

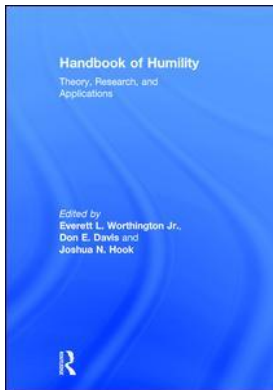
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## **Handbook of Humility Theory, Research, and Applications**

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### **Spiritual and Religious Predictors, Correlates, and Sequelae of Humility**

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# SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS PREDICTORS, CORRELATES, AND SEQUELAE OF HUMILITY

*Mark M. Leach and Adebayo Ajibade*

The rise of the positive psychology movement over the past several years has witnessed a marked increase in interest and empirical research on character strengths and virtues (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Empirical research continues to mount and to deepen scientific understanding of positive psychological constructs such as forgiveness, gratitude, and happiness. Humility research has been a bit slower to accumulate, primarily for two reasons. First, there have been concerns over its definition, and second, its empirical measurement has proven elusive (Davis, Worthington, & Hook, 2010). However, as this book can attest, there is growing consensus as to the primary factors associated with humility (Davis et al., Chapter 7, this volume). Furthermore, instruments recently developed to measure humility are promising (e.g., Exline & Hill, 2012; Jankowski, Sandage, & Hill, 2013). Growth in these two areas has allowed for the recent surge in literature in this area. In fact, a significant amount of the work in this area has occurred just over the past six to eight years.

Though the literature has grown regarding humility, in this present chapter the authors restrict their review to the association of religion and spirituality (R/S) and humility, a much smaller literature. One reason that may contribute to the lack of humility and R/S research is the often varying R/S constructs and measurement strategies found in the literature. We briefly define humility and R/S, then briefly offer examples of research from the literature, which is delineated into sections of health, forgiveness, and social and personality correlates. We identify gaps in the existing literature, including cultural correlates, and future areas of research in the intersection of humility, religion, and spirituality.

## **Fundamental Concepts**

### *Definitions*

Defining humility has proven to be challenging, though it has been theorized to have both interpersonal and intrapersonal components reflecting at least three

broad areas: accurate self-view, other orientation/low self-focus, and emotional self-regulation (Davis et al., 2011; Jankowski & Sandage, 2014). Tangney (2009) presented a broader multidimensional view of humility, including acknowledging one's limitations, perspective taking, openness to the importance of considering contradictory ideas, and seeing worth in all things (see also Grubbs & Exline, 2014). As empirical work in humility continues to accumulate across a variety of subdomains (e.g., religious leadership, organizations), the continued consolidation of definitions of humility is necessary (Davis & Hook, 2014). Though different forms of humility will be mentioned in this as well as other chapters, readers can draw at least one common denominator across the definitions. They can think of strongly humble people as possessing less ego involvement than those with less humility.

For the purpose of this chapter, the authors adopt a broad definition of R/S. We define religion as the adherence to a belief system and practices associated with an organized tradition, with agreement about what is believed and practiced (Hill et al., 2000). On the other hand, we define spirituality as a broader feeling of closeness and connectedness with the sacred (Davis, Hook, & Worthington, 2008). Many people likely experience spirituality in the context of their religious practices, but others may experience spirituality outside of any such structure. Spirituality can be experienced in the context of connections with humankind, nature, or the transcendent (Powers, Nam, Rowatt, & Hill, 2007).

### *Humility, Religion, and Spirituality*

Lundberg (2010) assembled the basic doctrines of every major world faith group, each considering humility an important character attribute. In addition, in the present volume, Porter and his colleagues have described five major religions' approaches to humility, and all major religions value humility. Though humility is an important construct in many religions across the world, there may be fundamental differences in how it is understood and applied by each faith tradition. This may affect the influences and roles humility plays in daily life for members of different faiths. As pertinent as this topic may be, it is beyond the scope of this chapter, though discussion of humility across the major world religions can be found elsewhere in this handbook (for a review, see Porter et al., Chapter 3, this volume).

### **Method of the Review**

The authors completed a literature search through November 1, 2015, using EBSCOhost and Medline with the search term "humility," resulting in an initial search of over 1,300 articles. We then included the search terms "religion" and "spirituality." Articles and chapters were chosen only if they included a religious or spiritual variable in conjunction with humility. References contained in article content but not found through the initial search were also examined.

Both quantitative and qualitative empirical articles were included in the review, whereas theory-based articles were omitted. After screening, a total of 83 articles were included in the final review.

### **Results of the Review**

#### *Humility and Religion/Spirituality*

A number of studies have shown positive correlations between R/S and humility (e.g., Exline & Hill, 2012; Rowatt, Kang, Haggard, & LaBouff, 2014). In one such study, Exline and Geyer (2004) investigated humility word-meaning associations with 127 undergraduate students from a predominantly Christian institution and found that humility was generally viewed as a strength, and positive views of humility were associated with religiosity. These findings indicate that more religious participants viewed humility as a positive attribute and desirable in themselves and others. Researchers are now extending these relationships to assess types of faith relationships. For example, in a study of 120 undergraduate students Rowatt et al. (2014) found that Protestant and Catholic adults self-reported higher levels of humility than their nonreligious counterparts. Self-reported humility was associated with religious practices, meaning in life, R/S coping, and humility ratings from others. As suggested by the authors, perhaps the prominence of humility in religious teachings was meant to temper self-righteousness in the faithful. Indeed, there is some evidence that higher levels of humility are associated with a reduction of the intensity of reactions to others' supportive and contrary opinions regarding one's religious beliefs (Hopkin, Hoyle, & Toner, 2014). In a follow-up correlational study using a small sample Rowatt et al. (2014) found that increases in both self-reported humility and self-reported R/S were positively correlated. Additionally, increases in self-reported R/S were associated with positive increases in an individual's humility as reported by others, meaning that R/S people are perceived by others as humble.

Krause and colleagues have focused on humility and R/S primarily through cross-sectional data from national surveys of middle-aged and older adults. For example, Krause and Hayward (2014) determined that, in a sample of over 1,100 individuals, those attending church more frequently received more spiritual support, resulting in greater trust in God and a closer relationship with God, which is associated with feelings of awe toward God, resulting in greater humility. This study highlights different humility hypotheses that will require further examination in future research. The authors found that people who are more committed to their faith are more humble and there is a greater negative interaction in the church for people with lower humility scores. Contrary to expectations, individuals did not become more humble as they age, previously

considered part of a normal developmental process. The continued interest in humility and R/S is exciting, and the field is ripe for more research, as will be highlighted in the discussion section. The following sections will highlight existing research delineated into sections on the relationships between R/S and humility as related to health, forgiveness, and social and personality variables, as these areas are most associated with R/S and humility in the literature.

### *Humility, Health, and Religion/Spirituality*

The humility and R/S literature is lacking in a number of areas, and perhaps none more so than its relationship to mental and physical health. An increasing body of literature indicates that religious individuals tend to experience better mental and physical health than less religious individuals, though this relationship is complex (Koenig, 2013; Moore & Leach, 2015).

There is some recent evidence that humility may also be related to better health, for two reasons (see Krause, 2010). First, using the stress literature as a foundation, Krause (2010) argued that successfully navigating through and eliminating a stressor requires both a realistic appraisal of the event and a successful coping plan, but these must be based on a truthful and realistic self-appraisal. Peterson and Seligman (2004) included in their conceptualization of humility accurate self-appraisals—as have most people who define and conceptualize humility. Thus, to the extent Krause's conceptualization is accurate, humble people should be able to cope with stressors better than nonhumble people, resulting in better health. Second, humble individuals are more likely to have positive interactions with others, whereas prideful or arrogant individuals are more likely to feel a variety of negative feelings toward others when their egos are (inevitably) challenged. These interactions with others have been associated with poorer health outcomes (Krause, 2010; Newsom, Mahan, Rook, & Krause, 2008).

Though a growing amount of research has been conducted examining the relationship of humility to health (see Toussaint and Webb, Chapter 12, this volume), much less has been considered when examined within a religious/spiritual perspective. Krause and Hayward (2012, 2014, 2015) have offered a series of studies using model estimation, largely from a longitudinal, multiwave dataset conducted by Harris Interactive. As with many datasets of this type, it is limited by the use of self-reported health ratings, but it provides important data nonetheless. Using social survey data from approximately 1,000 older adults Krause (2010) sought to assess the link among church attendance with spiritual support, humility, and self-reported health and found evidence for each link. Though there were multiple results for this study the one most relevant to this chapter may be that older adults who participated in religious/spiritual

communities were more likely to be humble and, in turn, were more likely to rate their health more positively than less humble adults.

In addition to self-reported health, two studies have examined the relationship of humility with trauma and depression. Krause and Hayward (2012) found that higher levels of humility offset the negative effects of religious doubt resulting from lifetime trauma. Krause and Hayward (2014) uniquely assessed stress by examining humility within the context of difficult church member interactions. It was expected that humble people would be better able to cope with these interactions and report lower levels of depression than less humble people, and although found to be true, it was only for individuals who reported the highest humility scores. Though only very humble individuals are most likely to offset depression through negative interactions in a church setting, humility may be a critical virtue in decreasing the onset of depression.

### *Humility, Forgiveness, and Religion/Spirituality*

The importance of humility to interpersonal relationships (e.g., Krause & Hayward, 2014) has been found in a number of studies, with humility associated with multiple positive outcomes. Humble individuals receive more support from others (Exline, 2012), are more generous (Exline & Hill, 2012), and have higher relationship quality (Peters, Rowatt, & Johnson, 2011). Much like humility, the process of forgiveness can be a means to increase interpersonal relationships. In fact, we might suggest that humble people, who are both other-oriented and have an accurate picture of their own contributions to offenses, might be more likely to forgive offenders than to seek revenge or hold on to grudges.

Following Worthington's (1998) suggestion that humility is a critical feature of forgiveness, there has been increased interest in investigating the two constructs. For example, using a student sample from a religiously affiliated university Jankowski, Sandage, and Hill (2013) found that dispositional forgiveness promoted lower depression levels through higher humility levels and that humility appeared to have a positive relationship to interpersonal forgiveness. Again, humility appears to be related to both lower depression levels and greater forgiveness.

In an international study of Turkish Muslims, Ayten (2012) found a positive relationship between humility and forgiveness and a negative relationship between humility and pride. Other researchers are now investigating additional forgiveness-related constructs and their relationship with humility. For example, the forgiveness research includes what is known as the injustice gap, or the degree to which victims of an offense see the outcome as meeting expectations of ideal justice, and a recent article examined this gap and its relationship to humility (Davis et al., 2016).

Some researchers have identified relational humility (see Davis et al., Chapter 7, this volume) as a means of quantifying others' perceptions of an individual's humility (Davis et al., 2011). Relational humility is considered important in the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Davis et al., 2013), and recent studies have begun assessing forgiveness within this lens (e.g., Davis, Hook et al., 2010). For example, Davis, Hook et al., (2010) found that after an interpersonal offense a victim's spirituality scores were positively correlated with the extent of an offender's spirituality and gratitude, and spiritual humility and unforgiveness were negatively correlated. Furthering relational humility, McElroy et al. (2014) found that appraisals of intellectual humility were positively related both to a parishioner's forgiveness of religious leaders after an offense and positive attitudes toward the sacred.

Finally, Powers, Nam, Rowatt, and Hill (2007) conducted a study on the intersection of forgiveness, humility, and spiritual transcendence, among other variables, and determined that more spiritual individuals may report more humility and valuing more forgiveness, though they pointed out that valuing and engaging in forgiveness are different issues. Overall, the literature is now seeing a surge of studies investigating the connections of humility and forgiveness, as these appear necessary for affirming continued relationships.

#### *Humility, Personality and Social Psychological Relationships, and Religion/Spirituality*

A growing number of studies have investigated humility within personality and social-psychological frameworks. For example, religiousness has been repeatedly associated with the high agreeableness [A] and high conscientiousness [C] factors of the Five-Factor Model of personality, but there have been concerns that nuances within personality and religiousness need to be assessed to get a more robust picture of these relationships (e.g., Ashton & Lee, 2007). A newer, six-dimensional HEXACO model of personality has been gathering attention because of its honesty-humility [HH] factor (which includes fairness, morality, greed avoidance, and modesty; Ashton & Lee, 2005, 2009). Using this framework, religiousness is associated more strongly with HH than A (e.g., 2014; Visser & Pozzebon, 2013), including a study with Iranian Muslims (Aghababaei, Wasserman, & Nannini, 2014), offering opportunities for more nuanced investigations of humility as a personality construct and R/S. For example, in a study comparing the dark triad (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism) and the HH factor, Aghababaei, Mohammadtabar, and Saffarinia (2014) confirmed that narcissism was the strongest (negative) correlate with humility, consistent with previous empirical research (e.g., Jonason & McCain, 2012), as well as providing theoretical insights on intellectual arrogance (e.g., Gregg &

Mahadevan, 2014). In a correlational study of 137 undergraduate students, Silvia, Nusbaum, and Beaty (2014) found that participants reporting higher humility scores were more likely to describe religion as important to their lives and report less negative attitudes toward and more literally adhere to religious institutions and doctrine. Humility may also have implications for the quality of one's faith. In a recent study humility was negatively related to divine struggles and religious fear and guilt (Grubbs & Exline, 2014). Related, the security of one's religious/spiritual beliefs can affect humility. For example, incorporating attachment theory and relational spirituality theories, Jankowski and Sandage (2014) found that it may be difficult to exhibit humility while experiencing insecurity in relationship to God and others. Instead of finding comfort and reassurance in relationship with God, some people experience fear and shame, resulting in self-regulation difficulties and eventually lower levels of humility. In a recent study of undergraduate students, Sandage, Paine, and Hill (2015) found that humility is related to several facets of spiritual maturity, including being negatively related to spiritual grandiosity and an insecure attachment to God and spiritual impression management.

In an experimental study assessing meaning, Van Tongeren and colleagues (2014) developed a study in which 79 Christian undergraduate students were challenged by a supposed interaction partner on their views of a strongly felt topic and were placed into in-groups and out-groups. Humility was defined through a meaning-focused conceptualization, as reduced defensiveness to their partner's negative comments, in part due to humble individuals being more open to alternative perspectives. Their results indicated that affirming relationships with others may decrease defensiveness toward out-group members not sharing similar attitudes. Thus, the authors concluded that bolstering meaning through affirming relationships with others may increase humility and positive interactions. It is clear that more investigations in this area are needed.

A related study including nonvalidated, though theoretically sound, questions was conducted to determine how intellectually humble people react to messages from others that are consistent or inconsistent with their religious beliefs (Hopkin, Hoyle, & Toner, 2014). The authors found intellectual humility characterized by an understanding that religious beliefs are fallible, realizing discretion in asserting those beliefs, being comfortable with keeping religious beliefs private, and being respectful of others' beliefs.

Overall, humility as a personality factor and religiousness seem to be significantly correlated, consistent with previous theoretical and empirical work. Though the body of empirical research investigating humility as a personality trait remains sparse, recent developments in measurement instruments provide opportunities for continued growth of research activity in this area.



### Discussion

Humility has always been embedded within religious faith groups across the globe, and given this historical relationship, it would seem appropriate to assess the empirical relationships of humility and religion. The majority of studies including both religious and humility variables have occurred primarily in the past five years, and this chapter briefly summarized the literature in this area. Humility, within a context of faith either through instrument inclusion or study participant sample, shows relationships with facets of physical and mental health, forgiveness, and personality variables. Due to the paucity of existing literature on the outlook for future research of the intersection of R/S and humility is exceptionally bright. Next we offer three broad areas to be considered for future research on the intersection of humility and R/S.

### *Future Research*

First, the broader research literature on R/S itself without the inclusion of humility has been hampered by a paucity of studies comparing R/S believers with nonbelievers (Moore & Leach, 2015). Much of the literature has compared individuals on a varied, though limited, range of R/S variables, with those scoring low often considered to exhibit low R/S. However, these individuals could represent a wide array of beliefs, from having a generalized higher power belief system to being agnostic, atheist, or any other nontheist belief system. Related, very little research has been conducted including spiritual, as opposed to religious, variables. One area to consider going forward is to measure the strength of the belief rather than solely the belief itself. For example, when assessing beliefs as well as the strength of the beliefs in a sample of over 4,600 participants, Moore and Leach (2015) found that secular and religious adherents reported similar mental health levels, contrary to previous empirical research. Given the strong historical, philosophical, and empirical link between R/S and humility and writings indicating that humility grows from faith, it seems that a fruitful area of research would be to incorporate nonbelievers to determine the relationships of humility to health and related constructs.

Additionally, humility has been associated with the interpersonal and spiritual support derived from church attendance, though the inclusion of studies incorporating nonbelievers could lend some insight into the role of church relationships and spiritual support itself, particularly when compared with other nonchurch-related support systems. Perhaps strong believers are in awe of God, which is then related to humility (Krause, 2012) whereas nonbelievers develop and maintain humility through a different mechanism.

Additionally, in a multiwave study Krause (2012) found that the stability estimate of humility over time is low, suggesting that it may be more situational than personality based. Following the research line to include nonbelievers, it would be interesting to determine whether they have similar stability estimates as believers and whether the development of humility differs over time in traditionally nonbelieving and believing households. In essence, are the developmental trajectories of humility different based on exposure to nonbelieving ideations?

Second, with few exceptions, the R/S and humility literature has been dominated by the focus on Christian groups. Though the major faith groups worldwide emphasize humility, it is currently unknown whether the development, correlates, and manifestations of humility are consistent across these groups. Are R/S individuals reporting and exhibiting similar levels of humility across faith groups? Is humility perceived differently depending on faith group? Different religious traditions may understand humility differently, such that religion might lead individuals to judge other people's humility based on conformance to tradition and authority structures. Or whether right-winged authoritarianism correlates as strongly with religious fundamentalism as it does with Christian groups in the United States? Are there differences in spiritual humility toward others depending on their perceived faith group? The research possibilities in this area alone are many.

Third, there is theoretical evidence that race and ethnicity may influence the role that humility has on other variables. There is abundant evidence showing that Blacks are more likely than Whites to attend church and pray (Levin, Taylor, & Chatters, 1994) and are more likely to report stronger congregational support systems than White congregants (Krause, 2002). Given that humility includes a strong social component, it would seem that Black individuals involved in a faith community would be more likely to show humility than White individuals. There is some evidence to bolster that argument. Krause (2015) determined that older Blacks reported more humility than older Whites, though they were also more likely to have attended church services. Krause and Hayward (2014) also found that, among nine virtues assessed, Blacks were more likely than Whites to report higher virtue scores in general, including humility. Their conclusion was that Blacks' relationship to their faith accounted for the differences between the two ethnic groups. No study to date has examined the development of humility across racial and ethnic groups or focused on other ethnic groups. What cultural variables contribute to additive effects when considering R/S and humility? How does humility and R/S interact with culture at both broad and specific group levels? The humility literature is almost devoid of studies examining broadly Asian-American, Hispanic-American, and American

Indian cultures, as well as immigrant and refugee groups that have become part of the American social fabric, and research in this area is in need of considerable empirical attention.

Lee, Leung, and Kim (2014) recently argued that psychologists could use face and dignity cultures as proxies for individualism-collectivism, and include humility as a means to explain these differences among East Asians and European Americans. Though their work focused on Asian cultures outside the United States, the same idea can be applied in the United States. Humility and East Asian religions are inextricably intertwined, and humility is considered a strong virtue in Asian and collective cultures. Other findings indicated that East Asians are likely to embrace a humility bias in order to maintain status within the group (see Kim, Cohen, & Au, 2010). Although most faith groups embrace humility and deference to a higher power, within Buddhism, humility allows for self-surrender and being present (Weber, 2006).

On a broader level Eriksson and Funcke (2014) investigated the better-than-average effect across countries, or the idea that most people describe themselves as above average on desirable characteristics (seemingly contrary to humility). The authors found that more religious people tended to refrain from judging themselves to be better than other people, particularly when comparing themselves to their religious in-group, with the latter phenomenon considered humble self-enhancement. International studies such as this hold great promise in this area.

### *Practical Lessons*

All of the published research on humility has merit, but translating some of the research into therapeutic interventions with clients seems particularly important. Lavelock and colleagues (2014) developed a two-week intervention promoting humility based on the work of Worthington (2003) and the REACH model, an intervention to promote forgiveness. The efficacy of the workbook was evaluated by students being assigned to either the workbook intervention or a control condition, and the researchers found that trait humility increased over time within the humility condition, though religious commitment and spiritual transcendence contributed to this improvement. Thus, the humility intervention equally benefitted both R/S and less R/S individuals. It is the first study to evaluate the potential for an efficacious humility intervention, and future researchers can build on this study to more fully integrate it into treatments. Some possible lines of research include mindfulness and contemplative practices in both religious/spiritual and nonreligious/spiritual individuals (for reviews, see Griffin et al., Chapter 23, this volume; Lavelock et al., Chapter 19, this volume; Sandage et al., Chapter 21, this volume).

### Conclusion

In this chapter, the authors summarized relevant research in the area of humility and spirituality R/S. Though it remains a relatively small area of study, researchers are beginning to investigate the ways in which these constructs interact and affect different aspects of a person's life. As the body of research continues to accumulate, there is exciting room for growth in understanding the role humility and R/S may play in several facets of the human experience. New research continues to shed light on the reaches of humility and R/S, from mental and physical health to interpersonal relationships and everywhere in between, and the authors encourage continued empirical investigation into this relevant and important work.

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