Political Identities, Emotions, and Relationships

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During Thanksgiving, many of our friends and students tell us they dread going home for a "celebratory" dinner. It isn't that their relatives disagree with their own political beliefs. It is that they insist on vehemently sharing their cockamamie ideas. Some relatives are just earnest do-gooders. "Can't you see?" they ask: carefully spelling out all the tired arguments you have heard a million times. "Trump is in line for the Nobel Peace Prize. The first to win the Nobel Peace Prize and the Prize for Literature—that is if the selection isn't rigged and if he wins the literature prize for *The Art of the Deal*." Some enjoy devilment. One student said her Fox watching uncle is an attack dog. "You are a naïve fool. How could you vote for crooked Hillary?" His kids join in, chanting "Lock her up! Lock her up."

Donald Trump Jr. even wrote a book, *Triggered,* telling Republican stalwarts how to "trigger" the sensitive spots in their liberal friends. In fact, he offered prizes for those followers who could do the best job of driving their liberal relatives crazy: an autographed copy of his tome, *Triggered* and a MAGA cap. "Just take photographs of them blowing their top," he advised and their prizes would be on the way. Trump also offered prizes for those tormenting their liberal relatives on Christmas and New Year's Eve—Trump themed Trump Christmas ornaments. "It's easy," Trump Jr. crowed: "Liberals are such haters" (Bostock, 2019). Conservatives are no slouches in that department, either.

"I just can't do it," students lamented. "Sit through another family gathering. Maybe I could volunteer at a soup kitchen."

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A poll conducted by *Business Insider* found that politics and religion are the two most explosive topics for dinner conversations (Bostock, 2019).

What invests such disagreements with such strong emotion? How can we bring civility to the dinner table? Can we? Can we change the minds of our adversaries? Is it inevitable that we "catch" the emotions of irate celebrants—particularly their anger?

Let us begin by discussing the nature of political identities and their importance. Then we will look at Emotional Contagion and why it is so difficult to be stuck with anxious and angry people who do not share our beliefs.

1.1 Political Identities

Henri Tajfel (1982), in his Introduction to *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations,* defines social identities as:

…that part of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership (p. 2).

Huddy (2013) continues:

A key concept…is political identity…. political identities refer to identification with and meaning attributed to membership in politically relevant groups, including political parties and national, ethnic, linguistic, or gender groups (p. 2).

Staerklé (2015) adds:

Research has, for example, shown that individuals who strongly identify with their group are more likely to act on behalf of a group and related causes, to view the political environment in antagonistic terms, and to act defensively in the face of group criticism (p. 2).

The centrality of our political beliefs—especially in these intensely polarizing times—explains why such holiday debates are so explosive and why it is so difficult to devise a strategy for dealing with these powerful familial conflicts. Our political beliefs don't just stand alone. It isn't possible to say this single belief is "off-limits." We just won't talk about politics at dinner. Alas, our political beliefs are bound up with our ideas of the desirability of all-powerful rulers versus democracy, the role of government in solving social problems, the value of the economy versus public health, how much we should worry about social inequalities, the role of education in social life, and the like.

These social disagreements become especially explosive when we are confronting anxious or angry people who are eager to stir up trouble … or worry that we will.

1.2   Emotional Contagion

The great fictional detective Sherlock Holmes could detail consciously the processes of deduction that most of us carry on outside of conscious awareness (Doyle, 1917/1967). There are many clues which allow us to deduce what others really feel about us and about our beliefs, even if others try to hide it.

Holmes startled Watson that he could read his mind by looking at his furrowed eyebrows, where his glances darted, the subtle movements of his hands, and the like (pp. 193–195).

Sherlock Holmes provides tricks for figuring *what* others are feeling about our most cherished beliefs; emotional contagion provides a clue as to others' intensity of feelings.

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, & Rapson, 1994b, p. 5).

The *Emotional Contagion Scale* (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994a) 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.

2   The Emotional Contagion Scale (EC)

This is a scale that measures a variety of feelings and behaviors in various situations. There are no right or wrong answers, so try very hard to be completely honest in your answers. Results are *completely confidential*. Read each question and indicate the answer which best applies to you. Please answer each question very carefully. Thank you.

Use the following key:

4	*Always*	=	Always true for me
3	*Often*	=	Often true for me
2	*Rarely*	=	Rarely true for me
1	*Never*	=	Never true for me

1. It doesn't bother me to be around angry people	4	3	2	1
2. I find myself nodding off when I talk with someone who is depressed	4	3	2	1
3. I feel tender and gentle when I see a mother and child hugging each other affectionately	4	3	2	1
4. Being around depressed people makes me feel depressed	4	3	2	1
5. I pay attention to what other people are feeling	4	3	2	1
6. I feel alive and vibrant when I am with the one I love	4	3	2	1

7. When someone laughs hard, I laugh too	4	3	2	1
8. When people hug me affectionately, I get upset and want to back away	4	3	2	1
9. I'm very accurate in judging other's people feelings	4	3	2	1
10. When I am around people who are angry, I feel angry myself	4	3	2	1
11. I find myself clenching my fist when overhearing others quarrel	4	3	2	1
12. I wince while observing someone flinching while getting a shot	4	3	2	1
13. I'm very sensitive in picking up other's people feelings	4	3	2	1
14. I keep a straight face when those around me are laughing hard	4	3	2	1
15. Listening to the shrill screams of a terrified child in a dentist's waiting room makes me feel nervous	4	3	2	1
16. Even if someone I'm talking with begins to cry, I don't get teary-eyed	4	3	2	1
17. When someone paces back and forth, I feel nervous and anxious	4	3	2	1
18. When someone smiles warmly at me, I smile back and feel happy inside	4	3	2	1

2.1 Scoring

Items 1, 8, 14, 16 are reversed in scoring. The higher the score, the more susceptible to emotional contagion a person would be said to be.

Contagion can occur in several ways. 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 help account for emotional contagion (see Iacoboni, 2005.)

Many scientists argue that the process of emotional contagion consists of three stages: Mimicry to Feedback to Contagion. People tend: (a) to mimic the facial expressions, vocal expressions, postures, and instrumental behaviors of those around them—in the case of this chapter, those of their table companions; (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.

Given this view of emotion, there is really not much mystery to the observations of therapists and others that, though not *consciously* aware that their clients (say) are experiencing joy, sadness, fear, or anger, they "somehow" do sense and react to these feelings. Today, emotion researchers assume conscious awareness of only a small portion of the information we possess about ourselves and others. Not surprising then, when we are surrounded by family members behaving badly, it is very hard to retain our composure.

Given the high emotions bound to confront us at family gatherings, how can we deal with the problem. What can we do to make people more willing to go home for, say, Thanksgiving when they know they will confront a plethora of hostile family members? What can they do to make sure that in the far future, when things are less polarized, that by behaving well today they can return to the family harmony that (allegedly) once existed?

Here are a variety of suggestions psychologists and social commentators have offered for bringing peace to family gatherings. Any of them may work for some people. For some. Not for all of us. We will end by describing what has worked for some folks.

2.1.1 Solutions

Goldfarb (2019) offers several suggestions for dealing with difficult relatives.

Start out with a game plan, she advises. Identify those events that have set you off in the past and figure out how to deal with them. Make small talk. Ask people questions about themselves and their personal accomplishments. "I'm actually more interested in your new job. How is it going?" Rempala (2013) observes: Try to gain some insight into why your contentious family member is doing what he or she is doing. Are they trying to gain the upper hand? Gain status? Hurt you? This doesn't mean approving of a monster, or letting yourself get pushed around: simply that understanding helps.

There is considerable research showing that if people have to view a horrific film, they feel less upset if they view it from an anthropological perspective than if they just respond emotionally (Rempala, 2013). Think as if this were the raving of some primitive tribe. Patronizing? Yes. But, whatever works.

Goldfarb (2019) suggests that bringing a supportive friend might be helpful. If things get rough, one can always leave the table to do dishes. Beier (2018), a decided optimist, wonders how someone can expect to change the world if they can't even change their relatives' minds? She offers ten suggestions for dealing with disagreeable relatives. She observes that before one can change anyone's mind, one must think and change the way one speaks to them.

1. The first step is to try to be calm, cool, and collected. Otherwise emotional contagion might set in.
2. Make sure the other person wants to have this conversation.
3. If they do, ask how the other person feels about the issue. Let them explain their position at length. This helps establish if their beliefs are as black and white as they might appear to be.
4. Listen intently. No sighing, rolling eyes, or crossing arms.
5. Then speak. Saying what one believes—focusing on the shared values. (At the very least one can make the observation that this issue is of mutual concern. Will the relative interrupt? Maybe).

6. Next, share a personal story about how these views have impacted a close friend or relative.
7. This done, invite the person to do the same. Focus on the values they report, rather than their conclusion.
8. Offer one or two facts the other person might not know. Invite them to reciprocate. Check in to see how the person feels about the conversation. (One might say "I still think what I thought before, but I'm glad we talked"). Keeping in mind that the facts we believe in are, of course, at the core of the problem. The "facts" offered by Fox News bear little relation to those offered by Rachel Maddow of CNN. If there is no agreement about the value of "gut feelings" versus objective evidence, reconciliation and understanding proves almost impossible to achieve.
9. Whatever the outcome, the experience of the conversation has provided a foundation or laid the seeds for future conversations.
10. After the conversation, one should do something restorative: walking, meditating, or drawing.

2.1.2   Our Vision

When reporters call us to ask us about contagion, they inevitably end with a single question: "How, then, can people overcome the effects of contagion?" What, they are wondering, is this: How can we turn off our ability to share others' feelings so that we can deal with families in turmoil?

In this malign climate, we are less optimistic than the other authors and scholars we have reviewed here. Be aware that you are not going to change anything. If you are a parent, perhaps you can change your child's behavior, but for adults you are a fool to take responsibility when you have no power. It is the trying…again and again and again …that wears people out.

We would assume that, ideally, people would not try to alter their basic natures too much. Some people are extremely sensitive; others have to be hit over the head with a 2 × 4 before they get the point. Each nature has its advantages and disadvantages.

Sensitive people, susceptible to emotional contagion, are wonderful at understanding and dealing with others; but after a bit, they grow quite tired. They can deal with trouble for perhaps a few hours but, soon, enough is enough: they must go back to their hotel room, be absolutely quiet, and recover.

Other, hardier (or less tuned-in) individuals are more or less oblivious to the emotional climates in which they dwell. (One of our mellow clients who, upon hearing a woman crying on the telephone, turned to his wife, and with a cheerful tone, said: "It's for you.") Such people might not be aware of what is going on in emotionally charged situations, but they can stay in them and deal with them a lot longer if they choose.

When as therapists, we sometimes offered this advice, clients would occasionally demur on the grounds of poverty or guilt. "I could never do that," they say. "My mother would be upset if I didn't stay at home. I'd end up yelling at her and she would cry and I'd feel awful about that." Or "I can't afford to get away from the fighting and stay at a pricy hotel." Guilt and poverty are often mixed. What happens if you turn down these suggestions? Think how you will feel if you get caught up in family dynamics and end up screaming at your anxious mother or lashing out at your uncle during the family get-together. Our clients who have tried our suggestion or advice have reported that their family got used to their wayward ways and admired their composure.

2.1.3 Individual Differences in Contagion

People probably do best if they accept their own temperaments and the concomitant advantages and disadvantages thereof. The very sensitive might be interpersonal experts or "angels of mercy," but only for short periods. When visiting the family, where woe and suffering and shouting and guilt inductions are the norm, they had better plan to stay in a hotel room, rest up, and meet the relatives for dinner. The money would be well spent.

Meanwhile, people who have become "turned off" to others' feelings often get overwhelmed when they begin to become more aware, feeling that they are somehow responsible for "fixing things." They do better if they remind themselves that probably the best they can do is to listen. Others should not expect them to be a miracle worker; those who demand too much attention cannot complain when the "oblivious" tune out for self-protection.

Some people love to fight. They gain energy and pleasure from their tumult. Others do not. Beware those who, through creating conflict, are self-medicating against depression. Their fighting buoys them emotionally, but it may bring you down—unless you, too, need to use conflict to rise from depression.

Several theories also suggest that how people process incoming social information can affect their ability to experience emotional contagion. For example, Byrne (1964) indicated that personality differences may affect how we respond to emotional distress. He distinguishes between "sensitizers" (i.e., individuals who are hypervigilant of their own emotions and those of others) and "repressors" (those who ignore internal and external emotional information). It would stand to reason that, among these two extremes, repressors would be less susceptible to contagion (Hatfield et al., 1994b). A similar dichotomy seems to exist based on the observer's mood state, such that happy observers are susceptible to contagion, while depressed observers are more self-focused and therefore, insulated from the mood of others (Hsee, Hatfield, Carlson, & Chemtob, 1990).

Aspects of the social situation also can affect both one's motivation to "receive" the emotions of others and one's susceptibility to emotional contagion. For example,

in a dyadic interaction, the more powerful (e.g., higher status) of the pair is less affected by (and possibly less interested in) the emotions of the weaker other than vice versa (Hsee et al., 1990). Similarly, if the observer is able to generate great substantial animosity toward the target, emotional contagion is inhibited (Zillman & Cantor, 1977).

There seem to be other motivational components to one's ability to experience contagion. Extroverts, for example, are more outwardly focused, specifically toward those with whom they are interacting with or wish to interact with. It is no surprise, then, that extraverts are more susceptible to emotional contagion than introverts (Fowles, Roberts, & Nagel, 1977). Similarly, we are more susceptible to members of our in-group (Schachter & Singer, 1962; Wheeler, 1966), and the more important the relationship with the target is to the receiver, the more susceptible the receiver is (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1992a; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1992b).

This last point, in fact, may be key to understanding one of the most consistent findings of the empathy literature: that women are more empathic than men. Most studies that have cared to look at sex differences in empathic ability have found significant differences in this direction (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983; Hall, 1978). However, this may be because emotional contagion is inhibited in men (Hatfield et al., 1994a; Wild, Erb, & Bartels, 2001).

Although there is no sex difference in expressiveness at birth, female infants quickly become more expressive than male infants (except for distress-related responses, which are more common in males) (Haviland & Malatesta, 1981). Social rules for emotional display are almost universally more restrictive for males than females (the lone exception being display of anger) (O'Leary & Smith, 1991; Brody, 1985; Fischer, van Rodriguez Mosquera, Vianen, & Manstead, 2004).

After all, while females showed no difference in decoding the symbolic and non-verbal messages of intimates as opposed to strangers, men were substantially better at decoding the messages of intimates than were strangers (Noller & Callan, 1960). This could be due to greater relaxation of display rules and cognitive defenses when dealing with those with whom they are familiar.

Based on the behavioral components of emotional contagion (e.g., mimicry of facial expression), if males have less freedom to express emotion, they may be less likely to feel the emotions projected by others (Wild et al., 2001). Through some of the attentional or perceptual mediators mentioned above, males may be able to inhibit the experience of emotional contagion. By extension, then, since emotional contagion is a vital component to empathy, the emotions are less likely to reach the conscious awareness of males, and the process is interrupted.

Thus, there are no one-size-fits-all strategies for dealing with nasty familial conflicts over politics and religion. We idealize family gatherings, but the realities are usually more complex, vexed, and—if one is properly armed—more interesting.

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