

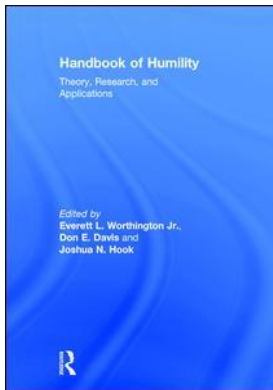
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## **Handbook of Humility Theory, Research, and Applications**

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### **Humility in Romantic Relationships**

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## HUMILITY IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

*Rachel C. Garthe, Chelsea A. Reid,  
Terri N. Sullivan, and Brianne Cork*

Humility contributes to the quality of relationships, as humble individuals demonstrate interpersonal virtues such as patience, gentleness, respect, and empathy (Means, Wilson, Sturm, Biron, & Bach, 1990). Humble individuals are able to view themselves accurately, are other-oriented, and are able to recognize their own limitations (Davis et al., 2011). This chapter illustrates how humility functions within romantic relationships and proposes that humility contributes to the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). The VSA framework is a commonly used model to explain adjustments and the maintenance processes of romantic and committed relationships; partners' enduring traits and vulnerabilities, couples' adaptive processes, and stressors ultimately affect relationship quality and satisfaction. We theorize that humility is an enduring trait that should be considered in the VSA framework, because scholarship demonstrates that humility is associated with both adaptive processes and stressors and relationship quality. Finally, although Karney and Bradbury (1995) hypothesized that enduring traits and vulnerabilities within the VSA model are relatively stable, it also is important to examine how enduring traits, such as humility, may change during the course of romantic relationships. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research and clinical applications of humility in romantic relationships.

### **A Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model**

A variety of theories have been used to examine the development and changes within romantic relationships, including attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1979), behavioral systems theory (Furman & Wehner, 1994; 1997), interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), and crisis theory (Hill, 1949). All of these theories demonstrate ways in which relationships change, how partners react to stressors and transitions, and how partners may bring vulnerabilities to a relationship (e.g., via insecure attachments). Although these theories are commonly used to explain and describe functioning in romantic relationships,

a more comprehensive model that combines aspects of all of these theories may be more useful in understanding functioning within romantic relationships during challenging times.

The Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model (VSA; Karney & Bradbury, 1995) is a comprehensive model that examines specific factors and mechanisms that may influence *how* relationships change over time. The VSA model highlights that the stability and quality of committed romantic relationships are influenced by a system of three mechanisms: adaptive processes, stressors, and enduring traits and vulnerabilities. First, adaptive processes include the ways in which romantic partners interact and engage with one another (e.g., provide support, problem solve, engage in effective communication processes, and forgive). Stressful events arise at varying points of committed romantic relationships and may create challenges and strains on the relationship (e.g., moving to a new city, getting a new job, having a child, losing a job). Finally, enduring traits and vulnerabilities are the relatively stable personality and individual characteristics that each partner brings to the relationship (e.g., attachment styles, personality traits, family of origin, and mental health). Together these three mechanisms reciprocally influence the stability and quality of relationships. Within a VSA model framework, we propose that humility (an enduring trait) may be a key contributor to stress management (i.e., stressors), relationship maintenance and relationship processes (i.e., adaptive processes), and relationship quality in romantic relationships. First, we define humility, and then we examine the literature linking humility and aspects of the VSA model.

### *Humility*

Humility is composed of several dimensions; a humble individual has the ability to (a) admit his or her own limitations, (b) acknowledge his or her strengths without arrogance, (c) be genuinely other-oriented, displaying modesty and self-effacement, and (d) be open to ideas and advice (Davis, Worthington, & Hook, 2010; Tangney, 2000). Humility is linked with numerous positive interpersonal qualities, including empathy, altruism, gratitude, and self-esteem (Exline & Geyer, 2004; Means et al., 1990). A humble partner acknowledges that he or she cannot control everything, displays patience and gentleness, and expresses empathy and love (Davis et al., 2011; Means et al., 1990). Greater humility is linked to greater social relationship quality (Peters, Rowatt, & Johnson, 2011) and greater marital satisfaction (Estephan, 2007). Additionally, a wealth of scholarship correlates humility with virtues necessary for high-quality relationships: patience and gentleness (Worthington, 1998), kindness, caring, generosity (Exline & Geyer, 2004), forgiveness (Davis et al., 2013; Powers, Nam, Rowatt, & Hill, 2007; Sheppard & Boon, 2012; Worthington, 1998),

gratitude (Kruse, Chancellor, Ruberton, & Lyubomirsky, 2014), and helpfulness (LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, Tsang, & Willerton, 2012). Furthermore, high levels of humility were associated with less manipulation, deception, and exploitation in romantic relationships (Holden, Zeigler-Hill, Pham, & Shackelford, 2014), and humility promoted sacrifice for others (Zettler, Hilbig, & Heydasch, 2013).

When examining humility, researchers need to consider how to measure humility. Humility can be difficult to measure; humble individuals may under-report characteristics of humility due to modesty, but individuals who are more arrogant and egocentric may over-report their own levels of humility (Davis et al., 2010). Thus, relational humility, a subjective measure of an individual's perception of their partner's levels of humility within a particular relationship, may provide a more accurate assessment of humility. Relational humility is defined as perceiving a romantic partner as other-oriented (e.g., showing empathy, gratitude, sympathy, love), regulating self-oriented emotions (e.g., pride and superiority), and being able to objectively perceive themselves (Davis et al., 2010). Seeing one's partner as humble may increase an individual's level of trust and intimacy, deepening the social bonds of that romantic relationship (Davis et al., 2010). Furthermore, in conflictual, stressful, or transitory times, relational humility "counteracts the natural tendency of these situations to cause instability in relationships" (Davis et al., 2011, p. 227). Thus, to truly understand how humility functions within a romantic relationship, it is important for researchers to consider using both self-reports and other-reports of humility (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013).

### *Humility as an Enduring Trait*

Enduring traits and vulnerabilities are the backgrounds that individuals bring to their romantic relationships. These traits can include attachment orientation, mental health symptoms, and temperament and personality traits. Humility is defined and demonstrated in the literature as a personality disposition (Davis et al., 2013), a personality dimension (Lee & Ashton, 2004), and a character virtue (Tangney, 2000). For example, Ashton and Lee (2007) included Honesty-Humility as a core personality dimension of their HEXACO personality theory (comprising the traits Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience). The Honesty-Humility dimension comprises the traits of sincerity, fairness, greed avoidance, and modesty. This personality dimension is associated with prosocial behaviors, including cooperativeness, benevolence, and fairness (Hilbig, Thielmann, Wuhrl, & Zettler, 2015).

Although humility has not been included in the VSA model as an enduring trait in previous literature, humility is associated with a variety of other enduring traits and vulnerabilities within the VSA literature. For example, greater

humility is associated with more secure attachment styles in adults (Dwiwardani et al., 2014), fewer symptoms of depression (Jankowski, Sandage, & Hill, 2013), and less negative affect (Chow, Berenbaum, & Flores, 2013). Furthermore, throughout the literature, humility has been linked to other components of the VSA model, including adaptive processes, stressors, and relationship outcomes. Humility allows individuals to regulate responses to stress (e.g., Krause, Pargament, Hill, & Ironson, 2016), as well as maintain aspects of one's relationship through forgiveness and commitment (e.g., Farrell et al., 2015). Ultimately, when couples are inevitably faced with difficulties and stressors, adaptive relationship processes need to be implemented to maintain relationship quality. Individuals with a humble disposition may be in a better position to positively cope with stressors and use adaptive processes within their relationships, compared to those with low levels of humility.

### *Humility and Adaptive Processes*

Adaptive processes are practices that couples engage in to handle stressors, including communication, problem solving, commitment, support (Doss et al., 2009), and forgiveness (Sheldon, Gilchrist-Petty, & Lessley, 2014). A budding area of literature demonstrates that humility is positively associated with a few of these adaptive processes. Davis et al. (2013) proposed the social bond hypothesis, which suggests that humility allows for positive relationship processes through the regulation and maintenance of social bonds. In other words, humility allows couples to repair and strengthen social bonds through forgiveness and enhanced levels of commitment. The social bond hypothesis is derived from social investment theory (Brown & Brown, 2006), which postulates that individuals are motivated to have affinities for others with whom they share social bonds. These affinities for strong social bonds typically manifest themselves in the form of other-oriented emotions, including empathy and sympathy. Self-focused emotions, including shame and contempt, may depreciate the relationship bonds. Thus, the social bond hypothesis suggests that humility may enhance social bonds, due in part to the other-oriented emotions that are integral to a humble disposition. The social bond hypothesis also suggests that humility repairs and maintains aspects of romantic relationships. For example, individuals with higher levels of humility may demonstrate higher levels of forgiveness for relationship offenses, ultimately repairing the romantic relationship and social bonds that are damaged by difficulties and transgressions. Thus, the social bond hypothesis illustrates how humility can affect adaptive processes within romantic relationships.

Worthington (1998) suggested that many couples in romantic relationships inevitably face wounds or encounters that threaten the trust and intimacy

within a relationship. These wounds are detrimental to romantic couples; negative communication, loss of intimacy and trust, withdrawal, and nonadaptive relationship processes may result. However, forgiveness (i.e., a reduction in vindictive and heated thoughts, feelings, and emotions, often accompanied by an increase in positive thoughts or feelings) of these wounds allows couples to repair the damage sustained by their relationship and move forward in a positive direction within their relationship (Wade & Worthington, 2003). In order for forgiveness to occur, Worthington (1998) proposed that individuals in relationships need to feel a sense of empathy for the offender, humility in order to see his or her partner as fallible, and the commitment to actually forgive his or her partner. Worthington (1998) and Worthington and Sandage (2016) proposed that humility, in conjunction with empathy and commitment, is essential for both forgiveness and marital therapy. Thus, humility is thought to be integral to the process of maintaining social bonds via adaptive processes such as forgiveness and commitment.

### *Humility and Stressors*

Stressors comprise contextual strains, including situational demands and circumstantial events, including the transition to parenthood, moving, separation, or changing jobs. In the face of stressors, romantic partners may respond by providing support and guidance to their partners. When couples provided support and assistance to their partners in the face of stress, ratings of relationships became more positive (Bodenmann, Pihet, Shantinath, Cina, & Widmer, 2006). Humility is a virtue and a trait that may allow individuals to cope more effectively with stress. For example, Krause et al. (2016) suggested that humility allows individuals to recognize their own limitations, making humble individuals more likely to accept support than individuals who are not as humble. Humble individuals may also be more willing to admit wrongdoings, and they are more likely to forgive themselves (Krause et al., 2016). Thus, humility has a strong potential to affect how couples react to and manage stressful situations. By allowing self-forgiveness, accepting support, and admitting wrongdoings and fault, humble individuals are more apt to effectively cope with stressors.

Humility is also linked to more positive outcomes when directly enduring stressors. For example, the effects of stress became weaker at higher levels of humility; individuals who experienced stressors but had high levels of humility showed lower levels of depressed affect, generalized anxiety, and increased levels of happiness (Krause et al., 2016). Furthermore, individuals with high levels of humility reported better physical health (Krause, 2010; Krause & Hayward, 2012). Accurate self-appraisals are a hallmark of humility; coping with stressors



relies on one's ability to make accurate self-appraisals about the cause of stressors and one's ability to cope with a stressor. Humble individuals are viewed as better adjusted (Exline & Geyer, 2004), show fewer symptoms of depression (Jankowski et al., 2013), rate health more favorably (Krause, 2010), and cope better with stress (Krause et al., 2016), compared to individuals with average or low levels of humility. Although this is a new area of the literature with great room for further exploration, the existing literature demonstrates a relationship between humility and stress.

### *Humility and Relationship Quality*

The final piece of the VSA model is to understand how enduring traits and vulnerabilities, adaptive processes, and stressors affect the overall relationship quality in romantic and committed relationships. Together, these individual, contextual, and relational factors reciprocally influence relationship outcomes. So far in the extant literature, humility has been related to greater social relationship quality (Peters et al., 2011) and greater marital satisfaction (Estephan, 2007). Relational humility also was associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction (Farrell et al., 2015), as well as greater levels of dyadic adjustment among 69 married couples who were transitioning to parenthood, a period of life often characterized by life stress and relational strain (Garthe et al., under review; Reid et al., in press). These studies highlight that humility plays an important role in the quality of relationship bonds in romantic relationships. However, there is a deficiency in the existing literature with regard to longitudinal investigations that link humility to all of the aspects of the VSA model, and the literature may benefit from investigations of this hypothesis across other major life transitions and stressors (e.g., moving, changing jobs) that committed couples typically face.

### **Proposed Model**

Scholarship demonstrates that humility is an enduring trait that is associated with a variety of factors within the VSA model. We propose that humility contributes to the VSA model. Not only may humility affect adaptive processes, including relationship commitment and forgiveness, but humility also may reduce the negative effect of stressors, allow for more positive coping, and ultimately, positively affect levels of relationship quality.

In addition to examining humility as an enduring trait, it is important to examine if and how this virtuous trait may change during transitions or developmental processes within a romantic relationship. Humility is typically defined as a personality disposition (Davis et al., 2013), but most personality traits display some variability in adulthood (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006). Kogan

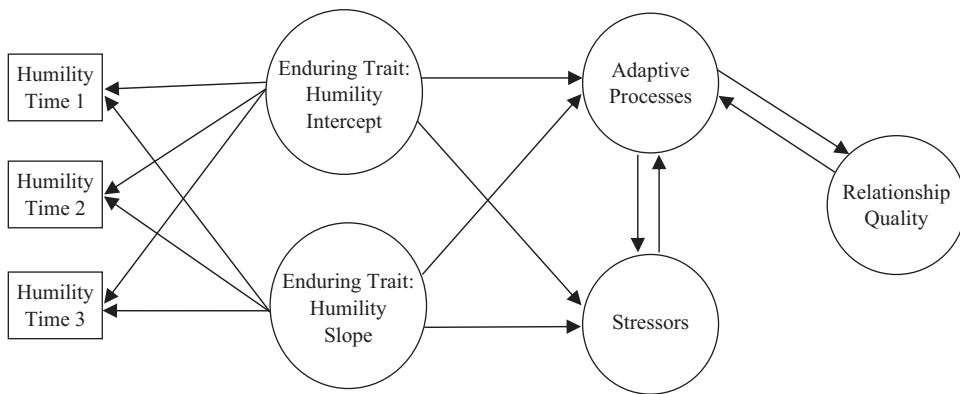
(1990) highlighted contextual models, which suggest that researchers should consider contextual and situational influences on personality, and interactional models, which suggest that researchers should consider the interaction between traits and one's environment. Past research suggested that life experiences and expectations lead to changes in personality traits, especially with new roles and expectations with age (Roberts & Caspi, 2003), and that changes in personality result from maturational or historical processes (McCrae et al., 2000; Roberts et al., 2006).

Personality and perceptions of personality may also change as a result of relationship transitions and stressors (Katz-Wise, Priess, & Hyde, 2010). In other words, individual traits and characteristics may be altered to some extent in response to new demands, new roles, and shifts in their own relationship. One particular transition that has been examined extensively within romantic relationships is the transition to parenthood. This transitory period can lead to major shifts in identity (Bost, Cox, Burchinal, & Payne, 2002), restructuring of the family system, and added stress and adjustments (Crnic & Low, 2002). Among couples who were transitioning to parenthood for the first time and experiencing greater levels of stress, individuals were more likely to experience decreases in relational humility (Nonterah et al., in press). This was the first study to examine if relational humility changed across a major transition or stressor, and the results highlight the need to further investigate changes in humility (Nonterah et al., in press).

Worthington et al. (in press) proposed a developmental hypothesis of humility, suggesting that people may become more humble from managing stressful, demanding, and ego-straining events. Humility may act as a coping strategy and may fluctuate across development. For example, when individuals are faced with stressors and strains (i.e., suffering, pain, loss) but consistently maintain a character of humility, they may be more likely to display a more stable humble personality. Adults who experienced more lifetime trauma but displayed humility were less likely to experience negative mental health symptoms over time compared to nonhumble adults. The authors concluded that humility is an effective coping resource when faced with an accumulation of stressful situations and events (Krause & Hayward, 2012).

Thus, the proposed VSA model (see Figure 15.1) examines initial levels of humility as an enduring trait (i.e., intercept of humility) and fluctuations in humility across time (i.e., slope of humility). The model specifically looks at how the intercept and slope of humility influence the rest of the VSA model, including stressors and adaptive processes in romantic relationships. The proposed model highlights the need for researchers to (a) consider the developmental nature of humility and (b) consider how humility may





**Figure 15.1** Proposed VSA model examining initial levels of humility (as an enduring trait) and changes in humility over time with stressors, adaptive processes, and relationship quality.  
\*Adapted from Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995)

contribute to aspects of romantic relationships, especially in moments of stress and adaptation.

### Research Agenda

The implications of this proposed model are twofold. First, the proposed VSA model of relational humility will allow researchers to investigate the developmental nature of humility. There is a dearth of research examining how personality traits, such as humility, or perceptions of personality traits, such as relational humility, may change across the lifespan. There is also a scarcity of research examining how humility and relational humility within romantic relationships may change across major transitions and events. To date, only one study has examined how relational humility changes across a major adulthood transition (Nonterah et al., in press). More research is necessary to truly understand the developmental nature of humility.

Second, the proposed VSA model will provide researchers a framework for understanding how humility operates in romantic relationships. The VSA model examines vulnerabilities and traits in relation to stressors and adaptive processes, ultimately affecting relationship satisfaction and relationship outcomes. The social bond hypothesis provides support for adding humility into the VSA model; humility repairs and maintains social bonds. Additionally, humility was directly associated with components of the VSA model, including stress (Krause et al., 2016; Ripley et al., in press), adaptive processes (i.e., forgiveness and commitment; Davis et al., 2013; Farrell et al., 2015), and relationship quality (Farrell et al., 2015; Reid et al., under review). Future research should examine how humility fits into the proposed VSA model, especially looking at how all of the VSA components function together in one model.

Finally, the literature also would benefit from examining enduring traits, including humility, across major transitions and developmental processes in romantic relationships. Transitioning to parenthood is just one such transition; marriage, relocation, first-time home ownership, beginnings of new careers, and coping with the loss of loved ones are additional transitions that are ripe for research in this area. Johnson, Galambos, and Krahn (2014) demonstrated the importance of examining changes in traits and vulnerabilities on relationship functioning. Thus, future research should focus on investigating how a) humility changes across time; b) how humility is associated with stressors, adaptive processes, and relationship outcomes within one model; and c) how humility may affect relationship variables within the VSA framework across major transitions and developmental processes in romantic relationships.

### *Practical Lessons*

Research and clinicians working with individuals in romantic relationships will benefit from the proposed model. Worthington (1998) proposed that clinicians use the empathy-humility-commitment model for family therapy. By allowing couples to forgive one another through increasing empathy, humility, and commitment for forgiveness, social bonds will be enhanced and damages and wounds to the romantic relationship will be repaired. For instance, cultivating empathy, humility, commitment, and apology enhanced forgiveness among couples coping with infidelity (Fife, Weeks, & Stellberg-Filbert, 2013), and a workbook intervention to enhance humility was associated with increased levels of forgiveness and patience, as well as decreases in negativity (Lavelock et al., 2014). We encourage researchers and clinicians to utilize the model proposed in this chapter to examine how humility can be understood within the proposed VSA model. Additionally, by understanding how humility changes over time, we will be able to examine its influence on stress and adaptive processes, including forgiveness. We will also be able to examine how humility changes developmentally over time, ultimately influencing levels of relationship quality.

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