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Contempt: A Hot Feeling Hidden under a Cold Jacket

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Summary. – Contempt is the feeling when one judges another person as an inferior human being, and is typically expressed through social exclusion. Feeling contempt thus implies rejecting others, considering others as unworthy of one's attention. Contempt is often mixed with other emotions, such as anger, hatred, or socio-moral disgust. Often therefore, the expression of contempt can coincide with feelings of revenge or even attempts to attack the other person. I think contempt is a moral emotion, in that it is often elicited in response to transgressions that are considered as amoral. These include behaviors such as betrayal, theft, (sexual) violence, which go against our moral standards and therefore deserve only contempt. These types of transgressions are too awful to criticize, and therefore can only lead to rejection or exclusion. Although we may feel contempt towards people we hardly know, contempt often develops out of anger, especially when we have been confronted with others or other groups who have not changed their behavior in reaction to our anger. Anger therefore does not seem functional, and contempt emerges as a way of coping with the lack of influence or control we have over the other.

Contempt is a negative feeling that embodies the judgment of regarding someone as inferior to oneself. Contempt often, but not necessarily, occurs in combination with other negative emotions, such as anger and disgust. Following this observation, Izard (1971) described contempt as part of the 'hostility' triad, referring to the idea that anger, disgust and contempt all involve not only negative evaluations, but also hostile tendencies towards another person. He regarded contempt as the coldest and most subtle of the three emotions.

Interestingly, contempt has received relatively little attention by emotion researchers, even though it has been included in the list of basic emotions. The

reason for this inclusion was that Ekman and some researchers (Ekman & Friesen, 1986; Ekman & Friesen, 1988; Ekman & Heider, 1988; Matsumoto, 1992) have proposed that contempt has a unique facial expression, and thus deserves its status as a basic emotion. It is not surprising, therefore, that most of the research on contempt has concentrated on the question of whether it has a unique facial expression or not. The various studies (e.g., Russell, 1991) that have been conducted to settle this issue have not reached a consensus, however. The main conclusion that can be drawn is that the so-called typical facial expression of contempt (the 'unilateral lip curl') is not spontaneously associated with contempt, and thus people generally have difficulty recognizing contempt. Only when people know that a face may reflect contempt, they may put the right label on the right face. The conclusion, however, that it is doubtful whether contempt is a basic emotion, does not mean that it is not an emotion at all. In the present chapter, I will argue that contempt is one of the most dangerous emotions, and that its apparent coldness may be instrumental to achieving its social goal.

In this chapter, I will review the characteristics of contempt, and how it differs from other negative emotions. I will describe the typical components of contempt, and discuss its elicitors. I will also discuss the expression of contempt, and its implications in social life, especially intergroup relations and in organizational settings.

CAUSES OF CONTEMPT

Contempt occurs on some lists of basic emotions (Ortony & Turner, 1990), and yet, its status as a universal, basic emotion is not without question and has been debated for many years. More specifically, its status as an emotion has sometimes been discussed, as well. The reason is that contempt is not characterized by a hot, aroused bodily state, but rather by a cool, disconnected state of mind, which has led some to conclude that contempt is not an emotion at all, but merely a negative attitude.

I consider contempt to be an emotion, however, because it is elicited in reaction to a specific event, mostly another person's behavior, which affects someone's emotional concerns. These concerns may involve one's self-esteem, or personal or moral values. People may feel contempt because they have been deeply hurt or insulted by someone, for example, a son whose father has told him that he really is not the son he expected him to be. People may also feel contempt because someone has transgressed a moral code, such as mistreating innocent people, betraying friends or family, using one's social position in order to improve one's own finances, or being disrespectful to elderly persons. Although the difference between

feeling contempt and merely having a very negative attitude about a person may be sometimes hard to establish, the difference is that contempt implies a strong inclination to act in response to this person, for example to show this person that we despise him or her. If we would merely have a negative attitude, we would feel indifferent about a person, and we would not experience any emotion or any motivation to act.

Whereas some authors have noted that contempt involves an element of indifference, I argue that the act of indifference is a way in which contempt can be expressed, not a characterization of the actual feeling. Thus, although contempt is not characterized by high arousal, as are anger or disgust, contempt does involve a strong motivational tendency. This tendency is clearly embodied, as supported by research showing that the processing of contempt faces is accompanied by activation of the amygdala (Sambataro *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, this brain activation is correlated with arousal measures during the contempt reaction. In sum, we can safely consider contempt as an emotion, and distinguish it from the mere negative evaluations of an individual.

In addition, contempt is a moral emotion. In contrast with other emotions that can be elicited in reaction to both moral and amoral events, contempt is generally elicited in reaction to a moral transgression. This has been very nicely illustrated by the research of Rozin, Haidt and colleagues. Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt (1999) have proposed that anger, disgust and contempt are part of a negative emotional triad, but they emphasize the moral nature of this triad. According to them, all three emotions imply a negative evaluation of others, but they are reactions in different moral domains. Following the typology of ethics proposed by Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park (1997), they argue that these three emotions are elicited in reaction to a transgression of three distinct ethics: Community, Autonomy, and Divinity (the CAD Triad Hypothesis). Anger is elicited when individual rights and the autonomy of the individual are violated, disgust is evoked when purity or sanctity is violated, and contempt arises when communal codes, such as hierarchy, are violated. This is the case when a person fails to carry out the duties of his or her community or the social hierarchy within the community, for example when being disloyal, disobedient or disrespectful, or breaking the rules of a social community.

The type of moral transgressions may differ in importance or relevance across cultures. In some individualistic cultures, for example, rules concerning appropriate behavior in social hierarchy may be regarded as less important than in collectivistic cultures. However, in both types of cultures, the transgression of these moral norms results in contempt. In the Netherlands, for example, contempt and disgust are often reported together in reaction to a violation of sexual norms. One's partner having extramarital sex, or an adult man having sex with children would

elicit both disgust and contempt. This also illustrates the notion of socio-moral disgust, which is elicited by similar transgressions of social norms that elicit contempt. The difference between such reactions of disgust and contempt would be mainly found in the different embodiment of both emotions.

In short, contempt is a moral emotion, because it is mainly elicited by the moral transgressions by others. Such transgressions are not regarded as merely negative, as something that we can choose to do or not do, but as morally wrong. Moral transgressions do not necessarily elicit the same emotions in the same intensity in everyone, however. There are individual dispositions or roles that may enhance feelings of contempt. For example, individuals who are high in power or status are more likely to feel contempt towards subordinates. The more superior one is, or feels, the more one may perceive others as inferior. There are also personality characteristics that may reduce contempt. One candidate is empathy, because the tendency to feel with other persons, and to try to understand why they feel the way that they do may more easily result in forgiveness than in anger or contempt when someone has transgressed towards you.

TYPICAL COMPONENTS OF CONTEMPT

In daily life, contempt frequently occurs along with other negative emotions, especially with anger and disgust. In a series of studies attempting to distinguish the typical components of anger and contempt (Fischer & Roseman, 2007), we found that when subjects had to autobiographically recall a contempt episode, it was almost always an event in which they also felt a lot of anger. In many cases of contempt, they even felt as much anger as they felt contempt. This implies that contempt more often than not is part of a mixture of negative feelings. Nevertheless, however, it is possible to disentangle characteristics that are more typical of contempt than of anger.

In the first of these studies, we asked individuals to think of a situation in which they had experienced contempt (and not anger), and a situation in which they had experienced anger, and not contempt. After they had recalled such an event, they were asked questions about what they felt, thought or did during and after that event. In the other studies we constructed different types of vignettes on the basis of these autobiographical reports.

We first of all found a difference in the appraisal pattern of both emotions. Whereas both emotions are associated with blaming another person, and perceiving the transgression of the other person as intentional, contempt is characterized by the appraisal that the other is inferior, maybe not even worth one's energy or attention, because he or she has a bad character. We simply despise the other. Thus

in the case of anger, we blame the other, because he or she has done something wrong and blocked our goals. However, in the case of contempt we blame the other, but explain the other's behavior in terms of his or her stupidity, incompetence or immorality. Thus, the person has behaved in a bad way, not accidentally, not because he did something stupid, but because he is bad. In other words, the attribution of blame is dispositional in the case of contempt, and situational in the case of anger. This different appraisal pattern is also associated with a larger experience of control in the case of anger than in the case of contempt. We think we can still change or influence the ones we are angry at, whereas we have given up this hope in the case of contempt.

This appraisal of inferiority and absence of control also leads to distinct motivational tendencies, both in the short term and in the long term. Roseman (2001) has referred to contempt as belonging to the 'exclusion' family of emotions, in contrast with the 'attack family', to which anger belongs. This distinction was also supported in our autobiographical data. Contempt more often was characterized by tendencies to ignore the other person, to gossip about the other person, in short to exclude the other person from one's social network. Anger on the other hand, was characterized by approaching and attacking the other person. This implies criticizing the other person, giving negative feedback, explicitly expressing anger, and so on. This difference in attacking versus excluding was also found in the reports of behaviors after a few days. Then, subjects reported to have reconciled more with the target of their anger than with the target of their contempt.

We also examined where this tendency to socially exclude originated, and we found that individuals often had a history of social transgressions with the target of their contempt, and that they had often been angry with this person. They also realized, however, that their anger had never the intended effect to change this person, and so the person kept transgressing, or behaving against the personal norms of our subjects. In other words, expressing anger did not help, and the person became more and more out of control. This feeling of being powerless in dealing with such transgressions finally evolved into feelings of contempt.

The emotivational goal of contempt (see also Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994) is indeed to exclude the transgressor, and this is a more radical way of dealing with the target of their anger. By showing contempt, the person is removed from one's circle of friends; the person stays out of sight, so that one does not have to deal with the negative behavior anymore. In fact, it is the best way out: pretending that one does not care anymore, that one's commitment with that person is over: this would be a final way of convincing others that one is really serious about the criticism that has been vented. This is, in fact, the final stage of a relationship, and research on marriage relationships by Gottman & Levenson (2002), for example, has shown that contempt is the best predictor of divorce. This is not surprising,

giving the emotivational goal of contempt just described. Once contempt evolves, it is probably too late to change one's relationship with the other person. This is also confirmed in our own research. In the cases where respondents recalled a contempt incident, they also more often indicated that the relationship had deteriorated, whereas this was not the case for anger. Thus, whereas anger may even lead to an improvement of interpersonal relations (though only to a certain extent), contempt announces the final stage in a relationship.

Thus, whereas various authors have characterized contempt as cooler than anger or disgust, I would like to speak against this idea. The 'coolness' of contempt basically is merely a contained expression of strong concerns and anger that the other person is bad and should be moved away from one's personal environment. The indifference is posed and hides a strong emotional state, although the strength of the emotion may vary with the nature of the length of the relationship with the contempt target.

GROUP-BASED CONTEMPT

Izard (1971) specifically mentioned the fact that we often feel contempt for groups. Indeed, some categories of people seem to be the object of contempt more often than others. This may be due to the fact that they already have the status of an inferior group in many societies, such as the homeless, psychiatric patients, or homosexuals. This is supported by research on prejudice, stereotyping, and "infrahumanization" (Demoulin *et al.*, 2004; Leyens *et al.*, 2001), the tendency to regard out-group (member)s as inferior and not even human, but more primitive, animal-like creatures. This line of research has first of all shown that contempt is a key element of prejudice, which indeed reflects the idea that we downgrade out-group members, which is associated with specific negative emotions.

Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu (2002) have proposed the stereotype content model, which hypothesizes that stereotypes are based on two dimensions: warmth and competence, depending on social structural features of intergroup relations in society. Specifically, status predicts whether groups are seen as competent or not, and competition predicts whether a group is seen as warm or cold. For example, high status groups are seen as more competent than low status groups, and competitive groups are seen as less warm than cooperative groups. These dimensions also predict how we emotionally react to members of specific out-groups. We would specifically feel contempt towards groups that are regarded as cold and incompetent, such as welfare recipients and poor people.

The fact that the content of stereotypes is related to specific emotional reactions means that we have an inclination to emotionally react to specific groups of

people who are regarded as low in competence and low in warmth, in other words, who are seen as cold and inferior. However, this does not mean that we only feel contempt towards members of groups low in the social hierarchy. We also may feel contempt in reaction to specific transgressions of moral norms committed by groups who are high in the social hierarchy. We may for example feel contempt for bank directors after the recent financial crisis, because they have used the money of others to satisfy their own greed, or we may feel contempt towards politicians who abuse their power, or leaders who are disrespectful towards their followers.

Contempt may be an important element in the development of intergroup conflict. Recently Halperin and colleagues (Halperin, 2008; Halperin, Cannetti Nisim, & Hirsch-Hoefler, 2009) have argued that in gaining more insight into political intergroup conflicts we need to study distinct emotions, rather than mere positive and negative effect. They argue that hatred is a key element in the predictor of political intolerance, more than anger and fear. Although they did not include contempt in their study, I would suggest that contempt has similar characteristics as hatred, such as appraising the essence of the group as bad, or inferior, and, on the contrary, not aiming to improve the relationship with this group. Contempt would imply that one wants to exclude the group, to move the group as far away as possible, and ultimately, maybe, to destroy the group. Because contempt implies a very negative attitude from a superior perspective, the likelihood to develop extreme views, and to think about extreme acts is more likely. I would argue that hatred and contempt often go hand in hand in a group-based context and are so dangerous because there is no hope that anything can be changed. Destruction or elimination is therefore the ultimate means to achieve this social goal.

In order to examine the role of contempt in the development of conflict, however, we also need to study the effects of contempt expressions on the targets of contempt. How do individuals or groups react when they are confronted with someone who acts in a contemptuous way? Research on social exclusion suggests that frequent exposure to social exclusion leads to a diminished self-esteem and an impairment of self-regulation (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005). The same may apply to contemptuous looks or remarks, aimed at showing someone that he or she is nothing. We have preliminary evidence supporting the idea that contempt leads to a decrease in self-confidence and a stronger inference of incompetence than is the case, for example, for angry looks. This implies that people indeed interpret a contemptuous face or remark as targeting their heart, at who they are, rather than what they do. The result is a feeling of being downgraded, and therefore a decrease in self-esteem may be the result.

In the case of groups, however, the support of the group may lead to a different social effect. As has been shown by researchers of group-based emotion (e.g., Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007), group-based anger leads to stronger tendencies

to oppose than individual anger. In other words, when one realizes that one is not alone, that the whole group is degraded, then resistance may grow and lead to actual opposition against this view, or even aggression against this group.

CONTEMPT IN DAILY LIFE

It is clear that contempt occurs in many forms and intensities in daily life. Less intense forms of contempt may be often experienced in work settings, where one deals with disrespectful or disloyal colleagues or superiors, whereas more extreme forms may occur among partners or family members, or among rival groups. Emotions have clear social functions, and the majority of emotions have a bonding function, enhancing and strengthening social relationships (Fischer & Manstead, 2008). Contempt, however, is an exception in that its function is to preserve or even enlarge the distance between individuals, or, at a group level, between groups. Our own research (Fischer & Roseman, 2007), for example, has shown that expressions of contempt in interpersonal relations are related to less intimacy and to the deterioration of the relationship. Although we did not use a longitudinal design, we assume on the basis of self-reports that contempt arises out of frequent conflicts that are not solved in a satisfactory way, and that slowly develop in an increased negative attitude towards the other person. This increasing negativity is paired with the wish to exclude this person from one's inner circle or social network.

There are several factors that may affect why people would start feeling contempt, rather than anger, disgust or disappointment. One factor is one's gender. Underwood (2004), for example, argues that girls or women are more likely to react in a contemptuous way than men are, because it is a form of non-verbal social aggression that has fewer negative social implications for women than for men. This argument is based on research on sex differences in relational, direct and physical aggression. Women have been found to be particularly anxious about the social consequences of direct forms of anger, such as verbal or physical aggression, whereas those consequences are less salient in the case of the indirect or silent expression of their anger (see also Evers, Fischer, Manstead, & Rodriguez Mosquera, 2005). The cold shoulder would therefore be a more appropriate form of showing that one does not agree than explicitly venting one's criticism. An additional reason is that social networks are more important for women than for men, and therefore the aim to exclude someone from one's social network would be a more efficient form of punishment for women than for men.

DEALING WITH CONTEMPT

Because contempt is a very negative emotion that is felt only in cases where individuals have strong negative judgments about others, the question is whether people try to hide or to suppress their contempt, or not. Is there any chance that people consider the outcomes of their contempt as undesirable, for example because of the negative consequences it has for the victim of their contempt, or because one considers the feeling of contempt an amoral feeling? It is interesting that there is no research to date on the regulation of contempt. Most emotion regulation attempts are instigated because of undesirable emotional behavior. For example, one may suppress one's anger in order not to attack another person, one may suppress fear, in order to be able to do things that normal individuals also do, one may want to suppress one's sadness, because it makes one feel and behave so helplessly, or one may want to suppress one's shame, because the expression of shame suggests that one did something really wrong.

In other words, one wants to regulate emotional expressions and behaviors that are extreme, that have strong negative consequences or that suggest that one is not in control and thus provide a very undesirable image of oneself. In the case of contempt, this seems to be different, as contempt is not associated with extreme behavior, but rather with silence, ignoring and coldness. Such behaviors may be less likely to be regulated, because the interpersonal implications are less visible and salient than, for example, the implications of anger. We know that social exclusion can have dramatic effects (e.g., Williams, 2001), but these effects are not immediately clear for the individual ignoring another person. This therefore does not enhance the likelihood that contempt will be suppressed.

The absence of visible negative effects and the feeling of deservingness that is associated with contempt would imply that contempt is not consciously regulated, in the sense that one seriously attempts to inhibit one's contempt. There are other ways of regulating contempt, however, which may occur more automatically, but also lead to reduced feelings of contempt. Individuals may, in some cases, start feeling empathy for the target of their contempt, and the increase of empathy implies a decrease of contempt. In a similar vein, one may start feeling guilty or ashamed if one becomes aware of one's contempt, which has similar consequences.

CONCLUSIONS

Contempt is a negative emotion that is characterized by a strong negative feeling towards an individual or a group that reflects a judgment that this individual or

group is inferior or inherently bad. Causes of contempt are either moral transgressions, or the stereotyping of a group as being inferior, incompetent, and cold in nature. Contempt is not as cold as it has sometimes been described. I argue that the coldness is a way to act out the contempt in order to convey to the other that he or she is not worth the trouble, not worth the energy and the agitation. Contempt may also be mixed with other emotions, such as anger or hatred; however, and in such cases contempt may be expressed in other ways, such as extreme violence. Here the wish to get rid of another person is not a cold act of ignoring anymore, but a hot act of making the other vanish from one's life, for good. Thus, the coldness is an expression, which is a function of the relationship and the problems that need to be dealt with (see also Parkinson, Fischer, & Manstead, 2005), and not the nature of the feeling.

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