



How Expectations Influence Self-conscious Emotional Experience

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Introduction

Extant theories suggest people feel self-conscious emotions (SCE) when they succeed or fail at self-relevant tasks (Tracy & Robins, 2004). But do they still feel SCE when everyone else succeeds at the same task? Then success is socially expected, so it says little about a person's distinct traits, skills, and abilities (Bem, 1972; Jones & Davis, 1965). We predicted people would feel proud if they exceeded social expectations by giving more to charity than other people gave. If they gave as much to charity as others gave, we predicted they would feel good, but not proud. If they gave less than others, we predicted they would feel shame and guilt.

Methods

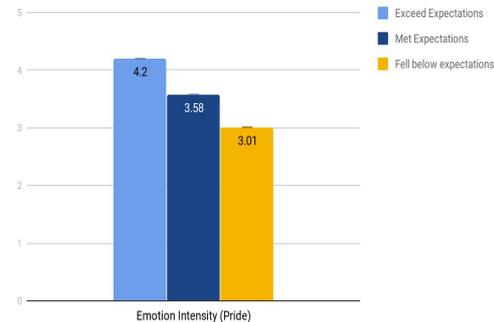
289 UBC psychology undergraduates volunteered to complete boring tasks to earn money for charity. After completing the task, participants learned how much money other participants raised. Here, we manipulated social expectations: participants learned they raised \$.35 more than other participants (exceed expectations), \$.05 more or less than other participants (meet expectations), or \$.35 less than other participants (fell below expectations). Then they reported how intensely (1-7) they felt pride, shame, guilt, and other positive and negative emotions.

When people give to others, they usually feel the “warm glow” of positive emotions.

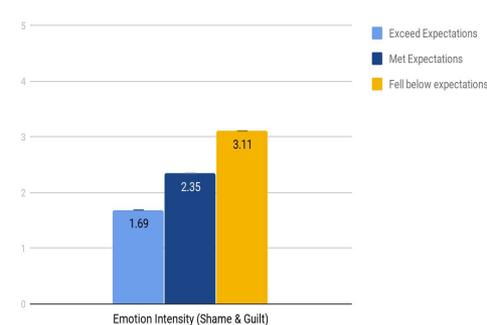
But when people donate *more* than others, they feel **pride**, distinct from positive emotions.

And when people donate *less* than others, they feel **guilt and shame**, instead of positive emotions.

Do people feel greater pride when they exceed expectations?



Do they feel greater shame & guilt when they fall below expectations?



Results

We tested a regression model comparing how much pride participants felt in our three conditions. We found participants felt more pride when they exceeded expectations ($M = 4.20$), compared to when they met ($M = 3.58$) or fell below expectations ($M = 3.01$; all contrasts $p < .005$). In addition, participants felt more shame and guilt when they fell below expectations ($M = 3.11$) than when they met ($M = 2.35$) or exceeded expectations ($M = 1.69$; $p < .005$). Analyses controlled for self-esteem

Testing a 2x2 ANOVA, we found these effects were specific to SCE: when participants exceeded expectations, they felt more pride than other positive emotions ($p < .05$). When participants fell below expectations, they felt more guilt and shame than other negative emotions ($p < .001$).

Discussion

These results suggest that people feel SCE not merely when they succeed or fail at self-relevant tasks like generously donating to charity. Rather, they feel SCE when they depart from expectations, such as by donating more or less than others. SCE might signal changes in one's abilities or traits, relative to others.

References

- Bem, D. J. (1972). Self-Perception Theory. *Adv. in Exp. Soc. Psy.*, 6, 1-62.
- Jones, E. E., & Davis, K. E. (1965). From Acts To Dispositions: The Attribution Process In Person Perception. *Adv. in Exp. Soc. Psy.*, 2, 219-266.
- Tracy, J. L., & Robins, R. W. (2004). Putting the Self Into Self-Conscious Emotions: A Theoretical Model. *Psy. Inq.*, 15, 103-125.