

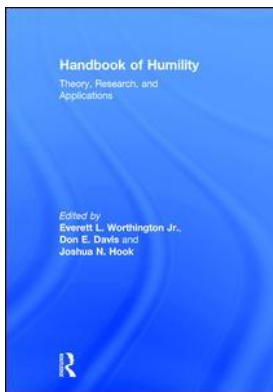
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Part III

APPLICATIONS OF HUMILITY TO RELATIONSHIPS AND TREATMENT



HUMILITY IN CAREER DEVELOPMENT

*Bryan J. Dik, Jessica Morse, Micah White,
and Adelyn B. Shimizu*

The fundamental goal in studying career development is to understand how people select, create, interact with, adjust to, and transition into and out of their educational and work experiences within the broader context of life as a whole (e.g., Brown & Lent, 2013). The study of virtues as factors that influence the career development process would seem a fruitful path for scholars to pursue, yet efforts to address these linkages empirically are conspicuously absent from the literature. One virtue in particular—humility, the focus of this edited volume—seems an especially likely candidate that may serve as an asset, or under some circumstances perhaps a detriment, to a person’s ability to successfully navigate the career choice and development process. Ask people to name public figures, past or present, who exhibited high levels of humility in their work, and you are likely to hear names like Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, or Mahatma Gandhi. Then ask for a list of people driven by a sense of calling, and the names may be the same. Based on such observations, intuition points to humility as a facilitative factor that promotes positive career development. Yet within many career paths, a certain amount of self-promotion may be required to advance or to sell ideas or products effectively. Similarly, in some highly competitive careers, a collaborative approach may undermine someone’s progress. To what extent is humility a barrier rather than a help in such circumstances?

To date, the role of humility within career choice and development per se remains largely uninvestigated. In fact, despite numerous studies of humility in organizational and leadership contexts, our PsychINFO search of the keywords “humility” and “career” failed to identify a single study investigating humility as a factor in career choice or work adjustment. This chapter explores possible linkages of humility within career development. We begin by defining humility, then offer a brief primer on career development theory, before outlining intersections between humility and career development. We close by proposing future directions for research and practice.

Defining Humility

A consensus definition of humility has proven elusive in philosophical, religious, and social science scholarship (Davis, Worthington, & Hook, 2010), and diverse definitions invariably create challenges in measuring a construct. Despite this challenge, investigators have made substantial progress in examining humility empirically. Some strands of this research continue to use self-report methods, most notably the Honesty-Humility facet of the HEXACO-PI model of personality structure (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Developed as an alternative to the Big Five trait model, the HEXACO-PI representation adds Honesty-Humility as a sixth distinct dimension defined by genuineness in relationships; modesty; and avoidance of fraud, opportunism, and greed (Ashton & Lee, 2005). Individuals high in Honesty-Humility demonstrate sincerity, a low sense of entitlement or status seeking, and intrinsic cooperativeness, even when there is potential to exploit others for profit without consequence (Ashton & Lee, 2007). Yet the Honesty-Humility scale has been criticized for containing items that lack face validity and appear to primarily assess modesty, a construct distinct from humility, while failing to represent other key aspects of how humility is typically conceptualized (Davis et al., 2010). Furthermore, humility is almost by definition difficult to measure through self-report (Tangney, 2005), given the inherent paradox in inviting individuals to claim humility.

Partly in response to such complexities in measurement, Davis et al. (2010) introduced *relational humility*, a personality judgment best measured by informant ratings that draw from cumulative experiences of a target person. Relational humility is marked by “other-orientedness” in relationships (i.e., others’ welfare is considered at least as much as one’s own welfare), socially acceptable regulation of “self-oriented” impulses (especially when one’s ego is strained), and an accurate self-perception (i.e., not thinking too much or too little of oneself). Although not yet directly examined in the context of career choice and work adjustment, we believe Davis et al.’s (2010) conceptualization shows substantial promise for better understanding humility’s role in career development, given work’s inherently relational nature (e.g., Blustein, 2006).

It is worth noting before we continue that diverse types of relational humility have been proposed (e.g., Worthington, 2014). Intellectual humility is relevant in the context of arguments about ideas with people with whom we may disagree. Leadership humility is expressed when leaders adopt a listening and learning orientation and maintain a mind open to feedback and ideas from others. Political humility is a (perhaps rare) form that is activated when candidates, lawmakers, or voters express a genuine interest in considering opposing points of view. Is there a “career development humility”? Perhaps within the

career development process generally, there are elements of humility that are particularly relevant when competing with others for a job, or when learning from others about how best to advance within an organization, or when revising a resume or preparing for an interview. Yet different types of humility are relevant within different fields of work (e.g., leadership humility, medical humility, scientific humility, theological humility), and more than one type may be helpful to forge an objectively and subjectively successful path within a particular career field. In this chapter, our default conceptualization of humility conforms to that of Davis et al. (2010).

Career Development and Humility

For context, we provide a very brief overview of career development theory before exploring conceptual and empirical connections, both positive and negative, between humility and successful career development.

Career Development Theory

Career development is an umbrella term that covers the factors that influence the trajectory of one's work throughout the lifespan. Diverse theoretical perspectives have driven career development research and practice during the course of its history. An early, yet still prominent, approach is the person–environment fit perspective. Person–environment fit theories assume that positive work outcomes occur when there is a good “fit” between an individual and a work environment (Larson, 2012). For example, John L. Holland's (1997) theory of vocational types builds on the “birds of a feather, flock together” axiom by articulating how people gravitate toward environments occupied by others with similar interests and personalities. Holland introduced the RIASEC types (i.e., realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, conventional) and the hexagonal structure that are ubiquitous in career counseling practice and in vocational interest research (Dik & Rottinghaus, 2013). Similarly, Davis and Lofquist's (1984) Theory of work adjustment demonstrated that people's satisfaction and productivity (and, in turn, the length of time in a job) flow from the relative correspondence of a person's abilities with the job's requirements and of a person's needs with the job's reinforcers, respectively. The theory of work adjustment also proposes that person–environment fit is dynamic and that individuals engage in various strategies or “adjustment styles” to improve a poor fit or ensure that a strong fit remains strong.

Developmental theories take a longitudinal approach, examining changes in how people interact with their work in the context of other life roles throughout the lifespan. The most established of these is Donald Super's life-span, life-space theory (e.g., Hartung & Taber, 2013), which postulates that people strive

to actualize a vocational self-concept. In this theory, work is one of several life roles that vary in relative importance across five primary career development stages: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance or management, and disengagement/retirement. These stages are sequential, but are typically cycled through multiple times as a result of various life transitions. As Super's theory evolved, its stage model and the construct of career adaptability (i.e., readiness and resources for coping with career development challenges) became increasingly flexible in application, ultimately intersecting with constructivist approaches such as career construction theory (Savickas, 2013). Career construction theory articulates how people simultaneously play the roles of actor, agent, and author of their career stories: a person may be an actor when developing a self-concept by interpreting interests, skills, and abilities; an agent when navigating life's developmental tasks and adapting to environmental influences; and an author when interpreting past experiences, identifying themes, and making meaning.

Social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) has risen to prominence within the last two decades. This theory applies Bandura's (2001) general social cognitive theory to the career domain by explaining how factors related to the person, overt behavior, and environments interact to influence career choice and development. More specifically, social cognitive career theory proposes that when people develop a requisite degree of self-efficacy for particular tasks paired with relevant outcome expectations, they develop personal goals that then drive behavior related to the development of vocational interests, educational and career choices, and job performance. A feedback loop stemming from these outcomes ultimately results in revising or reinforcing subsequent self-efficacy and outcome expectations, and so on (Lent et al., 1994).

Research attention focused on these theoretical approaches has been uneven, with more investigative effort devoted to Holland's theory and social cognitive career theory than other theories. Each has found enough support to attract adherents (for reviews, see e.g., Brown & Lent, 2013; Larson, 2012), and although calls for integrated theory or meta-theory occasionally surface (e.g., Osipow, 1990), most scholars and career counselors seem comfortable drawing from multiple theories, based on their particular set of research questions or the particular career-related concerns with which clients present.

Finally, a recent review of career development research published from 2007 to 2014 identified three overarching themes: promotion of personal agency, equity at work, and well-being in occupational and educational contexts—with a particular emphasis on eudaimonic well-being (Brown & Lent, 2016). This work on eudaimonic well-being moves beyond the historically favored

outcomes of job satisfaction and performance to investigate meaning, purpose, and a sense of calling among individuals in the career development process. In particular, theory and research on a sense of calling—a transcendent summons to purposeful work that serves other-oriented goals (Dik & Duffy, 2009)—has rapidly accumulated of late, with the number of published studies on this construct increasing approximately tenfold within the last decade (Dik & Domene, 2015). A sense of calling may be especially relevant for individuals high in humility, given the conceptual overlap of the constructs, a point we review in greater detail later.

Humility as a Likely Career Development Asset

In general, research on humility suggests that it is likely an asset within career development in many respects because qualities associated with being humble typically (theoretically and/or empirically) contribute to positive career development outcomes. Most research related to this question has investigated employee and leadership outcomes relevant to organizational success, typically from a management perspective. For example, humble employees receive higher supervisor ratings and perform better in caregiving positions (Johnson, Rowatt, & Petrini, 2011). Humility is also negatively correlated with workplace delinquency and with counterproductive behaviors at work (Marcus, Lee, & Ashton, 2007) and appears to buffer against the negative consequences of organizational politics (Wiltshire, Bourdage, & Lee, 2014).

Humility is frequently examined within research on leadership (Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005; Owens, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013). It is especially relevant to servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1997), which is defined in much the same way as relational humility but with an added dimension focused on motivating others. Evidence suggests that the humility component of servant leadership positively predicts the work engagement of followers, especially for high-level leaders (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2015). Collins (2001), in his empirical but highly selective review, reported that organizations led by humble CEOs are consistently among the highest performing, for long periods of time and through challenging transitions. Other outcomes of leader humility include enhanced organizational efficiency and collaboration (Frostenson, 2015); higher sense of empowerment and gratitude among employees (Kruse, Chancellor, Ruberton, & Lyubomirsky, 2014); greater interpersonal closeness and supportive relationships in the workplace (Morris et al., 2005); and socialized power that encourages worker autonomy, self-sufficiency, and participation in the organization (Morris et al., 2005). Humility nurtures an other-focus among leaders (Owens et al., 2013) that fosters delegation of tasks by matching employees to current demands on the basis of their strengths—an effective and

endearing practice (e.g., Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Exline & Geyer, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Humility also tempers the negative impact of leader narcissism (Owens, Walker, & Waldman, 2015) and contributes to an atmosphere of stability and trust.

Although the research summarized earlier sheds important light on employee outcomes and the impact of humility on performance within some types of work—leadership in particular—the lack of humility research undertaken specifically within a career choice and development frame requires appealing to theoretical linkages. Such points of connection are easy to identify. First, the accurate self-perception that is characteristic of relational humility, particularly in terms of one's skills, knowledge, strengths, and weaknesses, has many benefits in the career choice and work adjustment process. For example, the person–environment fit theories described earlier postulate that accurate self-assessment is a key prerequisite to informed career decision making. Similarly, developmental theories focus on the importance of actualizing an occupational self-concept, a process that unfolds much more smoothly for people who have an accurate picture of their self-concept. Indeed, career counseling interventions stemming from these paradigms typically incorporate individual assessment, a strategy designed expressly to foster an increased understanding of one's unique personal attributes.

Second, individuals high in relational humility also strive to maintain and enhance the accuracy of their self-perception through interactions with and feedback from others. They are typically transparent about their strengths and weaknesses, seek to learn from others, and take steps to modify actions based on feedback (Owens et al., 2013). These qualities are characteristic of self-awareness, a key career development meta-competency (Hall & Chandler, 2005) that is linked to the highly adaptive “protean career” orientation. Protean careers are marked by values-driven decision making that links people to work that expresses their gifts and facilitates personal growth (Hall, 2004). This self-awareness that accompanies relational humility improves interpersonal work relationships, job-related decision making, and job performance; increases trust and relational satisfaction among coworkers; and decreases the likelihood of complacency, arrogance, and other counterproductive workplace behaviors (Owens et al., 2013).

Third, along with openness to feedback, those high in humility are typically open minded and eager to learn and use what they learn to cope effectively with challenges. Such behavior reflects adaptability, the other key meta-competency that fosters a protean career orientation. Also a key construct within Super's life-span, life-space theory (Savickas, 1997) and career construction theory (Savickas, 2013), adaptability has been shown to positively predict

problem-solving confidence, career exploration behavior, proactivity, and occupational self-efficacy and to negatively predict negative affect and career decision-making difficulties (e.g., Hirschi & Valero, 2015; Rottinghaus, Day, & Borgen, 2005), among other beneficial career development criteria. Adaptability fosters a desire and willingness to learn new skills, a highly valued asset in a rapidly changing economy with increasingly specialized job demands.

Fourth, striving for achievement without ego, as is the case with those high in humility, may promote superior academic outcomes and enhanced internalization of learned material (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013). The stress and fear of failure that typically interfere with intrinsic approaches to learning are less evident among humble people. In this way, humility may offer an educational advantage, one that may manifest earlier in life. Evidence suggests that those high in humility approach learning with a mastery rather than a performance orientation, better understanding the material they encounter, achieving greater academic success, and ultimately entering the workforce with a deeper knowledge base and greater openness to on-the-job learning (Dinger et al., 2015). A mastery orientation also helps foster some of the factors that inform self-efficacy and outcome expectations within social cognitive career theory, most notably performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, and attention to self-generated outcomes (Lent, 2005).

Finally, the other-oriented focus within humility is shared by the construct of calling. People who experience a calling typically feel drawn to pursue work that aligns with a broader sense of purpose in life and that is driven by other-oriented motives and goals (Dik & Duffy, 2009). The accumulating research on calling has largely focused on the construct's correlates and consequences, revealing that workers with a calling experience greater job satisfaction (e.g., Bunder-son & Thompson, 2009; Duffy et al., 2012), are more committed to their careers and organizations (Duffy, Dik, & Steger, 2011), and miss significantly fewer days of work (Wrzesniewski, Mccauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997) than those who view their work in other ways. Those with a calling may also exhibit the aforementioned meta-competencies (e.g., self-awareness and adaptability; Hall & Chandler, 2005). College students with a sense of calling are more firmly decided and comfortable in their career choices, view their careers as carrying more importance, have stronger vocational self-clarity, improved work outcome expectations, and increased career decision self-efficacy (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Dik, Sargent, & Steger, 2008). Yet evidence also suggests that career development and well-being benefits are most pronounced for those who do not only perceive a calling, but also feel that they are currently living it out (e.g., Duffy et al., 2012).

Research on calling has been slower to identify antecedents (Duffy & Dik, 2013). Humility may function as one, to the extent that those high in

humility may be inclined to pursue career paths that align with their self-perceptions and other-focus. Of course, it also is plausible that living a calling promotes or reinforces humility. Perhaps most likely of all, genetic and/or early environment factors may predispose some people toward prosocial attitudes that influence both humility and a sense of calling. (The genetic basis is not yet well understood for either construct, e.g., Dik & Duffy, 2012; Zettler & Hilbig, 2015.) Living out a calling may also be, for some, a spiritual expression of surrender and obedience to God or the transcendent, which is included in some definitions of humility (Emmons & Kneezel, 2005; Powers, Nam, Rowatt, & Hill, 2007). Furthermore, humble people demonstrate a greater willingness to cooperate and contribute to the public good (Zettler, Hilbig, & Heydasch, 2013), characteristics typical of people living a calling. Humble people may also stay in careers to which they are called longer because of increased job performance levels (Johnson, Rowatt, & Petrini, 2011; Owens et al., 2013) and fewer counterproductive work behaviors, even under the stress of job insecurity (Chirumbolo, 2015). The conceptual linkages between humility and calling are clear; research is needed to substantiate and extend them.

To summarize, an accumulating body of research indirectly supports the very clear conceptual connections between humility and career development theory. Most of this points to humility as a construct highly facilitative of positive career development outcomes, although research clearly is needed that investigates these conceptual linkages more directly. Furthermore, there may be boundary conditions in which humility may actually serve as a detriment rather than an asset to one's career development.

Humility as a Possible Career Development Liability

Despite the positive ways humility may influence career development, in some circumstances humility may be introducing problems as well. For example, Wiltshire et al. (2014) found that job candidates with high humility scores are less likely to engage in impression management behavior during an interview, which may negatively affect their likeability and potential for getting hired. Also, Western cultures, perhaps especially in the United States, are often understood to value, reward, and promote those who engage in self-promotion and who demonstrate bravado (Worthington, 2008), characteristics that seem to run counter to humility. In fact, Exline and Geyer (2004) found that humility was rated unfavorably as a quality of leaders, albeit by a small undergraduate sample. If people view humility as a weakness, perhaps linking it with low self-esteem or submissiveness, then being viewed as humble could potentially detract from advancement opportunities and career growth.

Finally, some may argue that humility could stall career growth if it precludes one from taking credit for accomplishments or self-promoting sufficiently. However, relational humility calls for accurate self-assessment and promotion of others' needs without denying one's own needs and values. Thus, although high levels of relational humility may seem to run counter to such traits as narcissism and arrogance, relational humility does not contradict self-esteem, ambition, or leadership. In summary, the relative length of this section compared to the prior section testifies that humility appears more likely to serve as a help than a hindrance within most career development contexts.

Directions for Future Research

Relational humility is likely to play a meaningful role in the career choice and development process, but research has not yet investigated proposed conceptual linkages directly. Our most important and obvious suggestion for researchers is to begin testing some of the possible connections described earlier. For example, researchers investigating person–environment fit theory have long noted the possibility that personality factors may moderate the relation between fit and criterion variables such as well-being (Dik & Hansen, 2011). Its accurate self-perception component suggests that humility may function as a moderator in this relationship, such that the relationship between fit and positive career development outcomes (e.g., career commitment, job satisfaction) is stronger for people high in humility than low. This possibility warrants an empirical test, as does the possibility that humility fosters self-awareness and adaptability, the two key career development meta-competencies (Hall & Chandler, 2005). If such relationships are established, examining potential mechanisms that explain them may follow. Moreover, self-awareness and adaptability may serve as mediators between humility and positive career development outcomes. These relationships and others, if supported by evidence, could be combined into a theoretical model useful for driving additional hypotheses.

Research also is warranted to test proposed links between humility and educational achievement (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013), a key predictor of eventual career success. Social cognitive career theory could be used as a framework for bringing these constructs together, with humility serving as a “person variable” that informs self-efficacy and outcome expectations (perhaps via a mastery orientation), which in turn inform personal goals. It is noteworthy that of the studies examining humility in an organizational or leadership context, most used Ashton and Lee's (2005) self-report Honesty-Humility scale. A benefit of the prospective line of research proposed here is its use of informant judgments to measure relational humility.

Future research might also examine the relationships between humility and having and living a calling. Does one precede the other, is there a third variable (e.g., prosocial values, intrinsic religiousness) that cultivates the development of both, and are humility and calling mutually reinforcing? Does humility account for incremental variance beyond a sense of calling in predicting key career development and general well-being criterion variables? Duffy and Dik's (2013) review of calling research identified several future directions that could serve as frames for examining the role and function of humility, such as examining behavioral (rather than self-report) antecedents, correlates and outcomes; using longitudinal designs; advancing theory; and testing interventions.

Other ideas for future research include investigating the role that humility may play in how career choices are implemented. Do humble people market themselves to employers differently than less humble people? Extending Wiltshire et al.'s (2014) work, do humble people approach employment interviews with different strategies than less humble people? Analog studies gathering ratings from hiring managers of applicant humility and likely hiring success would offer a fascinating starting point for this line of research. Similarly, research might examine promotion and raise patterns for individuals high or low in humility. Do humble employees pursue promotions or ask for raises with a different frequency than employees low in humility? Are there differences in the motivation or rationale underlying these behaviors for individuals at various levels of humility? Such research may also identify compensation gaps between similarly qualified high- and low-humility employees, similar to how workers with callings may receive lower extrinsic rewards compared to other employees (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009).

Finally, it is interesting to consider the methodological challenges that may emerge when investigating various workplace contexts. For example, self-report measures of humility, although perhaps a reasonable strategy for investing humility in many contexts, seem unlikely to yield valid results in situations when one's ego is challenged. This may be the case when interviewing for a position that involves working closely and self-sacrificially with a team, a scenario that induces a respondent to report a higher-than-actual level of humility. Or, if leaders are being hired in an organization with a cutthroat culture for which tough, headstrong leadership is desired, these leaders may rate themselves as lower on humility than they actually are. Understanding and predicting potentially systematic patterns of such response biases may prove extremely helpful in considering appropriate measurement strategies given particular characteristics of a situation.

Practice Implications

Numerous potential applications to career counseling and management interventions would be informed by the research proposed earlier. Much of the discussion in this chapter has focused on how humility may intersect with established career development theory. Counselors or human resource professionals working with clients or employees who consistently exhibit relational humility may assume high levels of self-awareness and accurate self-perception, strengths that can be leveraged to help people identify opportunities that fit them well. From a person–environment fit perspective, if self-knowledge is strong, attention may be directed toward gathering information about career paths or opportunities within the organization and evaluate their relative fit, keeping in mind the unique developmental contexts in which this process unfolds for people. The prosocial orientation exhibited by humble people may also make relevant strategies to connect people more directly, at least cognitively, to the beneficiaries of their work, an approach that increases the sense that one’s work is meaningful (Dik & Duffy, 2009). Finally, if some aspects of humility negatively affect career development, raising awareness of this for clients and offering compensatory strategies would be helpful. To the extent that humility is helpful in the ways described in this chapter, efforts to optimize its potential benefits are indicated, as are efforts to increase or cultivate a sense of humility in clients for whom improving humility is a growth edge.

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