



# Honesty–humility in school: Exploring main and interaction effects on secondary school students' antisocial and prosocial behavior<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Social behavior is of high relevance in adolescence because it is associated with important outcomes such as having good relationships and academic achievement. The present study investigated the prediction of secondary school students' social behavior by personality in terms of the relatively recently introduced trait of honesty–humility and its interaction with situational school-life characteristics. To this end, 307 students provided self-reports on honesty–humility and, at a second measurement point, responded to vignettes describing realistic school situations in order to measure their antisocial and prosocial behavior. There were two main findings. First, adolescents higher on honesty–humility reported lower levels of antisocial behavior and higher levels of prosocial behavior. Second, and also in line with previous theorizing, situational characteristics had a greater influence for students low (versus high) in honesty–humility in predicting antisocial behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

Students' social behavior is important for the quality of everyday life at school. Both antisocial and prosocial behaviors of students affect their classmates and teachers as well as the educational careers of the students themselves (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000; McEvoy & Welker, 2000; Wentzel, 1993). Antisocial behavior comprises any form of behavior that intends to harm other people, for example, physical or verbal abuse (Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006). Prosocial behavior has been defined as voluntary behavior that intentionally produces a benefit for another person, regardless of whether this behavior is costly or also beneficial to the donor, for example, helping others or sharing with them (Grusec, Davidov, & Lundell, 2002). Antisocial behavior or a lack of (age-appropriate) prosocial behavior has been related, for instance, to low achievement, rejection by peers and teachers, or even school dropout (Caprara et al., 2000; Kokko, Tremblay, Lacourse, Nagin, & Vitaro, 2006; McEvoy & Welker, 2000; Warden & Mackinnon, 2003; Wentzel, 1993). Given this importance, research has consistently attempted to develop a better understanding of adolescents' social behavior (e.g., Sanson, Hemphill, & Smart, 2004).

Personality factors have repeatedly been found to be important predictors for social behavior. For instance, a meta-analysis by Miller and Lynam (2001) indicated that individuals lower on agreeableness and conscientiousness show less desirable social behavior. Concerning such basic traits, a relatively new line of research has suggested that the recently introduced personality trait honesty–humility is particularly crucial for predicting social behavior (Ashton & Lee, 2008a,b; Hilbig, Glöckner, & Zettler, 2014). More precisely, in both basic experimental research (e.g., Hilbig, Zettler, & Heydasch, 2012) and applied research (e.g., Wiltshire, Bourdage, & Lee, 2014), honesty–humility has been found to predict social behavior, directly and also in interaction with situational characteristics. At this juncture, research has mainly focused on adult samples, although the theoretical background seems to allow for a straightforward transfer to adolescents. Indeed, two recent studies of adolescents have found the first empirical support for direct effects of honesty–humility on one specific form of antisocial behavior, namely bullying (Book, Volk, & Hosker, 2012; Farrell, Della Cioppa, Volk, & Book, 2014). In the present study, we extend previous research in this area by testing the hypotheses that honesty–humility predicts secondary school students' social behavior in terms of antisocial and prosocial behavior, both directly and in interaction with situational characteristics.

## 2. Honesty–humility and social behavior

For several decades, the Five-Factor Model of Personality (McCrae & Costa, 2008) has been the dominant model for characterizing people's basic personality structure. In recent years, however, findings from lexical studies across several languages (e.g., Lee & Ashton, 2008) have

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suggested that there are six basic personality traits, resulting in the HEXACO Model of Personality (Ashton & Lee, 2007) which includes honesty–humility as a sixth trait. Honesty–humility is theoretically interpreted as “the tendency to be fair and genuine in dealing with others, in the sense of cooperating with others, even when one might exploit them without suffering retaliation” (Ashton & Lee, 2007, p. 156) including aspects such as honesty, modesty, or sincerity versus boastfulness, deceitfulness, or greed (Ashton & Lee, 2008a). Accordingly, honesty–humility has been found to predict various relevant outcomes in the fields of social behavior and deviant behavior (e.g., Ashton & Lee, 2008b; Zettler & Hilbig, 2010). This link is typically explained by the fact that people low in honesty–humility tend to be pulled toward luxury goods, prestige, or high social status and in turn are supposed to engage in deviant activities in order to achieve their aims. On the other hand, honesty–humility has been found to be positively related to cooperative behavior such as making prosocial choices (e.g., Hilbig et al., 2014).

The finding that honesty–humility is linked to social behavior seems to generalize across countries and research designs (e.g., Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, 2014; Dunlop, Morrison, Koenig, & Silcox, 2012; Hilbig et al., 2014; Marcus, Lee, & Ashton, 2007; Van Gelder & de Vries, 2012), substantiating the view of an “indisputable importance of honesty–humility for many aspects of broad societal relevance” (Zettler & Hilbig, 2015, p. 173).

Two studies have already linked honesty–humility to adolescents' social behavior (Book et al., 2012; Farrell et al., 2014). In these studies, the dimension was found to be negatively related to bullying. Given the importance of social behavior in the school context, we thus herein aim to extend the current knowledge by linking honesty–humility to both students' antisocial and prosocial behavior.

### 3. The interaction between honesty–humility and situational characteristics

Based on the description of honesty–humility, research has also suggested that, and tested whether, this trait interacts with situational characteristics in predicting social outcomes. More precisely, honesty–humility is described as representing “the tendency to be fair and genuine in dealing with others, in the sense of cooperating with others, even when [emphasis added] one might exploit them without suffering retaliation” (Ashton & Lee, 2007, p. 156). In other words, those high on honesty–humility should show cooperative (socially desirable) behavior irrespective of the situational circumstances. By contrast, the behavior of those low on honesty–humility might depend on situational characteristics; for instance, exploiting others if possible but not doing so when exploiting others is likely to result in negative consequences for oneself.

Several empirical findings have confirmed this interaction pattern, though only adult samples have been investigated hitherto. As one straightforward example, Hilbig and Zettler (2009) investigated the distribution of goods in the dictator- and the ultimatum game. In both games, participants are asked to share goods between themselves and a recipient. However, the recipient can reject the offer in the ultimatum game but has to accept the offer in the dictator game. An interaction was found between honesty–humility and the power of the recipient that was exactly in line with the description of honesty–humility. Participants low on honesty–humility made selfish distributions in the dictator game but more equal distributions in the ultimatum game, whereas those high on honesty–humility distributed fairly in both games (for similar findings, see, e.g., Hilbig et al., 2012; Zettler, Hilbig, & Heydasch, 2013).

Importantly, support for this interaction between honesty–humility and situational characteristics has been found in applied settings as well. Wiltshire et al. (2014) and Zettler and Hilbig (2010) found that employees high on honesty–humility showed less counterproductive work behavior in general whereas those lower on honesty–humility

showed more counterproductive work behavior in a work environment characterized by many self-centered activities (high levels of organizational politics) as compared to a work environment in which these activities do not occur so often. Recently, Chirumbolo (2014) extended these findings by reporting a conceptually fully similar interaction between honesty–humility and job insecurity—a personal stressor that may occur at work—when shaping counterproductive work behavior. Herein, we transfer this line of research to the school setting for the first time.

### 4. The present study

Based on the description of honesty–humility, it is assumable that honesty–humility is linked to students' antisocial and prosocial behavior both directly and in interaction with situational characteristics. Whereas the first studies (Book et al., 2012; Farrell et al., 2014) reported negative relations between honesty–humility and students' bullying behavior, relations to antisocial behavior more broadly, relations to prosocial behavior, and potential interaction effects with situational characteristics have not been tested for this target group yet. We have addressed these gaps in research.

Using different vignettes describing school-relevant situations (i.e., situational characteristics were manipulated between vignettes) with potential antisocial or prosocial behavior of students (i.e., the outcome variables were measured with the vignettes as well), we specifically hypothesized the following: Honesty–humility would be linked to students' antisocial behavior negatively (Hypothesis 1a) and to students' prosocial behavior positively (Hypothesis 1b). More importantly, anticipating an interaction between honesty–humility and situational characteristics, we predicted that students high on honesty–humility would show less antisocial behavior irrespective of the situational characteristics described in the vignettes, whereas students low on honesty–humility would show less antisocial behavior if the situation was likely to entail negative consequences for showing antisocial behavior, but they would show more antisocial behavior otherwise. In other words, the situational characteristics were expected to affect the antisocial behavior of students low on honesty–humility more strongly than the antisocial behavior of students high on honesty–humility (Hypothesis 2a). Similarly, we predicted that students high on honesty–humility would show more prosocial behavior, irrespective of the situational characteristics described in the vignettes, whereas students low on honesty–humility would show more prosocial behavior if the situation was likely to entail positive consequences for doing so but would show less prosocial behavior otherwise. In other words, the situational characteristics described in the vignettes were expected to have a greater influence on the prosocial behavior of students' low rather than high on honesty–humility (Hypothesis 2b).

### 5. Method

#### 5.1. Procedure and participants

The data were collected at secondary schools in a southern German state. Specifically, 307 students from five classes from Grade 8, six classes from Grade 9, and six classes from Grade 10 participated in our study. Thirty-four percent of the participants attended a Gymnasium (highest track in the German school system) and 66% attended a Realschule (middle track in the German school system). The mean age of all students (52% female) was 15.3 years ( $SD = 0.97$ , ranging from 13.3 to 17.8). After we obtained parental consent, the students completed a questionnaire concerning demographic information and honesty–humility. Four to six weeks later, students' antisocial and prosocial behaviors were assessed via vignettes.

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