

Associations between Dispositional Humility and Social Relationship Quality

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Quality social relationships depend, in part, on deferring self-interest to another person or group. Being too arrogant or self-focused could negatively affect relationship quality. In two studies we examined possible connections between trait humility and social relationship quality (SRQ). Participants completed survey measures of each construct. Self and peer-reported humility correlated positively with SRQ, even when social desirability (Study 1) and other relevant personality dimensions (e.g., Big Five, agency, communion) were statistically controlled (Study 2). These findings indicate humility could be an important trait with regard to interpersonal relations. Implications are discussed for the cultivation of humility and its potential relevance in other social contexts.

Keywords: Humility, Relationship Quality, Positive Psychology, Well-Being

Introduction

Forming and maintaining quality social relationships with family, friends, and co-workers may depend, in part, on the ability to humbly defer self-interest to others. Expressing too much arrogance or self-focus could negatively affect relationships. Building on previous research which connected Big Five personality dimensions and relationship satisfaction (Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Schutte, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2010), we investigated the possible association between understudied trait humility and social relationship quality. We also examined whether the association between humility and relationship quality persisted when other important personality constructs were controlled. The primary purpose of this research, however, was to examine the relationship between humility and social relationship quality. By *social relationship quality* (SRQ) we simply mean the degree to which one is happy or satisfied with social relationship partners, such as friends or roommates. SRQ is very similar to marital satisfaction (Norton, 1983) but is more appropriate for study among non-married college students who comprised our samples.

Humility Defined

Humility has been identified as a part of a sixth personality dimension (Lee & Ashton, 2004) and conceptualized as a virtue or character strength (Exline et al., 2004; Tangney, 2002, 2009). Consistent with both conceptualizations, we define *humility* as a characteristic and enduring way of being more humble, modest, respectful, and open-minded than arrogant, self-centered, or conceited. Like other theorists (Davis, Worthington, & Hook, 2010; Landrum, 2011; Tangney, 2009), we contend humility is not simply the absence of negative qualities but also the presence of positive qualities. That is, a humble person does not simply lack arrogance or self-focus, but also possesses humble

qualities like being modest or intellectually open (Roberts & Wood, 2003).

The trait or virtue of humility may include several facets and specific behavioral tendencies. For example, humble persons are likely down-to-earth (i.e., easy with whom to relate), willing to admit limits, not self-centered (Emmons, 2000; Exline et al., 2004; Myers, 1995; Rowatt et al., 2006), rarely call attention to the self, and prefer not to stand out in a crowd (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Humble persons may also accurately assess personal characteristics and abilities relative to others (Tangney, 2002) rather than inflate self-evaluations.

Possible Connections between Humility and Social Relationship Quality

Why might humility and relationship quality be connected? One team of scholars noted that humility includes important *relational* characteristics, such as a recognition one cannot control all social encounters, an attitude of patience-gentleness with other people, and a sense of empathy (Means, Wilson, Sturn, Biron, & Back, 1990). By being patient, gentle, non-controlling, empathetic, or realizing similarities with others (Worthington, 1998), humble persons may set the stage for quality relationships.

That humble persons are probably liked more than their arrogant counterparts could also impact relationship quality (Landrum, 2011). When asked to describe a very humble person, and why the person was viewed as humble, a majority of participants mentioned humble individuals' kindness or caring toward others (Exline & Geyer, 2004). There are ties between humility and other pro-social qualities as well that could increase relational well-being. For example, Worthington (1998) posited humility was critical in the process of forgiving a family member. Powers et al. (2007) found that self-reported humility and forgiveness correlated positively. People have been

found to be cooperative in a bargaining game with a self-effacing, humble person they expected to meet (Marlowe, Gergen, & Doob, 1966). Honest-humble persons were observed to be cooperative in an economic game (Hilbig & Zettler, 2009). Humble persons have offered more help to a person in need than less humble persons (LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, Tsang, & McCullough, 2010). That humility has been associated with positive qualities and behaviors (e.g. forgiveness, cooperation, helping) provides further support for a possible humility-relationship quality connection.

Hypotheses and Predictions

Study 1 examined whether measures of dispositional humility and social relationship quality were related. We predicted humility and relationship quality would correlate positively. Whereas humility and relationship quality appear to be socially desirable traits, it was important to include a measure of impression management for use as a statistical control. Furthermore, because some humble persons might not self-report being humble, we also assessed participant humility with peer-ratings.

Study 1

Method

Participants

A sample of 109 college students (87 women; M age = 19 years) participated to fulfill a course requirement or for extra credit. The sample was somewhat ethnically diverse (62% Caucasian, 12% Asian, 12% Hispanic, 7.4% Black, 1% American Indian, 5.6% selected "other"). In addition, the humility of 63 participants was rated by a close acquaintance who returned by mail a brief printed survey.

Measures and Procedure

Self- and other-reported *trait humility* was assessed with a seven-item semantic differential scale (Rowatt et al., 2006). We used this humility measure, in part, to assess humility independently from honesty (cf. Lee & Ashton, 2004) or modesty (cf. Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The following terms appeared between 7-point rating scales: *arrogant/humble*, *immodest/modest*, *disrespectful/respectful*, *egotistical/not self-centered*, *conceited/not conceited*, *intolerant/tolerant*, and *closed-minded/open-minded*. Higher scores indicated more humility. The simple statement, "I see myself as...", was printed at the top of the page.

Table 1.
Study 1: zero-order correlations and descriptive statistics.

	1	2	3	Mean	SD	α
1. Humility (self-report, $n = 109$)	-	.31*	.19*	5.47	.77	.75
2. Humility (peer-report, $n = 63$)	.33*	-	.29*	5.71	1.05	.89
3. Quality of social relationships	.27**	.31*	-	5.82	1.13	.93
4. Impression management	.31**	.13	.31*	.30	.16	.70

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; partial correlations controlling for impression management appear above the diagonal and zero-order bivariate correlations appear below the diagonal.

To obtain ratings of participants' humility from other persons, participants were asked to give an envelope containing the same humility measure to someone who knew them well. An instruction on the peer-report survey read, "Please circle the number that best describes this person on each trait below." The peer-rater then returned the survey by mail.

To assess *social relationship quality*, we revised the *Quality Marriage Index* (Norton, 1983) to apply to unmarried individuals. For example, the item "Our marriage is strong" was changed to "My social relationships are strong." Respondents were instructed, "The following items refer to your social relationships (i.e., friends, roommates)." The following five items were rated by the participant (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = neutral, 7 = strongly agree): *I have good social relationships*; *My social relationships are very stable*; *My social relationships are strong*; *My social relationships make me happy*; *I feel like part of a team in my social relationships*. Higher scores indicated higher perceived SRQ. Respondents also completed the 20-item impression-management subscale of the *Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding* (BIDR-IM) (Paulhus & Reid, 1991).

Results and Discussion

As shown in Table 1, self-reported and other-reported humility correlated positively with social relationship quality ($r_s = .27$ and $.31$, respectively). However, both self- and other-reported humility correlated with impression management (both $r_s = .31$), so we computed partial correlations. Both self- and other-reported humility still correlated significantly with SRQ when impression management was statistically controlled (*partial* $r_s = .19$ and $.29$).

No gender difference on self-reported humility was found (Men: $M = 5.24$, $SD = .78$; women: $M = 5.53$, $SD = .76$), $F(1,107) = 2.33$, $p = .13$. However, women were rated by others to be more humble ($M = 5.88$, $SD = .80$) than men ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.56$), $F(1,59) = 7.35$, $p = .009$. When controlling for gender, the correlations persisted between social relationship quality and self-reported humility (*partial* $r = .27$, $p = .005$) and peer-reported humility (*partial* $r = .32$, $p = .015$). No gender difference was found on SRQ.

We also found self-reported and other-reported humility correlated positively ($r = .33$, $p = .02$). This is important because it could be argued humble persons do not self-report being humble. That self and other ratings of humility correlated positively suggests some agreement of others with self-assessments of humility.

Study 2

Study 1 revealed a positive relationship between humility and social relationship quality (SRQ) even when social desirability and gender were statistically controlled. In Study 2 we examined whether the humility-relationship quality connection remained when statistically controlling for the Big Five personality dimensions and other personality variables implicated in social well-being (i.e., agency, communion; Bakan, 1966; Helgeson, 1994). We are not the first to suggest that a personality dimension like humility might account for unique variability in important social processes. Honesty-humility was found to better predict negative qualities like self and other-reported materialism, ethical violations, and criminality (all inversely) than other personality dimensions (Ashton & Lee, 2008). This is a preliminary indication that trait humility will account for unique variability in relationship-relevant constructs when the Big Five are statistically controlled.

Humility, the Big Five, and Subjective Well-being

Previous research has revealed connections between self-reported humility, the Big Five personality dimensions, and personal life satisfaction (Rowatt et al., 2006). In specific, self-reported humility correlated positively with agreeableness, openness, and personal satisfaction with life, negatively with neuroticism, and negligibly with conscientiousness and extraversion (Rowatt et al., 2006). In a large meta-analysis, neuroticism was found to be negatively related to subjective well-being measures, whereas extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness were shown to be positively related to subjective well-being (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). Longitudinal research has also implicated husbands' and wives' neuroticism in marital dissatisfaction and divorce (Kelly & Conley, 1987). Given these patterns, it could be the relationship between humility and SRQ we found in Study 1 was an artifact of the Big Five or another personality dimension.

Humility, Agency/Communion, and SRQ

We also investigated whether the association between humility and relationship quality was due in part to personal qualities like agency or communion. Somewhat unlike humble persons, agentic individuals are self-focused, independent, and seek to separate from others (Helgeson, 1994). Similar to humble persons, communal people focus more on others than the self and strive to connect with others (Helgeson, 1994).

Agency and communion can also be unmitigated (Helgeson, 1994). For example, agency unmitigated by communion or unmitigated agency (UA) refers to "a focus on the self to the exclusion of others" (Helgeson & Fritz, 1999: p. 132), and was operationalized with terms like arrogant, boastful, and egotistical (see Spence, Helmreich, & Holahan, 1979). UA is a conceptual opposite of humility. Unmitigated communion (UC) refers to "a focus on others to the exclusion of the self" (Helgeson & Fritz, 1999: p. 132) and was assessed with items like, "I always place the needs of others above my own" and "Even when exhausted, I will always help other people" (see Helgeson & Fritz, 1999).

Previous research has revealed that both UA and UC were inversely associated with personal and relational well-being. For example, UA and UC were positively associated with fre-

quency of negative social interactions when sex, agency, and communion were statistically controlled (Helgeson & Fritz, 1999). UA and UC were also negatively related with general well-being when sex and communion were controlled statistically (Helgeson & Fritz, 1999).

Hypothesis and Predictions

Whereas humble persons are less self-centered, we predicted a measure of trait humility would correlate negatively with measures of agency and unmitigated agency. Whereas humble persons may strive to connect with others, we predicted a measure of trait humility would correlate positively with communion and unmitigated communion. Some humble persons may be so humble they neglect the self relative to others. Finally, we hypothesized humility accounts for unique variability in SRQ above and beyond the Big Five, agency, or communion.

Method

Participants, Materials, and Procedure

A convenience sample of 258 undergraduate students completed an online survey (198 women, M age = 19 years). The sample was somewhat diverse with regard to ethnicity: 56% Caucasian, 17% Hispanic, 14% Asian, 10% African American, 2% other ethnicity, and 1% Native American. Participants received one credit that satisfied a course research participation requirement or extra credit.

Trait humility, social relationship quality, and impression management were assessed with the self-report measures described in Study 1. The Extended Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence et al., 1979) was used to assess *agency, communion, and unmitigated agency*. The Revised Unmitigated Communion Scale (Helgeson & Fritz, 1999) was used to measure *unmitigated communion* (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). On the Extended PAQ, two items appeared between a 5-point scale as a semantic differential (i.e., 1 = not at all arrogant, 5 = very arrogant). Example agency items included independent, competitive, and feels very superior. Example communion items included easy to devote self to others, gentle, and aware of other's feelings. Example unmitigated agency items included: arrogant, boastful, and looks out for self. An example unmitigated communion item was, "I always place the needs of others above my own." Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann's (2003) measure of the Big Five was used to assess extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and emotional stability. An example extraversion item was: "extraverted, enthusiastic" (1 = disagree strongly, 7 = agree strongly).

Results

Humility correlated positively with relationship quality ($r = .24$; see Table 2), even when impression management was controlled (*partial* $r = .17, p < .05$).¹ This replicates Study 1. In

¹Descriptive statistics and internal consistency estimates for Study 2 are provided in Table 2 (last three columns). Because each Big Five factor contained only two items, Cronbach alphas were not computed for those subscales. With increased sample size, we found women self-reported more humility than men (women $M = 5.44, SD = .84$; men: $M = 5.10, SD = .69$), $F(1,257) = 10.07, p = .002$. As in Study 1, no gender difference in relationship quality was found.

addition, humility was negatively correlated with unmitigated agency and neuroticism, and positively correlated with agreeableness, communion, unmitigated communion, and conscientiousness.

Hierarchical regression analyses were used to investigate whether humility accounted for unique variability in SRQ above and beyond the Big Five. In the first step, the Big Five personality factors were entered (see Table 3, Model 1 columns). In the second step, humility was entered (see Table 3, Model 2 columns). Humility accounted for unique variability in relationship quality when the Big Five were simultaneously controlled. Extraversion and neuroticism (inversely) were also associated with SRQ in models one and two (see Table 3). When gender was added to these regression models, the patterns were virtually unchanged; gender was unrelated to relationship quality.

A similar approach was used to examine whether humility accounted for unique variability in SRQ above and beyond gender, agency, communion, unmitigated agency, and unmitigated communion. Because men tend to be agentic and women tend to be more communal, gender was included in these regression models.

In the first step of the regression analysis we entered gender, agency, communion, unmitigated agency, and unmitigated communion (see Table 4, Model 1 columns). Humility was entered in the second step (see Table 4, Model 2 columns). Both agency and communion were positively associated with SRQ (see Table 4). The influence of humility on relationship quality was marginally significant with a two-tailed significance test. Given our *a priori* directional prediction (i.e., humility will be positively correlated with relationship quality) and

Table 2.
Study 2: zero-order correlations and descriptive statistics.

Personality/Self-Concept Measures	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Mean	SD	α
1. Humility Semantic Differential	-												5.37	.74	.71
2. Quality of Marriage Index	.24***	-											5.65	1.25	.92
4. Agency	-.06	.24**	-										3.42	.62	.75
5. Communion	.39***	.31***	.04	-									4.02	.54	.76
6. Unmitigated Agency	-.67**	-.20**	.18*	-.47**	-								2.44	.56	.75
7. Unmitigated Communion	.22***	.12	-.06	.44***	-.30**	-							3.54	.58	.70
8. Extraversion	-.05	.31***	.44**	.22***	.09	.14*	-						8.70	3.25	-
9. Agreeableness	.40***	.25***	-.12	.52***	-.56**	.30***	.02	-					10.73	2.43	-
10. Conscientiousness	.18**	.16**	.25**	.16**	-.29**	.06	.04	.19**	-				11.02	2.45	-
11. Neuroticism	-.19**	-.27***	-.26**	.03	.19**	.16*	-.04	-.25***	-.15*	-			6.74	2.91	-
12. Openness	.11	.15*	.27**	.11	.00	-.01	.25***	.08	-.05	-.16*	-		10.38	2.17	-
13. BIDRIM	.30***	.25***	.16*	.20***	-.43***	.21***	.05	.27***	.34***	-.18**	-.05	-	17.02	.18	.76

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. * For Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness two item inter-correlations were reported in the alpha columns.

Table 3.
Study 2: multiple regressions of relationship quality on big five traits (Model 1) and humility (Model 2).

	Model 1		Model 2		F change	R ² change
	β	T	β	t		
Extraversion	.28	4.91***	.30	5.15***		
Agreeableness	.17	2.96**	.12	1.96		
Conscientiousness	.09	1.57	.07	1.29		
Neuroticism	-.20	-3.38**	-.19	-3.22**		
Openness	.04	<1	.03	<1		
Humility	-	-	.15+	2.40*		
R ²	.20		.22			
F	13.25***		12.21**		5.74*	.02*

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 4.
Study 2: multiple regressions of relationship quality on agency, communion (Model 1) and humility (Model 2).

	Model 1		Model 2		<i>F</i> change	<i>R</i> ² change
	β	<i>t</i>	β	<i>t</i>		
Sex	-.01	<1	-.02	<1		
Agency	.25	4.22***	.24	4.11***		
Communion	.24	3.39**	.26	3.29**		
UA	-.13	-1.91+	-.05	<1		
UC	-.01	<1	-.01	<1		
Humility	-	-	.13	1.74+		
<i>R</i> ²	.16		.17			
<i>F</i>	9.52***		8.50***		2.75*	.01*

Note: + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; sex (male = 0, female = 1), UA = unmitigated agency, UC = unmitigated communion. *F* change is a test for the difference between models one and two (when humility was added).

direct observation of this in Study 1, it was appropriate to use a one-tailed significance test (i.e., $p < .099/2 < .05$). As such, we concluded humility accounts for unique variability in relationship quality when the Big Five or agency/communion variables were statistically controlled.

General Discussion

The positive correlation between humility and social relationship quality observed in Study 1 replicated in Study 2. We also found self-reported humility correlated positively with SRQ, even when the Big Five and agency-communion variables were controlled in separate regression models. These findings indicate trait humility could be important for social relationships. It should also be noted that extraversion, neuroticism (inversely), agency, and communion also account for unique variability in social relationship quality. These patterns fit with previous research about extraversion and happiness (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998) and agency/communion and well-being (Helgeson, 1994).

We encourage psychologists and researchers in other related disciplines to consider the role of humility in relationships and other domains. As psychological science has developed, more attention has been placed on negative traits like narcissism, which affect interpersonal relationships, and for good reasons. In contrast to humility, some people think and act like they are the center of the universe (i.e., narcissists). Narcissists have an unstable overly positive sense of self that could, over time, be relationally repulsive. Narcissism is not the exact opposite of humility, but measures of the two constructs are inversely related (Rowatt et al., 2006). Furthermore, as narcissism increases, perceptions of humility as a positive quality decrease (Exline & Geyer, 2004). Unlike humility, however, narcissism is associated with a variety of relationship problems. For example, narcissism correlates with qualities linked to exploitation of others (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Facets of narcissism, such as entitlement or arrogance, appear to contribute to unstable or poor social relationships and other self-defeating behaviors (Vazire & Funder, 2006). Although narcissists were perceived initially by others as agreeable and well-adjusted, they were rated more

negatively after group interactions (Paulhus, 1988).

Potential Benefits of Humility Relative to Narcissism

In contrast with narcissism, we suggest humility has potential personal, relational, and organizational benefits. At the personal level, humility has been found to correlate positively with academic performance even when other known correlates of good grades were controlled (Owens, 2009; see Rowatt et al., 2006, Study 2). Realizing that one does not know and being open to learning could facilitate intellectual growth and progress. At the relational level, Studies 1 and 2 reveal humility correlated with relationship quality even when other personality dimensions were controlled. Humbly recognizing one cannot control others and being patient, gentle, and empathic with others (cf. Means et al., 1990) may also facilitate relational well-being. At the organizational level, Collins (2001, 2005) discovered companies with CEOs who possessed a paradoxical combination of humility and strong professional will went from being merely “good” to being “great” (as measured by stock performance). Johnson, Rowatt, and Petrini (2011) found that honesty-humility predicts supervisor ratings of job performance. Humility could have other benefits for organizations as well (see Owens, Rowatt, & Wilkins, 2011).

Future Directions and Cautions

Future research should examine how humility affects outcomes in business, industry, education, law, medicine and other contexts. We suspect humility is important for some, but not all contexts. For example, humility might not predict performance in competitive sales environments or public performers who depend on self-promotion for success.

A few limits and possible alternative interpretations also merit brief discussion. Given the correlational design, we cannot determine the causal nature of the humility-relationship quality connection. We suggest humility increases relational quality, but the reverse is possible. Experiencing quality social relationships could engender humility in individuals. Perhaps being among close friends leads to less focus on the self that increases personal humility.

Measurement of humility also merits brief discussion. Despite its perceived value (Exline & Geyer, 2004), agreement among theorists that humility is a positive quality (Exline et al., 2004; Tangney, 2009), and representation in many languages (Ashton et al., 2004), the construct of humility has received very little empirical attention from personality researchers. Part of the challenge appears to be there is not a gold-standard measure of humility (Davis et al., 2010; Tangney, 2009). We used a brief measure of humility that is relatively independent from modesty or honesty. Other existing scales assess humility in combination with qualities like modesty (i.e., Peterson & Seligman, 2004) or honesty (i.e., Lee & Ashton, 2004), or indirectly through estimates of the degree to which humble qualities are liked (Landrum, 2011).

At this time, our purpose is not to say one definition or measure is best. Each conceptualization captures some of the essence of humility. Trait humble persons are likely modest (Exline et al., 2004), honest (Ashton & Lee, 2008), and less arrogant (Rowatt et al., 2006) than less humble persons. Measures of humility-modesty, humility-honesty, and humility-arrogance likely correlate positively. A gold-standard measure may emerge as data and findings accumulate. Readers who plan to study humility are encouraged to consult Davis et al. (2010) for a more thorough discussion of measurement issues.

In closing, perhaps paradoxically, humility appears to be an important quality. Future research is needed to determine whether state or trait humility is connected with other positive outcomes and whether state or trait humility can be cultivated. We speculate state humility can be induced by broadening one's perspective and contemplating how small (but not necessarily insignificant) one is relative to the known universe. If trait humility can be developed, it could have even more lasting and enduring personal and social benefits.

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