

The Elephant in the Room: Examining the Connections between Humility and Social Status

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ABSTRACT

Humility is most frequently discussed as a socially-valuable trait, and being perceived as humble is generally considered beneficial. Although there has been extensive scholarship expounding the concept of humility, previous work has yet to fully examine the role(s) of social status and stratification in regards to the perception of others' humility and being humble. In this sense, there is an elephant in the room that must be acknowledged in order to advance humility theory. In this paper, we provide brief overviews of humility, social status and stratification, and utilize expectation states theory as a flashlight to explore the potential connections between humility and social status from a more sociological perspective. We then showcase where the "elephant" may be hiding in the humility literature (focusing specifically on race and gender), attempting to shed light on potential next steps for future research.

1. Introduction

Humility is an individual-level trait that is exhibited in group contexts, and, in turn, is something that is perceived and evaluated by others (Davis et al. 2012). Despite the interactional qualities nested within the humility concept, humility scholarship has yet to fully examine the potential impact and role of certain social characteristics in regards to if, when, how, why, and to what extent some individuals may be perceived as being more or less humble (i.e., having more or less humility). This is especially true regarding the potential interaction effects of race and gender and humility. In this sense, social status (and in turn social stratification) is an elephant in the room of humility. Exploring the potential interplays between social status, specifically race and gender², and humility will not only advance humility theory but also provide a better understanding of how particular socially-valued traits, such as humility, *may or may not* be "valuable" for all.

2. Brief Background on Humility

Thus far, the conceptualization, theory development, and application of humility have been primarily conducted through the disciplines of philosophy, theology, and psychology, and newer fields such as positive psychology and leadership science have also expanded the humility landscape (Alfano, Lynch, & Tanesini, 2020; Wothington, Davis, & Hook 2017; Tangney 2000; Sousa & Van Dierendonck, 2017). Prominent scholars within these fields have provided historical explorations of humility, detailed accounts of its conceptual and theoretical evolution, evaluations of contemporary measurement techniques, as well as discussions outlining similarity and differences to related concepts (i.e., modesty, empathy, gratitude, etc.), and the development of conceptual-cousins such as intellectual humility, cultural humility, and relational humility (see: Snow 2020; Davis, Wothington,

² Within this paper, given the previous uncharted territory of exploring social status and humility, we focus primary on Black/white and female/male comparisons in regards to race and gender (respectively) as they relate to humility. We believe it is important for future work to explore beyond these binary frameworks.

and Hook, 2010), Van Toneren et al., 2019; Tervalon and Murray-García, 1998; Wright et al. 2016, among others). Regarding a cohesive conceptualization of humility, Tangney (2000) provides a widely accepted broad overview of the key elements of humility that include: the *accurate* assessment of one's abilities and achievements as well as the acknowledgement of one's limitations and gaps in knowledge. Furthermore, being humble involves a relatively low self-focus, appreciation of others' contributions, and recognition that one is but a part of a larger universe (Tangney, 2000). Similarly, Peterson & Seligman (2004) conceptualize humility as a process of self-evaluation that involves a non-defensive willingness to see oneself accurately (in regards to strengths and weakness) and the ability to transcend beyond self-focus and understand or view oneself from a broader perspective.

Although there is general agreement among contemporary scholars that humility is a socially valuable attribute and that being perceived by others as having humility and being humble is beneficial (Snow, 1995; Weidman, Cheng, & Tracy, 2018; Worthington & Allison, 2018), there is an apparent darker side to humility as well. For example, Wright et al. (2018) present research that highlights humility's connection with self-abasement and low self-opinion. Similarly, Tangney (2000) notes that public understandings of humility may also include negative self-views, a sense of worthlessness or incompetence, and a lack of self-confidence. Moreover, Exline and Geyer (2003) state that there may be potential social costs associated with humility, as people may relate humility with meekness, harsh self-criticism, failure experiences, or a lack of assertiveness. Taken together, this suggests that there is a conceptual duality for humility. Given this juxtaposition, one might wonder whether humility and being perceived as humble may be socially beneficial for some and socially deleterious to/for others.

Most examinations of humility have been relatively fixed at the micro, individual-level, primarily focused on dissecting humility as a trait and virtue. Left unexplored, however, is the role of humility at a more meso-, societal-level and in relation to social stratification, societal processes, practices, norms and expectations. Moreover, scholars have yet to unpack how humility may interact with constructs that carry social "value" and status, such as race and gender. In fact, social status has apparently sat as the elephant in humility's room, in that humility scholars typically utilize predominantly white study samples, explore race and/or gender merely as control variables, and/or simply neglect to explicitly state the role of race and/or gender in regards to humility (Wright et al., 2018; Exline & Hill 2012; Kruse et al. 2014; Krause 2010; 2012; Schein, 2013; Davis et al., 2011; Davis et al., 2012; Tangney, 2000; Snow, 1995, 2000). In turn, there has been little to no in-depth excavation of whether and how humility (and the notion of being humble) may function in different capacities and contexts for those within high and low social strata – specifically in regards to race and gender.

The sociological perspective, which has been relatively absent from the advances in humility theory, may offer valuable insights into the various nuances of humility at the societal-level, especially regarding the interplays of humility and facets of social stratification. To remedy this gap in the humility literature (and to further spotlight the "elephant"), we provide a general overview of social status and social stratification, paying special attention to the role of privilege. We then utilize expectation states theory (EST) to discuss how humility may, despite its apparent advantageous qualities, also serve as an implicit tool of social oppression through its secondary, more deleterious conceptualization – suppressing individuals within lower social strata positions through norms and expectations surrounding the shared understandings of humility.

3. Identifying the Elephant: Social Status, Social Stratification, and Expectation States Theory

Social status, according to Max Weber, is a subjective dimension consisting of how much esteem others accord to an individual (Cox, 1950). Status is derived from social judgements about a person's lifestyle, what they consume, their level of education and occupational prestige. Essentially, status assigns "worth" to different categories of people based on shared cultural beliefs or stereotypes. The perpetual practice of social stratification divides groups of people into hierarchies based upon particular status characteristics (class, race, gender, ethnicity, age, etc.) – where some groups are deemed to have more "social value"/ "worth" based upon the status of those characteristics. Where one falls in the social stratification system—that is, the hierarchical ladder of social status—determines access to resources (various forms of capital), opportunities and, in turn, power – the ability to realize one's will even against the resistance of others (Thye, Willer, & Markovsky, 2006; Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2020). The "value" of status characteristics is socially constructed (i.e., "made up" by members of society – most often by those in power) and is exercised and reaffirmed through various practices, policies, and norms associated with institutions such as education, employment, the criminal justice system, housing, healthcare (among others), but also in nuances nested within day-to-day interactions (Ridgeway, 1991; Berard, 2008; Becker & Sibley, 2015).

3.1 Social Status and the Role of Privilege

Within contemporary Western society, white men are afforded higher social status than other racial, ethnic, or gender categories (stemming from imperialism, colonialism, slavery, and culturally embedded patriarchal practices), and this "value" is protected through institutionalized policies and practices, as well as internalized social norms and expectations through socialization processes and mechanisms. Moreover, white male status yields accompanying privilege, "a system of benefits, advantages, and opportunities experienced by white persons in our society simply because of their skin color" (Donnelly et al. 2005, pg. 6). This

white male privilege has also been described by McIntosh (1989, pg. 10) as "...an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious."

Whereas literature has regularly highlighted the privilege and social affordances associated with the social statuses of white and male, extensive research has also shown that People of Color and women consistently and persistently encounter significant social barriers and hurdles, including institutional racism, sexism, applied prejudice, and implicit and explicit discrimination. They also experience significant micro-aggressions that function to suppress and oppress and keep these groups of individuals in the "low" status position, thwart upward social mobility (and access to viable resources and opportunities) and the acquisition of positions of power and authority (Eglitis, Chambliss, & Wortmann, 2021; Conley, 2021).

In the persistent struggle for resources, those in power will enact policies and practices that protect their resources – practices and policies that are likely to coincidentally oppress those looking to gain access to social resources. These protective policies and practices can be explicit, such as school segregation and voter suppression, and they can be implicit such as underlying racial and/or gender biases exercised in hiring procedures, as well as assumptions and norms that are exercised in everyday interactions such as how individuals are expected to behave (Ritzer & Murphy, 2019; Giddens, et al. 2021).

3.2 Expectation States Theory

Expectation states theory (EST) examines how key social categories (e.g., race, gender) are linked to status beliefs (e.g., men are more competent, whites are more trustworthy) and looks at how those status beliefs organize social interaction in a way to replicate and maintain stratification and hierarchical disparities (Ridgeway, 2001). Status, at its core, is relational and thereby reiterated and reaffirmed through interactions, and status characteristics are central in shaping how individuals interpret and relate to each other (Cohen & Zhou, 1991).

According to EST, status is important to interactions and the maintenance of social inequalities due to its connection to performance expectations – the way we expect individuals to "perform" in social interactions based on stereotypic assumptions of their status (Ridgeway, 2001). Low-status individuals (women, People of Color) are expected to perform attributes and traits that are of low social value, such as docility, incompetence, emotionality, etc. Similarly, we expect high-status individuals (whites, males) to perform highly socially valuable traits such as assertiveness and self-confidence.

These expectations are "learned" and reinforced through various socialization processes and mechanisms that are embedded in our social institutions; in turn, they reflect social norms or stereotypical behaviors and attributes regarding what is considered socially acceptable behavior for that particular social group. Put simply, these status-based expectations are so engrained in our perceptions of "others" (typically those dissimilar from us) that we are fairly unaware that we even bring them "to the table" in our daily interactions – hence, why they are often referred to as implicit biases (Dovidio, Adams, & Penner, 2018).

Performing as socially expected allows social interaction to progress with relative ease. Failure to perform as expected, however, especially for low-status individuals, may lead to accompanying social sanctions such as alienation, negative connotations, and the withholding of certain informational, tangible or even socio-emotional resources (Horne, 2004).

4. The Elephant is Hiding in Plain Sight: Arenas Informally Connecting Humility and Social Status

Much like assertiveness, competence, and emotionality, humility is an individual-level trait that is evaluated by others (Peters, Rowatt, and Johnson, 2011; Van Toneren et al., 2019). Therefore, there are shared understandings of what does and does not constitute humility and being humble, as well as expectations regarding *who* should be humble and *when* individuals should exhibit humility. We argue that these expectations surrounding humility, much like those surrounding assertiveness and competence, are dictated by social status.

This assertion is not necessarily new to the humility dialogue, but as noted above, explicit connections between humility and social status have been sparse in previous literature, as scholars have yet to fully expound on this interaction. In other words, the elephant is hiding in plain sight. For example, Bloomfield (2017: pg. 36) states, "Humility can be a tool of moral improvement, but it can also be an instrument of subjugation, a means of social control to maintain an unjust status quo." Yet Bloomfield offers no discussion on social status *explicitly*. Moreover, in his work *Humble Inquiry*, Schein (2013: pg. 11) defines humility as "...granting someone else higher status than one claims for oneself" and bases his three types of humility (Basic, Optional, and Here-and-Now) on the tenets of ascribed and achieved status. He states:

In traditional societies where status is ascribed by birth or social position, humility is not a choice but a condition. In most cultures, the 'upper class' is granted an intrinsic respect based on the status one is born into...all cultures dictate the minimum amount of respect required, or expected politeness and acknowledgement that adults owe each other.

Although Schein acknowledges the connection between ascribed status and humility, he neglects to explicitly highlight the roles of status-based characteristics like race and gender as they relate to humility, focusing primarily on the broad notions of class

and the subordinate-superordinate dynamic. However, Schein's notion that status may dictate humility as a *condition* rather than a *choice* is a useful frame to examine how race and gender affect social understandings of and social expectations regarding humility and being humble. In the sections that follow, we dissect classic and contemporary literature related specifically to race and gender and humility to not only spotlight where the elephant could be hiding in plain sight but also suggest particular areas for further research.

4.1 The Connections between Race and Humility

Touting their study as the "first step in understanding links between race/ethnicity and humility", Webster et al. (2017: pg. 66) suggest that the higher rates of humility found among the People of Color in their sample (as compared to whites) could be the result of "...coping mechanism in the face of stress that comes with unfair treatment because of racial/ethnic affiliations." Although offering religious affiliation as an alternative explanation, fundamentally, Webster et al. argue that People of Color may be more humble as a result of "resilience" in the face of social, institutional, and physical oppression they have experienced. We find this interpretation to be short-sighted and flawed, as it not only suggests that there are social and interpersonal benefits (e.g., becoming resilient or humble) to experiencing racism, discrimination, and prejudice, but also neglects to connect how humility may be *forced through* social oppression (as opposed to being a by-product of oppression, as they suggest).

Both W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) and Fredrick Douglass (1892) note how trait humility was encouraged by slave owners amongst the enslaved to temper ambition, confidence and to promote meekness and docility – explicitly connecting status and humility. In this sense, humility is not only a *condition* dictated by status, but a cage purposely promoted as a valuable virtue to stymie social mobility and perpetuate status hierarchies and power imbalances.

Similarly, Paine et al. (2017, pg. 286) asserts that positive psychology consistently tends to define socially "valuable" traits (e.g., humility) from a Eurocentric, Western white cultural context,

Humility, perhaps more than any other virtue, has the potential to be distorted and wielded as a tool to discourage subordinated populations from fighting for liberation and self-determination. While Black cultural expressions may not contradict the *definition* of humility utilized by positive psychologists (although this is an open question), the way in which humility is *interpreted* or *assessed* according to Eurocentric cultural norms may well be challenged as problematic and/or exclusionary.

Focusing on active Black resistance to racial oppression in the US and the conceptualization and operationalization of humility perpetuated by positive psychology (specifically, Peterson & Seligman 2004), Paine et al. (2017) highlights a key paradox regarding the role of humility and social status –namely, that expressions of healthy affirmations, self-assertion, or self-confidence by Black individuals can "...be judged as arrogance (i.e., lack of humility) by people who have no personal experience being subject to racism"(pg. 287).

From this position, we expand upon Paine et al. using the tenets of EST and argue that the status of an individual's particular social category such as race dictates, or at least strongly influences, how that individual's degree of humility is perceived and assessed in their everyday interactions, especially in status-discordant interactions (i.e., high status - low status interactions). Self-assertiveness and self-confidence are normative in Western white male culture, are normative in whiteness and in male-ness, but can be perceived negatively and as *anti*-humility if performed by People of Color in a variety of social contexts because of the status of the performer. From this perspective, humility is an assumed and expected default trait (i.e., socially determined and socially enforced) for those in lower social status positions primarily because of their lower status, particularly when interacting with individuals with high ascribed social status –especially in white, male dominated society. In this sense, humility is not a choice for People of Color but a condition. Moreover, although this particular literature does not necessarily suggest that the negative social connotations of humility are activated in regards to race, there is a challenge to what humility "looks like" in regards to race— in that it looks different for white people than it does for People of Color. There are different rules for humility when it comes to race.

Noted above, Paine et al. (2017) argue that the humility concept asserted primarily by the positive psychology scholarship, is steeped in Western white culture and context, and that it does not account for the persistent systemic and interpersonal oppression experienced by People of Color. The authors highlight that because of this embedded conceptualization and operationalization of humility, the psychological and interpersonal resources engaged by People of Color in fighting against and self-protecting through that oppression would be perceived and assessed as anti-humility, lending to the perception that People of Color lack humility. This position is also reflected in DiAngelo's (2011; 2018) argument that whiteness is the cultural norm and the universal reference. Therefore, from this standpoint, and in regards to humility, what is and what is not "humility" comes from a white patriarchal perspective by default – leaving much to be known about the various interplays between humility and race.

In short, in regards to race, humility is a socially determined and socially enforced trait that, through related embedded norms and expectations, implicitly perpetuates social status hierarchies.

4.2 The Connections between Gender and Humility

The notion of humility as a condition (and not a choice) can also be applied to the interplay between gender and humility. Research regarding gender and humility goes beyond merely whether men or women are more humble and highlights the *expectations of others* regarding gender and humility. Examining, in-part, demographic variations in self-reports of humility, Rowatt et al. (2006), Peters et al. (2011), Exline (2012), Webster et al. (2017), found no connection between gender and self-reported humility. However, Peters et al. (2011) did find that peers reported women *to be more humble* than men. Moreover, in their study on how humility may impact leadership assessment in the military, Swain and Korenman (2018) found that military men benefitted more from expressing humility than their female counterparts. Swain and Korenman (2018) suggest that because men are less likely to express humility (compared to women), when they do express it they are perceived as more confident and in turn rewarded in terms of how their leadership is assessed.

Examining humility and male and female leadership behaviors more broadly, Owens and Heckman (2012) found that female leaders in their study reported a double bind when trying to meet gender role expectations related to humility and leader role expectations, and they therefore operated in a narrower range of acceptability, "...feeling pressure to be a strong leader on the one hand and a humble female on the other" (pg. 796). Their study shows that whereas non-humble men were more likely to be viewed as strong, confident, and courageous, non-humble females were viewed as overcompensating and overall more negative. Furthermore, and similar to the Swain and Korenman study, the findings from Owens and Heckman (2012) suggest that when men are perceived as being humble they are less likely than women to be socially penalized and instead are more likely to be socially rewarded. In fact, interview data from both men and women in their study indicated that there is a consistent tendency for females to behave more humbly and in turn have their competence questioned when doing so – whereas males who express humility are likely to be admired.

These studies highlight the duality of humility in relation to gender. Women are not only expected to be more humble, but when they do not perform humility as expected, there are *social sanctions*. On the other hand, because men are not expected to perform humility (i.e., being humble is a choice, rather than a condition)– when they do, the beneficial social qualities of humility are activated, and in turn, men are *socially rewarded*. Therefore, whereas humility has a socially anchoring effect for women in that it is a persistent expectation and women are punished for not performing humility, it can be viewed as yet another tool in the privilege knapsack for men.

In short, in regards to gender, humility is a socially determined and socially enforced trait that through related embedded norms and expectations implicitly perpetuates social status hierarchies.

4.3 Humility's Conceptual Cousins

Subfields that may offer insight into potential connections between humility and social status (i.e., other areas where the elephant is hiding) are those that explore the conceptual cousins of humility – specifically the literature on relational humility, racial humility, and culturally humility.

According to Davis et al. (2011: pg. 226) relational humility is, "...an observer's judgement that a target person a.) is interpersonally other-oriented rather than self-focused, marked by a lack of superiority; and b.) has an accurate view of self – not too inflated or too low." With relational humility, Davis et al. (2010; 2011; 2012) attempt to shift the focus from the humility of the individual from that individual's perspective, to humility as a subjective personality judgement that is assessed by interaction partners. Their research findings support this theoretical shift, their work spotlights particular hierarchical roles (e.g., parent-child, manager-subordinate, teacher-student), and their samples include women and People of Color. Nonetheless, the authors use race and gender merely as control variables offering no discussion or insight into how humility is/was "judged" within status concordant or discordant pairs in regards to race and gender (Davis et al. 2011; 2012).

Although not offering a formal definition, DiAngelo (2018) presents the concept of racial humility as the antithesis to the notion of racial arrogance, specifically among whites. In this sense, racial humility might be broadly understood as the ability to recognize that whiteness has been the default race of Western sociocultural systems and structures but is not the absolute representation of everyone—that is, there are many other valid perspectives from people across races that need to be acknowledged and represented.

The discourse on cultural humility is situated almost entirely within the health fields, specifically medicine, nursing, clinical psychology, and clinical social work. Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998) propose the notion of cultural humility as a more suitable goal within health professions education (specifically medical education) as opposed to cultural competence. According to the authors, cultural humility, "...incorporates a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique, to redressing the

power imbalances in the patient-physician dynamic, and to developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic clinical and advocacy partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations” (pg. 123). In their conceptual analysis of cultural humility, Foronda et al. (2016) suggest that cultural humility is a life-long process that consists of the cultivation of the following attributes: openness, self-awareness, egoless, supportive interactions, and self-reflection and critique.

Although scholars working specifically with the racial humility and cultural humility concepts are promoting more inclusive and socially-aware approaches to understanding race, ethnicity, and culture at the institutional and interactional levels, there is no explicit discussion in either of these arenas regarding the interplays between humility and race and gender in regards to and/or embedded social norms and expectations of who *should be* humble. Within these dialogues, humility is portrayed as a vehicle to foster individual and group-level awareness and reflection.

Moreover, regarding relational humility, the focus of the scholarship seems to be oriented toward advancing novel conceptualizations and measurement strategies, rather than exploring a more socially-attuned approach to understanding humility.

Although important, the discourse regarding relational humility, racial humility, and cultural humility does not spotlight how social characteristics may impact how one’s humility is evaluated by others and/or the overarching cultural norms and social expectations associated with humility specifically in regards to one’s race or gender. Rather, scholars are simply expanding the prominent understanding of humility into new conceptual arenas.

5. The Need for Future Research: Examining the Elephant

Having explicitly acknowledged the elephant and noted its current places of hiding, it is essential for future work in this field to explore the various interplays between humility and race and gender – to examine the concept of humility more closely from a meso-level perspective and with a sociological lens. We need to move beyond using race and gender merely as control variables and viewing the notion of “status” simply as work-related superior-subordinate roles.

Similar to Exline and Geyer’s (2004) work on public perspectives of/on humility, a future interview-based or focus group study on this topic could utilize a more representative sample, perhaps even purposely oversampling People of Color and engaging participants from various age ranges. Such a study may provide further insights into how humility is not only perceived or experienced as a trait, but the various nuances of humility as a societal-level concept.

Furthermore, similar approaches could explore the if/when/how of humility, including how the norms and expectations surrounding humility are “learned” and how they are often reinforced. Funding agencies should strongly encourage and support autoethnographic and narrative-based approaches to presenting how humility, “being humble,” and the vulnerability associated with humility is experienced and purposely amplify voices that have been typically left out of the humility discourse (especially women and People of Color).

Vignette and/or survey-based studies could be designed to examine humility-based expectations related to characters of differing genders and races. Moreover, to further test the assertions presented in this particular paper, experimental studies could be designed using the Relational Humility Scale (Davis et al. 2011) to purposely and explicitly assess the judgement of humility by interaction partners in situations where the pairs are status concordant and discordant.

6. Conclusion

Although scholars have hinted at a dark side of humility, the literature consistently highlights the social benefits of having humility and the perception of being humble. Yet, the dearth of research on the potential impact and interplay of social status and humility suggests there is an elephant in the room. Within this paper, we have put a spotlight on that elephant (social status and stratification), and provided overviews of key sociological concepts, processes, and theory that lend insights into the connections between social status, social stratification, and humility. Moreover, we outlined key arenas in which the elephant has been “seen” hiding – existing literature that implicitly notes connections between social status and humility – thereby identifying grounds for potential next steps. It is essential that future research explore how and to what extent humility is explicitly and implicitly utilized as a tool to oppress and reaffirm— and even promote— social status hierarchies and stereotypes, and we have outlined new and dynamic approaches to examine these issues.

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