

CHARACTER STRENGTHS AND VIRTUES

A HANDBOOK AND CLASSIFICATION

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20. HUMILITY AND MODESTY

Humility is the most difficult of all virtues to achieve; nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself.

—T. S. ELIOT (1927, p. 8)

Who might be cited as a paragon of humility? We turned first to the early Christian monastic writers such as Saint Benedict and Bernard of Clairvaux. Their writings centered on humility, but they also communicated self-abasement and asceticism that did not resonate fully with our thinking about the construct. Other religious figures (Christ, Buddha, Moses, Saint Paul) often showed deep humility along with other virtues, with humility not standing out above the others. And because a truly humble person would presumably not seek fame for fame's sake, we had great difficulty pulling recognizable examples from current popular culture. Yet our search was not in vain, for it revealed another category of exemplars: those who knew the value of humility and struggled to become more humble.

One such example is Bill Wilson ("Bill W."), the cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous (Hartigan, 2000; Raphael, 2000). After an unsuccessful battle with alcoholism, Wilson had a religious conversion that caused him to reorder his priorities and opened the doorway to abstinence. He then used his life lessons to promote a "12-step" approach to the treatment of alcoholism. Humility-related themes played a central role within Wilson's 12-step framework (e.g., admitting personal and moral limitations; making amends; relying on a higher power). Yet throughout his life Bill often wavered between low self-esteem and arrogance, struggling to come to terms with his own personal demons while managing near-celebrity status in what was supposed to be an anonymous self-help organization. Bill Wilson was clearly someone who understood the central value of humility. However, he also understood firsthand the difficulty of attaining this virtue, and he wrestled throughout his lifetime in his attempts to cultivate it. 85

■ Consensual Definition

In the time of Thomas Aquinas, pride was considered sufficiently evil to be included among the deadly sins (Schimmel, 1992). Some even considered pride the ultimate sin, the root of all others (Murray, 2001). Yet—in the guise of self-esteem—modern Western culture encourages the pursuit of pride. When seeking to place blame for social ills such as drug abuse and violence, the modern world often points the finger at low self-esteem. The crusade to raise self-esteem has spawned countless self-help books (e.g., Branden, 1994) and even state-funded task forces (Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989). If people can only feel better about themselves, the logic goes, they will be happy and behave well—and society will benefit. Individuals now view pride as not only acceptable but worthy, whether it takes the form of overestimating one's good qualities and traits, viewing the self as better than average, or basking in unconditional praise despite lukewarm performance.

Feeling good about the self can yield benefits, such as positive emotions and the confidence to pursue goals. But society's eagerness to facilitate positive views of the self at all costs has created a dangerous imbalance. By focusing attention on the benefits of positive views of the self, we can easily overlook the dangers. We can certainly overlook the benefits of some rather unassuming virtues: humility and modesty.

What does it mean to be humble or modest, and why do we consider these qualities desirable? Although the present chapter addresses these questions from a psychological perspective, we acknowledge our debt to virtue ethicists, who have long debated the definitions and merits of humility and modesty (e.g., Ben-Ze'ev, 1993; N. Richards, 1988, 1992). Many theologians, devotional writers, and scholars of religious history have also written on these strengths of character (Casey, 2001; Murray, 2001). The past decade has also witnessed a surge of interest in the link between humility and science (Herrmann, 2000; Templeton, 1998) and in the role that humility might play within organizational and business settings (J. Collins, 2001).

In her review and critique of the existing theoretical literature, Tangney (2000, 2002) identified a number of humility's key features:

- an accurate (not underestimated) sense of one's abilities and achievements
- the ability to acknowledge one's mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations (often with reference to a "higher power")
- openness to new ideas, contradictory information, and advice
- keeping one's abilities and accomplishments in perspective
- relatively low focus on the self or an ability to "forget the self"
- appreciation of the value of all things, as well as the many different ways that people and things can contribute to our world

In contrast, the term *modesty* refers primarily to the moderate estimation of one's merits or achievements and also extends into other issues relating to propriety in dress and social behavior. Social psychological studies have often approached modesty in behavioral terms—for example, not taking full credit for success (Hareli & Weiner, 2000) or lowering estimates for one's future success when in the presence of another (Heatherington, Burns, & Gustafson, 1998).

■ Theoretical Traditions

We would like to take the analysis of humility and modesty a step further by trying to identify the crucial elements associated with these virtues. Our aim is not to make fine distinctions between modesty and humility but to emphasize common elements. Discussion will focus on humility, which we regard to be a private stance toward the evaluation of the self. We view modesty as a more socially oriented virtue, a style of presentation that can be consistent with an inner sense of humility but can also arise for other reasons, such as situational pressures and demands. Even those who are highly egotistical can behave modestly if they believe that modesty is appropriate in a particular situation. So, part of the script for being named MVP of a professional sports championship is to acknowledge the great effort of the loser, to thank God, and to mention one's team (all ostensible acts of modesty) and then to say, "I'm going to Disneyland" and to collect endorsement deals—certainly not acts of modesty.

The term *humility* has negative associations (Tangney, 2000). One might think of a humble person as weak and passive, with eyes downcast and lacking self-respect and confidence. Others might associate humility with humiliation, prompting images of shame, embarrassment, or disgust with the self. However, humility need not imply such negative views of the self. In fact, some humble individuals can have quite positive opinions of themselves (Exline & Geyer, in press) if they base their sense of worth on their intrinsic value (J. D. Brown, 1993), their good qualities (James, 1890), a sense of compassion toward the self (Neff, 2003, in press), their connections with other people (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), or their alignment with a higher power (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

What, then, is the essence of humility? We believe that humility involves a nondefensive willingness to see the self accurately, including both strengths and limitations. Humble individuals will not willfully distort information in order to defend, repair, or verify their own image (cf. Swann, 1997). For humble people, there should be no press toward self-importance and no burning need to see—or present—themselves as being better than they actually are (cf. chapter 11). They should also not be particularly interested in dominating others in order to receive entitlements or to elevate their own status. On the other hand, humility should not lead people to take harsh or condemning approaches to-

ward themselves, magnifying weaknesses and severely punishing failures while overlooking strengths and successes.

Our perspective on humility implies a willingness to see the self accurately rather than the absolute attainment of accuracy. Nonetheless, from our perspective, accuracy is secondary to whether a person is willing and able to weigh information in a nondefensive way (cf. chapter 6). Granted, a person who is willing to take an objective look at the self should acquire a more accurate view than a person who defensively distorts. Thus, the accuracy of a person's appraisals could serve as a useful marker for humility. Whether or not complete accuracy is attained, the crucial point is that humble people welcome accurate information about themselves and thus should be teachable.

Some scholars have argued that humility implies people's ability to transcend a focus on the self or to view themselves from a broader perspective (Morgan, 2001; Murray, 2001; Statman, 1992; Tangney, 2000). People are humble to the extent that they consider their own small role in the universe, their weakness in comparison to an omnipotent God, or their indebtedness to other people. Some theorists have gone further, arguing that assumptions about a transcendent (and usually religious) reality are so fundamental to humility that the construct cannot truly be understood from a secular perspective. We take a less extreme view and propose that self-transcendent beliefs and experiences are not essential components of humility—we know humble people who are not religious—but that these beliefs can nonetheless facilitate humility (cf. chapters 23 and 27). For example, when students were asked to identify situations in which they felt humble, a number of them identified situations involving contemplation of natural wonders (Exline, Bushman, Faber, & Phillips, 2000; Exline & Geyer, in press).

In our view, humility and modesty do not require self-disparagement, negativity, or a contemptuous attitude toward the self. We would even argue for the theoretically interesting possibility that some self-deprecating individuals might exercise humility by overriding impulses to verify a negative view of the self (Swann, 1997). But research suggests that, by and large, people tend to distort in a self-enhancing rather than self-deprecating direction (D. G. Myers, 2000; S. E. Taylor & Brown, 1988), which means that humility usually takes the form of lowering rather than lifting one's evaluation of the self. Similarly, attempts at modesty should more frequently involve resisting the temptation to boast rather than the temptation to self-deprecate. The preponderance of self-enhancement bias may help to explain why lay and dictionary conceptions of humility so often involve low self-evaluations or feelings of smallness.

■ Measures

Attempts to assess modesty have been more straightforward than attempts to assess humility. Because modesty is a social virtue, self-presentational behaviors provide a way to tap the construct. For example, modesty can be opera-

tionalized as the tendency to give public credit to others for success (R. S. Miller & Schlenker, 1985) or to downplay predictions of one's future performance (Heatherington et al., 1998). Granted, purely behavioral measures are problematic. They do not allow researchers to detect whether a modest self-presentation stems from a genuinely modest or humble attitude or from other goals, such as a desire to follow social norms or to manipulate the perceptions of others. Nonetheless, these behavioral measures provide a good starting point for studying modesty.

Attempts to assess humility have proved more difficult (but see Table 20.1). Efforts to create simple self-report inventories have often yielded measures with low internal consistency (Tangney, 2000, 2002). Diverging opinions about the essential features of humility have no doubt contributed to low reliability. Given the continued efforts to refine the constructs of humility and modesty, we hope that an internally consistent measure might exist in the near future (see chapter 28). We nonetheless need to be open to the possibility that humility is not unidimensional, in part because it is often defined by what a person does *not* do. Humility, rather than involving the presence of certain thoughts or behaviors, might better be construed as the absence of narcissism, self-enhancement, or defensiveness. We shortly review studies using such proxy measures for low humility. Another alternative is to assess specific attitudes or behaviors related to humility without claiming to measure the whole construct.

Another problem with self-report measures involves social desirability. To what extent can we trust a person who reports that he or she is modest or humble? On the flip side, would an authentically humble person recognize that he or she is humble, or would such a person readily admit to any small sign of pride, thus appearing less humble on paper than he or she actually is? Some

TABLE 20.1 *Measures of Humility and Modesty*

Strategy (see text)	
Self-report questionnaires (chapter 28)	
Scenario methods	
Proxy measures for low humility, e.g., narcissism, entitlement, self-enhancement, or defensiveness (e.g., Exline, Bushman, Campbell, & Baumeister, 2002)	
Physiological responses to ego threat	
"Think-aloud" paradigms in which people describe their goals and thought processes in situations involving ego threat	
Comparing evaluations of the self to evaluations by others (e.g., Robins & John, 1997)	
Comparing private vs. public self-evaluations (e.g., Shultz & Veschio, 2001)	

data suggest that social desirability correlates positively with self-reported humility (Landrum, 2002). The waters are further muddied by the fact that people are even more likely to self-enhance in moral domains than in intellectual domains (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989).

Given the inherent difficulty in the use of self-report to study humility and modesty, it seems wise to consider alternative measurement strategies. One worth exploring is the development of a scenario-based measure of humility that would contain humble and nonhumble items that are roughly equivalent in terms of social desirability. Similar approaches have been effective in assessing constructs such as shame and guilt (Tangney, 1995). Laboratory-based approaches to tap humility might also be considered, including physiological responses to ego threat, “think-aloud” paradigms in which people describe their goals and thought processes, or behavioral choices in situations involving ego threat.

Another avenue deserving further exploration is the use of experimental manipulations to put people in humble or nonhumble states of mind. The utility of such priming studies might depend partly on whether a state-based measure of humility can first be developed to serve as a manipulation check. Modest self-presentations might also serve as behavioral markers of humility.

In still another approach, people’s evaluations of their personal attributes can be compared with reports made by others who know them well (D. L. Paulus, 1998; see Robins & John, 1997, for a review). Even without outside observers, other measurable criteria could be used as a basis for comparison, such as grade point averages or task performance (Krueger & Mueller, 2002). Using these discrepancy-based paradigms, a humble person would be someone whose self-report aligned quite closely with the self-reports of others (Tangney, 2000), rather than someone whose self-reports were much higher or lower than the reports of others.

A final option is to compare ratings of the self given in a private condition (i.e., when participants do not believe that others will be rating them) with those given in a public condition (i.e., when participants believe that friends or peers will also be rating them). A person whose self-ratings were very similar in both private and public conditions might be considered high in humility or modesty. A study using this method was reported by Shultz and Veschio (2001) and suggested that a low discrepancy between private and public scores was associated with higher humility as measured by self-report.

■ Correlates and Consequences

Given the problems surrounding measurement of humility and modesty, headed empiricists might conclude that nothing is known about the correlates or consequences of these virtues. But such a conclusion is not warranted. Studies

of related constructs have yielded some interesting results pertinent to humility. Because much of this research involves narcissism and its absence, we briefly turn our attention to narcissism before proceeding.

Although narcissistic personality disorder is a clinical condition, narcissism also appears more generally as a personality trait normally distributed in the general population. One hallmark of narcissism is a highly positive self-conception, including a belief that one is better than other people. In particular, narcissists’ inflated beliefs reflect agentic concerns (e.g., intelligence, social extroversion). Narcissists do not necessarily see themselves as better than others on communal traits such as agreeableness or morality (W. K. Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002).

The narcissist’s highly positive view of the self is maintained in several ways. On an intrapersonal level, narcissists fantasize about fame and success and attribute failures to external factors. Interpersonally, narcissists are competitive and seek esteem by strategies like publicly outperforming others and winning admiration (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). From a social point of view, feelings of entitlement are an especially important part of narcissism. Narcissists believe that they deserve special treatment and other benefits, and they are focused on collecting all that they deserve.

Narcissists derive some benefits from their lofty self-views, such as low social anxiety (Emmons, 1984; P. J. Watson & Biderman, 1993) and high self-esteem (R. N. Raskin, Novack, & Hogan, 1991). They enjoy a belief in their own superior intelligence and physical attractiveness, although these flattering views of self do not have much basis in reality (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994). Despite these benefits, the weight of evidence paints narcissism in unattractive colors. In particular, the benefits just cited all pertain to good feelings about the self and are probably the main reasons that people are drawn to become narcissistic. Yet when we look at the interpersonal sphere, we find major drawbacks of narcissism. Here, humility seems a better option.

If people are not preoccupied with maintaining highly positive self-views, they will not lash out at others who threaten or challenge their self-views. Narcissists score high on questionnaire measures of competitiveness (P. J. Watson, Morris, & Miller, 1997–1998), dominance (Emmons, 1984), hostility (P. L. Hart & Joubert, 1996), and anger (McCann & Biaggio, 1989). Laboratory work confirms that narcissists show high levels of aggression, particularly when their sense of superiority is questioned (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998). They appear hypersensitive to threats to their esteem and willing to react with anger at any sign of disrespect. In the worst case, defensively high self-esteem sets the stage for violence (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996).

A sense of psychological entitlement—in which people are preoccupied with their own rights and overestimate the amount that is owed to them—is also associated with aggressive and unforgiving behavior. For example, studies using the Prisoner’s Dilemma Game suggest a negative interpersonal role of

entitlement (cf. R. Axelrod, 1980a, 1980b). This game gives people a series of chances either to cooperate with another player or to defect. Although long-term outcomes are best if both players cooperate, cooperating can also leave a player vulnerable to exploitation. The game creates the temptation to defect in order to take advantage of the other player, assuming that he or she cooperates. Entitled people are more likely than others to defect on the very first turn, to defect frequently during the game, and to respond with aggressive messages when provoked by the other player (Exline et al., 2000). Narcissistic entitlement also predicts antisocial responses in the wake of transgression. Bushman and Baumeister (2002) found that violent criminals scored significantly higher on personal entitlement than did college students. This finding is ironic because incarceration removes rather than bestows entitlements. Narcissistic entitlement has also been associated with less forgiveness (Exline et al., 2000).

In sharp contrast with entitled feelings, humble self-views may curb conflict escalation. In a Prisoner's Dilemma study, participants began by writing about a time when they felt humble, a time when they felt important, or no essay (Exline et al., 2000). They then played the game against an opponent (actually a computer program) who defected on the first turn. Males who had written humble essays waited longer to defect than males who had written important essays or no essay. Content coding suggested that individual interpretations of the word *humility* were critical. The players who waited the longest to defect were those who wrote about a time when they saw themselves from a larger perspective—not an incident in which they felt ashamed, guilty, or foolish.

In the wake of transgression, a willingness to look at one's flaws prompts people to seek and offer forgiveness (Means, Wilson, Sturm, Biron, & Bach, 1990; Sandage, 1999; Sandage, Worthington, Hight, & Berry, 2000). As demonstrated in one study, people induced to feel morally similar (rather than superior) to a perpetrator rated the perpetrator's offense as more forgivable (Exline, Baumeister, Faber, & Holland, 2002). Parallel results have been found in autobiographical recall studies: People are more forgiving to the extent that they can see their own capability for committing an act like the one done to them (Exline, Bushman, Campbell, & Baumeister, 2002). Narcissism, in contrast, is negatively associated with the seeking of forgiveness (Sandage et al., 2000).

To what extent are modest or humble people liked? Despite a stereotype that high self-esteem makes a person more likable, the evidence is more complicated. Positive self-views lead people to think they are more likable, just as they lead them to think they are more attractive and intelligent. And narcissists may initially be viewed as charming (Masterson, 1988). They surround themselves with admirers and try to associate with popular and attractive others (W. K. Campbell, 1999). However, the charms of a narcissist soon wear thin, leaving others with impressions of superficiality, hostility, and arrogance (D. L. Paulus, 1998). Narcissists are also more willing to behave in ways likely to provoke in-

terpersonal conflict, such as cheating on dating partners (W. K. Campbell & Foster, 2002) and taking credit from close others on interdependent tasks (W. K. Campbell, Sedikides, Reeder, & Elliot, 2000).

In terms of self-enhancement more generally, Colvin, Block, and Funder (1995) studied people who overvalued themselves (relative to how others saw them) and found that other people reacted negatively to them even in a first meeting. Individuals who evidenced inflated self-views were self-centered. They interrupted others and showed little interest in what others had to say. These findings also hold in clinical settings: Among youthful psychiatric inpatients, Perez, Pettit, David, Kistner, and Joiner (2001) found that those with very high self-esteem reported the fewest interpersonal problems, but they were the least liked by their fellow patients.

Why is it so easy to dislike those who think too highly of themselves? For one thing, an intense self-focus works against close relationships by precluding empathy, caring, and commitment. Not surprisingly, each of these prosocial qualities is negatively associated with narcissism (W. K. Campbell, 1999; W. K. Campbell & Foster, 2002). A person who overvalues the self may brag, and braggarts are universally disliked (Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986; Leary, Bednarski, Hammon, & Duncan, 1997). An inflated self-view—particularly if it involves feelings of entitlement—will also preclude equitable division of tasks and rewards (Ross & Sicoly, 1979). Narcissists also have difficulty acknowledging or expressing gratitude (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001), another tendency likely to lead to social resentment and rifts.

Humble individuals, in contrast, have fewer needs to impress and dominate others, and they should also be less preoccupied with collecting special benefits for themselves. This may also help explain why in communal cultures, where social networks are quite stable and getting along with a fixed, unchangeable group of people is an important challenge throughout life, egotism is held in disregard, whereas humility is strongly encouraged (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Even in American culture, self-promotion is most common among new acquaintances; in established friendships, modesty becomes more the norm (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995).

Is it possible that the benefits of humility and modesty are entirely interpersonal? Do modest and humble people maintain good relationships by sacrificing their own interests entirely? To the contrary, we believe that a humble approach is likely to carry some potent benefits for the individual, both in terms of emotional well-being and self-regulation. Although some evidence suggests that positive distortions may promote mental health (S. E. Taylor & Brown, 1988) and physical health (S. E. Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower & Gruenewald, 2000), other studies find that positive distortions are indicative of personality pathology, particularly of the narcissistic and antisocial types (cf. Asendorpf & Ostendorf, 1998; Colvin et al., 1995). Individuals who frequently enhance them-

selves may base their self-evaluations on grounds that are fragile (see also Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993). Threats to self-esteem should therefore be common, and frequent negative affect ensues.

A humble self-view may aid in self-regulation attempts (H. M. Weiss & Knight, 1980). Under conditions of ego threat, for example, humility may protect people from taking foolish risks and making poor decisions. When facing threats to self-image, proud people can become preoccupied with maximizing their esteem at any cost. In laboratory settings, for example, people with high self-esteem facing ego threat often set inappropriately risky goals far beyond their capabilities (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993). A humble person, having less reason to defend self-esteem, should thus take a more cautious approach and be less likely to fail.

Humble people should benefit in other ways by being free of self-preoccupation. When individuals strive to maintain a certain image of self, they may find that doing so creates a psychological burden. The load may become so heavy that it prompts a need to escape, sometimes through destructive means such as substance abuse, masochism, eating disorders, or even suicide (Baumeister, 1991). A more humble approach, particularly if accompanied by the ability for self-transcendence, should preclude this need to escape. On a related note, narcissism has been linked with unstable self-esteem (Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998), suggesting that narcissists are likely to spend considerable energy working to maintain their inflated self-images. The humble person, in contrast, should be able to conserve emotional and psychological energy by not having to constantly defend the self-image from threat.

Finally, cross-cultural research suggests that willingness to self-criticize, if moderated, may ultimately help people move toward self-improvement goals (Heine et al., 2001). Personal deficits will be addressed only if we are willing to see that they exist.

■ Development

We propose that factors that promote secure attachment also lay the foundation for humility (cf. Bowlby, 1973; chapter 13). Secure attachment provides a sense of security that can serve as a buffer against the effects of negative feedback. A sense of security by itself should be insufficient to foster humility, however, because a highly secure person might become arrogant if not given realistic feedback. In order to become humble, it seems crucial that a child learn that both positive feedback and negative feedback are worth considering. Such lessons could come from parental modeling of humility, or they might come from humbling feedback. Reality-based feedback from a parent or teacher about one's strengths and weaknesses would probably be especially useful, particularly if conveyed in an atmosphere of caring and respect. Other sources of humbling

feedback might include awe-inspiring experiences, educational approaches that emphasize the limits of human knowledge, or situations in which a person encounters failure or disappointment.

On the flip side, it is easy to think of factors that would work against the development of humility. To give just a few examples, we propose that humility would be unlikely to stem from parenting or educational styles that involve (a) an extreme emphasis on performance, appearance, popularity, or other external sources of self-evaluation, particularly if combined with perfectionist performance standards; (b) inaccurate, excessive praise or criticism; (c) frequent comparison of the child against siblings or peers, especially if this comparison is accompanied by competitive messages; and (d) communicating to the child that he or she is superior or inferior to other people. Such practices would predispose a child to turn to external sources of validation for a sense of security, and they would also encourage the child to make competitive, invidious comparisons.

■ Enabling and Inhibiting Factors

Because identity development is a necessary condition for the presence of humility or modesty, factors that facilitate this process will undoubtedly foster the development of these two virtues, namely, "appearance of attachment, the development of a sense of self, the emergence of independence in infancy, openness to new experiences, experience with decision making, and life review and integration in old age" (Santrock, 1996, pp. 332–333). Democratic parenting facilitates adolescents' identity development; autocratic and permissive parenting does not. Cooper, Baker, Polichar, and Welsh (1992; see also Cooper & Grotevant, 1989) showed that connectedness in family relations facilitates identity formation, whereas Hauser and colleagues (1984) found that enabling behaviors (such as explaining, giving empathy, and accepting) promote identity development more than constraining behaviors (such as judging and devaluing). These factors and other disciplinary and family interaction styles only indirectly foster the development of modesty and humility. Direct influences (both positive and negative) on these virtues remain unexplored to date.

■ Gender, Cross-National, and Cross-Cultural Aspects

A number of studies suggest more modest self-presentation in women than in men (Berg, Stephan, & Dodson, 1981; Heatherington et al., 1998; see Exline & Lobel, 1999, for a discussion). Because of the measurement problems surrounding humility, we are not aware of any data that directly address gender differences in humility. However, women in general have slightly lower self-esteem

than men (Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999), and narcissism also tends to be higher in males than in females (L. Carroll, 1989).

It seems reasonable to predict that both modesty and humility would be more highly valued in communal or collectivist cultures than in those in which independence and individualism are prized. For example, a substantial body of research suggests that modesty is assigned higher value in Japanese culture, which is collectivist, than in American culture, which is individualist (Heine et al., 1999, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Finally, cross-cultural research suggests that willingness to self-criticize, if moderated, may ultimately help people move toward self-improvement goals (e.g., Heine et al., 2001). Personal deficits will be addressed only if we are willing to see that they exist. For example, empirical data suggest that success in “12-step” recovery programs for addictions may be especially difficult for narcissists, as narcissists find it difficult to acknowledge their own limitations (K. E. Hart & Huggett, 2003; Kurtz & Ketcham, 1992).

■ Deliberate Interventions

Given the potential benefits of humility and modesty, we must ask whether individuals can cultivate these attributes. In order for individuals to become more humble or modest, they need to override tendencies to inflate their self-images. A large body of work in social cognition suggests the existence of a pervasive drive to be better and to feel better than average (S. E. Taylor & Brown, 1988). The research focus on biases, illusions, and inaccuracies creates a rather pessimistic outlook (despite the claim that cognitive illusions are healthy). However, some evidence suggests that self-serving distortions may not be quite as common as some psychologists propose. The ostensibly high prevalence of egocentric distortions reported in the literature is partly a consequence of how these distortions are measured (Krueger, 1998a; Krueger & Funder, in press). A significant difference between self-related and other-related judgments, however small it might be, is usually taken to support the view that people, in general, are biased. Yet, by definition, many people are better than average on the dimensions of interest in these studies, meaning that not everyone with a positive self-image is engaging in self-enhancement. Once we can distinguish those who are distorting the facts from those who are seeing themselves clearly, the story of self-enhancement will become a more accurate (and more humble) one (Krueger & Mueller, 2002).

If self-enhancement is understood as a motivated and partially controllable strategy, and not as a cognitive illusion, humility seems to be within reach for most. In one study, self-enhancement was assessed by two independent measures (Krueger, 1998b). The first measure was the traditional difference between self-descriptions and descriptions of most other people. The second measure was the partial correlation (computed for each participant) between ratings of

trait descriptiveness and ratings of perceived trait desirability while the group averages of these desirability ratings (i.e., social desirability) were controlled. On both measures, most participants self-enhanced. However, there was little evidence for self-enhancement among participants in a second group that was asked to estimate the social desirability of each trait (i.e., the average desirability rating obtained from the group). These participants were able to ignore their idiosyncratic definitions of trait desirability. These findings suggest that self-enhancement can be viewed as a controllable bias rather than a cognitive illusion. A simple request for a change in perspective may help to reduce such distortions. If this is true, then there is some hope that people can learn to override their tendencies to self-enhance. Another set of findings from J. Katz and Joiner (2002) is also encouraging. Across three studies, the authors found that when people received feedback about themselves from others (dating partners and roommates), they preferred accurate feedback—even when this information was relatively negative. Thus, in the service of accuracy, people do seem willing to accept some negative feedback.

Religiousness similarly fosters humility by encouraging self-transcendence. Eastern traditions such as Zen Buddhism and Taoism associate humility with a process of letting go of the self while simultaneously connecting with a greater reality (Watts, 1960). In monotheistic traditions such as Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, humility is often associated with submission before God (Fromm, 1941; Morgan, 2001; Murray, 2001). Yet simply feeling small or dependent might not be sufficient to lead to the nondefensive stance that we associate with humility. In fact, a constant sense of being lowered might lead some individuals to a sense of shame or insignificance. In order for religions to promote humility as we have defined it, they need to encourage people to see themselves not only as small but also as valuable and safe.

The basic research just cited offers some hope for the cultivation of humility and modesty. Nonetheless, we are not aware of formal interventions specifically designed to increase these strengths. As mentioned earlier, self-help groups that follow a 12-step model, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, might be effective in fostering humility (Kurtz & Ketcham, 1992). Similarly, character development programs, spiritual disciplines, and psychotherapeutic interventions could also be effective in increasing humility. However, empirical tests in any of these areas are lacking.

Although empirical data are sparse, existing theory and research do suggest some strategies that might facilitate humility-related goals such as accuracy, self-transcendence, and a willingness to lower one's self-evaluation in a specific area. To foster accurate self-evaluation, for example, it would seem crucial to provide people with accurate feedback about both their strengths and their limitations, preferably from an early age. Techniques from the literature on awe (chapter 23) could be used to foster self-transcendent ability. Christian devotional literature suggests a number of behavioral techniques that could

work against self-enhancement, ranging from doing menial chores to washing another person's feet (done ceremonially in some churches). Seeking forgiveness or keeping a gratitude journal might also be humbling, as each of these behaviors might make people more aware of their indebtedness to others. The development of close relationships might also facilitate greater humility and modesty. For example, some research suggests that the self-serving bias is reduced or eliminated in the context of friendships (W. K. Campbell et al., 2000). Modest self-presentations are also more likely between friends than between strangers (Tice et al., 1995).

Any or all of these interventions might increase modesty or humility, although direct empirical tests are needed. Yet we strongly suspect that these techniques, by themselves, will be insufficient to induce humble states of mind—much less increases in humility as a trait—unless they lead to a lifestyle change. We hasten to add that this conclusion probably holds for attempts to encourage any character strength, although it is particularly obvious in the case of humility.

Another potential problem is that if people receive feedback that is discrepant or emotionally painful to accept, they might simply not internalize it. Such problems could occur even when feedback is positive, if such information is discrepant with a negative or depressive self-view (Swann, 1997).

Any of the preceding approaches could backfire if they cause a person to feel helpless, shamed, or insignificant—feelings that could, in turn, cause negative emotion or reactance. People often defend against threat by self-enhancing or behaving aggressively. It is easy to imagine that something similar might occur with behavioral “lowering” techniques. To use the examples just cited, if someone were induced to clean toilets or to wash another person's feet in the service of humility, he or she might resist. Worse, such exercises might lead to a sense of degradation or shame that would work against the ultimate goal of increased humility. In short, successful humility inductions might require a delicate balance: They need to prompt a person to reduce self-focus or gain a new perspective on the self without feeling that the self has been obliterated or damaged.

As noted, we believe that people will be more willing and able to cultivate humility if they have a sense of security or value not entirely dependent on self-evaluative assessments. We therefore propose that any technique, resource, or relationship that would provide a person with alternate means of feeling safe—besides their own self-evaluation—would facilitate humility. A sense of safety could come from religion, from secure attachments to parents or close others, or from significant others who communicate unconditional positive regard (C. R. Rogers, 1961). It might also prove helpful for people to observe role models who are able and willing to accept both positive and negative information about themselves without overreacting. Regardless of the means used, the goal would be to enable the individual to feel safe enough to nondefensively acknowledge both strengths and limitations.

■ What Is Not Known?

Here are some of the important questions about modesty and humility not yet answered by research:

- Is it possible to create a measure that effectively differentiates between humility and modesty?
- Do modesty and humility have more positive manifestations than the simple absence of arrogance, boasting, and entitlement?
- How do modesty and humility vary across the life span? Because very young children are necessarily egocentric, at what age can we expect these strengths to appear, and relatedly, at what age would deliberate interventions to encourage modesty and humility have any effect?
- How do modesty and humility manifest themselves across sociodemographic contrasts in the United States and other countries: for example, gender, cohort, ethnicity, and religion?
- Does everyone have a potential to develop these strengths? Do actions motivated by these virtues come more easily for some individuals than for others?
- What types of intervention programs might be developed to foster the development of modesty and humility? Can we ensure that these programs are truly fostering the development of the internal conception of the world held by those who are truly humble, or would they only serve to minimize negative self-presentation (false modesty)?

■ Must-Read Articles and Books

- Baumeister, R. F., Smart, L., & Boden, J. M. (1996). Relation of threatened egotism to violence and aggression: The dark side of high self-esteem. *Psychological Review*, 103, 5–33.
- Casey, M. (2001). *A guide to living in the truth: Saint Benedict's teaching on humility*. Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph.
- Murray, A. (2001). *Humility: The journey toward holiness*. Bloomington, MN: Bethany House.
- Richards, N. (1992). *Humility*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Tangney, J. (2000). Humility: Theoretical perspectives, empirical findings and directions for future research. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 19, 70–82.
- Tangney, J. P. (2002). Humility. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 411–419). New York: Oxford University Press.