Literature Review: Is the Emotional Expression of Contempt Recognized Universally or Culturally?

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Abstract

The universal facial expression of contempt is often described as one lip corner raised and tightened. This literature reviews whether or not this expression is recognized universally. After examining theories and methods, low agreement of this expression recognized as contempt was found across cultures. Evidence so far is not sufficient enough to support the unilateral lip corner as an universal expression for contempt. The expression and recognition of contempt is highly dependent on culture and context.

Literature Review

Contempt is an emotion described as annoyance (Alvarado, 1996), ignoring or belittling a person (Fischer & Roseman, 2007), and involving another person's negative actions and feelings of superiority (Wagner, 2000). This emotion is usually initiated when one perceives the inability to change or correct another person's behavior. The social function of contempt is to end a relationship through rejection and exclusion (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). The concept of emotions serving functions dates back to Darwin's days (1876) when he proposed the physiological component and facial expressions of basic emotions as innate because they serve towards a goal in one's environment. He used his observations of evolution as evidence of the universality of emotions. Ekman (1971) challenged Darwin's theory by conducting his own research in a remote village of Papua New Guinea. Ekman discovered emotions as innate and recognizable through facial expression. His research has also suggested the universality of a contempt expression (Ekman, 1988). Claims for a unique, universal facial expression has been discovered for other emotions such as anger, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, and happiness (Ekman & Friesen, 1986). In 10 different cultures, cross cultural agreement was found for facial expressions of emotions (Ekman, Friesen, O'Sullivan, Chan, Diacoyanni-Tarlatzis, Heider, Tzavaras, 1987). Development and cross- culture research also support Darwin's hypothesis for the innateness and universality of a few sets of emotion facial expressions (Izard, 1994).

In opposition to the universal claim, research also suggests culture to be a highly influential variable in the process of emotions. Culture is the transmission of information and behaviors from one generation to its next generation. It can influence the structure of the inner self, which affects how individuals will interpret emotions. Western cultures hold an independent view of the self and encourage individuals to organize behavior according to one's internal

thoughts, feelings, and actions (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In contrast, the Japanese's interdependent culture values connectedness, which motivates the self to organize behavior according to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Interpretation of emotion is also influenced by culture. Japanese used the expressions of other people to determine the central person's feelings, whereas Westerners focused on the central person (Masuda, Ellsworth, Mesquita, Leu, Tanida, & Veerdonk, 2008). Japanese see emotions as inseparable from the group and Westerners interpret emotions as individual feelings. These findings indicate culture's pivotal role in understanding emotion and the influence it has over the expressions of emotions like contempt. The recognition and expression of contempt is dependent on the context of culture.

There is still a debate in scientific literature concerning the universal expression of contempt. The consensus around the facial expression of contempt is that one side of the face has a corner of the lip slightly raised and tightened (Ekman & Friesen, 1986) and (Matsumoto, 1992). Ekman et. al (1986) found this expression as recognizable across several cultures and as "pure signals" (p.166). This claim and the methods involved in characterizing this universal contempt expression have been challenged by other empirical studies (Gendron et. al, 2014; Russell, 1991; Wagner, 2000). Russell's study (1991) found the unilateral lip curl as insufficient in recognizing the facial expression of contempt. Russel (1991) also criticized the methods in Ekman & Friesen research (1988) for requiring participants to choose from a short list instead of freely labeling. A forced or required answer choice is a problem because it restricts the participants to choose between the limited choices instead of selecting a preferred label not readily available (Russel, 1991). Research also suggests that this methodological concern is weak

because choice options allow for experiments to be quantitatively compared (Alvarado, 1996). Both methods are practiced empirically, but there is not a review that determines which method is superior in efficiency and scientific quality. Empirical research support both claims of contempt as universal and cultural, but there is not a clear comparison between these two theories by examining the overall research and their methodological strengths and weaknesses.

My literature review compares the claims of a universal facial expression for contempt and the claims of contempt as culturally dependent. To determine the most established scientific theory, research methods from both sides were evaluated. Emotion perception and the expression of contempt is dependent on emotion concepts shaped by language, culture, and individual experiences. The expression of contempt is not universally recognized and research supporting this claim is only due to forced choice options and contextual constraints (Gendron, Roberson, & Barrett, 2014).

Frames & Tools

Universal

The claim for the universal facial expression of contempt is supported by a few studies that preformed cross-cultural comparisons. Undergraduates from Japan, Vietnam, Poland, and Hungary had high agreements on the expressions signaling contempt (Matsumoto, 1992). This study tested the students in their native countries and their native languages (Matsumoto, 1992). The participants were shown 12 photos of a face depicting a contempt expression with the unilateral lip raising and tightening. These faces were originally used for research by Ekman and Friesen (1986) and Ekman and Heider (1988). Participants were given a list of words and were asked to choose the best word that represented the given photo. After testing participants from 4

different cultures, Matsumoto (1992) found no cultural difference for the unilateral lip corner in representing a contempt expression.

Ekman and Friesen (1986) presented contempt as an emotion with specific signal characteristics and highly recognized universally. Data was collected from 10 different countries, included 8 different languages, and represented Western and non-Western cultures. Three different types of contempt facial expressions were tested; unilateral lip corner tightened and raised, bilateral lip corner tightened and raised, and bilateral upper lip raised. Out of these 3 types of contempt expression, the unilateral expression resulted in the highest agreement as expressing contempt. Seventy- five percent of participants judged the raised and tightened unilateral lip corner as a contempt expression. Similar to Matsumoto's experiment (1992), participants labeled the expression by choosing the best word from a short list. The conclusion from Ekman and Friesen's research suggests (1986) the unilateral expression to be highly recognized across cultures.

Contextual

Contrary to the claim of a unilateral lip curl as contempt, research has also concluded this expression as being interpreted as disgust or sad (Russel, 1991). Participants were asked to rate the degree to which the facial expression conveyed anger, frustration, disgust, scorn, boredom, and contempt. When shown a photograph of the lip curl expression, contempt was not rated highly. In fact, when participants saw the unilateral lip curl after a disgust expression, "sad" was the most selected interpretation. However, when participants saw this contempt expression after "sad" or any other expression, they believed the expression to be most represented as disgust. Participants were English speakers and randomly selected in public places. The low agreement of

the lip curl as contempt suggest that even within the same culture, contempt is not universally recognized and that the unilateral lip raise is influenced by context like what facial expression preceded the lip raise expression.

Cultural

The facial expression of unilateral lip raise has negatively been reported as contempt and is not recognized across all cultures. Participants from the United States and a remote culture in northwestern Namibia were asked to sort images of facial expressions into piles of emotion categories. Without cues to emotion concepts, Namibia participants did not organize the facial expressions in the "universal" pattern, while the U.S participants did organize the photos with the universal features (Gendron, Roberson, & Barrett, 2014). The results of this experiment suggest the influential aspect culture holds on the perception of emotion. The subtle contempt expression is not highly recognized like other emotions and the interpretation of contempt differs between cultures. In another study that tested the universality theory of emotions, Russell, Suzuki, & Ishida (1993) found the contempt expression to not be recognized by Canadian, Greek, and Japanese participants. Using Matsumoto and Ekman's (1988) photographs of emotion expressions, Russel et al. (1993) asked their participants to freely choose a word they believed best matched with each particular photo. Across all cultures, there was about an 80% agreement for the happy expression and a 2% agreement for the contempt expression. These findings support the notion that contempt varies across culture and is not recognized universally.

Forced Choice or Free Response

Cross-cultural research determines whether emotions are universally or culturally framed by asking participants to label an emotion for a photo depicting a specific facial expression.

Facial expressions were predetermined by Friesen and Ekman's Facial Action Coding System (FACS). FACS recognizes an individual's emotion through their facial expression by coding the many nuances in the face like brow position, eye movement, or lip angles to determine the emotion expressed. For each photo, participants were either asked to come up with (free labeling) or choose the best word describing the emotion from a list (forced choice). The method of forced choice has the scientific advantage to allow research to be quantified, whereas freely labeling does not. This quantifiable quality permits comparison across many experiments (Alvarado, 1996). Comparison is a scientific tool needed because assessment of data is how we apply this understanding to the real world. The goal of science is to help us understand and advance our capabilities. Comparison in research is a way to make meaning of the information we collect in scientific experiments. To perpetuate and evaluate the forced choice method has the investigative power of helping find the best word to describe a given emotion expression. If each experiment included a different word option, this variation can lead to the discovery of the best fitted word. For example, annoyance was the most given word to describe a contempt expression during a free response experiment (Alvarado, 1996). In future forced choice experiments, participants may choose annoyance as the preferred label over all the other selections.

Although forced choice seems to be scientifically prosperous, this method constrains participants to a few preselected words and cuts their opportunity to give a word that is not given on the list. When participants were asked to freely come up with any word to describe a facial expression, "80% spontaneously" responded in a different way than the predicted emotion in a forced choice format (Widen, Christy, Hewett, & Russell, 2011). This means that participants have low agreement on the interpretation of facial expressions when they are allowed to freely decide instead of choosing from a list. The validity of forced choice methods needs to be

assessed. Forced choice methods do not accurately measure emotion word choice because participants are restricted to a few preselected words.

Conclusions gathered from experiments are dependent on the nature of the methods because empirical research needs to be logical and replicable. The forced choice method is more constraining than fruitful. Research suggesting a universal contempt expression only use forced choice methods. When research used freely labeling or rating scales, the conclusions did not support the universal theory and instead gave evidence towards a cultural dependent interpretation of emotion expressions.

Discussion

Future research should not classify contempt as a basic emotion because it is not supported empirically by research as a universal emotion. For contempt to be labeled as a basic emotion, research needs to show that contempt is expressed across many cultures in a similar manner like a smile for happiness. Experiment conclusions for contempt are limited. Further research needs to be conducted to understand and define the contempt emotion. Researchers should keep in mind the influence culture has on the expression and recognition of contempt.

The format of each response collected matters. Researchers should understand that their research method affects the validity of their experiment. They should also keep in mind that the forced choice method does not yield the same data as in when using a free response method. When conducting experiments requiring participants to interpret facial expressions, experimenters need to check the validity of the facial expressions that are presented to participants. There could be more representative facial expressions to represent emotions that have yet to be tested. Researching emotion is a challenging task because emotion involves

interactions and experiences not easily portrayed in experimental settings. Emotions are a bidirectional process between an individual and others, which means that social interactions are necessary for emotions to occur. The system of emotion is also dependent upon the receiver and the sender, so the social relation between 2 people can influence emotion perception. Research needs to consider how much of their findings can be demonstrated in actual real life settings.

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