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Yixue Tiffany Zhou
University of Pennsylvania

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Contempt and Self-Esteem:
The Effect of the Contempt Expression on Self-Enhancing Behaviors

Yixue Zhou

Advisor: Maurice Schweitzer

University of Pennsylvania

Wharton Research Scholars Program

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The characteristics, antecedents, and consequences of emotions have been studied extensively in psychological research. It is widely established that there are a number of “basic” emotions which are distinct in their expression, physiology, antecedent events, and subjective experience (Ekman, 1999). While emotions such as happiness, sadness, fear, and anger are commonly acknowledged among the set of basic emotions, some researchers extend the set to include emotions such as guilt, shame, and contempt.

Although emotions are most simply understood as internal experiences, they also play a significant role in social interactions (Keltern & Kring, 1998). Furthermore, emotional states have been shown to drive basic moral judgments against ourselves and other individuals (Rozin et al., 1999). In this paper, we investigate the emotion of contempt and its effects on behavior. In particular, we wish to examine how individuals in a controlled laboratory setting alter their behavior after being exposed to a display of contempt.

Evolutionarily, the basis for contempt may have been to motivate an individual to feel superior to an opponent prior to a confrontation (Izard, 1977). In modern contexts, contempt continues to suggest an element of disapproval towards the object of contempt, often from a social or moral standpoint. For the purposes of this study, we will define contempt as *an emotional reaction to a target individual or group who is perceived to be either morally or socially inferior to oneself*.

In social psychology, contempt has been described as an exclusion-emotion, the purpose of which is to reject the contempt object from one’s social network (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). Additionally, contempt has also been conceptualized as a response to moral violations of the ethics of community, which include social virtues such as duty and hierarchy (Rozin et al., 1999). Furthermore, according to the stereotype content model, we are contemptuous of those

whom we perceive to be low in competence and warmth (Fiske et al., 2002). The unifying theme of these studies and other research on contempt is that the emotion acts to signal some distance between the contemptuous individual and the target individual along dimensions of social and moral evaluation.

Contempt is often studied in conjunction with the associated emotions of anger and disgust; together, these are thought to constitute the “hostility triad” (Izard, 1977; Rozin, 1999). While contempt, anger, and disgust all involve negative evaluations of another individual, they differ in their emotional antecedents and social function. Anger, for example, is a vivid but short-lived emotion, often experienced when we are dissatisfied with someone else’s behavior and wish to influence it a certain way (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). In contrast, contempt is a less intense but longer-lasting emotion resulting from a permanent negative evaluation of the target individual. Finally, disgust differs from contempt in that it is typically triggered by viscerally repulsive stimuli. As a result, the disgust response tends to be more physiologically intense than the experience of contempt (Miller, 1997). Indeed, research has identified animal precursors to both anger and disgust, whereas an animal precursor to contempt is not evident (Plutchik, 1980; Rozin & Fallon, 1987). It has also been observed that contempt is a notably cooler and more subtle emotion than either anger or disgust (Izard, 1977; Miller, 1997).

While the existing research on contempt has focused on its antecedents, emotional content, and facial expression, the social effects of contempt are not as well understood. In this paper, we will examine the implications of the contempt expression in an interpersonal context. In particular, we will explore the following question: How does the expression of contempt alter the behaviors and affective states of the target individual?

In order to extend our understanding of contempt from the individual in whom the emotion originates to the individual who is targeted by the emotion, we begin with Fischer and Roseman's conceptualization of contempt as a mechanism by which one socially excludes the target individual. This manner of social exclusion may include rejecting the target individual to an inferior outgroup, demoting him to an inferior position relative to oneself, or casting him as an object of indifference, unworthy of notice or attention.

Social exclusion has been shown to have a variety of negative effects on humans, including declines in cognitive performance, increase in self-defeating behaviors, and decreased self-discipline (Twenge et al., 2003; Twenge et al., 2002; Baumeister et al., 2005). Thus, it is likely that an individual initially targeted with contempt, upon perceiving that he or she has been socially excluded, will experience many of the same negative effects of social exclusion.

However, psychological research has also shown that when faced with threats to self-integrity, the human psyche may respond in one of three ways (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). One type of response is to accommodate the threat, as was the case with the participants in Twenge and Baumeister's studies. After being told that they were likely to be alone later in life, these participants accepted their fate of social exclusion and sought temporary, short-lived pleasures in the absence of the potential for a socially fulfilling and meaningful life.

A second response to self-threat is to directly confront the threat, but often this is not easy or even possible, as in the case of social exclusion. The third response, however, presents interesting possibilities for our present study. According to self-affirmation theory, people can restore their battered sense of self-worth by sidestepping the field in which their integrity was threatened and affirming an alternative source of self-worth. Someone who has experienced a

threat in the social arena, for example, might self-affirm in the professional arena by performing highly at his or her job.

The interplay of social exclusion theory and self-affirmation theory provide the premise for our understanding of the effects of the contempt expression on the target individual. Specifically, we will explore the premise that exposure to contempt creates the effect of social exclusion, and that individuals who find themselves the target of contempt will engage in self-affirming behaviors in order to counteract the threat posed by social exclusion.

Method

Participants

Participants were members of an American college community, including students and university staff (n=203).

Overview

Participants completed a total of three tasks through an online survey. In the first task, participants were shown a series of fourteen randomly ordered photos of people's faces and asked to identify whether the person in each photo was male or female. Following this task, participants viewed a single photo of a person's face and imagined meeting the person in the photo for the first time. While viewing the photo, participants answered three open-response questions about whether they imagined the experience would be pleasant or unpleasant, whether they would like or dislike the person, and whether the person would like or dislike them.

In the final task, participants were presented with lists of academic terms (e.g. "nuclear fusion") and asked to indicate how familiar they were with each term (5-point scale, from "heard of it" to "very familiar"). Terms were organized by topic into ten main blocks, including

historical figures and events, fine arts, and physical sciences. (A full list of blocks and terms are included in the appendix.)

Independent Variable

Participants were assigned to one of two conditions: *contempt* and *neutral*. In the experimental *contempt* condition, the photos presented in the gender identification and imagined experience tasks contained faces displaying subtle expression of contempt. Participants in the experimental condition thus spent approximately seven minutes viewing repeated expressions of contempt, followed by another five minutes in which they imagined themselves interacting with a person displaying a contemptuous expression. In the *neutral* control condition, the photos presented in the gender identification and imagined experience acts contained faces displaying no emotion.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable was calculated from participants' performance on the final task. In this task, participants were presented with the Over-Claiming Questionnaire, which tests for self-enhancing behaviors (Paulhus, Harms, Bruce & Lysy, 2003). While the questionnaire is ostensibly a simple survey of familiarity with different academic fields, some items presented in the questionnaire were foils, or non-existent terms (e.g. "pseudo-verb"). The extent to which a participant claimed familiarity with these non-existent terms, therefore, could be used as a proxy for the tendency to self-enhance. Consistent with our hypothesis, we predicted that participants in the contempt condition would show more self-enhancement on the OCQ.

Results

Data from the Over-Claiming Questionnaire were analyzed using several calculations. Each participant's performance on the OCQ was summarized using four statistics. For each

participant, we calculated *hits*, the number of real items the participant claimed to know, and *foils*, the number of foil items the participant claimed to know. The participant's *accuracy* was calculated as the difference of hits and foils divided by the total number of items, and the participant's *bias* was calculated as the sum of hits and foils divided by the total number of items.

The data included 102 participants in the experimental contempt group and 101 participants in the control group. Overall, performance on the OCQ was not significantly different between groups. A very small effect was observed in the difference in foils. The mean number of foils claimed by the contempt group was 11.32, compared to a mean of 10.56 foils claimed by the neutral group. A summary of the data are presented below.

Group		Hits	Foils	Accuracy	Bias
<i>Contempt</i>	<i>Mean</i>	89.49	11.32	0.52	0.67
	<i>SE</i>	1.53	0.72		
<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Mean</i>	89.64	10.56	0.53	0.67
	<i>SE</i>	1.44	0.66		
<i>Significance</i>		0.942	0.438		

Discussion

The data from this study do not allow us to confirm our hypothesis. We expected that participants in the contempt group would show greater self-enhancement in the Over-Claiming Questionnaire than participants in the control group. Greater self-enhancement would have resulted in a greater number of foils in the contempt group, leading to lower accuracy and higher bias. However, our data show that foils were only marginally higher in the contempt group. Furthermore, due to the small difference in foils, accuracy and bias were virtually the same for

both groups. As a result, we cannot conclude from this study that expressions of contempt lead to increases in self-enhancing behavior.

Nevertheless, the difference in foils is directionally consistent with our hypothesis, and it is possible that the effect size would increase with a greater sample size and adjustments to the manipulation. There were several limitations to our contempt induction which may have reduced its effect on participants. Our selection of contempt photos for the gender identification task was quite conservative in both the duration and depth of emotion. We limited ourselves to subtle expressions of contempt, which some participants may not have properly interpreted as contempt. The gender identification task also included only fourteen photos, because we were limited by the availability of photos of contempt. It is possible that including more photos in the task would have more effectively “saturated” participants with contempt. A further limitation of the gender identification task is that it did not involve a personal interaction between the participant and the face exhibiting contempt. Participants may have been unaffected by the contempt expression because they felt it was irrelevant to themselves.

We included the imagined experience task in order to compensate for the absence of a personal interaction in the gender identification task. However, as the task was simply to *imagine* oneself interacting with a person who appeared contemptuous, participants who were not highly engaged or who did not exert their imaginations may not have been able to experience the full effect of interacting with a contemptuous person. Taken together, both the gender identification task and the imagined experience task were a fairly subtle induction of contempt.

Because our contempt induction was relatively subtle, participants may have expressed individual differences in their reaction to the manipulation. In particular, participants with lower sensitivity to emotions (e.g. lower EQ) may have been unaffected by the contempt manipulation

and thus behaved in the OCQ like participants in the control group, while participants with greater sensitivity to emotion performed on the OCQ according to our predictions. One observation from the data which supports this possibility is that standard errors for hits and foils were higher in the contempt group than in the control group. This difference tentatively suggests that while the average performance of the contempt group was close to that of the control group, some members of the contempt group (the higher EQ participants) were indeed affected by the manipulation.

Ideas for Further Research

We have identified several opportunities for further research into the effects of contempt on self-esteem and related behaviors. These opportunities include ideas to strengthen the intensity of the contempt induction as well as suggestions for other dependent variables which we believe may be affected by an exposure to contempt.

Strengthening the contempt induction. A critical weakness of the contempt induction used for the present study was that it did not give participants a true experience of being directly exposed to contempt. In order for the expression of contempt to operate on a participant's self-esteem and thereby affect his need to self-enhance, he must perceive that someone is contemptuous *of him in particular* as a result of some judgment that the contemptuous person has made. Only then will the participant express a tendency to self-enhance as a reaction to the contempt expression.

One solution to increase the relevance of the contempt induction to the participant is to engage the participant in what feels like a genuine social interaction, such as a simulated negotiation exercise or ultimatum game. The simulation need not be lengthy or complex. Exposure to contempt can be manipulated by showing the participant pictures of the

“opponent’s” face which are either contemptuous or neutral and by including lines of dialogue which are either contemptuous or neutral. The critical element of this induction is that the participant should feel as if he is engaged in a true interaction with a real opponent.

A second solution which eliminates the need to simulate a social interaction is to ask participants to complete a test or questionnaire (e.g. personality test, cognitive abilities test, etc.), and to then give participants “feedback” on their test results. The feedback will be delivered via a recorded video of an “expert” offering an interpretation of the results. Although all participants will hear the same scripted neutral feedback, the experimental group will watch someone explaining the results in a contemptuous manner, while the control group will watch someone explaining the results in a neutral manner. This contempt induction has two advantages. First, participants will feel that the “expert” who is exhibiting contempt has a valid basis for making a judgment of their personalities or self-worth. Second, the video interface will allow for a much clearer and more realistic expression of contempt than is possible through photos or text.

Other effects of the contempt expression. If we accept the premise that expressions of contempt damage self-esteem, there should be other interesting effects which we can observe by exposing participants to contempt. For example, self-enhancement is not the only possible response when one’s self-esteem has been threatened. According to the social exclusion literature discussed earlier in this paper, another response is to accept the threat and engage in self-defeating behaviors. Some self-defeating behaviors which would be interesting to study include the tendency to cheat on a test, choosing between want-should choices (e.g. a fatty, delicious snack or a healthy, less delicious snack), and risk-taking tendencies.

Conclusion

Although we were unable to confirm our hypothesis through the data from the present study, we suggest that our pattern of results may have resulted from weaknesses in our manipulation rather than errors in our hypothesis. We have identified several limitations to our method, including weak inductions of contempt and the absence of a manipulation check which would allow us to confirm whether participants were affected by the manipulation. We have also recommended several opportunities for further research into the effects of the contempt expression. Exploring these opportunities will allow us to develop a better understanding of the relationship between contempt and self-esteem and the behaviors that are affected by the contempt expression.

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Appendix: Over-Claiming Questionnaire (foils are denoted in bold)

<i>Historical names and events</i>	<i>Fine arts</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Books and poems</i>
Napoleon	Mozart	subjunctive	Antigone
Robespierre	a cappella	hyperbole	Murphy's Last Ride
El Puente	Pullman paintings	alliteration	Catcher in the Rye
My Lai	art deco	sentence stigma	The Bible
The Lusitania	Paul Gauguin	euphemism	Hiawatha
Ronald Reagan	Mona Lisa	double entendre	Trapnell Meets Katz
Prince Lorenzo	La Neige Jaune	blank verse	Mein Kampf
The Luddites	Mario Lanza	pseudo-verb	The Aeneid
Neville Chamberlain	Verdi	ampersand	Faustus
Vichy Government	Vermeer	myth	The Boy Who Cried Wolf
Queen Shattuck	Jackson Howell	aphorism	Pygmalion
Bay of Pigs	Grand Pooh Bah	shunt-word	Hickory Dickory Dock
Torquemada	Botticelli	simile	The Divine Comedy
Wounded Knee	harpsichord	acronym	Windermere Wild
Clara Barton	dramatis personae	synonym	The Raven

<i>Authors and characters</i>	<i>Social science and law</i>	<i>Physical sciences</i>	<i>Life sciences</i>
Adonis	yellow journalism	Manhattan Project	mammal
Mephistopheles	angst	planets	adrenal gland
Shylock	nationalism	nuclear fusion	sciatica
Ancient Mariner	megaphrenia	cholarine	insulin
Doctor Fehr	acrophobia	atomic number	meta-toxins
Venus	pulse tax	hydroponics	intestine
Romeo and Juliet	pork-barreling	alloy	bio-sexual
Bulldog Graziano	prejudice	plate tectonics	meiosis
Norman Mailer	Christian Science	photon	ribonucleic acid
Horatio Alger	ombudsman	ultra-lipid	electrocardiograph
Charlotte Bronte	consumer apparatus	centripetal force	amniotic sac
Artemis	superego	plates of parallax	hemoglobin
Lewis Carroll	trust-busting	nebula	retroplex
Admiral Broughton	behaviorism	particle accelerator	antigen
Mrs. Malaprop	Oedipus complex	satellite	recessive trait

<i>20th century culture names</i>	<i>Philosophy</i>
Gail Brennan	logistic heresy
Jackie Robinson	creationism
Houdini	Goedel's theorem
Ginger Rogers	social constructionism
Greta Garbo	Platonic sense
Dale Carnegie	hermeneutics
Scott Joplin	esoteric deduction
Rube Goldberg	ghost in the machine
George Gershwin	Hegel
Mae West	Socrates
Jesse Owens	categorical imperative
Oliver Marjorie	free will
Louis Lapointe	Ayn Rand
King Kong	situational ethics
P.T. Barnum	Principia Mathematica