

Dissertation Abstract: Status, Affect Contagion, and Behavioral Influence

Kayla Pierce

Department of Sociology, University of Notre Dame

It is said that sadness begets sadness and that happiness can be infectious, but is everyone similarly likely to “spread” or “catch” those emotions? I investigate whether and how status is an organizing structure for emotional contagion. Sociological social psychologists find that individuals who occupy higher status positions speak more often, are more likely to have their ideas validated and have more influence in group tasks than lower status alters (Berger, Conner, and Fisek 1982). Yet we do not know whether one’s status position also affects the likelihood their emotions spread to others. Are the emotions of those who are higher status more contagious? More specifically, do emotions travel in patterns that are consistent with influence in status hierarchies?

My dissertation builds testable predictions from two theories of interaction— expectation states theory and communication accommodation theory—to better understand emotional contagion, specifically how emotions travel based on the composition of the group and the specific emotion being emitted. Using a 3x4 factorial design, I vary status position relative to an alter (high/equal/low) and the types of emotions those alters express (happiness/sadness/anger/no emotion) to examine how status affects emotional contagion across a range of status relationships and emotions. I also investigate whether an expressed emotion disrupts a status hierarchy, with particular emotions perhaps undermining the influence of high status people or boosting the influence of low status people.

Understanding the conditions under which emotions travel is important for the development of interventions for unhealthy and ineffective environments. Awareness of these processes may help workplaces safeguard against poor emotional cycles and burnout, especially in high stress, team-based careers such as military personnel, police officers, and pilots. More information about my research projects can be found at my website:

kayladrpierce.com.