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Held in Contempt: The Psychological, Interpersonal, and Performance Consequences of Contempt in a Work Context

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Guided by a social function of emotions perspective, the authors examined a model of the psychological, interpersonal, and performance consequences of contempt in a series of 3 experiments that tested the outcomes of being a recipient of contempt in the work domain. In these experiments, participants engaged in a business strategy simulation with a virtual partner—a computer programmed to give contemptuous and other types of feedback. In Study 1, which examined the task performance and interpersonal outcomes of contempt, recipients of contempt had significantly better task performance but also significantly more interpersonal aggressiveness toward their virtual partners compared with recipients of failure, angry, or neutral feedback. Study 2 examined 3 psychological outcomes mediating the contempt–task performance/aggression relationship: self-esteem, returned feelings of contempt, and activation levels. Lowered levels of implicit self-esteem and greater levels of activation significantly mediated the relationship between receiving contempt and task performance, whereas the contempt–aggression relationship was mediated by lowered implicit self-esteem and increased feelings of returned contempt. Study 3 examined status as a moderator of these relationships. Low-status recipients had significantly better task performance than did equal-status recipients, who performed significantly better than did the high-status recipients of contempt. In addition, low-status recipients displayed significantly lower levels of aggression in response to contempt than did equal-status and high-status recipients.

Keywords: emotion, contempt, status, work performance, moral emotion

Contempt is a subtle but powerful emotion (Izard, 1977) that is likely to lead to meaningful consequences within interpersonal interactions. Indeed, in groundbreaking research on marital relations, emotional displays of contempt were found to be the single most important emotion predicting the future dissolution of a marriage (Gottman, 1993). Researchers have largely examined contempt as an *intrapersonal* phenomenon, with regard to both its facial expression (Matsumoto & Ekman, 2004) and its relational and moral antecedents (Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999)—but there has been little research outside of the domain of marriage on the social consequences of expressing contempt in other types of interpersonal interactions.

Emotions experienced in other domains of life may not be as intense as those encountered in marital interactions; however, given the potency of being a recipient of contempt in a marriage, expressions of contempt in other life domains may nonetheless have important social consequences. One particularly useful setting for examining the influence of contempt is the workplace, which is where people spend many of their waking hours and is saturated with the active exchange of both positive and negative emotions (Barsade, Brief, & Spataro, 2003; Brief & Weiss, 2002), including feelings of contempt (Pelzer, 2005). In this article, therefore, we focus on the work domain to examine the interpersonal and task performance outcomes that result from being a recipient of contempt, as well as the psychological experiences that help to explain these outcomes.

Theoretical Background: The Construct of Contempt in an Interpersonal Context

Contempt has been defined as a moral emotion, the part of the contempt–anger–disgust triad that is elicited toward members of the social environment who are perceived to have violated community norms related to respect and hierarchy (Rozin et al., 1999) or failed to meet expected goals (Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Miller, 1997). Contempt, as an "exclusively social emotion" (Hess, 2009, p. 100), serves to punitively enforce these norms through distancing expressions of superiority (Morris &

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Keltner, 2000), condescension, disapproval (Izard, 1977), and exclusion (Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Frijda, 2004). Inherently defined by its social-distancing function, contempt is communicated through a variety of verbal and facial expressions, including statements of ridicule (Gottman, 1993) and one-sided smirks (e.g., Matsumoto & Ekman, 2004), which signal to the recipient that he or she is of lower status and is to be excluded from engaging in social interactions with the agent (Fischer & Manstead, 2008; Frijda, 2004). Given this social nature of contempt, the social–functional approach to emotions is a particularly relevant foundation for understanding its influence on social interactions. Scholars within this theoretical domain have argued and found that emotions are held not only intrapsychically but also have important social functions that allow them to be conduits of communication regarding people's relational orientations (Knutson, 1996), intentions (Fridlund, 1994), and interpersonal goals (Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994) and consequently have significant emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral effects on their recipients (Keltner & Haidt, 1999).

In the case of contempt, social–functionalist emotion theorists have proposed that displays of contempt have two simultaneous social-distancing functions: the enactment of social exclusion (Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Roseman et al., 1994) and the reduction of status of the recipient in the social hierarchy (Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Morris & Keltner, 2000). With regard to its exclusionary function, contempt communicates that the recipient is inferior, beneath the agent's notice (Miller, 1997); has failed to meet the agent's interpersonal standards; and therefore, is not good enough to be included in the agent's in-group (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). Gerber and Wheeler's (2009) recent meta-analysis of 88 studies of experimental research on the effects of exclusion offers useful information about its three key outcomes: greater negative mood (e.g., Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004), lowered self-esteem (e.g., Leary, Cottrell, & Phillips, 2001), and higher activation, or energy (e.g., Blackhart, Eckel, & Tice, 2007). Contempt's status-altering function has also been found to have very similar outcomes. Because displaying contempt triggers perceptions of strength and superiority over others, it causes a status imbalance that leads to a drop in status for the recipients of contempt (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). Correspondingly, expressing contempt boosts the agents' status: In student settings, for example, those who displayed contempt were judged to be of higher status (Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig, & Monarch, 1998). As such because people value status gains in social situations (Fiske, 1993), experiencing inferiority due to a loss of status can be a painful experience that, similar to the outcomes of social exclusion, leads to lowered self-esteem (Wojciszke & Struzynska–Kujalowicz, 2007), negative emotions (Kemper, 1991), and the increased activation that accompanies these emotions (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004). Thus, given that social exclusion and status reduction are the primary functions of contempt (Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Keltner & Haidt, 1999), we predict that recipients of contempt will subsequently experience lowered self-esteem, increased negative emotion (specifically feelings of contempt in kind), and increased activation. Further, we predict that being a recipient of contempt will influence recipients' interpersonal and task performance outcomes and that these three proposed psychological states will serve as mediators in these relationships. Last, we posit that the relative status of the recipient versus the agent of contempt will moderate the contempt–outcome relationship.

Psychological Outcomes of Being a Recipient of Contempt

Lowered Self-Esteem

Self-esteem, or the extent to which individuals value themselves, can fluctuate on the basis of individuals' positive and negative social interactions (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) and the extent to which they feel liked by others (e.g., Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). We predict that being a recipient of contempt, with its dual message of exclusion and loss of status, will have a threatening influence on recipients' self-esteem. On the basis of Leary and colleagues' sociometer theory, which finds that self-esteem is a subjective gauge of the extent to which an individual feels included and accepted by other people (e.g., Leary et al., 1995), we can expect that the exclusionary message embedded in contempt will diminish recipients' self-esteem. Indeed, a large body of work corroborates this claim: Feelings of self-esteem have been found to be threatened and diminished by exclusionary behaviors such as rejection (Leary et al., 1995), implicit and explicit criticism (Leary, Haupt, Strausser, & Chokel, 1998), and ostracism (Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004). Furthermore, empirical research has consistently found that being placed in a lower status position leads to reduced self-esteem (Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999; Twenge & Campbell, 2002). For example, Wojciszke and Struzynska–Kujalowicz (2007) found that participants placed in subordinate positions in a work context had decreased levels of self-esteem compared with those placed in supervisory status positions. Hence, we predict that self-esteem will decrease as a result of being a recipient of contempt.

Feelings of Returned Contempt Toward the Contemptuous Agent

Past research has demonstrated that generalized negative emotions occur in response to status loss and exclusion (Buckley et al., 2004; Kemper, 1991). While we would expect generalized negative emotion to occur in response to contempt, we predict that receiving contempt will trigger a more specific, discrete emotional outcome, that of the returned feeling of contempt toward the contemptuous agent. Given the functions of contempt, the feeling of returned contempt is a uniquely relevant emotion in its ability to explain the relationship between being a recipient of contempt and its subsequent interpersonal and performance outcomes. Recipients of contempt will respond with contempt in kind because they will catch the agent's contempt through emotional contagion, a process by which people automatically mimic, synchronize, and converge with another person emotionally (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993), both in-person (Barsade, 2002) and through computer-mediated interactions (de Dreu, Carnevale, Emans, & van de Vliert, 1994). In addition, through a process of cognitive appraisal (Lazarus, 1991; Roseman et al., 1994), recipients of contempt are expected to engage in a conscious attempt to defend themselves, regain status, and avoid exclusion. When people at-

tempt to safeguard themselves psychologically, they have been found to do so though downward comparisons (Beauregard & Dunning, 1998), derogation of others (Fein & Spencer, 1997), and ostracism (Bourgeois & Leary, 2001)—all components of feeling contempt toward another.

Enhanced Levels of Activation

We predict an increase in activation, or an energetic, aroused state, when a person receives the message of contempt, because activation helps people rally to overcome threats (Nix, Ryan, Manly, & Deci, 1999) and has been found to be a driving force motivating individuals to cope successfully with threats (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). People have been found to get activated or mobilized when presented with unexpected or demanding situations, including self-esteem threats (Arndt & Goldenberg, 2002), negative feedback (Rivkin & Taylor, 1999), and exclusion (Blackhart et al., 2007), all of which are part of being a recipient of contempt. Furthermore, recent psychophysiological research suggests that due to the aversive nature of most forms of social exclusion, the experience of exclusion can trigger a neurological state resembling physical pain (MacDonald & Leary, 2005) and distress (Blackhart et al., 2007), both of which correlate with physiological signals of activation, such as heightened cortisol levels (VandenBos, 2007).

Performance Outcomes of Being a Recipient of Contempt

Interpersonal Aggression as an Outcome of Being a Recipient of Contempt

An important dimension of interpersonal behavior, including at work, is the degree of interpersonal aggression displayed in the interaction (O'Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Glew, 1996). Because the expression of contempt disturbs the status quo, by responding aggressively—in a competitive, harmful, and retaliatory manner that is directed toward damaging the contemptuous agent's self-esteem or social standing—recipients attempt to reduce the agent's status, thus reestablishing the hierarchical and psychological social balance in the interaction.

The three psychological mechanisms we discussed above are predicted to mediate the positive relationship between being a recipient of contempt and interpersonal aggression. First, because the unflattering and belittling messages of contempt are external threats to self-esteem, such threats can cause recipients to react aggressively (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996) in an attempt to show the agents that they are not to be devalued or dismissed. Second, feelings of returned contempt are predicted to mediate the relationship between receiving contempt and acting aggressively. Because being a recipient of an antisocial negative emotion leads individuals to pay less attention to norms of politeness and respect (Bushman, Baumeister, & Philips, 2001), being the recipient of contempt—and feeling contempt in return—may incite people to reciprocate the perceived aggressive acts involved in their own display of contempt. Last, recipients' activation levels are predicted to rise as they prepare to deal with the threatening exposure to the agent's contempt. This build-up of activation will result in a greater need for aggression, because aggression is a form of activation, or energy discharge (Lorenz, 1966). In sum, we predict that being a recipient of contempt will cause recipients to behave more aggressively and that these aggressive outcomes will be mediated by the recipients' experiences of lowered self-esteem, increased feelings of in-kind contempt, and increased activation levels.

Task Performance Quality as an Outcome of Being a Recipient of Contempt

With respect to task performance outcomes, we predict that recipients of contempt will respond by increasing the quality of their task performance. This is because, as we described earlier, when individuals are forced into positions of low status they experience a self-esteem threat (Wojciszke & Struzynska–Kujalowicz, 2007), which can drive them to engage in various types of activities to recover their self-esteem. One way to overcome such self-esteem losses is to work harder (Gollwitzer, 1990) and thereby improve performance (Johnson & Stapel, 2007). Thus, we predict that recipients' efforts to overcome the esteem threat posed by the contemptuous feedback will lead to improved performance. The increased activation predicted to occur in response to contempt is also expected to help with performance. Activation is associated with a state of alertness (Nix et al., 1999) that can be used for controlled processing (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998) or active problem solving (Schmeichel, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2003). Additionally, the release of neurotransmitters such as dopamine and noradrenaline that accompanies a surge in activation enhances working-memory capacity and increases the individual's ability to think more flexibly (Dietrich, 2004) and efficiently process task-related information (Chamberlain, Müller, Blackwell, Robbins, & Sahakian, 2006). Last, if recipients of contempt are responding with contempt in return, they will likely experience feelings of superiority and power (Izard, 1977; Miller, 1997). In general, elevated levels of power galvanize the behavioral activation system (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), which in turn allows individuals to pursue goals, including improved performance (Keltner et al., 2003), developing creative ideas (Kark & Carmeli, 2009), and persisting in the face of failure (Baumeister et al., 1998). In sum, we predict that being a recipient of contempt will lead to increased task performance quality through the mediators of lowered self-esteem, increased feelings of returned contempt, and increased activation.

Status as a Moderator in the Contempt–Performance Relationship

Because status imposes prescriptive expectations on people's behaviors (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Carli, LaFleur, & Loeber, 1995; Tiedens, Ellsworth, & Mesquita, 2000), the status of the recipient of contempt relative to the agent of contempt may play a mitigating role in their reactions to contempt.

Those in positions of equal and higher status are more likely to see contempt as a status challenge, whereas lower status individuals may see displays of contempt as more normative and appropriate to the placement of the two individuals in the hierarchy. Low-status recipients are expected to accept disproportionately higher levels of negative outcomes that come from their lower status positions, especially from high-status others, and to act

deferentially in response (Keltner et al., 2003). When the lower status recipients receive contemptuous feedback, they may, therefore, be motivated to act in an ingratiating manner that promotes reconciliation (Keltner et al., 1998) and attempt to regain status by focusing more strongly on the task at hand (Johnson & Stapel, 2007). In contrast, when individuals receive contempt from a peer, they are likely to interpret contempt as a status challenge. In these equal-status settings, people commonly engage in status contests—not only to attain high status but also to avoid a drop in status and the feelings of inferiority that the drop engenders (Baumeister et al., 1996). Rather than accept a demotion in status, the equal-status recipient is therefore likely to fight to maintain the balance of status through acting aggressively (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994) and working harder to prove themselves to their detractors (Williams, 1989). Last, expectations about possessing status are predicted to also influence the responses of high-status individuals to receiving contempt from their subordinates. Because group members expect low-status individuals to conform and submit to those higher in the hierarchy, high-status recipients will interpret low-status individuals' expressions of contempt as attempts to inappropriately seize status and act above their rank. Higher status recipients, who are more likely to express their displeasure and pay less attention to politeness norms (Brown & Levenson, 1987), are predicted to respond with overt expressions of aggression. To illustrate, Porath, Overbeck, and Pearson (2008) found that men (operationalized as a relatively higher status group) responded more strongly to status challenges and acted less civilly than did women. Furthermore, higher status individuals have been found to engage in more superficial cognitive processing (Gruenfeld, 1995) and to be distracted by negative feedback (Gruenewald, Kemeny, & Aziz, 2006). As such, we do not expect that the performance of high-status recipients will increase due to being a recipient of contempt. Overall, we predict a moderating role for status, specifically, the lower the status of the recipients of contempt, the less interpersonal aggression they will display and the better their task performance quality.

In sum, we offer a model of the psychological, interpersonal, and task performance outcomes of being a recipient of contempt (see Figure 1). Specifically, we predict that being a recipient of contempt will lead to increased task performance and increased aggression within the work context. These relationships are posited to be mediated by the psychological outcomes of receiving contempt—decreased self-esteem, increased activation, and in-kind feelings of contempt—and moderated by the relative status of the agent and recipient of the contempt.

The Present Research

In a series of three studies, we tested a model of how being a recipient of contempt influenced psychological, interpersonal, and performance outcomes in the work domain. In all three studies participants took part in a multiple-round business simulation designed for this purpose. They received contemptuous (angry, failure, or neutral) feedback about their work from someone they believed was their partner, but who in reality was a computer-based confederate. The experimental manipulation was embedded in the computer confederate's feedback to the participants about their performance on the tasks at hand. Study 1 examined the direct relationships between being a recipient of contemptuous (vs. angry, failure, or neutral) feedback on task performance quality and levels of interpersonal aggression. Study 2 examined three psychological outcomes predicted to mediate the relationship between being a recipient of contempt and task performance as well as interpersonal aggression. These mediators (decreased self-esteem, increased returned feelings of contempt, and higher levels of activation) were measured following every round of contemptuous (or failure) feedback. In Study 3 we examined whether these same outcomes differed depending on whether the recipient of contempt was of relatively lower, higher, or equal status to the agent of contemptuous (or failure) feedback.

In all studies participants received multiple rounds of contemptuous (angry, failure, or neutral) feedback to allow for a better

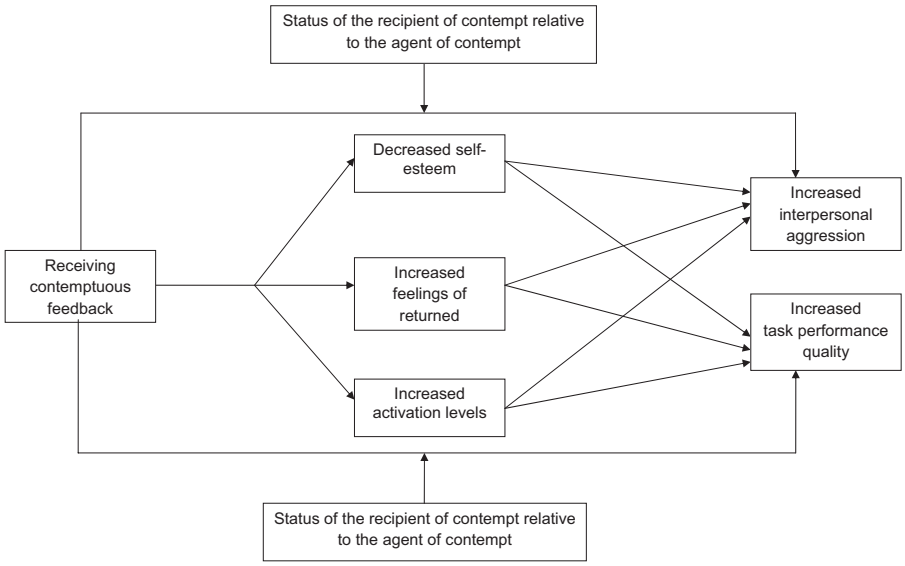

Figure 1. A model of the psychological, interpersonal, and task performance consequences of being a recipient of contempt.

understanding of how multiple exposures to this feedback may have different consequences compared with a single exposure. Moreover, our multiround repeated-measures design enabled us to establish causal, mediating relationships by testing whether recipients' levels of self-esteem, returned contempt, and activation in earlier rounds were predictors of subsequent task performance quality and interpersonal aggression.

Study 1: Interpersonal and Performance Outcomes of Being a Recipient of Contempt

This study provided a test of the influence of contempt on recipients' interpersonal and task performance outcomes. The study took place in a virtual work context: Participants believed that they were working on a series of tasks with a partner, whose behavior was actually simulated by a computer software program. Over the course of the experiment's three rounds, we had this (computer) partner give the participant one of four types of performance feedback: contemptuous feedback, angry feedback, emotionally neutral failure feedback, or emotionally neutral feedback with no performance-specific information. We based the content of the contempt manipulation on Gottman's (1993) depiction of contempt, characterized by expressions of scorn and ridicule. Furthermore, to make the contempt statements believable in the context of newly formed work dyads, we focused the statements on the participants' work performance. This focus on work performance is in line with Morris and Keltner's (2000) suggestion that questioning the competence of a colleague is often the crux of contempt in the workplace.

Method

Participants and experimental design. Three hundred fifty-five undergraduate students (155 men and 200 women) at the University of Pennsylvania participated in the study as part of a behavioral lab in which they received monetary compensation (U.S. $10). The mean age was 20.35 years ($SD = 2.67$).

The study used a 4 (condition: contemptuous, angry, failure, or neutral feedback) $\times$ 3 (task performance or aggression: Round 1, Round 2, Round 3) mixed-model design, with repeated measures on the latter factor. In the experimental condition (the contempt condition), the (computer) partner offered contemptuous remarks about recipients' performance. In the first control condition (the anger condition), the partner conveyed performance feedback in an angry tone. Angry feedback allowed us to confirm that the participants were responding to the contemptuous feedback and not to the presence versus absence of (negative) emotion in the feedback, or to any type of negative emotion. In the second control condition (the failure feedback condition), the computer partner's message conveyed the failure feedback in the form of a low "objective" numerical score, with no emotional content. To prevent participants from speculating about their partner's emotions, participants were told that this score was produced by a computer algorithm but delivered to them by their partners. This failure feedback condition was included to ensure that participant responses were driven by the emotional content of contempt, over and above its negative informational content. In the last control condition (the neutral condition), participants received only neutral comments that contained neither emotional nor performance feedback. To enhance the face validity of the computer confederate, we intentionally manipulated the contemptuous (and other) feedback so that the feedback in the first round was significantly weaker (and thus more believable) than in the next two rounds.

Procedure. On arrival at the laboratory, participants, seated separately, read that the purpose of the study was to simulate a two-person virtual-team work environment and that they would, along with their partners, need to make strategic decisions about product development. To preclude any a priori status-related differences from emerging, the introduction between the participants was crafted such that the virtual partner's gender and age were the same as those of the participant.

The experiment consisted of three rounds of a computer-based business simulation developed for this purpose, and participants were required to make one set of decisions per round. In the first, preexperimental feedback (baseline) round, participants were presented with two high-tech alarm clocks and were asked to choose one of them as their company's product.[1] The participants were then instructed to write a short essay providing three reasons that defended their product choice; the essays were then uploaded to the team's shared communication system for their partner to assess. After each task, participants received contemptuous (angry, failure, or neutral) feedback about the quality of their answers from their partners through a real-time instant-messaging (IM) communication feature. Using IM allowed the manipulation to feel more believable while giving us the ability to control the valence and intensity of the experimental manipulations. After receiving the experimental manipulation via this feedback, participants were given the option to respond to their partners through the same IM program. After each round, the participants were asked to assess what emotions they thought their partner was feeling. In the next two rounds, the tasks included making decisions about product pricing and adding additional product features. To further increase believability, the participants were told that the simulation consisted of six rounds and that they would receive feedback from their partner for Rounds 1–3 and would then give feedback to their partner for Rounds 4–6. The experiment, however, always ended after three rounds. Participants were then debriefed and paid.

Experimental manipulation. In each of the study's three rounds, participants received the same type of feedback (contemptuous, angry, failure, or neutral) depending on the condition. We first conducted a pilot study to calibrate the intensity of contemptuous feedback. To do so, we interviewed a set of working adults and asked them to recall "a contemptuous statement that had been said to them in their current job(s)." They were also asked to recollect an angry statement, to ensure that they were able to differentiate contempt from anger and for use in the anger manipulation. We obtained five contemptuous and five angry statements, whose intensity we then tested using a within-participant design. We also included a list of five experimenter-generated neutral statements as well as three anger statements based on van Kleef, de Dreu, and Manstead (2004). Sixty-one undergraduate students at the University of Pennsylvania rated each statement on the degree

[1] The alarm clocks included a "runaway clock" that literally runs off the table when the alarm is sounded and a "video-arcade shooting clock" that uses laser beam technology. The choice of product did not have a significant influence on any participant outcomes.

of contempt, anger, pleasantness, and neutrality that the statement conveyed. For the manipulations, we selected three statements that had the highest scores on that specific emotion and the lowest scores on the other emotions according to paired-sample *t* tests. In all cases above, ts > 2, and ps $< .05$. To ease the participants into the study and increase the realism of the feedback, feedback in all conditions was initially weaker and then strengthened after the first round so that the second and third rounds were stronger and of equal strength to one another. In this pretest we statistically confirmed that the first contempt statement ($M_{\text{Statement1, Round1}} = 5.07$) was perceived as being significantly less contemptuous than the two others used in Rounds 2 and 3 ($M_{\text{Statement2, Round2}} = 5.59$ and $M_{\text{Statement3, Round3}} = 5.72$): Statement 1 versus 2, $t(60) = 3.18$, $p < .01$; Statement 1 versus 3, $t(60) = 3.76$, $p < .01$; Statement 2 versus 3, $t(60) = 0.97$, *ns*. To help make the virtual partner appear more believable, the IM feedback was presented in a different font and contained some minor typing errors. See Table 1 for the contemptuous, angry, failure, and neutral feedback given during each round.

Dependent measures.

Partner's (computer confederate) emotions. Participants rated a set of positive and negative emotions they thought their partner was feeling, three of which we used for the manipulation check: contempt, anger, and neutrality. These discrete emotions were assessed through single-item measures after each of the three rounds (on a scale of 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much so*).

Interpersonal behavior: Aggression. To assess levels of aggressive behavior, three raters (blind to the experimental condition) rated participants' IM responses to the feedback statements. The raters used a 7-point scale, from 1 (*not at all aggressive*) to 7 (*very aggressive*). A sample aggressive statement made by a participant was, "I think you are off base—you simply have nothing to contribute," whereas statements low in aggression usually included comments like "I'm sorry, please forgive me." The intraclass coefficients (based on a two-way random effects model; Shrout & Fleiss, 1979) were .69 for Response 1, .71 for Response 2, and .68 for Response 3.

Task performance quality. To assess the quality of the participants' performance on their three-bullet point proposals, three expert raters (blind to experimental condition)—senior *Fortune 500* management consultants with a mean of 11.21 years ($SD = 1.56$) of work experience—independently rated each of the answers in a different random order. The raters used a 7-point scale to assess "overall quality" (1 = *very low quality* to 7 = *very high quality*). The intraclass coefficient agreement scores (Shrout & Fleiss, 1979) for the quality assessments were .75 for Answer 1 (the baseline round), .70 for Answer 2, and .68 for Answer 3. The three expert raters' scores for each answer were averaged to create a task performance score for each round.

Results

To examine the differences across the conditions, we conducted the analyses in two phases: mixed-model analyses of variance (ANOVAs) and planned contrasts using contrast coding procedures. Given the planned difference in the intensity of manipulations between Round 1 versus Rounds 2 and 3, we focused on the (Condition × Outcome) interaction that measured whether the outcomes varied over time as well as significantly across conditions within the 4 (condition: contemptuous, angry, failure, or neutral feedback) × 3 (dependent variable measured at: baseline Round 1, Round 2, Round 3) mixed-model ANOVA with the latter variable as a within-participant factor.[2,3] In the second phase of our analyses we used contrast codes to test the nuanced differences across conditions within each of the rounds.

Manipulation check. In addition to our pretest of the contemptuous, angry, failure, and neutral feedback statements described earlier, we also conducted an in-situ manipulation check, asking the participants to assess their (computer) partner's emotions after they received each round of feedback, focusing on how contemptuous, angry, and neutral participants thought their partner had been during each round of the interaction. Results from a 4 (condition: contemptuous, angry, failure, or neutral feedback) × 3 (perceptions of partner's contempt: Round 1, Round 2, and Round 3) mixed-model ANOVA indicated that the manipulation was successful. Across the three rounds, participants in the contempt condition rated their computer partner as being significantly more contemptuous ($M = 5.01$) than did those in the neutral condition ($M = 2.24$), failure feedback condition ($M = 2.55$), and angry condition ($M = 4.04$), $F(3, 350) = 103.80$, $p < .001$. Additionally, a priori planned contrasts within the contempt condition showed that, as per design, recipients of contempt saw their partner's contempt significantly increase from Round 1 ($M = 4.33$) to Round 2 ($M = 5.28$), $t(98) = 5.68$, $p < .01$, and Round 3 ($M = 5.38$), $t(99) = 5.77$, $p < .01$, but also as designed, perceived equivalent amounts of contempt in Rounds 2 and 3, $t(98) = 0.82$, *ns*.

We also corroborated the perceptions of the participants who received angry feedback. These participants rated their partner as being significantly more angry ($M = 5.21$) than did those in the contemptuous ($M = 3.98$), neutral ($M = 1.79$), and failure ($M = 2.99$) conditions, $F(3, 349) = 128.85$, $p < .001$. In addition, the levels of angry feedback were also perceived as increasing significantly from Round 1 ($M = 4.59$) to Round 2 ($M = 5.48$), $t(68) = 5.29$, $p < .01$, and Round 3 ($M = 5.57$), $t(68) = 5.01$, $p < .01$, while staying consistent between Rounds 2 and 3, $t(68) = 0.63$, *ns*. Last, in checking whether recipients of neutral and failure feedback perceived their partners as being emotionally neutral, we found that indeed, these recipients rated their partners as being significantly more neutral ($M = 4.45$ and $M = 4.68$, respectively) than did those in the contempt condition ($M = 2.62$) or the angry condition ($M = 2.87$), $F(3, 348) = 51.33$, $p < .001$. There were no significant differences in levels of neutrality between the neutral and failure feedback conditions across all three rounds: Round 1, $F(1, 184) = 3.37$, *ns*; Round 2, $F(1, 184) = 0.02$, *ns*; and Round 3, $F(1, 184) = 0.51$, *ns*. Thus, these results indicate that the

[2] As the study implicitly relies on participants' perceptions of the level of contempt contained in their partner's feedback, we replicated analyses using participants' perceptions of their partner's contempt as the predictor variable rather than experimental condition. The results were equivalent; for parsimony, we report the ANOVAs and planned contrasts only using the experimental condition.

[3] We conducted additional mixed-model ANCOVAs with sex, baseline (trait) self-esteem, and age as covariates; however, their inclusion had no influence on the study outcomes.

Table 1
Statements Used for the Contempt, Angry, Neutral, and Failure Feedback Manipulations

Round	Contempt statements	Anger statements	Neutral statements	Failure feedback statements
Round 1 (less intense feedback)	Are you sure you understood the question? Your answer was quite unsatisfactory.	On reading this answer, I'm getting annoyed with you.	Thanks for the response.	Your score is 5.4 out of 10.
Round 2 (intense feedback)	I expected you to show quick thinking and generate creative ideas— so far I haven't seen you show either. Your work doesn't show the originality that I've grown accustomed to here.	I'm really getting pissed off about your work.	Got it—it looks fine.	Your score is 3.8 out of 10.
Round 3 (intense feedback)	Ok, whatever. All in all, as a University of Pennsylvania student myself, I'm surprised by the low quality of your performance.	This is making me angry. I'm so mad about the extra work this will require.	Thanks again for the work.	Your score is 3.8 out of 10.

Note. Deliberate typing errors have been removed in this text.

manipulations of the agent's contempt, anger, and neutrality were successful.

Interpersonal aggression. We predicted that recipients of contempt would act more aggressively toward their partners than would recipients of angry, failure, and neutral feedback. On conducting a 4 (condition: contemptuous, angry, failure, or neutral feedback) × 3 (aggression: Round 1, Round 2, Round 3) repeated-measures mixed-model ANOVA, we found the predicted significant interaction, $F(3, 185) = 3.23$, $p < .05$. For the more intense feedback rounds (Rounds 2 and 3), the means (see Table 2) and a set of planned contrasts indicated that recipients of contempt showed significantly more aggression in their IM remarks toward their partners than did participants in the neutral condition: Round 2, $t(239) = 7.77$, $p < .001$; Round 3, $t(217) = 9.42$, $p < .001$; and failure feedback condition, Round 2, $t(239) = 5.14$, $p < .001$; Round 3, $t(217) = 5.64$, $p < .001$. The results also showed that recipients of contempt behaved significantly more aggressively than did recipients of anger, Round 2, $t(239) = 6.27$, $p < .001$; Round 3, $t(217) = 7.08$, $p < .001$, supporting our hypothesis that receiving contempt leads to increased levels of aggression compared with receiving angry, failure, or neutral feedback.

Task performance quality. Using a similar 4 (condition: contemptuous, angry, failure, or neutral feedback) × 2 (quality of task performance: Task 2 [post-Round 1 feedback], Task 3 [post-Round 2 feedback]) repeated-measures mixed-model analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), controlling for Task 1 (as it was a baseline measure that occurred prior to receiving any experimental manipulation), we found that as predicted, recipients of contempt performed significantly better than did those who received angry, failure, or neutral feedback, $F(3, 350) = 2.94$, $p < .05$. A priori planned comparisons using contrast coding indicated that in the third task of the simulation, which occurred after the first intense round of contempt, the task performance quality of recipients of contempt was significantly higher than that of the participants in the failure feedback condition, $t(351) = 4.29$, $p < .01$, as well the neutral condition, $t(351) = 2.23$, $p < .05$. Moreover, recipients of angry feedback performed worse than did the contempt recipients not only after they received more intense anger feedback, $t(351) =$

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations for Interpersonal Aggression and Task Performance Quality as a Function of Experimental Condition (Study 1)

	Interpersonal aggression						Task performance quality					
	Post-Round 1 feedback		Post-Round 2 feedback		Post-Round 3 feedback		Pre-Round 1 feedback: Baseline Task 1		Post-Round 1 feedback: Task 2		Post-Round 2 feedback: Task 3	
Condition	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Contempt	3.66_a	1.38	4.70_a	1.43	4.89_a	1.42	2.92_a	0.91	3.98_a	1.21	4.14_a	1.42
Anger	2.76_b	1.35	3.35_b	1.62	3.39_b	1.41	2.74_a	1.38	3.34_b	1.29	3.09_b	1.13
Neutral	3.44_a	1.09	3.11_b	0.65	2.87_c	1.28	2.94_a	1.17	3.67_a	1.03	3.70_c	1.28
Failure feedback	2.68_b	0.98	3.59_b	1.16	3.63_b	1.48	3.10_a	1.16	3.82_a	1.37	$3.32_{b,c}$	1.48

Note. Means within the same column that do not share a subscript differ at the $p < .05$ level or higher.

4.98, $p < .01$, but also after they received the less intense angry feedback of Round 1, $t(351) = 3.28$, $p < .01$ (see Table 2). These analyses support the hypothesis that receiving contemptuous feedback led to increased performance quality compared with the three control conditions of angry, failure, and neutral feedback.

Discussion

Study 1 sheds light on the dual influence of contempt on recipients' work outcomes; being a recipient of contempt leads to performance quality improvement but also promotes more aggressive interpersonal interactions. Specifically, in support of our hypotheses, recipients of contempt showed better performance quality and more aggression toward their partners across three tasks in a business simulation than did recipients of angry, failure, and neutral feedback.

It is interesting that although anger has long been associated with hostile and aggressive behaviors, expressions of contempt triggered more verbal aggression than even expressions of anger. One explanation for this arises from the different functional implications of contempt and anger (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). Contempt, as part of the exclusion emotion family, indicates to recipients that they have been excluded from the agent's social network. Anger, on the other hand, is part of the attack emotion family; although associated with the agent's attempt to attack the recipient in the short term, anger can also signify a desire on the agent's part to connect with the recipient by reconciling in the long term. Thus, though anger may warn of immediate physical or emotional harm, it also suggests that the recipient might be able to regain the agent's approval over time (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). This could lead to less aggression on the part of anger recipients than contempt recipients, who may feel more permanently excluded and dismissed and thus respond in a more interpersonally aggressive way. Last, we also found that receiving nonemotional failure performance feedback did not explain the performance effect in the contempt condition. That is, recipients of contempt performed better than did recipients of nonemotional failure feedback, suggesting that it was contempt itself and not information about poor performance alone that caused the performance improvement.

Study 2: Mediators of the Contempt–Outcome Relationship

Study 1, the first study to examine the social consequences of contempt in a work-task context, showed the significant influence of contempt on recipients' interpersonal and task performance outcomes. In Study 2 we examine three psychological mechanisms predicted to explain these effects: lowered self-esteem, increased levels of activation, and reciprocated feelings of contempt that result from being a recipient of contempt.

Method

Participants and experimental design. One hundred twenty-seven undergraduate students (65 men and 62 women) with a mean age of 20.56 years ($SD = 1.36$) at the University of Pennsylvania participated in the study for monetary compensation (U.S. $10). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions and received either contemptuous or failure feedback. As in the previous experiment, participants engaged in a business strategy simulation with a virtual (computer) partner.

Procedure. The procedure followed that of Study 1, with the following differences. First, to assess the three hypothesized mediators of the contempt–outcome relationship, we measured both implicit and explicit self-esteem and included multiple-item measures of participants' own emotions and activation levels (as well as what participants thought their computer partner was feeling). A second difference related to the choice of control conditions: We included only the control condition we considered most relevant to this test, the failure feedback condition—in which the feedback is conveyed in the form of a low numerical score, without any emotional content. Using this comparison condition enabled us to understand the emotional influence of contempt over and above that of negative performance feedback. Identical to Study 1, the Round 1 feedback was less intense than the feedback in Rounds 2 and 3. Last, to enhance the experimental design and take advantage of the third round of feedback, the business simulation was modified to include a fourth task, which followed this last round of contemptuous (or failure) feedback and enabled us to investigate the causal influence of one additional round of contemptuous feedback on recipient outcomes.

Measures. The psychological mediators, aggression, and task performance quality outcomes were collected after each of the three rounds of feedback. Only new information about the variables is provided below.

Emotions and activation. After each round of feedback, participants completed (a) a three-item contempt scale (how contemptuous, disdainful, and scornful they were feeling; Zevon & Tellegen, 1982; $.72 < \alpha < .83$, across rounds) and (b) a three-item activation scale (using the following items from Feldman Barrett and Russell's, 1998, activation scale: "I feel full of energy," "I feel keyed up," and "I am stirred up"; $.80 < \alpha < .86$, across rounds), both evaluated on a 1–7 scale. As in Study 1, they also assessed their (computer) partner's emotions using these scales. All items were embedded in a larger set of questions to mask the intent of the study.

Self-esteem. Participants completed explicit and implicit measures of self-esteem both before beginning the experiment (to provide a baseline measure) and after each round of feedback. Explicit self-esteem was measured via a shortened six-item version of the performance and social components of Heatherton and Polivy's (1991) State Self-Esteem Scale. Sample items included "I feel inferior to others at this moment" and "I feel like I am not doing well," evaluated on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much so*) scale. We then averaged these responses to form the self-esteem index for the three different rounds in the experiment ($.86 < \alpha < .88$). To assess implicit self-esteem, we employed a single-target category self-esteem Implicit Association Test (IAT; Karpinski & Steinman, 2006), which is preferable in the case of multiple single-target assessments (Bluemke & Friese, 2008), as is the case here. In this test, the evaluative dimension had the labels *good* and *bad*, and the object dimension was labeled *self*. Four target words were selected to be associated with "self" category (i.e., *I*, *me*, *mine*, *myself*). The "good" words included *brilliant*, *marvelous*, and *excellent*, and the "bad" ones included *hate*, *vomit*, and *terrible*. Each critical block consisted of a total of 72 trials in which stimuli were presented randomly. Participants completed the

self + positive blocks and the self + negative blocks in a counterbalanced order. Indices of self-esteem were based on responses to words about the self, using the *D* measure proposed by Greenwald, Nosek, and Banaji (2003) for standard IAT applications lacking a built-in error penalty, such that more positive values indicate a higher level of self-esteem.

Dependent variables. Interpersonally aggressive behaviors and task performance quality were coded exactly as in Study 1. Aggression was assessed via IM responses by three raters (interrater agreement using intraclass coefficients was .83 for Response 1, .79 for Response 2, and .82 for Response 3). Task performance quality was rated by three expert senior *Fortune 500* senior consultants (different from the consultants who rated the questions in Study 1) who had been employed by large consulting firms for an average of 21.33 years ($SD = 8.39$). The intraclass coefficient scores for the performance assessments ranged from .72 to .81.

Results

Manipulation check. Conducting a 2 (condition: contemptuous and failure feedback) × 3 (contempt: Round 1, Round 2, and Round 3) mixed-model ANOVA with repeated-measures on the latter factor, we found that as expected, recipients of contempt rated their computer partner as being significantly more contemptuous ($M = 5.37$) than did recipients of failure feedback ($M = 2.96$), $F(1, 125) = 195.38$, $p < .001$. As designed, the Condition × Round interaction showed that contempt was also perceived as increasing across rounds, $F(1, 125) = 22.71$, $p < .001$. Specifically, participants in the contempt condition perceived a significant increase in the agent's level of contempt from Round 1 ($M = 4.59$) to Round 2 ($M = 5.69$), $t(62) = 9.96$, $p < .01$, and Round 3 ($M = 5.83$), $t(62) = 10.68$, $p < .01$, but equivalent amounts of contempt in the agent's contemptuous feedback in Rounds 2 and 3, $t(62) = 1.92$, *ns*. We also confirmed that the failure feedback was perceived as being emotionally neutral compared with the contemptuous feedback. Failure feedback recipients rated their partner as being overall more neutral ($M = 4.73$) across rounds than did those in the contempt condition ($M = 2.03$), $F(1, 125) = 112.99$, $p < .001$, with no significant differences in emotional neutrality across the three rounds of the failure feedback condition.

Interpersonal aggression. Replicating Study 1 results, recipients of contempt acted with significantly higher levels of aggression toward their partner than did recipients of failure feedback, $F(1, 121) = 84.63$, $p < .01$, across all three rounds: Round 1, $t(125) = 5.65$, $p < .001$; Round 2, $t(125) = 7.25$, $p < .001$; and Round 3, $t(125) = 7.05$, $p < .001$; see Table 3 for means.

Task performance quality. A 2 (condition: contemptuous or failure feedback) × 3 (quality of task performance: Task 2, Task 3, Task 4) mixed-model ANOVA controlling for baseline Task 1 performance (i.e., pre-Round 1) indicated that recipients of contempt performed significantly better than did their counterparts in the failure feedback condition, $F(1, 124) = 14.82$, $p < .01$. As in Study 1, although there were no differences across the two conditions after receiving the milder first round of feedback, Task 2, $t(125) = 0.524$, *ns*, the performance of recipients of contempt after the intensive second and third rounds of contemptuous feedback was significantly higher, Task 3, $t(125) = 4.08$, $p < .01$, and Task 4, $t(125) = 6.59$, $p < .01$, than that of recipients of failure feedback (see Table 3).

Mediation analyses. Having again found support for our main hypotheses on the positive and direct effects of receiving contempt on interpersonal aggression and task performance quality, we examined the mediators of these relationships. We first established that the predicted mediators—self-esteem, returned feelings of contempt, and levels of activation—varied by condition. In line with our proposition, we found that controlling for baseline levels of implicit self-esteem prior to receiving any feedback, recipients of contempt experienced a significant drop in their levels of implicit self-esteem—with baseline levels of implicit self-esteem significantly higher than both post-Round 2 implicit self-esteem, $t(62) = 1.98$, $p = .05$, and post-Round 3 implicit self-esteem, $t(62) = 3.70$, $p < .01$—compared with recipients of failure feedback, who had no significant change across the rounds, $F(1, 125) = 7.46$, $p < .01$. Conversely, explicit self-esteem showed the inverse relationship; after dropping significantly from baseline levels, recipients of contempt reported significant increases in self-esteem between Round 1 and Round 3, $t(62) = 2.74$, $p < .01$ (see Figure 2). Because explicit self-esteem did not vary significantly across experimental condition, $F(1, 125) = 1.90$, *ns*, and did not significantly relate to either dependent variable, we pursued mediation analyses using only the implicit self-esteem measure. Separately, as predicted, recipients of contempt felt significantly more contemptuous, $F(1, 125) = 21.67$, $p < .01$,

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations for Interpersonal Aggression and Task Performance Quality as a Function of Experimental Condition (Study 2)

	Interpersonal aggression						Task performance quality							
	Post-Round 1 feedback		Post-Round 2 feedback		Post-Round 3 feedback		Pre-Round 1 feedback: Baseline Task 1		Post-Round 1 feedback: Task 2		Post-Round 2 feedback: Task 3		Post-Round 3 feedback: Task 4	
Condition	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Contempt	3.83_a	1.23	4.63_a	1.50	4.90_a	1.58	3.38_a	1.36	3.55_a	1.22	4.02_a	1.06	4.22_a	1.20
Failure feedback	2.63_b	1.15	2.97_b	1.04	3.05_b	1.37	3.26_a	1.18	3.44_a	1.31	3.30_b	0.92	2.90_b	1.05

Note. Means within columns not sharing a subscript differ at the $p < .05$ level or higher.

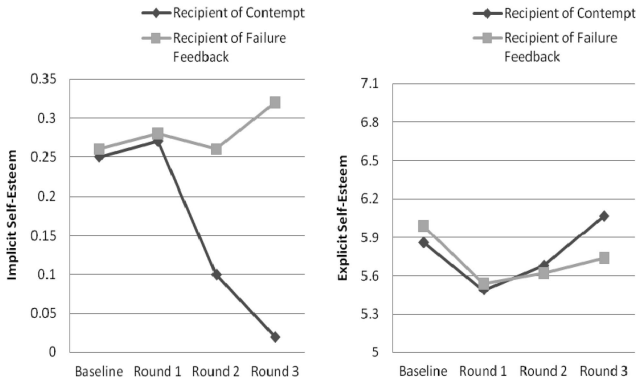

Figure 2. Differences in the influence of being a recipient of contempt and failure feedback on implicit versus explicit self-esteem across the three rounds of the experiment (Study 2).

and activated, $F(1, 125) = 15.58$, $p < .001$, than did recipients of failure feedback.

We then conducted mediation analyses using Preacher and Hayes's (2008) bootstrapping methods for estimating direct and indirect effects with multiple mediators. This method enabled us first to assess the existence of an overall mediation effect and then simultaneously to test and contrast multiple mediating variables. In addition, the authors highlight that this technique has the benefit of increasing power and maintaining control over the Type I error rate. Hence, to test for mediation, we constructed a model in which the perceived level of received contemptuous feedback was individually entered as a predictor variable;[4] task performance quality (or interpersonal aggression) was entered as the dependent variable; and implicit self-esteem, activation, and returned feelings of contempt were entered together as proposed mediators.[5] We also statistically controlled for the effects of prior behaviors in each round to control for their influence on the dependent variable. To determine how each mediator uniquely accounted for the effects of receiving contempt on task performance and interpersonal aggression, we conducted analyses using 5,000 bootstrap samples with bias-corrected confidence estimates. Specifically, we found evidence for mediation: The total direct effect of receiving contempt on interpersonal aggression (.37), $t(127) = 4.73$, $p < .001$, became nonsignificant when three mediators were included in the model (.12), $t(127) = 1.06$, *ns*. Specifically, the indirect effects of two of the mediators, self-esteem, with a point estimate of .06 and a 95% (bias-corrected and accelerated) bootstrap confidence interval (BCa CI) of [.01, .13], and returned feelings of contempt, with a point estimate of .22 and a 95% BCa CI of [.01, .39], did not include zero in their 95% CIs and therefore showed evidence of mediation (see Figure 3A). Activation levels with a point estimate of –.02 and a 95% CI of [–.07, .02] did not mediate the effect of receiving contempt on aggression. Contrasts of the significant indirect effects (self-esteem vs. returned feelings of contempt) showed no significant differences ($Z = 1.62$, *ns*, 95% CI [–.05, .36]); the mediating effects of implicit self-esteem were the same as those of contempt.

On testing the extent to which these same three psychological outcomes mediated the relationship between receiving contempt and task performance quality, the results indicated that the total effect of contemptuous feedback on task performance (.16), $t(127) = 3.17$, $p < .01$, became insignificant when the mediators were included in the model (.08), $t(127) = 1.21$, *ns*. As can be seen in Figure 3B, the results indicated that implicit self-esteem, with a point estimate of .05 and a 95% BCa CI of [.02, .13], and activation, with a point estimate of .03 and a 95% BCa CI of [.01, .08], were unique mediators, as they did not include zero in their 95% CI. Feelings of returned contempt with a with a point estimate of –.002 and 95% BCa CI of [–.10, .08] did not have a mediating effect. Last, a contrast of the specific indirect effects of the two significant mediators (levels of self-esteem vs. levels of activation) indicated that there were no significant differences between their effects; rather, both the mediators equally reconciled the association between receiving contempt and task performance ($Z = 0.78$, *ns*, 95% CI [–.03, .08]).

Discussion

Results from Study 2 offer insight into the processes by which contemptuous feedback influences the performance and interpersonal behaviors of its recipients. In this study, we tested the proposed causal model, confirming that receiving contempt decreased implicit self-esteem and led to increases in activation levels and returned feelings of contempt. These experiences were in turn linked to individuals' task performance and interpersonal aggression. Specifically, a drop in implicit self-esteem and an increase in activation had a positive influence on recipients' task performance quality, whereas the experience of declining implicit self-esteem along with increased feelings of contempt caused recipients of contempt to act in a more interpersonally aggressive manner.

Threatened implicit self-esteem was an especially potent mechanism that played a key role in mediating the relationship between receiving contempt and both the positive workplace outcome of increased task performance quality and the negative workplace outcome of increased verbal aggression. Our results showed that receiving contempt initially threatened both implicit and explicit measures of self-esteem. But whereas implicit self-esteem significantly decreased with participants' every exposure to the stronger contempt feedback, participants' explicit, self-reported levels of self-esteem increased rather than decreased through Rounds 2 and 3. These results are interesting both in the context of understanding the influence of self-esteem on contempt and its outcomes, as well as in highlighting the differences between implicit and explicit self-esteem on these outcomes. Indeed, previous research suggests that the differing directionality of implicit and explicit self-esteem may not be an uncommon result (e.g., Rudman, Dohn, & Fairchild, 2007) and may arise because implicit and explicit attitudes are rooted in different memory systems and convey different types of information (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). In addition, it may be that participants were using their explicit assessments of self-

[4] We also replicated the results found in this mediation analysis using experimental condition as the predictor variable.

[5] For parsimony, we focus on the outcomes that occurred as a result of the contemptuous feedback at Round 3, or the second, intense manipulation of contempt; however, results of analyses for the outcomes that occurred after Round 2 (an equally intense contempt manipulation) were the same as the Round 3 results presented here and are available from the first author.

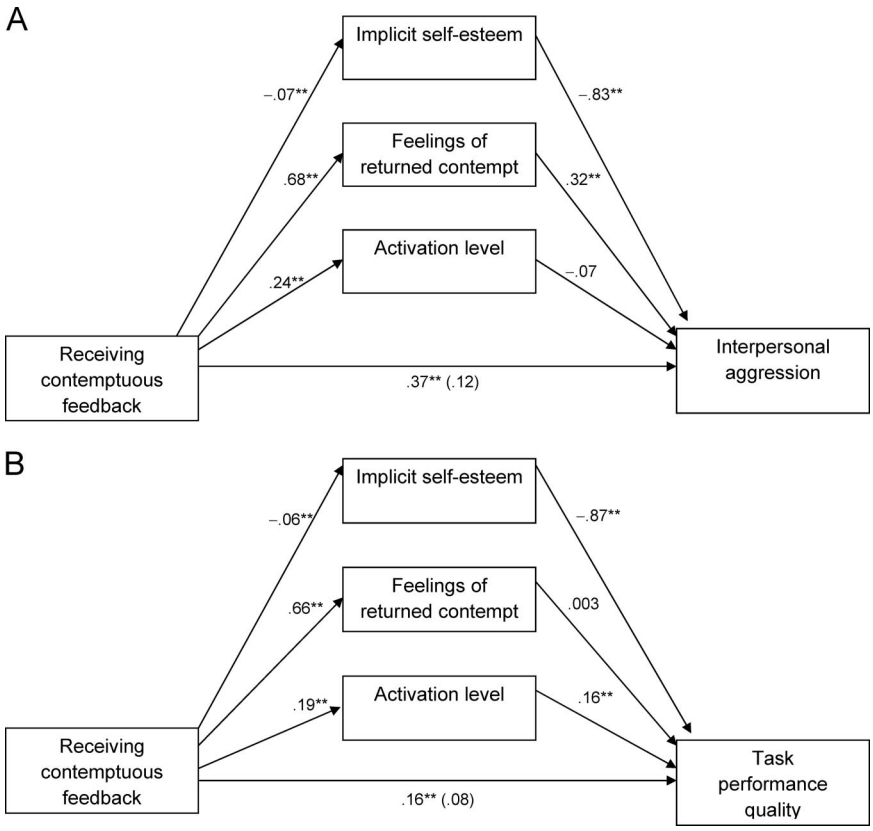

Figure 3. Psychological mediators of the link between (A) receiving contempt and interpersonal aggression and (B) receiving contempt and task performance quality (Study 2). Path values are unstandardized regression coefficients. The values outside parentheses represent the total effect of receiving contempt on interpersonal aggression/task performance prior to the inclusion of the mediating variables. The values inside parentheses represent the direct effect, from bootstrapping mediation analyses, of receiving contempt on interpersonal aggression/task performance after the mediators are included. ** $p < .01$.

esteem as a way to actually boost their lowered implicit self-esteem, or that explicit self-esteem is more resistant to reflecting momentary changes in an individual's self-concept (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Both are interesting questions for future research.

In addition, feeling contempt in return and experiencing activation also mediated the contempt–outcome relationship, but not in as consistent a way as did implicit self-esteem. Specifically, the feelings of returned contempt mediated the relationship between contempt and aggressive behaviors, but not contempt and task performance, whereas activation levels mediated the relationship between contempt and task performance, but not contempt and aggression. With regard to in-kind feelings of contempt, the pattern of results we found is consistent with past research that highlights that feeling and displaying contempt is associated with exclusion (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). That is, feelings of contempt compelled recipients to exclude their partners, a sentiment more easily conveyed through verbal aggression than through improving performance, a behavior that is associated with a desire to regain inclusionary status. Similarly, an examination of the methods used in prior research also sheds light on why we may not have found support for the predicted link between activation and aggression. Most previous studies typically have induced arousal through physical exercise (Zillmann, Katcher, & Milavsky, 1972) or environmental stimuli like hot temperatures (Anderson, Deuser, & DeNeve, 1995). Activation generated through physical exercise does not carry an emotional or hedonic tone and may differ significantly from activation that occurs in response to negative emotional feedback. The underlying cause of activation might have an influence on whether it hinders or helps individuals' responses. Future research could delve into understanding the antecedents of activation and their potentially differing outcomes.

Study 3: Outcomes of Contempt Moderated by Status

Studies 1 and 2 provide evidence for the relationships between contempt and its subsequent psychological mediators and performance and interpersonal effects on its recipients. In Study 3 we examine the relative status of the agents and recipients of the contempt as an important boundary condition in understanding the underlying processes of the contempt–outcome relationships. We posit that a recipient's status compared with that of the agent of contempt will serve as a moderator and create differences in the recipients' responses to contempt. To test this hypothesis,

we manipulated the status (low, equal, or high) of the recipient relative to the contemptuous agent.

Method

Participants and experimental design. A total of 268 undergraduate and graduate students (99 men and 169 women) at the University of Pennsylvania participated in the study for monetary compensation (U.S. $10). The mean age was 22.70 years (SD = 5.49). Participants were randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions in a 2 (condition: contemptuous feedback, failure feedback) × 3 (status: high status [manager], equal status [peer], or low status [subordinate]) between-subjects experimental design, with a 3 (outcome variable: interpersonal aggression or task performance quality: Round 1, Round 2, Round 3) within-subject factor.

Procedure. The procedure duplicated that of Studies 1 and 2, but with one major exception: We manipulated the status of the participant with respect to the computer partner. Similar to Study 2, we had one control condition, the failure feedback condition. As in Study 1, we returned to the three-task design and continued to use a less intense initial stimulus in Round 1, to ease participants into the experiment, with no differences in the increased intensity of contempt in Rounds 2 and 3.

Manipulation of status. Status was manipulated through the formal status of hierarchical role and ascribed status through age and educational background. In the low-status condition, we assigned participants the role of subordinate, whose virtual partner, described as an older, more experienced graduate student, was the manager who controlled how much of the $20 remuneration the participant would receive. Participants in the high-status condition were assigned the role of manager who would decide the percentage of remuneration ($20) awarded to their subordinate partner and who were told their partner was a first semester freshman. In the equal-status condition, participants had the same title (consultant) as their partner, were told their partner's age was the same as their own, and were given equal rewards of $10 each.[6] In all conditions, the sexes of the participant and of the (computer) partner were maintained to be the same, to preclude additional status judgments.

Dependent variables. Interpersonally aggressive behaviors and task performance quality were coded exactly as in Study 1. Interpersonal aggression was assessed by three raters (agreement varied from .75 to .81 for the three responses). Task performance was rated by three highly experienced senior *Fortune 500* senior consultants (different from the consultants in Studies 1 and 2) who had been employed by large consulting firms for an average of 16.85 years (SD = 5.71). Intercoder agreement for the performance assessments ranged from .67 to .71 for the three tasks.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. To determine whether study participants understood their status position, all participants reported their status in the firm—a choice of manager, team member, or subordinate. One hundred percent of participants in each position accurately identified their status. Furthermore, confirming the viability of the contempt manipulation, participants in the contempt condition perceived higher levels of contempt in their (computer) partner (M = 4.62) than did those in the failure feedback condition (M = 2.83), $F(1, 263) = 101.44$, $p < .001$. Last, a 3 (status: low, equal, high) × 3 (contempt: Round 1, Round 2, Round 3) mixed-model ANOVA conducted within the contempt condition indicated that the amount of contempt perceived by the recipients of contempt across all status conditions was not significantly different, $F(1, 133) = 2.25$, *ns.*

Interpersonal aggression. In accordance with our predictions, a mixed-model ANOVA with two between-subjects factors, condition (contemptuous vs. failure feedback) and status (low, equal, and high), and a within-subject factor, aggression (at Round 1, Round 2, and Round 3), showed a significant interaction, $F(2, 101) = 3.14$, $p < .05$. This interaction (and the means and contrasts in Tables 4 and 5) indicated that both the participants' status levels and the type of feedback received influenced how aggressively they behaved. Low-status recipients of contempt grew less aggressive from Round 2 to Round 3, exhibiting lower levels of aggression than did their counterparts in the failure feedback condition (see Contrast 2 in Table 5) and equal- and high-status recipients of contempt (see Contrasts 5 and 6 in Table 5). In contrast, low-status participants in the failure feedback condition became significantly more aggressive with increased exposure to failure feedback (from Round 2 to Round 3) and, unlike recipients of contempt, had equivalent levels of aggression as did equal- and high-status recipients of failure feedback (see Contrasts 8 and 9 in Table 5). Equal-status participants who received contempt significantly increased their levels of aggression with every exposure to contemptuous feedback and also acted more aggressively than did their counterparts who received failure feedback (see Contrast 3 in Table 5). These same participants, although acting more aggressively than the low-status participants, unexpectedly did not differ significantly in their levels of aggression from their high-status peers who also received contempt. However, high-status recipients of contempt were significantly more aggressive than their counterparts who received failure feedback (see Contrast 4 in Table 5). Overall, although we did not find the expected differences in aggression between high- and equal-status recipients of contempt, recipients at both these status levels behaved more aggressively than did both low-status recipients and their counterparts in the failure feedback condition, suggesting that, overall, status significantly influences the degree of interpersonal aggression displayed by recipients of contempt.

Task performance quality. In line with our prediction that status would moderate the contempt–task performance relationship, a 2 (condition: contemptuous feedback, failure feedback) × 3 (status: low, equal, high) × 2 (task performance quality: Task 2, Task 3) mixed-model ANCOVA, controlling for pre-Round 1 (baseline, or Task 1) performance, indicated a significant interaction, $F(2, 260) = 3.19$, $p < .05$. In these analyses, we focused our a priori planned comparisons on Task 3, which followed the first

[6] The equal-status condition mirrored the procedure used in Study 1. Although participants in Study 1 were not given any explicit information as to their status relative to that of their computer partner, we examined whether participants would view their (computer) partner as having status equal to theirs. To do this we had 45 University of Pennsylvania students read the Study 1 instructions. When asked what status level they would assign to their "team member" compared with themselves (lower, equal, or higher), 97% answered that the team member represented someone with equal status, offering support for the status equality of the manipulation.

Table 4
Means and Standard Deviations for Interpersonal Aggression and Task Performance Quality as a Function of Experimental Condition (Study 3)

	Interpersonal aggression						Task performance quality					
	Post-Round 1 feedback		Post-Round 2 feedback		Post-Round 3 feedback		Pre-Round 1 feedback: Baseline Task 1		Post-Round 1 feedback: Task 2		Post-Round 2 feedback: Task 3	
Status condition	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Contemptuous feedback												
Low status	4.07	0.92	3.41	1.15	3.19	1.02	3.28	1.62	3.30	1.53	3.82	1.11
Equal status	4.17	1.25	4.56	1.10	4.75	0.88	2.72	1.37	2.98	1.13	3.28	0.87
High status	3.99	1.18	4.44	1.33	4.88	0.85	3.02	1.07	2.91	1.45	2.59	0.86
Failure feedback												
Low status	2.36	0.93	3.46	0.47	3.99	0.83	2.89	1.27	3.12	1.07	3.16	1.19
Equal status	2.71	1.01	3.89	1.42	4.04	1.43	2.67	1.00	3.19	1.17	2.60	1.10
High status	3.13	0.98	4.13	1.21	4.17	1.02	3.12	1.13	2.81	1.18	2.60	0.90

round of intense contemptuous feedback. An examination of the means (see Table 4) and contrast coding results (see Table 5) shows that receiving contempt had a positive main effect on performance quality. Both low- and equal-status recipients of contempt performed significantly better than did their status counterparts in the failure feedback condition (see Contrasts 2 and 3 in Table 5). In contrast, the performance of high-status participants did not vary by experimental condition (see Contrast 4 in Table 5). As predicted, the results indicate that low-status recipients of contempt had the greatest performance enhancements, achieving greater task performance quality than did equal-status recipients of contempt (see Contrast 5), who, in turn, showed significantly better task performance than did high-status participants (see Contrast 7).

By emphasizing the role of status as a moderator of the relationship between receiving contempt and better task performance and greater interpersonal aggression, Study 3 highlights that contempt is indeed an "emotion that articulates and maintains hierarchy and status" (Miller, 1997, p. 217) and adds to the growing body of research showing that status differentials have important interpersonal and behavioral consequences in a variety of domains, including work. Specifically, after receiving the strong dose of contemptuous feedback, lower status participants performed significantly better on the task than did equal-status participants, who performed significantly better than did high-status participants—whose performance actually significantly deteriorated from baseline levels, $t(41) = 2.78$, $p < .01$. Although we did not find the predicted difference in the level of interpersonal aggression between participants in the high-status and equal-status conditions, both responded in a more aggressive way to their contemptuous partners than did the low-status participants. Thus, rather than being coerced into a lower status position as a result of receiving contempt, equal-status recipients fought to maintain status equilibrium through better performance outcomes and interpersonal aggression. Together, the results suggest that the inherently hierarchical nature of contempt interacting with the hierarchical structure within which people often work makes a significant difference in the interpersonal and task performance responses to receiving contempt within a work context.

Table 5
Contrast Codes for Interpersonal Aggression and Task Performance Quality as a Function of Experimental Condition (Study 3)

	Contempt			Failure feedback			Interpersonal aggression: Post-Round 3	Task performance quality: Post-Round 2 feedback:
Contrast	Low status	Equal status	High status	Low status	Equal status	High status	*t* value	Task 3 *t* value
1	1	1	1	−1	−1	−1	0.26	3.56**
2	1	0	0	−1	0	0	−2.55*	3.02**
3	0	1	0	0	−1	0	2.40*	3.10**
4	0	0	1	0	0	−1	2.03*	−0.04
5	1	−1	0	0	0	0	−6.37**	2.63*
6	1	0	−1	0	0	0	−6.17**	5.82**
7	0	1	−1	0	0	0	0.44	3.12**
8	0	0	0	1	−1	0	−0.26	2.43*
9	0	0	0	1	0	−1	−0.39	2.55*
10	0	0	0	0	1	−1	−0.12	0.004

Note. $N = 268$. Please refer to Table 4 for means and standard deviations for interpersonal aggression and failure feedback as a function of experimental condition.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

General Discussion

As contempt has been singled out as the key damaging discrete emotion in marital relations (Gottman, 1993), an aim of this article was to extend our understanding of the outcomes of contempt to other important areas of life, specifically the domain of work. To do so, we created a business strategy simulation in which we tested a model of the immediate psychological, interpersonal, and task performance consequences of receiving contempt. Our findings, possibly unique to the work environment, highlight that being a recipient of contempt led to significantly better performance quality. Yet, these higher performance outcomes did not occur without a cost. Consistent with Gottman's (1993) results, we found a significantly negative influence of contempt on interpersonal relations in the form of greater expressed verbal aggression toward one's partner.

Following our model of the outcomes of being a recipient of contempt in workplace interactions, we found evidence for this dual pattern of results across three studies. Specifically, in Study 1 we found that, compared with recipients of angry feedback, emotionally neutral failure feedback, or completely neutral feedback, recipients of contempt responded with significantly higher levels of both task performance quality and interpersonal aggression. Study 2 built on these findings by examining the psychological mediators of the relationship between receiving contempt and its outcomes. We found that being on the receiving end of contempt threatened recipients' implicit self-esteem, which, in turn, stimulated both better task performance and a rise in interpersonal aggression. Contempt also begot returned contempt on the part of its recipients. These feelings mediated the relationship between receiving contempt and heightened displays of aggression toward the agents but did not influence task performance. Last, the rise in activation that occurred in response to contempt led to improved task performance but had no influence on recipients' aggressive behaviors. In Study 3, we further extended our findings by examining the moderating influence of status on these relationships. As predicted, low-status recipients performed significantly better than did equal-status recipients, who performed significantly better than did the high-status recipients of contempt. In addition, low-status recipients displayed significantly lower levels of interpersonal aggression in response to contempt than did equal-status and high-status recipients, who, contrary to predictions, did not differ from one another.

Implications

Given the negative consequences of expressing contempt within the marital domain (Gottman, 1993), our finding that contempt can lead to better performance within the work context raises the question as to why contempt might have different effects in marital versus work interactions. A social functional approach to emotions emphasizes that although the functions of emotions stay the same regardless of situation (e.g., Roseman et al., 1994), their outcomes are often context dependent (Fischer & Manstead, 2008). In this case, the context of work provides recipients with a socially sanctioned and clear outlet to regain both position and inclusionary status by increasing the quality of their work. It would be interesting to examine whether there are performance domains of marriage (e.g., child rearing, income earning) that could operate similarly. For example, spouses who are targets of contempt may work harder in other areas, either inside or outside of marriage, to show that they are not, in fact, inferior to their contemptuous spouse.

Although the results offered support for the positive influence of contempt on task performance, this does not mean that contempt is an unmitigated good within the workplace. For instance, it is possible that the type of task and the social context may moderate the contempt–performance relationship. Contempt may influence only certain types of tasks; more difficult, logic-based tasks that necessitate internal resources like energy and self-esteem (Schmeichel et al., 2003) may be more influenced than routine cognitive tasks. Also, the social context of the task can matter: Recipients may perform differently when observed (Zajonc, 1965) and evaluated (e.g., Geen, 1991) or on the basis of expected future interactions with the contemptuous agent. The long-term effects of contempt may be quite severe. Even as receiving contempt infuses recipients with a surge of activation that helps provide an impetus to cope with the negative feedback and increase performance quality, prolonged activation may be exhausting and even unsustainable. In time, the recipients may become overwhelmed by feelings of depletion, which could lead to longer-term emotional exhaustion (Melamed, Kushnir, & Shirom, 1992) and as a result, eventually, even decreased performance (Schmeichel et al., 2003). The drop in self-esteem that triggered enhanced performance may also be problematic over extended periods of time as recipients become preoccupied with trying to increase their self-esteem, a state that reduces positive affect, learning, relationships, and even physical health (Crocker & Park, 2004). Even in the short term, in this experiment there were troubling outcomes of receiving contempt. First, being a recipient of contempt increased recipients' aggressive behavior toward their partners; such behavior would hurt interpersonal relations necessary for interdependent work (Evans & Dion, 1991). As we found here, contempt breeds contempt and thus could start a contemptuous cycle in which the recipient's attempt to right the balance with more contempt may generate an even stronger response from the original agent. Such emotional spirals can cause a breakdown of the relationship altogether (Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008). But although our multiround experimental methodology enabled us to see the beginning stages of this spiral, we did not delve into the series of interactions that can hurt longer standing relationships. These longer term effects of contempt may be particularly harmful and are an important area for future research. This harm could be even more prevalent, as contempt may be tempting for employees to use as a more subtle aggressive act (Underwood, 2004), one that can boost their own status by lowering that of others, without the penalty associated with more blatant hostility.

Methodologically, our studies used a series of novel measures and procedures. Along with designing a simulated business environment that incorporated real-time feedback, we used several diverse measures to assess psychological, interpersonal, and behavioral outcomes. In addition to self-reports measuring recipients' levels of contempt and activation, for example, we assessed task performance and interpersonal aggression through actual behaviors (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007) that were rated by a set of expert coders. We contribute to the growing implicit processes literature by examining self-esteem through both implicit measures and explicit self-reports. Our conflicting findings for

these two measures (see Figure 2) indicate the benefit of capturing implicit as well as explicit attitudes. Last, by having participants engage in the study through multiple rounds of contempt, we were able to begin to examine the causal consequences of contempt over time.

Limitations and Future Directions

A primary limitation of this study is the lack of a richer medium—not having face-to-face interactions between the agent and recipient of contempt. Using a computer-mediated contempt manipulation allowed us to have much better control over the level and intensity of the emotional manipulation, but this may have come at the cost of generalizability; perhaps interactions involving nonverbal behaviors would produce more powerful or entirely different outcomes. Still, the influence of contempt, even without face-to-face interactions, was strong enough that it had significant and consistent consequences. Yet, although we have no reason to expect that our findings are restricted to computer-mediated interactions alone, the increasing use of computer-based communications like e-mail and social networking highlight the importance of studying this type of communication in its own right.

To maintain tight experimental control in our studies, all participants, regardless of their efforts and performance, were given the same type of contemptuous (angry, failure, or neutral) feedback. Because the agent's feedback was not contingent on the recipient's performance, it is possible that recipients may have interpreted the agent's contempt differently, on the basis of the extent to which they believed it to be legitimate. If the recipients deemed themselves to be ill equipped to deal with the business simulation or recognized that they had not expended enough effort, they may have viewed the agent's contempt as legitimate and justified. On the other hand, recipients who had a strong sense of performance efficacy may have viewed the agent's contempt as unreasonable. Indeed, our finding that low-status recipients, who may have viewed their high-status counterpart's contempt as legitimate, responded deferentially by working harder and acting more obsequiously suggests that the notion of legitimacy may prove to be important in future studies. Similar to our investigation of the role of status, future research could include the study of additional moderators in the contempt–outcome link, such as culture, relationship quality, or personality traits. For example, there is research demonstrating that culture can influence reactions to moral discrete emotions (Bagozzi, Verbeke, & Gavino, 2003). Individuals from Western cultures (as is the case in our sample) have been found to show a preference for autonomy and uniqueness, basing their self-esteem on their ability to showcase their own abilities and receive positive appraisals from others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). When confronted with the status-reducing, exclusionary message of contemptuous feedback, these individuals may choose to reaffirm their self-esteem and perhaps feelings of uniqueness through aggression and enhanced performance. On the other hand, people from interdependent cultures define themselves by their social relationships and place a high value on inclusion (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Therefore, although contempt's exclusionary message may cause these individuals to increase task performance quality to regain inclusionary status, the importance they place on maintaining social relationships may lead to less aggression and more deferential behavior than was displayed here. Also, with regard to relationships more generally, contempt displayed within a previously close and supportive relationship, for instance, may be perceived as more threatening given its comparison to the prior positive tone of the relationship. Recipients may feel let down by their relational partner and thus experience exacerbated negative outcomes. Additionally personality differences—such as trait self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979), need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), or attachment style (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007)—may moderate recipients' responses to contempt. Future research could explore whether individuals who have lower self-esteem, are anxiously attached, or have a high need to belong may be particularly reactive to the exclusionary and status-reducing messages that contempt conveys. Last, per our earlier discussion, we examined here the more immediate effects of being a recipient of contempt. It is critical for future research to continue this examination over longer time periods and in the field to examine whether these effects hold or take a different form in the long term.

Conclusion

This set of studies extends the social–functional emotional literature in a new direction: the outcomes of being the recipient of contempt within a work context. Our findings suggest that being a recipient of contempt can have both positive and negative work outcomes. On the positive side, being a recipient of contempt led to significantly better performance quality. On the negative side, receiving contempt caused participants to behave in a more interpersonally aggressive way toward their partners. Receiving contempt also led to a lowering of implicit self-esteem and greater activation, both of which mediated the contempt–performance relationship; reduced implicit self-esteem and returned feelings of contempt caused by being a recipient of contempt positively mediated the contempt–aggression relationship. Status was a significant moderator in these contempt–outcome relationships. Although the multiround nature of our study allowed for the beginnings of understanding the influence of contempt over time, longitudinal field studies are necessary to understand fully the long-term influence of contempt within the workplace. Overall, these three studies offered support that contemptuous exchanges are influential in the important interactions in people's lives—marriage and work alike.

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