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Seeing the World Through Humility-tinted Glasses: Exploring Social Cognitive Explanations for Outcomes of Humility

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Chayce Baldwin and Dr. Robert Ridge, Psychology

In recent years, psychological research on humility has burgeoned, highlighting the influence of humility in prominent aspects of life such as well-being (Toussaint & Webb, 2017), interpersonal relationships, and prosocial behaviors (Hilbig, Zettler, & Heydasch, 2012), as well as self-control (De Vries et al., 2013). Particularly, studies have connected humility to traits and behaviors such as agreeableness and conscientiousness (Lee & Ashton, 2004), cooperation (Hilbig et al., 2012), and helpfulness (Exline & Hill, 2012), painting a picture of humility as predominantly prosocial and characterized by low self-focus. Indeed, many researchers highlight low self-focus as a defining attribute of humility, with Quiros (2012) describing humility as “a perception that focuses primarily . . . on the value of the non-self” (p. iii).

However, much is still unknown about humility, and there are few agreements among researchers about what humility is, how to concretely define it, and where it comes from. Often, the best definitions of humility that can be devised are more descriptive than they are explanatory. For example, Templeton (1997) describes humility as involving open-mindedness, a willingness to admit mistakes and seek out advice, and a desire to learn. Moreover, though past research indicates that humility is largely a social construct, little research has investigated the social cognition (i.e. social thinking, or thinking about how one relates to others) that may precede and explain humble behavior.

Rather than describing what humble people do, the present research is concerned with exploring why humble people do what they do. Particularly, do humble people think about and interpret their social world different than others do? And is this thinking, as Quiros (2012) suggests, characterized by a focus outside of the self, rather than on the self? Because past research has associated humility with open-mindedness, the objectives of this research are to 1) examine the effects of humility when people are exposed to new or opposing ideas and 2) to use this exposure to explore the mechanisms that may help explain humble behavior.

Method

In this study, we are interested in assessing how and why people may react in different ways to oppositional or threatening ideas. Through doing so, we seek to assess 1) if humble people are more open to and less judgmental of new or conflicting ideas and 2) what social cognitive processes help explain why humble people react differently. In pretesting, we asked BYU students about their attitudes toward politically and religiously controversial topics. Students reported strongest opposition toward premarital cohabitation (i.e. living with a romantic partner outside of a marriage relationship). Therefore, this study exposes students to arguments for or against premarital cohabitation in order to assess their reactions to arguments and ideas which they oppose.

BYU students were recruited through SONA Systems to participate in this study. First, participants complete a short survey, which among other things, assesses humility, aspects of social cognition, and opposition toward various controversial topics. This assessment acts as a screener: students who report strong opposition toward premarital cohabitation are invited to participate in the laboratory portion of the study. By using only students who strongly oppose premarital cohabitation, we are able to assess the

effects of humble cognition (i.e. the way humble people think) on students' reactions to new or oppositional ideas.

To mask the true intentions of the research, participants are told that the study concerns literacy and comprehension of scientific writing. During the laboratory session, participants are asked to read a scientific article about premarital cohabitation, which they are led to believe is written by researchers at a prestigious university. Half of the participants are given an article that is written using research that supports, and half are given an article that opposes, premarital cohabitation. The articles read by each group of students are identical, except for a few words that are altered to provide support for or against premarital cohabitation (e.g. "This result is in line with findings that risk of divorce decreases/increases for younger couples"). Comprehension of and attitudes toward the article are then assessed. At the conclusion of the study, participants are thoroughly debriefed.

Results

Preliminary results demonstrate an association between humility and openness to opposing or threatening ideas: higher scores on humility predicted higher openness to others' ideas and beliefs, greater ability to consider the limits of one's perspective, and increased seeking out of alternative viewpoints. Moreover, it predicted lower defensiveness and impatience with others' beliefs. In turn, those who demonstrated openness to others' ideas and beliefs also tended to compare themselves less to other people, use less absolute judgment (e.g. judge things more moderately, rather than as extremely good or extremely bad), and believe that people can change who they are.

Additionally, participants who scored higher on humility espoused a growth mindset of intelligence, for both themselves and others (i.e. the belief that one can grow and become smarter), rejected feelings of entitlement, and tended to see ways in which they are similar to, rather than different from, others.

Discussion

Past research has shown that humble people are more generous and helpful, more willing to listen to differing points of view, and more open to learning new things, even when it requires personal risk. Here, we are investigating the cognitive mechanisms that may explain why this is—how humble people think, feel, and see the world differently, and importantly, how that affects their behavior. This research has provided insight into the qualities of the "lens" through which humble people see and interact with people and the world around them. We have found that humble people, compared to less humble people, espouse fewer feelings of entitlement (even when others are clearly in the wrong); think more about their own personal growth and less about how they compare to others; and tend to see ways in which they are similar to, rather than different from, others. These cognitions together provide a broad view of the humble mindset: egalitarian, with a focus on growth, purpose, and connection rather than comparison, temporal worries, and distinction between "us" and "others". Further, this mindset leads humble people to do things that helps them connect with others and grow personally, such as being open-minded and willing to learn about new or opposing ideas.

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