

Study of Olympic athletes shows that pride and shame are universal and innate expressions

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The victory stance of a gold medalist and the slumped shoulders of a non-finalist are innate and biological rather than learned responses to success and failure, according to a University of British Columbia study using cross-cultural data gathered at the 2004 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

In the first study of its kind, UBC psychology researcher Jessica Tracy investigated how pride and shame are expressed across cultures, and among the congenitally blind. She compared the non-verbal expressions and body language of sighted, blind, and congenitally blind judo competitors representing more than 30 countries, among them Algeria, Taiwan, North Korea, the Ukraine and the United States.

Asst. Prof. Tracy's findings – published in this week's online Early Edition of the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* – show that the individuals displayed pride and shame behaviours in response to the same success and failure situations.

Pride, unlike fear, anger or joy – which are categorized as primary emotions – has received little research attention in the past, explains Tracy. Her work explores how pride as an innate human biological response has evolved through time and shapes human social dynamics.

"Since congenitally blind individuals could not have learned pride and shame behaviors from watching others, these displays of victory or

defeat are likely to be an innate biological propensity in humans, rather than learned behaviour," says Tracy.

Tracy and co-author Psychology Prof. David Matsumoto of San Francisco State University analyzed photos taken by an official International Judo Federation photographer who was not told about the specific research goals. The photographer shot the athletes during and immediately after each match, repeatedly for approximately 15 seconds, allowing for a series of moment-by-moment images of each behavioural response.

The researchers coded the athletes' head, arms and body positions. They found that winning athletes, both sighted and blind and across all cultures, tended to raise their arms, tilt their head up and puff out their chest. Also largely universal were the expressions of defeat, which include slumped shoulders and a narrowed chest.

The researchers found that, to some extent, culture moderated the shame response among sighted athletes. It was less pronounced among individuals from highly individualistic, self-expression-valuing cultures, primarily in North America and West Eurasian countries. However, congenitally blind athletes across cultures showed the shame response, suggesting that the cultural difference found among sighted athletes was due to the Western cultural norm of hiding one's shame.

"These findings support evolutionary accounts that pride and shame would have been powerful mechanisms in enhancing or inhibiting an individual's social status," says Tracy.

Source: University of British Columbia

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