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Finding middle ground between intellectual arrogance and intellectual servility: Development and assessment of the limitations-owning intellectual humility scale

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ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship in intellectual humility (IH) has attempted to provide deeper understanding of the virtue as personality trait and its impact on an individual's thoughts, beliefs, and actions. A limitations-owning perspective of IH focuses on a proper recognition of the impact of intellectual limitations and a motivation to overcome them, placing it as the mean between intellectual arrogance and intellectual servility. We developed the Limitations-Owning Intellectual Humility Scale to assess this conception of IH with related personality constructs. In Studies 1 (n = 386) and 2 (n = 296), principal factor and confirmatory factor analyses revealed a three-factor model – owning one's intellectual limitations, appropriate discomfort with intellectual limitations, and love of learning. Study 3 (n = 322) demonstrated strong test-retest reliability of the measure over 5 months, while Study 4 (n = 612) revealed limitations-owning IH correlated negatively with dogmatism, closed-mindedness, and hubristic pride and positively with openness, assertiveness, authentic pride. It also predicted openness and closed-mindedness over and above education, social desirability, and other measures of IH. The limitations-owning understanding of IH and scale allow for a more nuanced, spectrum interpretation and measurement of the virtue, which directs future study inside and outside of psychology.

1. Introduction

In 2014, Laszlo Block, a senior vice president at Google, detailed the personal qualities the company seeks in employees. “What we've seen is that the people who are the most successful here, who we want to hire, will have a fierce position. They'll argue like hell. They'll be zealots about their point of view. But then you say, ‘here's a new fact,’ and they'll go, ‘Oh, well, that changes things; you're right’” (Friedman 2014). Instead of internship experience, high test scores, or even expertise, Block implicated intellectual humility as an important trait for success. Collins (2001) described that a paradoxical combination of strong professional will and humility are found in the best CEOs. Owens and colleagues (2016) also uncovered the important role humility plays among business teams and leaders.

Intellectual humility (IH) has also proven to be a beneficial quality in other personal and interpersonal contexts as well. Krumrei-Mancuso (2017) found that IH positively predicted perspective-taking, empathetic concern, gratitude, altruism, and valuing benevolence and universalism. However, until recently, measurement of general humility and IH has lagged (Davis, Hook, Worthington, Van Tongeren, Gartner and Jennings, 2010), in part because of multiple philosophical and psychological perspectives on IH ranging from lacking intellectual arrogance to low concern for intellectual status to one of proper reliance on beliefs (Roberts & Wood 2003; Samuelson et al. 2014). A handful of different IH scales were developed within the past few years, but all focus on a binary interpretation of IH and intellectual arrogance (IA), where IH is primarily defined as a lack of IA (cf. Hill, Laney, & Edwards, 2014; Hoyle, Davisson, Diebels, & Leary 2016; Krumrei-Mancuso & Rouse 2015; Leary et al. 2017). Instead, we propose a conceptualization of IH that involves owning one's intellectual limitations, which lies on a

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spectrum between IA and intellectual servility (IS).

1.1. Current conceptualization and measurement of intellectual humility

Within positive psychology and virtue epistemology, there is strong consensus about what humility is not – arrogance (Davis, Worthington, & Hook 2010; Gregg & Mahadevan 2014), narcissism (Bollinger & Hill 2012), self-deprecation (Tangney 2009), low self-esteem (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky 2013; Tangney 2009), or modesty (Exline & Geyer 2004). Similarly, available theory and measures of IH tend to focus on this negative view applied to one's intellect, relying on factors such as lacking overconfidence in one's beliefs, separating ego and intellect, and low concern for intellectual status (Hill, Laney, & Edwards 2014; Krumrei-Mancuso & Rouse 2015; Leary et al. 2017). As research in general humility has emphasized, someone who is only self-deprecating is not necessarily humble. Davis and colleagues (2010) stress that a humble person is accurate in their self-appraisal, not over-confident or under-confident in their abilities. If one is a highly-respected scholar in an academic field, then one should not undersell his or her abilities in that area. However, if one is new to a particular realm of knowledge, one should be receptive to inviting multiple perspectives and altering views if new information arises. To account for the issue of accuracy, the General Intellectual Humility Scale (GIHS; Leary et al. 2017) and Comprehensive Intellectual Humility Scale (CIHS; Krumrei-Mancuso & Rouse 2015) include a willingness to change viewpoints in the face of appropriate evidence or respecting others' views. However, this creates unnecessary overlap between IH and open-mindedness, and centers IH as related only to what one knows or what others know, not an orientation toward knowledge and its attainment overall.

Along these lines, there remains a need for a theory and measure of IH that includes both its deficiency, or IA, as well as its excess, which we posit is IS. Just as general humility is not simply thinking less of oneself, IH is not just endlessly questioning each piece of knowledge or thought, nor is it overthrowing long-held and tested beliefs when new or contradictory evidence arises. IH, then, emerges as the mean between the extremes of IA and IS. Within this framework, a person high in IH should be aware of their intellectual limitations and their potential impact and not overwhelmed by their existence, while a person lacking IH could be dismissive of criticism or completely overwhelmed by it.

1.2. The limitations-owning approach to intellectual humility

To synthesize and clarify the existing conceptualizations of IH, Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, and Howard-Snyder (2015) provided a comprehensive philosophical analysis of the current state of the virtue. The innovative contribution of their work focuses on defining IH as owning one's intellectual limitations while being appropriately attentive to them. That is, not consumed by them, as with IS, but also not willfully ignorant of them, as in IA. The “owning” in question is made up of a suite of affective, motivational, behavioral, and cognitive dispositions toward knowledge. These dispositions, in turn, characteristically bring one to have accurate beliefs about one's intellectual limitations and the outcomes that are due to them, and to feel, act, and be motivated in certain ways in certain circumstances: for instance, to not feel hostile about them, to not lash out in anger about them, and to work to remedy them or perhaps come to peace with them. Excesses in these dispositions result in IS, in which an individual is so preoccupied with their limitations, he or she struggles to do anything about them, whereas deficiencies result in IA, in which an individual fails to recognize their intellectual shortcomings. When these dispositions come in the appropriate (i.e., non-deficient and non-excessive) degree, though, they make for IH. When they are motivated by a love of such goods as truth, knowledge, and understanding, they make for the virtue of IH, as opposed to the non-virtuous trait. This approach to IH is unique in that it captures the connection between IH and a desire/openness to learn, allows it to be distinguished from intellectual pride, which is the proper owning of and attentiveness to one's intellectual strengths, and relies on a spectrum rather than binary understanding of IH.

Whitcomb et al.'s (2015) conceptualization also allows for specific predictions about the kinds of behaviors, motivations, and feelings that an intellectually humble person would demonstrate. According to the limitations-owning conception, open-mindedness (considering alternative ideas) is distinct from IH, but is likely to be correlated with IH. For example, an intellectually humble person should be less likely to pretend to know something, more likely to consider alternative ideas, and less likely to treat intellectual inferiors with disrespect. This marks the first theory to provide testable hypotheses concerning how IH manifests within an individual.

1.3. Present research: developing and validating and limitations-owning IH scale

To expand the current conceptualization of IH and empirically examine its connection to specific behaviors, motivations, and emotions, we sought to create a measure founded on the understanding of IH provided by Whitcomb et al. (2015). Based on discussions with a team of psychologists and philosophers, we identified three important factors needed to measure IH as a virtue – owning one's intellectual limitations, love of learning, and appropriate discomfort with one's intellectual limits, which taps into the servility component of limitations-owning. Combined, these three factors tap into the constellation of characteristics that define IH according to a limitations-owning understanding.

First, the owning one's limitations factor focuses on the ability of an individual to admit to intellectual limitations, generally acknowledging and accepting that there are gaps in one's knowledge and that they may impact future feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. The appropriate discomfort component taps into the degree of attentiveness to intellectual limitations, especially the emotional experience associated with considering the gaps in one's intellect. This distinguishes between those who are attentive to their limitations but not preoccupied by limitations from those who are both attentive and preoccupied by them, miring themselves in IS. This inclusion is unique to our scale, as the others do not address outcomes related to an excess of IH. Lastly, the love of learning component captures the desire to gain more knowledge to bring about more understanding and helps to distinguish those who are virtuously intellectual humble, as reflected in Whitcomb et al.' (2015) argument that motivation to be intellectual humble must be for gaining epistemic goods, such as knowledge, truth, and understanding. It is similar in definition and function to Seligman and Peterson and Seligman (2004) love of learning virtue in their Values in Action (VIA) inventory, but the L-OIHS items are designed to capture a broader orientation to seek out new information compared to the VIA items. They overlap in their more abstract concerns, such as being a life-long learner, seeking truth, and finding out new information. However, the clearest differences are that the L-OIHS love of learning factor is not as concerned with the sources consulted or the ways in which knowledge is gained.

2. Study 1

To begin, 64 potential scale items were written by a team of philosophers and social-personality psychologists to match the criteria of IH as the three factors mentioned previously (available from first author). Thirty-seven of these items assessed owning one's intellectual limitations, 12 items measured love of learning, and 15 items measured appropriate discomfort with one's intellectual limits.