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Constructing contempt
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Abstract:	The authors argue that contempt is a natural kind and that its experience cannot be explained by a constructionist account of emotion. We dispute these claims, and offer a positive constructionist model of contempt that accounts for the existing evidence and unifies conflicting findings in the literature on contempt.

Commentary on Gervais & Fessler

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"Constructing Contempt"

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Abstract

The authors argue that contempt is a natural kind and that its experience cannot be explained by a constructionist account of emotion. We dispute these claims, and offer a positive constructionist model of contempt that accounts for the existing evidence and unifies conflicting findings in the literature on contempt.

Constructing contempt

Gervais & Fessler characterize contempt as a "sentiment" to account for inconsistent findings on contempt as a basic emotion. They claim constructionism, an alternative to basic emotions approaches, cannot account for contempt findings. We suggest that "sentiments" sound a lot like basic emotions as natural kinds, a theoretical approach that has been heavily criticized. Moreover, Gervais & Fessler misunderstand constructionism, which parsimoniously accounts for the messy literature on contempt.

Despite claiming that contempt is not a basic emotion, Gervais & Fessler use basic emotion theory terms (e.g., Ekman & Cordaro, 2011; Izard, 2011; Panksepp, 2011) to define sentiments: "as with emotions, each sentiment likely has a distinct evolutionary history and taxonomic distribution ... as well as partially dissociable neural bases […] corresponding to distinct social-relational affordances" (pp. 26-27).

As in basic emotions approaches, Gervais & Fessler define contempt as a natural kind. A natural kind is a non-arbitrary collection of natural phenomena or properties existing independent of human observation (e.g., chemical elements, Mill, 1884). However, growing evidence suggests that emotions are not natural kinds. Emotion categories

have neither consistent nor specific outcomes making them biologically distinct from one another (Barrett, 2006; Mauss & Robinson, 2009; Kreibig, 2010; Lindquist et al., 2012; Vytal & Hamann, 2010; Wager et al., 2015). Contempt is no exception.

Contempt lacks consistency and specificity. People fail to consistently identify facial expressions as contempt; the label "contempt" is used to categorize posed facial portrayals of contempt at or below chance (Izard & Haynes, 1988; Wagner, 2000). Instead, facial muscle movements are not specific to contempt—people categorize them as disgust (Haidt & Keltner, 1999; Russell, 1991; Russell, Suzuki, & Ishida, 1993) or annoyance (Alvarado, 1996) depending on context. Although some studies find that people associated a unilateral lip-curl with contempt (Matsumoto & Ekman, 1988), this only occurs in forced choice designs involving direct comparisons between prescribed categories.   In fact, prototypically contemptuous facial expressions are not universally perceived as contemptuous (Heuer et al., 2010; Russell, 1991). Additionally, predicted correspondences between specific antecedent events (e.g., violations of community norms) and contempt are not upheld (Rozin et al., 1999). The evidence for the existence of contempt as a natural kind is so in question that even proponents of natural kinds views of emotions admit contempt is less likely to qualify as such (Haidt & Graham, 2016; Rosenberg & Ekman, 1995).

If contempt is not a natural kind, then what is it? We suggest it is a constructed experience, like all emotions and mental states (Barrett, 2009; Clore & Ortony, 2013; Cunningham, Dunfield, & Stillman, 2013; Lindquist, 2013; Russell, 2003). Rather than

arising from discrete mechanisms with domain-specific functions, constructionism suggests that distinct mental states are the emergent product of domain-general ingredients including core affect and conceptual knowledge (Barrett, 2013; Cameron, Lindquist, & Gray, 2015; Lindquist, 2013; Russell, 2003). These ingredients combine in different ways to produce different mental products. For example, just as the same combination of ingredients can create a sugary cake or a savory biscuit, different combinations of core affect and conceptual knowledge can construct different emotions.

Gervais & Fessler dismiss constructionism as a theoretical framework for understanding contempt, but their argument is based on a misunderstanding of constructionism. The authors wrongly claim that a constructionist view predicts that "a word such as 'contempt' is necessary to anchor…features categorized as a specific emotion" (p. 19) pointing to evidence in which people experience contempt without linguistic prompts (Fridhandler & Averill, 1982; Matsumoto & Ekman, 2004; Rozin et al., 1999). However, this is a misunderstanding; constructionism hypothesizes that *most* instances of emotion are experienced in the absence of an explicit linguistic prompt—little of daily life involves explicitly labeling experiences. Instead, a constructionist view predicts that language plays a covert role in emotion insofar as it implicitly helps people acquire, organize, and use emotion concept knowledge during online categorization (Lindquist & Gendron, 2013; Lindquist et al., 2015a, b).

Constructionism predicts that a person experiences a specific emotion concept (e.g., contempt) when she draws on her rich cache of conceptual knowledge about that

category. Conceptual knowledge of "contempt" consists of past internal feelings in situations categorized as contempt, as well as past motor representations of behaviors, sensory representations of situations, and cultural knowledge about what it means to experience contempt. These diverse sensorimotor representations are partly united by the word "contempt" because contempt is *not* a natural kind with strong perceptual regularities uniting members of the category (Lindquist et al., 2015a, b). Unbeknownst to human observers, words cohere this category information and facilitate its accessibility during online perception (Lupyan, 2012; Lindquist et al., 2015a, b; Vigliocco et al., 2009). People can still experience contempt in the absence of explicit emotion words, but emotions are disrupted when implicit access to emotion words is impaired (Gendron et al., 2012; Lindquist et al., 2006, 2014).

In sum, constructionism accounts for the "messy" data on contempt more parsimoniously than the authors' model, suggesting domain-general processes underlie emotion rather than many discrete, local mechanisms. This converges with neuroscientific evidence suggesting domain-general neural networks are implicated in many different mental states besides the emotional (Barrett & Satpute, 2013; Cushman & Young, 2011; Lindquist & Barrett, 2012; Shenhav & Greene, 2010). Additionally, constructionism generates novel predictions about contempt: people with more fine-grained conceptual knowledge about emotions (Lindquist & Barrett, 2008) may be more likely to construct contempt as opposed to anger or disgust out of diffuse core affect. This suggests, contrary to Gervais & Fessler's claims, the experience of contempt may

vary across persons within the same situation, and within the same person across situations.

If the authors make a mistake, it is placing too much emphasis on the meaning of words. The lack of a verbal label in an experiment doesn't invalidate constructionism. And a new label of contempt—as a "sentiment"—doesn't make this argument different from old natural kinds claims about emotions. Words have power, but we shouldn't confuse our labels with the essence underneath—especially when that essence may not exist.

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