



## Contrasting self-report and consensus ratings of intellectual humility and arrogance



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### ABSTRACT

Despite a growing interest in intellectual humility (IH) and intellectual arrogance (IA), adequate measurement remains a challenging issue. This paper presents a pair of studies that compare two strategies: self-assessments and relational measures of group consensus. In Study 1, unacquainted participants provided round-robin judgments following a set of collaborative tasks. A social relations analysis revealed no consensus for either construct, making the relational measure untenable. However, a round-robin design following months of cooperative course work (Study 2) produced consensus for both constructs. Self-reported IH in both studies was positively associated with self-enhancement, despite the construct's definitional association with accurate self-appraisals, whereas relational IH was not. These studies reveal key ways in which personal and relational assessments can differ.

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“Self-seeking, self-glory, that is not me. No. Many people say I embarrass them with my humility.” Archbishop Peter Akinola, as quoted in [Polgreen and Goodstein \(2006, December 25\)](#).

The study of human virtues has a long intellectual history, particularly in the fields of philosophy and theology. However, it has only been within the past few decades that the positive psychology movement led psychological researchers to begin to seriously consider virtues and their role in human life ([Peterson & Seligman, 2004](#)). The result has been a wealth of recent scholarship on a variety of relevant topics, such as gratitude and forgiveness ([Carlisle & Tsang, 2013](#)), love ([Fehr, 2013](#)), and self-control ([Baumeister & Vohs, 2012](#)). Despite this broad, growing interest in positive human attributes, humility, on the other hand, has been referred to as the “most overlooked and underappreciated virtue” ([Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013, p. 819](#)), as it has yet to produce a comparably large body of work within empirical psychology.

This dearth has recently generated a great deal of consideration, motivated in large part by extended reflection on the critical importance of humility as a virtue specifically within the intellectual and academic domain ([Thrive Center for Human Development, 2014](#)). For example, the advancement of scientific knowledge seems to fully depend on practitioners possessing some degree of

intellectual humility. That is, researchers must be motivated to pursue the truth, wherever that may lead them, instead of being focused on status within the field, defending a “pet theory” regardless of its adequacy, or refusing to question one's own initial assumptions and positions in light of new, conflicting evidence ([Roberts & Wood, 2003](#)). Even among non-scientists, learning from others first requires an acknowledgment and admission of ignorance ([Hodges, Meagher, Norton, McBain, & Kimball, 2014](#)), so education itself is largely dependent upon these open expressions of intellectual humility.

In light of the wide-reaching influence humility has on critical aspects of human social functioning, empirical efforts to better evaluate and understand this construct are well overdue. In this paper, we begin with a brief description of the two primary challenges responsible for curtailing empirical research on the topic of humility generally: conceptual issues, in terms of defining humility, and measurement issues, regarding how one can accurately assess individual differences. Following this discussion, we consider the relevance of these theoretical and methodological issues for humility within the intellectual domain specifically.

### 1. Conceptual issues in the study of humility

The first stumbling block for an empirical approach to studying humility has been a basic conceptual question: What is humility? As is true for many terms in the psychological literature, conceptual definitions of humility often differ dramatically among lay

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persons, theoreticians, and researchers. As noted by Tangney (2009), dictionary definitions typically describe humility as merely holding oneself in low regard, a trait entailing meekness, self-abasement, and low self-esteem. However, despite this fairly negative portrayal, lay theories of humility are actually quite positive, associating humility with good psychological adjustment and positive emotions (Exline & Geyer, 2004). This finding is consistent with the historical, English-language lexical research that led to the development of the Five Factor Model of personality structure (Costa & McCrae, 1985; McCrae & Costa, 1997), which places humility-related items within the facet of modesty under the higher-order factor of agreeableness. Thus, this framework views humility as one component of having a prosocial and communal orientation toward others. More recently, Lee and Ashton (2004), developing their own model of personality structure, have argued that lexical studies across multiple languages indicate that humility (with honesty) represents its own unique factor independent of agreeableness, which is characterized by facets of sincerity, fairness, greed-avoidance, and modesty. Notably, distinguishing between agreeableness and Honesty–Humility is generally done by researchers interested in different forms of social morality: agreeableness predicting receptive forms (e.g., tolerance, forgiveness) and Honesty–Humility predicting more agentic forms (e.g., altruism, pro-sociality).

Outside of these lexical and lay theories of humility, a number of philosophers, theologians, and psychologists have sought to develop more nuanced definitions of the construct. Although several different conceptions have been proposed (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Davis, Worthington, & Hook, 2010; Exline et al., 2004; Tangney, 2009), humility within these frameworks is consistently characterized as a multidimensional construct, most commonly including an accurate or moderate assessment of one's own abilities, being open to new ideas, having a low self-focus, and being able to acknowledge one's own mistakes. Notably, a large portion of this theoretical work has involved distinguishing humility from a number of closely related constructs. For example, although measures of modesty (e.g., self-reporting lower values on desirable traits than do knowledgeable others) have often been used as proxies for humility, Tangney (2009) argues that modesty is a narrower construct, involving a moderate estimate of one's abilities but lacking the openness and low self-focus characteristic of humility. Exline et al. (2004) make a slightly different distinction, suggesting that modesty is an exclusively social trait, entailing a particular type of self-presentation that may or may not be consistent with internal humility. In both cases, humility is conceptualized as a more expansive construct than modesty. Researchers have also argued that humility differs from certain conceptually-related negative attributes, such as high self-esteem or narcissism, which is characterized by feelings of grandiosity, an overestimation of self-importance, and a sense of entitlement. Tangney (2009) points out that although narcissistic people necessarily lack humility, it is less evident that people low on narcissism must also be high in terms of humility. For example, a person with low self-esteem will likely be low in narcissism, but also potentially low in humility, as they may be engaging in self-deprecation as a means of eliciting a positive social response and therefore still demonstrating a high self-focus.

The philosophical and theoretical literature on humility has dramatically outpaced the empirical work attempting to scientifically evaluate these theories. As evidenced in this short review, theoretical work has primarily sought to clarify many subtle definitional distinctions between humility and related constructs. However, more empirical testing is needed to evaluate the adequacy and robustness of these nuanced conceptual frameworks when observing how individuals actually describe themselves and others. As a result, the extent to which humility can be

empirically disentangled from numerous related traits, such as agreeableness, modesty, narcissism, and arrogance, is still an open question. The primary cause of this difficulty—concerns over measurement—will be described next.

## 2. Measurement issues in the study of humility

The second chief challenge for empirical work on the topic of humility has been the question of how to accurately measure the construct (Davis et al., 2010). As with most psychological traits, researchers have generally relied on self-report measures, such as the Honesty–Humility subscale of the HEXACO Personality Inventory (Lee & Ashton, 2004) or the Modesty–Humility subscale of the Values in Action Strengths Inventory (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). However, as the opening quote of this paper hints, it is unclear whether humility can be accurately self-reported. Would a humble person be likely to brag to a newspaper that he embarrasses others with his humility? The large-scale distribution of Rev. Akinola's quote by his many detractors would suggest that most people believe not.

This concern over self-report measurement stems from the very characteristics of the attribute itself. Because humility is conceived of as entailing an accurate or moderate view of oneself (i.e., not self-enhancing), as well as a low self-focus, it is a construct that is inherently linked to self-assessment. As a result, it is perhaps not surprising that many question the internal validity of a self-report measure. For example, people with low humility may self-enhance and report high levels, and people with high humility may express modesty and report lower levels (Davis et al., 2010). This challenge has led a number of researchers to develop and consider alternative measurement strategies (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013), such as implicit assessments (Rowatt et al., 2006). However, the most prominent alternative methodology employed in the past several years is the use of personality judgments from raters (Davis et al., 2010, 2011, 2013; Kruse, Chancellor, Ruberton, & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Davis and colleagues (Davis et al., 2010, 2011) have framed this approach as a measurement of *relational humility*, defined as a social judgment, rather than an intrinsic individual attribute. They argue that humility is easier and more reliably assessed in others, as it avoids problems related to self-enhancement and socially desirable responding. Moreover, this perspective draws on Vazire's (2010) self-other knowledge asymmetry model, which proposes that ratings by others tend to be more accurate than self-assessments on traits that are highly evaluative, in that they are closely tied to motivational and ego-defensive processes. Humility, being a highly valenced construct, falls into this evaluative classification.

Nevertheless, two important challenges exist for the quantitative assessment of relational humility. First, Davis and colleagues' (Davis et al., 2010, 2011, 2013) relational model proposes that relational humility is best measured in terms of inter-judge agreement across a number of raters. However, these peer ratings will only be meaningful if there actually is consensus among raters (Kenny, 1994). Groups are most likely to reach consensus for trait judgments when perceivers witness the same or similar behaviors that reflect a particular trait (Kenny, Albright, Malloy, & Kashy, 1994), viz., actions that provide good information (Funder, 1995). A consensus assessment of humility may therefore be limited only to a very specific set of contexts or relationships that are capable of revealing this virtue. Several authors have argued that humility will be most evident behaviorally in situations where it is directly challenged, such as during interpersonal conflict, when receiving recognition or praise, when interacting with someone of a lower social status, or when describing past success (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Davis et al., 2010, 2011; Kruse et al., 2014).

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