



Leader humility in Singapore



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ABSTRACT

The theoretical development and empirical testing of the effects of humility in the organizational sciences is surprisingly rare. This is especially pronounced in the study of leadership in Asian contexts. To address this we employ a qualitative approach to examine the conceptualization of leader humility in Singapore and assess whether this conceptualization differs from other emerging conceptualizations of leader humility. In Study 1, using semi-structured interviews of 25 Singaporeans, we identified nine major dimensions of humble leader behaviors and explored our participants' beliefs about culturally-based differences in leader humility. In Study 2 ($N = 307$), we generalized our findings to a broader sample and explored how the nine dimensions fit with existing taxonomies. In addition to replicating all of the Western conceptual dimensions of humility, we identified five unique dimensions of behaviors indicative of leader humility in Singapore.

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Leader humility is believed to be one of the key determinants of leader effectiveness. Indeed, most newly derived leadership theories include humility as a defining feature of an effective leader (e.g., servant leadership, level-five leadership; Owens & Hekman, 2012). Despite humility's prominence in newer leadership theories, and despite widespread belief that leader humility affects a range of employee and organizational outcomes (Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005; Owens, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013; Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004; Weick, 2001), empirical studies of humility in leadership are extremely rare. The scarcity of research on leader humility is likely due, in part, to a lack of consensus regarding humility's conceptualization. For example, humility has been used synonymously with honesty, modesty, empathy, low self-esteem, and integrity (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Lee & Ashton, 2008; Tangney, 2000a; Weiss & Knight, 1980) despite the fact that it is distinct from each of these (Exline, Campbell, Baumeister, Joiner, & Krueger, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Ryan, 1983; Tangney, 2000a). Adding to this lack of clarity, humility has also been defined as a personality trait, a value, an orientation, and a virtue (Owens et al., 2013). Recent research by Owens et al.

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(2013) attempts to more clearly define leader humility, but questions remain about whether their conceptualization captures the full construct of humility and whether it generalizes to a non-Western context. Given the centrality of humility to some Asian conceptualizations of leadership (e.g., ethocracy, or "ruling by ethical values", Cheung & Chan, 2005, p. 47), it is quite possible that humility may be conceptualized differently in an Asian context. As such, we designed two studies to investigate how leader humility is conceptualized in Singapore and whether this conceptualization differs from existing Western views of humility.

We contribute to the literature on humility in general, and leader humility specifically, in several ways. First, we review existing definitions of humility and discuss how humility is distinguished from other related constructs to better explicate its position in the nomological network. Second, we discuss the importance of leader humility and integrate the limited empirical research on it. Third, we conduct two studies that conceptualize leader humility in a Singaporean context and assess the cross-cultural generalizability of this Singaporean-based conceptualization.

Definitions of humility

Despite some recent attention to humility in the scientific literature there remains a lack of consensus regarding what humility is and is not. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary defines humility as the "quality of having a modest or low view of one's importance" and it is considered synonymous with "having a feeling of insignificance, inferiority, subservience, lowliness" (www.dictionary.com). While some research embraces this definition (e.g., examining how humility is related to low self-esteem; Knight & Nadel, 1986), more recent perspectives on humility have shifted to treating humility as something desirable rather than as a flaw.

From this perspective, humility is conceptualized as a willingness to try to accurately assess oneself (Tangney, 2000a,b) and an awareness of the fact that no one is perfect (Clark, 1992; Templeton, 1997). Humble people are viewed as being more open-minded, willing to admit mistakes, and willing to learn from those mistakes (Hwang, 1982). As such, humility is not the devaluing of one's own strengths and accomplishments, but rather the accurate recognition of the strengths and accomplishments of oneself and of others (Means, Wilson, Sturm, Biron, & Bach, 1990).

This more positive view of humility is gaining traction in the literature. For example, other work in the broader psychological literature has proposed a two dimensional structure of "empathy for" and "kindness to" other people (Means et al., 1990). Similarly, Tangney (2000a) reviewed the philosophical, theological, and psychological literatures and identified six positive aspects of humility: 1) viewing oneself accurately, 2) willingness to admit mistakes and accept weaknesses, 3) receptiveness to new ideas, feedback, 4) awareness of one's abilities and accomplishment, 5) transcendence (e.g., being aware that you are a part of something greater), and 6) valuing the different ways people and things contribute to our world. Nevertheless, despite these early proposals, with few exceptions humility remains a relatively new, poorly understood, and often neglected construct in organizational research. Only recently has research on the conceptualization of leader humility beginning to emerge.

The first comprehensive, empirically-based conceptualization of leader humility was proposed by Owens and Hekman (2012). To develop their definition of leader humility, they conducted 55 qualitative interviews with managers from a variety of levels and occupations. They specifically focused on "expressed humility" or observable behaviors that respondents defined as humble. Based on their interviews, they defined expressed leader humility as a composition of three factors: 1) admitting mistakes and limitations, 2) modeling teachability, and 3) spotlighting follower strengths and contributions. In a follow up study, using a sample of 164 undergraduate business students, Owens et al. (2013) demonstrated that their measure of expressed humility was related to but distinct from modesty ($r = .62$), core self-evaluations ($r = .34$), and the honesty-humility dimension of the HEXACO model ($r = .55$) (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Lee & Ashton, 2008). Building on this conceptualization, Ou et al. (2014) recently used a mixed deductive/inductive approach to identify three additional dimensions of humility: low self-focus, self-transcendent pursuit, and transcendent self-concept. These dimensions include cognitive and motivational components not originally included in Owens et al. (2013) expressed behavioral scale.

Aside from efforts to describe what humility is, work is also ongoing to describe what humility is not (Tangney, 2000a). Consistent with more positive definitions of humility, consensus seems to be emerging that humility is not the same as low self-esteem or the devaluation of one's accomplishments or abilities (Ryan, 1983). Humility also is assumed to be related to, but different from modesty, narcissism, (Tangney, 2000a) and honesty (Ashton, Lee, & Goldberg, 2004). While modesty may be related to the "accurate view of the self" dimension of humility, it does not tap many of the other dimensions such as teachability or an appreciation of others' strengths (Tangney, 2000a). As such, modesty may represent a component of humility, but it does not capture the whole construct (Tangney, 2000a). Similarly, narcissism has been described as the closest negatively-valenced correlate of humility (Tangney, 2000a). However, as Morris et al. (2005) note, "The absence of narcissism does not necessarily imply self-awareness. At best, the absence of narcissism is a necessary but incomplete condition for humility" (p. 1335). Finally, while honesty with oneself may be associated with some prosocial characteristics related to the dimensions of humility, it has been argued (and demonstrated) that it too falls short of capturing the richness of the broader construct (Owens et al., 2013). Humility then, while overlapping with each of these constructs, still occupies a unique space in the nomological network. We contribute to this existing literature by assessing the generalizability and appropriateness of these current conceptualizations in an Asian culture (Singapore). Before presenting our two studies, we briefly review the limited existing theoretical arguments and empirical evidence regarding leader humility's relations to important follower, leader, and organizational outcomes.

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