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Chapter 6

Rejecting the Unworthy: The Causes, Components, and Consequences of Contempt

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> "I was playing a game with my friend and he just couldn't beat me. After about an hour he was screaming at me that I was cheating and I just looked at him and I was like 'no, you just suck.' "—research participant describing an experience when he felt contempt more intensely than any other emotion. (Roseman, Sulik, & Jose, 2012)

Though a surprising number of Americans do not know the meaning of the word "contempt" (Matsumoto & Ekman, 2004), most, like people from other cultures, recognize facial or vocal expressions of this emotion and the situations in which it is likely to occur (e.g., Hawk, van Kleef, Fischer, & van der Schalk, 2009; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). Indeed, though contempt entered psychologists' emotion pantheon after many others, and some theorists do not regard it as a *basic* emotion (e.g., Gervais & Fessler, 2017), contempt is all around us, threaded through our daily lives from childhood onward.

Contempt is present in the schoolyard, where the literature on physical aggression is being supplemented by a growing number of studies on "social aggression" manifest in teasing, taunting, reputation sullying, and exclusion from relationships (e.g., Underwood, 2004). It is present in some marriages, where Gottman (e.g., 1993) concludes that contemptuous statements predict divorce. It is present in the workplace, where managers may have contempt for workers, workers may have contempt for managers or coworkers, and workers and managers may share contempt for customers (Pelzer, 2005).

Contempt is prominent in electoral campaigns and political discourse. For example, in the 2016 U.S. presidential contest, in addition to incessant slights from Donald Trump (Lee & Quealy, 2017), Ted Cruz disparaged Marco Rubio as "just another pretty face,"[1] and an ad for Jeb Bush called Trump

"unhinged, liberal, and dishonest."[2] In a 2008 rally, Hillary Clinton mocked then rival Barack Obama as naively hopeful,[3] and a 1980 ad for Jimmy Carter said that being president was "too complex a job" for Ronald Reagan.[4] Indeed, in a recent study of two U.S. Senate elections, Redlawsk, Roseman, Mattes, and Katz (2017) found contempt to be the negative emotion perceived *most* by voters in negative campaign ads and when candidates talked about each other.

In academia, sociolinguist Deborah Tannen (1998) points to a prevailing "culture of critique," where journal reviewers "often take a tone of derision" (p. 271) in evaluating manuscript submissions. We may get a sense of the prevalence of contempt in our own contexts by counting the number of times we detect the emotion (or feel it ourselves) while watching the news, listening to lunchtime conversations, or attending professional conferences.

In this chapter, I employ psychological and social science theory and research to elucidate the causes, components, effects, and functions of contempt. I then consider how empirically grounded knowledge about contempt can inform debates about the wisdom and morality of responding—or not responding—with contempt in a variety of situations.

WHAT IS CONTEMPT?

According to the American Heritage Dictionary (2016a), contempt is "the feeling or attitude of regarding someone or something as inferior, base, or worthless; scorn." As an emotion, contempt is a syndrome of responses (Averill, 1980) having the phenomenological, physiological, expressive, behavioral, and goal components that are characteristic of such states (cf. Kleinginna & Kleinginna, 1981; Roseman, 2011; Scherer, 2005).

The phenomenological component of an emotion encompasses its characteristic thoughts and feelings. In contempt, these include thoughts about the target person's unworthiness, and feelings of revulsion (Roseman, 2002).

According to Ekman (2003), the facial expression of contempt involves a tightening and slight raising of the corner of the lips on one side of the face. The American Heritage Dictionary (2016b) terms this a *sneer*. Darwin (1872) cites sources who suggest that tilting the head up and back can also express contempt, especially when combined with downward gaze (creating the appearance of looking down at the target). Contempt can also be expressed by non-speech vocalizations, such as "tsʰə" (Schröder, 2003) or "tse" (Hawk et al., 2009), "pha?" (Schröder, 2003), or the laughing sounds "hə̧h," (Schröder, 2003) or "huh" (Hawk et al., 2009).

The physiology of contempt has been rarely studied. Sambataro et al. (2006) found differential activation in the amygdala and globus pallidus in

participants viewing contemptuous faces, but note these might be responses *to* contempt rather than responses *of* the emotion. If contempt has pan-cultural expressive signals, it would seem the brain and body processes generating them will eventually be specified. For example, the sneer of contempt is produced by the buccinator and zygomaticus major muscles (Matsumoto & Ekman, 2008), which are innervated by cranial nerve VII, controlled subcortically by a motor nucleus in the pons portion of the brainstem (Cattaneo & Pavesi, 2014). Delineating the neurophysiology and psychophysiology of contempt is an important area for future research.

The behavioral component of contempt includes the tendencies or readiness (Frijda, 1986) to look down on (Roseman, 2002), disparage (speak of in a disrespectful way), or scorn (treat as unworthy; Fischer & Roseman, 2007).

In addition to action tendencies, emotions also have what I have termed an "emotivational" component: goals that people want to pursue when the emotion is experienced (cf. Frijda, 1986; Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994). Emotivational goals in contempt include wanting to have nothing to do with the target of contempt, wanting other people to know about the target's shortcomings, and wanting the target to be rejected by (e.g., excluded from) one's group (Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Roseman, 2002).

The various responses characteristic of an emotion are not isolated elements which just happen to be part of one emotion rather than another. Instead they are interrelated, with the set of responses in each emotion forming a "strategy" for coping with a particular type of situation (Roseman, 2011). Like reproductive and other strategies in evolutionary theory (e.g., Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991), these are not consciously developed or deliberately pursued plans, but rather response syndromes, shaped by natural selection, that function to solve repeatedly encountered adaptive problems.

Building on de Rivera's (1977) concept of distinctive "instructions" in different emotions, I have proposed that the strategy of contempt is to *move other persons away from the self* (Roseman, 2011). That is, contempt is a *rejection emotion* aimed at other people (though the self can be treated like another person in self-contempt; Gilbert, Clarke, Hempel, Miles, & Irons, 2004).

There are at least two other members of a rejection *family* of emotions in the emotion system (Roseman, 2011). The emotion of *disgust* rejects offensive stimuli (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2016), including impersonal objects and events. *Shame* rejects the self or something associated with the self (Gilbert, 2000).

People feeling contempt sometimes adopt an attitude of indifference toward the target of the emotion, which can communicate that the target is insignificant or unworthy of attention (Aristotle, 350 BC/1966; Walker, 2006). Bell (2013) terms this *passive contempt*, and distinguishes it from

active contempt, which she says motivates withdrawal (pp. 52, 154). But the seeming indifference of passive contempt may be a "pose" (Fischer & Giner-Sorolla, 2016) or pretense (Darwin, 1872). As with disgust and shame, a person feeling contempt is far from neutral toward its target (Fischer, 2011).

Behavior when experiencing an emotion may represent a manifestation of the emotion and/or attempts to regulate the emotion (Gross, 2015; Roseman, 2011). Thus withdrawal from the object of contempt, like avoidance of the object of disgust, may be (a) an alternative pattern of action readiness (compared to that of active rejection) in contempt; (b) an instrumental behavior undertaken to achieve contempt's goal of excluding someone; or (c) a means to decrease the felt intensity of contempt, or control its expression.

Whereas the rejection emotions of disgust, contempt, and shame move offensive stimuli, other people, and aspects of the self away, the *attack emotions* of frustration, anger, and guilt *move against* (Horney, 1950) the three types of targets, respectively. Anger moves against another person in order to force a change in the target's behavior (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). In anger people report wanting to hurt and get back at someone (Roseman et al., 1994), for example, via actions such as confronting and criticizing the other person, which are reported more in instances of anger than in instances of contempt (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). In anger, we are more likely to say negative things *to* the target of the emotion, whereas in contempt we are more likely to say negative things *about* the target (e.g., to third parties), to get others to join in rejecting the person.

Research has also begun to differentiate contempt from interpersonal *dislike*. Dislike is a member of the *distancing family* of emotions, whose strategy involves moving the self away from the target of the emotion (more than moving the target away from the self, as in exclusion family emotions such as contempt; cf. de Rivera, 1977). Disliked others are avoided more than excluded. Roseman et al. (1994) found dislike was the emotion rated highest in wanting "to be far away from someone." Roseman (2002) found experiences of dislike rated higher in this goal than experiences of other emotions, including contempt and anger. Dislike was also more characterized by the action tendency "feel like avoiding interactions with someone."

APPRAISAL DETERMINANTS OF CONTEMPT

My colleagues and I (Roseman, 1998; Roseman, Antoniou, & Jose, 1996; Sulik, Roseman, & Jose, 2012) have tested several theories to identify determinants of rejection emotions. These studies have provided some support for the hypothesis that an appraisal of intrinsic problem type (having an undesirable quality) versus instrumental problem type (causing an undesirable

outcome) distinguishes rejection emotions from attack emotions (though Sulik et al., 2012, found shame to be distinguished from guilt by appraisals of uncontrollability rather than problem type). When contempt is experienced in response to another person's action, it may be because a perceiver infers a trait or disposition from the behavior (Fischer & Giner-Sorolla, 2016; Roseman, 2013). In our most recent data, the wording that seems to best capture a key appraisal eliciting the rejection emotions involves being "beneath some standard" (Roseman et al., 2012; see also Welten, 2011, cited in Nelissen, Breugelmans, & Zeelenberg, 2013).

Contempt in particular results in part from thinking "that another person was unworthy" in some way (Roseman, 2002), a cognition that then continues as part of the emotion's phenomenology. e.g., a person may be judged to be beneath a moral standard, e.g., dishonest, disloyal, or racist (see Nelissen et al., 2013), or as failing to perform community-mandated duties or show appropriate respect within a hierarchy (Rozin et al., 1999). Failure to live up to nonmoral standards can also evoke contempt. For example, contempt can be elicited by perceived stupidity (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011; Roseman, 2002) or incompetence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Hsu, 2002; Hutcherson & Gross, 2011). Miller (1997) maintains contempt can also be evoked by perceptions of another person's inferior status, or status below that which a person claims.

The determinants of contempt for others are analogous to those of shame toward the self (see Miller, 1985), which includes nonmoral as well as moral shame (Ausubel, 1955). Thus, we might experience contempt for other people whom we appraise as ugly or clumsy; or who are disparaged, mocked, or regarded disdainfully by others, if we assume the contemptuous reactions are warranted; or if contempt expressed by others leads us to make the associated appraisals (Lerner & Keltner, 2000).

Some maintain that, for contempt to be elicited, the target must be appraised as *globally* bad (Bell, 2013), analogous to the claim that appraising the whole self as bad is a crucial determinant of shame (Lewis, 1992). Others disagree. For example, Abramson (2009) maintains that one can have contempt for someone yet appreciate that person's redeeming qualities. In our data (Roseman et al., 2012), narratives of rejection emotions most often focus on particular qualities, actions, or outcomes, rather than the whole object or person. For example, participants describing experiences in which they felt intense contempt cited such causes as friends' inferior performance or lack of self-control, and acquaintances' "poor skills" or an "attention to detail deficiency" (Roseman et al., 2012). Miller (1997) describes feeling contempt for his mason's vulgarity, while respecting the man's job-related ability.

If contempt is based on an appraisal of another person being beneath a standard, it can resemble an assertion of the contemnor's superiority. Indeed,

Miller (1997) writes that "contempt is itself the claim to relative superiority" (p. 214). But studying emotions across languages and cultures, Wierzbicka (1999, 108) contends that contempt does not involve a superiority component, or any direct and explicit comparison with oneself. Nor do we see an appraisal of superiority in most experiences of contempt collected in our research (Roseman et al., 2012). Typically, those first-person accounts of contempt focus on the *other* person as beneath some standard: the other's disloyalty, deficiency, irresponsibility, and so forth. Rarely is there mention of superior qualities of the self. Of course, it could be argued that if the other is inferior, the self must be implicitly superior, and this could *motivate* people to feel contempt (as discussed in the next section). But most often in our data, the other is evaluated as beneath a standard that is generally applicable, *not* one at which the self excels. Even when there is an element of comparison, as in the contempt experience that began this chapter, in most cases the focus is on the other person: "you suck." Contempt is an emotion that is chiefly about the target.

True, contempt can co-occur with other emotions, including emotions that are about the self. But when the experienced emotion is primarily based on an appraisal of one's own superiority, the primary emotion is also about the self, for example, authentic or hubristic pride (Tracy & Robins, 2007). It is also possible that emotions about another person and emotions about the self (e.g., contempt and pride) might co-occur or combine in equal proportions, as perhaps in haughtiness.

FUNCTIONS OF CONTEMPT

I have proposed that appraisals function to sort situations into categories for which particular emotional response syndromes are most likely to be adaptive (e.g., Roseman, 2013). Thus appraisals and emotion strategies are intimately linked. In the attack emotions of frustration, anger, and guilt, the emotion's target is not appraised as bad in itself, but rather has a bad effect (i.e., is blocking a goal, or causing harm). If the target can change behavior or cause a different outcome, attacking may be worthwhile to induce, coerce, or force a change. That may explain why anger is especially likely to result from actions appraised as voluntary (Averill, 1982) or controllable (Weiner, 1985), and guilt from actions it seems the self could have prevented (Tracy & Robins, 2006). If the rejection emotions of disgust, contempt, and shame are elicited by perceiving that the target has a substandard quality, and qualities are more difficult to change than actions, then moving the target away from the self may be more effective than attack under such conditions.

Although this functional logic may be *most* adaptive if the targets or their substandard qualities are unchanging, stability does not seem essential for a rejection emotion to be experienced. For example, we have not found stability appraisals to distinguish disgust from frustration, or shame from guilt (Roseman et al., 2012). Indeed, Bell's (2013) discussion of the moral and instrumental value of contempt presupposes the target's ability to change. Bell observes that contemptuous disengagement can serve as a "protest," and one of her "aptness conditions" for contempt is the contemnor's openness to forgiveness (pp. 153–54). This suggests that some type of change is at least conceivable (in response to the protest). For example, in response to received contempt, a person could reassess racist beliefs. Contempt could be deployed to shame an executive into refraining from sexist comments, and ridicule might embarrass some politicians into abandoning foolish policies. But while the target is manifesting badbeing (Bell, 2013), contempt can reduce its impact by moving the target away.

A second function of contempt exists at the group and interpersonal levels: to bind together those who feel contempt toward the same target. Durkheim (1984/1893) proposed that an important function of a society's punishment of crime is to define and strengthen norms. Erikson (1962) extended this by observing that control of deviance takes place in many informal as well as formal settings: "Each time the community censures some act of deviance, then, it sharpens the authority of the violated norm and re-establishes the boundaries of the group" (p. 310). Social psychological research indicates that having a common enemy increases solidarity within a group (Dion, 1979, cited in Myers, 2013).

Interpersonally Rimé (2009) has shown that emotional experiences are shared more than nonemotional experiences. The stronger the emotion, the more likely it is to be shared, and passed on again to others. Rimé delineates a process in which sharing of an emotional experience often creates a similar emotion in the listener, and increases empathy and attachment between individuals. Rimé cites studies by Espitalier, Tcherkassof, and Delmas (2002) showing that people who discuss together emotional aspects of a film subsequently have stronger ties than people who discuss its technical aspects or who do not engage in a discussion, and by Peters and Kashima (2007) finding that sharing an emotion forms a kind of alliance between narrator and listener.

A third potential function of contempt is to assert or affirm the contemnor's status (Miller, 1997). Contemptuous downward comparisons may be especially likely if a person's self-esteem is low or threatened, insofar as they negate or shift attention from one's possible inferiority (Smith, 2000). If this is true, we may expect heightened contempt when a person's status is insecure or needs to be established (e.g., among adolescents eager to show

they are no longer childish, second-year graduate students who have learned the norms of their recently acquired roles and wish to demonstrate they are professionally savvy, and immigrants who have been in their new country long enough to distinguish themselves from just-off-the-boat arrivals). However, Abramson (2009) observes that even if contempt can sometimes be accompanied by pleasurable feelings of superiority, observers would perceive something amiss if a person spends a lot of time with those toward whom the person professes to feel contempt. This reminds us that whatever the secondary gains one may obtain from the appraisals that elicit contempt, or the emotions that may accompany it (e.g., relief from threat; hubristic pride), contempt remains primarily a negative emotion, characterized by revulsion and distancing rather than attraction and contact.

CONSEQUENCES OF CONTEMPT

Several potentially functional consequences of contempt have just been discussed. But as Averill (1994) points out, the consequences of an emotion may also differ from its functions. For one thing, not all consequences of an emotion *are* functional, even if, as claimed by many psychologists, emotions are functional most of the time (Frijda, 1994). In addition, what is functional for the group may not be functional for the individual, and vice versa (Averill, 1994).

Melwani and Barsade (2011) found that receiving contemptuous feedback *improved* some students' performance on a business simulation task. These effects apparently followed an appraisal-mediated logic. If targets of contempt accept its discrediting appraisals, they may at least temporarily feel shame or decreased self-esteem, and work harder so as to show, via improved performance, that they do not deserve contempt. Melwani and Barsade (2011) found that decreased self-esteem and increased activation mediated contempt's performance increment.

However, if targets dispute discrediting appraisals, they may feel anger and attack the contemnors. Indeed Aristotle's *Rhetoric* presents unmerited disrespect (unjustified "slights") as the paradigmatic elicitor of anger. Similarly, psychologist Richard Lazarus (1991) claimed that challenges to a person's self-esteem are especially involved in generating anger. Indeed, Melwani and Barsade (2011) found that receiving contempt also increased returned contempt and interpersonal verbal aggression.

This abbreviated summary of immediate focal consequences of contempt must be supplemented by a more in-depth and extended consideration of its potential impact on the targets, on the contemnors, and on their social and societal context. Melwani and Barsade (2011) note that the beneficial effects

of contempt that they observed on work performance may be limited to short-term interactions in which targets were provided with "a socially sanctioned and clear outlet to regain both position and inclusionary status by increasing the quality of their work" and caution that "the long-term effects of contempt may be quite severe" (p. 516).

The behaviors (e.g., derogation, ostracism), goal (exclusion), and strategy (moving contemptible others away) of contempt can hurt its targets. For example, academics are intimately familiar with the importance of recognition and reputation: consider how often we look to see if we are cited, quoted, invited to contribute, and accorded respect. More generally, studies have shown that exclusion from a simple game of online ball-tossing activates the same brain centers as are involved in physical pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). Contempt not only hurts, it *wounds*. Baumrind, Larzelere, and Owens (2010, 161), citing studies on child development, conclude that " 'wounding words' which demean or belittle the child" (Moore & Pepler, 2006) contribute powerfully to child maladjustment, and to a greater extent than physical punishment.

In addition, the effects of contempt *last*. Miller (1997, 216) quotes Lord Chesterfield: "There is nothing that people bear more impatiently, or forgive less, than contempt; and all injury is much sooner forgotten than insult." Baumrind et al. (2010) found that parents' verbal hostility toward their preschool children (belittling via sarcasm; yelling or shouting; disapproving chatter) was the disciplinary practice associated with the greatest number of adverse adolescent outcomes ten years later. Contempt, once felt, may be difficult to reverse, insofar as it goes beyond disapproval of behaviors (which are relatively specific) or harm caused (for which one could conceivably make reparations) to disapproval of traits or character (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). Character or trait ascriptions may be difficult to conclusively disprove, because they can be manifest in an infinite number of situations, in an infinite variety of ways. Moreover, such dispositional attributions may "grow legs" as people think of other grounds for the belief (Anderson, Lepper, & Ross, 1980), and maintain them via well-known processes of confirmation bias (e.g., Nickerson, 1998). Contempt, like shame (Lewis, 1971, 503), may be difficult to "discharge."

Contempt can mark and stigmatize its targets. Even if, as I have argued above, contempt need not be based on an assessment that the whole person is unworthy, directing contempt at an individual or group and rejecting and excluding them can do considerable damage. A recent review by Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, and Link (2013) on the effects of stigma is essential, sobering reading for all who ponder the moral psychology of contempt. They cite Link and Phelan's (2001) conceptualization of the stigma process, which involves associating human differences with negative attributes, and separating "us"

from "them," which results in diminished target status, and provides a rationale for rejection, exclusion, and discrimination. Hatzenbuehler et al. (2013) discuss effects of stigma (conceptualized as including discrimination) associated with minority racial status, sexual orientation, disability, weight, HIV, and mental health status. For example, stigma can result in significant stress, which has been found to increase maladaptive coping behaviors, such as unhealthy eating, cigarette smoking, and alcohol consumption. Both stress and its behavioral sequelae contribute to adverse health outcomes, and stigma is linked to increased mortality among stigmatized group members.

Stigma can also lead to social isolation. Hatzenbuehler et al. (2013) suggest that stigmatized individuals may fear negative evaluation and rejection, and therefore avoid entering into close relationships. Social isolation, in turn, diminishes social support, which large literatures show has beneficial effects on health and numerous other outcomes.

Penologists once thought that solitary confinement would give convicts time away from bad companions to reflect upon their conduct. Now most researchers believe this kind of social isolation produces numerous detrimental consequences, including depression, anxiety, and panic, as well as memory, concentration, and sleep difficulties (Smith, 2006). Moreover, "Social isolation is arguably the strongest and most reliable predictor of suicidal ideation, attempts, and lethal suicidal behavior across the life span"; rejection, to the extent that it increases social isolation, increases suicide risk (van Orden and Joiner, 2013, 215).

Thus contempt—insofar as it rejects and excludes people, and ends relationships (Fischer & Roseman, 2007)—decreases social support and increases stress, social isolation, and the risk for significant adverse psychological, physical, and behavioral consequences.

Moreover, contempt can interfere with its targets' abilities to change the very badbeing and conduct that contemnors disparage. According to Hatzenbuehler et al. (2013), "The effort required to cope with stigma diminishes individuals' psychological resources" (p. 816). This may be in part because the painfulness of contempt (and perhaps resulting shame) intrudes into consciousness, leading to rumination, and diverting attention from problem-solving coping and important tasks. We know that "stereotype threat" can lead to decrements in the performance of stigmatized individuals, which then appear to confirm and perpetuate the stereotypes (Steele, 1997). If contempt increases rather than decreases the likelihood of targets' subpar behavior, this seriously undermines a rationale for the moral deployment of contempt.

Contempt also has effects that go beyond the individual. As noted, it predicts marital dissolution (Gottman, 1993) and relationship deterioration generally (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). In groups and societies, contempt is related to maltreatment, dehumanization, and genocide. Cuddy, Fiske, and

Glick (2007) found that survey respondents believe Americans feel contempt and disgust and do active harm (e.g., attack, fight, harass), as well as passive harm (e.g., exclude, ignore, neglect), to groups appraised as low in competence and high in competition for resources, such as welfare recipients. Similarly, Staub (1989, 60) concludes that "devaluation makes mistreatment likely." He cites research in which students acting as teachers gave much higher levels of electric shocks for inadequate performance when learners had been labeled as "an animalistic, rotten bunch" (Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975, 258). Analyzing the Nazi Holocaust, genocides in Armenia and Cambodia, and mass killings in Argentina, Staub concludes that each followed from cycles of mistreatment and devaluation. Other researchers have also documented how genocidal violence is preceded by a period of time in which target groups are systematically devalued (though for genocide to occur, devaluation may need to be accompanied by perceptions of existential threat; Sémelin, 2007).

Finally, there is reason to look more carefully at the effects of contempt on the contemnors, and not only in the most serious cases (e.g., when all parties suffer from the dissolution of a salvageable relationship, or an entire society is catastrophically damaged for a generation by genocide). For example, based on answers to a question about the causes of racial disparities in income, jobs, and housing, Kennedy, Kawachi, Lochner, Jones, and Prothrow-Stith (1997) calculated the level of "collective disrespect" that Whites had toward Blacks in various American states. They found that states higher in collective disrespect had greater age-adjusted mortality among both Blacks *and* Whites. Lee, Muennig, Kawachi, and Hatzenbuehler (2015) found that greater individual-level racial prejudice was associated with greater mortality among *both* races in communities that had relatively low overall prejudice; and greater community-level racial prejudice was associated with increased mortality in *all* communities.

At least some of these effects may be mediated by the destructive effects of prejudice on social capital (e.g., limiting interactions that help all community members secure beneficial resources). Lee et al. (2015) also note that high-prejudice individuals have higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol, as well as maladaptive cardiovascular responses, when interacting with members of stigmatized groups than when interacting with other groups (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2001). Melwani and Barsade (2011) found that even in their laboratory situation where contempt could be relatively easily overcome by working harder and improving performance, contempt still generated aggression and returned contempt from targets. They noted that contempt "could start a cycle in which the recipient's attempt to right the balance with returned contempt may generate an even more contemptuous response from the original agent" (p. 516). It is for *his son's* sake

that Lord Chesterfield advises him to avoid showing contempt, as insults can make instant lifelong enemies (Miller, 1997, 216). So in many, if not most, cases, contempt may be deleterious for all concerned.

TO REACT WITH CONTEMPT?

Psychologists, like other scientists, typically hesitate to cross the bridge from "is" to "ought" (Myers, 2013), as facts don't dictate prescriptions. But we can marshal facts that may be relevant to ethical claims and practical goals. These include knowledge of how contempt is elicited, its characteristic response profiles, and its likely effects.

Psychologists do consider ethical questions when conducting research within professional guidelines, which have been organized around the principles of respect for persons, justice, and beneficence (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1978). In this section, without claiming to be exhaustive, I will attempt to summarize some facts and considerations that are relevant to these three ethical principles.

Does Contempt Violate Respect for Persons?

All human societies confer status, allocate prestige differentially among members, specify norms and standards, and have moral sentiments (Brown, 1991). If the standard according to which someone is judged unworthy is ethically questionable—for example, if it is a prejudgment (a prejudice), or baseless (e.g., arbitrarily denies respect to a class or group of people), or is insensitive to evidence—then the principle of respect for persons may be violated. But in such cases it seems the primary problem is the standard, rather than the emotion that reacts to departures from a standard.

Contempt can be evoked by a friend's lack of game-playing skill or a scholar's carelessness, even when other positive qualities or attributes (those that underlie the friendship, or the scholar's knowledge of the literature) are present and acknowledged. If contempt is not inherently a globalist emotion (e.g., if improved game-playing or publication of a revised well-written work would diminish felt contempt), then ultimate respect is not incompatible with feeling contempt presently.

Does Contempt Violate the Justice Principle?

As Fischer and Giner-Sorolla (2016) observe, contempt can be used to support societal hierarchies in which powerful groups set standards, sometimes

arbitrarily, in terms of which outgroups are judged as falling short. However Miller (1997) argues that societally low-ranking individuals and groups can define alternative standards (valuing equality, or outgroup-centric skill, toughness, appearance) and feel *upward* contempt. Similarly, Fischer and Giner-Sorolla (2016) maintain that low-ranking individuals may have contempt for powerful people based on moral or competence criteria. Contempt may also be felt when members of dominant groups fail to live up to their own standards. Thus, even if more often deployed by those whose resources control communication channels (in order to promote self-serving standards), contempt is not an *inherently* unjust emotion.

Does Contempt Violate the Principle of Beneficence?

As we have seen, contempt can have harmful as well as beneficial consequences. So, on balance, does the evidence suggest that it is best never to react with contempt? I would suggest that considering the nature of contempt as an *emotion*—going beyond mere judgment that some aspect of a person is beneath a standard—may help illuminate the answer to this question. As discussed in Roseman (2011), the various response components of emotions often facilitate acting quickly, flexibly, and effectively to cope with crises and opportunities.

The *feeling* of contempt draws extra attention to the target and eliciting event, keeps attention focused on them, underscores their importance, and contributes to one's sense that this is a time when coping may be needed (Frijda, 1986). For example, a bartender surveyed in Roseman et al. (2012) felt contempt when she perceived that a previously trusted coworker had stolen some of their pooled tip money. Insofar as she felt contempt, she would not feel indifferent, but instead motivated to consider doing something in response to her coworker's dishonesty. The feelings and thoughts of the phenomenological component also sensitize us to other emotion-relevant information in the situation (e.g., additional examples of the coworker's disreputable character), and cue retrieval of other experiences of the emotion and associated information that may be relevant for coping (e.g., ways she has previously dealt with contemptible people).

The expressive component of an emotion can serve as an attention-getting signal that prompts *other people* to act in ways that fit with the emotion's strategy (Roseman, 2011). If the target is present, a contemnor's sneer or derisive tone *forcefully* communicates a judgment of low value, exerting social pressure on the target to withdraw, suppress, or diminish the offending characteristic or behavior, thus helping to accomplish contempt's strategy of moving the target person or that person's targeted qualities away. Nonverbal *expression* of contempt may achieve these effects without the emotional *behaviors* of

actual disparagement, ridicule, or ostracism (just as expressions of anger can change and deter harm-doers' behavior without the necessity of coming to blows and risking physical injury; cf. Gervais & Fessler, 2017). Expressions of contempt also suggest to third parties that they come to share its eliciting appraisals and responses (including its expressions, via contagion), collaborate on its goal of social exclusion, and themselves avoid the contemptible actions and characteristics.

The behavioral component of an emotion urges actions that evolution and experience indicate are likely to successfully implement an emotion's strategy (Roseman, 2011). A contemnor's disparagement, ridicule, or shunning may motivate the target to suppress or alter substandard actions and ways of being. As with emotional expressions, such emotional behaviors also can recruit others to reject the target or the offending characteristics, greatly magnifying the contemnor's impact. The appeal of satire, put-down humor, and spectacles of public humiliation (Amarasingam, 2011; Kohm, 2009; Zillmann & Stocking, 1976) shows that people often enjoy watching and sometimes participating in rituals of rejection. Also, insofar as behaviors of contempt affect the target's social standing, they may contribute to formation and maintenance of social status hierarchies, which can function to regulate expectations and minimize conflict over position and resources (Gervais & Fessler, 2017).

The goals of an emotion's emotivational component motivate and direct instrumental action to be consistent with the emotion's strategy. Seeking to end relations with the dishonest coworker and have her rejected by others (e.g., the bar manager and staff), if achieved, would move the coworker away from the bartender. Whereas the behavioral component suggests actions that might be implemented quickly, emotivational goals provide for flexible action. The particular behavior undertaken may depend on which action is perceived most likely to achieve the goal in a given situation (e.g., whether, in our bartender's work context, disparaging or shunning would be more effective in getting the coworker to leave or change her ways, or getting other bar staff to reject her). Emotivational goals also help explain action sequences in which one behavior (e.g., disparaging) fails to attain an emotion's goal and is replaced by another (e.g., shunning).

Finally, the physiological component of an emotion provides the biological substrates for the various responses within an emotion's strategy (e.g., the feelings, expressions, and behaviors of contempt). By way of neural and chemical processes in the brain, the physiological component is also the substrate for their organization and coordination.

Thus going beyond mere judgment, contempt as an emotion gives priority to particular departures from standards, communicates their unacceptability to its targets and observers, acts to diminish their presence, and motivates the contemnor, target, and observers to achieve this outcome. In response,

the target or observers might challenge or reject the contempt that they perceive, for example, by refuting its appraisals, or by acting contrary to them (e.g., engaging in prideful, non-submissive conduct, or allying with the stigmatized persons). A recent study by Flitter (2016) suggests that refuting contempt-appraisals eliciting and questioning the contemnor's motives may sometimes succeed in defusing contempt. Thus it seems that the emotion of contempt can be adaptive as well as harmful, and its appraisals subject to potentially rational debate.

Still, would an alternative to contempt be better, in light of its destructive potential? To achieve the moral purpose of contempt—diminishing the extent and impact of badbeing and substandard behavior—we might try to utilize positive strategies, including rewarding goodbeing and praiseworthy conduct through the emotion of admiration and its elicitation of pride and self-esteem in recipients (instead of the shame elicited by contempt). This path has much to recommend it. Motivating by reward instead of punishment is pleasant rather than unpleasant, and tends to be more enduring. Behavior regulated by punishment is suppressed, rather than extinguished (Huesmann & Podolski, 2003), and tends to reemerge if sanctions are relaxed. Via admiration, norms and values can still be affirmed, conflict reduced, and human capital salvaged rather than discarded.

However there are also limits to this approach. Biological and mechanical systems tend to have dual control mechanisms that work in opposite directions: one that increases and another that diminishes (see Carlson, 2013). Cars require a brake as well as an accelerator, as it is sometimes necessary to stop quickly—taking one's foot off the gas is not enough. There are physiological mechanisms for both hunger and satiety (Carlson, 2013), and there are positive and negative emotions (see, e.g., Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994). Sometimes it is not enough to reward goodbeing—at times badbeing and reprehensible conduct (environmentally destructive greed; racism; maltreatment) must be ended as quickly as possible. Expunging the emotion of disgust and relying on the presence or absence of attraction would leave us vulnerable to the rapid spread of disease (Curtis, de Barra, & Aunger, 2011). Extirpating contempt—rejecting rejection—could allow immoral behavior to continue, demagogues to keep spreading hateful ideologies, and incompetent leaders to persist in foolhardy policies.

Contempt is part of an emotion *system* that forms an organically functioning whole (Roseman, 2011). Opposite to the type of affection I have here termed admiration, contempt is the interpersonal counterpart to disgust and shame. Its abandonment would leave a hole in the matrix of response strategies, with an emotion that rapidly rejects offensive objects (disgust) and one rejecting substandard aspects of the self (shame), but no emotion to reject unacceptable aspects of other people.

As it happens, there is a property of emotions that may allow us to find a middle way: they can, at least to some degree, be regulated (Gross, 2015). Humans are emotional, but not only emotional. Emotion regulation methods include situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation (Gross, 2015). The first four alter factors that generate contempt. *Situation selection* involves putting oneself in contexts likely to produce desired emotions and avoiding those situations that foster undesired ones. For example, the bartender who felt contempt could refrain from interacting with her dishonest coworker and thereby avoid feeling (and expressing or acting on) contempt. This approach fails to alter the contemptible behavior, but could avert contempt's unpleasantness, conflict with the target, and the likelihood of wounding or being wounded by her. In instances where the contempt-elicitors are less important than the potential harm from enacting the emotion (or are less modifiable), situation selection may be a preferable alternative.

Attentional deployment involves directing one's cognitive focus toward events and situations that would elicit desired emotions, and away from those producing undesired ones. Our bartender could simply avoid thinking about her coworker. This method has similar advantages and disadvantages as situation selection, though it also risks continued harm to the self from interaction with the person whose actions or traits are problematic.

Situation modification involves active problem-solving—altering the events that are eliciting the emotion. For example, the bartender could speak to her coworker (attempting to get her to see the error of her ways or at least return the stolen money) or inform the bar owner or the police, so that the unacceptable situation is ended. Here, instrumental action is an adjunct or alternative to the emotion of contempt. It could diminish negative effects of feeling, expressing, and acting in a contemptuous way, while working to change a situation one is practically or morally required to correct (cf. Mason, 2003).

Cognitive change refers to reappraising a situation in a way that alters one's emotion. This might involve: questioning the standard underlying the emotional reaction (e.g., equal distribution of tip money); thinking about mitigating circumstances (e.g., the extent to which the coworker needed money); seeing the event in historical or clinical context (e.g., a prior conflict with the coworker, or an impulse control disorder); and considering whether other motives of the contemnor (e.g., defending or boosting her ego) could be distorting evaluation of the target. Cognitive change is often recommended by clinicians, as when marital therapists advise couples to appraise dissatisfactions in terms of problematic behaviors rather than negative traits. Cognitive change may be appropriate when the new appraisals correspond to the reality of the situation (e.g., if the coworker really needed the money)

and the contemnor's motives (e.g., if she truly believes that need outweighs the importance of honesty). Mason (2003) and Bell (2013) have taken pains to delineate conditions required for contempt to be aptly felt. For example, the target of contempt must be acting voluntarily and knowingly, and not be psychologically abnormal. Cognitive change is less appropriate if it distorts the situation or disregards the contemnor's true preferences and values.

Finally, *response modulation* involves feeling the emotion, but altering one's response or a portion of it. Gross has focused especially on emotion expression, and finds that its suppression may *increase* activity in emotion-generating regions of the brain (Goldin, McRae, Ramel, & Gross, 2008), and intensify physiological arousal, including unhealthy cardiovascular activation (Gross, 1998).

However in some instances, suppression may be worth the cost (e.g., when a mediator refrains from expressing contempt toward a brutal warlord in order to negotiate the end to an armed conflict). Response modulation also encompasses options short of total suppression, such as modulating the *intensity* of expression (e.g., to avoid humiliating the target, as humiliation would make it less likely the target could accept the evaluation and consequently change). The mediator might also express contempt privately to confidants (where it would do no harm). Allowing oneself to feel an emotion but deciding whether or how to express it may in some instances be preferable to avoiding the feeling (e.g., by attentional deployment). As noted earlier, the phenomenology of contempt highlights the situation as important, and can reaffirm one's standards and guide future conduct ("I don't want to rupture my relationship with this person, but I know I never want to act that way").

Response modulation also encompasses deciding *how to act* on one's emotions. Recall that the emotivational component provides goals that guide instrumental behavior to be consistent with the emotion's strategy, and that goals in contempt include excluding the target, or the target's qualities, from interactions. A person feeling contempt might focus comments on the target's behavior rather than a negative trait, or on the way the target is being *now* or has been heretofore. Such statements make clear that the contemnor believes the behavior or trait is beneath a standard, but allow some separation between the target and that which is contemptible. They say "this is unworthy" or "this is unworthy of you," and thus offer an opportunity for rehabilitation. This is arguably a universalizable maxim, giving others the chance we wish to give ourselves when we feel shame (Miller, 1985). One may also laugh *with* the target instead of laughing *at* the target (see Griffiths, 1976), acknowledging the extent to which one shares a risible shortcoming and desires to correct it.

It was in such conditions of possible recovery that Melwani and Barsade's (2011) participants worked harder to improve their performance after receiving contemptuous feedback, and it contrasts with the debilitating effects of

stigma which impair a person's ability to perform desired behaviors. Statements of this type do not allow the contemptible conduct or trait to go unchallenged, but function to provide a conditional response, a warning similar to that in Cogley's (2014) virtuous anger, which brings a grievance to the attention of a harm-doer. They correspond to the dictum "love the sinner, but hate the sin" but go beyond that platitude insofar as they are militant (King, 1968) rather than exculpatory. They say, "This is the low esteem with which you will be regarded, if you continue to act this way" and communicate that the target could be rejected, shunned, or ostracized by the contemnor and by others if he or she persists.

The approach of feeling the emotion but modulating or regulating its expression and behavior recognizes costs and hazards of unbridled contempt, as well as costs of apathy and inaction. It is mindful of the strategy and functions of the emotion, in acting forcefully to move behaviors and traits that are beneath a standard away from the contemnor and the group; it seeks the most effective way to do so, considering the welfare of all concerned.

In discussing the thoughts and behaviors that are possible sequelae of negative emotions, Clark and Isen (1982) proposed that "automatic processing" leads to thinking and acting in an emotion-consistent manner, whereas "controlled processing" can involve thinking and acting to change one's emotion. They noted that controlled processing is effortful, and is therefore more likely to occur when one has resources such as energy and time. Frijda's (1986) concept of "control precedence" implies that greater emotion intensity is associated with greater felt compulsion to act. In line with Frijda's formulation, I have proposed that at low-to moderate-intensity emotional behavior is more flexible and tends to be guided by emotivational goals, whereas at higher intensity emotional behavior is more constrained toward emotion-specific action tendencies and readiness (Roseman, 2011). Thus at higher levels of emotion intensity, it may be more difficult to modulate or regulate contemptuous emotional responses. But it may still be worth attempting, in order to maximize the likelihood of more desirable conduct, while minimizing the extent and impact of behaviors and ways of being that violate our standards.

NOTES

1. http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/269136-cruz-ad-on-rubio-vote-for-more-than-pretty-face.
2. https://amp.twimg.com/v/11e59ebd-56b2-480d-a760-5392415df93d.
3. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbIN3GLynXk.
4. http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1980/streetgov.

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