

Emerging Insights Into the Nature and Function of Pride

Jessica L. Tracy¹ and Richard W. Robins²

¹University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, and ²University of California, Davis

ABSTRACT—Pride, a “self-conscious” emotion involving complex self-evaluative processes, is a fundamental human emotion. Recent research provides new insights into its nature and function. Like the “basic” emotions, pride is associated with a distinct, universally recognized, nonverbal expression, which is spontaneously displayed during pride experiences. Yet, pride differs from the basic emotions in its dependency on self-evaluations and in its complex structure, which is comprised of two theoretically and conceptually distinct facets that have divergent personality correlates and cognitive antecedents. In this article, we summarize findings from the growing body of research on pride and highlight the implications of this research for a broader understanding of emotions and social behavior.

KEYWORDS—pride; authentic pride; hubristic pride; self-conscious emotion; nonverbal expression; emotion recognition

When it comes to motivating social behavior, pride may be the most important human emotion. Our most meaningful achievements, both everyday and life changing, are accompanied by feelings of pride. Students experience pride after receiving a good grade, children after succeeding at a new task, and adolescents after finding a mate. Adults feel pride in response to a promotion at work, a child’s first steps, and once-in-a-lifetime accomplishments like winning the Nobel Prize. Conversely, wounded pride lies at the heart of many of society’s largest problems, such as intergroup conflict and terrorism, as well as smaller interpersonal problems, such as an argument that destroys a friendship. Indeed, pride is a cornerstone emotion that fuels several fundamental human pursuits: the desire to achieve; to attain power and status; to meet a romantic partner with high mate value; to feel good about oneself and one’s social group; and to raise successful, intelligent, and well-behaved children.

Address correspondence to Jessica L. Tracy, Department of Psychology, University of British Columbia, 2136 West Mall, Vancouver, British Columbia V6T 1Z4, Canada; e-mail: jltracy@psych.ubc.ca.

A COMPLEX EMOTION THAT IS “PLAINLY EXPRESSED”

One of the major findings in the social and behavioral sciences is the discovery that a small set of “basic” emotions (anger, disgust, happiness, fear, sadness, and surprise) have distinct, universally recognized, nonverbal expressions (Ekman & Friesen, 1971). This finding, which emerged from studies conducted across a wide range of cultures including highly isolated, preliterate groups, led many scientists to adopt a Darwinian perspective toward these emotions. In this framework, each emotion is assumed to be biologically based; shared with other animals; experienced across all cultures; and identifiable via a discrete, universal expression. The predominance of this perspective led to major advances in basic-emotion research but also to the neglect of more cognitively complex, “self-conscious” emotions, such as pride, which were assumed to be less evolutionarily basic.

In the decades following Ekman and Friesen’s (1971) seminal work, researchers searched for but, with a few possible exceptions, failed to find additional universal emotion expressions. Long overlooked was Darwin’s (1872/1998) suggestion that

Of all the . . . complex emotions, pride, perhaps, is the most plainly expressed . . . A proud man exhibits his superiority over others by holding his head and body erect. He . . . makes himself appear as large as possible; so that metaphorically he is said to be swollen or puffed up with pride. (pp. 262–263)

Building on Darwin’s proposition, we conducted a series of studies testing whether pride has a distinct, recognizable nonverbal expression. We started by asking observers to identify the emotion conveyed in posed expressions, based on nonverbal behaviors documented in children following task success (Stipek, Recchia, & McClintic, 1992), as well as in our own work manipulating components of these expressions (e.g., posture, head tilt). We found that the best-recognized, or most prototypical, pride expression includes facial (low-intensity smile) and bodily components (expanded posture, slight head tilt, arms akimbo with hands on hips or raised above the head with hands in fists; see Fig. 1). This expression is reliably recognized and distinguished from similar emotions (e.g., happiness) by adults



Expression A



Expression B

Fig. 1. Prototypical pride expressions. Expression A is slightly better recognized than Expression B, but both are reliably identified as pride. Reprinted from Tracy & Robins (2004).

from several cultures and by children as young as 4 years old (Tracy & Robins, 2004; Tracy, Robins, & Lagattuta, 2005; see Fig. 2).

Perhaps the strongest evidence for Darwin’s claim about pride is the recent finding that individuals from a highly isolated, preliterate tribe in Burkina Faso, West Africa, can reliably recognise the pride expression (Tracy & Robins, 2007a; Fig. 2). Given that these individuals are unlikely to have learned the pride expression through cross-cultural contact, such as exposure to Western media, their recognition suggests that the expression may be a human universal and not simply a culture-specific gesture like the “thumb’s up” sign.

Other research confirms that the nonverbal display we identified is, in fact, expressed when individuals experience pride. Children tend show components of the expression, including

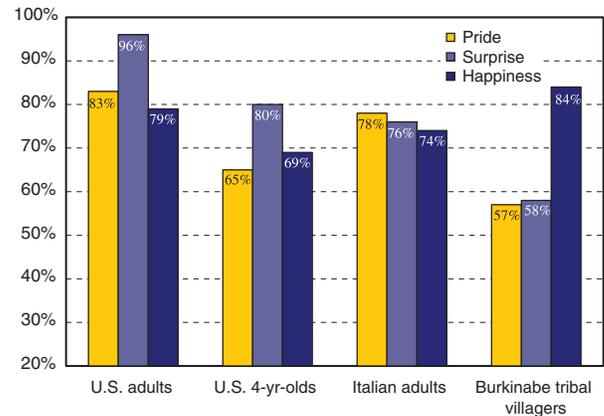


Fig. 2. Mean pride-recognition rates compared with recognition rates for two “basic” emotions, in four samples. All frequencies are significantly greater than chance. *N*s = 56 (U.S. adults); 10 (U.S. 4-year-olds); 28 (Italian adults); 39 (Burkinabes). Full studies reported in Tracy and Robins (2004); Tracy and Robins (2007a); Tracy, Robins, and Lagattuta (2005).

head tilt and expanded posture, after success (e.g., Stipek et al., 1992). Athletes from a wide range of cultures were found to display several components of the pride expression (e.g., head tilt, expanded chest) after winning a match in the 2004 Olympic judo competition (Tracy & Matsumoto, 2007). However, future research should examine the extent to which the pride expression is displayed versus regulated in real-life contexts that are less emotionally intense or in which social norms prohibit pride displays. Moreover, studies should examine how pride-display rules might differ across (a) other aspects of the social context, such as being alone versus with others; (b) eliciting conditions, such as pride felt for a personal achievement versus an achievement involving the relational self (e.g., pride in one’s child or spouse) or collective self (e.g., national or ethnic pride); and (c) cultures, such as those with individualistic as opposed to collectivistic orientations.

A TALE OF TWO PRIDES

The research we described demonstrates that the pride expression is cross-culturally recognized and spontaneously displayed in achievement contexts. However, these studies do not address the question of what, exactly, pride is. Writings by laypeople and scientists alike suggest that there may be more than a single emotion lurking beneath the term *pride*. Ancient Greek and biblical thought condemned excessive pride or *hubris*, yet in Western culture pride is widely viewed as a virtue to be sought and encouraged.

Reflecting these divergent views, pride has been linked to both adaptive and maladaptive outcomes. Although pride in one’s successes promotes continued achievement-oriented behaviors, the “hubristic” pride associated with narcissism may contribute to aggression, hostility, and interpersonal problems.

This paradox can be resolved by distinguishing between two facets of pride: authentic and hubristic.¹

Several lines of research provide converging support for this two-facet account (Tracy & Robins, 2007b). First, when asked to think about and list words relevant to pride, participants consistently generate two very different categories of concepts, which empirically form two separate clusters of semantic meaning. The first cluster (authentic pride) includes words such as *accomplished* and *confident* and fits with the prosocial, achievement-oriented conceptualization. The second cluster (hubristic pride) includes words such as *arrogant* and *conceited* and fits with the self-aggrandizing side of pride. Second, when asked to rate their pride-related feelings during actual pride experiences, participants' ratings consistently form two relatively independent factors, which closely parallel the two semantic clusters. Third, when asked to rate their general dispositional tendency to feel each of a set of pride-related emotional states, participants' ratings again form the same two factors. Further analyses have demonstrated that the two pride factors are not statistical artifacts of the tendency to group together good versus bad, activated versus deactivated, or trait versus state words. Given that these factors are largely (though not entirely) independent, in any single pride experience the facets may co-occur, or may not.

To further explore the psychological meaning of the facets, we developed brief, reliable self-report measures of each (Tracy & Robins, 2007b). Using these scales, we found that authentic and hubristic pride have highly divergent personality correlates, such that authentic pride is positively associated with adaptive traits like extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and genuine self-esteem, whereas hubristic pride is negatively related to these traits but positively associated with self-aggrandizing narcissism and shame-proneness. This pattern suggests that authentic pride is the more prosocial, achievement-oriented, and socially desirable facet of the emotion.

A final piece of evidence supporting the two-facet account of pride is the finding that the facets have distinct cognitive antecedents. In correlational and experimental studies, we found that attributing positive events to internal, unstable, controllable causes (e.g., effort) tends to promote authentic pride, whereas attributing the same events to internal, stable, uncontrollable causes (e.g., ability) is more likely to promote hubristic pride. Importantly, the facets are not distinguished by the kinds of events that elicit them; both occur after success in a range of domains (e.g., academics, romantic relationships). Rather, it is the causes to which success is attributed that play a role in determining which facet of pride will emerge.

¹We labeled the first facet "authentic" to emphasize that it is based on actual accomplishments and is likely accompanied by genuine feelings of self-worth. Although we do not view hubristic pride as an inauthentic emotional experience, its elicitors may be more loosely tied to actual accomplishments and may involve a self-evaluative process that reflects a less authentic sense of self (e.g., self-aggrandized self-views).

One question for future research is whether the two facets are, in fact, distinct emotions. In contrast to their divergent cognitive antecedents and personality correlates, the evidence collected to date indicates that both facets are reliably associated with the same nonverbal expression, suggesting that, at least based on this criterion, there is only one form of pride.

THE FUNCTION OF PRIDE

Emotions are likely to have evolved to serve two primary functions: promoting the attainment of survival and reproductive goals and promoting the attainment of social goals more indirectly related to survival. Whereas basic emotions clearly serve both survival and social functions, self-conscious emotions seem more narrowly tailored toward social functions. Specifically, pride might have evolved to provide information about an individual's current level of social status and acceptance (e.g., "I feel proud; I must have accomplished something that will make others like and respect me"). Self-esteem may be an important part of this process. After successes, individuals feel pride, and over time these feelings may promote positive feelings and thoughts about the global self (i.e., high self-esteem), which inform individuals of their social value. In fact, the development of pride may be closely linked to the development of self-esteem. Children first experience pride early in the course of development (at approximately 2.5 years), can recognize the pride expression by age 4, and reach an understanding of pride between the ages of 7 and 9 (see Lagattuta & Thompson, 2007, for a review). Future research should examine how the cognitive processes that underlie these transitions might be linked to the development of global self-esteem, which emerges around the age of 7.

Pride feelings also function to reinforce and motivate the socially valued behaviors that help maintain a positive self-concept and others' respect. We strive to achieve, to be a "good person," or to treat others well because doing so makes us proud of ourselves. Although we know cognitively that we should help others in need, it often takes the psychological force of an emotion like pride to make us act in altruistic ways, and individuals who perform such socially valued acts are, in turn, rewarded with social status and acceptance (Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006). At an interpersonal level, proud individuals ensure these benefits by directly informing others of their accomplishments; the two most frequent behavioral responses to a pride experience are "making contact with others" (reported by 47% of individuals experiencing pride) and "seeking out others" (39%; Nofle & Robins, 2006). At an intrapsychic level, the rewards of pride are experienced as pleasurable pride feelings, which motivate future pride-eliciting behaviors. Experiencing pride after task completion promotes improved performance at subsequent tasks (Herrald & Tomaka, 2002), and experiencing pride in one's altruistic activities promotes more time spent volunteering (Hart & Matsuba, 2007).

The nonverbal expression of pride may serve a similar adaptive function as the experience: alerting one's social group that the

proud individual merits increased status and acceptance. The cross-cultural generalizability of the expression is consistent with its being an evolved response, as is the fact that similar “dominance” displays (e.g., expanded posture, erect gait) have been observed in some nonhuman primates—animals who show precursors of self-awareness (Hart & Karmel, 1996). The finding that the pride expression is associated with success across cultures also supports this functionalist account (Tracy & Matsumoto, 2007).

However, the functionalist account of pride also raises a perplexing question: Why does pride have a dark (i.e., hubristic) side? One possibility is that the two facets solve unique adaptive problems regarding the acquisition of status. Authentic pride might motivate behaviors geared toward long-term status attainment, whereas hubristic pride provides a “short cut” solution, promoting status that is more immediate but fleeting and, in some cases, unwarranted. A related possibility is that the second facet (hubristic pride) evolved as a “cheater” attempt to convince others of one’s success by showing the same expression when no achievement has occurred. This view is supported by our failure to find distinct nonverbal expressions for authentic and hubristic pride, but future studies should examine whether both facets have the same impact on actual and perceived status and acceptance.

At a more distal level of analysis, perhaps the most important question about the adaptive nature of pride is this: Given our evolutionary history, how did humans come to experience and express pride in the ways we do? Humans and (possibly) the great apes seem to be the only animals that experience pride, perhaps because it requires self-awareness and the capacity to form stable self-representations. Previous studies on the ontological development of self have used the pride expression as a proxy for early signs of self (e.g., Stipek et al., 1992); similar methods could be used to address questions about the phylogenetic development of self. Given that pride is one of the only self-conscious emotions that seems to have a reliably recognized, universal expression, the ability to assess pride through observable behaviors across cultures and perhaps even species may prove useful for addressing long-standing questions about the evolution of self.

CONCLUSION

Over a century ago, Darwin (1872/1998) included pride within his functionalist model of emotions and emotion expressions. New findings support Darwin’s view and demonstrate the significance of pride to research in social, personality, clinical, cultural, developmental, and biological psychology. We hope these findings provide the groundwork for future research on pride, an emotion that is central to the human need for status and acceptance. By coding pride from nonverbal behaviors and assessing its distinct facets using our self-report scales, researchers may gain new insights into the affective core of a wide range of psychological phenomena—from dominance, aggression, and narcissism to achievement, caretaking, and altruism.

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