The Role of Admiration in the Evolution of Behavioral Modernity

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Abstract

The hypothesis advanced here is that the human desire for admiration is not a mere end-product of modern human culture. It is one of its causes. During the emergence of behavioral modernity, the brain's ancient dopamine reward system acquired a new target: instead of rewarding another new behavior, it began rewarding an outcome—being admired by others.

The new reward could motivate an extraordinary range of social behaviors, from teaching to storytelling, bypassing generations of natural selection that might otherwise have been needed to evolve separate instincts for each. The result was an explosion of innovation, cooperation, and other behaviors characteristic of modern human culture.

The universality of admiration-seeking behavior suggests a heritable architecture, consistent with a foundational role in behavioral modernity.

Keywords: admiration; behavioral modernity; dopamine; cultural evolution; human evolution

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1. Introduction

For centuries, philosophers and scientists have sought to understand human behavior. Explanations have appealed to rational choice, moral commitment, religious belief, or evolutionary advantage. Yet people routinely act against their own interests, disregard moral teachings, and ignore sound advice. The question remains: why do people do the things they do?

Drawing on work in social psychology, neurobiology, and anthropology, this paper proposes that, in our distant evolutionary past, the emergence of a biological reward for being admired helped bring about behavioral modernity and remains a powerful influence on human social behavior today.

The hypothesis rests on evidence that is presently indirect. Nevertheless, it offers a new explanation for two longstanding questions: why do humans behave as they do, and what drove the emergence of behavioral modernity?

2. Existing Accounts and Their Limits

Several theories explain different aspects of human behavior. Rational choice theory describes how decisions are made (Simon, 1955). The widespread desire to belong provides another important source of social motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), as does status (Anderson et al., 2015). Cultural evolution explains how admired individuals and prestige facilitate the transmission of successful behaviors through populations (Boyd & Richerson, 1985; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Neuroscience has identified the brain's reward systems and established that social approval and status engage them (Ruff & Fehr, 2014; Berridge & Kringelbach, 2015; Sherman et al., 2016).

These theories explain important aspects of human behavior, including how admiring and copying successful individuals can contribute to prestige and cultural transmission. But they do not fully answer an underlying question: what motivated individuals to seek admiration in the first place?

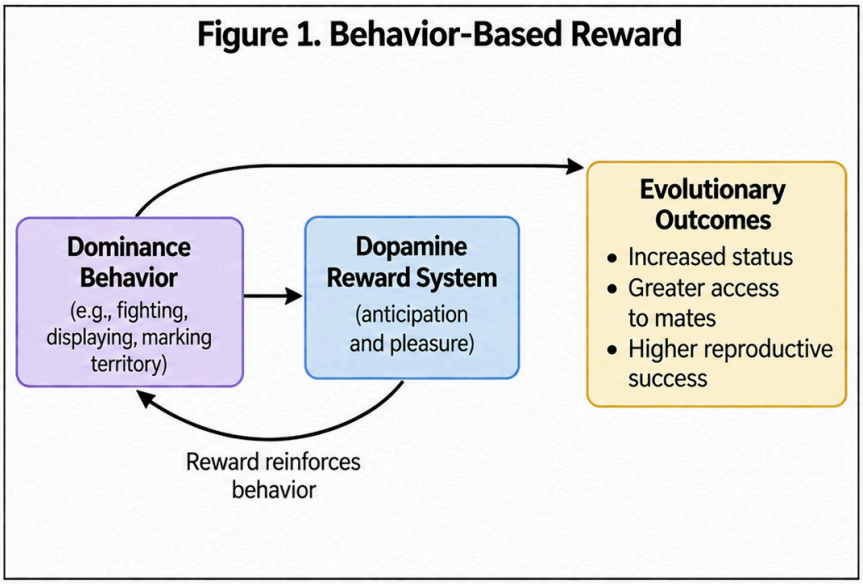
3. The Admiration Hypothesis

Like their primate ancestors, early humans would have been motivated to learn from and admire successful individuals long before behavioral modernity. This hypothesis examines the other side of that relationship—the recipient of admiration—and asks a different question: why and when did being admired begin to feel good?

In this paper, admiration as a source of motivation includes seeking, anticipating, and receiving admiration, approval, and recognition. The reward sought can vary enormously, from worldwide celebrity to the quiet approval of a valued relative.

Now imagine noticing that people admire your work, yet you feel little satisfaction—or perhaps none at all. Any imagined benefits—alliances, reproductive success—would lie far in the future and be heavily discounted (Villmoare et al., 2024; Dasgupta & Maskin, 2005). Without stronger immediate reinforcement, there would be little motivation to repeat the behavior.

In animals, anticipation of food generates a dopaminergic reward response (Schultz, 2015). Such rewards reinforce behaviors that improve survival or reproduction. Over generations, natural selection strengthens these reward systems, producing strong instincts such as nest building and dominance that require no conscious understanding from the animal (Figure 1).



A dog approaching a fire hydrant is not consciously evaluating territorial claims or mating opportunities; the brief surge of reward is sufficient motivation to guide the act.

For the same reason, an early human fashioning a new tool would not have been motivated by distant benefits such as alliances or mating opportunities. To encourage repetition and teaching, a more immediate reward was needed.

For hundreds of thousands of years, archaic humans knapped handaxes and lived in small, dispersed groups (Slimak, 2024), likely structured by dominance hierarchies (Boehm, 1999). Whatever cognitive capacities archaic humans possessed did not produce behavioral modernity.

This paper proposes that, at the emergence of behavioral modernity, changes in ancient dopaminergic reward circuitry provided that motivation. But in this case, the adaptation did not create a reward for a particular behavior. It created a reward for an outcome—being admired by others—and any word or deed that earned admiration could earn that reward.

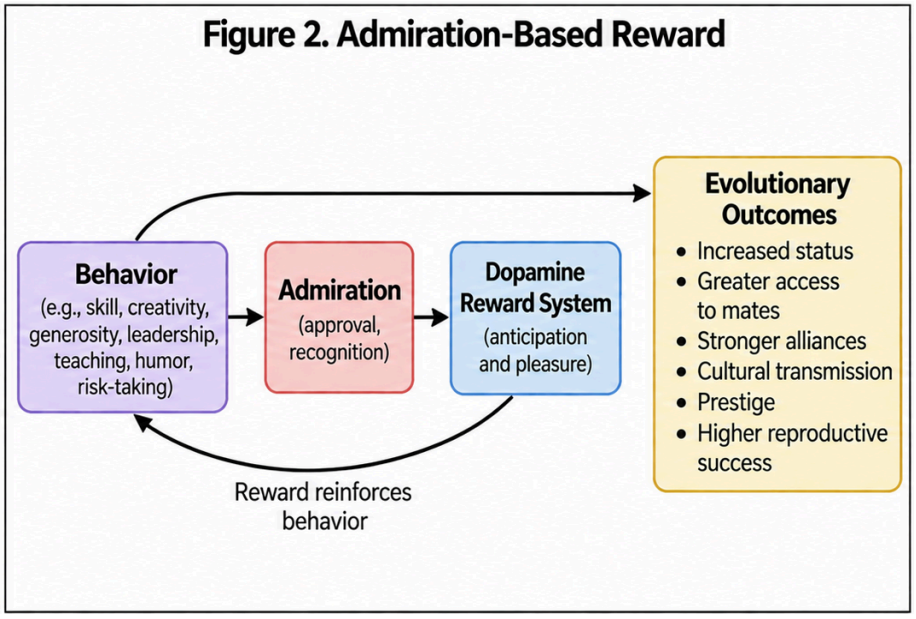
With the new reward providing immediate feedback, people would eagerly repeat what earned admiration and discover new ways of earning it, increasing status and, ultimately, reproductive success (von Rueden & Jaeggi, 2016).

4. The Amplified Reward Pathway

What evolutionary change might have finally opened the way for admiration? One possible explanation is provided by the self-domestication hypothesis, which argues that near the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, selection increasingly acted against reactive aggression, resulting in greater tolerance (Wrangham, 2019; Hare, 2017). As suppressing rivals through aggression became a less prevalent means of achieving status, an alternative route—earning the favorable attention of others in the group—would have become increasingly valuable.

Modern neuroimaging demonstrates that acquiring a good reputation in the eyes of others engages reward circuitry (Izuma et al., 2008). The change may not have required a new reward system, but only an amplification or redirection of existing circuitry. Such a modification could

have involved relatively modest regulatory changes and is consistent with evidence for evolutionary changes in the human dopaminergic system (Raghanti et al., 2018) (Figure 2).



Culture has provided new tools for earning admiration, from striking a flint to driving a Porsche, but the underlying reward mechanism has remained the same. A person telling a witty joke is probably not consciously evaluating status or networking opportunities; the brief surge of reward from earning admiration is sufficient motivation to guide the act.

The new reward pathway was unusually flexible. It programmed what to want—to be admired—and left the means open.

5. Why Admiration Works

In socially visible situations, the prospect of admiration works as a guide because it simplifies decisions. By using admiration as the yardstick, complex choices collapse into a single question: will this choice earn approval?

The compression makes decisions faster and easier (Gigerenzer & Todd, 1999). The same person who spends hours rationalizing and optimizing a travel credit-card strategy can decide in seconds to breach a dangerous doorway. Knowing what will be admired may not eliminate uncertainty, but it can eliminate indecision.

A breakthrough in abstract or symbolic thinking would not provide the same shortcut. It could help design a better tool or plan a successful raid, but critically, it would offer no simple answer to whether one should make a joke about the leader. In an increasingly social world, the opinions of others could provide a surer heuristic than simply more rationalizing (Hertwig & Herzog, 2009).

Functionally, admiration provided an extraordinarily efficient path to a multitude of modern human behaviors. If, instead, specific behaviors were rewarded—for example, toolmaking or exploration—then success would advance more toolmaking or exploration. A reward for being admired was different: success here could motivate toolmaking and exploration and many other behaviors in a single stroke, unlocking a cascade of modern possibilities. It could also greatly increase the speed of change. A new behavior favored through natural selection might require hundreds of generations to become genetically established; admiration could amplify it the day it appeared.

6. From Reward to Habit

Many social behaviors receive immediate reinforcement. Holding a door open, telling a joke, offering advice, or making a generous gesture may earn approval within seconds. Other behaviors—a mechanic restoring a vintage car or parents writing their wills—may work toward rewards that will not be realized for years, or even generations. In such cases, the anticipation alone may be sufficient to motivate the act (Schultz et al., 1997).

From childhood onward, repeated experiences of approval and disapproval shape behavior into habits (Wood & Rünger, 2016). A firefighter entering a burning building, a parent caring for children under desperate conditions, or a teacher preparing a lesson explain the behavior simply as, “It’s my job,” because each day those roles are reinforced by the accumulated effects of approval, admiration, and the satisfaction of meeting standards that individuals have internalized as their own.

7. Boundary Conditions

The present hypothesis addresses behaviors subject to social valuation. Whether the same mechanism extends to social behavior unseen by others—such as anonymous charity, family or

religious devotion, or taking satisfaction in work that no one else will ever see—remains unanswered. Some of these behaviors may carry rewards of their own; for example, private, unobserved donations activate brain regions associated with reward processing (Harbaugh et al., 2007). In other instances, an internal judge may provide a reward for some unseen behaviors. Emotions such as love and jealousy are not themselves socially visible but can certainly lead to socially visible actions. Whether, and how far, the admiration hypothesis extends into this private world remains a subject for future study.

While admiration can simplify many social decisions, it can also complicate practical ones. Choosing a vehicle, for example, normally invites a rational comparison of horsepower, fuel economy, and other measurable factors. Once the opinions of family, friends, and mother-in-law enter the calculation, social considerations compete with utility, making the choice more, instead of less, complicated. In such reason-plus-social situations, the contribution of reason may be limited to evaluating which choice is most likely to earn approval.

8. Admiration and Its Pitfalls

When the desire for admiration and conventional notions of common sense compete for a decision, common sense often loses.

This pattern helps explain why people repeatedly choose actions that seem to conflict with ordinary notions of self-interest. Volunteering for combat is the classic example, but the same question applies to more common cases: deciding to become pregnant despite the sacrifices involved or monopolizing a conversation instead of listening and learning.

Leaving college and its career path to travel with a band, for example, may appear irrational, but from the perspective developed here, the choice is primarily temporal: choosing admiration now over admiration later.

Reward sensitivity has also been associated with dishonest behavior (Abe & Greene, 2014). Apparently, the chemical reward for being admired doesn't care how honestly it is earned.

Modern social environments create additional opportunities for this mechanism to misfire. People now seek validation from thousands—or even millions—of strangers, earning admiration through spectacle and outrage as easily as through genuine contribution.

The susceptibility of admiration to manipulation has long been recognized by practical observers of human behavior. Napoleon Bonaparte is often credited with observing that "a soldier will fight long and hard for a bit of colored ribbon" (Iodice, 2022).

Individuals who become hopeless about their future social relationships are at increased risk of suicide (Joiner, 2005). If admiration functions as a fundamental social reward, then its loss—or the inability to experience it—could have profound psychological consequences. And at the cultural level, preserving an admired identity has sometimes been valued so highly that death itself has been preferred to public disgrace (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III.8).

9. From Individuals to Populations

Just as the invention of paper provided a physical platform upon which Shakespeare and the Declaration of Independence could emerge, making admiration rewarding provided a motivational platform for cultural innovation. Once that platform existed, culture could supply the targets, and the existing reward system could make them worth pursuing.

Biological capacities such as higher-level thinking were not themselves behaviors, but they could increase the effectiveness of a behavior and be carried along with its selection. Greater cognitive ability might allow an individual to tell a better story or invent a better tool, and the resulting reproductive advantage could favor that ability.

Escalating competition for admiration, prestige, allies, and mates could create a runaway selection process (Nesse, 2007), driven by neurochemical rewards for increasingly effective displays of leadership, persuasion, teaching, humor, and gossip.

These behaviors would strengthen social learning and cooperation. Groups containing such individuals could become larger and more effective through cooperation, innovation, warfare, broader social networks, and increasingly sophisticated language.

As these advantages became established within a population, there is little reason to expect them to have remained confined there. In the search for resources and mates, individuals and groups possessing these new characteristics would come into contact with the dispersed populations that characterized Pleistocene Africa (Scerri et al., 2018). Over generations, natural selection could favor the admiration reward architecture, while other differences, cultural and physical, would

rise and fall and blend into a larger population. In this way, modern humans would inherit both the genetic diversity of many formerly separate populations and the fondness for admiration that would eventually become ubiquitous across our species.

10. Implications, Limits, and Conclusion

The present account is necessarily indirect. No fossil, experiment, or genetic marker currently provides direct evidence that admiration became integrated into the human reward system during the emergence of behavioral modernity.

On the particular subject of this paper—the recipient side of admiration—there is a paucity of literature, with the predictable result that gaps remain in the supporting evidence.

But the same paucity helps establish that the paper is addressing a genuinely neglected question.

Admiration-seeking is often treated as a character flaw: stop showing off, stop caring what other people think, stop trying to make people like you. But the same desire that can motivate costly or destructive behavior can also motivate extraordinary achievement. If the desire for admiration is rooted in our biology, it cannot simply be wished away; like hunger, it persists whether it serves us well or not.

People act not because they understand the evolutionary goals of their behavior, but because of an evolved instinct that makes admiration—and the pursuit of it—chemically rewarding. When admiration aligns with evolutionary goals, those goals are reinforced. When it does not, behavior often proceeds all the same**.**

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