TIP Interview With Professor Sigal Barsade

In this issue, we enter the metaphorical construction site of organizational neuroscience (ON) with one of the builders of the field, Professor Sigal Barsade, PhD, the Joseph Frank Bernstein professor of Management at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. Her work focuses on the influence of emotions on the following: organizational behavior, group emotions, emotional contagion, organizational culture and change, executives and their management teams, decision making, and employee performance. Sigal Barsade earned her doctorate from University of California, Berkeley. She has extensive consulting experience, including clients such as Levi Strauss and the NBA (National Basketball Association). She has served on several editorial boards and has received awards for excellence in teaching and research.

In this issue, we discuss ways that affect influences organizational outcomes. Dr. Barsade describes ways in which her research studies and consulting work raise awareness of emotional phenomena and how she uses ON to enhance her work.

What are your research interests in I-O psychology? How do your projects relate to ON?

One of the things that got me interested in ON was my emotional contagion research. Initially, my idea for emotional contagion in groups came from an actual work experience when I worked with a really unpleasant person. When that person took vacation, I felt my shoulders lower, and everybody was happier. Then the
person returned along with the tension everyone felt at the office. It fascinated me that other people’s emotions had a much stronger effect on people than they realized. People realized they had an emotion but not that it had originated in other people around them.

This led to a bigger idea, which was that we don’t come to work tabula rasa without previous experiences or personality. We come in with our traits, backgrounds, and insecurities. What really fascinated me was that we’re not conscious of some of these things, yet they can have a really powerful effect on how we respond differentially to a situation. For example, some people may have in their history that people tend to not listen to them and their last job placement was in a secluded office. When they come into an organization, they’re hypersensitive to whether they’re being listened to or not in a way that their managers or co-workers may not necessarily expect or appreciate. Thus, some people may get very upset about something that others would barely notice. That got me interested in what’s outside of our conscious awareness, in addition to what we already know about work. I’m certainly interested in what happens within conscious awareness. It isn’t that one piece is more important than the other. Things are definitely happening within conscious awareness, but there is this whole other piece that is happening outside of conscious awareness at work, and as a field we should know more about that.

So that’s what spurred the article, “Implicit Affect in Organizations,” written with Professors Lakshmi Ramarajan and Drew Westen, which was meant to review the topic (Barsade, Ramarajan, & Westen, 2009). It’s not enough to just show that implicit affect leads to different behaviors, but one must also show that it operates outside of conscious awareness. Lack of conscious awareness shows clearly from a subconscious prime, but this is usually difficult to administer in the field. If you’re not doing subconscious priming, the question is how do you show that affect is outside of conscious awareness? We talk about that in the article. Sometimes it can be as easy as simply asking people about the implicit affect source and embedding the source in a whole list of attributions, for example.

In the article, we described three categories of types of implicit affect. These aren’t mutually exclusive, and often they run into each other. The first category is implicit sources of affect, meaning that people feel the emotion but they don’t know where it’s coming from. We then divided that externally and internally. So externally that can be from other people in the environment, which includes emotional contagion. Alternatively, the
source of affect could be from the physical environment, such as how literal artifacts in your environment can influence your mood in ways you don’t know (Rafaeli & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2004). Internally, implicit sources of affect can include things like transference, which involves having feelings about another person that actually stem from your generally unrecognized association of that target person with another person in your past. For example, I call this the “You remind me of that kid in elementary school who I hated, and I don’t much like you either” effect. There is no reason for the immediate dislike to this new person, except the associations that she or he activates in your brain. Often you don’t realize that your associations are the cause, rather you just know that the target person immediately rubbed you the wrong way. This can also happen the opposite way with liking someone for no apparent reason. Another implicit source of affect is attachment styles, which are ways of relating to the world that stem from early childhood experiences.

The second category is implicit experience of affect, which is when people aren’t actually aware of feeling the emotion but it still influences their cognition and behaviors. Most of the research about this in I-O would be implicit attitudes or implicit association tests. This second category entails how we have feelings we’re unaware of about other people or even ourselves. For example, Professor Shimul Melwani and I conducted a study where we examined the influence of being a recipient of contempt on performance in an OB setting (Melwani & Barsade, 2011). Students at the University of Pennsylvania did a simulated consulting task with a partner, but the partner was really a computer. The computer “partner” was contemptuous of their work and in each round the computer became increasingly contemptuous of the participant’s performance. In the third round the computer said “Ok, whatever. All in all, as a University of Pennsylvania student myself, I’m surprised by the low quality of your performance.” We examined the influence of being a recipient of contempt on performance (rated by senior management consultants), antisocial behaviors, and aggressive behaviors. After each round we asked participants to explicitly rate their state self-esteem (“I’m doing great on this task”). What we found was that as the feedback got more contemptuous after each round, the participants’ self-report of state self-esteem (“I’m doing great on this task”). What we found was that as the feedback got more contemptuous after each round, the participants’ self-report of state self-esteem didn’t fall but actually rose in each round. One of the fascinating implicit affect findings in this study is that we also measured implicit state self-esteem through an implicit self-esteem association test that participants completed after each round of feedback. In this case, the exact opposite was occurring—participants’ implicit, unconscious self-esteem fell after each round! When we examined the mediation between be-
ing a recipient of contempt and successful performance, it was actually the implicit self-esteem that mediated performance, not the explicit self-esteem. In essence, participants were using the explicit self-esteem measures as a type of self-affirmation. However what actually predicted their better self-performance was their drop in implicit self-esteem and their “fighting back” response towards better performance. The discrepancy in this case of the relative awareness and importance of implicit and explicit affect is a great example of the second category of the influence of the implicit experience of affect.

The third category is the implicit regulation of affect and is the most controversial despite supporting research. Implicit regulation of affect occurs when people don’t feel the emotion because they’re regulating it, and they don’t even realize that they’re regulating it. Interestingly, it doesn’t have to be controversial because in organizational psychology we actually generally put it in the personality category. For example, narcissism has been written as a chronically activated implicit affect regulatory construct and has been talked about as a regulatory construct. Narcissists don’t necessarily realize that they’re being narcissistic and regulating their emotions in that way. We also have an article coming out soon about emotional culture that can be conscious but can also lead to implicit regulation of people’s affect. Implicit regulation of affect is one of the more challenging areas, but just because it’s challenging doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try to access it.

An important point here is that your ON research doesn’t require scanners and technicians.

Exactly, understanding subconscious processes does not necessarily need to be high tech. Rather, it’s about different ways to access the same phenomenon. The use of the IAT test that I mentioned in the study earlier was not particularly high tech. The most high tech I’ve gotten is in a study with Professor Andrew Knight at Washington University in St. Louis where we put monitors that measure electrodermal activity (sometimes called galvanic skin response) on people’s wrists as a measure of their energy (Barsade & Knight, in press). We are examining the influence of emotional contagion on the outcomes of entrepreneurial success in an entrepreneurial pitch competition. In this setting, entrepreneurial teams pitch ideas to judges and the winners get some help to launch the venture. The electrodermal monitors, worn by team members and judges, measure energy and gesticulations. We are interested in how the emotional contagion among the team, and then with the judges of the competition (who are also wearing these monitors around their wrists), predicts who wins the competition. Initial results are promising and indi-
cater that literally synchronizing energy, which can be out of awareness, particularly between the team and the judge, can positively influence performance.

An interesting future direction in this area is the question of what happens when you take something that’s out of awareness and put it into awareness? For contagion, I think it’s problematic that people don’t realize that they’re catching their emotions from other people at times. People may really own their bad moods, when they shouldn’t. I am beginning a study examining what happens when people become consciously aware of the subconscious.

To what extent do you use your research findings in your consulting work?

I use my research all the time, and one piece that people consistently connect with is the emotional contagion piece. For instance, I teach the concept all the time. A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* used my research in emotional contagion in groups to remind managers that they need to be thoughtful about where they place people when they decide where to seat them at work. I’ve got an article about CEOs and their senior management team that looks at homogeneity in trait positive affectivity (the type of chronic activation that involves the third type of implicit affect above). We found that the more similar the CEO was to the rest of the team, the more participative the CEO, and there was less conflict and more cooperation on the team. In the publicly traded companies, those companies made more money. However the CEOs and their senior management teams didn’t know that it was influencing their behavior. So I have found the managers are open to implicit affect and understand it, and the challenge comes when deciding what to do about it structurally.

Often a real “aha” moment occurs when managers learn about these processes. For example, after learning about facial feedback, they start to see that if they’re looking sour or annoyed, even if it has nothing to do with the employees they are interacting with, those employees may automatically catch those moods to ill effect. So managers begin to see things affectively about their leadership that they didn’t see before. They realize that these microeffects and contagion can then ripple out to the entire affective culture of the group.

It sounds like a training intervention to help people create a desired affective culture. Is that the goal?

My colleague Professor Mandy O’Neill and doctoral student Nick Lobuglio and I are doing a study in a hospital about creating a culture of companionate love where we are exploring some of these
issues (Barsade & O’Neill, in press). I am starting a study soon with my doctoral students Jamie Potter and Daniel Tussing to conduct an intervention in a call center where we’re going to use ESM software to measure how team members are feeling three times a day. Evidence shows that affect influences performance but doesn’t inform whether you can intervene. Can you give people feedback about how they’re feeling, their teams’ feelings, and use that information to lead to better results? In all of these field experiments, it is particularly important to be thoughtful and careful about protecting the individuals in the studies, as this is their workplace, and you want to be sure to leave it untouched or better for you having been there examining these issues.

**What final comments do you have for TIP readers?**

Affect is absolutely important to organizations in a practical way, in their employees and how they experience work and their performance. It is something that we can understand and investigate, not only at the conscious level, but the unconscious, implicit level as well.

**Conclusions**

A heartfelt thank you to Sigal Barsade for sharing her perspective as one of the builders of ON. Her work concerning emotional contagion reveals the power of affect, unconscious or otherwise. Thoughtful methodologies exhibited in her research provide some initial structure to the metaphorical construction site of ON.

**References**


