



Sticks and Stones Will Break My Bones and Words Will Hurt Me: Effects of Contempt in the Workplace

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Descriptive Summary

The workplace is fraught with emotion. Although emotions are on the agenda of management research, we need to much better understand the influence of negative emotions at work. Of the negative emotions, while contempt has been shown to be one of the most powerful emotions in the viability (or lack thereof) of personal relationships (Gottman, 1998), this emotion has not yet been examined in a work setting.

Contempt is defined as "...the feeling with which one regards that which is mean, vile or worthless" (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). In its simplest form, contempt is a feeling of superiority over others (Izard, 1977). Most research on contempt has highlighted its position in the catalog of basic emotions (Darwin, 1872) and defined its corresponding facial expression (Matsumoto & Ekman, 2004) which reflects its hierarchical nature: the perceiver "looks down" at the target with a one-sided smirk, raised head and partially closed eyes (Matsumoto & Ekman, 2004). Contempt is closely linked with the search for or maintenance of social dominance. It is motivated by a need for superiority and by its very nature, removes or reduces the legitimacy of the other, systematically disempowering them. Thus, contempt is a hierarchical emotion used to one to acquire social power through the processes of disempowerment and exclusion of another.

Relationships in organizations are characterized by hierarchies, in which people have and seek power. Power is defined as the ability to provide or withhold valuable resources (Fiske, 1993). Emotions are often used strategically in organizations to gain resources; for example, anger is used as an influence strategy (Tiedens, 2001). Similarly, contempt can be used strategically to garner power and manage resources. As contempt is a hierarchical emotion that establishes clear status boundaries, people can use contempt as a tool to buttress and retain their higher levels of power and status. Because contempt and power are symbiotically linked, I predict that contempt is an emotion in which the differential status of the actor and target will play a role in the manner in which it is expressed and decoded. The target's interpretation of and response to contempt could occur in two competing ways: mimicry and complementarity. That is, employees could mimic the contemptuous actor, and respond with contempt, escalating tension and battling for power. On the other hand, they could respond in a complementary and contrasting manner (e.g. humility), which would cause the hierarchical relationship to intensify. Thus, in my proposed study I will be investigating the following questions: How does the status of the contemptuous other play a role in the way employees react to contempt? I specifically hypothesize the following (with regard to resulting emotions)

- (1) If a superior displays contempt to a subordinate then they are more likely to experience shame.
- (2) If a peer displays contempt to a peer then they are more likely to experience contempt

- (3) If a subordinate displays contempt to a superior then they are more likely to experience anger.

Proposed Method:

In order to test the hypothesis that the status of the contemptuous other plays a role in the way people respond to contempt, I propose to conduct two studies, a laboratory experiment as well as a study using survey methodology.

Study 1: Lab Experiment

A between-subjects lab experiment is proposed in which participants will be randomly assigned to one of three conditions. Participants will be led to believe that they are working in a team task with a high-, low- or same-status co-worker.

On arrival to the laboratory, participants will be seated in separate cubicles in front of a computer. Before they start the task, they will be asked to complete the following 3 personality scales:

- 1) The Self-Esteem Inventory (Rosenberg, 1979)
- 2) A measure of personality dominance (Wiggins, Trapnell & Phillips, 1988)
- 3) The PANAS (Watson, Tellegen & Clark, 1988).

Method

Participants read about the purpose of the study (which will simulate a virtual team working environment) and believe that they will be working with a another participant (whose behavior will be simulated by the computer program).The task is a business simulation, which captures the characteristics of a real-life business problem that would be solved by a virtual team. The participant plays the role of a successful junior employee at an advertising firm who has been given the chance to develop a marketing strategy for a new product developed by a new technology startup. They participant also learns that the simulation comprises four rounds and that they will receive additional information that will help them make their decisions after every round. In addition, they will be told that they are participating in this task with a co-worker (whose status will vary based on the condition).

After the first round, participants continue on to the next few rounds, in which they will have to make decisions on product placement, product price and product features. For each step, they will receive information on their choices and create a 3-bullet point proposal to explain their choice. This document will be uploaded to the team's shared online space (simulating email) after every round. After they submitted their plans, they will be given the opportunity to communicate once with their team member (i.e., actually the computer), whom they are told is involved in another task (related to the overall project). The team member (computer) will respond first (before the participant has a chance to respond to the computer) and will make a *contemptuous* remark about the quality of the participant's choices. The participant will be given an option to respond after every comment. I have already pre-tested these contemptuous statements in a pilot study with students, none of whom will be allowed to participate in the main study. Participants were asked to rate the degree to which a set of statements reflected the following emotions: contempt, anger, disgust, sadness and happiness, on a 7-point scale. I then selected the statements that had the highest scores on the contempt dimension and the lowest scores on all the other emotions. I specifically wanted to ensure that the selected statements

differentiated contempt from anger and disgust. After each round 2 and 3 the subject will be asked about their emotions and self or other blame attributions. At the end of round 4, the subjects will be presented with the possibility of harming their team member's reputation.

The dependent variables in this study are the participants' cognitions, emotions and behavior. Self-reported emotions will also be measured, as will the behavioral outcomes of quality of performance and choice to engage in harming their team member's (computer) reputation.

Dependent Measures

Emotions: Participants rate their experience of 8 different emotions (happy, ashamed, contemptuous, angry, warm, sad, humiliated, afraid) on a scale of 0 ("none") to 7 ("extremely") at four different points (three times during the simulation and once after the simulation). I will code their "instant messaging" responses for different emotions.

Cognitions: Participants will rate the extent to which they blame themselves or their team member for the outcome/feedback. This will be measured three times during the simulation.

Behaviors:

Performance: The participants' answers will be reviewed by external raters to assess performance.

Creativity: The participants' answers will be reviewed by external raters to assess creativity.

Effort: measured through participant self-report and by counting the length of their answers.

Relational outcomes: These will include responses to the dilemma about harming their coworker's reputation. They may choose to ally with their team member, form coalitions with other organizational members, reporting their team member's behavior, or help the team member.

I have already conducted a pilot study and found participants experienced different emotions based on the source's power. There were robust between-condition differences in the emotion experienced by the participants, such that participants in the Low Status condition were likely to feel more humiliated as a result of the contempt shown to them, while the participants in the High Status condition were more likely to feel angry as a result of this. I also found between-condition differences in the effort expended by the participants.

Study 2

I would also like to test the effects of contemptuous feedback on a sample of working adults. The second study will be a web-based survey sent to a filtered group of adults through a service used by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania (www.pureprofile.com). This service has roughly 400 thousand subscribers. However, only a sample of 350 working adults will be sent the survey, as pureprofile.com estimates a 40-60% response rate. This study has two independent variables: status (High status, Same status, Low status) and an additional variable of "display"—whether the contemptuous display was done publically or privately (public display of contempt, private display of contempt). Participants will be randomly assigned to one of six conditions. Participants will be asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their demographic and personality characteristics. To create this scenario study, participants will be presented with

a fictional situation and will answer a series of questions about that situation and their reactions to it.

Dependent Measures

Emotions: Participants will rate their experience of 8 different emotions (happy, ashamed, contemptuous, angry, warm, sad, humiliated, afraid) on a scale of 0 (“none”) to 7 (“extremely”) at four different points (three times during the simulation and once after the simulation). I will code their “instant messaging” responses for different emotions.

Behavioral Intentions: Participants’ motivations to avoid or seek revenge against their transgressors will be tested with McCullough et al.’s (1998) TRIM Inventory. In addition, I will measure benevolence with a scale from McCullough & Hoyt (2002).

<i>Detailed Budget</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>\$/hour</i>	<i>Amount</i>
Participants (Study 1)	300	\$1.5	\$450
Participants (Study2)	300	\$1.5	\$450
Set up of Study 2 ¹			\$200
Survey Designer (Study 1) ²	1	20	\$600
Software (Dictionary of Affect in Language) ³	1		\$150
Conference Travel			\$500
Total			\$ 2350*

¹ Set Up of Study 2: PureProfile.com charges \$200 for survey set-up, testing and sampling.

² Survey Designer: A computer science student will be needed to design the “virtual team environment” for Study 1 (with email and instant messaging capabilities)

³ Dictionary of Affect in Language: This software will help analyze participants’ open-ended responses in Study 1. It can be downloaded for \$150.

* I have not received any other funds for this study.

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