Children's use of display rules in pride-eliciting situations

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Toddlers' (21—63 months) use of display rules was investigated during competitive interaction between siblings. The toddlers were judged to show pride when, after winning the game, they drew attention to their achievement. All children, with the exception of three younger siblings (mean age = 23 months), showed pride. Older siblings (mean age = 58 months), however, used display rules significantly more often than younger ones (mean age = 34 months) in order to mask their pride.

This brief report presents the results of research about the development of pride in young children. It is assumed that pride is a complex emotion, involving feeling, social and moral aspects. In its feeling aspect pride is a complex form of pleasure, deriving from situations of self-achievement. In its social aspect pride is a self-evaluative emotion (Taylor, 1985), closely linked to children's evaluation of their performance and their appraisal of social situations (Stipek, 1983). It is distinguished from shame in its positive valence. In its moral aspect—in English society at least—pride should not invite comparisons of self-worth; otherwise, positively valued pride is transformed into negatively valued arrogance (Harre, 1986).

Preschool children may not yet have developed their own standards of achievement, looking instead to their parents for acknowledgement and praise (Kagan, 1981). Yet display of the mature concept of pride obliges children to subdue their pleasurable feelings such that others do not evaluate their pride as arrogance. The social knowledge of what is, or is not, an acceptable emotional expression underlies children's use of display rules. Display rules, according to Snyder (1974), require the motivation and ability to control one's behaviour in accordance with one's knowledge of the appropriateness of a particular emotional expression in a particular context. The appropriateness of the emotional expression, such as the smile that accompanies gratitude, is learned at an early age (Cole, 1986). The knowledge of its social appropriateness results in the social display of an emotion that may be at odds with the child's affective experience, as in the display of pleasure when receiving a disappointing gift (Cole, 1986; Saarni, 1979).

The present study considers a commonplace domestic situation—two siblings engaged in a competitive game in the presence of their mother. The game was

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designed to evoke the three aspects of pride: pleasure in self-achievement, positive evaluation of the performance and refraining from personal comparisons of self-worth. Attention-seeking behaviour was analysed in order to confirm that the experimenter had elicited pride in the subjects. The question for analysis became: how do children draw parental attention to their victory over their sibling without giving the impression of their better self-worth? To this purpose, children’s use of display rules in the winning condition was investigated.

Method

Subjects

Twenty-eight children (13 boys and 15 girls, ranging in age from 21 to 63 months with a mean age of 46 months) took part in the study. Fourteen of the subjects, nine girls and five boys, ranging in age from 21 to 46 months (mean = 33.8), were younger siblings. Fourteen of the subjects, eight boys and six girls, ranging in age from 49 to 63 months (mean = 58.1) were elder siblings.

Procedure

Children were observed playing a competitive game that consisted of two apparently identical puzzles. Each puzzle comprised a wooden board with five holes graded in diameter. In one of the boards, the ‘fair’ board, five red wooden pieces fitted exactly into the holes. In the other, the ‘rigged’ board, only two pieces fitted; the other three pieces were slightly too large or too small for the holes.

A camera was installed in a corner of the room and focused on mother and two siblings, seated opposite on the floor. Before the play session started, the camera was turned on and the entire session was taped without interruption.

The children were introduced to the game by the experimenter who explained that the puzzles were to be completed by both siblings and that it was to be a race between them. The fair board was shown to the children with pieces correctly fitted. The pieces were then knocked out and placed in front of the younger sibling. After that the rigged board and its pieces were placed in front of the elder sibling. No indication was given that it was rigged. The children were told to start the race. After the younger sibling had fitted all the pieces correctly into the board, the two boards were exchanged and the siblings played the game a second time. The advantages of this game lay in the facts that fitting pieces into the holes of a board is well known to English children; the game requires little manual dexterity; the task of completing puzzles elicits pride (Reissland, 1988); and the winning or losing result is visually striking and quickly decided (each game lasted 14—60 s).

The use of a rigged board ran the risk of alienating the elder siblings, who, upon discovering in the first round that the board was tricked, might have taken as much time as they wanted in the second round, knowing that the boards were switched and the younger sibling had no chance of winning. Since it was impractical to counterbalance the first and second situations across pairs of siblings, a check was carried out in order to determine whether the standard order of giving the boards discouraged elder siblings from any further competition. With a McNemar test it was established that the older siblings (mean = 18s) were significantly faster compared with younger siblings (mean = 25s) ($\chi^2 = 6.46, p< .025$). Hence, even after one or both of the siblings had had the opportunity to realize that the game was rigged, they were still keen to pursue the competition.

Results

Attention-seeking behaviour

The 28 subjects were observed in the interval between inserting the winning piece of the puzzle and the end of play. Because the length of the game was dependent on how
fast the child in the winning condition placed the piece of the puzzle into the hole the coded intervals varied. During each interval which lasted a mean 8.92 seconds, range 4—29, all children were classified according to the following set of behaviours: not drawing attention to their completed board vs. drawing attention by (1) raising hands or clapping, (2) placing hands on thighs in act of sudden passivity, (3) patting the board, (4) raising the board off the ground and (5) clasping the finished board.

The five attention-seeking behaviours were coded from the videotapes by an independent judge and the experimenter. The reliability for the coding scheme was established between the experimenter and an independent judge by calculating the number of agreements divided by the sum of the number of agreements and disagreements. The percentage agreement between the two judges was 89 per cent for raising hands or clapping, 81 per cent for placing hands on thighs in an act of sudden passivity, 75 per cent for patting the board, 86 per cent for pointing to or lifting the board off the ground and 99 per cent for clasping the finished board. All disagreements were resolved by discussion.

Children were coded for the number of different attention-seeking behaviours that they displayed. Hence, each child's score could range from 0 to 5. Elder siblings produced a mean of 1.6 (range 0-3) and younger siblings a mean of 1.5 (range 0—3) attention-seeking behaviours. The Wilcoxon matched pairs signed rank test showed that elder siblings drew attention to their achievement as much as their younger siblings (T=14, N=8, n.s.).

Display rules

Children's display rules were classified into two types: restraint and masking. Children were judged to exhibit restraint if they engaged in any of the following three behaviours: (1) they pursed their lips, bit them or pressed them together to minimize a broad smile; (2) they pressed their chin into their sternum, thereby lowering their face; (3) having initially raised their arms with outspread hands, they restrained their exuberance by closing their hands and drawing their arms inward to their body.

Children were judged to mask their pleasure if they exhibited any of the following three behaviours: (1) placing a thumb near their mouth as if to suck it or placing their fingers near their face as if to scratch their nose or chin; (2) placing their hands under their thighs after having raised one or both hands triumphantly in the air; (3) masking of a broad smile by protrusion of the tongue.

The six masking or restraint behaviours were coded from the videotapes by an independent judge and the experimenter. The reliability for the coding scheme was established between the experimenter and an independent judge by calculating the number of agreements divided by the sum of the number of agreements and disagreements. The percentage agreement between the two judges was 72 per cent for pursing, biting or pressing lips, 93 per cent for pressing chin into sternum, 85 per cent for inhibiting gesture of raised outspread hands, 89 per cent for placing thumb or finger in facial region, 85 per cent for placing hands under thighs, and 72 per cent for protrusion of tongue. All disagreements were resolved by discussion.

Children were scored for the number of different masking or restraint behaviours
that they exhibited. Hence scores could range from 0 to 6. Elder siblings exhibited a mean of 1.9 (range 1—4) masking or restraint behaviours, whereas younger siblings exhibited a mean of 0.3 (range 0-1) masking or restraint behaviours. The Wilcoxon matched pairs signed rank test confirmed that elder compared to younger siblings showed significantly more restraint or masking of their pleasure in victory (T=0, N= 13, p < .001, one-tailed).

Discussion

Of the children who drew attention to their achievement, only six younger and one elder sibling did not use a restraint or masking rule to hide pleasure in victory. The facial and bodily movements which the older children (IV =18, mean age = 53.8 months) used to attenuate their expressions of pleasure were roughly analogous to two of the four display rules described by Ekman & Friesen (1969). One entailed the restraint or de-intensification of emotional expressions. When restraining their pleasure, children would bite or purse their lips or they would transform an outstretched hand raised above their head into a fist drawn closely to their body. The other rule entailed dissimulation, whereby children transformed their raised hand, gesturing victory, into a movement of sucking their thumb, scratching their nose or straightening their hair.

Why did the 4-year-old children resort to display rules? Research suggests that the age at which children start to show display rules is dependent on the context in which they are acting and on social conventions. As they grow older, children begin to realize that others expect of them certain affective responses, and hence they begin to alter their emotional expressions according to social conventions. Kagan (1981) suggested that children start to show concern for adult standards very probably as early as 2—3 years. This is supported to some extent by Cole's (1986) findings that 3- and 4-year-olds can hide their negative feelings under a smile when receiving a disappointing gift.

In contrast to previous research on children's display behaviour, in which children had to hide a negative emotion, in the study described here children had to hide their positive vis-a-vis the potentially negative emotion of a sibling. The results suggest that some children at the relatively early age of 3 years can hide a positive emotion, using one of the six possible display behaviours, and that by the age of 5 years nearly all the children resorted to several of the six observed masking and/or restraint behaviours.

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References


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