

Edge

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2013 : WHAT *SHOULD* WE BE WORRIED ABOUT?

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[Jessica L. Tracy](#)

Associate Professor of Psychology, University of British Columbia

Unmitigated Arrogance

I worry about the recent epidemic of lying and cheating that has infected public discourse in a diversity of domains. Think of science writer Jonah Lehrer's fabrication of fairly trivial details in his non-fiction book, *Imagine: How Creativity Works*—which was subsequently pulled from shelves by its publisher. Or social psychologist Dietrich Stapel's fabrication of empirical data reported in over 50 published articles—most of which were eventually retracted by the journals. Or Lance Armstrong's many years of competitive cycling powered by illegal doping—resulting in the removal of his seven *Tour de France* victories and a lifetime banishment from the sport.

On the one hand, these problematic behaviors are each the result of a distinct technological advance or shift in the social climate. The current mass appeal of social psychology and social-science lit created a high pay-off for smart and creative people like Lehrer and Stapel, who were able to attain a level of fame from writing social science that was, until recently, inconceivable. And Armstrong was lucky (or unlucky) enough to come of age in cycling at the same time that blood doping technology became largely undetectable.

But these changes in science marketing and mass appeal, and blood doping techniques, are only the local causes of this epidemic. There is also a broader, deeper, psychological cause, and it is far from a recent development; it has been part of human nature throughout evolutionary history. The psychological mechanism that motivates and facilitates these corrupt behaviors is *hubristic pride*—the emotional feeling of arrogance, egotism, and superiority that drives people to brag, lie, cheat, and bully others to get ahead.

Hubristic pride is distinct from the more triumphant and confident authentic pride felt in well-earned achievements. While authentic pride motivates hard work, persistence, and empathic concern for others, hubristic pride motivates hostility, aggression, intimidation, and prejudice. And this makes sense, because feeling hubristically proud does not mean feeling genuinely good about oneself; it is not a true sense of self-worth. Instead, hubristic pride involves inflated, inauthentic, and superficial feelings of grandiosity, which are used strategically and defensively to compensate for deep-seated, often unconscious, insecurities. People who frequently feel hubristic pride are narcissistic, but have low self-esteem and a proneness to shame. Their arrogance is their way of coping with, and keeping hidden, their partially suppressed self-doubts. And, because any kind of pride feels so much better than shame, those who are prone to feeling hubristic pride seek to maintain it at any cost. This means constantly finding new ways of self-promoting, self-enhancing, and derogating others. Like a drug, hubristic pride makes getting ahead feel essential, as it is the only way to keep those

insecurities at bay. But the insecurities still occasionally bubble to the surface of awareness, reminding the hubristically pride-prone that they are not good enough, smart enough, or fast enough, and leaving them with no option but to go beyond what they can achieve on their own. They use force, aggression, lying, and cheating to maintain the power and pride they have come to depend on. And, as a side effect, hubristic pride makes them feel invincible, convincing them that they can get away with their abhorrent behaviors.

The evolved desire to feel hubristic pride, which underlies the universal human motivation to climb the social hierarchy, is not a new development. What is new is that the bullies who feel it have a literal bully pulpit. Lehrer and Stapel were not the first writers or scientists to seek fame, but they were working in a new climate where science and science writing are a viable means of attaining fame. As for Lance, it's fair to say that by coming back from a near fatal cancer to win the world's most difficult race *seven times*, he became the first professional cyclist to achieve the same name recognition as a movie star.

What is the solution to my worry? Ideally, institutions will develop better technologies to catch liars and cheaters, and will enforce more severe penalties against them, so that the risk-to-payoff balance tilts in the other direction. But, there may be another solution, too. We cannot stop people from feeling hubristic pride; it is part of our human nature, and, given that power provides financial and reproductive benefits, it is evolutionarily adaptive. But we can become alert to this emotion's presence and pitfalls, and catch it earlier. It is not hard to recognize arrogance; research from my lab has found that people very quickly and accurately identify the most dominant members of their social group—the ones who feel the most hubristic pride. What's more difficult is avoiding falling prey to these individuals' manipulative influence; calling them out instead of granting them power. Is this even possible? Perhaps, but only if we start questioning the success stories that feel too good to be true. This means sacrificing the collective pride we feel when we bask in the apparent accomplishments, and even brash arrogance, of our cultural heroes. By encouraging, or at least enabling, others' arrogance, we nurture the pride that can lead to large-scale deception and even crime, and further increase the gap between true accomplishments and just rewards.

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