

The Perks and Pitfalls of Pride

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Pride has perplexed philosophers and theologians for centuries, and it is an especially paradoxical emotion in American culture. We applaud rugged individualism, self-reliance and personal excellence, but too much pride can easily tip the balance toward vanity, haughtiness and self-love. Scientists have also been perplexed by this complex emotion, because it is so unlike primary emotions like fear and disgust.

University of British Columbia psychologist, Jessica Tracy, and Richard Robins of the University of California, Davis, have been exploring the origins and purpose of pride, both in the laboratory and in the field. They wanted to know if pride is as universal as, say, joy or anger.

In the June issue of *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, Tracy and Robins review several recent studies on the nature and function of pride.

In one experiment, researchers used photographs of models with varying facial expressions and body language, asking subjects to identify the nonverbal signs of pride. And they did indeed find a prototypical prideful look, which was recognized by children as young as four, and people in many different cultures, including members of an isolated, preliterate tribe in Burkina Faso, West Africa.

So, pride appears to be universal, but that still leaves the question: What is it? What is its purpose? To explore this, Tracy and Robins first asked people to come up with words that they associated with pride. They found that either people link pride to such achievement-oriented ideas as accomplishment and confidence (authentic pride) or, people connect pride to self-aggrandizement, arrogance and conceit (hubristic pride).

People who tend to feel authentic pride were more likely to score high on extraversion, agreeableness, genuine self-esteem and conscientiousness. However, those who tend to feel hubristic pride were narcissistic and prone to shame. Further, they found that people who felt positive, achievement-oriented feelings of pride viewed hard work as the key to success in life, whereas hubristic people tended to view success as predetermined, due to their stable abilities.

Tracy and Robins argue that the primitive precursors of pride probably motivated our ancestors to act in altruistic and communitarian ways, for the good of the tribe, and the physical display of pride both reinforced such behavior and signaled to the group that this person was worthy of respect. So individual pride, at least the good kind, contributed in important ways to the survival of the community.

But what about pride's dark side? Tracy and Robins speculate that hubris might have been a social "short cut," a way of tricking others into paying respect when it was not warranted. Those who could not earn respect the old-fashioned way figured out how to look and act accomplished in order to gain status.

Social cheaters puffed themselves up because deep down they did not have what it took to succeed in their world. Whatever respect they got would have been fleeting, of course, as it is today.