

Pride and Prejudice:  
Considering the Role of Contempt in Community and  
Conflict

By

Tricia S. Jones, Ph.D.  
Dept. of Communication Sciences  
Temple University  
Philadelphia, PA 19122  
Tel/fax: 215-204-7261/5954  
e-mail: [tsjones@astro.temple.edu](mailto:tsjones@astro.temple.edu)

## Pride and Prejudice: The Role of Contempt in Community and Conflict

For the past twenty years my primary focus of scholarship, consultation and practice has been conflict processes in interpersonal, organizational and community settings. My experiences, some of which will be discussed in more detail in the following sections, have led me to wonder why, as a field, we have done so little to study and appreciate the role of emotion in these processes. Recently, I have speculated about the reasons for this oversight and have argued why I believe that emotion and emotional communication is fundamental for any understanding of conflict dynamics (Jones, in press).

This paper affords me an opportunity to further reflect upon perhaps the least studied and most virulent emotion of them all—contempt. The upcoming conference on practical theory also affords an opportunity to learn new ways in which constructive processes in conflict management and community building may inform our efforts to constrain the corrosive consequences of contempt in practice. To that end, this paper presents several points of discussion that will hopefully serve as a starting point for a much-anticipated conversation.

First, by way of providing a personal context, I very briefly recount some of my activities as a conflict scholar and practitioner in the past several years. These experiences have been the driving force in my need to better comprehend the complexity of conflict and should provide you with a better sense about the source of my interest and questions. Second, I present a summary of my thinking about the role of emotional communication in conflict. This section outlines basic assumptions I make about emotion and the role of emotional communication in conflict; assumptions that obviously relate to the more targeted treatment of contempt. Third, I present a discussion of the emotion of contempt, its nature and forms. Part of this discussion is a comparison of contempt and related emotions that are more often (though not nearly enough) the subject of conflict theory and practice. Fourth, the role of contempt in community and conflict is summarized. While this discussion really deserves a very prolonged analysis, the summary should be sufficient to suggest why scholars interested in community building and conflict should attend seriously to contemptuous behavior and orientation. Fifth, I turn my attention to initiatives that, I believe, offer hope for the prevention of contempt behaviors and orientations in youth. However, these efforts, generally grouped under the heading of conflict resolution education and social-emotional learning, are discussed and also critiqued in light of how practical theory may enhance these practices. And, last, I discuss dialogue models and raises questions about the utility of a general dialogue approach for intervention in contempt conflicts.

### **A Brief Personal Introduction**

Let me begin by acknowledging that this section is a foreign element to me. My relatively conventional scholarship has rarely veered from the straight and narrow path/voice of the

third person. Yet, I believe it is important to share a sense of the personal, to begin a dialogue; and so, I offer the following with humility and all necessary apologies for elasticizing the usual scholarly format.

My initial interest in conflict processes was a focus on labor relations contexts and the study of labor-related negotiation and mediation processes in organizations. Shortly into my doctoral work I became entranced with mediation and its applications for interpersonal and community disputes. During my studies I was trained as a mediator and for three years mediated approximately 6-7 cases per week for the City of Columbus – cases ranging from neighbor disputes (“barking dogs” variety) to domestic violence. Drawn by the power of the process to effect problem-solving and relational change, this experience led to my focus on divorce and family mediation for the next seven years.

As a scholar and a practitioner of divorce mediation I was (and continue to be) amazed at the emotional intensity of the divorce experience and the divorce mediation process, and the inattention to this condition in the literature (both practice-oriented and scholarly). It also seemed apparent that many of the disputants were not necessarily intentionally enacting the worst of their conflict management repertoire, but simply had not developed alternatives within that repertoire to draw upon that would help them in the process. Believing firmly in prevention as advantageous to intervention, my scholarly interest fell to questions of the development of conflict competence and means by which we may enhance that development in youth.

Fortunately, at this time, a new field of conflict resolution education (CRE) was being created. Initially started at the University of Massachusetts, the field of CRE has developed significantly and has increasingly broadened its focus from skills training to social justice concerns. Since the late 1980s I have concentrated on the study of conflict resolution education and its impact on the conflict competence of youth from K-12. An outgrowth of that work has been attention to the relationship of the broader community to school-based conflict resolution efforts, both in the US and in South Africa. The following projects suggest the focus of my work in this area and the learning path I have engaged as a scholar/practitioner.

Several projects have examined the effectiveness of conflict resolution education programs in public schools. The Philadelphia Peer Mediation Project (1992-1994) studied the initial implementation of a system-wide innovation in the Philadelphia Public Schools. The intent was to implement peer mediation programs in 60 middle and senior high schools in the district over a two-year period. Our multi-method study concentrated on qualitative interviewing and observation of the program implementation and learning process in the 43 schools that ultimately participated (Jones & Carlin, 1994). We were interested in the process by which program implementation was most effective and this necessitated attention to the learning and conflict contexts of the schools. Our research suggested very strongly that these programs required fertile ground, the creation of a support network within the schools that would nurture the efforts (Jones & Bodtger, 1999). Our insights led us to conduct the Comprehensive Peer Mediation Evaluation Project funded by the Hewlett and Surdna Foundations. This study was a field experiment

in which 27 schools in three cities participated during a two-year period. In each city, a 3 x 3 design was employed in which different models of CRE (peer mediation cadre, whole school programs, and control) in different educational levels (elementary, middle, and high school) were studied for their impact on students' conflict competence, school climate, and program utility. While this project was designed to attend to several pressing issues in the CRE field, one prominent focus was the question of whether a whole school program was necessarily superior. This focus was personally relevant given our earlier work and suppositions that what was needed was the creation of a supportive environment/community within the school in order for CRE to be effective (Jones et al., 1997; Jones, 1998). The project revealed that the question of community was vital in two ways. First, it was essential that practitioners grapple with the difficulty of creating community within the classroom and school. This process was far from transparent. Second, that the broader community supporting and surrounding the school could have significant influence. To further our learning on the first area, we are currently engaged in the National Curriculum Integration Project. This project, headed by the Colorado School Mediation Program, is developing ways to integrate conflict resolution education, social-emotional learning (SEL), anti-bias education (ABE), and law-related education (LRE) and to infuse it into ongoing educational curricula in seven middle schools across the country. The infusion process has concentrated on helping teachers "build the container" – create a safe and powerful community within the classroom that, we believe, is necessary for the creation of community outside the school (Jones et al., in process). We have also recently completed a more focused whole school effort dealing with special needs youth in Pennsylvania (Jones & Bodtker, 2000). This project involved the development and implementation of a comprehensive CRE and SEL curriculum for students from 11-17 identified with severe emotional and behavioral disturbance problems, and a two year process of staff and teacher training, parent training, and whole school community development.

Linking school-based efforts with the surrounding community has been our focus in two projects since 1995. The first project involved an 18 month effort in which US educators and conflict management experts worked with South African educators and conflict management experts to develop and link school and community mediation programs in the Gauteng province in South Africa (Jones & Bodtker, 1998; Jones, Bodtker, & Cutrona, forthcoming). This project, funded by the United States Information Agency, involved participants from Soweto, Thokoza, Linden, and Rosebank in the Johannesburg area in a multicultural and multinational effort which proved a very significant learning experience on a personal and professional level. And, recently we have just completed a two-year project developing Community Peace and Safety Networks in the Northeast Philadelphia area. These efforts involved linking community members, school programs, business people, clergy, and police in the development of communities supportive of constructive conflict practices.

Each of these projects offered opportunities to work with others to develop and implement programs that we believed had social significance. As such, they each involved a community-building process necessary for long-term collaborative efforts. And, they often necessitated work within larger professional and practitioner

communities. Thus, on many levels, they have afforded me a chance to reflect on our dynamics, our successes, our failures, and most importantly, our futures. These reflections are the basis of the ideas expressed in this paper.

## **Emotion and Conflict**

### **Principles of emotion.**

**Emotions are socially constructed.** A debate still in progress is the extent of social and cultural influence on the nature of emotion. The most common view, as Oatley (1993) summarizes, acknowledges the biological/physiological dimensions of emotion (conceding the existence of a limited range of natural emotional responses) but emphasizes the extent to which emotions, even those that may be considered primary, are socially constructed. Emotions can be seen as socially shared scripts that are culturally determined. Kitayama and Markus (1994) discuss a process they call “emotionalization” (p. 9) in which the scripts integrate the internal sensations with the external reality. The result is a personal and social meaning of the experience of the internal sensations.

**Emotion is rule-governed.** Hochschild (1983) argues that emotions are created and socially regulated by “feeling rules” that prescribe how individuals “ought” to feel. People then engage in “emotion work” to try and enact the appropriate emotion or influence the way others “should” feel in that situation. Feeling rules function as cultural, or subcultural expectations for “normative” emotional responses to the situation (Saarni, 1985).

**Emotional experience is inherently communicative;** constituted through discourse. Duncombe and Marsden (1993, 1996) argue that we are able to participate in emotional lives because we have the ability to construct narratives of the self through discourse. These authors see the relationship between discourse and individual emotional behavior as the way we undertake “emotion work” in our attempts to conform or resist cultural ideologies about emotion (or Hochschild’s feeling rules).

**Emotional experience is fundamentally moral.** Values impact how we experience emotions and our emotions reveal what we value (Manstead, 1991). Some emotions are more communicative of moral orientation than others. For example, disgust, anger and contempt are “moral” emotions. The moral nature of anger is most obvious; it signals a violation of a behavioral norm toward the self or other. Disgust occurs when the moral violation is so great it results in complete rejection of or revulsion toward the other. Contempt is seen as falling between the two others, laced with feelings of superiority as well as moral outrage (Rozin, Haidt & McCauley, 1993).

**Emotional competence is developmental.** We become emotionally competent through processes of enculturation by which we learn what emotional experiences and expressions are appropriate. Children learn that emotional expression depends on gender (Underwood, Coie, & Herbsman, 1992), witnesses to expression (Zeman & Garber, 1996), proscriptions on allowed negativity (Eisenberg, Fabes, Nyman, Bernszweig, &

Pinuleas, 1994), age (Dorr, Rose, Doubleday & Kovaric, 1995; Labouvie-Vief, DeVoe, & Bulka, 1989; Michalson & Lewis, 1985) and peer status (Underwood, 1997). Further, developing emotional competence links in an iterative fashion with general cognitive development (Davidson & Ekman, 1994) and social competence (Hubbard & Coie, 1994).

### The Role of Emotional Communication in Conflict

**Conflict is emotionally defined.** Most conflict scholars believe the triggering event of a conflict can be perceived disagreements about scarce resources, methods of achieving a goal, the nature of a goal or real or anticipated interference. The triggering events that “cause” conflict are, by definition, events that elicit emotion. Perceived interruption of plans and/or perceived discrepancies between our goals/aspirations and reality elicit emotions.

**Conflict is emotionally defined** and influenced by the social ideologies of emotion or the “feeling rules” that are germane to the cultural or subcultural affiliation of the conflicting parties. Further, given the mutually constitutive nature of emotion and culture, conflicts defined emotionally reinforce or alter the practice of the feeling rules and the cultural ideology reflected therein. The emotional definition of the conflict will likely impact the strategic orientation to conflict and, at least, the initial patterns of communicative exchange in the conflict. Definitions trigger scripts that social actors follow in doing their “emotion work”.

**Emotional communication morally frames conflict.** As discussed, emotion is essentially moral in that we are emotional about something because of our conceptions of right and wrong, good and bad, appropriate and inappropriate. We perceive a conflict because it is related to our moral sense, we communicate in conflict in ways that reinforce our moral sense and we attempt to manage conflict in ways that optimize the morality of the outcome and its function for our moral needs, both individual and social. The implications of this principle are profound, for they point to the function of emotional communication as a framing for the issues in conflict. Emotional communication frames all conflict interaction by revealing the moral orientation of the speaker to the issues being expressed. Emotion is not something that operates as a psychological addendum to the “real” conflict (Coser, 1956); indeed, emotional communication melds previous conceptions of “real and unreal” conflict. Our emotional communication informs self and other about the “rightness” of relational states.

### The Nature of Contempt

Even with the renaissance of emotion scholarship in the social sciences, contempt is the least studied emotion. As I argue in this and the next section, that oversight is considerable given the conceptual and practical significance of contempt in conflict.

### Contempt and its Relation to Other Emotions

There has been little controversy over the essential meaning of contempt. Izard (1977), Ekman (1994), and Fridlund (1994) describe contempt as a basic feeling of superiority over others. Ekman and Friesen (1975) maintain that contempt, unlike disgust, can only be felt for people, and includes an element of condescension. Izard (1977) considers it the primary emotion fueling prejudice against groups thought to be inferior to one's own.

Ortony, Clore and Collins (1988) define contempt as a reproach emotion under the purview of attributions made about the other. Specifically, as the following figure suggests, they argue that we make attributions about self and other that result in either positive (e.g., pride/admiration) or negative (e.g., admiration/reproach) emotions:

Identity of Agent	Praiseworthy Appraisal of Agent's Action	Blameworthy Appraisal of Agent's Action
Self	Approving of one's own praiseworthy action resulting in PRIDE emotions	Disapproving of one's own blameworthy actions resulting in SHAME emotions
Other	Approving of another's praiseworthy action resulting in ADMIRATION emotions	Disapproving of another's blameworthy action resulting in REPROACH emotions

The primary reproach emotions are contempt, disdain, and indignation. The extent to which one feels contempt according to their theory is based on the degree of judged blameworthiness and the unexpectedness of the action. The more taboo the agent's action and the more out-of-role or out-of-character the behavior, the greater the degree of reproach.

Although Ortony, Clore and Collins (1988) define contempt as a response to the action of another, it can also be a response to an inherent characteristic of the other. While I may be contemptuous of your inability to enact certain rituals of protocol, thereby signaling your social inferiority (attribution based on action), I can also be contemptuous of you because of some demographic or physical characteristic (e.g., your race, gender, socio-economic status, religion, physical attractiveness) if that characteristic is assumed to be "inferior". Obviously, the more inherent the characteristic (race v. socio-economic status), the more "you" are powerless to remove the condition or characteristic that elicits the contempt. In this case the contempt is more global and it has more longevity.

Of the three emotions in the hostility triad – anger, disgust, and contempt – contempt is the most subtle, the coldest. Anger is a "hot" emotion, usually impelling forthright action. Contempt is cold and distant, more likely to foster aggression characterized by trickery or deceit. Contempt depersonalizes and objectifies the other, making it easier to commit hurtful acts against them in a "cold-blooded way". Izard's (1977) research indicates that contempt is often experienced without anger; and is often less associated with fear or guilt than anger. Conversely, joy is highest with contempt. Thus, when one is feeling

contempt for another they are usually feeling unafraid, and to some extent joyful, without usually feeling ashamed or guilty about being contemptuous.

Although the main focus of Miller's (1997) work is the emotion of disgust, he provides a thoughtful comparison of disgust and contempt. He acknowledges, as did Darwin, that the most intense forms of contempt overlap with disgust. Darwin called this extreme contempt "loathing contempt", an emotion that blends contempt, disgust, and hatred. But through most of their usual ranges, these emotions are readily distinguishable. Both contempt and disgust assert a superior ranking against their objects. But the experience of superiority based on one is quite different from that based on the other. We can enjoy our feelings of contempt, mingled as they often are with self-congratulation. Whereas disgust finds its object repulsive, contempt may find its object amusing. Contempt can often be found in its more "polite" or socially desirable form of forbearance and pity for the inferior.

Does this mean that contempt is always present when there are status-related differences between people? Not necessarily. The two are often very related in practice but are not conceptually equivalent. I may occupy a higher "rank" than another without feeling that the other is inferior or deserving of less respect or active disrespect. Additionally, we must consider that status is something that is usually conferred externally, i.e., the social structure confers status on a person due to their ability/right to occupy a certain position in that structure. Superiority is an internal sense, one created and maintained by the self, although social pressures may act for or against that internalization. So, although status and contempt are not equivalent; when social hierarchies are created and privileged, they may be conflated. This view is supported by Kemper's (1993) theory of social relations with two dimensions – power and status. For him, status subsumes consideration, sociability, caring, respect, esteem and even love.

Are pride and contempt two sides of the same coin? If I experience pride in my behavior does that necessarily mean that I see others with "lesser" behavior as worthy of contempt? No. Pride is the sense of achievement or praiseworthiness that one establishes against an abstract standard of performance (even though that standard is socially constructed). The assessment of pride is a result of one's ability to live up to and beyond expectations. However, if those expectations or standards are defined vis a vis another, as they often are, then pride and contempt are more closely related emotional experiences. I am "proud" because I am better than you, or "not you". Some cultures emphasize the latter through a focus on competitive orientations toward the other rather than accomplishment orientations toward the self. In such cultures, it is much more common to find pride mingled with superiority and contempt.

### Expression of Contempt

Despite its appearance on most "basic emotions" lists, there hasn't been nearly as much agreement on the expressive component of contempt as there has been for other basic emotions. Many researchers believe there is a universal expression for the emotion of contempt (Darwin, 1872; Ekman & Friesen, 1986; Matsumoto, 1992) and recent

research has documented its utility and interpretation cross-culturally (Ekman & Heider, 1988; Rosenberg & Ekman, 1995). However, it is important to remember that the actual demonstration of contempt will depend on its social and cultural contexts.

Like other emotions, the communication of contempt is not limited to facial displays. In some cultures there are unique emblems of contempt (Morris, 1994). More generally, we can express contempt for others by engaging in acts that are intended to belittle and degrade them, to “put them in their place.” There are two ways that contempt may be communicated: territorial intrusions, and threat displays.

***Territorial intrusions***—standing too close, touching, staring, shouting, and so on—do not in themselves communicate contempt. Yet, when the intruder *disregards the negative signals of the intrudee*, the intruder’s behavior becomes contemptuous, ranging from mild teasing, to serious harassment, or worse. In addition, certain actions that would not signal contempt in one context can readily do so in another. The best example of this is what happens in competitive contexts (e.g., fights, games, quarrels, contests, etc.) where many otherwise innocent behaviors—eye contact, touch, smiling, expansive gestures, proximity, mock expressions of fear, babytalk, and so forth—suddenly become ***threat displays***, *actions implying that one’s rival is not a worthy adversary* and need not be taken seriously (or even needs help, as when overly supportive behaviors signal condescension).

Less attention has been given to verbal forms of contempt. However, current scholarship suggests that two ways of expressing contempt are through verbal disconfirmation, or verbal aggression. For example, Gottman (1994) distinguishes characteristics of complaint, criticism and contempt statements. While a complaint is a specific statement of anger, displeasure, distress or other negativity, it is focused on a specific action or lack of action (e.g., “I am upset because you didn’t take out the garbage tonight”). A criticism tends to be global and includes blaming the partner (e.g., “You never take out the garbage because you are lazy”). Contempt adds insult to the criticism, it is verbal character assassination (e.g., “You idiot, why can’t you ever remember to take out the garbage?”) What separates contempt from criticism is the intention to insult and psychologically abuse your partner and to “put down” your partner. The most common signs of contempt are insults and name calling, hostile humor, and open mockery.

The “milder” verbal expressions of contempt are synonymous with relational responses of disconfirmation. As Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) initially noted, disconfirmation is a response that denies the right of the other to make a certain relational bid. It is the enactment of the inferiority and delegitimacy of the other, resonating with Miller’s comment (1997, p. 33) that “Contempt is in one of its avatars indistinguishable from indifference, which may be understood as a particular instantiation of complacency. Indifference is that particular kind of contempt which renders its objects nearly invisible.”

It is critical to emphasize that these generalizations about the expression of contempt are broadly presented and do not negate the variety of ways in which these expressions can

be altered in social and relational contexts. In fact, one of the most significant contributions of practical theory in this area would be the exploration of the communicative practice of contempt and its coloring of the social fabric. Among the questions of interest in such work might be the following. What are the important dimensions of contemptuous communication in a given situation? For example, how does the expression of contempt differ in terms of directness-indirectness, publicness-privateness, verbal-nonverbal, etc.? What are the display rules for contempt and for responses to contempt in a particular culture? What role does contempt have in defining and refining the display rules for related emotions like anger and disgust? In short, practical theorists may attend to the question of the operative grammar of contempt displays in a specific social and cultural context.

### **The Relation of Contempt to Conflict and Community**

The overriding purpose of this conference, and of much of the work I am engaged in is the creation of positive communities in order to help develop constructive conflict management. Obviously, I see this as an iterative process. The better the communities, the better the conflict management and vice versa. So, any insight or practice that enables the achievement of one or the other has true social significance. I believe that contempt is destructive to both in the long run, although the relationship between contempt and community is more complex than that between contempt and conflict. In this section, I provide a very brief analysis of both.

We may be contemptuous of an individual or contemptuous of a group. Although both are important in terms of conflict interaction and intervention, the latter is more relevant to our discussion of community. Moreover, the form of contempt (active versus passive) has different impact if it is expressed against an individual or a group. For example, there is the contempt of assumed superiority in general (i.e., a classist and usually passive form of contempt) like that of master for slave that results in general indifference to the inferior, that almost prohibits strong affect toward the other. This type of contempt is generally experienced on an individual level but is not as sanguine when it is considered on a social level. In fact, it is usually not possible for large groups to maintain this kind of indifference since assumed superiority must be enacted through more active denigration of and control of the other group. Contempt against an individual is also common in a basically egalitarian setting where we seek and desire status over others. This form of contempt looks more like the contempt of the popular student for the unpopular one, the academic “star” for the less prominent colleague. This active contempt is part of a system of challenge and parry that does more than just confirm rankings already in place, it seeks to claim superiority for oneself and to reduce the rank of the other in order to establish and confirm new rankings.

### **Contempt and Community**

*“Contempt raises a myriad of issues involving the relation of emotions to various social orders, to the justice of those social orders, and to the micropolitics of face-to-face interaction in those social orders.”*

- Miller (1997, p. 207)

I believe we must resist the tendency to condemn contempt as a purely negative emotion, one without any positive consequences. The “truth” is that contempt is quite powerful as a cohesive agent and has proven to be one facet enabling the formation and maintenance of community. This aspect is mentioned as part of the evolutionary significance of the emotion, as Izard (1977) explains:

In contempt, one feels prejudiced against some object, idea or person . . . contempt may have emerged as a vehicle for preparing the individual or group to face a dangerous adversary. For example, a young man might prepare for defense of himself or of his group with such thoughts as: “I am stronger than he, I am better.” Eventually, this message might become a rallying signal for all the men in preparation for defense or attack. Perhaps those who were quite persuaded marshaled more courage (and felt less empathy for the enemy) and were more successful in surviving the hazards of hunting and fighting. Still today the occasions that elicit contempt are situations in which one needs to feel stronger, more intelligent, more civilized, or in some way better than, the person one is contending with. . . .However, once contempt is turned against other human beings, it is hard to find anything positive or adaptive in this emotion.” (pp. 339-340).

Durkheim argued that groups cohere because they take ritual activities that lead to heightened emotions among the members that bind them to the group. Collins then integrated those ideas in his theory of interactional ritual chains designed to explain emotion at the microlevel but linked to forces at the macro level. Groups create and maintain emotional energy that both defines the group, and the experience of being in the group as well as forms the emotional boundaries of membership. Contempt and specifically, contempt rituals, are very potent in this sense, as a review of hate group dynamics suggests (Jackson, 1994).

Emotional communication, including expressions of contempt, are central to group identity formation. Group identification is based on perceptions of salient differences resulting from social influences (Thalhofer, 1993). The stronger the perceived difference, the stronger the tendency to form in-group and out-group identifications. And, individual and group identities are linked: the more an individual’s social identity is derived from group identity the greater the motivation to define and denigrate an out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The twist is that contempt for the out-group can create great pride and cohesion in a group and/or community. We all know the adage that the best way to create a united front is to recognize or create a common enemy. To me, one of the most pressing issues facing conflict managers and social change agents is how to retain the pride and dispense with the contempt. Practical theory devoted to these questions would help by promoting socially useful description and the emergence of new abilities for all parties involved.

As I mention in the last sections of this paper, I believe that certain public education efforts and certain dialogue processes have real potential for addressing these issues and providing the positive consequences.

### Contempt and Conflict

*“There is nothing that people bear more impatiently, or forgive less, than contempt; and all injury is much sooner forgotten than insult”*

– Lord Chesterfield (1746)

There is a clear link between the expression of contempt and the escalation of conflict. Certainly, many interpersonal conflicts escalate—and may even turn violent—simply as a result of angry feelings. In their recent review of the research on interpersonal anger, Canary, Spitzberg, and Semic (1998) reported that aggressive behavior is often precipitated by anger. Moreover, among the many causes (“sites”) of anger that they identified, one of the primary causes refers to “the perception that one’s self concept or public image is under attack” (p. 194). Included in this category are actions such as: condescension, insults, teasing, self-esteem threats, and so on.

Of particular interest is the work of John Gottman (1994). Although based exclusively on studies of married couples, his research shows how expressions of contempt fuel destructive patterns of conflict. Identified as one of “the four horseman of the apocalypse,”—the others are criticism, defensiveness, and stonewalling—displays of contempt by individuals during conflict episodes, according to Gottman, are strong indicators of marital dissatisfaction and predictors of eventual separation.

Communication of contempt creates and reflects the degree of intergroup conflict (Heise & O’Brien, 1993). Contempt displays are self-perpetuating, building and cementing stereotypes (Ponterotto, 1991) that increase intergroup conflict (Betancourt, 1990; Tzeng & Jackson, 1994) which, in turn, may actually increase the in-group identification process (Wagner & Ward, 1993). In cultural conflict, displays of disrespect, or intentional demonstration of perceived superiority can be linked with explosive, destructive escalatory cycles (Jones & Remland, 1993; Remland, Jones, & Brown, 1994; Ting-Toomey, 1985). And, contempt displays are often linked with shame cycles in conflict. As Lewis (1993), argues, the link between contempt and shame can be very important for group and interpersonal conflict. Does being treated with contempt cause shame? It may if we accept the evaluation of others and use it as a metric by which we see ourselves lacking in our general ability to meet expectations. If being treated contemptuously results in shame, it may result in shame reparation cycles discussed in detail by Retzinger (1991). She argues that when one is shamed and signals that s/he has been shamed, the other must acknowledge the shame and try to repair it to avoid anger and retaliatory shaming and/or social withdrawal.

The foundations of intergroup conflict among adolescents are similar to those of adults with the possible exception of the importance of the group identity as social identity for the child (Keashley, Fisher, & Grant, 1993). The dynamics are likely to be more extreme

among adolescents precisely because their “forming” social identity is almost exclusively dependent on group affiliation (in their eyes) (Ponterotto, 1991). Further heightening this impact are differences between adult and adolescent social competence and conflict competence. As Selman has argued (Selman et al, 1986; Yeates & Selman, 1989), adolescents’ social competence and conflict competence is less developed in terms of perspective-taking ability and sophistication of strategic conflict behavior. Thus, adolescents are more likely to define themselves in terms of peer groups, to identify with peer groups, and to adopt strategies that protect the integrity of the peer group and its’ perceived superiority.

So, when we talk about the relationship between contempt and conflict, the extant research and theory shows that contempt can clearly fuel conflict by heightening identity damage (Haviland & Kalbaugh, 1993), excusing more abusive behavior toward the other, and creating shame cycles that lead to retaliatory escalation. But, as a practitioner, there are more insidious aspects of the relationship between contempt and conflict that I want to muse about for a moment. Specifically, there are four reasons why I believe that contempt is a much more virulent emotion for destructive conflict. **First, contempt, by its very nature, removes or reduces the legitimacy of the other, thus disempowering him or her (or them) in conflict processes.** If empowerment is necessary or advantageous for resolution of the conflict, it stimulates the potential for the target of contempt to build factions or use violent means of acquiring and wielding power against the other. **Second, contempt is seductive, stimulating more of the same by creating its own pleasure for the person feeling contempt.** This aspect of contempt has actually been suggested in some biological research using primates that suggests that contemptuous behavior or “gratuitous superiority” may create the same kinds of physiochemical responses that simulate sexual or endorphin “rushes”. And, without meaning to wander into cynicism, my own experience as a conflict practitioner suggests that these dynamics are not uncommon. There are numerous examples of individuals who seem to “groove” on contempt, who actively seek it, and who seem to instigate others to follow suit. **Third, contempt can be very subtle and thus, hard to detect or counteract.** Not always, but often, people develop more sophisticated ways for demonstrating social superiority against an other. In work and professional settings it is rare to see colleagues using some of the extreme displays of contempt described earlier. Just as people learn to move from more extreme forms of disconfirmation (e.g., imperviousness) to less extreme forms (e.g., disqualification), they also learn to use nonverbal rather than verbal forms of contempt, and often the subtler nonverbal forms (i.e., territorial invasion rather than contempt emblems). These behaviors are difficult to confront (even if one were afforded the legitimacy to do so) because they can easily be denied as intentionally contemptuous. In certain conflict situations, this allows the target of contempt to be doubly victimized – they are insulted by the behavior and insulted by the inability to “call” or claim the behavior for necessary reparation. **Fourth, contempt displays are often done outside of the awareness of the target of contempt.** The value of this behavior is that it allows the contemptor to build his or her sense of superiority, attempt to bond with others who may share or be susceptible to the contempt, without having to worry about confrontation with the target. While cowardly, such strategies are highly effective.

If I were to summarize my professional hopes in this area, it would be to have communication and conflict scholars and practitioners shed light on ways to prevent contempt from occurring (and prevent people from desiring to be contemptuous) and to effectively intervene to reduce enacted contempt and its social consequences in on-going conflict and community building. There are hopeful developments on both fronts that I will discuss in the last two sections. In this discussion the emphasis is on why they may be valuable rather than on the specific content of curricula or implementation techniques that are used.

### **Conflict Resolution Education and Socio-Emotional Learning**

The hope of conflict resolution educators is that CRE and SEL programs will help develop constructive climates in schools and communities that will reinforce the use of respectful, constructive conflict management behavior. The theoretical link to contempt is a bit circuitous, but I'll try and keep it brief. The crux of the argument is that enhanced cognitive and affective perspective-taking decreases the tendencies for negative emotion, aggressive tendency, and destructive conflict that often ensues. Basically, if I can understand things from your intellectual and emotional point of view, I should be less willing to inflict harm on you. As scholars of conflict realize, there is a very long and very rich theoretical and research literature on the importance of perspective-taking. I will summarize some of that here (and suggest that others interested in the basic idea of perspective-taking visit the extremely valuable extant theory and research that is often not well represented in more "practice" oriented conflict publications).

Of course, a key component of social problem-solving is the ability to take the role of the other. Also referred to as cognitive perspective taking, this ability has been presented as the core of collaborative problem-solving or negotiation strategies in interpersonal conflict (Selman, 1980, 1986). Selman also makes a very strong link between emotional perspective taking and cognitive perspective-taking. In this model enhancing emotional perspective taking is hypothesized to increase cognitive perspective taking and related social problem-solving skills.

Social problem-solving has received considerable attention from aggression researchers and scholars interested in violence prevention. As Guerra and Slaby (1990) argue, deficits in social problem-solving skills have been linked to childhood aggression. Aggressive children are more likely to believe that aggression is all right, that aggression will lead to positive outcomes, that aggression will reduce aversive treatment by others, that aggression is a legitimate response, and that aggression does not lead to suffering by the victim.

Guerra and Slaby (1990) and several others (Aber et al., 1999; Jones et al, 1997; Lane-Garon, 1998; Sandy & Cochrane, 1999) have found that conflict resolution education programs are effective in increasing children's perspective-taking, decreasing children's aggressive orientations and aggressive behaviors.

From my point of view, an even more important link is found in the theory on emotional competence and emotional development. If one develops emotional competence, it is assumed that one also develops emotional perspective taking. If one can and does engage in emotional perspective taking, it is less likely that one can and should be willing to be contemptuous of or show contempt to another. Hence, the issue of emotional competence is critical. SEL programs are targeted at helping children develop emotional competence.

Saarni (1988) defines emotional competence “. . . as the demonstration of self-efficacy in the context of emotion-eliciting social transactions (pp. 117-118).” The theoretical traditions of emotional intelligence, emotion regulation and emotional competence share common foci on a child’s ability to be emotionally aware, to appreciate the emotional experience of others, to understand the context of emotional experience and action, and to strategically enact emotion in social interaction. These commonalities form the basis for the four defining principles of emotional competence (Bodtger, 1997). Emotional Awareness involves the ability to detect emotional states in both self and others. Emotional self-awareness facilitates the recognition and understanding of other’s emotional states (Saarni & Harris, 1989) and the enables one to infer the other’s motivation for the emotional state (Thompson, 1989). Other awareness consists of decoding skill or the ability to identify emotions by others based on expressive cues. Emotional Perspective Taking is the ability to recognize the emotional experience of the other and to understand that emotional experience from the others’ point of view. Emotional perspective taking is conceptually distinct from cognitive perspective taking, although in action each is highly related and both are critical for social perspective coordination, or the ability to attune appropriately in interaction with others (Selman, 1980, 1986). Cultural Understanding refers to both the ability to appropriately follow display rules that prescribe emotional expression and to understand that different emotional cultures operate with different display rules. Cultural understanding represents an extension of perspective taking in that it requires being aware that situations may not elicit the same emotions in others, and that people may experience emotion differently. Strategic Expression involves what Saarni (1990) calls "self-efficacy" in the course of emotion eliciting events--the ability to regulate one's emotional experience and expression in adaptive and beneficial ways. Strategic expression requires that one can control their emotional expression, which may involve the ability to control impulses and/or delay gratification.

In her newest book, Carolyn Saarni (1999) succinctly summarizes the relationship between conflict resolution education and social emotional learning and counteracting contempt and its negative effects. She argues that emotional development is inseparable from moral and social development:

In terms of emotional competence, empathic responsiveness may be one of the most significant components for promoting social bonds among people and fostering prosocial behavior. Without empathy as a component of emotional competence, one could conceivably demonstrate all of the other “skills” of emotional competence in a Machiavellian or even sociopathic fashion. . . . Empathy has also been referred to as one of the moral emotions . . . The moral stance taken when we feel empathy (or guilt) upon witnessing another’s distress is

a felt sense of personal responsibility to ameliorate that person's distress. (pp. 162-163)

Both CRE and SEL efforts are prevention rather than cure. Their aim is to increase emotional competence and social problem-solving in children so they never become seduced by contempt. But, there are many things about this process that we do not understand and that would be served by practical theory.

One of the projects I referred to earlier, the National Curriculum Integration Project, has been attempting to infuse integrated CRE and SEL efforts in middle school environments. In our first year, dedicated to helping teachers "build the container" or create a safe learning community within their classrooms, we have discovered the needs for theory that "co-evolves with both the abilities of its practitioners and the consequences of its use, thus forming a tradition of practice." What we have learned, and have been disturbed by, is that many students do not have any concept of community or its enactment. We have learned that the initial stages in "building the container" are having dialogues about what community is and might be; how community serves and constrains. We have learned that teachers must create practices of classroom community that do not exist in the school ideology or the educational infrastructure that prepared them as teachers. And we have learned that that same school ideology and educational infrastructure is often highly contemptuous of those teachers' attempts. This is just one small example of where I believe practical theory would contribute a grammar of practice that is sorely needed.

And, in a broader sense, the goal of CRE and SEL, to create emotional competence, requires an approach that illuminates the ways in which emotional competence is enacted. Although there are several SEL curricula that are excellent (e.g., the PATHS, Second Step, and Self-Science curricula) they depend upon highly sensitive teachers to be able to appreciate and communicate the emotional feeling rules and displays rules in a given context. For, as the definition of emotional competence underscores, it is a "situated" competence rather than an abstract one. It is also an ever-changing, indeterminate competence rather than an absolute and finite one. Thus, to teach it, learn it, enact it, understand it, and/or study it, requires a commitment to its nature. Practical theory seems to offer that.

### **Dialogue Processes**

Let me very briefly turn my attention to the role that dialogue processes may play in dealing with contempt. And, let me clarify from the outset that I have had limited experience with the dialogue models that others here have a great deal of experience with. As a result, instead of critiquing those models per se, I raise questions about them given my experiences.

In their discussion of moral conflict, Pearce and Littlejohn (1997) suggest that new ways of communication can be found to deal with moral conflict and propose dialogue models as key possibilities. They stress that they are not seeking techniques to "smooth" or make

nice, but to allow substantive dialogue. They characterize parties enjoined in moral conflict as “compelled by its highest and best motives to act in ways that are repugnant to the other (p.7)”. They seem to acknowledge that often, but not always, dialogue processes are used in heated moral conflicts in which one or both sides are to some extent contemptuous of the other.

The best hope to overcome moral conflict is transcendent discourse that requires that we deconstruct not only the opponent’s moral order but also our own. They state that “when we enter dialogue, we risk being changed” (p. 161). And, suggest that models of dialogue may be effective for moral conflict because they can move from suasive discourse to discovery that encourages parties to question their own moral order. They quote Hill (1991, p.161) who refers to such discourse as a conversation of respect:

Conversations of respect between diverse communities are characterized by intellectual reciprocity. They are ones in which the participants expect to learn from each other, expect to learn non-incidental things, expect to change at least intellectually as a result of the encounter. . . .In such conversations, one does not presume that the relationship is one of teacher to student. . . of parent to child, of developed to underdeveloped.

If the links to contempt are not yet clear, they even end their chapter on transcendent discourse by stating that “it can change contempt into respect” (p. 162).

The questions about the ability of dialogue models to sufficiently address contempt stem largely from my experiences with the South Africa project (although they have been fueled by experiences in other projects and particularly in witnessing intense conflicts among professional colleagues).

It seems that dialogue models make certain assumptions that limit their utility for the kinds of problems I have been discussing. Specifically, dialogue models focus on bringing people from relatively well defined positions (e.g. pro-life, pro-choice) who have already identified as a member of that group to have dialogue with others from the “other side”. These processes assume: (1) that participants are willing to dialogue, (2) that they are willing to communicate respectfully in the facilitated process, (3) that they have the skills to communicate respectfully (e.g., to listen, to articulate without verbal aggression), and (4) depending on the dialogue model, are willing to share personal experiences that inform the other about their individual orientation to the issues from their life experience.

In my experience these are significant assumptions. Again, referring only to the South Africa project for the moment, it was clear that we could have had a dialogue process in initial, middle or late stages of the 18 month project. But, I am convinced that even at the end of the project, the participants would not have been willing to openly and honestly dialogue about the basic institutionalized contempt based on race and ethnicity that permeated their life experience and impacted the group project. I am not arguing that they would not have made (or did not make) progress. However, participants in the project who were most contemptuous of others (but only privately in “aside” comments), never

gained the motivation to address their own moral order and the contempt that they enacted because of it. Perhaps a certain technique, or longer-term effort would have been successful. If so, I am interested in understanding, **“How do you motivate one who is contemptuous to engage in dialogue process? And “How do you structure the process so that their participation will be honest rather than manipulative?”**

Considering these assumptions in terms of youth conflict in school-based settings, I am also skeptical about the assumption concerning the necessary skills to engage in respectful dialogue. I am not trying to insult our youth, but after working with a couple of hundred schools, I have a sense that the most contemptuous students, those most engaged in protracted intergroup conflict, are often not good communicators. They find it difficult to express their ideas, concerns, and experiences; one of the reasons that other scholars suggest they are so likely to resort to other-denigration and aggression. **“How do you prepare participants so they have skills necessary for effective dialogue?” “Is/should this process logically linked with other CRE efforts?”**

Most processes also assume that dialogues are “events” that happen between “groups” that are already self-identified” and that they are “one-shot or short-term”. Dialogue is not understood as an on-going feature of interaction between the groups (at least not as usually described in the literature). And, most of the dialogue models assume there is a “problem” or “issue” to be dealt with other than the simply relational issue of contempt or dislike. **“Does dialogue work when the conflict concerns pure contempt, i.e., the “issue” is your inferiority?”**

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