

Understanding Hubris in Failure Situations

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Abstract

Hubris reflects an individual's exaggeration of self-worth and seems unlikely to be present in situations of failure. In present studies, situational stories were used as materials to investigate how adults perceive hubris in failure situations. The results showed that: 1) Participants rated the protagonist who denied failure higher in hubris compared to the protagonist who admitted failure. 2) Participants believed that protagonists who failed due to their own factors experienced more hubris than those who failed due to external factors. This paper highlighted the presence of hubris in failure situations and how it was influenced by the protagonist's defensive behavior and attribution cues within the context.

Keywords

Hubris, Failure Situation, Emotion Understanding

1. Introduction

Hubris is distinct from authentic pride (Dickens & Robins, 2022; Mercadante et al., 2021). Numerous research studies have shown that hubris is characterized by an exaggeration of self-worth (Holbrook et al., 2014; Tracy et al., 2023; Tracy & Prehn, 2012; Tracy & Robins, 2007). For instance, individuals who imagined themselves to be very talented and succeed with little effort experienced hubris (Tracy & Robins, 2007). It was also found that boasting about one's achievements could induce hubristic feelings (Holbrook et al., 2014). In the context of social interactions, individuals who claimed themselves as very talented and always made the right choice were rated high in hubris (Wubben et al., 2012). Prior studies revealed that narcissistic individuals tended to experience hubris, on the contrary, authentic pride was positively associated with self-esteem and reflected genuine feelings of self-worth (Tracy et al., 2009; Tracy & Robins, 2007).

Can hubris also manifest in situations of failure? It was found that non-verbal expressions of hubris were not typically positive, but rather had a neutral valence

(Nelson & Russell, 2014). Therefore, hubris may be displayed even in the absence of success. Theorists proposed that following self-threat individuals may adopt defensive behaviors to protect self-worth. For example, individuals with fragile self-esteem tended to suppress negative, threat-related thoughts when self-worth was threatened (Borton et al., 2012; Thomas et al., 2013). Compared to individuals with stable self-esteem, individuals with unstable self-esteem tended to use defensive language and distort information that threatened self-esteem (Kernis et al., 2008; Zogmaister & Maricuțoiu, 2022). These behaviors may be perceived as hubris as they attempt to downplay one's own failure and exaggerate their self-worth.

Attribution can play a role in understanding of hubris. For example, protagonists who merited credit for their success were believed to experience authentic pride, while protagonists who accepted honor for which they did not deserve credit were believed to experience feelings of hubris (Holbrook et al., 2014). In the case of failure, imagine that two players who both lost a match. One player failed due to bad luck while the other failed due to internal factors. We can infer that the player who failed due to internal factors may have lower skill than the unlucky player. As a result, the player with lower skill received the same result as player with higher skill, which may lead to an exaggeration of the low-skill player's self-worth.

Previous studies have primarily focused on successful situations (Ho et al., 2016; Tracy & Robins, 2007; Wubben et al., 2012), leaving it unclear how individuals perceive hubris in the context of failure. In line with prior research (Holbrook et al., 2014; Kusano & Kimmelmeier, 2022; Tracy & Robins, 2007), present research investigated hubris along with authentic pride in order to control potential confounds. It was hypothesized that: H1: The protagonist who denied failure is rated higher in hubris compared to the protagonist who admitted failure. H2: The protagonist who failed due to their own factors is rated higher in hubris than the one who failed due to external factors.

2. Study 1

2.1. Methods

Study 1 employed a 2×2 mixed design with instruction condition (Admit failure/Deny failure) as the between-subject factor and emotion type (Authentic pride/Hubris) as the within-subject factor. Power analyses were performed using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) and it revealed that a minimum sample size of 128 was required for a two-group comparison (medium effect size $d = 0.50$, power of $\beta = 0.80$, and $\alpha = 0.05$). Study 1 recruited 130 Chinese adults (51 males) through Credemo, with age ranging from 18 to 67 years ($M = 31.29$, $SD = 11.51$).

Procedure. Participants read and agreed with the informed consent before starting the task. Then participants were presented with a story: "Zhang Ming participated in a competition. Due to not carefully studying the rules, Zhang Ming failed. Zhang Ming refused to admit/admitted that it was a failure." The

story was presented for at least 10 seconds. Next, participants rated the feelings of the protagonist on the Authentic and Hubristic Pride Scale (Tracy & Robins, 2007). It is a 7-point scale (1 = none at all, 7 = very strong) consisting of two subscales, Authentic Pride subscale and Hubristic Pride subscale. In present research, the Chinese version of this scale was used. Finally, participants filled in demographic information. Each participant received a reward of 1 RMB after completing the questionnaire.

2.2. Results

Preliminary analysis revealed that Authentic Pride subscale and Hubristic Pride subscale were highly reliable ($\alpha_s = 0.91, 0.96$). Ratings of Authentic Pride subscale were averaged as authentic pride while ratings of Hubristic Pride subscale were averaged as hubris. There were no significant effects related to participants' gender ($p_s > 0.31$).

A 2 within (emotion type: Authentic pride/Hubris) \times 2 between (instruction condition: Admit failure/Deny failure) mixed-factorial analysis of variance was conducted. The main effect of emotion type was significant, $F(1, 128) = 60.04, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.32, BF_{10} > 100$. Hubris was significantly higher than authentic pride. The main effect of instruction condition was significant, $F(1, 128) = 31.28, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.20, BF_{10} > 100$. The protagonist who denied failure was believed to have stronger feelings than protagonist who admitted failure. The interaction of instruction condition and emotion type was also significant (Figure 1), $F(1, 128) = 50.97, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.29, BF_{10} > 100$.

Post hoc analysis. There was no significant difference of authentic pride between the protagonist who denied failure ($M = 3.11, SD = 1.25$) and the protagonist who admitted failure ($M = 2.95, SD = 1.42$), $t(128) = 0.66, p = 0.513$. However, the protagonist who denied failure was rated significantly higher in hubris ($M = 5.26, SD = 1.27$) than the protagonist who admitted failure ($M = 3.04, SD = 1.83$), $t(128) = 8.01, p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 1.40$.

Therefore, H1 was supported. The protagonist who denied failure was rated higher in hubris compared to the protagonist who admitted failure. Study 2 aimed to replicate this finding with different stories.

3. Study 2

3.1. Methods

Study 2 recruited 130 Chinese adults (57 males) through Credemo, with age ranging from 18 to 89 years ($M = 37.79, SD = 15.77$).

Procedure. The procedure was identical to Study 1 except that different stories were used. Participants first consented to the study and then they were presented with a story: "Chen Liang developed a fitness plan and planned to participate in 8 physical exercises this month. Because going out for dinner took up time, Chen Liang only completed 2 physical exercises this month. Chen Liang didn't admit/admitted that the fitness plan failed." The story was presented for at least

10 seconds. Next, participants rated the feelings of the protagonist on the Authentic and Hubristic Pride Scale. Finally, participants filled in demographic information. Each participant received a reward of 1 RMB after completing the questionnaire.

3.2. Results

Preliminary analysis revealed that Authentic Pride subscale and Hubristic Pride subscale were highly reliable ($\alpha_s = 0.96, 0.97$). Ratings of Authentic Pride subscale were averaged as authentic pride while ratings of Hubristic Pride subscale were averaged as hubris. There were no significant effects related to participants' gender ($p_s > 0.68$).

A 2 within (emotion type: Authentic pride/Hubris) \times 2 between (instruction condition: Admit failure/Deny failure) mixed-factorial analysis of variance was conducted. The main effect of emotion type was significant, $F(1, 128) = 15.86, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.11, BF_{10} > 100$. Hubris was significantly higher than authentic pride. The main effect of instruction condition was significant, $F(1, 128) = 105.52, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.45, BF_{10} > 100$. The protagonist who denied failure was believed to have stronger feelings than protagonist who admitted failure. The interaction of instruction condition and emotion type was also significant (**Figure 1**), $F(1, 128) = 20.08, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.14, BF_{10} > 100$.

Post hoc analysis. The protagonist who denied failure was rated significantly higher in authentic pride ($M = 3.86, SD = 1.96$) than the protagonist who admitted failure ($M = 2.82, SD = 1.59$), $t(128) = 3.32, p = 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.58$. Moreover, the protagonist who denied failure was rated significantly higher in hubris ($M = 5.65, SD = 1.11$) than the protagonist who admitted failure ($M = 2.72, SD = 1.76$), $t(128) = 11.4, p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 1.99$.

The results were consistent with Study 1. Compared to the protagonist who admitted failure, the protagonist who denied failure was believed to have stronger feelings of hubris. The protagonists in Study 1 failed due to carelessness, while the protagonist in Study 2 failed to achieve personal goal due to spending time in eating out, both of whom failed due to their own factors. Does the attribution of failure influence the understanding of hubris? Study 3 manipulated the attribution of failure to investigate this question.

4. Study 3

4.1. Methods

Study 3 employed a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ mixed design. Attribution (Internal attribution/External attribution) and defensive behavior (Admit failure/Deny failure) were between-subject factors while emotion type (Authentic pride/Hubris) was the within-subject factor. Power analyses suggested that a minimum sample size of 128 was required (medium effect size $f = 0.25$, power of $\beta = 0.80$, and $\alpha = 0.05$). Study 3 recruited 130 Chinese adults (52 males) through Credemo, with age ranging from 18 to 72 years ($M = 31.52, SD = 11.25$).

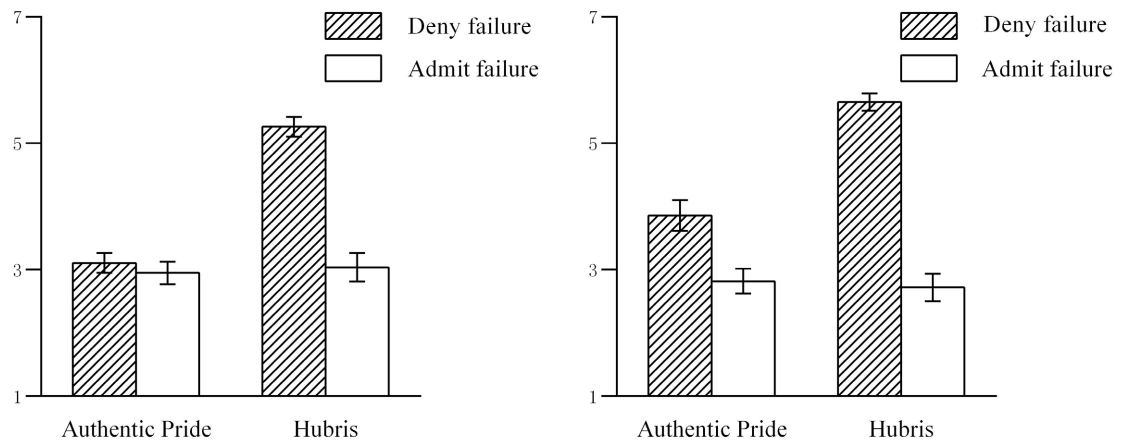


Figure 1. Emotion ratings of Study 1 (left) and Study 2 (right). Error bars indicate standard errors.

Procedure. Participants read and agreed with the informed consent before starting the task. In the internal attribution condition, participants were presented with the following story: “Zhang Ming participated in a competition. Due to not carefully studying the rules, Zhang Ming failed. Zhang Ming refused to admit/admitted that it was a failure.” In the external attribution condition, the story read: “Zhang Ming participated in a competition. Due to equipment malfunction at the competition venue, Zhang Ming failed. Zhang Ming refused to admit/admitted that it was a failure.” The story was presented for at least 10 seconds. Next, participants completed the manipulation check of attribution, which consisted of two items, “Zhang Ming failed due to own factors” and “Zhang Ming failed due to external factors (reversed scored)”. These items were presented on a 7-point scale (1 = disagree, 7 = agree). Participants rated the feelings of the protagonist on the Authentic and Hubristic Pride Scale (Tracy & Robins, 2007) as in Study 1. Finally, participants filled in demographic information. Each participant received a reward of 1 RMB after completing the questionnaire.

4.2. Results

Preliminary analysis revealed that Authentic Pride subscale and Hubristic Pride subscale were highly reliable ($\alpha_s = 0.90, 0.94$). Ratings of Authentic Pride subscale were averaged as authentic pride while ratings of Hubristic Pride subscale were averaged as hubris. There were no significant effects related to participants’ gender ($ps > 0.21$).

Manipulation check. The two items correlated significantly, $r = 0.97, p < 0.001$. Therefore, the scores were averaged, with high score implying internal attribution. It was found that protagonists in the internal attribution condition received higher rating ($M = 5.75, SD = 1.19$) than protagonists in the external attribution condition ($M = 1.43, SD = 1.27$), $t(128) = 20.0, p < 0.001$, Cohen’s $d = 3.50, BF_{10} > 100$. Thus, the manipulation of attribution was successful.

Table 1 displayed emotion rating results across conditions. A 2 within (emo-

tion type: Authentic pride/Hubris) \times 2 between (attribution: Internal attribution/External attribution) \times 2 between (defensive behavior: Admit failure/Deny failure) mixed-factorial analysis of variance was conducted. The main effect of defensive behavior was significant, $F(1, 126) = 17.71, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.12, BF_{10} = 21.51$. The protagonists who denied failure were believed to have stronger feelings than protagonists who admitted failure. The main effect of attribution was not significant, $F(1, 126) = 1.03, p = 0.313, BF_{10} = 0.20$. The main effect of emotion type was not significant, $F(1, 126) = 0.76, p = 0.386, BF_{10} = 0.16$. The interaction of attribution and defensive behavior was not significant, $F(1, 126) = 1.11, p = 0.294, BF_{10} = 0.28$. The 3-way interaction of attribution, defensive behavior and emotion type was not significant, $F(1, 126) = 0.70, p = 0.406, BF_{10} = 0.33$.

The interaction of attribution and emotion type was significant (**Figure 2**), $F(1, 126) = 76.50, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.38, BF_{10} > 100$. Post hoc analysis revealed that ratings of authentic pride in the internal attribution condition ($M = 2.68, SD = 1.06$) were significantly lower than those in the external attribution condition ($M = 3.93, SD = 1.45$), $t(128) = -5.60, p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = -0.98$. Ratings of hubris in the internal attribution condition ($M = 4.22, SD = 1.73$) were significantly higher than those in the external attribution condition ($M = 2.64, SD = 1.51$), $t(128) = 5.56, p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.97$.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of emotion ratings in Study 3 ($M \pm SD$).

Attribution	Defensive behavior	Authentic pride	Hubris
Internal attribution	Admit failure	3.03 \pm 1.22	3.36 \pm 1.77
Internal attribution	Deny failure	2.32 \pm 0.73	5.10 \pm 1.17
External attribution	Admit failure	3.97 \pm 1.52	1.74 \pm 0.70
External attribution	Deny failure	3.88 \pm 1.39	3.55 \pm 1.57

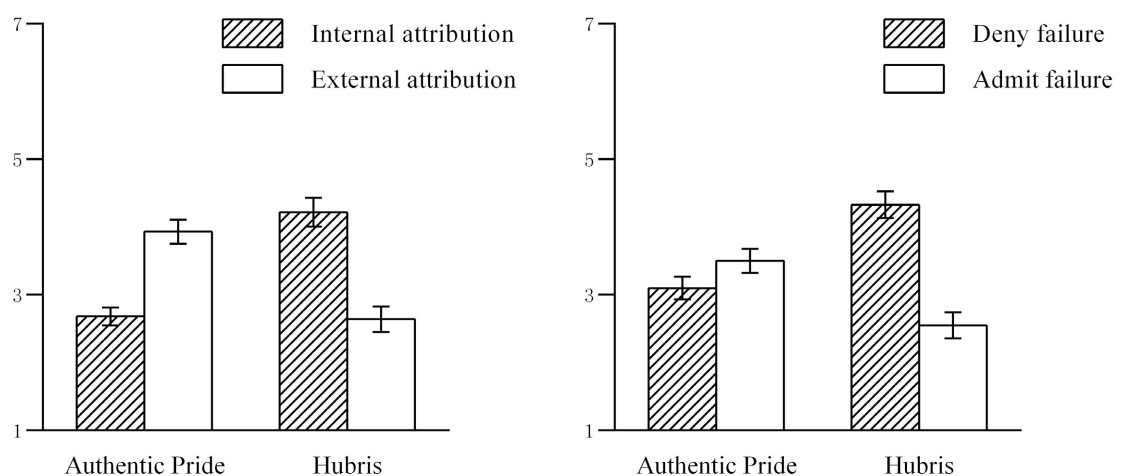


Figure 2. Emotion ratings of Study 3. Error bars indicate standard errors.

The interaction of defensive behavior and emotion type was significant (**Figure 2**), $F(1, 126) = 44.86, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.26, BF_{10} > 100$. Post hoc analysis revealed that there was no significant difference of authentic pride between the protagonists who denied failure ($M = 3.10, SD = 1.35$) and those who admitted failure ($M = 3.50, SD = 1.45$), $t(128) = -1.62, p = 0.108$. The protagonists who denied failure ($M = 4.33, SD = 1.58$) were significantly higher in hubris ratings than those who admitted failure ($M = 2.55, SD = 1.57$), $t(128) = 6.42, p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 1.12$.

These results supported H2. The protagonist who failed due to internal factors was rated higher in hubris than the one who failed due to external factors. Meanwhile, the findings of Study 1 were replicated both in the internal condition and in the external condition.

5. Discussion

Present studies investigated the understanding of hubris in failure situations. For the first time, it was found that protagonists who denied failure were perceived to express stronger hubris compared to those who admitted failure. Previous studies have shown that individuals were influenced by the protagonist's beliefs when understanding emotions (Bradmetz & Schneider, 1999; Döhnel et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2022), indicating that there is rich information in the context as clues for emotion understanding. Present research further revealed that the protagonist's denial of failure significantly influenced the understanding of hubris, highlighting the role of defensive behavior in emotion understanding. These results suggested that individuals may detect hubris even in the context of failure in daily life.

Both denial of failure and attribution were found to influence ratings of hubris, but their interaction was not significant. Indeed, Bayesian analysis showed moderate evidence supporting the null hypothesis that denial of failure and attribution do not interact. These results suggested that denial of failure and attribution may influence the understanding of hubris in separate ways. Denial of failure focused on the outcome whereas attribution was related to participants' understanding of the cause. Protagonists who denied failure attempted to downplay the negative outcome, but from another perspective, they may have exaggerated their self-worth. Attribution didn't distort the outcome, but it could change participants' estimation of the self-worth of protagonists. Compared to the protagonist in the external condition, the protagonist in the internal condition may have lower self-worth and participants' ratings of their authentic pride were also lower. Because the outcome was the same, the self-worth of the protagonist in the internal condition may appear to be exaggerated, thus perceived as hubris by participants.

The study provided new insights for the design of hubris scenarios. Both Study 1 and Study 2 found the ratings of hubris were higher than that of authentic pride. Previous studies have generally shown that hubris is less intense than

authentic pride (Ho et al., 2016; Kusano & Kimmelmeier, 2022; Lange & Crusius, 2015; Tracy & Robins, 2007; Weidman & Tracy, 2020), with only two studies reporting higher ratings of hubris (Holbrook et al., 2014; Wubben et al., 2012). These studies have primarily investigated hubris in success situations. When an individual really achieves success, the intensity of authentic pride is generally high (e.g. Ho et al., 2016). Further research could investigate hubris in failure situations, wherein the intensity of authentic pride is lower and hubris becomes more salient.

Present research was confined to some limitations. Firstly, it focused on the understanding of hubris rather than the experience of hubris in failure situations. It's unclear whether denying failure leads to hubristic feelings. Because individuals tend to project their own feelings to others when understanding emotions (Trilla et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2023), the pattern of hubris experience may be similar to present findings. Indeed, individuals with narcissistic traits and unstable self-esteem tended to distort information that threatened their self-esteem (Gritti et al., 2021; Kernis et al., 2008), potentially leading to a denial of failure and subsequent hubristic experience. Secondly, participants may notice the setbacks as well as hubris of the protagonists, which could influence their social interaction with them. The social function of hubris needs further examination along with context factors. Finally, admitting one's own failure may help reduce hubris and an individual can set a new goal rather than imagining that she/he has already succeeded. This tactics is worthy of further investigation.

6. Conclusion

Present research found that participants rated the protagonist who denied failure higher in hubris compared to the protagonist who admitted failure. Participants also believed that protagonists who failed due to internal factors experienced more hubris than those who failed due to external factors.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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