



To boast or not to boast: Testing the humility aspect of the Honesty–Humility factor



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ABSTRACT

Interest in the HEXACO Model of Personality has consistently grown in the past decade – with a particular focus on the newly proposed sixth basic factor: Honesty–Humility. In essence, this factor was proposed as the driving force behind cooperative, honest behavior and the basis for a modest, unassuming nature. However, whereas recent research has accumulated substantial evidence for the prediction that Honesty–Humility drives non-exploitative behavior, there is little conclusive evidence for the proposition that it also signals humility. We tested this conjecture in a web-based study – assessing modest behavior in terms of people's over- vs. under-representation of their actual abilities. As hypothesized, the Honesty–Humility factor scale and the Modesty facet scale of the HEXACO Personality Inventory-Revised predicted the degree to which participants' self-appraisals matched their actual general mental ability in the expected direction: those low in Honesty–Humility and/or Modesty overstated their ability.

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1. Introduction

For several decades, models of basic personality structure have provided a guide for research into individual differences (Funder, 2001). One such model that has attracted much attention in recent research is the HEXACO model of personality structure (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Ashton, Lee, & De Vries, in press). Based on the results of lexical studies in various languages (Ashton & Lee, 2010a; Ashton et al., 2004; Lee & Ashton, 2008), this model subsumes the many ways in which individuals differ in six basic factors: Honesty–Humility, Emotionality, eXtraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness (thus the acronym HEXACO).

Specifically, the HEXACO model is a variant and extension of the more classic five-factor model of personality structure, or the Big Five (Costa & McCrae, 2009; John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & Costa, 1989; McCrae & Costa, 2008). Three of the HEXACO factors (Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness) are practically equivalent to the corresponding Big Five factors. In addition, there are some rather nuanced and some more striking differences between the two models (Lee & Ashton, 2004; Lee, Ashton,

Ogunfowora, Bourdage, & Shin, 2010). In terms of the former, the HEXACO factors Emotionality and Agreeableness are variants of Big Five Neuroticism and Agreeableness (for details, see Ashton & Lee, 2007; Ashton et al., 2014). More strikingly, the main extension proposed in the HEXACO model lies in a sixth basic personality factor, named Honesty–Humility. Indeed, it is this proposition of an additional factor that has stimulated most recent research into the HEXACO model (for a list of references see hexaco.org).

Honesty–Humility essentially reflects individual differences in morality and active cooperativeness (Hilbig, Zettler, Leist, & Heydasch, 2013), covering socially desirable attributes such as being sincere, fair-minded, unassuming, and modest versus sly, greedy, boastful, and hypocritical (Ashton & Lee, 2008a; Lee & Ashton, 2012). Correspondingly, Honesty–Humility is primarily understood as “the tendency to be fair and genuine in dealing with others” (Ashton & Lee, 2007, p. 156) and it is measured with the facets Sincerity, Fairness, Greed Avoidance, and Modesty in the HEXACO Personality Inventory-Revised (Lee & Ashton, 2004; Lee & Ashton, 2006). In essence, Honesty–Humility is conceptualized as the basic personality factor that drives honest, cooperative, non-exploitative behavior and signals an unassuming, modest nature.

With respect to the first aspect (that Honesty–Humility drives cooperative behavior), empirical evidence in support of Honesty–Humility has rapidly accumulated. There is now substantial

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evidence that Honesty–Humility is linked to diverse criteria that could be subsumed under the aspect of non-exploitation and cooperativeness. For example, Honesty–Humility has been associated with less sexual harassment tendencies and fewer sexual quid pro quos (Ashton & Lee, 2008b; Lee, Gizzarone, & Ashton, 2003; Lee et al., 2013), higher integrity and more honesty (Hershfield, Cohen, & Thompson, 2012; Lee, Ashton, Morrison, Cordery, & Dunlop, 2008), more prosocial behavior and cooperation in social dilemmas (Hilbig, Glöckner, & Zettler, in press; Hilbig & Zettler, 2009; Hilbig, Zettler, & Heydasch, 2012; Zettler, Hilbig, & Heydasch, 2013), as well as other related criteria (for an overview, see Ashton et al., 2014).

However, with regard to the second aspect (that Honesty–Humility reflects an unassuming nature), the extant literature is notably thinner. To best of our knowledge, there is only indirect support for this humility-aspect of Honesty–Humility. For example, there is substantial ($r \sim .40$) self-observer-agreement on the Modesty facet of Honesty–Humility (Lee et al., 2009), showing that this scale measures substantive trait content rather than mere response styles. However, this is not sufficient to conclude that this content actually reflects Modesty. Also, there is a consistent negative association between Honesty–Humility and the so-called Dark Triad traits, especially narcissism (Lee & Ashton, 2005; Lee & Ashton, in press). The latter subsumes attributes such as grandiosity, entitlement, and a feeling of superiority and its negative relation with Honesty–Humility can thus be considered support of the idea that Honesty–Humility also reflects individual differences in Modesty. However, more direct tests of the humility-aspect of Honesty–Humility – that is, that the factor subsumes “a tendency to be modest and unassuming” (Lee & Ashton, 2004, p. 334) – seem necessary.

In the study reported below, we thus aimed for a straightforward test of the hypothesis that Honesty–Humility predicts modest behavior. Specifically, we consider Modesty in terms of one’s “unexaggerated estimate of one’s qualities and abilities” (The Oxford English Dictionary, 2014) or, more precisely, the “public underrepresentation of one’s favorable traits and abilities” (Cialdini, Wosinska, Dabul, Whetstone-Dion, & Heszen, 1998, p. 473). Note that, in line with common definitions (cf. Gregg, Hart, Sedikides, & Kumashiro, 2008), Modesty is thus understood to be relative: it represents the fit between one’s actual traits and abilities as compared to what one thinks or claims about one’s traits and abilities. So, Honesty–Humility should account for the degree to which individuals over- vs. under-state their abilities. In other words, we aimed to test whether there is a negative relationship between Honesty–Humility and the difference between what individuals state about their own abilities and their actual abilities. Note that strong conclusions indeed necessitate some comparison between what individuals state about themselves and some objective criterion; otherwise, findings will necessarily remain inconclusive. For a highly similar experimental logic, see the comparison of self-appraised vs. measured intelligence by Paulhus and Williams (2002).

2. Study

2.1. Material, procedure, and participants

The current investigation was run via the internet, in close adherence with common standards for web-based experimenting (Reips, 2002). Note that it is now well-established that investigations of personality via the internet do not suffer method-specific biases (Chuah, Drasgow, & Roberts, 2006; Cronk & West, 2002; Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). Specifically, we matched data from two independent web-studies run via the online-studies web page of the distance teaching University of Hagen (Germany).

Matching proceeded by means of self-generated pseudonymous codes that fully preserved anonymity. Undergraduate psychology students participated in return for course credit.

In the first study, all six HEXACO factors were assessed using the German 100-item version (e.g. Hilbig, Zettler, Moshagen, & Heydasch, 2013; Zettler, Hilbig, & Haubrich, 2011) of the HEXACO-PI-R (Lee & Ashton, 2004; Lee & Ashton, 2006). Thus, each HEXACO factor was assessed with 16 items and each facet scale comprised four items. The four Honesty–Humility items from the Modesty facet scale were “I am an ordinary person who is no better than others”, “I would not want people to treat me as though I were superior to them”, “I think that I am entitled to more respect than the average person is” (reverse coded), and “I want people to know that I am an important person of high status” (reverse coded). For more information on the inventory, the scales, and all items, see hexaco.org.

In the second study, participants worked on different tasks, two of which are pertinent to the current investigation: First, they completed a self-appraisal measure of mental ability, namely the Trapnell SMART scale (Trapnell, 1994) which comprises four items: “I’m considered exceptionally or unusually intelligent”, “I’m considered extremely ‘gifted’ or talented at academic things”, “I’m considered a very ‘brainy’ or scholarly person”, and “My school grades have usually been near the top of every class”. The scale possesses very satisfactory internal consistency and has been shown to correlate with other self-appraisal measures of mental ability (Paulhus, Lysy, & Yik, 1998). Second, participants completed a short objective test of general mental ability, the 10-Minute-Test.¹ Specifically, the test comprised 32 tasks arranged in order of increasing difficulty assessing mathematical, verbal, and logical skills as well as general knowledge. It is thus similar in structure and content to the well-known Wonderlic Cognitive Ability Test (Wonderlic, 1992). Participants had 10 minutes to complete as many tasks correctly as possible. Example items can be found in the Appendix A.

Exact code matches were obtained from a total of 400 participants (311 female, aged between 19 and 66, $M = 33.4$ and $SD = 9.2$ years) who had specified German as their native language. The mean time lag between completing the two studies – i.e. assessment of (i) the HEXACO factors and (ii) assessment of self-appraised as well as actual mental ability – was 174 days ($SD = 139$ days) and thus about half a year. Most participants were either full-time students (35%) or concurrently in employment (55%).

3. Results

Descriptive statistics and reliabilities of all variables of interest can be found in Table 1, alongside bivariate correlation coefficients. As can be seen, there was no association of either the full Honesty–Humility scale or the Modesty facet scale with actual mental ability. Approximation of the Bayesian posterior probability of the hypothesis that there is a correlation (using the BIC-approximation for R^2 assuming uniform priors, cf. Raftery, 1995, equation 26; Wagenmakers, 2007) yielded $p(H_1|D) = .05$ and $p(H_1|D) = .14$,

¹ The test itself is currently unpublished. Nonetheless, in an independent community sample of over 6500 participants (also tested online) it showed very good reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha > .80$) and correlated $r \sim .50$ with a test of verbal IQ (the Word Sorting Test by Schmidt & Metzler, 1992), and $r \sim .35$ with participants’ level of education. In another unpublished study ($N = 250$, offline) by Ostapczuk (2006), it was substantially associated ($r \sim .40$) with a test of analytical reasoning abilities (Ostapczuk, Musch, & Lieberei, 2011) and a test of executive functions (the Trail-Making Test by Oswald & Roth, 1987) as well as moderately associated ($r \sim .30$) with a test of verbal knowledge (Lehrl, 1999) and the discrimination index from the Overclaiming Test (Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, & Lysy, 2003). Thus, the 10-Minute-Test can be safely assumed to provide an objective measure of mental abilities.

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