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The Self-Conscious Emotions

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Introduction

Until recently, the self-conscious emotions have been poorly studied.[1] Little research on their meaning, how they develop, and how individual differences arises have been conducted, even though Charles Darwin discussed them in some detail as far back as his book, The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals.[2] Darwin's observations were not followed up by neither psychoanalysis nor developmental psychopathology until about 40 years ago. In part, this was due to Freud's focus on guilt and on the confusion between such self-conscious emotions as embarrassment, guilt and shame. In fact, Darwin's observations and theorizing were not able to differentiate these different self-conscious emotions, in large part due to his measurement of the self-conscious emotions, where he used blushing behaviour. While blushing is a useful behaviour to measure, many people do not blush. Moreover, blushing is a measure of self reflection in the presence of other people, most noticeable embarrassment, but is not a measure of all the other self-conscious emotions such as shame, guilt or pride. While Darwin recognized the role of a person's thoughts, especially around the emotion of embarrassment, he did not use cognitive capacities as a way to differentiate between them.

Subject

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Michael Lewis, in his studies of the origins of the self-conscious emotions, makes the point that to understand the ontogenesis of these emotions in children, it is necessary to consider the cognitive development of the child which likely give rise to them.[3,4,5] Indeed, using the evolution of the cognitive capacity to represent the self, he has suggested that the emergence, both phylogenetically and ontogenically, of the mental representation of "me" or self-reflected awareness, provides the capacities most necessary for the emergence of these self-conscious emotions.[4] It is the capacity to think about the self (self reflection or awareness) along with other emerging cognitive capacities that provides the basis for these emotions starting at the end of the second year of life. Thus, while early action patterns such as fear, anger and joy emerge in the first year of life, some even in the early months of life, it is not until self reflection/awareness – or what Lewis has called "consciousness," the mental representation of "me," – emerges in the second half of the second year of life that we see the earliest of these self-conscious emotions.[5,6]

Problem

What are the Self-Conscious Emotions?

The set of the self-conscious emotions include embarrassment, jealousy, empathy as well as shame, guilt, hubris and pride. I have called the first group the exposed self-conscious emotions since they require the cognitive ability to reflect on the self but do not require elaborate cognitive capacities such as the understanding of rules and standards. These first self-conscious emotions appear in the second half of the second year of life when the emergence of self awareness gives rise to such emotions as embarrassment, empathy and jealousy.

Embarrassment is a complex emotion that first emerges when self awareness allows for the idea of "me." At this point the child comes to understand that "she/he" is the object of another's attention. The attention of others acts as an elicitor of embarrassment. So, for example, complimenting a toddler may cause the child embarrassment; even pointing to the child and saying his/her name can produce this effect. Empathy also emerges at this time since the child can now place himself/herself in the role of the other.[7] Finally, jealousy also appears since, again, the child is capable of knowing that another has what she/he wants. These early self-conscious emotions appear during at age 15-24 months. They are not the consequence of the child's knowledge of the standards, rules and goals (SRGs) of the people around him/her, they are the direct consequence of children's ability to consider themselves in their interactions with others.

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In the third year of life, children begin to incorporate the SRGs of their family and peers. This new capacity gives rise to a new set of emotions, one which I have called self-conscious evaluative emotions.[5,8] They include a new form of embarrassment as well as guilt, shame, pride and hubris. Embarrassment now occurs as a less intense form of shame. The child experiences embarrassment when in the company of others it violates the SRG of the culture. At this point, the child's embarrassment can occur both as a function of being the object of another's attention in and of himself/herself, and also because of being the object of other's attention because of a failure of some SRG.

Shame is the product of a complex set of cognitive activities: the evaluation of individual's actions in regard to their SRGs and their global evaluation of the self. The phenomenological experience of the person having shame is that of a wish to hide, disappear or die.[1,9] It is a highly negative and painful state which also results in the disruption of ongoing behaviour, confusion in thought and an inability to speak. There are specific actions people employ when shamed[1] such as reinterpreting the causes of the shame, self-splitting (multiple personalities), or forgetting (repression). Shame is not produced by any specific situation but rather by the individual's interpretation of the event.

The emotion of guilt or regret is produced when individuals evaluate their behaviour as failure but focus on the specific features of the self, or on the self's action which led to the failure. Unlike shame, where the focus is on the global self, here the individual focuses on the self's actions and behaviours which are likely to repair the failure. Because the cognitive attributional process focuses on the action of the self rather than on the totality of self, the feeling that is produced – guilt – is not as intensely negative as shame and does not lead to confusion and to the loss of action, but is associated with it a corrective action which the individual can do to repair the failure.

Because in guilt the focus is on a specific attribution, individuals are capable of ridding themselves of this emotional state through action. The corrective action can be directed toward the self as well as toward the other; thus, unlike shame which is a melding of the self as subject and object, in guilt the self is differentiated from the object. As such, the emotion is less intense and more capable of dissipation.

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Hubris is defined as exaggerated pride or self-confidence often resulting in retribution. It is an example of pridefulness, something dislikeable and to be avoided. Hubris is a consequence of an evaluation of success of one's standards, rules and goals where the focus is on the global self. In this emotion, the individual focuses on the total self as successful. It is associated with such descriptions as "puffed up." In extreme cases, it is associated with grandiosity or with narcissism.[10] Mueller and Dweck[11] have shown that too much praise of children may result in negative performance, the assumed mechanism may be in the enhancement of hubris in the children so treated. In fact, hubristic is defined as to be insolent or contemptuous.

From the outside, other people view the individual having hubris with some disdain. Prideful people have difficulty in their interpersonal relations since their own hubris is likely to interfere with the wishes, needs and desires of others, in which case there is likely to be interpersonal conflict. Moreover, given the contemptuousness associated with hubris, the "other" is likely to be shamed by the nature of the actions of the person having this emotion. At least three problems are associated with the prideful person: (1) it is a transient but addictive emotion; (2) it is not related to a specific action and, therefore, requires altering patterns of goal-setting or evaluation around what constitutes success; and (3) it interferes with interpersonal relationships because of its contemptuous and insolent nature.

Pride is the consequence of a successful evaluation of a specific action. The phenomenological experience is "joy over an action, thought or feeling well done." Here, again, the focus of pleasure is specific and related to a particular behaviour. In pride, the self and object are separated as in guilt. Unlike shame and hubris, where subject and object are fused, pride focuses the organism on its specific action. The organism is engrossed in a specific action which gives it pride. Because this positive state is associated with a particular action, individuals have available to themselves the means by which they can reproduce the state. Notice that, unlike hubris, pride's specific focus allows for action. Because of the general use of the term "pride" to refer to "hubris," "efficacy," and "satisfaction," the study of pride as hubris has received relatively little attention. Dweck and Leggett[12] similarly have approached this problem through the use of individuals' implicit theories about the self which are cognitive attributions that serve as the stimuli for the elicitation of the self-conscious emotion of mastery.

Implications

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All of emotional life takes place in a social environment. From the beginning of life the early emotional expressions such as joy, sadness, fear, anger, disgust and interest, are affected by the social world. The situations that illicit these emotions and their expressions are affected by the rules of their parents, siblings and peers. Thus, it is safe to conclude that even these early emotional expressions are socialized. Even so, there is some reason to believe that these early emotional expressions themselves are not learned but have an evolutionary adaptive significance for the species.[13]

What is clear is that as we move from these early emotional action patterns to self-conscious emotions, socialization plays an increasing role in determining what situation elicit what emotions, as well as how they are expressed. One might think of development of emotional life as requiring an ever increasing socialization influence.

In our cognitive-attributional model of the development of the self-conscious emotions, we see that the SRGs the child incorporates as part of its socialization. Standards, rules and goals have to be learned by the child, both through direct learning or through indirect observation.[14] The SRGs constitute the information the child acquires through culturalization to a particular society and family. How the child evaluates his/her actions, thoughts and feelings is learned. In one family the child's action, for example, in getting a "B" on an exam, is considered a success while in another, a failure. Evaluations are culturally determined, success and failure are cultural artifacts. Moreover, how the child evaluates himself/herself or his/her self attribution, whether he/she sees himself/herself in a global fashion or in a specific fashion is also learned. Global attributions give rise to shame and hubris while specific attribution give rise to guilt and pride.

Our discussion of self-conscious emotions requires us to note that in order to understand them we must keep in mind that the biology of the species, and the cultural rules that surround the child, along with the child's specific dispositional functions like temperament, are all necessary for the understanding of their development. The emergence of the self-conscious evaluative emotions, also called the moral emotions, truly marks the human condition and which sets us apart from the rest of the animal world.

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