

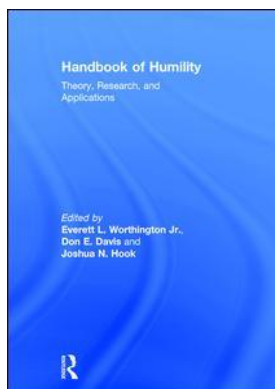
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### **Relational Predictors and Correlates of Humility**

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# RELATIONAL PREDICTORS AND CORRELATES OF HUMILITY

## An Interdependence Analysis

*Jeffrey D. Green, Jody L. Davis, Athena H. Cairo,  
Brandon J. Griffin, Anna Maria C. Behler,  
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Though philosophers, poets, and religious leaders over the centuries have extolled humility as a virtue that plays a central role in human affairs, empirical work on humility in general, and on humility in the context of close relationships in particular, is largely a twenty-first-century phenomenon. Valuable theoretical work on *relational humility*, which construes humility as a relationship-specific personality judgment, has been developed in recent years and propelled the empirical study of humility forward (Davis et al., 2011). Conceptualizations of relational humility have addressed scholarly concerns about the assessment of humility by associating self- and other-reports of humility and relating humility to various pro-relationship behaviors (Davis, Worthington, & Hook, 2010; Peters, Rowatt, & Johnson, 2011). This innovative work should be complemented by linking humility to existing relationship theories, particularly macro theories such as evolutionary theory, attachment theory, and interdependence theory. Some initial steps have been taken in this regard. For example, the social bond hypothesis of humility (Davis et al., 2013) draws upon selective investment theory (Brown & Brown, 2006) to explain how humility can regulate the strength of social bonds by acting as a cue that a social partner will be unselfish, committed, and likely to reciprocate helping behavior. Regarding attachment theory, correlational research suggests that low avoidant attachment is linked to self-reported humility (Dwiwardani et al., 2014). We propose that one macro theory of relationships that could serve as a framework for contextualizing current humility research as well as guiding future research is interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and its generative extension, Rusbult's investment model of commitment (Rusbult, 1980). Before elaborating on relevant tenets of interdependence theory, we briefly discuss definitions of humility.

### Defining Humility

Definitional disagreements as well as measurement challenges (principally, the dubious validity of a self-report measure of humility) have hindered humility research. Some resolution may have been achieved regarding the latter, as a cogent argument has been made that humility should be measured as a personality judgment (Davis et al., 2010). However, disagreement continues over defining humility (or the various types of humility, as illustrated in many chapters of this volume). Many researchers proffer multidimensional elements that include both intrapersonal and interpersonal components (e.g., Davis et al., 2011; Sheppard & Boone, 2012). The intrapersonal elements usually emphasize a moderate and/or relatively accurate self-view (Davis et al., 2011; Van Tongeren, Davis, & Hook, 2014). The interpersonal elements typically are more wide ranging and thus have been harder on which to come to consensus (Davis et al., 2013); they involve pro-relationship behaviors such as forgiveness and helping and may occur in both egalitarian relationships (e.g., romantic partners; Farrell et al., 2015) and in hierarchical relationships (e.g., religious and business settings; McElroy et al., 2014). Given our topic of relational predictors and correlates of humility, we focus on humility within the context of relationships, or *relational humility*.

We propose that in the context of relational humility, the process of *transformation of motivation* (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003)—changing orientation from one's own happiness or preferences in an interaction to taking a broader, relationship-oriented perspective—captures the interpersonal nature of humility. Put another way, the interpersonal dimension of relational humility is the act of engaging in transformation of motivation. Though we are not the first to see the advantages of this theorizing (cf. Van Tongeren et al., 2014), we will focus more squarely on it and related theoretical concepts from interdependence theory.

We choose not to dwell overly on the accurate self-appraisal element of the definition for several reasons. First, because we are looking at relational humility almost exclusively, the interpersonal element is more critical. Second, it is conceivable that someone could be inconsistently humble across different facets of the definition. For example, an individual could be rather boastful and have an inflated view of self, but still engage in transformation of motivation, resulting in pro-social behaviors directed toward his or her partner. In practice, we suspect these elements naturally correlate to a high degree. But from a relationship standpoint, the proof is in the pudding: the actions—and their underlying transformation of motivation—speak louder than words. Correlational and experimental evidence suggests that individuals tend to be more humble with

close others, but self-enhance more with strangers (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995). Also, individuals in close relationships (both friendships and romantic relationships) who felt that their basic psychological needs were met had a lower desire to prioritize a particular self-image goal (Hadden, Øverup, & Knee, 2014). That is, individuals whose needs are fulfilled in a particular relationship are able to have more authentic interactions.

### **Interdependence Theory as a Framework for Relational Humility: Literature Review**

Interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) focuses on a repertoire of behaviors within a dyad and the outcomes (satisfying or dissatisfying) for each interaction partner of the various possible combinations of behaviors enacted. Sometimes outcomes are correspondent, such as when partners have the same preference for saving versus spending money, but other times outcomes do not align, such as when partners disagree about division of labor for household chores. In the inevitable situations in which preferences diverge, partners are faced with a dilemma. The real test of a relationship, according to interdependence theory, is when partners encounter such dilemmas in which preferences conflict and thus outcomes for each partner are inversely correlated. Each partner is faced with a choice: try to maximize one's own well-being versus prioritize the partner and the relationship. These dilemmas can involve transgressions, difficult interactions, or simply incompatible goals or desires. Humility speaks to these dilemmas because their resolution affects the health and well-being of the relationship and of each partner, as well as the very longevity of the relationship. These situations have been termed *diagnostic situations* because Partner A's transformation of motivation—acting in ways that are not aligned with self-interest, or a humble response—reveals important information to Partner B regarding Partner A's broader goals and values, particularly how he or she prioritizes and values the relationship.

In diagnostic situations, individuals have two fundamental options; in the language of interdependence theory they may behave in a manner consistent with the *given situation* or the *effective situation*. The given situation is characterized by individuals' automatic, "gut-level" impulses to respond to situations based on self-interest or their own preferences. The effective situation is characterized by individuals' behaviors that reflect broader goals or motives such as the partner's preference or the long-term health of the relationship. Over time in the context of healthy-functioning close relationships, other-oriented motivations may become routine, habitual, and perhaps even nonconscious: long-time partners may not even think about forgoing certain preferred behaviors because they know that the outcomes for their partner will be low (Righetti, Finkenauer, &

Finkel, 2013). That is, such altruistic habits will become the fabric of a close relationship, though they may take months or years to evolve.

What motivates individuals to consider the outcomes of the partner rather than only their own outcomes (for example, maximizing shared or joint outcomes or, more dramatically, maximizing outcomes for the partner)? What influences the likelihood or nature of such a transformation? Distal factors such as disposition, social norms, and relationship-specific motives all affect the likelihood and nature of transformation of motivation through their influence on the proximal effects of cognition, emotion, and habit. Some individuals are dispositionally oriented toward transformation of motivation, focused on maximizing the partner's or the dyad's outcomes, whereas others are dispositionally oriented toward competition, focused on maximizing the relative difference between own and partner outcomes, even if that means lower outcomes for the self (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). For instance, married partners high in empathic accuracy were more likely to respond constructively to negative behavior from each other (Kilpatrick, Bissonnette, & Rusbult, 2002) and married partners with greater trait humility were more likely to forgive (McCullough, 1997). Trait humility should facilitate transformation of motivation by down-regulating egoistic goal seeking. In contrast, narcissists tend to espouse agentic orientations toward relationships, believing their own perspectives to be most important (Foster, Shira, & Campbell, 2006). They are less forgiving both in the short term and over time (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004). Beyond dispositional predictors, certain situations and social norms will elicit transformation in almost everyone (e.g., a person crying out for assistance), whereas other situations may inhibit transformation away from selfish motives (e.g., provocation).

Most pertinent to the expression of relational humility via transformation of motivation are relationship-specific motives, and the two most relevant motives are commitment and trust. Relationship-specific motives are preferences to act a certain way with a specific interaction partner. *Commitment* is the felt experience of dependence on a relationship partner for important needs and is characterized by psychological attachment to the partner, long-term orientation to the relationship, and intent to persist in the relationship (Rusbult, Olson, Davis, & Hannon, 2001). Thought, emotion, and behavior all are shaped in a benevolent manner by a high level of commitment. Thus, commitment leads to transformation of motivation, of which we will elucidate several examples later (e.g., forgiveness). Importantly, relational humility and commitment are associated (Farrell et al., 2015). Moreover, when the partner reliably engages in transformation of motivation, individuals develop *trust*. Trust emerges when individuals have a high degree of confidence in the partner's prosocial orientation. That is,

when Partner A consistently eschews selfish choices in diagnostic situations and chooses behaviors that reflect the well-being of Partner B, Partner B develops trust, confident that Partner A will consistently be responsive to his or her needs in the future (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). In high-humility relationships, there should be greater trust; consistent with this idea, those high in self-reported trait humility engaged in more trustworthy behaviors in a Dictator game (Thielmann & Hilbig, 2015).

Commitment and trust and other relationship-specific motives are strengthened in response to transformation of motivation (Rusbult et al., 2001). Moreover, individuals are likely to reciprocally engage in transformation of motivation to build a beneficial upward spiral termed *mutual cyclical growth* (Wieselquist et al., 1999). For instance, individuals who have greater self-reported humility reported feeling stronger positive emotions and weaker negative emotions when recalling having received an act of kindness (Exline, 2012); humility also seems to promote grateful acceptance of others' help as opposed to indebtedness, both when measured at the trait level (Exline, 2012) and at a state level in a daily diary study (Kruse, Chancellor, Ruberton, & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Thus, it may be that humility facilitates positive giving and receiving experiences among romantic partners to create stronger relationships via mutual cyclical growth.

Transformation of motivation, even in close relationships, appears to require some time in order to reflect and move beyond gut-level self-interested responses (Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994). However, transformation of motivation can occur relatively automatically in response to frequently encountered situations, becoming a relationship habit (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). It could even be that the routine accumulation of experiences of prioritizing the needs of a partner and/or relationship in which expressions of humility become a relationship habit promote the development of humble character. Conversely, Dwiwardani et al. (2014) found that an avoidant romantic attachment style was negatively associated with self-reported trait humility. It is possible that highly avoidant individuals lack the experiences of giving and receiving with humility that tend to build humble character over time for individuals who are more willing to become interdependent and trusting with close others. Furthermore, transformation is likely easier to engage in when one's partner also engages in it (McCullough et al., 1998). That is, observing multiple instances of a partner's pro-relationship orientation may help individuals feel valued and subsequently more willing to reciprocate by giving up their own hedonic preferences.

### **Transformation of Motivation Revealed**

Interdependence theorists have identified several outcomes of commitment described as "maintenance mechanisms" (Rusbult et al., 2001)—the processes

involving transformation of motivation by which partners keep a relationship intact. These mechanisms are behavioral demonstrations of relational humility that should also be a consequence of high-trait humility.

### *Accommodation*

Accommodative behaviors are pro-relationship responses to irritating or inconsiderate behaviors by a relationship partner. When faced with a destructive act by the partner, such as a cutting remark or a failure to follow through on a promise, individuals typically have an impulse to engage in a reciprocal destructive act. Therefore, accommodation involves inhibiting this impulse to counter with a destructive act and instead enact a more constructive response. Such a response demonstrates relational humility in the act of transformation of motivation—eschewing gut-level, self-oriented preferences in favor of a benevolent response. Accommodation is effortful and is more likely to occur in relationships characterized by high commitment (Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998).

Research has confirmed that accommodation represents a transformation of motivation from gut-level self-oriented responses to more pro-relationship responses. Members of couples who recalled destructive actions by their partner reported considering more destructive responses than they eventually chose to enact (Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994). In addition, when given a limited time (i.e., insufficient time for transformation of motivation) to react to a hypothetical destructive action by their partner, individuals typically chose destructive acts; however, when given ample time to react, individuals typically chose more pro-relationship acts (i.e., sufficient time for transformation of motivation). Individuals for whom a humble response has become habitual may take less time to accommodate to their partner's destructive behaviors.

Other research (Finkel & Campbell, 2001) has revealed that when self-regulatory resources are low (the state of ego depletion), accommodative responses are significantly less likely to occur. In a related vein, individuals high in trait self-control are more likely to engage in accommodation. For example, theorists surmise that self-control is required for humility in order to overcome self-enhancing tendencies (Baumeister & Exline, 2000). Ego depletion can be ameliorated over time if a behavior becomes habitual (Muraven, Baumeister, & Tice, 1999), so humble people likely are able to engage in routine pro-relationship responses because they are less likely to become ego depleted in critical situations. In support of this hypothesis, priming a humble mind-set is associated with increased self-control in laboratory tasks (Tong et al., 2016). It is important to note that the insights from this research regarding having ample time in which to decide on an accommodative behavior,

as well as the critical role of ego depletion, almost certainly apply to pro-relationship responses such as sacrifice and forgiveness, discussed next.

### *Sacrifice*

Another behavioral consequence of diagnostic situations and ensuing transformation of motivation is willingness to sacrifice. As previously discussed, noncorrespondent situations are commonplace and inevitable in close relationships. When partners have different preferences, individuals acting with humility are likely to sacrifice their wants and prioritize their partner's wants to resolve the dilemma, though this hypothesis has yet to be tested directly. Sacrifices can range from the mundane (which type of food to eat) to the profound (which city to live in). When a partner routinely makes sacrifices for the sake of the relationship, it avoids conflict and sends a powerful signal to the partner that a benevolent approach to the partner is a habitual orientation. Higher commitment predicts sacrifice (Nielson, Marrone, & Slay, 2010; Rusbult & Agnew, 2010) and perceiving relationship sacrifices as less harmful to the self (Agnew & Dove, 2011).

### *Forgiveness*

Commitment predicts forgiveness (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002) and humility also predicts forgiveness (Sheppard & Boone, 2012). How do these constructs fit together? One causal pathway is that humility and its transformation away from self-centeredness increases relationship satisfaction, which in turn enhances commitment to the relationship, promoting forgiveness (Farrell et al., 2015; Peters et al., 2011). Humility is an attractive quality: it is associated with being perceived as a better potential romantic partner (Van Tongeren et al., 2014) as well as greater acceptance and higher status in a small group after performing a series of tasks (Davis et al., 2013). Thus, people who enter into relationships with humble others should report greater satisfaction with the relationship.

Individuals high in humility likely are more remorseful for their transgressions and are more likely to provide an apology in the aftermath of perpetrating an offense. A chronic other-oriented response should engender greater trust and reduced fear of exploitation by the partner (Burnette, McCullough, Van Tongeren, & Davis, 2012; Farrell et al., 2015). Relatedly, individuals who scored higher on the Honesty-Humility HEXACO scale were less likely to intend to commit vengeful acts that were premeditated and calculated (Lee & Ashton, 2012). It is quite possible that partners high in humility engage in fewer transgressions, at least serious transgressions, but this hypothesis has not been directly examined.

Davis et al. (2013) conducted a longitudinal study of individuals who had been recently hurt in their romantic relationships in which they described the nature



of an offense by their partner and their reaction to it and then completed six weekly follow-up surveys. These surveys included measures of forgiveness and perceptions of their partner's humility. Judgments of greater humility predicted reduced unforgiveness at subsequent time points. In a related vein, Van Tongeren, Davis, and Hook (2014) found that individuals involved in long-distance (vs. proximal) relationships reported more unforgiveness of their partners, but that perceptions of the partner as humble buffered the link. The impact of perceived partner humility on unforgiveness was stronger in the long-distance relationships relative to proximal relationships. Thus, it appears that humility is a particularly beneficial orientation in the context of more stressful long-distance relationships.

### *Other Pro-Relationship Processes*

It is likely that several other behaviors or orientations are associated with humility that influence close relationships. For example, one set of studies found that there is an upward spiral of humility and *gratitude* (Kruse et al., 2014). To be specific, a gratitude manipulation (writing a grateful letter) predicted state humility, and state humility also influenced amount of gratitude experienced after writing a letter of gratitude. Most importantly, a diary study revealed that gratitude and humility reciprocally predicted each other (when controlling for the other variable at a previous time point). Both gratitude and humility involve transcending the self (Mathews & Green, 2010), which might enhance one's perception of one's partner's investments.

In addition, the inverse association between humility and self-enhancement suggests that humility might facilitate the development of more respectful interpersonal interactions among culturally diverse populations (Hook et al., 2013). For example, humble individuals who represent ethnic majorities may be more oriented to the well-being of socially marginalized groups and less likely to commit insensitive or aggressive acts. On the other hand, humble individuals who represent ethnic minorities may be less likely to suffer from the negative effects associated with being a victim of discrimination because they have a clear and accurate sense of self that is independent from the evaluation of others. Although these hypotheses are not yet empirically examined, they elucidate the potential of humility research to the development of harmonious relationships in an increasingly culturally pluralistic society.

### **Discussion: Future Research and Practical Applications**

Future research should examine directly the various relationship-maintenance behaviors previously articulated such as sacrifice, accommodation, and gratitude. Existing research on forgiveness and humility could serve as a model

for these other behaviors. For example, in reacting to a partner's undesirable behavior, humble individuals should be better at accommodation. More specifically, humble individuals should more effectively inhibit the desire to reciprocate negatively, as well as have the strength to replace a destructive response with a more constructive response. Similarly, humility (measured at the trait or state or particularly the relationship-specific level) should predict sacrifice for the partner, which in turn should increase commitment and trust. Speaking of these macro motives, humility should be examined in conjunction with them to understand more precisely how they interact to predict both individual and couple well-being.

Furthermore, increased methodological rigor is needed to advance understanding of humility and its correlates, particularly in an interpersonal context. Our survey of the current literature suggests that the majority of this work until recently has been personological, emphasizing correlational analyses of self-reported trait humility (e.g., HEXACO Honesty-Humility subscale, Lee & Ashton, 2004). As Davis et al. (2010) have noted, empirical investigations of humility have been hindered by the dubious validity of self-reports for too long. One fruitful method of testing humble behaviors has been to observe humility in social situations that naturally instill power or prompt self-enhancement (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013), thus inhibiting transformation of motivation. Using observer reports as well as more sophisticated research designs (e.g., longitudinal) will help researchers better understand the interpersonal functions of humility and establish causal links between humility and relationship behaviors.

### **Practical Applications**

Various practical applications may be adduced from our interdependence analysis of relational humility. First, we have argued that transformation of motivation characterizes the interpersonal component of humility. This transformation may be illustrated by relationship enhancement through accommodation and sacrifice for the sake of the relationship, and couple-focused interventions may aim to promote these behaviors (Lavelock et al., Chapter 19, this volume). However, promotion of humility may be a more effective approach than directly targeting accommodation and sacrifice behaviors, given that increased humility may yield generative changes that include other positive relational experiences (e.g., enhanced gratitude, greater forgiveness; Worthington, 1998) as well.

Second, Clark, Mills, and Powell (1986) argue that what differentiates communal from exchange relationships are unique patterns of receiving and giving benefits. Individuals in exchange relationships give to the extent that

they expect their partner to reciprocate comparable benefits. However, those in communal relationships give out of concern for their partner's needs without the expectation of reciprocation. The evolution from exchange to communal relationships that characterizes close relationships may be driven by a humble orientation, particularly toward giving (Exline & Hill, 2012) and receiving (Exline, 2012), leading to greater commitment and trust between partners.

Furthermore, as partner intimacy and interdependence increase, so does conflict. However, transformation of motivation or interpersonal humility facilitates pro-relationship responses between both perpetrators (e.g., offering an apology) and victims (e.g., offering forgiveness) of relational offenses. For these reasons, humility interventions would be a welcome inclusion in couples-focused therapy, both at the early stages of close relationships as new patterns of interaction are developing (e.g., pre-marital therapy) and in situations in which relationship reparation is needed following violations of trust and commitment (e.g., affair recovery counseling).

Third, the modality by which humility intervention has been administered to this point is individual, self-directed therapy (e.g., Lavelock et al., 2014). This approach ought to be augmented by modalities of therapy that provide a better platform for interpersonal expressions of humility. Although it is possible that individuals who complete self-directed activities experience interpersonal as well as intrapersonal benefits, relationships provide a critical platform for the development of humility as a transformation of motivation from self- to other-focus. Future intervention investigations should examine the benefits reported by people who participate in couples, group, and community-based humility intervention efforts relative to those who participate in individual and self-directed therapies. We expect that interpersonal modalities of therapy would provide a supportive context for individuals to practice humble behaviors in an environment that simulates extra-therapeutic relationships.

### Conclusion

Philosophers and religious leaders have exhorted individuals to be humble for millennia. Now empirical work on humility, and its intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes, is just now entering its golden age. An interdependence analysis of humility reveals that a transformation of motivation from self-oriented to other-oriented yields a host of pro-relationship responses from sacrifice to forgiveness to accommodation. These responses in turn increase relationship commitment and trust. In short, the decision to humbly prioritize a partner's needs over one's own needs results in greater relationship satisfaction for both partners.

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