A New Look at Pride

DAVID G. MYERS

Poised somewhere between sinful vanity and self-destructive submissiveness is a golden mean of self-esteem appropriate to the human condition.

—STANFORD LYMAN

Of the benefits of high self-esteem, there is little doubt. Those with positive self-image are happier, freer of ulcers and insomnia, less prone to drug and alcohol addictions. Researchers have also found that people whose egos are temporarily deflated—say, by being told that they did miserably on an intelligence test—are more likely to derogate other people or even express heightened racial prejudice. More generally, people who are negative about themselves also tend to be negative about others. Low self-esteem can feed contemptuous attitudes.

Of the benefits of “positive thinking,” there is also little doubt. Those who believe they can control their own destinies—who have what researchers in more than a thousand studies have called “internal locus of control”—achieve more, make more money, are less vulnerable to being manipulated. Believe that things are beyond your control and they probably will be. Believe that you can do it, and maybe you will.

Knowing such to be true may encourage us not to resign to bad situations, to persist despite initial failures, to strive without being derailed by self-doubts. But as Pascal taught, no single truth is ever sufficient, because the world is not simple. Any truth, separated from its complementary truth, is a half-truth. That high self-esteem and positive thinking pay dividends is true. Equally true, though more often forgotten, are the pitfalls of pride. So let us examine social psychology’s new version of ancient wisdom about the pervasiveness of pride.

THE SELF-SERVING BIAS

It is popularly believed that most of us suffer the “I’m not OK—you’re OK” problem of low self-esteem. As Groucho Marx put it, “I’d never join any club that would accept a person like me.” Carl Rogers described this low self-image problem when objecting to Reinhold Niebuhr’s idea that original sin is self-love and pretension. To the contrary, declared Rogers, “the central core of difficulty in people as I have come to know them . . . is that in the great majority of cases they despise themselves, regard themselves as worthless and unlovable.”

The evidence, however, now indicates that Niebuhr was much closer to the truth. As writer William Saroyan put it, “Every man is a good man in a bad world—as he himself knows.” Researchers are debating the reasons for this phenomenon of “self-serving bias,” but they now generally agree that the phenomenon is both genuine and potent. Eight streams of data merge to form a powerful river of evidence.

Stream #1: Accepting More Responsibility for Success Than Failure

Time and again, experimenters have found that people readily accept credit when told they have succeeded (attributing the success to their ability and effort), yet attribute failure to such external factors as bad luck or the problem’s inherent “impossibility.” Similarly, in explaining their victories, athletes have been observed to credit themselves, but are more likely to attribute losses to something else: bad breaks, bad officiating, the other team’s super effort. And how much responsibility do you suppose car drivers tend to accept for their accidents? On insurance forms, drivers have described their accidents in words such as these: “An invisible car came out of nowhere, struck my car, and vanished”; “As I reached an intersection, a hedge sprang up, obscuring my vision and I did not see the other car”; and “A pedestrian hit me and went under my car.” Situations that combine skill and chance (such as games, exams, and job applications) are especially prone to the phenomenon: winners can easily attribute their success to their skill, while losers can attribute their losses to chance. When I win at Scrabble, it is because of my verbal dexterity; when I lose, it is because, “Who could get anywhere with a Q but no U?”

Michael Ross and Fiore Sicoly at the University of Waterloo observed a marital version of the self-serving bias. They found that married people usually gave themselves more credit for such activities as cleaning the house
and caring for the children than their spouses were willing to give them credit for. Every night, my wife and I pitch our laundry at the bedroom clothes hamper. In the morning, one of us puts them in. Recently she suggested that I take more responsibility for this. Thinking that I already did so 75 percent of the time, I asked her how often she thought she picked up the clothes. "Oh," she replied, "about 75 percent of the time."

**Stream #2: Constructing Favorably Biased Self-Ratings**

It appears that on nearly any dimension that is both subjective and socially desirable, most people see themselves as better than average. For example, most American business people see themselves as more ethical than the average American business person. Most community residents see themselves as less prejudiced than others in their communities. Most Americans perceive themselves as more intelligent than their average peer. Most French people perceive themselves as superior to their peers in a variety of socially desirable ways.

The College Board recently invited the million high school seniors who took its aptitude test to indicate "how you feel you compare with other people your own age in certain areas of ability." Judging from the students' responses, it appears that America's high school seniors are not wracked with inferiority feelings. While 60 percent reported themselves as better than average in "athletic ability," only 6 percent felt themselves to be below average. In "leadership ability," 70 percent rated themselves as above average, 2 percent as below average. In "ability to get along with others," 0 percent of the 829,000 students who responded rated themselves below average, 60 percent rated themselves in the top 10 percent, and 25 percent saw themselves among the top 1 percent!

Note how radically at odds these findings are with the notion that most of us have low self-esteem. We are, to be sure, strongly motivated to maintain and enhance our self-esteem, and therefore we will welcome nearly any message that helps us do so. But most of us are not gorging about with feelings that everyone else is better than we are. To paraphrase Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the question seems rather to be, "How do I love me? Let me count the ways."

**Stream #3: Believing Phony Compliments**

The "Barnum effect" was named in honor of P. T. Barnum, who said that "there's a sucker born every minute" and that a good circus has a "little something for everybody." Consider the following, which is intended to be a description that fits most people:

You have a strong need for other people to like you and for them to admire you. You have a tendency to be critical of yourself. You have a great deal of unused energy, which you have not turned to your advantage. While you have some personality weaknesses, you are generally able to compensate for them. Your sexual adjustment has presented some problems for you. Disciplined and controlled on the outside, you tend to be worrisome and insecure inside. At times, you have serious doubts as to whether you have made the right decision or done the right thing. You prefer a certain amount of change and variety and become dissatisfied when hemmed in by restrictions and limitations. You pride yourself on being an independent thinker and do not accept other opinions without satisfactory proof. You have found it unwise to be too frank in revealing yourself to others. At times, you are extroverted, affable, sociable, while at other times you are introverted, wary, and reserved. Some of your aspirations tend to be pretty unrealistic.

In many experiments, B. R. Forer, C. R. Snyder, and others have shown people such descriptions, drawn from statements in horoscope books. Told, as were you, that the information is true of most individuals, people usually indicate that it fits so-so. But if told that the description is designed specifically for them on the basis of their psychological tests or astrological data, people usually say the description is very accurate. Moreover, people see these "Barnum descriptions" as more true of themselves than of people in general, especially when the description is positive. If favorable, the description will be readily believed by most people, regardless of whether it is said to come from an experienced clinician, their fellow students, a psychological test, or a horoscope. Do people ever distinguish between credible and nontrustworthy sources? Yes—when the feedback is negative.

So here is more evidence of a self-serving bias. Within reason, the more favorable a phony personality description is, the more people believe it and the more likely they are to perceive it as uniquely theirs.

**Stream #4: Revising One's Past to Fit the Present**

We also maintain favorably biased ideas of ourselves by remembering our past in ways consistent with our current attitudes. For example, in research at the University of Waterloo, Michael Ross and his colleagues exposed some students to a message that was designed to convince them of the desirability of frequent toothbrushing. Shortly afterwards, in a supposedly different experiment, these students recalled brushing their teeth more often during the preceding two weeks than did other students who had not heard the message. Noting the similarity of such findings to happenings in George Orwell's 1984—where it was "necessary to remember that
events happened in the desired manner”—social psychologist Anthony Greenwald surmises that we all have “totalitarian egos” that continually revise our past in order to preserve our positive self-evaluations.  

Stream #5: Falling into Self-Justification

If an undesirable action cannot be forgotten, misremembered, or undone, then often it is justified. If social psychological research has established anything, it is that our past actions influence our current attitudes. Every time we act, we amplify the idea lying behind what we have done, especially when we feel some responsibility for having committed the act. In experiments, people who harm someone—by delivering electric shocks, for example—tend later to express disdain for their victim. Such self-justification is all the more dangerous when manifest in group settings: Iran justified its taking of hostages as a just response to morally reprehensible American policies in Iran; the United States saw the moral lunacy on the other side. So everyone felt righteous, and a standoff occurred.

Stream #6: Believing in One’s Personal Infallibility

Researchers who study human thinking have often observed that people overestimate the accuracy of their beliefs and judgments. So consistently does this happen that one prominent researcher has referred to this human tendency as “cognitive conceit.” Here are two examples of such.

The I-knew-it-all-along phenomenon. As Baruch Fischhoff and others have demonstrated, we often do not expect something to happen until it does, at which point we overestimate our ability to have predicted it. People told the outcome of an experimental or historical situation are less surprised at the outcome than people told only about the situation and its possible outcomes.

If the I-knew-it-all-along phenomenon is pervasive, you may be feeling now that you “knew it all along.” Almost any result of a psychological experiment can seem like common sense—after you know the result. The phenomenon can be crudely demonstrated by giving half of a group some purported psychological finding and the other half the opposite result. For example:

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It is my experience that when fifty people are given one of the above “findings,” another fifty are given the opposite “finding,” and all are asked to “explain” the result and then indicate whether it is “surprising” or “not surprising,” virtually all one hundred people will claim that the result they were given is “not surprising.”

The overconfidence phenomenon. The intellectual conceit evident in our judgments of our past knowledge (the I-knew-it-all-along phenomenon) extends to estimates of our current knowledge. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky have given people factual questions, asking them to fill in the blanks (for example, “I feel 98 percent certain that the number of cars imported into the United States in 1980 was more than ______, but less than ______”), and found that people fail to recognize their own vulnerability to error. For with regards to such questions, nearly 50 percent of the time the true answer is outside the range about which those questioned feel 98 percent confident. This overconfidence phenomenon has become an accepted fact among researchers. If people say the chances are 70 percent that their answer to a factual question is right, the odds are almost 50-50 that they will be wrong. Even if people feel 100 percent sure, they still err about 15 percent of the time.

Stream #7: Maintaining Unrealistic Optimism

Margaret Matlin and David Stang have amassed evidence pointing to a powerful “Pollyanna principle”—that people more readily perceive, remember, and communicate pleasant than unpleasant information. Positive thinking predominates over negative thinking. In recent research with Rutgers University students, Neil Weinstein has further discerned a tendency toward “unrealistic optimism about future life events.” Most students perceived themselves as far more likely than their classmates to experience positive events (such as getting a good job, drawing a good salary, and owning a home) and as far less likely to experience negative events (such as getting divorced, having cancer, and being fired). Likewise, most college students believe they will easily outlive their actuarially predicted age of death (which calls to mind Freud’s joke about the man who told his wife, “If one of us should die, I think I would go live in Paris”.)
Stream #8: Overestimating How Desirably One Would Act

Researchers have discovered that, under certain conditions, most people will act in rather inconsiderate, compliant, or even cruel ways. When other similar people are told in detail about these conditions and asked to predict how they would act, nearly all insist that their own behavior would be far more virtuous. Similarly, when researcher Steven Sherman called residents of Bloomington, Indiana, and asked them to volunteer three hours to an American Cancer Society drive, only 4 percent agreed to do so. But when a comparable group of other residents were called and asked to predict how they would react to such a request, almost half predicted they would help.

So, to summarize the argument thus far: It is true that high self-esteem and positive thinking are adaptive and desirable. But unless we close our eyes to a whole river of evidence, it also seems true that the most common error in people’s self-images is not unrealistically low self-esteem, but rather a self-serving bias—not an inferiority complex, but, if you will, a superiority complex. In any satisfactory theory of self-esteem, these two “truths” must somehow coexist.

Objections to the Self-Serving Bias

Many readers have no doubt found this portrayal of the pervasiveness of pride either depressing or somehow contrary to what they have experienced and observed. Let us imagine some of their objections.

1. **I hear lots of people being self-disparaging, and I’m sometimes hampered by inferiority feelings myself.** Let us see why this might be. First, those of us who exhibit the self-serving bias—and that’s most of us—may nevertheless feel inferior to certain specific individuals, especially when we compare ourselves to someone who is a step or two higher on the ladder of success, attractiveness, or whatever. Thus we may believe ourselves to be relatively superior yet feel discouraged—because we fall short of certain others or fail to reach our own goals fully.

Second, not everyone has a self-serving bias. Some people do suffer from unreasonably low self-esteem. For example, several recent studies have found that while most people shuck off responsibility for their failures on a laboratory task, or perceive themselves as having been more in control than they were, depressed people are more accurate in their self-appraisal. Sadder but wiser, they seem to be. There is also evidence that while most people see themselves more favorably than other people see them (thus providing yet another demonstration of the “normal” self-serving bias), depressed people see themselves as other people see them. This prompts the unsettling thought that Pascal may have been right: “I lay it down as a fact that, if all men knew what others say of them, there would not be four friends in the world.” And that truly is a depressing thought.

Third, self-disparagement can be a self-serving tactic. As the French sage La Rochefoucauld detected, “Humility is often but a . . . trick whereby pride abases itself only to exalt itself later.” For example, most of us have learned that putting ourselves down is a useful technique for eliciting “strokes” from others. We know that a remark such as “I wish I weren’t so ugly” will at least elicit a “Come now, I know a couple of people who are uglier than you.” Researchers have also observed that people will aggrandize their opponents and disparage, or even handicap, themselves to convey an image of modesty and to protect themselves. This tactic provides both an excuse for failure and extra credit for success. The coach who publicly extols the upcoming opponent’s awesome strength renders a loss understandable, while a win becomes a praiseworthy achievement. Thus, self-disparagement can be subtly self-serving.

2. **Perhaps all this “pride” is just an upbeat public display; underneath it, people may be suffering with miserable self-images.** Actually, when people must declare their feelings publicly, they present a more modest self-portrayal than when they are allowed to respond anonymously. Other evidence also points to the conclusion that most people really do see themselves favorably and do not simply describe themselves that way to researchers. Self-serving bias is exhibited by children before they learn to inhibit their real feelings. And if, as many researchers believe, the self-serving bias is rooted partly in how our minds process information—I more easily recall the times I’ve bent over and picked up the laundry than the times I’ve overlooked it—then it will be an actual self-perception, more a self-deception than a lie. Consider, finally, the diversity of evidence that converges upon the self-serving bias. Were it merely a favorability bias in questionnaires ratings, then we might find some way to explain the finding away.

3. **Is not the self-serving bias adaptive?** It likely is, for the same reasons that high self-esteem and positive thinking are adaptive. (Indeed, the three concepts are difficult to distinguish, although I would like to believe that we can be self-accepting and self-affirming without the self-delusions of the
self-serving bias. For example, it has been argued that the bias has survival value—that cheaters, for example, will give a more convincing display of honesty if they believe in their honesty. Belief in our superiority can also motivate us to achieve, and can sustain our sense of hope in difficult times.

However, the self-serving bias is not always adaptive. Pride does, as Proverbs reminds us, often go before a fall. A series of experiments by Barry Schlenker at the University of Florida shows how self-serving perceptions can poison a group. In nine different experiments, Schlenker had people work together on some task. He then gave them false information that suggested that their group had done either well or poorly. In every one of these studies, the members of successful groups claimed more responsibility for the group’s performance than did members of groups who supposedly failed at the task. Likewise, most presented themselves as contributing more than the others in their group when the group did well; few said they contributed less.

Such self-deception can be detrimental to a group. It can lead its members to expect greater-than-average rewards when their organization does well and less-than-average blame when it does not. If most individuals in a group believe they are underpaid and underappreciated, relative to their better-than-average contributions, disharmony and envy will likely rear their ugly heads. College presidents will readily recognize the phenomenon. If, as one survey revealed, 94 percent of college faculty think themselves better than their average colleague, then when merit salary raises are announced and half receive an average raise or less, many will feel an injustice has been done. Note that the complaints do not necessarily signify that any actual injustice has been done. Even if, unknown to the professors, God himself had determined the raises according to his most perfect justice, discontent would likely still exist.

Biased self-assessments can also distort managerial judgment. Corporation presidents widely predict more growth for their own firms than for their competition. Similarly, production managers often overpredict their performance. As Claremont University investigator Laurie Larwood has observed, such overoptimism can produce disastrous consequences. If those

*One possible distinction is that self-esteem concerns one’s overall feelings about oneself, while the self-serving bias generally concerns one’s reaction to specific events (such as success/failure). However, those who explain their successes and failures with self-serving bias tend also to score high on tests of self-esteem. Moreover, people who score high on tests of self-esteem tend also to score high on tests of “defensiveness.”* 

who deal in the stock market or in real estate perceive their business intuition to be superior to that of their competitors, they may be in for some severe disappointments.

(4) Does not the Bible portray us more positively, as reflecting God’s image? The Bible offers a balanced picture of human nature—as the epiphonate of God’s creation, made in his own image, and yet also as sinful, as attached to false securities. Two complementary truths. This chapter affirms the sometimes understated second truth: “This then is the religious meaning of sin,” writes Langdon Gilkey:

Sin may be defined as . . . an overriding loyalty or concern for the self, its existence and its prestige, or for the existence and prestige of a group. From this deeper sin, that is, from this inordinate love of the self and its own, stem the moral evils of indifference, injustice, prejudice, and cruelty to one’s neighbor, and the other destructive patterns of actions that we call “sins.”

In the biblical account, pride is self-deceit, ignorance of the truth about ourselves. In John’s gospel, the religious leaders are portrayed as blind, self-righteous teachers who typify our unwillingness to come to the light, lest our hypocrisy be seen. The experimental evidence that human reason is adaptable to self-interest is thus entirely congenial to the Christian contention that becoming aware of our sin is like trying to see our own eyeballs. There are self-serving, self-justifying biases in the way we perceive our actions, observes the social psychologist. “No one can see his own errors,” notes the Psalmist. Thus the Pharisee could thank God “that I am not like other men” (or at least better than the average sinner). St. Paul must have had such self-righteousness in mind when he admonished the Philippians to “in humility count others better than yourselves.” Pride alienates us from God and leads us to disdain one another. It fuels conflict among individuals and nations, each of which sees itself as more moral and deserving than others. The Nazi atrocities were rooted not in self-conscious feelings of inferiority, but in Aryan pride. And so, for centuries, pride has been considered the fundamental sin, the deadliest of the seven deadly sins.

(5) These researchers seem like kiljiyos. Where is there an encouraging word? Are not the greater kiljiyos those who would lead us to believe that, because we’re number one, we can accomplish anything? Which means that if we don’t—if we are unhappy married, poor, underemployed, or have rebellious children—we have but ourselves to blame. Shame. If only
we had tried harder, been more disciplined, less stupid. This was the experience of Boston Red Sox star Carl Yastrzemski:

The game used to eat me up. If I had a bad day it would just destroy me inside. If I went 0-for-4, I'd get so messed up, it would still affect me mentally the next day. If I went 4-for-4 I was so "up," it carried me over too. Everything was "me." What did I do, was all that mattered.

I don't know how far into my career it was—maybe 10 years—when I finally learned the secret. The thing that drives you nuts in this game is not giving credit to the other guy. Now when I go 0-for-4, I remind myself that the pitcher has performed well, I give him the credit instead of tearing myself apart.39

To know and accept ourselves—foibles and all, without pretensions—is not gloomy, but liberating. As William James noted, "To give up one's pretensions is as blessed a relief as to get them gratified." Our first step towards the experience of genuine self-affirmation is thus to come to terms with our not-godness—with our vanity and illusions. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount hints at the paradoxical ways by which comfort, satisfaction, mercy, peace, happiness, and visions of God are discovered: "Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor, the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!"40

"Christian religion," said C. S. Lewis, "is, in the long run, a thing of unspeakable comfort. But it does not begin in comfort; it begins in [dismay], and it is no use at all trying to go on to that comfort without first going through that dismay."41 In coming to realize that self-interest and illusion taint our thoughts and actions, we take the first step toward wholeness. The new insights gained from psychological research into vanity and illusion therefore have profoundly Christian implications, for they drive us back to the biblical view of our creatureliness and spiritual poverty, the very view that, in our pride, we are so prone to deny.

Christians furthermore believe that God's grace is the key to human liberation—liberation from the need to define our self-worth solely in terms of achievements, or prestige, or physical and material well-being. Thus, while I can never be worthy or wise enough, I can, with Martin Luther, "throw myself upon God's grace." This is what St. Paul did, and in the surrender of his pretensions, he proclaimed victory: "I no longer have a righteousness of my own, the kind that is gained by obeying the Law. I now have the righteousness that is given through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God and is based on faith."42 The Lord of the universe loves me, just as I am.

This "forgiveness of sins," as the Bible calls it, means that when ex-

hausted in our quest to be virtuous, we can come back in the warmth of God's love. There is tremendous relief in confessing our vanity—in being known and accepted as we are. Having confessed the worst sin—playing God—and having been forgiven, we gain release, a feeling of being given what we were struggling to get: security and acceptance.43 The feelings one has in this encounter with God are like those we enjoy in a relationship with someone who, even after knowing our inmost thoughts, accepts us unconditionally. This is the delicious experience we enjoy in a good marriage or an intimate friendship, where we no longer feel the need to justify and explain ourselves or to be on guard, where we are free to be spontaneous without fear of losing the other's esteem. Such was the experience of the Psalmist: "Lord, I have given up my pride and turned away from my arrogance. . . . I am content and at peace."44

(6) What, then, is true humility? First, we must recognize that the true end of humility is not self-contempt (which still leaves people concerned with themselves). To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, humility does not consist in handsome people trying to believe they are ugly, and clever people trying to believe they are fools. When Muhammad Ali announced that he was the greatest, there was a sense in which his pronouncement did not violate the spirit of humility. False modesty can actually lead to an ironic pride in one's better-than-average humility. As a pastor of one modest church remarked to me, "We are a humble people—and we're proud of it!" (Perhaps some readers have by now similarly congratulated themselves on being unusually free of the inflated self-perception this chapter is describing.)

True humility is more like self-forgetfulness than false modesty. It leaves people free to esteem their special talents and, with the same honesty, to esteem their neighbor's. Both the neighbor's talents and one's own are recognized as gifts and, like one's height, are not fit subjects for either inordinate pride or self-deprecation.

Obviously, true humility is a state not easily attained. "There is," said C. S. Lewis, "no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. . . . If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud. And a biggish step, too." The way to take this first step, continued Lewis, is to glimpse the greatness of God and see oneself in light of this. "He and you are two things of such a kind that if you really get into any kind of touch with Him you will, in fact, be humble, feeling the infinite relief of having for once got rid of [the pretensions which have] made you restless and unhappy all your life."45
NOTES


11. A New Look at Pride


13. 1970–1977 data from the College Board’s Student Descriptive Questionnaire.


27. Peter M. Lewinsohn, Walter Mischel, William Chapline, and Russell Barton, “Social Competence and Depression: The Role of Illusory Self-Perceptions,” Journal of Abnormal Psychology 89 (1980): 203–212. (The depressed people in this study were also less socially com-
petent, which may also have contributed to their depression.) Many other research studies confirm that, although most people see themselves the way they think others see them, this is often not the way others actually see them (S. Sidney Shrauger and Thomas J. Schooneman, "Symbolic Interactionist View of Self-Concept: Through the Looking Glass Darkly," Psychological Bulletin 86 (1979): 549-573.


29. La Rochefoucauld, Maxims, 262.


37. Psalms 19:12.

38. Philippians 2:3.


40. Matthew 5:3.


42. Philippians 3:10.


44. Psalm 131:1-2a, Good News Bible.

45. Lewis, Mere Christianity, p. 99.

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BIOPGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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