



An experimental investigation into perceptions of disrespect during interpersonal conflict



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ABSTRACT

Perceptions of disrespect are central to everyday life. Despite the importance of disrespect across various social arenas, prior research has failed to empirically examine the factors influencing these perceptions. This problem is magnified when considering that perceptions or disrespect may vary across individuals and social situations alike. Drawing from theories of social geometry and symbolic interaction, this study examines the individual and situational characteristics that inform perceptions of disrespect. Using factorial vignettes, and a large sample of students, respondents were asked to assess actors in various conflicts. Results from a series of hierarchical linear models show that perceptions of disrespect vary across individuals. The content of situations appears to drive perceptions of disrespect more than individual characteristics. Implications for future research on disrespect are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Respect, fairness, and equality of treatment are normative, desired elements of everyday life (Tyler, 2006). These abstract concepts guide norms of interpersonal conduct, which individuals follow and expect reciprocated in social interactions (Carter, 1998; Elias and Jephcott, 1982; Gouldner, 1960). Violating these norms is likely to evoke perceptions of disrespect (Miller, 2001). The notion of disrespect is endemic to social relations, and perceptions of disrespect carry severe consequences. Strain and subcultural theories suggest disrespect removes valued elements of an individual's identity and prompts violence (Agnew, 2006; Anderson, 1999). Procedural justice and defiance theories posit disrespectful treatment to reduce institutional legitimacy and compliance with the law (Sherman, 1993; Tyler, 2006). These perceptions extend beyond laws and violence to assessments of medical care (Lacy et al., 2004), education (Lickona, 1996), and personal relationships (Rosenblatt et al., 1979). In short, perceptions of disrespect are a salient part of everyday life, shaping how individuals engage social institutions and one another.

Despite its relevance to these diverse social arenas, critical questions about disrespect remain unanswered. Prior accounts of disrespect have been descriptive in nature (e.g., Jacobs and Wright, 2006). Consequently, research has yet to identify whether perceptions of disrespect vary across individuals and situations, and what elements of situations inform these perceptions (Shwalb and Shwalb, 2006). We thus ask: are perceptions of disrespect uniform or are they personally and situationally contingent? To better understand perceptions of disrespect, it is necessary to parse out the elements of

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situations that may color perceptions. Divergent approaches to situations emphasize either their structure or content. We draw on two theories, social geometry and symbolic interaction, to hypothesize the factors influencing individuals' perceptions of disrespect. Social geometry (Black, 1998; Cooney, 1998) highlights situational characteristics like relational differences among actors and the presence of third parties in conflicts. Symbolic interaction (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959) focuses on subjective elements, like situational settings and content, and their influence on perceptions. Both theories also recognize that individuals import personal characteristics into situations. These characteristics may moderate the influence of situational elements on perceptions of disrespect (Short, 1998).

The present study examines social features influencing individuals' perceptions of disrespect during interpersonal conflicts. Using experimental data from a sizable sample of undergraduate students at a large southwestern university, we ask two research questions: (1) do individuals differentially perceive disrespect?, and (2) what characteristics influence these perceptions? Through a series of factorial vignettes (Rossi and Anderson, 1982), respondents rated how disrespectful two actors—an instigator and a recipient—were in various social situations. To assess perceptions of disrespect, we use hierarchical linear models incorporating random intercepts, nesting vignettes within respondents (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). In doing so, we are able to more closely identify the features of social life which influence these perceptions. As research on disrespect has so far been descriptive in nature, empirically unpacking the influence of these characteristics on perceptions of disrespect is an important next step for this literature. We begin by elaborating on the concept of disrespect and the theoretical perspectives that inform our study.

2. Theoretical perspectives for understanding perceptions of disrespect

Disrespect refers to degradations of the self or others within social space (Honneth, 1992; Miller, 2001). Past accounts suggest three necessary components for disrespect to be perceived: (1) an interaction or lack thereof (2) between two or more parties, (3) and violations of conduct norms, experienced or observed directly or vicariously (Anderson, 1999; Miller, 2001). Hence, disrespect reflects perceived violations of expectations of interpersonal behavior, interaction rituals, or challenges to individuals' social standing (Collins, 2008; Gould, 2003; Martin et al., 2012). Activities ranging from malicious gossip and rumor to direct insults and confrontations over property and persons are all potentially disrespectful. Conceived of this way, disrespect moves beyond “honor cultures” into everyday lives (Collins, 2008; Goffman, 1959). Consider this quote from one incarcerated offender:

‘Right, some geezer pulled a glass bottle on me, he smashed it and said he was going to do me with it, yeah, so I said “Alright, hold up I’ll be back in a minute”...So I went and got a broomstick...I’m ready for combat...It was all over a banana. I used to be giving out the bananas [in the prison cafeteria], yeah, and...he had been given a banana with a bruise on it’ (Butler and Maruna, 2009; 235).

While this scenario may not be perceived as disrespectful by many outside observers, it highlights a number of situational elements that might influence such perceptions: relational differences (prisoner v. cafeteria worker), age differences, a setting (prison) where status is tenuous, gender, and interactional dynamics. These elements reflect the structure (where, when, who) and content (what) of situations (Birkbeck and LaFree, 1993; Stebbins, 1972, 1981), and the characteristics individuals bring to situations. We draw from social geometry and symbolic interaction theories to better understand the influences on perceptions of disrespect.

2.1. Social geometry

Social geometry emphasizes structural dimensions of situations as an explanation for behavior (Black, 1998). Accounts of disrespect implicitly invoke social geometry, such as doctor–patient and police officer–civilian relations (Warren, 2011; Wofford et al., 2004). One element of social situations is relational distance, or the intimacy between actors. As relational distance between actors increases, so too does the likelihood of experiencing social control (Black, 1998). For example, Phillips (2003) interviewed men convicted of violent interpersonal crimes. The men reported greater tolerance of aggressive or disparaging behavior from family and friends relative to acquaintances or strangers. Relational distance should similarly impact perceptions of disrespect, as different social norms exist for interactions between strangers, family, and peers (Collins, 2008: 344). Hence, greater social distance between actors should correspond to stronger perceptions of disrespect during conflicts.

A second aspect of social geometry is third party presence in situations. Third parties shape the scope and nature of violence (Cooney, 1998; Felson and Steadman, 1983; Phillips and Cooney, 2005), with their presence and behavior capable of aggravating conflict (Cooney, 1998; Copes et al., 2013; Luckenbill, 1977). The presence of third parties should similarly shape perceptions of situations, including disrespect. For instance, when offenders voice concerns about public displays of disrespect, they are concerned about the presence of third parties. Third parties to a situation witness disrespect and judge the actors within those situations, thereby impacting reputations and likely magnifying social tensions (Anderson, 1999; Collins, 2008). Thus, an increased presence of third parties should result in stronger perceptions of disrespect.

Social geometry offers a good starting point for identifying aspects of situations that may influence perceptions of disrespect, but it downplays the subjective salience of behavior within situations. By this, we mean that social geometry focuses only the conditions under which social control will be enacted for comparable behaviors. Perceptions of disrespect

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