

## Victory is mine



APGarret Weber-Gale and Michael Phelps display an evolutionary trait

WHETHER you are a gorilla, a four-year-old child, a politician or an Olympic athlete, the signs of victory are obvious for all to see: the chest inflates, the head is thrown back and the victor displays a strutting and confident air. Shame at being defeated is equally recognisable: the head bows, and sometimes the shoulders slump and the chest narrows too—something that is not a million miles away from the cringing postures associated with submission in animals, from chimpanzees to rats, rabbits and even salamanders. Are these displays of pride and shame common to all humans? If they are, they will have evolved to serve some function.

The past week in Beijing demonstrates that different cultures do indeed show similar displays of pride and shame. But it is difficult to say if these reactions are instinctive or learnt. Jessica Tracy at the University of British Columbia and David Matsumoto at San Francisco State University decided to explore this by comparing pictures of blind and sighted athletes from different cultures.

In their research, published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the team analysed images from the judo competition held in the 2004 Olympic and Paralympic Games. They looked for whether or not competitors indulged in post-match behaviour such as tilting their heads back, raising their arms or expanding their chests in victory, or hiding their face or narrowing their chests in defeat. They found that in response to success and failure, people from different cultures displayed the stereotypical gestures of pride and some of the components of expressions of shame. This included the blind competitors—even those blind from birth.

Although the researchers say that congenitally blind children might have been taught by their parents to lift their hands above their heads after a victory, they speculate that it would be harder to teach them the full spectrum of displays they witnessed. These findings, then, imply that displays of pride are not simply cultural stereotypes learnt after birth, but an innate form of behaviour that was relevant to the way humans lived. A display of pride (or shame), in other words, may be an evolved and innate behavioural response.

Why? Such displays may have an evolutionary function. People could be advertising their accomplishments and ensuring their status and acceptance within their social group. Similarly, shame shows acceptance of a defeat and a reluctance to fight on (which may help to avoid further aggression), and so might well be a display of submission.

The researchers also found that the behavioural response to shame was weaker in sighted athletes from cultures that were individualistic—or “self-expression valuing”—societies in the West. They suggest that athletes from these parts were suppressing responses in accordance

with “cultural norms” that stigmatise displays of shame. If so, this would explain why the congenitally blind displayed more shame in defeat than did people who became blind in life.

Culture has a lot to do with displays of victory, whether it is the two-fingered “V” salute or footballers removing their clothing. Both are culturally influenced, but they have their roots in showing exactly who is on top.

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