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Morality, the Self, and Self-Conscious Emotions

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### **Morality, the Self, and Self-Conscious Emotions**

In one of the most famous scenes in Western literature, Lady Macbeth is seen furiously scrubbing her hands, desperately trying wash off the invisible blood she hallucinates covering them. Shakespeare uses this image, along with Lady Macbeth's immortal words ("out, out, damn spot!"), to convey the intense guilt she feels over her role in her husband's murderous behavior. In another, equally famous, Shakespearean play, Hamlet spends his time on stage fretting over the shame he feels about his inability to avenge his father's death. The self-doubt and even self-loathing Hamlet experiences from his unwillingness to take on this morally complex act fuels the play's narrative. Meanwhile, the moral crux of *Othello* is shaped around the titular king's hubristic pride, which allows him to believe that his wife was unfaithful, in turn motivating him to kill her. In all three tragedies, the story's narrative thrust relies on a tight connection between immoral behavior, moral decision making, and self-conscious emotions. These emotions, like guilt, shame, and pride, are regularly experienced in response to the self-reflection and self-evaluation that moral quandaries can cause, and they influence the moral and immoral behaviors that humans enact. As Shakespeare knew, a full understanding of human morality requires an understanding of self-conscious emotions and how they shape people's sense of self, and, as a consequence, the moral decisions they make.

The impact that these emotions have on people's identity, and the kind of person they see themselves becoming as they engage in moral or immoral behaviors, makes self-conscious emotions a critical part of existential psychology. To understand the human experience, we must understand those emotions that are uniquely human and therefore part of what make us most human. Furthermore, being or becoming moral is one of the major ways in which people strive to

make their lives meaningful, to belong, and to justify their existence. The intersection of self, emotions, and morality is thus a critical area of research in existential psychology.

In this chapter we review the extant literature on self-conscious emotions and morality, as well as broader links with moral identity. Although guilt and shame have been labeled “moral emotions” (Tangney & Fischer, 1995), few studies have directly examined the ways in which these emotions are integral to moral thinking or behavior. For the most part, research in moral psychology has proceeded separately from research on self-conscious emotions, and moral psychologists most often study emotions that shape judgments about others, rather than self (e.g., Haidt & Hersh, 2001; Horberg et al., 2009). Although other-oriented emotions like disgust, anger, and contempt influence moral decision making and may underlie people’s sense of what is and is not immoral (Schnall et al., 2008; Tracy et al., 2019), these emotions do not typically influence the way that people view and understand themselves.

In contrast, guilt, shame, and pride are elicited by our own morally relevant behavior, and motivate us to change our behavior to align with moral standards (e.g., Keltner & Buswell, 1997; Tangney & Tracy, 2012; Tangney & Dearing, 2003). People feel guilt or shame when they engage in immoral acts like lying, stealing, or cheating, and when they fail to engage in morally upstanding behaviors like helping or showing compassion for others (Baumeister et al., 1994; Leith & Baumeister, 1998; Retzinger, 1987; Tangney & Dearing, 2003). Conversely, behaving in a prosocial way, by avoiding temptation, donating to charity, or contributing to a shared pool of resources, can lead to feelings of pride (Dorfman et al., 2014; Heltzel & Tracy, 2024; Hofmann & Fisher, 2012). As a result, self-conscious emotions are intricately interconnected with morality, but only with those moral behaviors that elicit positive or negative evaluations of the self. Given

that most moral or immoral acts individuals commit do cause them to self-reflect and self-evaluate, self-conscious emotions play a crucial role in human morality.

We begin by reviewing extant research literature on morality and the self, discussing how moral identities form. Next, we turn to specific self-conscious emotions and review research on the ways in which each contributes to moral thought and behavior. Studies have shown that pride, shame, and guilt are relevant to moral action at both the individual level—meaning, personal experiences of each of these emotions—and at the group level—where feelings about their social identities (e.g., pride in one’s country) shape intergroup relations. Finally, we briefly review research on other complex social emotions that are relevant to both the self and morality: awe, gratitude, anger, and envy. In closing, we highlight important areas for future research.

### **Morality and the Self**

Morality is central to the self-concept (e.g., Lewis, 2003; Strohminger & Nichols, 2014), yet early research in moral psychology did not include the self in theories of moral judgments and decision making. Instead, initial work followed the precedent set by Kohlberg (1969), who emphasized the role of cognitive reasoning in shaping moral judgments. According to this perspective, moral judgments evolve throughout the lifespan, beginning with a focus on obedience to authority and avoiding personal harm, and maturing through the development of more sophisticated moral principles like justice and equality.

Most of this research focused on the moral judgments people make about others in hypothetical dilemmas (e.g., whether a husband should steal a drug to save his terminally ill wife; Rest et al., 1969), leaving open questions of how moral judgments influence people’s own behavior. Although some studies found effects of moral judgments on behaviors (e.g., Bernardi et al., 2004; Kalliopuska & Mustakallio, 1986), these associations tended to be weak or

inconsistent (Blasi, 1980). This makes sense; even when people appraise a situation as morally wrong, there are many factors that might prevent them from acting to resolve it. However, theories emphasizing cognitive moral development have historically not accounted for the wide variation observed in enacted moral behaviors and reported moral intentions.

More recently, moral psychologists sought to address this gap between individuals' moral judgments and their behaviors by accounting for the role of the moral self-concept, defined as "a complex system of self-defining moral attributes involving moral beliefs, orientations, dispositions, and cognitive and affective capacities that engage regulatory focus toward moral behavior" (Jennings et al., 2015, p. 106). Researchers who incorporate the moral self still tend to include a role for cognitive reasoning, but view the self as the primary anchor of moral processes, because it determines the criteria that shape whether an individual bears moral responsibility in a given situation (e.g., Aquino & Reed II, 2002; Blasi, 1980). For example, a person whose moral identity is strongly tied to values of fairness might be particularly likely to intervene after witnessing a colleague being treated unfairly. As a result, individual differences in the moral self might explain the gap, or the association, between moral judgments and behavior (e.g., Patrick et al., 2018; Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007).

### **The Importance of the Moral Self**

Studies have found that morality plays a central role in self-perceptions, and occupies principal importance relative to other components of the self-concept like competence (Everett et al., 2020; Leach et al., 2002; Lewis, 2003). Perceptions of oneself as a moral being start early in life; by the age of eight, children view moral beliefs as central to their self-understanding (Heiphetz et al., 2018). Among adults, moral identity is perhaps the most self-defining component of selfhood; one set of studies found that participants asked to imagine experiencing

a permanent change to some aspect of their identity due to a traumatic event, such as a brain injury, reported the greatest identity change when moral traits were affected (Strohming & Nichols, 2014; see also Heiphetz et al., 2018).

From an evolutionary perspective, moral beliefs and the enforcement of moral norms emerged in human societies to promote harmonious group functioning, motivate cooperation, and minimize societal harm. In short, a shared sense of morality allows people to live and work together in large groups (e.g., Baumard, 2016; Gray & Kubin, 2024; Curry et al., 2019). In this view, the moral self is adaptive because it is an internal representation of the extent to which a person is behaving in accordance with their society's moral norms. Holding a moral self, and desiring to maintain or increase the extent to which that self meets its moral values, facilitates each group member's ability and ease in encoding the group's norms and following them (Aquino & Reed II, 2002; Blasi, 1993; Hardy et al., 2014). In support of this account, studies have found that people who view their ideal self as moral report a greater sense of purpose, social responsibility, and altruistic behavior, as well as lower levels of aggression (Hardy et al., 2014).

### **Moral Identity and Moral Behavior**

Most extant empirical research on the moral self focuses on Aquino and Reed II's (2002) concept of *moral identity*, defined as a self-concept organized around a collection of ideal moral traits. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), social identities are formed based on traits, habits, or cultural beliefs people share with others in their society. In the same way, moral identities form around a constellation of socially normative moral traits that others view as useful or aspire to possess. These identities, in turn, provide a framework that guides behavior, as people strive to behave consistently with their identity (Erikson, 1964; Suh, 2002).

Supporting this account, priming people to view themselves as morally good motivates them to engage in prosocial actions (Young et al., 2012).

Although moral identity is a central part of most people's self-concept, there are individual differences in the way people think about these identities; these differences have been operationalized in terms of *internalization* and *symbolization*. Internalization captures the intrinsic importance of morality to the self, whereas symbolization captures the extrinsic, reputational aspect of identity, or the degree to which moral traits manifest in one's outward-facing social behavior (Aquino & Reed II, 2002). Studies controlling for shared variance between internalization and symbolization have found that each dimension independently predicts moral outcomes (Jennings et al., 2015). Internalization tends to be the stronger and more positive predictor of prosocial moral behavior and attitudes, such as charitable donations (Aquino & Reed II, 2002), favorable attitudes toward outgroup members (Reed II & Aquino, 2003), and a reduced likelihood of anti-social behavior such as aggression in sports and dishonesty (Aquino et al., 2009; see Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016 for a meta-analysis; Sage et al., 2006). Symbolization, in contrast, tends to predict moral behavior only in situations where individuals can gain public recognition for their actions (Winterich et al., 2013).

Nonetheless, moral decision making is regularly influenced by others, even for people low in symbolization. Indeed, when individuals are reminded that their moral judgments might influence how others perceive them, they are more likely to alter those judgments to align with social norms (Rom & Conway, 2015). Reputational concerns also contribute to engaging in moralistic third-party punishment against perceived offenders (Jordan & Rand, 2020; Jordan & Kteily, 2023). However, for people who have a strongly internalized moral identity, moral behaviors tend to be less influenced by social or situational factors (DeCelles et al., 2012;

Skarlicki & Rupp, 2010). For example, one study found that participants manipulated to feel powerful subsequently made more selfish decisions in a resource allocation task, but only if they were low in moral identity internalization. Participants high in internalization were more aware of the moral implications of their behavior and consequently avoided selfishness. Overall, social cues and situations seem to be less reliable elicitors of moral behavior compared to holding a strong, core internalized moral identity (Krettenauer, 2022).

### **The Moral Emotions**

A growing number of studies have linked moral identity with behavior, but fewer studies have examined the specific self-relevant emotions likely to underlie these associations. Nonetheless, scholars have long suggested that self-conscious emotions like shame, guilt, and pride motivate moral behaviors, as these emotions are often elicited by situations appraised as congruent or incongruent with one's moral identity (Lewis, 1995; Tangney & Dearing, 2003; Tracy & Robins, 2004). For example, committing a social transgression (e.g., forgetting to call a friend on their birthday) that is incongruent with one's moral identity (e.g., being a good friend) is likely to promote feelings of guilt or shame (Heltzel & Tracy, 2024; Tracy & Robins, 2004). These feelings, in turn, might motivate a compensatory response to address the incongruence (Tangney & Dearing, 2003). As a result, self-conscious emotions can be understood as serving a crucial moral signaling function, informing individuals that the standards of their moral identity have been met or surpassed (eliciting moral pride) or violated (eliciting guilt or shame), and also a motivational function, prompting behavior to rectify the situation.

This account is consistent with the suggestion that moral identity influences behavior because people are intrinsically motivated to behave consistently with their identity (Aquino & Reed II, 2002; Damon & Heart, 1992). Self-conscious emotions may provide an essential



missing piece to this model, as they function to both inform individuals whether their behavior is consistent with their moral identity and motivate them to address any inconsistencies. A meta-analysis of 57 studies found that the self-rated importance of the moral identity was positively correlated with experiencing a range of moral emotions, including self-conscious ones (which appeared in 22 instances;  $r_s = 0.32-0.33$ ; Lefebvre & Krettenauer, 2019).

### **Guilt, Shame, and Morality**

According to a fairly large body of research, individuals experience guilt when they focus on negative aspects of their behavior—“the thing done or undone”—and shame when they focus on negative aspects of themselves—the self who did or did not do it (H. B. Lewis, 1971, p. 30; M. Lewis, 2000; Tangney & Dearing, 2003; Tracy & Robins, 2004; 2006). In other words, both emotions are elicited by internal attributions, or blame to the self, but different kinds of internal attributions. The same negative self-relevant event, such as failure on an exam, tends to elicit greater guilt if attributed to unstable, controllable and specific causes like the amount of effort a person put into studying, but greater shame if attributed to stable, uncontrollable, and global causes like general intelligence or ability (e.g., Brown & Weiner, 1984; Covington & Omelich, 1981; Jagacinski & Nicholls, 1984; Russell & McAuley, 1986; Tracy & Robins, 2006).

Given this distinction, whether a person feels guilt or shame in response to a moral infraction depends at least in part on how the infraction is appraised. Both emotions follow appraisals of the self or the self’s behavior as incongruent with moral identity standards (Lewis, 1971; Tangney & Dearing, 2003; Tangney et al., 2007). However, guilt is typically associated with self-blame for a specific moral transgression enacted, whereas shame entails appraisals of an entirely flawed moral identity. Given this distinction, it is not surprising that shame is the far more painful emotion (Izard, 1971; Tangney & Dearing, 2003), and more difficult to address.

Whereas feelings of guilt involve a sense of control over one's behavior, and thus can motivate people to consider how to repair or compensate for their transgression (Graton & Ric, 2018), those who feel shame have no clear recourse, as there are no specific actions one can take to fix a flawed moral identity.

Guilt thus tends to be the more morally adaptive and pro-social emotion, associated with reparations, concern for others, and cooperative behavior (e.g., de Hooge et al., 2007; Tang et al., 2019; Tangney & Dearing, 2003; Tangney et al., 1996). Shame, in contrast, is associated with avoidance, externalizing blame, minimizing the negativity or impact of one's immoral actions, and attempts to deny or escape shame-inducing situations (de Hooge et al., 2007; Stuewig et al., 2010; Tangney & Dearing, 2003; Tillman et al., 2018). Similarly, a tendency to experience guilt is associated with dispositional empathy and perspective-taking, whereas trait shame-proneness is associated with a more egocentric focus on one's own negative feelings, along with reduced empathy and perspective-taking (Joireman, 2004; Leith & Baumeister, 1998; see Yang et al., 2010 for similar relations for state-level guilt and shame). Shame-proneness has also been found to motivate hostile, anti-social behaviors toward others, including verbal and physical aggression (Elison et al., 2014; Stuewig et al., 2010). Indeed, shame is strongly related to anger and aggression, at both the trait and state level (Heaven, et al., 2009; Tangney et al., 1996; Tangney et al., 2007). These externalizing responses are generally assumed to be attempts to counteract, suppress, and avoid painful shame feelings (Tangney & Tracy, 2012; Tracy & Robins, 2006).

Although shame is clearly problematic for day-to-day moral functioning, evolutionary theories indicate ways in which shame might nonetheless serve important moral functions at a more distal, or ultimate evolutionary level. In other words, although at a proximal level shame seems to promote morally problematic behaviors (e.g., avoidance, aggression), viewing shame

from a distal perspective allows us to see how the emotion likely evolved to serve the crucial moral function of informing individuals that they have violated their group's moral norms, and motivating them to change course to avoid rejection or ejection from the group (Beall & Tracy, 2020; Gilbert, 1998). Ancestral humans relied heavily on their social groups for protection from external threats, and those without strong interpersonal connections would have failed to secure the benefits of shared cultural knowledge and resources. As a result, group membership and belongingness were crucial to survival (e.g., Hill & Hurtado, 1989; Henrich & Boyd, 1998). Functionalist accounts therefore suggest that shame is adaptive by virtue of helping individuals maintain their current social status and acceptance in the eyes of their group (Tracy & Robins, 2004).

Indeed, studies show that shame informs individuals of a discrepancy between their current and desired selves (Leary et al., 1995), and the resulting aversive emotional state pushes them to halt their unsuccessful status-seeking efforts and minimize further negative consequences of lowered status. A desire to avoid shame's unpleasant feelings may also provide an anticipatory incentive to avoid future status-lowering actions (Fessler, 2007). Like physical pain, which is aversive to experience but adaptive by virtue of promoting injury avoidance, shame feelings may have evolved as a kind of alarm system, warning individuals that a drop in social rank is imminent (or has already occurred; Fessler, 2007; cf. Nesse, 1991). Consistent with this account, Westerners asked to recount shame-eliciting events tend to list situations involving punishable moral transgressions (e.g., being caught cheating on an exam). This same pattern has been documented among members of a small-scale traditional fishing village, suggesting that the propensity to feel shame in response to a moral deviation may be a human universal (Fessler, 2004).

Shame may be a particularly useful response to such transgressions; violating moral rules risks potentially dangerous reactions from others, such as anger or retaliation (Gilbert, 2007), and shame may help individuals avoid these penalties by motivating appeasement behaviors.

Appeasing higher status or more powerful others is a cost-efficient way of dealing with conflict; though it may come at the cost of social status, as it typically entails acknowledging one's transgression, appeasing a more formidable opponent saves valuable resources that might be lost from fighting (Keltner et al., 1997). In addition, the time and energy saved by submitting and appeasing rather than fighting can be used for other pursuits that enhance fitness, such as resource and mate acquisition and retention (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000).

Supporting this account, one study tested whether shame facilitates appeasement following a moral violation by asking participants to read hypothetical scenarios about a fictitious CEO who apologised for an ecological incident (i.e., a chemical spill) caused by his company. Participants who learned that the CEO verbally expressed feelings of shame while apologizing were more satisfied with the apology than those who learned that he communicated guilt or no emotion (Giner-Sorolla et al., 2008). In another study, participants applied weaker penalties to fictitious sex offenders who were described as feeling ashamed compared to offenders described as feeling sad and remorseful, or no emotion (Proeve & Howells, 2006). According to Fessler (2007), these expressions of shame reassure onlookers that, despite their misstep, the shamed individual is a morally upstanding, trustworthy group member who believes in and can behave in accordance with social norms.

Other research consistent with this account suggests that shame feelings directly correspond to—and therefore may inform individuals of—their social group's disapproval (Sznycer & Lukaszewski, 2019). Across several multinational studies, participants read scenarios

about people engaging in socially undesirable behaviors (e.g., “He does a bad job taking care of children”), then rated either the extent to which they would devalue the behavior, or the extent of shame they would feel if they were that person. Across countries, feelings of anticipatory shame were strongly correlated with others’ likely devaluation (Cohen et al., 2020; Sznycer et al., 2016). Extending these correlational findings, experiments have found that social exclusion causally increases shame due to increased feelings of devaluation (Robertson et al., 2018).

According to this Interpersonal Adaptiveness account, the proximal behaviors motivated by each self-conscious emotion are consistent with their distinctive distal-level evolved elicitors. Guilt motivates promotion-oriented behaviors, which ultimately increases a person’s social value, and shame motivates escape or withdrawal from the triggering situation, which ultimately minimizes further social devaluation (Sznycer, 2019). Notably, although this perspective has been contrasted with the attributional perspective (see Landers et al., 2024), the two in fact complement one another. The suggestion that guilt leads people to focus on others whereas shame leads people to focus on themselves is consistent with H.B. Lewis’ (1971) and Tangney and colleagues (2004) original attributional distinction, especially given that attributions to specific wrongdoings promote greater attentiveness to the consequences suffered by others (guilt), whereas attributions to one’s tarnished identity emerge in tandem with an egocentric concern for the self (shame). The two accounts may therefore be understood as two levels of explanation—distal and proximal—for the same set of effects and mental processes.

Interestingly, under the assumption that shame is a causal factor underlying one’s awareness of their wrongdoing and corresponding desire to change, governments have historically used public shaming as a punitive means of curbing problematic behaviors which tend to violate moral rules (Jacquet, 2011). Such institutionally sanctioned shaming practices

remain common; examples include the statewide issuance of marked license plates for individuals convicted of DUIs (Nussbaum, 2006) and online lists of noncompliant taxpayers (Jacquet, 2011). Supporting the use of these practices, researchers have found that the experience of shame motivates individuals to seek to improve their self-image (de Hooge et al., 2011) and that the threat of public shaming promotes greater contributions to a common good (Jacquet et al., 2011).

However, it is not clear that shame experienced about a particular wrongdoing promotes positive behavioral change relevant to *that* domain; in other words, whether the shame an individual feels from being forced to drive with a marked DUI license plate reduces that individual's future likelihood of drinking and driving, as opposed to deterring others from doing the same. In fact, feelings of shame for immoral or unhealthy behaviors are more often associated with continued problematic behaviors. One study found that the degree to which newly sober recovering alcoholics demonstrated behavioral displays of shame while discussing their past drinking significantly predicted subsequent declines in their physical and mental health, and, most importantly, their likelihood of drinking again, as well as the severity of their relapse (Randles & Tracy, 2013). In sum, although shame may have evolved to serve adaptive moral functions, more research is needed to demonstrate its most adaptive consequences, because of all the emotions thought to be endemic to our species, shame currently seems to come with the most negative social and psychological outcomes (see Randles & Tracy, 2015).

### **Group-Based Guilt, Shame, and Morality**

One area of research in which the distinction between shame and guilt appears to be less pronounced is in the study of group-based self-conscious emotions, or self-conscious emotions felt on behalf of one's social or group identities (e.g., nationality, race). People hold a sense of

self at multiple levels of identity (Hornsey, 2008; Robins et al., 2010; Turner & Reynolds, 2011), such that they can feel shame, guilt, and pride in response to events enacted by others who share a self-relevant group identity (Lickel et al., 2007; Mackie et al., 2008). Correspondingly, studies have found that group-based guilt emerges in response to specific, controllable actions enacted by ingroup members (Branscombe et al., 2004; Leach et al., 2002; Lickel et al., 2007), whereas group-based shame emerges in response to the perception that the group's moral identity is flawed (Branscombe et al., 2004; Lickel et al., 2004). In line with this attributional distinction, feelings of guilt for an ingroup's transgression motivate greater support for reparations, whereas group-based shame motivates avoidance of the issue, downplaying it, and even denying that a transgression occurred (e.g., Lickel et al., 2005; Schmader & Lickel, 2006). However, other studies have found that group-based shame can be more predictive of support for reparations than group-based guilt (Allpress et al., 2010; Allpress et al., 2014; Gausel & Brown, 2012; Shepherd et al., 2013b; 2013a). A meta-analysis of 58 studies found that, overall, both group-based guilt and group-based shame are positive predictors of intergroup reparations (Hakim et al., 2021).

To address these mixed findings, and the apparent distinction between the outcomes of shame at the group versus individual level, scholars have made a distinction between two forms of group-based shame (Allpress et al., 2014). The first, labeled group-based *image shame*, is focused on how others perceive the ingroup's harmed reputation, and tends to preclude genuine moral culpability. In contrast, group-based *moral shame* entails a focus on the group's tarnished moral identity, which has been internalized by the individual experiencing the emotion. Studies show that, after partialling out shared variance between group-based guilt, moral shame, and image shame, group-based moral shame strongly predicts a willingness to make institutional

reparations for an ingroup's misdeeds, whereas group-based image shame predicts avoidance tactics (Allpress et al., 2014; Ibasco & Tracy, 2024) and has little-to-no effect on reparation intentions (Grigoryan et al., 2024). Furthermore, group-based guilt seems to only weakly predict support for reparations after controlling for group-based moral shame (Allpress et al., 2010; Allpress et al., 2014; Ibasco & Tracy, 2024).

There are several possible explanations for the finding that group-based moral shame, compared to group-based guilt, seems more useful for promoting intergroup harmony even though, at intrapsychic and interpersonal levels, guilt tends to promote greater prosociality. First, individuals may be less desperate to protect themselves from group-based shame than personal shame, because ingroup identities tend to be several layers removed from the personal self, and efforts to repair the group identity do not rest on a single individual alone. Making amends at the group level involves a collective or institutional effort, so the experience of moral shame may not carry the same burden of hopelessness as it does at the intrapsychic level. As a result, individuals may be less defensive against, and thus more willing to experience, this form of shame. Second, shame may be the more relevant emotion to experience in response to group-level moral transgressions, compared to guilt. Given that guilt is elicited by specific immoral actions, it is less likely to occur in response to group-based immorality, where experiencers are usually not directly involved in the problematic group actions (e.g., in the case of North Americans' feelings about their society's history of racism toward Indigenous populations). As a result, the more global and symbolic group identity that is the focus of group-based moral shame may be more relevant to culture- or country-level transgressions (Gausel et al., 2012, 2016; Gausel & Brown, 2012).

### **Pride and Morality**



Like shame and guilt, pride is elicited by internal attributions for a self-relevant event. However, in the case of pride the event is appraised as *congruent* with one's identity, rather than incongruent (Tracy & Robins, 2004; 2007). Moral pride therefore is elicited by events appraised as congruent with one's moral identity—behaving in ways that meet or exceed one's moral standards (notably, recent research suggests that pride is more likely to occur from appraisals of *exceeded* expectations rather than merely met ones; Heltzel & Tracy, 2024). Pride is the emotion that makes people not only feel good, but good about themselves, and that consequently reinforces behaviors that facilitate further experiences of pride. In this way, pride rewards morally upstanding behaviors, and a desire for pride motivates people to engage in such behaviors (Tracy & Robins, 2004; Tracy, 2016). Indeed, although research on pride often emphasizes achievement-oriented activities, which tend to be amoral (e.g., academic or occupational achievements), pride is also an important component of moral judgements and decisions (Tangney et al., 2007).

The behaviors that give rise to pride are those that are socially valued (Sznycer et al., 2017), and individuals tend to be valued for acts that convey moral character, as they suggest that the individual is likely to be a cooperative social partner (Curry et al., 2019). As a result, pride plays an important role in the development of moral identity and in motivating moral behavior. Experience sampling studies have found that pride felt in response to successful instances of self-control led to an increased ability to resist similar temptations in the future (Hofmann & Fisher, 2012). Similarly, considering future experiences of pride led to increased cooperation in economic games (Dorfman et al., 2014; van der Schalk et al., 2012). More specifically, anticipated pride increased fair decisions in bargaining, donations to public goods, and the perceived importance of cooperation.

However, in the same way that there are two distinct self-conscious emotions which occur in response to perceived incongruencies with one's identity (guilt and shame), a fairly large body of research suggests that pride is not, in fact, a single unitary emotion. Instead, psychologists have argued that pride has two distinct components (Lewis, 2000; Tangney et al., 1989; Tracy & Robins, 2004), and several lines of empirical work support this account (Ashton-James & Tracy, 2012; Carver & Johnson, 2010; Mercadante & Tracy, 2022; Tracy & Robins, 2007; Tracy et al., 2009; see Tracy et al., 2023 for a review). First, when asked to think about and list words relevant to pride, participants consistently generate two very different categories of concepts. The first set, which has been labeled "authentic pride", includes words such as "accomplished" and "confident," and fits with a prosocial, achievement-oriented, earned pride conceptualization. The second set, labeled "hubristic pride", includes words such as "arrogant" and "conceited," and fits with a more self-aggrandizing, egotistical, and undeserved-pride conceptualization (Tracy & Robins, 2007). This same distinction has emerged in studies asking participants to rate their subjective feelings during a pride experience, or the feelings that describe their general dispositional tendency to feel pride (i.e., trait pride). All of these findings were replicated in Mainland China and South Korea, suggesting that the tendency to distinguish between authentic and hubristic pride is not likely to be an artifact of Western culture, and may reflect pride's universal structure (Shi et al., 2013).

Like shame and guilt, the two pride facets are different not only in their content but also their implications for moral behavior. Authentic pride is positively related to prosocial traits like agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability, as well as humility (Tracy & Robins, 2007; Weidman et al., 2018). Furthermore, individuals high in dispositional authentic pride tend to be low in anti-social traits like hostility and aggression, and high in the tendency to support

(and be supported by) others. In contrast, individuals high in hubristic pride tend to be disagreeable and unconscientious, regularly experience hostility, and engage in a range of anti-social misbehaviors (e.g., drug use, petty crimes; Tracy et al., 2009). Not surprisingly given these divergent personality profiles, the pride facets are located in different places on the Interpersonal Circumplex (i.e., the independent dimensions of agency and communion; Kiesler, 1983).

Although individuals high in agency are prone to experiencing both facets of pride, individuals high in communion—meaning those who tend to care for and be oriented toward others—are prone only to authentic pride; hubristic pride shows a negative relationship with communal traits (Cheng et al., 2010). Hubristic pride is also positively associated with psychopathy and Machiavellianism (Bureau et al., 2013; Mercadante & Tracy, 2022; Tracy et al., 2009), two traits that predict of a range of immoral behaviors.

Both forms of pride have been found to promote social status or high rank (e.g., Cheng et al., 2010; Witkower et al., 2022; Tracy et al., 2023) but they seem to do so in different ways, with hubristic pride motivating people to engage in behaviors that are less moral or ethical in their status pursuits. One set of studies found that people high in dispositional hubristic pride were more likely than those low in this emotional tendency to dishonestly exaggerate their performance on a cognitive task (i.e., lie) to a partner whom they knew had outperformed them (Mercadante & Tracy, 2022). Interestingly, these individuals were not more likely to lie if their partner had not outperformed them (i.e., if the partner posed no status threat), nor did they do so to gain benefits other than status enhancement, such as concrete rewards or power. These findings suggest that hubristic pride may facilitate immoral behavior specifically in the context of rank attainment, but it does not promote immoral activity or even false bragging more indiscriminately, in the way that psychopathy and narcissism might. Pride therefore seems not to

be associated with general-purpose immoral tendencies, but rather may be the affective mechanism that nudges people to take advantage of others when doing so is necessary to protect their own status.

Other research suggests that authentic pride may play an important role in another morally questionable trait: greed. Dispositional greed is defined as the desire to acquire more combined with the dissatisfaction of never having enough (Seuntjens et al., 2015a). Although this personality trait has been associated with certain positive characteristics (e.g., greater productivity; Krekels & Pandelaere, 2015), it has more often been linked to unethical behaviors. Greedy individuals are less cooperative in economic games, more likely to cheat on their romantic partners, more likely to lie on tax returns, and less likely to return a lost wallet (Seuntjens et al., 2015b; Seuntjens et al., 2019). Until recently, however, it remained unclear why these individuals demonstrate the critical behavior that defines them as greedy: chronic acquisition. In other words, why are greedy people never satisfied with what they have, and always desiring more?

Across several longitudinal and cross-sectional studies, Mercadante and Tracy (2024) found that individuals high in dispositional greed experienced a sharp boost in authentic pride after a new acquisition, but these feelings were short-lived, dissipating within a week, and thus required repeated boosting from more acquisitions. The desire to increase feelings of authentic pride therefore may be a cause of greedy people's constant acquisitiveness. The additional finding that this pattern was particularly pronounced among those in high greed and low in self-esteem supports this account; greedy people with low self-esteem may be most in need of frequent upticks of authentic pride (the form of pride most closely related to self-esteem).

Several authors have argued that the pride felt in response to moral actions, or behaviors that directly benefit others, must be distinguished from a more generalized pride that can occur in response to morality or achievement (e.g., Etxebarria et al., 2015). These scholars argue that the standard authentic and hubristic pride scales (Tracy & Robins, 2007) are not ideal for capturing moral pride, given, for example, that participants are unlikely to report feeling “egotistical” or “snobbish” (two items on the hubristic pride scale) for pro-social behaviors. Instead, researchers have validated scenario-based measures that more directly target trait levels of authentic and hubristic moral pride (Bai et al., 2022; Ibasco & Tracy, 2024; Krettenauer & Casey, 2015). Similar to their broader counterparts, authentic moral pride occurs in response to appraisals of specific moral behaviors, whereas hubristic moral pride occurs in response to appraisals of an inflated moral character. In a study demonstrating the validity of these measures, authentic moral pride was associated with greater self-reported engagement in prosocial activity, whereas hubristic moral pride predicted fewer prosocial actions (Krettenauer & Casey, 2015).

In addition to motivating behaviors that fall within the moral domain of harm or care, pride also may influence attitudes relevant to the moral domain of fairness. Recent studies have identified two distinct moral values related to fairness: equality, or support for the equal distribution of resources, and proportionality, or support for resource distribution based on deservedness (Atari et al., 2023). In hierarchical social groups, a greater share of resources is typically allocated to those at the top (e.g., leaders) compared to those at the bottom (Brown & Maurer, 1986). Given that the unequal distribution of resources benefits those with high status, it is advantageous for high status individuals to promote proportionality, rather than equality, as a group-guiding moral value. A large body of evidence suggests that pride is elicited by achievements or other events that lead to status gains (e.g., Cheng et al., 2010; Tracy &

Matsumoto, 2008; Tracy & Robins, 2007; Williams & DeSteno, 2009; Witkower et al., 2022), so we might expect pride experiences to increase the value that individuals place on proportionality compared to equality.

There is evidence to support this prediction. First, nonverbal displays of pride communicate an individual's support for meritocracy, a form of proportionality in which resources are distributed based on merit (Horberg et al., 2013; McLatche & Piazza, 2020). When a target individual expresses pride, observers infer that the target endorses merit-based resource distributions over equality-based ones. This effect was mediated by observers' beliefs that proud targets were more self-interested and therefore likely to endorse ideologies that would benefit them. Other studies have shown that adherence to norms of equality is shaped by one's assigned role in a group. De Cremer and van Dijk (2005) found that leaders adhere less to equality values than followers, and this effect is explained by leaders' feelings of entitlement and deservingness. Given that hubristic pride is associated with an increased sense of entitlement and dispositional traits that promote selfish behavior (e.g., Machiavellianism, narcissism), leaders high in hubristic pride may be particularly likely to shape their fairness values around proportionality rather than equality.

Given these findings, observers may attribute selfishness to those displaying pride. This expectation is consistent with research examining how needy targets' pride expressions influence observers' decisions about whether to help them. Tracy and colleagues (2018) coded the nonverbal displays shown by individuals in developing nations who used the website Kiva.org to request financial aid from donors in more economically developed countries. Requesters posted photos of themselves along with a short description of how they planned to use the funds. The researchers used these data to test competing hypotheses: on the one hand, donors might give

more to requesters who display pride, responding to its high-status signal and, presumably, seeing these individuals as more likely to make good on their plans for the funds. On the other hand, donors might infer from proud requesters' high-status signal that they are less needy, and perhaps more entitled, and therefore give them less. Results across two pre-registered studies provided clear and consistent support for the latter hypothesis; displaying pride reduced the amount of aid requesters received by 33-77% across studies, indicating that those asking for help do best by not displaying pride.

### **Group-Based Moral Pride**

Few studies have examined group-based pride, let alone its moral relevance. However, new research has begun to explore the ways in which group-based pride might regulate group-based shame and guilt to promote moral outcomes. As noted above, studies have found that group-based guilt and moral shame have positive implications for intergroup reparations (Hakim et al., 2021). However, these emotions are aversive to experience, as they violate people's basic motivation to view their groups as morally good. As a result, individuals are often reluctant to feel group-based guilt and shame, and tend to respond defensively when reminded of their group's current or past moral transgressions, denying or downplay the immoral acts (Ferguson & Branscombe, 2014; Leach et al., 2002; White & Branscombe, 2019; Wohl et al., 2006).

New data, however, suggest that group-based moral pride might counteract this effect, increasing people's willingness to experience guilt and moral shame for their groups' moral transgressions (Ibasco & Tracy, 2024). Drawing on distinctions previously made between authentic and hubristic moral pride at the individual level (Krettenauer & Casey, 2015; Tracy & Robins, 2007), Ibasco and Tracy (2024) defined group-based authentic moral pride as involving a focus on specific, moral actions taken by ingroup members, and likely associated with low

defensiveness. In contrast, group-based hubristic moral pride was expected to entail an aggrandized, inflated sense of the ingroup's moral character, and to motivate defensiveness against perceived threats to group character. Given this distinction, people experiencing or disposed to group-based hubristic moral pride, compared to group-based authentic moral pride, should be less receptive to feeling or acknowledging group-based guilt or moral shame, and more likely to experience group-based image shame, in response to threats to the ingroup's morality.

A series of studies provided support for these hypotheses. Among non-Indigenous Canadian citizens, dispositional authentic pride in Canada's moral pro-social history was associated with greater guilt and moral shame for Canada's historical genocide of Indigenous people. In contrast, dispositional hubristic pride in Canada's moral reputation was associated with greater image shame, but not group-based guilt or moral shame, for these historical atrocities. In subsequent experimental studies, non-Indigenous Canadians and White Americans were induced to feel authentic moral pride in their respective countries, and this emotion induction led them to feel greater group-based guilt and moral shame for their countries' histories of racism. Moreover, elevated levels of group-based moral shame, caused by the authentic pride induction, led to greater support for intergroup reparations; whereas elevated levels of group-based image shame mediated a relation between group-based hubristic moral pride and a desire to avoid conversations about reparation (Ibasco & Tracy, 2024). These studies provide initial evidence that feelings of pride in one's group's morality may play an important role in moral decision making and behavior in the domain of intergroup relations.

### **Other Self-Relevant Emotions and Morality**



A number of emotions beyond pride, shame, and guilt contribute to individuals' self-perceptions. Although these emotions do not require self-evaluations, and may not always influence the ways in which individuals see themselves, they often affect the self-concept and consequently influence moral behavior. In this section we review a handful of these emotions, which have been found to connect importantly with morality.

### *Awe*

Awe is typically defined as the experience of vastness and accommodation (Keltner & Haidt, 2003), where vastness refers to an awareness of something much larger than oneself, either in physical or social size (e.g., fame); and accommodation refers to the adjustment of mental structures (e.g., knowledge, beliefs) that cannot make sense of (i.e., assimilate) the awe-inducing experience. Accommodation captures the confusion, disorientation, and, at times, fear that accompany experiences of awe. Studies show that the sense of vastness induced by awe leads to a sense of a smaller self (Campos et al., 2013; Piff et al., 2015). This changed self-perception can, in turn, influence moral behavior. As a result of their diminished self-focus, individuals experiencing awe become more inclined to define themselves in terms of larger social categories, rather than in purely individualistic terms (Shiota et al., 2007; van Cappellen & Saroglou, 2012), which in turn allows for a greater focus on others and a motivation to engage with the collective group, promoting ethical decision-making, generosity, and prosocial values more broadly (Piff et al., 2015).

### *Gratitude*

Gratitude is defined as the positive emotional state that arises from a desired outcome that was partially or completely caused by another person (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). In other words, people feel grateful when someone else helps them achieve their goals. Grateful

individuals, in turn, experience an enhanced sense of connectedness with others, humility, and indebtedness (Armenta et al., 2017). They may also feel heightened “elevation”, a positive moral emotion elicited by perceptions of virtuosity and characterized by a warm feeling in the chest that motivates individuals to emulate others’ virtuous behaviors (Haidt, 2003).

Gratitude seems to play an important role in facilitating moral behavior; it can promote self-improvement (Emmons & Mishra, 2011) and a broad range of prosocial behaviors (Ma et al., 2017). More specifically, people feeling gratitude show an increased desire to strengthen social bonds (Algoe, 2012; Fredrickson, 2004); they tend to manage conflicts constructively and seek to spend more time with close others (Baron, 1984; Barlett et al., 2012; Lambert & Fincham, 2011). Moreover, gratitude has been found to promote a “pay it forward” attitude, motivating increased kindness and upstream reciprocity that extends beyond one’s benefactor (i.e., the target of the gratitude) toward improving society at large (Barlett & Desteno, 2006; Nowak & Roch, 2007; Froh et al., 2010).

### *Anger*

According to evolutionary accounts, anger is experienced when an individual believes that their welfare is not sufficiently valued by others (Sznycer et al., 2022). Supporting this account, studies show that individuals’ perceptions of their social value shape the extent to which they experience anger in response to transgressions (Sell et al., 2009). According to the recalibrational theory of anger (Sell et al., 2009; Sell, 2011), the emotion motivates behaviors like intimidation, threatening to impose costs (e.g., cause physical harm), and withholding benefits (e.g., not cooperate in the future), which function to incentivize the anger-eliciting target to recalibrate the angry individual’s welfare (i.e., they come to see the angry person as more valuable). This recalibration, in turn, causes them to reconsider their anger-inducing behaviours.

One implication of this model is that a person's self-concept shapes their tendency to experience anger. Supporting this account, individuals who are more physically formidable, and thus able to inflict greater costs on others (e.g., physical harm), are more prone to anger and more likely to use anger to effectively resolve conflicts (Sell et al., 2009; Wyckoff & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Similarly, individuals who are more physically attractive tend to be perceived as more valuable social partners (Langlois et al., 2000), allowing these individuals to withhold benefits from others (e.g., association with an attractive social partner). Purportedly as a result of this greater bargaining power, physically attractive people have also been found to be more prone to anger and more capable of using it to resolve conflicts (Sell et al., 2009). Individual differences in the propensity to experience anger, in turn, have important consequences for moral decision-making. The most obvious moral consequence is a tendency to treat others with hostility and a willingness to engage in violence (Sell, 2011). However, anger also plays a role in generating the courage and moral outrage required to intervene when witnessing a moral violation (Salerno & Peter-Hagene, 2013; Sasse et al., 2022).

### *Envy*

An additional moral emotion that involves comparisons between the self and others is envy. In contrast to pride, which is experienced in response to one's own (potentially moral) accomplishment, envy is experienced in response to accomplishments of a competitor. It is defined as the negative emotional response to lacking a valuable possession, accomplishment, or quality that someone else has (Parrott & Smith, 1993). Like pride, envy has been found to have two distinct forms—benign and malicious – which promote distinct behaviors. In both cases, envy motivates people to bring an envied other closer to themselves in status or competence, but those who feel benign envy seek to raise their own status, to become as successful as the envied

person; whereas those who feel malicious envy seek to lower the status of the envied person, to eliminate their advantage (Lange & Crusius, 2015). In either case, envy tends to occur only when individuals view themselves as similar to the envied person; a high-school basketball player is more likely to feel envious of a stronger player on their team than of Michael Jordan (Schaubroeck & Lam, 2004). As a result, a person's self-concept and self-evaluations influence which others become targets of envy.

Given its impact on interpersonal relationships, envy has substantial effects on moral behavior. It has been linked to the use of deception in ultimatum games, where an assigned proposer decides how to split a sum of money with a partner, and the responder decides whether to accept the decision. If the responder declines, neither player receives any money, incentivizing proposers to make offers that will seem fair (Moran & Schweitzer, 2008). One study found that when proposers were allowed to lie about the total sum of money available, those who were first made to feel envious of their responder partner were more likely to do so, to increase the likelihood that the responder would accept an unfair proposal. Envy also has been found to increase free-riding in classic public goods dilemmas (Parks et al., 2002), and increase feelings of *schadenfreude* among male students who watched an academically superior male student experiencing a setback (Smith et al., 1996). In general, benign envy has been associated with more prosocial attitudes and behaviors toward the envied target and an increased focus on self-improvement (Crusius & Lange, 2014; van de Ven et al., 2009), whereas malicious envy has been associated with antisocial behavior aimed toward impairing the performance of the envied target (van de Ven et al., 2015). However, both malicious and benign envy are associated with Machiavellianism (Lange et al., 2018), suggesting that both promote a desire to increase one's status relative to others.

## Conclusions and Future Directions

The extant literature on moral identity and moral emotions suggests that certain emotions—especially those that are most intricately interconnected with people’s sense of self—are important elicitors of moral and immoral behavior, and even shape the extent to which individuals come to see their own behavior as moral or immoral. Nonetheless, the research literature integrating distinct emotions with moral behavior is in its infancy, and there is much more to be done. Here, we mention several promising research directions.

First, in integrating the literature on moral identity and moral self-conscious emotions, a trend can be seen in the contrast between possessing an internal vs. external motivation to behave morally, and experiencing self-conscious emotions about one’s immoral behavior or character vs. one’s moral reputation. Those who hold an internalized moral identity may be particularly likely to also show a non-defensive emotional profile, comprised of emotions like guilt, moral shame, and authentic pride, which entail a genuine focus on moral accountability. In contrast, those who have a more external, symbolic moral identity tend to care most about appearing moral to others, and therefore are likely to experience emotions reflecting defensiveness and an egocentric focus, such as image shame and hubristic moral pride. Studies are needed to test these emotion-specific hypotheses.

Future studies are also needed to parse the different functions of self-conscious emotions at different levels of the self. For example, although studies have produced mixed findings for the adaptive benefits of guilt and shame, results seem especially equivocal at the group level of identity, where both emotions tend to promote similar prosocial tendencies (see Hakim et al., 2021, for a meta-analysis). A growing body of work also suggests that group-based moral shame more strongly predicts prosocial intentions than group-based guilt (Allpress et al., 2014;

Grigoryan et al., 2024; Ibasco & Tracy, 2024). Although theories offer possible explanations for these findings (Gausel, 2012; Gausel & Brown, 2012), studies have yet to conclusively test these accounts, or the boundary conditions and mechanisms through which shame promotes more adaptive moral outcomes than guilt. Important studies might examine whether interpersonal vs. intergroup transgressions differently elicit feelings of guilt and shame, or moderate the associations between each emotion and reparation intentions. It remains possible (and seems likely) that guilt, and not shame, is the emotion most predictive of reparations in response to interpersonal, but not intergroup transgressions.

Future research might also investigate how pride influences fairness judgments surrounding equality and proportionality. Previous research has shown that anticipated pride increases a motivation to abide by principles of equality (van der Schalk et al., 2012). However, other studies show that individuals displaying pride are assumed to value proportionality (Horberg et al., 2013). Given the burgeoning literature on proportionality and equality as distinct values (Atari et al., 2023) and the relevance of both forms of fairness to pride's social function (i.e., to acquire and benefit from social status), more research is needed to investigate these interrelations. These findings also raise questions for when pride displays are likely to be more or less functional. The extent to which equality (compared to proportionality) is valued varies between individuals and cultures (Atari et al., 2023). Given that pride displays communicate that the displayer values proportionality, these displays may be less adaptive in cultures that value equality. Supporting this expectation, villagers in a small-scale traditional society in Fiji were found to judge pride displays as less deserving of high status than happiness displays, in contrast to the reverse pattern seen among North Americans (Tracy et al., 2014). Future research might

investigate whether cross-cultural differences in equality (vs. proportionality) values contribute to this cultural distinction.

In summary, a substantial body of evidence supports the importance of self-conscious and self-relevant emotions to moral psychology. These emotions inform individuals of moral congruencies and incongruencies in their own behavior, and motivate behavioral change (or consistency) to address these observations. We hope that this review serves as a useful starting point for scholars who wish to continue exploring the relevance of these emotions to the moral domain, perhaps eventually returning guilt, shame, and pride to their early status as “moral emotions.”

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