

Contradictions in the Study of Contempt: What's It All About? Reply to Russell

Paul Ekman¹

University of California, San Francisco

Maureen O'Sullivan

University of San Francisco

David Matsumoto

San Francisco State University

A number of methodological problems make it difficult to draw any conclusions from Russell's studies of contempt, including a task which may maximize the influence of unfamiliarity with the task, and instructions which may encourage observers to rate many rather than few emotions. We raise questions also about ecological validity, and the appropriateness of using still photographs to study the influence of context on the judgments of emotion.

We agree that many factors may influence the inferences observers make when viewing a facial expression. It is evident by examining differences obtained in Russell's various studies, and from our findings as well, that still photographs of a unilateral tightening of the lip corner is judged as contempt under one circumstance and not under another. Observers do infer contempt if they make that judgement when judging many different expressions, and when given a choice of at least seven different emotions, including both positive and negative terms. Observers are more likely to infer disgust than contempt if they are shown only one or two photographs. What are we to make of this?

¹Address all correspondence to Paul Ekman, Human Interaction Laboratory, University of California, 401 Parnassus, San Francisco, California 94143.

First let us consider two possible methodological problems in Russell's series of experiments. In the first experiment Russell gave his subjects only one photograph and asked them "to describe the emotion expressed with whatever single label they chose". While this procedure has the virtue of seeing how people freely label photographs of expression when they have not had prior exposure to other photographs, it may have the disadvantage of maximizing the influence of task unfamiliarity on the results. The fact that nearly one-third of the responses were completely idiosyncratic suggests the possibility that his subjects might have been confused about what was expected of them. In our early studies (Ekman, 1972) we found unreliability in initial responses when subjects had to judge expressions. For that reason we have since always thoroughly explained the task and then encouraged subjects to ask questions about the task before proceeding. Even if some subjects might still have been uncertain after we answered their questions, this probably had little influence on our results, as we have found that subjects better understand what is expected of them after trying it a few times. Typically we collect judgments on 30 or more photographs, not on one or two, and the effect of possible confusions on initial responses does not count for much.

A different problem may have occurred in the second experiment and in a number of Russell's (1991a) other recent studies of contempt in which he had his subjects "rate the degree to which the face shown expressed each of six emotions," rating *each* emotion on a 4-point intensity scale. Wedding this judgment task with a design in which the subject sees only one or two photographs, intended to depict only one or two different emotions, may create demand characteristics to rate many rather than few emotions. Otherwise why would the experimenter have given them so many different labels when they are seeing only one or two expressions? When we use the multiple-emotion rating procedure we show the subjects many photographs. Our subjects may develop a different set, believing that many labels are provided because many faces are to be judged, and thus may not be implicitly encouraged to use many labels on each photograph.

Even if we dismiss these possible design problems, we regard the differences between Russell's findings and ours as trivial for the following reasons. First, the problem may be limited only to the English language. Our findings have been replicated in many cultures and languages; Russell has only studied English speakers in North America. It may be that in English the lexical distinction between disgust and contempt is less clear than it is in most other languages. Such an interpretation would be consistent with our finding that there is higher agreement about contempt judgments in a number of other languages than we have found for English speakers (Ekman, O'Sullivan and Matsumoto, 1991). Second, Russell has not deter-

mined whether his results are specific to contempt or common to other emotions. Third, his procedure—each person sees one or two faces—has less claim to ecological validity than our procedure—each person sees many different expressions in many different contexts. While neither of our designs can claim to be very similar to actual life, certainly seeing many different expressions is a bit more life-like than forming impressions about one or two isolated expressions. Fourth, we believe the use of still photographs—even multiple expressions as we have done—to study the issue of how context influences observers' inferences is too artificial to learn much of value. Most of our inferences are drawn from seeing moving faces not static ones, attached to bodies not disembodied, with sound and words coming out of the mouth not silent, and with observers having information or expectations about the situation in which the expression occurs. It is quite possible to utilize videotape to manipulate many of those contextual variables and measure their influences on observers' inferences. We and others (Berry, 1991; Bugental, 1986; Ekman, Friesen, O'Sullivan and Scherer, 1980) have done such work. Russell (1991b) terms such work the study of the expresser's context, and says that he instead is interested in the variables other than the expresser which affect the observer, what he terms the judgment context. Granted his interest, we still believe it would be far preferable to utilize more realistic, robust stimuli than still photographs. It is not that we believe still photographs are useless—we continue to use them to answer such questions as whether the apex of an expression can elicit agreement across a group of observers—but we think it is the wrong medium to address the more complex social psychological questions which Russell focuses upon.

Russell believes he has established the importance of the observers' context on the judgment of facial expressions of emotions. We think he has failed to demonstrate this because of design flaws, and because the use of still photographs to represent expression and to manipulate context has little relevance to important issues in the social psychology of interpersonal perception. We hope in the future Russell examines these important questions in more robust instantiations of the phenomenon.

REFERENCES

- Berry, D. S. (1991). Accuracy in social perception: Contributions of facial and vocal information. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61, 298-307.
- Bugental, D. (1986). Unmasking the "polite smile": Situational and personal determinants of managed affect in adult-child interaction. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 12, 7-16.
- Ekman, P. (1972). Universal and cultural differences in facial expressions of emotion. In J. Cole (Ed.), *Nebraska symposium on motivation, 1971* (pp. 207-283) Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

- Ekman, P., Friesen, W. V., O'Sullivan, M., & Scherer, K. (1980). Relative importance of face, body and speech in judgments of personality and affect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 38*, 270-277.
- Ekman, P., O'Sullivan, M., & Matsumoto, D. (1991). Confusions about context in the judgment of facial expressions: A reply to "The contempt expression and the relativity thesis." *Motivation and Emotion, 15*, 169-176.
- Russell, J. A. (1991a). The contempt expression and the relativity thesis. *Motivation and Emotion, 15*, 149-168.
- Russell, J. A. (1991b). Rejoinder to Ekman, O'Sullivan, and Matsumoto. *Motivation and Emotion, 15*, 177-184.