Measuring Humility and Its Positive Effects

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Over a decade ago, the positive psychology movement encouraged the discipline to examine the possibility that it had focused too much on problem-focused stories and research questions, while ignoring the positive features that made life worth living. This shift in attention catalyzed the study of human flourishing, strengths, and virtues. Whereas the study of some virtues has thrived in this context — for example, subjective well-being and forgiveness — the study of humility has advanced relatively slowly.

The problem does not appear to be a lack of interest. Constructs related to low humility — such as narcissism and self-enhancement — are some of the most robust in social psychology. In addition, humility-related constructs have received a fair amount of popular attention. APS Fellow Jean Twenge of San Diego State University and W. Keith Campbell of the University of Georgia recently published a popular book on the so-called "narcissism endemic," building on their research findings that narcissism and other individualistic traits have increased in the past few decades. In his 2001 book, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap…and Others Don't,* management consultant and writer Jim Collins identified several companies that have made a transition from good to great, and how each company sustained these changes after the leader left. When examining the leaders of these companies, Collins found that the CEOs had a unique mix of drive and humility.

Rather, research on humility has struggled because it has gotten mired in disputes regarding how to define and measure the construct. Researchers have proposed overly complex definitions that have focused on views of the self that are "just right" (i.e., not too high or too low) for the context. While it might be good for someone steeped in honor to moderate their view of self, someone involved in an unhealthy relationship probably needs to bolster his or her sense of self-worth. Furthermore, the measurement of humility is shrouded in paradox. Someone who claims to be "very humble" on a self-report measure might be displaying arrogance and lack of awareness. He or she is essentially bragging about his or her humility. Researchers have been looking for the "holy grail" of measures that will bypass this problem, and many have been humbled by the quest.

Defining Humility

Our research team has joined a small but rapidly growing group of scholars who are seeking to move beyond the measurement problems, so that we can learn more about this paradoxical virtue. We have defined humility using two main characteristics. On the intrapersonal level, humility involves an accurate view of the self. On the interpersonal level, humility involves a stance that is other-oriented rather than self-focused. We have advocated for a method of measuring humility that triangulates self-report, other-report, and trait-relevant behavior.

One main benefit of humility is that it appears to strengthen social bonds, especially in important relationships that may experience conflict, or where differences might threaten the security of the relationship, according to our research. Our team has begun to examine humility in several different types of relational contexts (e.g., married couples, therapist and client, supervisor and supervisee, church leader and church member). We briefly outline our model of relational humility and some initial research findings supporting this model.

First, humility *is most accurately judged when it is under strain.* Humility involves self-regulation which, like a muscle, can be "weakened" with short-term use, but strengthened with regular exercise. Just like courage is easier to judge in the context of danger, humility ought to be easier to judge in contexts that evoke egotism, defensiveness, and conflict. This logic has informed the design of our studies. For example, we are studying humility during important transitions expected to strain humility — such as couples getting married, parenthood, or therapists forming a relationship with clients who hold different worldviews. We also have several projects where we study how people discuss religious or political differences.

Second, *humility is easier to observe accurately in others than it is in oneself.* This research question aligns our work with the study of personality judgments. Character strengths that involve interpersonal behavior are often more accurately assessed with other-reports; however, internal behaviors (e.g., attitudes, thoughts) are often better assessed by self-report. We try to triangulate self-reports, other-reports, and behavior relevant to humility. Round-robin designs are one nice way to do this. Namely, we have people come into a group to complete several activities together (which we can videotape and later code). Then we also have group members rate their own and each other's humility, which can be analyzed with complex models that incorporate both an estimate of a person's humility, as well as how much they may be overestimating their humility.

Third, *humility strengthens social bonds*. We call this the *Social Bonds Hypothesis*. Commitment promotes a sense of "we-ness" in close relationships so that individuals enjoy sacrificing for a partner. This capacity to form cooperative alliances is adaptive, but only if there is a mechanism to avoid exploitation. Viewing others as humble should facilitate greater commitment, whereas viewing others as egotistical and selfish should decrease commitment. We have found initial evidence for this idea in studies on romantic couples, forming groups, and clients in therapy

Fourth, *humility might optimize the benefits of competitive traits by buffering the wear-and-tear they can have on relationships*. We call this the *Social Oil Hypothesis.* Just like oil prevents an engine from overheating, humility is theorized to buffer wear-and-tear generally caused by traits that promote competition (e.g., high standards, competitiveness). This idea is consistent with the findings of Collins's

study of business leaders published in 2001. CEOs are generally selected based on performance. However, being too competitive can strain one's relationships with co-workers. Humility may be the secret ingredient that allows people to compete at high levels without leading to breakdown in one's relationships.

Fifth, higher levels of humility may be related to better health outcomes. We call this the *Health Hypothesis*. If humility involves self-regulation in situations that generally lead to egotism or conflict, then it ought to be related to long-term health outcomes. Namely, relationship conflict is stressful. This conflict should amplify stress to the degree that people struggle to practice humility across relationships and contexts. People low in humility may struggle to form and repair strong social bonds, leading to lower social support and weakened coping. In the fall 2012 issue of the *Journal of Psychology and Theology,* Neal Krause of the University of Michigan provided preliminary evidence for this hypothesis in his research on older adults. He found that older adults who were more humble also rated their health more favorably over time. Our research team is currently working to link humility to reactivity and recovery from stress.

Looking Ahead

The positive psychology movement provided the incentive for psychologists to study variables related to virtue and human flourishing; however, the field of humility has struggled due to important definitional and measurement problems. We expect these debates will continue, but as we have done our best to tackle these issues, we have also shifted our focus to examining broader ideas regarding the social and societal benefits of humility. œ

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