Humility

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Abstract
We review humility, a trait characterized by (a) an ability to accurately acknowledge one’s limitations and abilities and (b) an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented rather than self-focused. We explore two key contexts of humility, intellectual and cultural; explain why humility is important; and identify open questions for future research.

Keywords
Humility, humble, modest, modesty

Research on humility has been growing rapidly (see Worthington, Davis, & Hook, 2017). Although research in social psychology has long documented the many ways in which humans are egoistic, selfishly motivated, and self-protective (Van Tongeren & Myers, 2017), recent work on humility has examined personality characteristics associated with acknowledging and owning one’s biases and limitations (Haggard et al., 2018), openness (Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013), and prioritizing the well-being of others (Davis et al., 2013). The purpose of this article is to review the research on humility, identify open questions for further inquiry, and catalyze future research in this important area of psychological science.

What Is Humility?
Although some lay conceptualizations of humility involve characteristics such as lowliness or self-abasement (Weidman, Cheng, & Tracy, 2018), these have not been core features of psychological conceptualizations of humility. Rather, a recent review of humility measures (McElroy-Heltzel, Davis, Deblaere, Worthington, & Hook, 2019) revealed that most researchers conceptualize humility as involving both intrapersonal and interpersonal processes, although there is somewhat more agreement among scholars about the intrapersonal aspect of the definition. Intrapersonally, humility involves the degree to which someone seems to have a relatively accurate view of self. Expressions of this aspect of humility might include the ability to acknowledge and own one’s limitations (Haggard et al., 2018), recognize the fallibility of one’s beliefs, and have a clearer sense of one’s strengths and weaknesses. Interpersonally, humility involves the degree to which one has an orientation toward the needs and well-being of others (Davis et al., 2011). People might judge this aspect of humility through interpersonal behaviors that indicate the restraint of the ego, modest self-presentation, and respectful interpersonal interaction.

Early research focused on potential problems defining and measuring humility (Davis, Worthington, & Hook, 2010), given concerns that self-reports of high humility might paradoxically indicate a lack of humility. Over time, several teams began to use a personality-judgment approach that treats multimethod measurement strategies as the gold standard (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007). Using this approach, researchers have published many measures of humility, with most including both intrapersonal and interpersonal content (McElroy-Heltzel et al., 2019). Measurement approaches have included self-reports (e.g., Ashton et al., 2004; Leary et al., 2017), other-reports (e.g., Davis et al., 2011; McElroy et al., 2014; Owens, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013), implicit measures (e.g., Rowatt et al., 2006), and behavioral measures (e.g., Van Tongeren, Stafford, et al., 2016). The vast majority of
Why Is Humility Important?

Humility involves a set of attitudes and behaviors that facilitates accurate self-understanding and regulation in social relationships. From our perspective, humility may have evolved as a signal to others of one’s relational approachability, safety, and valuing. Humble individuals are less likely to harm and more likely to care for and prioritize the needs of valued relationships. Accordingly, individuals who are perceived as humble may possess relational advantages, which include being seen as desirable mates. In the following, we describe three primary hypotheses that have organized initial scholarship on the nature and social functions of humility.

Social-bonds hypothesis

The social-bonds hypothesis posits that humility is important for the formation, maintenance, and repair of social relationships. Social bonds cause people to consider the benefit of a relationship rather than simply their own self-interest. To avoid exploitation, people must precisely regulate their social bonds. This hypothesis suggests that humility-relevant behaviors (e.g., arrogant vs. relationship-prioritizing behaviors) cause people to view a relationship partner as more or less humble, which in turn causes changes in the willingness of that person to commit to the relationship (or engage in behaviors that prioritize the relationship). Previous research has found that people are more willing to form new relationships (Davis et al., 2013) and initiate romantic relationships (Van Tongeren, Davis, & Hook, 2014) with partners they perceive as humble. Humility helps maintain relationships by strengthening commitment (Farrell et al., 2015) and bolstering relational gratitude (Dwiwardani et al., 2018), which leads to higher levels of relationship satisfaction. In short, perceptions of humility contribute toward the formation and flourishing of relational bonds.

Social-oil hypothesis

The social-oil hypothesis asserts that humility is helpful for reducing relational wear and tear in situations in which conflict is highly likely or there is a substantial power differential between partners. Namely, it predicts that consistently expressing humble behaviors will buffer a relationship from deterioration in relationship quality that often accompanies competitive traits or conflict. When offenses occur, humility also helps to promote relational-repair behaviors and forgiveness in interpersonal relationships (da Silva, Witvliet, & Riek, 2017; Davis et al., 2013; Farrell et al., 2015; Van Tongeren et al., 2014).
Currently, two lines of research have provided promising evidence for the social-oil hypothesis. First, research examining the role of humility in leadership contexts provides initial support. Leaders often possess a power differential, in which exploitation and relational strain can be common. Because of this, high-performing and hard-driving leaders can struggle in their relationships with subordinates, often leaving a trail of interpersonal damage in their wake. Successful leaders are most effective when they are also perceived as humble (Collins, 2001). For example, perceptions of leaders’ humility have been shown to buffer the negative effects of leader narcissism on job outcomes (i.e., effectiveness, engagement, and performance; Owens, Wallace, & Waldman, 2015). Second, research on humility in the context of intercultural relationships provides support for the social-oil hypothesis. For example, in a therapy context, clients who reported that their therapists missed opportunities to discuss their culture reported worse therapy outcomes—but this relationship was buffered if the clients also reported that their therapists were high in cultural humility (Owen et al., 2016). Correlational and experimental research has also demonstrated that humility can mitigate defensive attitudes and aggressive behaviors toward religious out-group members (Van Tongeren, Stafford, et al., 2016). Other work suggests that intellectual humility is associated with tolerance toward religious out-groups (Rodriguez et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2018). Humility was also associated with actual attitude change following discussion with a conversation partner about a religious disagreement (Rodriguez et al., 2019), consistent with an acknowledgment of the limitations of one’s beliefs and an openness to new perspectives.

**Well-being hypothesis**

The well-being hypothesis contends that humility is positively associated with psychological and physical well-being. We see three possible mechanisms for this process. First, humble individuals may have better relationships (see Exline & Geyer, 2004), including stronger social support (bolstered by the social-bonds and social-oil hypotheses). Second, willingness to engage with other people’s beliefs and practices with intellectual and cultural humility could provide humble individuals with a richer sense of meaning in life and well-being (Van Tongeren, Green, Davis, Hook, & Hulsey, 2016). Third, humble individuals may be able to engage in expansive personal growth because they acknowledge their own limitations and areas for improvement and demonstrate a willingness to learn (Owens et al., 2013). Humility has been shown to positively correlate with life satisfaction (Krause, 2016) as well as buffer the negative effects of stress on well-being (Krause, Pargament, Hill, & Ironson, 2016) and is positively associated with prosocial values and other virtues (Krumrei-Mancuso, 2017). Furthermore, evidence that humble responses promote well-being emerges from relational research on the emotional and physical heart. After wrongdoing, when transgressors responded with “humbled and repentant” responses (whether coupled with imagery of receiving forgiveness, being begrudged, or self-forgiveness), they experienced more emotional and cardiac regulation. By contrast, ruminating about the harm one caused without humble change reliably dysregulated emotions and impaired the parasympathetic cardiac-calming response (da Silva et al., 2017). In dyadic relationships, greater humility was related to better psychological (e.g., stress, depression) and physical (e.g., lower blood pressure) health following stressful events (i.e., transition to parenthood, discussing an area of chronic disagreement), but only when one’s partner was also high in humility (Van Tongeren et al., 2019). This effect—termed the complementarity-of-humility hypothesis—reveals that the benefits of humility, at least in terms of well-being within relationships, may be present only to the degree that one’s partner is also humble.

**Open Questions and Future Research Directions**

We see several open questions that create exciting areas for future humility research. First, future work should continue to consolidate the psychological characteristics that are core to humility. Because research on humility is a relatively new field, scholars have disagreed on which characteristics are constitutive to humility and which characteristics are merely correlative to humility. As more research begins to accumulate, we expect the field to move toward consensus.

Second, future work should identify whether there is a dark side to humility. Character traits that we typically consider virtuous often have drawbacks in certain contexts (McNulty, 2010). What are the risks of humility? Are there certain situations in which humble people also need other characteristics (e.g., discernment, self-respect, self-differentiation, courage) to buffer against exploitation by other individuals? In what conditions might humility discourage accomplishment? How important is the relational balance of humility (i.e., humble complementarity; see Van Tongeren et al., 2019) in dyadic exchanges? How might humility norms or expectations vary by culture, religion or spirituality, age, ability, or gender? Does humility offer the same benefits (or drawbacks) across cultural, religious and spiritual, developmental, ability and disability, mental health, and gender groups?
Third, more work needs to be done to examine the cross-cultural experiences and effects of humility. Most research in this area has been done in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic countries (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), with nearly all of it in the United States. Before claims can be more conclusively made about the nature and function of humility, research in different cultures and countries must be conducted. For example, research on narcissism points to rising levels in the United States, in contrast with other countries (Stronge, Milojev, & Sibley, 2018). Research on self-enhancement, which is conceptually related to humility, also reveals cultural differences (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; but see also Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003).

Fourth, we encourage work in evolutionary psychology that details the emergence of humility and what types of advantages or disadvantages it might confer to individuals who are humble and those in relationships with them. We have articulated initial ideas about humility as a signal to other people of approachability, trustworthiness, and valuing as a relationship partner, but this work has yet to be thoroughly examined.

Fifth, more fully integrating humility in major fields of social and personality psychology is likely to be fruitful (Van Tongeren & Myers, 2017). Work on humility and related constructs such as self-enhancement, narcissism, self-protective biases, confirmation bias, belief perseverance, impression management, receipt of feedback, accountability, and intergroup conflict seems ripe for future work. Social-psychological research on decision-making and thinking errors, emotion regulation, leadership, and political and moral disagreements could integrate humility as an important feature in such work. Relationship researchers could examine when exhibiting humility is most helpful and when failing to demonstrate humility is most costly. Moreover, the social neuroscience of humility is an underexamined and promising avenue for advancing an understanding of the neural and cardiac mechanisms involved in humble behaviors and interactions.

Finally, we readily see the benefits of integrating humility into clinical and counseling settings (Hook, Davis, Owen, & DeBlaere, 2017; Paine, Sandage, Rupert, Devor, & Bornstein, 2015). Work should be done to test the effects of humility interventions as well as the efficacy of encouraging clients to cultivate humility in their own lives, especially in response to their relational concerns or in situations with ideological conflict—along with self-respect and relational problem solving. More work could be done to link humility to the development of other relational characteristics, such as gratitude, generosity, forgiveness, and forgiveness seeking (e.g., Krumrei-Mancuso, 2017). Moreover, work has already begun to document the importance of the therapist developing humility, especially cultural humility, to strengthen the therapeutic alliance and improve therapy outcomes. Additional research should provide insights into effective methods for clinicians to consider.

Coda

The once modest field of humility has been growing considerably over the past several years. Researchers from various subdisciplines within psychology, as well as interdisciplinary collaborations, have contributed to defining humility and have examined its intrapersonal and interpersonal functions. Here, we consolidated and summarized those efforts and identified gaps in the research for future empirical science. Given the benefits of humility and the growing momentum in this field, we are hopeful that this will catalyze the development of future research that advances a better understanding of this important feature of social life.

Recommended Reading


Action Editor

Randall W. Engle served as action editor for this article.

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