ESIC 2022 DOI: 10.26613/esic/6.1.273

# Emotions Can Cause Antisocial Behavior

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In their target article, Keltner and Oatley propose that emotions evolved to enable cooperation among individuals. They convincingly explain how emotions' cooperative functions likely drove their evolution, while acknowledging that emotions have also "given rise to much of what is 'bad' about human nature: genocide, ethnocentrism, sexual violence, and honor killings." We agree with this synopsis: emotions evolved in humans largely to serve social functions, tying individuals together and within groups in various ways, even while frequently fomenting antisocial behaviors that lead to problematic or dangerous social consequences. In this commentary, we consider how emotions can evoke behaviors that are antisocial— that is, causing negative consequences for others or for the individual's relationships— yet also socially functional.

First, some emotions elicit antisocial behaviors that ultimately promote cooperation. Keltner and Oatley describe how "prosocial physiological systems" underlie numerous forms of cooperation, such as sharing with non-kin and sacrificing for the needy. These examples reflect the prototypical conception of cooperation, motivated by pro-social desires, wherein people work together to pursue a common goal out of mutual care and respect. Nonetheless, antisocial behaviors, which are also shaped by distinct emotions and their physiological and psychological systems, promote other kinds of cooperation. In particular, hubristic pride, an emotion involving subjective feelings of grandiosity, arrogance, and superiority (Tracy and Robins 2007) promotes group cooperation by motivating antisocial behavior. There is no evidence to suggest that hubristic pride motivates prosocial behavior; in contrast, this emotion is associated with several socially problematic traits and behaviors, such as arrogance, disagreeableness, narcissism, and aggression (Tracy et al. 2009). These individuals are often disliked, and report low levels of social support and elevated attachment anxiety and social phobia (Tracy et al. 2009).

Yet hubristic pride functions to help individuals attain social rank, and thereby helps implement the organization, structure, and coordination that hierarchy provides for group living. More specifically, hubristic pride promotes the attainment of *dominance*, a form of high rank achieved through aggression and intimidation (Cheng, Tracy, and Henrich 2010; Tracy, Mercadante, Witkower, and Cheng 2021; Witkower, Mercadante, and Tracy, in press). Dominant leaders acquire power by threatening subordinates, and subordinates fall in line to protect themselves, rather than out of respect for the dominant leader (Henrich and Gil-White 2001; Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, and Henrich 2013). By eliciting feelings of superiority and reducing empathic concern (Ashton-James and Tracy 2012), hubristic pride mentally prepares individuals to take control and intimidate others. As a result, dominant individuals behave in ways that seem patently *uncooperative*: they strike fear in followers, and they are not kind, helpful, or generous (Cheng et al. 2010; Maner and Mead, 2010; Case and Maner 2014). However, by taking on a leadership role, hubristically proud individuals enable cooperation, via establishing a structured hierarchy that allows individuals to work and live together better and more cooperatively than in groups without a clear hierarchy (Berger, Rosenholtz, and Zelditch 1980; de Kwaadsteniet and van Dijk 2010). Even for low status group members, the benefits of being a part of a hierarchical group outweigh

the costs of having low status in that group (van Vugt 2006; Glowacki and von Rueden 2015). High status individuals bear costs as well, typically associated with the risks of climbing the social ladder and effort expended toward leading group activities, but they benefit even more, as high rank comes with greater access to valued resources and potential mates (Barkow 1975; Hill 1984; Cowlishaw and Dunbar 1991; Ellis, 1995). In sum, hubristic pride, along with fear, enables cooperation by motivating individuals in groups to pursue their own self-interests. Dominants seek high rank, and fearful subordinates seek to avoid harm, yet both of these seemingly selfish behaviors ultimately result in greater group cooperation.

Second, emotions can also motivate antisocial behaviors that increase group cooperation but might ultimately harm the social group. Although cooperation often brings benefits to all parties involved, this is not always the case. Again, hubristic pride provides a useful example. We recently conducted a series of studies testing whether people who regularly tend to feel high levels of hubristic pride engage in antisocial behavior—specifically, lying—when doing so might help them attain social rank (Mercadante and Tracy in press). Participants completed an individual task, such as solving anagrams, and were informed that they would subsequently complete a similar task with a (fictitious) partner. They were then asked to report their score on the individual task to their partner. Compared to those low in hubristic pride, hubristically proud individuals were more likely to lie about their score—exaggerating how well they performed—but only when they felt that their status was threatened, by the prospect of being paired with a partner who had scored higher than they did. In contrast, when these individuals believed they would be working alone, or that they would work with a partner who had performed worse than they did or whose score was unknown, they reported their own scores more accurately, and were no more likely to lie than were those low in hubristic pride. These findings thus suggest that hubristic pride motivates *strategic* dishonest behavior, oriented towards gaining status in the eyes of a higher-status peer following a status threat. This may be one way that hubristic pride helps individuals attain dominance; it motivates them to do whatever it takes to get ahead, even when their resultant higher rank is not merited.

Interestingly, in this situation the hubristically proud individual who lies to attain rank may end up hurting the group more than helping it. The presence of a status threat implies that a more qualified potential leader is available; by lying, hubristically proud individuals usurp this individual's status, and thus prevent their group from benefitting by following and learning from a more prestigious leader. However, their actions may also provide some benefits to the group, as dominant leaders tend to be more willing to choose unpopular but effective strategies, compared to prestigious leaders (Case, Bae, and Maner 2020). These findings suggest that a person who cheats to get ahead may both hurt and help the group, depending on what is required in the particular situation. Future studies are needed to address this important question of how groups function and cooperate when a dominant leader usurps the leadership position, but the present findings clearly suggest that hubristic pride promotes adaptive social functions, at least for the individual experiencing the emotion, by virtue of motivating antisocial behaviors.

Third, it is noteworthy that certain emotions can lead to antisocial, uncooperative behavior because of the way that people respond to, or cope with, them. For example, we found in prior work that newly sober alcoholics are more likely to relapse if they feel shame (assessed via nonverbal expressions) about their addiction (Randles and Tracy 2013). Shame functions intrapsychically to inform individuals of personal flaws or transgressions and promote behaviors, including hiding and avoiding others (Tangney and Tracy 2012; Steckler and Tracy 2014; Sznycer et al. 2016), that may help ashamed

individuals mitigate the social consequences of their failure (e.g., reduced social standing, retaliation from others; Lewis 1971; Tangney and Dearing 2002; Tracy and Robins 2004; Gilbert 2007; Beall and Tracy 2020). In this way, shame facilitates cooperation, by motivating appeasing behaviors that inform others that the transgressor regrets their actions and accepts the consequences, demonstrating that they can still be considered a reliable and trustworthy group member (Keltner, Young, and Buswell 1997; Fessler, 2007). As a result, shame and its associated behaviors are crucial for the smooth functioning of group hierarchies (Martens, Tracy, and Shariff 2012; Beall and Tracy, 2019).

At the same time, however, Western society has made shame the most intolerable emotion to experience, and most individuals in our society are desperate to avoid it (Lewis 1972; Tangney and Dearing 2002). The desire to avoid feeling shame, and to escape the situation that caused it, can lead to a range of problematic coping behaviors; these include binge drinking, which reduces the cognitive self-awareness necessary for a self-conscious emotional experience like shame (Hull, Young, and Jouriles 1986; Tracy and Robins 2004). Those who chronically experience shame may excessively drink to escape from themselves—in essence, to bury their shame—and in doing so, create a new elicitor of shame: their addiction. The finding that alcoholics who feel greater shame about their addiction are more likely to relapse supports this account, and demonstrates how the functional behavioral output of an emotion, which likely evolved to promote cooperation, can lead to antisocial behaviors under certain environmental contingencies.

In conclusion, Keltner and Oatley's theory that emotions share a common function of enabling cooperation is widely supported by several lines of evidence, and accounts for the functional outcomes of numerous emotions. However, to fully understand how emotions enable cooperation, antisocial behaviors and outcomes must be explicitly considered. Doing so can help explain why certain emotions motivate people to be uncooperative, selfish, and hostile, as well as engage in behaviors that harm their relationships and their sense of themselves.

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