



Humility facilitates higher self-control



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We hypothesize that humility enhances self-control.
- Recalling humility experiences improved performance in a handgrip task (Studies 1 and 4), food abstinence task (Study 2), and tracing task (Study 3) than recalling other experiences.
- In Studies 3 and 4, reported self-control was higher in the humility condition compared to the low and high self-esteem conditions.
- We discuss how the findings might be relevant to understanding outcomes associated with humility.

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ABSTRACT

Prior evidence and existing theories imply that humility engenders intra- and inter-personal attributes that facilitate self-regulatory abilities. Four experiments were conducted to test the hypothesis that humility predicts enhanced self-control. Participants who recalled humility experiences were found to be better able at sustaining their physical stamina in a handgrip task (Studies 1 and 4), resisting indulgence in chocolates (Study 2), and persevering in a frustrating tracing task (Study 3) than those who recalled neutral experiences. Studies 3 and 4 demonstrated that the effect of humility was distinct from that of self-esteem, which did not affect self-control. Study 2 ruled out two alternative hypotheses concerning achievement and compliance motives. We discuss how the findings might relate to outcomes associated with humility as evidenced in past studies.

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Humility has been hailed by philosophers, religious figures, and psychologists as having numerous positive qualities. These qualities include moderate self-views, low self-focus, open-mindedness, and pro-social motivation, which can confer adaptive advantages in terms of personal growth and social support (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Emmons, 1999; Tangney, 2009). Indeed, humility has been associated with positive life outcomes, such as effective leadership (Collins, 2001; Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005), competence at work (e.g., Johnson, Rowatt, & Petrini, 2011; Owens, Rowatt, & Wilkins, 2011), and academic excellence (Rowatt et al., 2006). One question is whether these various outcomes associated with humility can be ascribed to a common construct. In this research, we propose that enhanced self-control is one such construct and, over four studies, test the hypothesis that humility predicts higher self-control.

1. Humility

Research on humility remains thin, but the available literature suggests that humility is associated with several intra- and inter-personal qualities. In the intrapersonal domain, theorists have posited that humble people have a balanced view of themselves (e.g., Emmons, 1999; Exline et al., 2004; Owen, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Tangney, 2009). Specifically, they are able to acknowledge their failures and imperfections without self-deprecation, and view their achievements and strengths in perspective instead of seeing themselves as superior to others (Emmons, 1999; Sandage, 1999; Tangney, 2009). As such, their self-view is more robust and less likely to be influenced by social acceptance/rejection and personal successes/failures. They are also thought to be open-minded, which is in line with other attributes including their ability to accept criticisms, seek self-improvement, and consider the views of others (Davis, Worthington, & Hook, 2010; Means, Wilson, Sturm, Biron, & Bach, 1990; Owen, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013; Tangney, 2009).

In the interpersonal domain, humility was found to be positively associated with pro-social attributes such as empathy, gratitude,

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generosity, patience, helpfulness, and forgiveness (e.g., Davis et al., 2011; Exline & Hill, 2012; Exline & Zell, 2008; Hilbig & Zettler, 2009; LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, Tsang, & Willerton, 2012; Means, Wilson, Sturm, Biron, & Bach, 1990; Peters, Rowat, & Johnson, 2011; Powers, Nam, Rowatt, & Hill, 2007; Rowatt et al., 2006). Humble people are also respectful to others, sensitive to others' needs, and helpful to those in need of assistance (Exline et al., 2004; Owen, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013; Rowatt et al., 2006; Tangney, 2000).

2. Humility and self-control

Self-control involves volitional engagement of physical or psychological resources in order to attain desired goals or overcome impulses (Baumeister, 2005; Carver & Scheier, 1981). It is instrumental for generating adaptive personal and social responses, and predicts important life outcomes such as higher grades, better social relationships, and health-promoting behaviors (e.g., Funder, Block, & Block, 1983; Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2009; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). In contrast, the lack of self-control has been shown to predict undesirable outcomes such as academic under-achievement, aggression, and depression (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; Funder & Block, 1989; Shoda, Mischel, & Peake, 1990).

We hypothesized that humility predicts higher self-control. This hypothesis is based on several indirect theoretical considerations and empirical findings. First, humble individuals are thought to be able to resist self-enhancing tendencies (Davis et al., 2011; Emmons, 2000; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Rowatt et al., 2006; Tangney, 2009). There is evidence that self-enhancement is a dominant and automatic tendency (e.g., Beer, Chester, & Hughes, 2013; Koole, Dijksterhuis, & van Knippenberg, 2001). Also, overriding natural responses requires considerable resources (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003). This suggests the possibility of a greater self-control capacity driving the proficiency of humble people at resisting self-enhancement. However, it is also possible that the humble individual's ability to rein in self-enhancing urges has been automatized due to prolonged engagement, requiring less regulatory resources. Testing both possibilities is beyond the scope of the current research, but if the first possibility is true, it would be consistent with the hypothesis that humility and self-control are correlated. Also, those who aim to be humble but are inexperienced in resisting automatic self-enhancing urges would have to summon significant self-regulatory resources to do so.

Further, humility is associated with the tendency to focus on the concerns of other people. Of interest is the idea that pro-social orientation can make egoistic demands easier to control (Crocker, Niiya, & Mischkowski, 2008). Indeed, studies have shown that when reminded of values that go beyond egoistic needs (e.g. values concerning justice and charity), people are better able to exert higher self-control when facing threats to their self (Burson, Crocker, & Mischkowski, 2012). Demonstrating the broader connection between self-control and pro-sociality, studies have also found that diminished self-regulatory ability is associated with less willingness to help others (DeWall, Baumeister, Gailliot, & Maner, 2007), less willingness to forgive (Stanton & Finkel, 2012) and greater tendency to exploit others (e.g., Mead, Baumeister, Gino, Schweitzer, & Ariely, 2009). While indirect, these findings are consistent with the possibility that humility can boost self-regulatory capability by virtue of the associated pro-social orientation.

Finally, there are findings in the humility literature that are consistent with our hypothesis but fall short of validating it convincingly. For instance, humility was positively related to conscientiousness (e.g., Exline & Hill, 2012; Johnson, Rowatt, & Petrini, 2011), and negatively to materialism (Ashton & Lee, 2008) and entitlement (e.g., Exline & Hill, 2012). Humility was also positively related to performance in jobs that require patience and understanding (e.g., health care; Johnson, Rowatt, & Petrini, 2011). Humility is posited to be associated with down-regulating negative self-focused responses in favor of positive other-focused responses, such as dropping personal grievances

and cultivating forgiveness (Davis et al., 2013). Further, individuals higher in humility were found more willing to forego personal interests for altruistic purposes in economic games (Hilbig & Zettler, 2009). In all these cases, humility predicted outcomes suggestive of better regulatory control. However, these outcomes are at best proxies of self-control, not to mention also that the findings have been correlational.

To our knowledge, no study has focused specifically on the causal connection from humility to self-control. Only one research came close, using reported intention as a measure of self-control. Kesebir (2014; Study 5) examined whether humility might buffer against the negative effects of mortality salience. Humility was induced by having participants recall experiences of humility (vs neutral experiences). Mortality salience was also manipulated. Participants then reported their intention to resist pleasurable but harmful activities (e.g., drinking beer). Humility reduced the facilitative effect of mortality thoughts on such intentions, suggesting, indirectly, that humility might have enhanced participants' capacity to control their urges. However, this study focused on the effects of mortality thoughts and self-control was measured by reported intention.

Hence, there appears to be considerable consensus among theorists and convergence among findings that humility should predict enhanced self-control. One issue that has not been fully addressed to date, is whether humility is different from low and high self-esteem (LSE and HSE), and, in particular, in influencing self-control. LSE involves negative evaluation of the self (Coopersmith, 1967; Rosenberg, 1965). However, while humble individuals are mindful of their weaknesses, they are also aware of their strengths, accepting both in a balanced manner (Richards, 1992; Tangney, 2009). Humility appears to be dissimilar to HSE too. Individuals experiencing HSE hold highly favorable self-views, believe in their abilities, and may even feel that they are better than others (Kernis, 2003; Mruk, 2006; Owens & McDavitt, 2006). In contrast, humble people have never been thought to endorse overly positive, one-sided views of themselves (Emmons, 1999; Means, Wilson, Sturm, Biron, & Bach, 1990; Tangney, 2009). These considerations suggest that humility is distinct from LSE and HSE. If indeed so, would humility predict self-control differently from LSE and HSE? Our research investigates this issue.

In testing our hypothesis on the relationship between humility and self-control, we pursued other objectives, all geared towards testing the robustness of this relationship. First, going beyond correlational data, we sought direct evidence of the causal effect of humility on self-control. Second, we employed behavioral measures of self-control instead of reported intention. Third, we examined whether humility would predict self-control differently from LSE. Fourth, likewise, we examined whether humility would predict self-control differently from HSE. Fifth, some self-control measures may confound regulatory control with achievement or compliance motives. We used a task that ruled out these motives. Finally, we tested for possible moderators and mediators (to be mentioned).

We tested our hypothesis over four studies. In all studies, humility was manipulated using a recall procedure similar to that of Kesebir (2014). Consistent with the fact that self-control is expressed in a variety of domains (e.g., physical urges, motivation, and attention) and that a diverse range of outcomes have traditionally been assessed in past studies (e.g., Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998; Winterich & Haws, 2011), we assessed self-control using different methods: control of physical stamina (Studies 1 and 4), control of appetite (Study 2), and persistence in a frustrating task (Study 3).

There could be concerns for treating humility as a state and for generating a state-level prediction from a literature that largely treats humility as a trait construct. However, humility has been conceptualized not just as a trait, but also as an orientation (Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005), an attitude (Grenberg, 2005), a virtue (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and, in particular, a state (Tangney, 2009), among others. Also, a large literature has shown that trait-level relationships can manifest as state-level effects because chronic cognitive

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