

In press, *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*

The psychological structure, social consequences, function, and expression of pride experiences

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Abstract

Pride is a positively valenced emotion that occurs in response to success and is comprised of two distinct facets: authentic pride, characterized by feelings of accomplishment and confidence; and hubristic pride, characterized by feelings of arrogance and conceit. The two facets diverge in their associations with a range of personality traits and social consequences, but they share a nonverbal expression and evolutionary function. Specifically, both pride facets facilitate the attainment of social rank, but in notably different ways: authentic pride motivates hard work to get ahead, whereas hubristic pride is associated with more antisocial and dishonest means to high status. In closing, we discuss how knowledge of pride can inform research into other positive emotions.

What made you get out of bed this morning? Perhaps you felt energized by the morning sunshine, and simply could not resist throwing off the covers and jumping up to face the day, but, more realistically, you probably woke to a loud, persistent alarm and immediately remembered a long list of goals you hoped to accomplish. You might have been motivated to achieve these goals by a range of emotions, such as fear of disappointing your boss, or excitement about pursuing a personal passion. Indeed, individuals vary in the motivations that push them to attain their goals and the emotions that underlie those motivations. However, there is one emotion and corresponding motivation that seems to be widely shared by humans and to promote the attainment of a vast range of goals: pride, and the desire to feel it (Tracy, Mercadante, Witkower, & Cheng, 2020).

Pride is the emotional response to internally attributed success in a valued domain (Tracy & Robins, 2004a). Yet despite this fairly simple definition, pride experiences are often very different from each other. This highlights a unique feature of this emotion: it is not just one thing.

Psychological structure of pride. Research on the structure of pride has distinguished between two facets, most frequently referred to as authentic and hubristic pride (Lewis 2000; Miceli, Castelfranchi, & Pocobello, 2017; Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1989; Tracy & Robins, 2007). Authentic pride is characterized by feelings of accomplishment and confidence, and typically stems from successes attributed to controllable and unstable causes (e.g., effort). It is the generally prosocial facet of pride that people feel in response to hard-earned successes and moral behaviors. In contrast, hubristic pride is characterized by feelings of arrogance and egotism, stems from successes attributed to uncontrollable and stable causes (e.g., natural talent), and is the more anti-social facet – evidenced by trait-level associations with a range of

problematic outcomes including aggression, lying, and misbehavior (Bureau, Vallerand, Ntoumanis, & Lafrenière, 2013; Tracy, Cheng, Robins, & Trzesniewski, 2009).

At the trait-level, people high in authentic pride demonstrate adaptive personality profiles marked by high levels of Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Openness to Experience, whereas hubristically proud individuals tend to be low in both Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (Tracy & Robins, 2007). Those high in authentic pride also tend to have high self-esteem and psychological well-being, whereas those high in hubristic pride have low self-esteem, are typically narcissistic and prone to shame, and more likely to suffer from anxiety and other psychopathologies (Tracy et al., 2009).

Importantly, mixed findings have emerged regarding the attributional antecedents of authentic and hubristic pride (Dickens & Robins, 2020; Holbrook, Piazza, & Fessler, 2014), and this has led several scholars to propose that the critical distinction between authentic and hubristic pride, at least as measured by the Authentic and Hubristic Pride Scales (Tracy & Robins, 2007), is not an attributional one. Holbrook and colleagues (2014) further assert that hubristic pride may not represent a distinct form of pride, but rather a self-judgment that one's feelings of pride are excessive and unwarranted. Although it is possible that those who report high levels of hubristic pride are critically judging themselves for feeling the relevant socially undesirable items, like egotistical and arrogant, Holbrook and colleagues' (2014) findings do not provide any empirical support for this claim. To support their suggestion, studies would need to show that those who report hubristic pride also indicate that they feel badly about themselves for those feelings, and that they do *not* in fact feel the feelings they have endorsed on the hubristic pride scale (i.e., a participant would need to indicate something along the lines of, "I endorsed the item 'arrogant' because I don't like my arrogance, but not because I actually felt arrogant.")

More broadly, the empirical critiques that have been brought against the two-facet model of pride thus far speak to only one component of the original model—a component that may, in fact, need amending. Setting their attributional findings aside, the majority of Holbrook and colleagues' (2014) account of the two facets is consistent with the Tracy and Robins' (2007) model. These authors agree that pride is not a unitary construct; it is likely comprised of two facets with distinct but related evolutionary origins (see section titled *Function* below).

Social Consequences. Not only do the two facets of pride differ in elicitors, subjective feelings, and associated personality profiles, they also result in notably different social consequences (Tracy et al., 2020; see Table 1). A trait-like tendency to feel authentic pride has been linked to numerous adaptive outcomes such as creativity (Damian & Robins, 2012), authenticity, low aggression, healthy relationships (Tracy et al., 2009), adaptive responses to negative evaluations (Dickens & Robins, 2020), ethical leadership (Michie, 2009; Sanders, Wisse, Yperen, & Rus, 2018), and a prestigious reputation in one's community (Cheng, Tracy, & Henrich, 2010). In contrast, a trait-like tendency to feel hubristic pride is associated with inauthenticity, aggression, problematic relationships (Tracy et al., 2009), fear of negative evaluations, envy (Dickens & Robins, 2020), and a dominant reputation in one's community (Cheng et al., 2010).

Function. Functionalist theories argue that every distinct emotion evolved to serve a distinct function ultimately relevant to humans' survival and reproduction (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007; Nesse 1990; Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Shiota et al., 2017). Pride is thought to be functional by promoting behaviors that advance one's social status, thereby helping individuals attain the fitness benefits that come with high social status, such as increased

influence, power, access to resources, and social alliances (Bolló, Bóthe, Tóth-Király, & Orosz, 2018; Cohen, Chun, & Sznycer, 2020; Sznycer et al., 2017).

The specific behaviors used to advance social rank, however, vary between the two facets of pride. People intentionally try to feel authentic pride in demanding situations (Weidman & Kross, 2020), suggesting that it may facilitate effort. This finding is consistent with research showing that generalized pride experiences (i.e., not specifically assessed as authentic or hubristic) increase effort, persistence, and motivation to work hard during challenging tasks (Sigall & Gould, 1977; Verbeke, Belschak, & Bagozzi, 2004; Williams & Desteno, 2008; 2009). Authentic pride is also experienced in response to the successful achievement of long-term goals (Weidman, Tracy, & Elliott, 2016), suggesting that individuals may work hard in order to obtain feelings of authentic pride from personally significant achievements. At the same time, although feelings of authentic pride can enhance performance *during* a task, the experience of pride *after* success may have a downside; in this context, pride has been associated with reduced subsequent effort in the same domain (Seo & Patall, 2020). In fact, Weidman and colleagues (2016) found that students who reported *low* levels of pride in response to poor exam performance subsequently studied harder for their next exam, and performed better as a result—due to that prior absence of desired authentic pride.

In contrast, those high in hubristic pride may adopt a different strategy, leveraging their uninhibited and anti-social tendencies to advance their social rank. Hubristic pride is associated with the social rank attainment strategy of dominance, in which individuals use aggression and intimidation to elicit deference from others via fear of punishment (Cheng, Tracy, & Henrich, 2010; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Thus, the feelings of grandiosity and superiority that

constitute hubristic pride may be functional by virtue of encouraging individuals to exert dominance over others, ultimately leading to a rise in social rank.

Nonverbal Expression. Despite the numerous differences between the two facets of pride, both are communicated with the same static nonverbal expression (Tracy & Robins, 2004b). This reliably recognized pride expression includes a slight upward head tilt, small smile, expanded chest, and arms extended out from the body—either akimbo with hands on hips or raised above the head with hands in fists (see Figure 1). This expression is recognizable among a range of populations, including several small-scale traditional societies with little exposure to Western media, making it unlikely that reliable pride recognition is due to cultural learning (Tracy, Shariff, Zhao, & Henrich, 2013; see Tracy et al., 2020). Much like experiences of pride, nonverbal expressions of pride also function to enhance social status (Tracy et al., 2013). However, the effectiveness of these nonverbal displays may depend on whether observers perceive them as genuine; inauthentic or excessive displays of positive emotion after success can lead to negative social judgments and do not necessarily increase the expresser's status (Greenaway, Kalokerinos, Murphy, & McIlroy, 2018; Kalokerinos, Greenaway, Pedder, & Margetts, 2014).

Although individuals seem unable to distinguish between the two facets from viewing static posed expressions alone, other studies suggest that observers can discern each distinct facet from dynamic movements of the head and face (Lange & Crusius, 2015; Nelson & Russell, 2014). In particular, people accurately identify authentic pride from a moving expression involving “a single fist, an expanded posture, a slight smile, a gaze at the fist, and generally faster movements,” and hubristic pride from a moving expression involving “hands akimbo, an expanded posture, an asymmetric smile, directed gaze, head titled back, leaning back, and

generally slower movements” (Lange & Crusius, 2015, p. 461). Not only does this research provide new insight into the nonverbal communication of pride, it also challenges a critique of the two-facet model, which claims that evidence for a single nonverbal expression suggests that pride is unlikely to have two facets (Williams & Desteno, 2010). By providing evidence for distinguishable nonverbal displays, these findings are more consistent with the notion that each facet of pride could be a distinct “natural kind”.

What does the study of pride tell us about research on positive affect? In addition to advancing our understanding of this socially and morally important emotion, research on pride informs the study of positive affect more generally. Here, we discuss three lessons from pride research that might guide future work in this domain.

Most notably, pride is difficult to classify as either “positive” or “negative,” because of its two-facet structure. Indeed, pride’s status as a positive emotion depends to some extent on which facet of the emotion, and which emotion taxonomy, is prioritized when making this distinction. For taxonomies that stress the intrapersonal valence of the emotion (i.e., how pleasurable it feels), both authentic and hubristic pride can be considered positive (Weidman & Tracy, 2020), though authentic pride is more strongly associated with pleasant and positive affect (Tracy & Robins, 2007). Indeed, the valence of hubristic pride may more accurately be characterized as mixed; it is positively associated with both positive and negative affect, at both the state- and trait-levels (Dickens & Robins, 2020). Thus, if a positive emotion is defined on the basis of being a positive experience for the individual, authentic pride fits the bill, but it is less clear that hubristic pride does.

Similarly, hubristic pride could not be considered an unambiguously positive emotion within taxonomies that categorize positive emotions as those that facilitate the acquisition of

informational, social, or material resources (Fredrickson, 1998; Shiota et al., 2017). By promoting increases in social status (Tracy et al., 2020), both facets of pride directly help individuals acquire social resources (i.e., social rank), and, as a result, greater material resources (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; van Vugt, 2006; van Vugt & von Rueden, 2020). The two facets differ, however, in how they promote the acquisition of informational resources. Authentic pride is associated with high intrinsic motivation (Damian & Robins, 2013), self-control, and perseverance (Carver et al., 2010), all of which facilitate learning new information. Hubristic pride, in contrast, shows the opposite pattern of relationships (Carver et al., 2010; Damian & Robins, 2013), and may therefore hinder learning.

Another way to classify positive versus negative emotions is on the basis of whether they serve a pro- versus anti-social function. In this approach, positive emotions are those that motivate the experiencer to behave pro-socially, whereas negative emotions motivate the experiencer to behave antisocially. Authentic pride remains a positive emotion in this categorization, due to its many prosocial consequences, but hubristic pride would become negative, given that hubristically proud individuals demonstrate numerous anti-social behaviors (Dickens & Robins, 2020; Tracy et al., 2009; Tracy et al., 2020). In fact, perhaps the only categorization approach that places both facets of pride squarely in the positive sector is that based on approach versus avoidance motivation (Carver & White, 1994; Harmon-Jones, 2003); both facets are associated with greater reward seeking and reward sensitivity, making them clearly approach-oriented emotions (i.e., high Behavioral Activation System; Carver et al., 2010).

The association between hubristic pride and anti-social behavior also highlights an interesting truth about positive affect: emotions that feel good can make people do bad things.

Pride is a clear example of a positive emotion that may have negative interpersonal consequences, but other seemingly positive emotions might also have this effect, or, like pride, a dark variant awaiting illumination. For example, recent work found that the seemingly positive emotion of gratitude can be costly, by fostering obedience even when that means committing harm (Tong et al., 2020). Similarly, other studies have uncovered a more negative, “threat-based” variant of awe, elicited by vast, complicated, and dangerous phenomena (e.g., natural disasters; Gordon et al., 2016).

The dual-faceted nature of pride also has implications for personality, and in particular the close interplay between emotions and personality. Given that the two facets are associated with largely divergent personality profiles, individuals with different personality traits might experience a different facet of pride in response to the same situation. For example, following a promotion at work, a person with high self-esteem might feel authentic pride, but one who is narcissistic might instead feel hubristic pride. Thus, whereas previous research has tended to focus on personality traits that lead people to feel more intense or frequent positive emotions in general (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1992; Shiota et al., 2017), future work should examine how individual differences influence the discrete *kinds* of emotions that people feel.

Finally, although the large majority of emotion expression research has focused primarily on the face (Witkower & Tracy, 2019; Ekman & Oster, 1979), research on pride highlights how certain emotions require the involvement of the body for reliable recognition. Taking a cue from research on the pride expression, future work on nonverbal displays would benefit from examining the importance of features beyond the face in communicating various emotions (see Witkower & Tracy, 2019 for a review of extant evidence on the bodily communication of emotions). Furthermore, given that the two facets of pride can be reliably differentiated only

from dynamic expressions involving the face and body, future work might also examine how movement may allow for more nuanced communication of other emotions. Beyond visual cues, researchers have identified distinct and cross-culturally recognized nonverbal vocal utterances for several emotions (Sauter, Eisner, Ekman, & Scott, 2010), pointing to another important and often overlooked modality for reliable emotion communication.

In conclusion, pride is a unique emotion with a dual-faceted structure. Findings on pride raise important questions and highlight potential research directions for other positive emotions. We hope that the work reviewed here will inspire future research on pride and related emotions.

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Table 1. Correlations of Authentic and Hubristic Pride with Theoretically Related Traits and Behaviors.

Domain	Authentic Pride	Hubristic Pride
<i>Self-evaluation</i>		
Explicit Self-Esteem ^f	.50*	-.14*
Implicit Self-Esteem ^g	.26*	-.10
Self-Efficacy ^e	.62***	-.06
Narcissism ^f	.32*	.22*
Shame-Proneness ^f	-.28*	.09*
<i>Big Five Personality Factors</i>		
Extraversion ^f	.39*	.11
Agreeableness ^f	.19*	-.26*
Conscientiousness ^f	.38*	-.25*
Emotional Stability ^f	.28*	-.05
Openness ^f	.29*	.01
<i>Attributions for Success</i>		
Effort Attributions ^f	.17*	-.10*
Ability Attributions ^f	.02	.09*
<i>Interpersonal Emotions and Functioning</i>		
Authenticity ^g	.46*	-.11*
Envy ^e	.05	.27***

Fear of Negative Evaluation ^e	-.33***	.17***
Petty Crimes and Misbehaviors ^g	-.05	.20*
Aggression ^g	-.20*	.26*
Dyadic Adjustment ^g	.24*	-.11*
Prejudice ^a	-.12***	.29***
Peer-Rated Dominance ^c	.01	.36**
Peer-Rated Prestige ^c	.33*	-.01
<i>Goal Pursuit</i>		
Reward Sensitivity ^b	.27***	.21***
Punishment Sensitivity ^b	-.15***	-.14***
Self-Control ^b	.31***	-.24***
Perseverance ^b	.41***	-.18***
Intrinsic Motivation ^d	.37***	-.11*
Extrinsic Motivation ^d	.05	.10*

Note. References for each effect are indicated with superscripts, as follows: ^aAshton-James & Tracy, 2012; ^bCarver et al., 2010; ^cCheng et al., 2010; ^dDamian & Robins, 2013; ^eDickens & Robins, 2020; ^fTracy & Robins, 2007c; ^gTracy et al., 2009.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$



Figure 1. Prototypical pride expressions, with arms raised (left), and arms akimbo and hands on hips (right). Both displays are reliably recognized at high rates in educated Western samples and by members of isolated small-scale traditional societies.