and created through explicit and implicit affective transfer processes. When referring to the construct of group affect, we use the term *affect* as an umbrella term for phenomena that can encompass three general components: dispositional or trait affect, emotions, and moods (for distinctions, see Frijda, 1986; Kelly & Barsade, 2001).

Corresponding Author:
Sigal G. Barsade, Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, 2000 Steinberg-Dietrich Hall, Philadelphia, PA 19104.
E-mail: barsade@wharton.upenn.edu

Our approach, then, is to use this combined top-down and bottom-up affective transfer process framework to understand the outcomes of group affect. We define a group as "an intact social system, complete with boundaries, interdependence for some shared purpose, and differentiated member roles" (Hackman & Katz, 2010, p. 1210) and focus on groups or teams (using the terms interchangeably) whose members interact together to complete a task.

The Influence of Group Affect Composition on Group and Individual Outcomes: Affective Homogeneity and Diversity

Affective homogeneity: Mean-level group affect

To date, the focus of group-affective-composition research has been on mean-level group affect, the "consistent or homogenous affective reactions within a group" (also called "group affective tone"; George, 1990, p. 108). Researchers have examined homogeneity in both positive and negative mean group affect and its influence on performance, prosocial behavior, absenteeism, collective efficacy, decision making, and group development in both the laboratory and the field.

Regarding the influence of mean group affect in field settings, in a foundational study in which employees reported their moods at work over the past week, George (1990) offered a theoretical model and found empirical support for the existence of homogeneity in positive and negative group mood. Further, George (1990) demonstrated that employees' negative mood was significantly negatively related to prosocial behavior toward customers in a sales setting and significantly positively related to employee absenteeism, with some evidence of positive work-group mood being negatively related to absenteeism. In a field study of the influence of dysfunctional behavior on performance in a sample of work teams in a multinational corporation, Cole, Walter, and Bruch (2008) found that self-reported team negative mood was negatively related to team performance and mediated the relationship between dysfunctional team behavior and performance. Additionally, the study found that this relationship was stronger when nonverbal emotional expressivity was high than when nonverbal emotional expressivity was low.

Regarding the influence of positive group mood in field settings, in a study of nursing teams in the United States and Indonesia (as well as in a realistic and complex managerial-simulation lab exercise), mean group positive mood, as measured by raters outside the group, was found to be associated with greater group-level efficacy (the group's collective belief in or estimate of its ability to perform a task; Gibson, 2003). In a field study of teams in a college-level military competition, Knight (2011) found that group-level positive mood was a critical factor in the development of project-directed teams with clear deadlines and their subsequent performance. Specifically, at the temporal midpoint of team life, the group positive mood (controlling for group trait positive affect) facilitated a needed transition from innovation and exploratory behaviors to implementation behaviors, and that shift positively predicted group success in the competition.

Laboratory-based studies have found mixed results in terms of the influence of group-level affect on decision making in distributed-information tasks—that is, tasks in which the correct answer can be reached only if group members share necessary information. One study in which certain individuals had unique information needed by their group showed that task performance was better in groups in which a positive mood had been induced, and this superior performance was mediated by a focus on critical evidence (Bramesfeld & Gasper, 2008). However, in another laboratory study in which group affect was defined as mean trait negative affectivity, group trait negative affectivity led to better performance in the unique-information groups, and this increased performance was mediated by more sharing of information (Kooij-de Bode, van Knippenberg, & van Ginkal, 2009). In both studies, group emotion had no influence on decision-making performance in groups whose members all had the same information.

Much less research has examined aggregate measures of specific (or discrete) group emotions, such as anger, fear, or happiness, rather than generalized positive and negative group affect. One example, however, is from a study of student teams working toward a graded group project over the course of a semester. In this study, mean group envy (a measure of each member's degree of envy toward the other members of the group as a whole) had a negative influence on group cohesiveness and group potency (the group's belief that it can be effective), both of which positively predicted group performance and the satisfaction of group members (Duffy & Shaw, 2000).

Research has also examined the outcomes of the affective transfer processes we described earlier; such research has predominantly focused on emotional contagion (the transfer of moods and emotions among group members). Barsade (2002) directly tested and demonstrated both positive and negative emotional contagion. She found that laboratory groups in which pleasant (versus unpleasant) emotional contagion was induced engaged in significantly greater group-level cooperation (including more equal allocation of funds among group members) and less group conflict in a managerial negotiation/decision-making task. In a longitudinal study using multiple measures of positive mood, Totterdell (2000) found that the team-level positive mood (happiness versus unhappiness) of professional cricket players influenced the individual players' own moods via emotional contagion, which then enhanced individual performance.

Affective diversity

A second compositional approach to group emotion examines the *variance* or heterogeneity in individual affective tendencies in groups rather than the average of these tendencies in mean group-level affect. This approach differs from the idea that groups must be affectively homogeneous in order for

group behavior and its outcomes to be meaningfully described, and instead emphasizes that affective diversity is an inherent part of the group's affective experience. Barsade, Ward, Turner, and Sonnenfeld (2000) conducted the first empirical test of this approach in a study of top management teams and found that greater diversity in a team's trait positive affect was related to poorer corporate financial performance. Trait-positive-affective diversity and mean trait positive affect significantly interacted, predicting cooperativeness and task-related and emotional conflict in top management teams.

Affective diversity has also been examined using measures of state affect. Within the lab, researchers have manipulated affective diversity by showing pictures of groups with either homogeneous (all happy or all sad) or heterogeneous (mixed happy and sad) facial expressions to participants. Participants who rated a group's emotions as being more diverse judged the group as sharing less of a common fate. The degree of perceived similarity among group members mediated the relationship between group affective diversity and perceived group cohesiveness (Magee & Tiedens, 2006).

The Influence of Affective Context on Group and Individual Outcomes

Affective culture

Affective context refers to affectively based group-level forces acting on a group. A significant part of a group's affective context is its affective culture—that is, "the collection of assumptions, beliefs, norms, practices, rituals, symbols, stories, and physical arrangements which deepen group members' understanding of the emotional patterns of meaning and subsequent appropriate behavioral enactment of those emotions within their groups" (Barsade & O'Neill, 2011, pp. 4–5). Although, as described above, affective culture is a broad construct, most research to date has focused on its subcomponent of affective norms or emotional-display rules (Ekman, 1973), which guide group members' understanding of which affective expressions are encouraged or sanctioned within a group or organization (see Kelly & Barsade, 2001).

Some researchers have found that affective-display norms can have a constraining and even negative influence on individual members' attitudes even when the group as a whole performs well, such as in the case of flight attendants (Hochschild, 1983) and Disneyland employees (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989). However, other research has examined the clarifying or positive effects of affective culture on both individual and group performance. For example, in a recent longitudinal field study, Barsade and O'Neill (2011) found that a stronger affective culture of companionate love (i.e., caring and compassion) among staff in long-term-care units predicted greater employee satisfaction and teamwork; less emotional exhaustion; and better patient outcomes, including enhanced patient mood, quality of life, and health outcomes, and greater satisfaction on the part of patients' families.

Group-leader affect

The affect of the group leader is also a significant factor in a group's affective context. The management of moods and emotions (both one's own and those of others) is a critical element of effective leadership: A leader can set the tone for the ways in which a group reacts emotionally to the situations it faces (George, 1995).

This may occur unconsciously on the part of the leader, or the leader may purposefully use emotional expressions to influence group affect and behavior—using positive affect, for example, to foster group cohesiveness and enthusiasm and negative affect to increase motivation and signal a change in direction. In a qualitative study of collegiate rowing crews and semiprofessional jazz music groups, Pescosolido (2002) found that group leaders modeled appropriate emotional responses to situations the groups faced and, in that way, helped the groups to improve their performance. In a laboratory study examining the processes underlying the influence of leaders' emotion on group outcomes in self-managing teams, Sy, Côté, and Saavedra (2005) found that leaders transmitted their moods to other group members through emotional contagion, which then influenced performance. When leaders were in a positive mood, individual group members tended to experience more positive and less negative moods, and the group as a whole had a more positive affective tone, exhibited more coordination, and expended less effort than did groups with leaders in a negative mood.

Some preliminary investigations have examined moderators in the relationship between leader–group mood and performance. For example, Van Kleef, Homan, Beersma, and van Knippenberg (2010) argued that the influence of a leader's emotions on a group depends on the personality traits, expectations, and attitudes of the group members. Van Kleef and his colleagues found that teams composed of participants with lower average levels of agreeableness performed better when their leader expressed anger, whereas teams composed of participants with higher average levels of agreeableness performed better when their leader expressed happiness.

Findings from these studies imply that group leaders have a significant impact on the affective context through both conscious and unconscious affective displays that shape group affect. Effective leaders manage group affect by understanding the collective response of the group to situations and obstacles it faces and by responding emotionally in ways that help the group to cope more effectively.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Our review of the current state of research reveals clear evidence that group affect has significant consequences on groups as a whole and on the individuals within them. However, more research is needed in this domain. While it is logical to initially focus on more generalized positive and negative traits and moods, it is clear that, because groups also experience more nuanced and discrete emotions, more research is needed to

understand the consequences of specific discrete group emotions, such as group fear, joy, anger, and the like. As discrete emotions have been shown to have distinct social functions (Keltner & Haidt, 1999) and to lead to a variety of attitudinal, behavioral, and performance outcomes at the individual level (Frijda, 1986), it is likely that differential outcomes also occur at a collective level. Other emotional processes that are meaningful at the group level, such as group emotional intelligence, are also a fruitful area for future study (Elfenbein, 2006).

Second, as technology has shifted what it means to work together as a group, the research literature needs to keep pace and examine groups within the context of new technologies—by, for example, investigating how group emotions are created and then influence outcomes within virtual teams using various computer-mediated technologies, such as e-mail, texting, and video-conferencing.

Last, research examining patterns of the ways in which group emotion unfolds and differentially influences group development and outcomes over time has shown promising initial results (e.g., Knight, 2011). While this type of research can be methodologically challenging, it offers a necessary and more complete view of the functioning and outcomes of group-level emotion.

Ever since the idea of the group mind gained traction in psychology, researchers have been intrigued by the phenomenon of group affect—that groups can act to appraise their surroundings and respond with collective feelings and actions. Although more research is needed to advance our understanding of the nature of group affect—including affective context, affective composition, and affective transfer processes—research examining task-directed groups has greatly increased our understanding of the consequences of group affect for individual group members and groups as a whole.

Recommended Reading

Barsade, S. G., & Gibson, D. E. (1998). (See References). A theory and review article that was the first to characterize group affect through bringing together the "top-down" affective-context and "bottom-up" affective-composition approaches.

George, J. M. (1990). (See References). One of the first empirical articles theorizing about and examining the existence of homogeneous group mood and its performance outcomes.

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Parkinson, B., Fischer, A. H., & Manstead, A. S. R. (2005). (See References). A detailed review of theory and research regarding myriad aspects of collective emotion, including group emotion.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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