



## Registered Report

## Perceived partner responsiveness promotes intellectual humility

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## ARTICLE INFO

Handling editor: Kimberly Rios

## ABSTRACT

The relatively novel construct of intellectual humility describes people's tendency to be open-minded and non-defensive when appraising oneself and one's beliefs. Although intellectual humility describes an intrapersonal style of processing information, we theorize that it also has interpersonal roots. This article describes four experiments and one daily-diary study examining the impact of perceived partner responsiveness and unresponsiveness on two manifestations of intellectual humility, lesser self-serving bias and openness to novel information that may contradicting existing beliefs. Studies 1–3 indicated that three well-established examples of self-serving bias—the tendency to rate oneself as better than an average peer, overclaiming personal responsibility for shared household activities, and hindsight bias—were strengthened when people were induced to perceive their partners as unresponsive, but weakened when they were led to perceive their partners as responsive. Study 4, a daily-diary study, demonstrated similar effects of everyday perceptions of responsiveness on hindsight bias, and also found that people reported having been more open to considering alternative, potentially conflicting points of view when they felt that their social environment was responsive to them. Finally, Study 5 found that perceived partner responsiveness led people to adopt a broader perspective. Together, these studies point to perceptions of responsiveness and unresponsiveness as one factor that lessens and intensifies, respectively, openness and non-defensiveness.

## 1. Introduction

Much research speaks to people's tendencies to overestimate their strengths and the accuracy of their beliefs. Perhaps in response, researchers have become interested in the opposite side of this coin, a construct referred to as *intellectual humility*. Intellectual humility has been defined as “a hypo-egoic phenomenon that involves a non-defensive willingness to see oneself accurately by acknowledging one's personal limitations” (Hill & Laney, 2016, p. 243). Researchers have operationalized intellectual humility in various ways, but most include two components: openness to information that may conflict with personal views and relatively weak needs to enhance one's ego (e.g., Bauer & Wayment, 2008; Hill & Laney, 2016; Leary et al., 2017; Tangney, 2009).

Intellectual humility is a relatively new construct, but research already documents these two components. Concerning the former, Leary et al. (2017) showed that persons high in intellectual humility tend to

be less convinced of their personal beliefs and more attuned to the strength of persuasive messages. As for the latter, Deffler, Leary, and Hoyle (2016) demonstrated that individuals high in intellectual humility were less likely to claim that they knew things that they in fact did not know. Together, these studies support the idea that intellectually humble individuals are open-minded because their interpretation of situations “is not predicated on how that situation makes one feel about oneself; that is, the person's awareness is detached from egoistic appraisals of the situation” (Bauer & Wayment, 2008, p. 12).

Although existing theories without exception conceptualize intellectual humility as a personal trait, the present article proposes that it also has interpersonal roots. Based on several relevant and well-supported theories, we propose that people may be better able to respond openly to their social environment and to exhibit lesser needs for self-enhancement when they feel understood, validated, and cared for by significant others. This prediction follows from the general principle that self-perception, and particularly the processes through which

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people maintain a stable, positive view of the self, depends on reflected appraisals: how others are believed to value the self (Leary & Guadagno, 2011). In this article, we report four experiments and a daily diary study exploring the interpersonal roots of openness to novel information that is potentially contrary to existing views and weaker needs for egoistic self-enhancement.

### 1.1. Intellectual humility as openness and lower ego-defensiveness

Before explaining why interpersonal factors ought to contribute to intellectual humility, it will be useful to briefly review research on the two components of intellectual humility that we describe. To be sure, we do not equate intellectual humility with the absence of egoistic self-enhancement. Intellectual humility has more components than self-serving biases, and self-serving biases reflect numerous mechanisms other than intellectual humility, as decades of social-psychological research has demonstrated. Nevertheless, intellectual humility is usually defined as “the degree to which people recognize that their beliefs might be wrong” (Leary et al., 2017, p. 793), a definition that features prominently the two general processes that were the focus of our research.

The first component is receptiveness to novel information, even if that information might reveal personal shortcomings or contradict current beliefs. Correlational studies have shown that intellectual humility is associated with the need for cognition, as well as openness to experience (e.g., Davis et al., 2016). Both the need for cognition and openness to experience have been studied extensively and, under certain common circumstances, tend to be associated with more effective information processing and decision making, and higher levels of creativity (see Cacioppo, Petty, Feinstein, & Jarvis, 1996; McCrae & Costa Jr, 1997; Petty, Briñol, Loersch, & McCaslin, 2009, for reviews). These constructs are somewhat broader than intellectual humility, which more narrowly focuses on the specific idea that because one's own knowledge and experience is inevitably limited, and because other people, on average, should be no less honest and well-informed than oneself, being open to their input may be informative. In this narrower sense, the only study of which we are aware that explicitly examines openness is Leary et al. (2017), who found that attitude change among intellectually humble individuals, compared to less intellectually humble people, was more dependent on the strength of persuasive messages. (Price, Ottati, Wilson, & Kim, 2015, found that open-minded cognition predicted empathic concern for outgroups, but they did not explicitly look at receptivity to novel information.) Most theoretical accounts presume that this form of openness increases people's knowledge and their ability to work collectively with diverse others. Support for this idea comes from research on attitude correctness, which shows that individuals high in the subjective sense that their attitudes are correct and valid are more likely to resist persuasive messages and to send more competitive messages to another student with whom they anticipated debating (Petrocelli, Tormala, & Rucker, 2007; Rios, Demarree, & Statzer, 2014).

The second component of intellectual humility, lower ego-defensiveness, is a well-established social-psychological construct. Extensive research spanning many specific operational measures shows that people tend to construe themselves and their circumstances in a manner that inflates their self-view and competence. This tendency is exemplified, for example, in well-known phenomena such as the tendency to evaluate oneself more favorably than most other people—the so-called “better than average effect” (Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Brown, 2012),—to claim greater personal responsibility for success than failure (Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004), to express unrealistic optimism about the future (Weinstein, 1980), to perceive more control over events than is actually the case (Langer, 1975), and to see one's own decisions as less biased than the decisions of others (Pronin & Kugler, 2007). These tendencies are commonly interpreted as evidence of a broad self-serving bias that helps people minimize their

shortcomings while maintaining a positive sense of self-worth (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008).

Some of the most compelling evidence for the self-serving nature of these biases comes from research in which the self is threatened. Such threats—for example, facing actual or likely failure on a prognostically important task—tend to magnify self-serving biases, presumably because the defensive bias protects the self from having to acknowledge a diminished view of one's capabilities or worthiness (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999). Conversely, research shows that when the self is bolstered—such as by a self-affirming intervention that makes salient one's positive attributes and values—self-serving biases tend to be reduced (Sherman & Cohen, 2006).

In the large majority of existing studies, threats and affirmations are personal in nature—that is, the active threat or affirmation applies specifically to the individual's personal abilities, beliefs, values, or expected future. In the present research, we sought to provide evidence for a different sort of affirmation, an *interpersonal* one, perceived partner responsiveness. We conducted five studies aimed at demonstrating that when people feel that significant others are responsive to their needs, intellectual humility is enhanced. That is, we predicted that when people perceive others to be responsive, they will be more open to alternative points of view and self-enhancing biases will be reduced. On the other hand, when people feel that significant others are not responsive to their needs, we predicted that they will be less open to alternatives and self-serving biases will be magnified. More generally, these studies indicate that intellectual humility, in addition to being an intrapersonal attribute, also reflects interpersonal functions of the self.

### 1.2. Why would perceived partner responsiveness lessen self-serving bias?

Because social-psychological research has more commonly investigated the lower-defensiveness component of intellectual humility, we focus on it, while noting that the same logic applies to openness (see introduction to Study 4). Existing research has identified several processes that dampen people's need to defensively enhance their sense of self-worth. A key example is self-affirmation, or, the tendency to highlight values or attributes that are favorable to the self, which may lessen “self-evaluative concern in the situation at hand and allow other motivations, such as a desire to be even-handed, rational, or healthful, to predominate” (Sherman & Cohen, 2006, p. 221). Research has shown, for example, that writing a paragraph about one's most valued life domain reduced people's tendency to optimistically inflate their performance estimates on a difficult test (Critcher, Dunning, & Armor, 2010) and that recalling prior acts of kindness engenders openness to health risk-related information (Reed & Aspinwall, 1998). Common to these and other examples of self-affirmation is the idea that when positive aspects of the self are salient, there is less immediate need to defend the self against threatening information (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988).

Self-affirmation manipulations typically have participants complete tasks that remind them of their *individual* strengths and integrity, such as mentally engaging with their most important personal values or desirable competencies. We reasoned that it would also be informative to show that *interpersonal* feedback can lessen self-enhancement needs. At least two existing lines of theorizing and research, both concerned with self-evaluation rather than defensiveness, support this proposal. The first, Leary's sociometer model, asserts that self-esteem is a meter of perceived interpersonal value, which, in part, is strongly influenced by one's social environment (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). This model posits that people monitor their social relations for cues about how they are valued by others. Self-esteem directly reflects this monitoring process, rising when the social environment seems encouraging, and declining when it seems unpromising or rejecting. Existing research supports this interpersonal conceptualization of self-evaluation, both generally in social life (e.g., Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995) and in close

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