

# The psychology of pride

June 13 2017, by Neil Mclatchie

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The Greek philosopher Aristotle described pride as the "[crown of the virtues](#)". It's after all an emotion we experience when we've achieved something great, or when someone close to us has. It usually has a

recognisable physical expression – a slight smile, the head tilted back, the chest expanded, with arms raised or akimbo. Think Superman after he's defeated a villain.

Yet pride often gets a bad rep. While it can help us feel dignified and aware of our self-worth – ensuring that others do not walk all over us – it can seemingly interfere with empathy and make us come across as arrogant and egocentric. Pride comes before a fall, goes the saying. It is also one of the seven deadly sins, sitting alongside terrible traits such as envy, greed and arrogance.

So would it be better if we didn't feel pride at all? Let's take a look at what modern psychologists think.

## **Beware of hubris**

Much of the research in this area has focused on determining whether pride is good or bad for us. A solution has been to split it into two emotions: hubristic pride and authentic pride. Some researchers argue that hubristic pride is [what leads to states of arrogance and smugness](#), while authentic pride is what promotes confidence and fulfilment.

However, others say that this splitting of prides may be too simplistic. In fact, some argue that [hubristic pride doesn't really qualify](#) as an emotion at all. It's not that arrogant people are feeling a different emotion than non-arrogant people. The emotion of pride is present in both cases. Hubris is mainly about how someone communicates their pride to others. This is when pride might become problematic.

According to this research, people who express their pride in a hubristic or arrogant manner are those who tend to score high on narcissism, and who are less conscientious about how they present themselves socially. Consider US president, Donald Trump, who is [often accused of](#)

[narcissism](#). Many people thought he came across as hubristic when hitting back against reports that his [inauguration drew significantly fewer people](#) than his predecessor Barack Obama's.

Meanwhile, when Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the British Labour Party, said he was "very proud" of his party's 2017 general election results it seemed more understandable. Corbyn dramatically outperformed expectations, overcoming seemingly insurmountable hurdles. But to many people he comes across as a more humble individual. However there is no reason to assume he is experiencing pride to any less degree than Trump.

## **Moral emotion?**

When you look at the causes and consequences of pride, it emerges that pride may be a core moral emotion. Moral emotions encourage pro-social behaviour and group harmony. But how could pride – an emotion that seems so self-focused – be considered a moral emotion?

In a [forthcoming review of the literature](#), Jared Piazza and I found that pride is often elicited by actions that are considered socially praiseworthy. That is, we often feel proud about actions we think others will admire. For example, adults don't tend to feel pride when they lace up their shoes in the morning, but a young child might if they think their parents will praise them for it. Pride therefore is quite socially oriented.

[A study](#) conducted outside of the lab by Jeanne Nakamura obtained experiences of people feeling pride at work and at home. This research found that most situations that elicited high levels of pride were "social" in nature. That is, pride was experienced most strongly when others were around, such as family members or work clients.

Another study [demonstrated the social aspect of pride beautifully](#).

Participants were told that they had performed exceptionally well on a difficult task. Some of the participants were also praised for their performance ("great job!"). The participants that received this additional praise reported feeling more pride and tended to persevere longer in subsequent similar tasks. The study demonstrates that pride can motivate behaviours that are likely to bring us social praise.

That pride is experienced in response to achievements associated with social or moral value might encourage people to "stand their ground" to a greater extent than people who don't experience pride about a topic. Of course, in such instances, such pride – accompanied by the [increased self-esteem](#) and confidence associated with pride – might simply come across as stubbornness.

From an evolutionary perspective, the tendency to experience pride likely [benefited our ancestors in a number of ways](#). First, by motivating people to achieve socially approved goals, pride can motivate us to contribute to society. By doing so, it can enhance the social status of the achiever – granting them greater influence over group resources and decision making. This can be especially effective depending on how we communicate that pride to others. For instance, raising one's hands in the air after winning a sporting event might be considered appropriate, but raising one's hands in the air after winning an argument with a romantic partner might be deemed as slightly less appropriate.

While pride can certainly lead to arrogant displays, this may be more about personality than the emotion of [pride](#) itself. Pride as an emotion seems to be quite functional and exist to encourage people to engage in socially valued behaviours more likely to bind people together than to separate and divide.

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