COMMENTARIES

What Is Unique About Self-Conscious Emotions?

Jennifer S. Beer and Dacher Keltner

Department of Psychology
University of California, Berkeley

In their target article, Tracy and Robins (this issue) offer a far-reaching and generative theory of self-conscious emotion. The central assertion is that the self-conscious emotions differ from other well-studied emotions, such as fear or anger, and their understanding requires concepts from the self literature. The focus of this commentary is to sharpen the discussion regarding the unique facets of the self-conscious emotions, in terms of how they differ from other emotions and from one another. The commentary concludes by positing self-regulatory function as the most unique characteristic of self-conscious emotion.

Differentiating Between Self-Conscious Emotions and Other Emotions

A main focus of the model proposed by Tracy and Robins (this issue) is to identify the characteristics of self-conscious emotions that differentiate them from other emotions that have been considered more basic. However, closer examination of the proposed characteristics raises several questions about their unique role in self-conscious emotion.

First, some of the cognitive properties proposed to be specific to self-conscious emotions are perhaps better characterized as relevant to emotions in general. For example, studies showing that self-focused attention increases emotional experiences are suggested to support the hypothesis that self-conscious emotions specifically require attention to the self. However, self-focused attention increases all kinds of emotions, not just self-conscious emotions (e.g., Beer, Heerey, Keltner, Scabini, & Knight, 2003; Scheier & Carver, 1977). Therefore, why conclude that self-focused attention plays a unique role in self-conscious emotion?

Similarly, attributions of globality and stability are theorized to distinguish different self-conscious emotions from one another. However, these types of attributions differentiate other emotions from one another (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Weiner, 1985). For exam-

ple, criminal actions that are attributed to stable characteristics of the defendant evoke anger, whereas criminal actions attributed to situational factors evoke sympathy (Weiner, 1993). It is more likely the case that varying degrees of self-directed attention and different attributions alter the intensity, quality, and content of many different emotions.

Second, self-conscious emotions are theorized to differ from other emotions based on their nonverbal display. In many ways, the summarized evidence of the displays of self-conscious emotions relies too heavily on the assumption that facial muscle actions have special status as elements of emotional displays. In particular, self-conscious emotions are claimed to lack universally recognized facial expressions. It is true that there may be no facial actions uniquely associated with the individual's experience of self-conscious emotion or observers' judgments of self-conscious emotion. However, empirical studies have shown that shame and embarrassment can be communicated via a combination of facial actions, postural changes (e.g., head movements down), and gaze activity (e.g., Bonanno et al., 2002; Keltner, 1995). Postural, head, and eye movements are considered to render the nonverbal display of self-conscious emotions more complex than facial movements, but justification for this claim is unclear. However, these signals have many of the dynamic properties that differentiate facial expressions of emotion from other kinds of displays: they lasted about 5 sec, and their actions occur in a coherent, coordinated pattern, similar to other evolved signals (Keltner, 1995). Furthermore, there is evidence that these displays are universally recognized. In particular, participants from rural India and the United States reliably identified displays of embarrassment and shame from photographs at above-chance levels. Embarrassment was identified at an identification rate similar to other emotions such as fear (Haidt & Keltner, 1999; see also Izard, 1977).

Third, unsatisfying arguments are proposed to account for the lack of universal facial expressions of

self-conscious emotion. For example, self-conscious emotions are proposed to be more readily communicated through spoken language, yet it is widely held that shame is quite difficult to admit and discuss. It also seems unlikely that a lack of communicative urgency is really the crux of why some emotions have nonverbal displays but self-conscious emotions do not. If self-conscious emotions have evolved for maintaining group bonds and social order, why would they not be important to communicate to others? For example, research suggests that the display of embarrassment has an appeasing effect on those one has transgressed against (Keltner, 1995) and therefore may ward off attack or rejection. Conversely, it is unclear why sadness or amusement would need to be urgently communicated. Finally, self-conscious emotions are theorized to be more maladaptive to express and subsequently subject to greater regulation. This assumption seems most true of pride in different cultures but is problematic if these emotions are theorized to meet evolutionary pressures.

Finally, the evolutionary pressures specific to self-conscious emotions need to be clarified. It is claimed that self-conscious emotions will not arise from situations that have implications for fitness, such as waiting for the results of an important medical test. However, it seems possible that self-conscious emotions may be associated with fitness concerns. For example, guilt or shame may arise if a medical test was necessary because an individual's careless behavior compromised his or her health (i.e., contracting a sexually transmitted disease from unprotected sex). In addition, the model is unclear about why self-conscious emotions have evolved. The first part of the article focused on the intergroup regulatory function of self-conscious emotion whereas the latter portion seems to focus on the importance of self-conscious emotions for regulating identity goals. In its current form, the proposed model focuses on one kind of regulatory function (i.e., intergroup) to hypothesize antecedent evolutionary pressures but then focuses on another kind of regulatory function (i.e., identity goals) to make specific behavioral predictions. The model would benefit from a little more explanation of the relation between evolutionary pressures and the function of self-conscious emotions.

Differentiating Among Self-Conscious Emotions

In addition to distinguishing self-conscious emotions from other emotions, Tracy and Robins (this issue) summarize numerous studies devoted to differentiating self-conscious emotions from one another. Tracy and Robins suggest that this literature shows that embarrassment is less cognitively complex than other self-conscious emotions, such as guilt,

shame, and pride. Although it may be true that embarrassment can occur with less cognitive effort than other self-conscious emotions, it may be misleading to categorize embarrassment as less cognitively complex. In particular, definitions of embarrassment (as well as pride) frequently include the vicarious elicitation of this emotion in addition to self-generated experiences. In other words, we may become embarrassed or take pride in our own actions just as much as we experience these feelings in response to witnessing someone else's faux pas or accomplishment. This may not be the case as frequently for other self-conscious emotions. For example, we are angry if someone else's actions offend us, we are ashamed if find our own actions offensive. The inclusion of self and other antecedents for embarrassment and pride suggests that they may be more cognitively complex than guilt and shame.

New Evidence for the Self-Regulatory Function of Self-Conscious Emotions

Perhaps the unique characteristic of self-conscious emotions is their role in self-regulation. In other words, the self-conscious emotions are particularly important for helping individuals recognize and correct their social mistakes. For example, the experience of self-conscious emotions provides internal feedback about a specific goal, expectation, or standard that has been violated. The specific nature of the violation is specific to particular self-conscious emotions. Violations of social conventions may result in embarrassment, violations of character ideals are associated with shame, and violations of rules related to harm, justice, and rights are related to guilt (Keltner & Buswell, 1997).

Second, the outward displays of the different self-conscious emotions serve different appeasement functions. These displays serve as vital social signals that remediate social interactions that have gone awry. They provide information to observers that the individual is committed to social norms and morals and feels some remorse for the preceding transgression. Furthermore, the display of self-conscious emotion leads to emotions and behaviors in others that help remedy social transgressions (see Keltner & Buswell, 1997, for relevant citations). These studies have exposed participants to displays of self-conscious emotions in different ways: Participants have watched an individual knock over a supermarket display, informed a confederate of bad news, judged a hypothetical defendant convicted of selling drugs, or judged political candidates. Across these different methods, participants were more likely to forgive, like, and approach the individual who displayed self-conscious emotion more than the comparison individual who displayed other nonverbal behavior or no emotion (Cupach & Metts, 1990, 1992; Cupach, Metts, & Hazleton, 1986; Keltner, Young, & Buswell, 1997; Semin & Manstead,

1982; Sharkey, 1991; Sharkey & Stafford, 1990; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). In addition, parents punish children less if they display embarrassment and related behavior following transgressions (Semin & Papadopoulou, 1990).

The most direct evidence for the regulatory function of self-conscious emotion comes from recent patient research (Beer et al., 2003). In this research, the social regulation function of self-conscious emotions was examined by comparing healthy participants with a neuropsychological population (i.e., patients with orbitofrontal damage) characterized by selective regulatory deficits. If self-conscious emotions are associated with the regulation of social behavior, then individuals who consistently violate the norms governing social behavior should show deficits in their self-conscious emotions. Participants took part in two social interaction tasks. The first task was a nickname game in which participants had to tease experimenters by making up nicknames for them. This task required behavioral regulation because teasing between strangers must be done in an apologetic, submissive manner (Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig, & Monarch, 1998). It was expected that the patients would tease more inappropriately than healthy controls. Furthermore, if self-conscious emotions are important for regulating social behavior, then we expected that the patients would not be embarrassed by their inappropriate behavior. The second task was an overpraise task in which participants generated a title for a boring paragraph. After announcing their title, they were excessively praised for 2 min. This task required accurate monitoring (a component of self-regulation) for individuals to realize that it was not necessary to modestly accept the praise by showing embarrassment. It was expected that the patients would not recognize the mismatch between their behavior and their praise and show more modest embarrassment than control participants.

The findings of this study support the hypothesis that disrupted self-conscious emotions are indeed associated with poor behavioral regulation. As expected, patients' teasing behavior was judged to be more inappropriate than that of controls, however patients tended to be proud rather than embarrassed by their behavior. In addition, patients were not able to recognize the absurdity of the praise for their title and were much more likely to show embarrassment than control participants. Taken together these findings suggest that patients' with orbitofrontal damage self-conscious emotions reinforced their poor regulation and monitoring rather than correcting it.

Conclusion

The model proposed by Tracy and Robins (this issue) spans a wide range of research and with a little clarification will provide a valuable framework for understanding self-conscious emotions. The regulation of social behavior is a fundamental property of everyday human interaction, and more research is needed to understand the role of self-conscious emotions in this process.

Note

Jennifer S. Beer and Dacher Keltner, Department of Psychology, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720. E-mail: jbeer@socrates.berkeley.edu; keltner@socrates.berkeley.edu

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Digging Deeper: The Fundamental Nature of "Self-Conscious" Emotions

Mark R. Leary

Department of Psychology
Wake Forest University

The so-called self-conscious emotions—such as embarrassment, social anxiety, pride, guilt, and shame—undoubtedly constitute a distinct category of emotional experience that differs in important ways from emotions—such as anger, sadness, and fear—that have attracted the greatest attention from emotion researchers. Perhaps most important, the self-conscious emotions require self-awareness and, thus, are not seen in animals without the capacity for self-reflection or in human infants who have not yet acquired the ability to think consciously about themselves (Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979; Mitchell, 2003). Thus, these emotions must have emerged relatively late in evolutionary history, after self-awareness appeared in the lineage that led to modern human beings (see Leary & Buttermore, 2003).

Since Darwin (1872/1998), all theories of emotion have assumed that the capacity for emotional experience evolved because it had adaptive value in helping organisms deal with recurrent challenges and opportunities in their physical and social environments (Frijda, 1986). The subjective, motivational, and behavioral features of emotions help animals deal with events that have implications for their reproductive fitness, including events involving mating, the nurturance and protection of offspring, relations with conspecifics, food acquisition, safety from predators and other dangers, and so on. The big question, then, is what do self-conscious emotions do? It is easy to see the tangible benefits of fear (to avoid dangers) or anger (to attack threats), however what are the evolutionary functions of guilt or embarrassment or pride? What is the adaptive significance of self-conscious emotions, and why is their function tied to self-awareness in a way that differs from other categories of emotion?

Tracy and Robins (this issue) propose that self-conscious emotions occur when people "become aware that they have lived up to, or failed to live up to, some actual or ideal self- representation." Thus, according to this view, self-conscious emotions help to promote adherence to one's actual or ideal self-representations. Furthermore, Tracy and Robins suggest that these emotions "promote the attainment of specifically social goals" by motivating and coordinating behaviors that lead to outcomes essential to an inherently social animal that depends on complex, shifting interpersonal relationships to survive and reproduce. Specifically, they suggest that these emotions compel people to behave in ways that are socially valued and to avoid doing things that might lead to disapproval.

I agree entirely with the claim that self-conscious emotions are involved in the maintenance of social relationships (see Leary, Koch, & Hechenbleikner, 2001; Miller & Leary, 1992) but would like to put a somewhat different spin on the role that the self plays in this process. Specifically, I do not think that self-conscious emotions are fundamentally about living up to one's own actual or ideal self-representations as Tracy and Robins (this issue) suggest. Self-awareness is certainly an essential aspect of these emotional reactions, however self-conscious emotions are not fundamentally about people's stable self-representations.

As Tracy and Robins (this issue) note, self-conscious emotions are social emotions that help to regulate people's interpersonal behavior. Of course, all emotions, including those that we do not label "self-conscious" (such as anger and fear), often emerge within interpersonal interactions and regulate interpersonal behavior, however these other emotions