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Citation

Leader humility in Singapore

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A B S T R A C T

The theoretical development and empirical testing of the effects of humility in the organizational sciences is surprisingly rare. This is especially pronounced in the study of leadership in Asian contexts. To address this we employ a qualitative approach to examine the conceptualization of leader humility in Singapore and assess whether this conceptualization differs from other emerging conceptualizations of leader humility. In Study 1, using semi-structured interviews of 25 Singaporeans, we identified nine major dimensions of humble leader behaviors and explored our participants' beliefs about culturally-based differences in leader humility. In Study 2 ($N = 307$), we generalized our findings to a broader sample and explored how the nine dimensions fit with existing taxonomies. In addition to replicating all of the Western conceptual dimensions of humility, we identified five unique dimensions of behaviors indicative of leader humility in Singapore.

Leader humility is believed to be one of the key determinants of leader effectiveness. Indeed, most newly derived leadership theories include humility as a defining feature of an effective leader (e.g., servant leadership, level-five leadership; Owens & Hekman, 2012). Despite humility's prominence in newer leadership theories, and despite widespread belief that leader humility affects a range of employee and organizational outcomes (Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005; Owens, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013; Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004; Weick, 2001), empirical studies of humility in leadership are extremely rare. The scarcity of research on leader humility is likely due, in part, to a lack of consensus regarding humility's conceptualization. For example, humility has been used synonymously with honesty, modesty, empathy, low self-esteem, and integrity (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Lee & Ashton, 2008; Tangney, 2000a; Weiss & Knight, 1980) despite the fact that it is distinct from each of these (Exline, Campbell, Baumeister, Joiner, & Krueger, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Ryan, 1983; Tangney, 2000a). Adding to this lack of clarity, humility has also been defined as a personality trait, a value, an orientation, and a virtue (Owens et al., 2013). Recent research by Owens et al.

(2013) attempts to more clearly define leader humility, but questions remain about whether their conceptualization captures the full construct of humility and whether it generalizes to a non-Western context. Given the centrality of humility to some Asian conceptualizations of leadership (e.g.,ethocracy, or "ruling by ethical values", Cheung & Chan, 2005, p. 47), it is quite possible that humility may be conceptualized differently in an Asian context. As such, we designed two studies to investigate how leader humility is conceptualized in Singapore and whether this conceptualization differs from existing Western views of humility.

We contribute to the literature on humility in general, and leader humility specifically, in several ways. First, we review existing definitions of humility and discuss how humility is distinguished from other related constructs to better explicate its position in the nomological network. Second, we discuss the importance of leader humility and integrate the limited empirical research on it. Third, we conduct two studies that conceptualize leader humility in a Singaporean context and assess the cross-cultural generalizability of this Singaporean-based conceptualization.

Definitions of humility

Despite some recent attention to humility in the scientific literature there remains a lack of consensus regarding what humility is and is not. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary defines humility as the "quality of having a modest or low view of one's importance" and it is considered synonymous with "having a feeling of insignificance, inferiority, subservience, lowliness" (www.dictionary.com). While some research embraces this definition (e.g., examining how humility is related to low self-esteem; Knight & Nadel, 1986), more recent perspectives on humility have shifted to treating humility as something desirable rather than as a flaw.

From this perspective, humility is conceptualized as a willingness to try to accurately assess oneself (Tangney, 2000a,b) and an awareness of the fact that no one is perfect (Clark, 1992; Templeton, 1997). Humble people are viewed as being more open-minded, willing to admit mistakes, and willing to learn from those mistakes (Hwang, 1982). As such, humility is not the devaluing of one's own strengths and accomplishments, but rather the accurate recognition of the strengths and accomplishments of oneself and of others (Means, Wilson, Sturm, Biron, & Bach, 1990).

This more positive view of humility is gaining traction in the literature. For example, other work in the broader psychological literature has proposed a two dimensional structure of "empathy for" and "kindness to" other people (Means et al., 1990). Similarly, Tangney (2000a) reviewed the philosophical, theological, and psychological literatures and identified six positive aspects of humility: 1) viewing oneself accurately, 2) willingness to admit mistakes and accept weaknesses, 3) receptiveness to new ideas, feedback, 4) awareness of one's abilities and accomplishment, 5) transcendence (e.g., being aware that you are a part of something greater), and 6) valuing the different ways people and things contribute to our world. Nevertheless, despite these early proposals, with few exceptions humility remains a relatively new, poorly understood, and often neglected construct in organizational research. Only recently has research on the conceptualization of leader humility beginning to emerge.

The first comprehensive, empirically-based conceptualization of leader humility was proposed by Owens and Hekman (2012). To develop their definition of leader humility, they conducted 55 qualitative interviews with managers from a variety of levels and occupations. They specifically focused on "expressed humility" or observable behaviors that respondents defined as humble. Based on their interviews, they defined expressed leader humility as a composition of three factors: 1) admitting mistakes and limitations, 2) modeling teachability, and 3) spotlighting follower strengths and contributions. In a follow up study, using a sample of 164 undergraduate business students, Owens et al. (2013) demonstrated that their measure of expressed humility was related to but distinct from modesty ($r = .62$), core self-evaluations ($r = .34$), and the honesty–humility dimension of the HEXACO model ($r = .55$) (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Lee & Ashton, 2008). Building on this conceptualization, Ou et al. (2014) recently used a mixed deductive/inductive approach to identify three additional dimensions of humility: low self-focus, self-transcendent pursuit, and transcendent self-concept. These dimensions include cognitive and motivational components not originally included in Owens et al. (2013) expressed behavioral scale.

Aside from efforts to describe what humility is, work is also ongoing to describe what humility is not (Tangney, 2000a). Consistent with more positive definitions of humility, consensus seems to be emerging that humility is not the same as low self-esteem or the devaluation of one's accomplishments or abilities (Ryan, 1983). Humility also is assumed to be related to, but different from modesty, narcissism, (Tangney, 2000a) and honesty (Ashton, Lee, & Goldberg, 2004). While modesty may be related to the "accurate view of the self" dimension of humility, it does not tap many of the other dimensions such as teachability or an appreciation of others' strengths (Tangney, 2000a). As such, modesty may represent a component of humility, but it does not capture the whole construct (Tangney, 2000a). Similarly, narcissism has been described as the closest negatively-valenced correlate of humility (Tangney, 2000a). However, as Morris et al. (2005) note, "The absence of narcissism does not necessarily imply self-awareness. At best, the absence of narcissism is a necessary but incomplete condition for humility" (p. 1335). Finally, while honesty with oneself may be associated with some prosocial characteristics related to the dimensions of humility, it has been argued (and demonstrated) that it too falls short of capturing the richness of the broader construct (Owens et al., 2013). Humility then, while overlapping with each of these constructs, still occupies a unique space in the nomological network. We contribute to this existing literature by assessing the generalizability and appropriateness of these current conceptualizations in an Asian culture (Singapore). Before presenting our two studies, we briefly review the limited existing theoretical arguments and empirical evidence regarding leader humility's relations to important follower, leader, and organizational outcomes.

Humility and leadership

Theoretical role of leader humility

Several theories of leadership suggest that humility is a key feature of effective leadership (e.g., Avolio, Gardner, Walumba, Luthans, & May, 2004; Bass, 1985; Collins, 2005; Weick, 2001). For example, leaders who are self-aware, teachable, and appreciative of the strengths of others are more likely to exhibit the behaviors typical of servant leaders (e.g., remaining in the background, giving credit to followers; Morris et al., 2005). Similarly, self-awareness, one of the most commonly cited dimensions of humility (Morris et al., 2005; Ou et al., 2014; Owens & Hekman, 2012), is deemed to be a necessary feature of being an authentic leader (Avolio et al., 2004).

Likewise, humility has been posited as an important trait of both transformational and charismatic leaders (Rajah, Song, & Arvey, 2011). For instance, humility can help transformational leaders better generate, communicate and implement their vision (Barbuto & Burbach, 2006). Similarly, Nielsen, Marrone, and Slay (2010) suggested that humility may be a characteristic of some types of charismatic leaders. Specifically they argue that socialized charismatic leaders with their altruistic, self-transcendent and empowering orientation can also be expected to express humble behaviors. In contrast, personalized charismatic leaders with their selfish, narcissistic and dominant orientation would be expected to be quite low on humility.

Humility also has been positioned as one of the key factors in bottom-up, follower-influenced leadership processes (Collins, 2005; Weick, 2001). For example, humble leaders are likely to be more candid about (and aware of) their own limitations, more receptive to ideas and suggestions from their followers, and more aware of the strengths of their followers — all of which may subsequently translate into followers influencing leadership processes.

Given the role of humility in theories of effective leadership, it is not surprising that leader humility is expected to relate to positive outcomes for followers, leaders, and organizations. For example, Weick (2001) argued that leaders who are humble and admit ignorance foster stronger leader–member relationships and better follower trust and learning. Morris et al. (2005) proposed that humble leaders, due to their appreciation of others and their accurate self-appraisals, are more likely to be supportive of others and to engage in participative leadership which, in turn, is likely to relate to positive follower outcomes. Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez (2004) argued that humble executives accept successes without becoming arrogant, learn from failures, and avoid self-complacency. These leaders are said to be better able to understand and react to external opportunities and threats as they emerge. Finally, leaders who express humility may motivate followers to develop a learning orientation, to view challenges as opportunities to grow, and subsequently to identify with their work thereby resulting in increased follower engagement and job satisfaction (Owens & Hekman, 2012; Owens et al., 2013).

Despite these arguments for a positive effect of leader humility several theoretical boundary conditions have been proposed. For example, Owens and Hekman (2012) argue that leaders who express ostensibly humble behaviors (e.g., highlighting the strengths of followers), but do so in an insincere manner, are perceived as engaging in "false" or "instrumental" humility. This, they argued, makes followers more cautious and defensive rather than engaged and satisfied. As another example, in situations in which there are severe time pressures or threats, followers may prefer leaders who are decisive and assertive rather than leaders who solicit opinions or admit their mistakes (both of which are aspects of humility). Humble leaders in these situations may be seen as lacking confidence and as being less effective. Similarly, in organizations or cultures with strict hierarchies, a leader who is humble may violate implicit theories of leadership. In these instances, the tendency of humble leaders to use a bottom-up approach to solicit opinions or build consensus may be antithetical to the conceptualization of effective leadership for followers in those types of cultures (e.g., Chhokar, 1999). This mismatch of cultural expectations with humble leader behaviors may be perceived negatively resulting in increased dissatisfaction with the leader (Peterson, 1999). Indeed, we believe different cultures may value, conceptualize, or respond to leader humility differently. After a brief review of the limited empirical research on leader humility, we present two studies examining this possibility that leader humility may be conceptualized differently in different cultures.

Empirical findings

Empirical work on leader humility is limited but the research that exists supports several of the theoretically expected relations between leader humility and positive outcomes. For example, leader humility relates to making fairer decisions (Hilbig & Zettler, 2009) and behaving in a prosocial manner (LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, Tsang, & Willerton, 2012). Owens et al. (2013) demonstrated that expressed humility incrementally predicted variance in team contribution (which they categorized as a type of contextual performance in student project teams) and individual performance beyond conscientiousness, self-efficacy, and general mental ability. In addition, they observed that expressed humility positively related to team learning orientation and negatively to turnover of followers through decreased job satisfaction. Similarly, Ou et al. (2014) found that leader humility related to empowering behaviors in CEOs.

These studies represent an excellent starting point for empirically testing the relations between leader humility and important individual and organizational criteria. However, as discussed below, how well the above conceptualizations and empirical findings from Western contexts generalize to Asian (Singaporean) contexts is less understood.

Humility in Asian leadership

Riordan and Vandenberg (1994) warned that scholars should avoid importing concepts developed in the West into different cultural contexts and expecting them to function or be interpreted in the same way. As Markus and Kitayama (1991) convincingly

argued, cultural values can shape our attributions, our behaviors, as well as what we believe to be appropriate behaviors of others. Given some of the boundary conditions discussed above, in particular the emphasis on the possible effects of strict hierarchies or competitive organizational cultures on the effects of leader humility (Owens & Hekman, 2012), it seems reasonable to step back and reassess the conceptualization of leader humility in non-Western contexts; especially one which is said to be relatively hierarchical, competitive, and collectivistic. As a starting point, we chose to explore leader humility in Singapore which is described as being relatively high on the cultural values of power distance and collectivism (Hofstede, 1980; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004).

The importance of humility in an Asian context

Singapore is part of the Confucian Asian cluster of cultural values (House et al., 2004). As a function of a shared history and social and political relationships with Mainland China, it is argued that this cultural cluster is heavily influenced by Chinese traditional values (Pillai, Kohles, Bligh, Carsten, & Brodowsky, 2011). Two of the philosophies central to leadership in this type of cultural context are Taoism and Confucianism (Cheung & Chan, 2005), both of which explicitly mention the role of leader humility. For example, Lao Tze, best known as the author of the Tao Te Ching is quoted as saying, "…the reason why seas are able to be lords over a hundred mountain streams is that they know how to keep below them" (chapter 66 [7]). Given this emphasis on humility in some of the earliest philosophies in the Asian region, some efforts have been made to delineate what humility means in a broader Asian context.

Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez (2004) argued that Asian cultures, because they are ostensibly more collectivistic and interdependent, have a more natural inclination towards humility. Presumably, the other-focus inherent in collectivism should make individuals and leaders more sensitive to the larger context and their places in it. Consistent with this rationale, in a study of Chinese college students in Hong Kong, individuals who gave humble or self-effacing attributions for their performances were rated as being more likable by their peers (Bond, Leung, & Wan, 1982). As such, it has been argued that in more interdependent cultures" …humility is the desired response, or the culturally appropriate response, and that it is wise not to gloat over performance or to express confidence in ability" (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 244). Similarly, in a series of interviews with five CEOs in Hong Kong, Cheung and Chan (2005) reported that all of their respondents practiced a style of leadership that was partly infused with what they described as the Confucian doctrines of benevolence, harmony, learning, loyalty, righteousness, and of particular relevance here, humility. Indeed, it is interesting to note that across all five CEOs and their different industries, humility was the only value universally endorsed by these leaders as integral to their leadership styles.

Given the potentially unique importance of humility in collectivistic or high power distance cultures, it is possible that it is conceptualized differently in such cultures compared to the West. For example, Chiu, Huang, and Hung (2012) propose that humility in a Chinese context should include a stronger emphasis on dimensions not always captured by current Western conceptualizations including "transcendence", or accepting one's insignificant place in the universe and "showing courtesy" or understanding the importance of respecting others. Morris et al. (2005) agree that, from a Taoist perspective, humility is more about a losing of the self so that one can connect to a larger reality. As such, humility may be more important, expected, salient, or even defined differently in some cultures than others. An objective of the current study is to determine whether a new conceptualization of humility developed with an Asian sample might differ from recent Western conceptualizations.

Operationalization of humility in an Asian context

The general (but untested) belief in the strong salience of humility in an Asian context may be due to the point noted earlier, that humility is a central tenet of many Asian cultures (Chiu et al., 2012; Morris et al., 2005). However, there are few empirical investigations of the particular importance of humility for leaders in Asia or to what extent humility in Asia may differ from leader humility in Western cultures. It is worth noting that, although Ou et al.'s (2014) studies were conducted in China, the authors theoretically conceptualized humility based on the existing literature. Although this approach has its merits, it also may fail to fully capture the uniqueness and completeness of leader humility in Asia as conceptualized by its members. Below, we present data from two studies designed to address this gap in our understanding.

Overview of studies

To address the possibility that previous conceptualizations of leader humility may be deficient in general, or may not generalize to an Asian context in particular, we conducted two studies. In these studies, we sought to first understand the concept of leader humility in an Asian context (Singapore), and how this conceptualization might differ from existing operationalizations developed in Western contexts. In Study 2, we examined the extent to which the identified dimensions from Study 1 replicated to a broader sample of managers and explored how our dimensions compared to existing taxonomies. Together these two studies help develop our understanding of what leader humility is and how humble leadership in an Asian context may differ from humble leadership in Western contexts.

Study 1

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 Singaporean participants (23 self-identified as Chinese Singaporean, 1 as Malay Singaporean, and 1 as Indian Singaporean), all of whom were either full-time MBA students, part-time students in a PhD of General Management (also simultaneously working as executive-level managers), or other full-time working Singaporeans. Forty four percent of the sample was female with an average age of 33.44 years ($SD = 8.30$). Participants represented different organizational levels: non-management ($n = 5$), first-line supervisors ($n = 6$), middle-management ($n = 5$), and upper-management ($n = 9$) and were from a variety of industries: government ($n = 4$), service ($n = 9$), manufacturing ($n = 2$), financial ($n = 5$), education ($n = 3$), and transportation ($n = 2$). The average tenure among participants in their current organization was 4.48 years ($SD = 3.36$).

Procedure

Respondents were contacted by email or in class and invited to participate in an interview regarding leader humility in Singapore. They were given a set of likely interview questions to consider prior to the actual interview. The interviews lasted an average of 28.29 minutes and were based on a semi-structured protocol of three core questions with follow-up probe questions (see Appendix A). These questions were primarily formed to elicit participants' definitions of leader humility and participants' perceptions of what represents humble behaviors. In addition, because we were also interested in whether Singaporeans thought there was something explicitly unique about Singaporean humility, at the end of the interviews (so as not to influence the inductive process built on the participants' earlier answers) participants were asked to highlight, if any, their perception of differences in the definition of leader humility in Singapore compared to other cultural contexts. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for coding.

Prior to conducting interviews, the research team met several times to discuss the procedures and questions to be used during the interviews. Following the recommendations of Lee (1999), five interviewers participated in a total of 4 hours of training. In this training, interviewers were instructed in how to introduce the study and explain its goals, audio record, take notes if necessary, avoid leading participants to give answers in specific ways, and probe participants' responses while keeping focused on the topic of interest (e.g., leader humility and not leader effectiveness). Interviews were conducted in locations and at times of the interviewees' choosing.

We conducted interviews until the point of theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the point at which additional interviews do not add any new information. In this study, although we conducted 25 interviews, saturation was reached at 20 interviews (no unique information was identified after the 20th interview).

Coding and analysis strategy

Following the steps of inductive analyses (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981), our team met a total of seven times to: (1) go through the collected data and label primary emerging dimensions, (2) review those dimensions previously generated and examine their relevance to newly collected data, (3) create typologies for main dimensions, and (4) examine the possible relationships between the main dimensions (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981).

In the first step of our inductive analysis (Lee, Mitchell, & Sablynski, 1999), our research team met to decide on the paragraph-level statements and emerging first-order codes in the interview data. First-order codes are akin to sub-dimensions to help researchers systematically arrange, identify, and illustrate the interview data in terms of the emerging dimensions (Lee, 1999). Two of the researchers read and re-read the transcribed interview data and defined initial labels for first-order codes. We repeated this process until we had sufficient first-order labels to identify main dimensions across the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Once the research team agreed on the coding of first-order and main dimensions, the entire coding process was replicated by two independent, naïve coders (one PhD and one Masters-level student in Psychology) who were not a part of the initial process of inductive analyses. The interview protocol as well as the first-order coding process and our main dimensions were explained to both of these independent coders. In addition, we instructed them to code the interview at the paragraph level (to ensure that the respondents' answers did not repeat and inflate frequencies; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The independent coders and the first author met several times to discuss when issues arose regarding dimension definitions. The naïve coders independently coded 88% of the statements identically (Cohen's $\kappa = .86$, Cohen, 1960) and subsequently resolved all disagreements through discussions. The independent coders also were instructed to create additional dimensions if they thought a statement did not fit into one of the main dimensions. Of the 359 statements, our naïve coders were unable to sort 22 statements into any of the nine preexisting dimensions. However, none of these 22 statements (e.g., being persistent, controlling anger, looking beyond the company's objectives) clustered together into any new meaningful dimension and thus were removed from the analysis.

Results

Humble leader behavior

In total, nine dimensions emerged from our interviews: 1) "having an accurate view of self", 2) "recognizing follower strengths and achievements", 3) "modeling teachability and being correctable", 4) "leading by example", 5) "showing modesty", 6) "working

together for the collective good", 7) "empathy and approachability", 8) "showing mutual respect and fairness", and 9) "mentoring and coaching" (see Table 1 for a list of labels, brief definitions, and example statements).

As can be seen from the frequency count (please see Table 2), three dimensions stand out most prominently: "empathy and approachability," accounted for 33.53% of the statements, "showing modesty," accounted for 16.02% of the statements, and "modeling teachability and being correctable," accounted for 11.57% of the statements. The remaining six dimensions were each mentioned to a lesser extent with frequencies ranging from 4.15% to 7.72%.

We also examined the frequencies by gender, age, and organizational level. First, in terms of gender, the frequency pattern seemed relatively similar between males and females with the exception of "showing modesty". This dimension accounted for almost 23% of the statements for female respondents but only about 10% of the statements for male respondents. Second, we median-split our participants into two age groups (median = 32) to examine if there were differences by age. "Empathy and approachability" were mentioned most frequently across both age groups. However, there appear to be differences in the frequency pattern for relatively younger and older participants. Relatively younger participants placed more emphasis on "showing modesty" (21.57%) and "modeling teachability and being correctable" (14.38%), while older participants found these two dimensions less descriptive (11.41% and 9.24% respectively) of leader humility. In contrast, older participants appear to perceive "showing mutual respect and fairness" as quite important (10.87%) compared to the younger participants (3.92%) when defining leader humility. Third, in terms of organizational level, "empathy and approachability" were mentioned most frequently across all levels with the exception of the non-management participants. For this group, "showing modesty" was the dimension mentioned most frequently and "empathy and approachability" was the second most frequently mentioned dimension (34.48% and 25.86% respectively). Middle managers identified "recognizing follower strengths and achievements" and "modeling teachability and being correctable" more frequently than did participants from other organizational levels (12.15% and 15.15% respectively).

Humility in Singapore

While our primary goal was to explore, through an inductive process, whether Singaporean definitions of humility were different from current (largely Western-based) conceptualizations, we also were interested in assessing whether Singaporeans *explicitly* thought that there was something unique about humility in Singapore. As such, at the final stage of the interview we asked our participants whether they thought there was something unique about Singaporean humility with two additional, broad questions: 1) "Does leader humility mean the same thing to Singaporeans as it does to non-Singaporeans? If not, what are some differences?" and 2) "Can you think of leader behaviors that might be considered humble in Singapore but not considered humble in other cultures?"

Our participants' answers to these two questions were quite variable, although a few (contradictory) themes emerged. Many participants argued that humility is a universal value (similar to earlier theoretical arguments made by Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004) with a sizable proportion (40%) of respondents suggesting that humility means the same thing across cultures and contexts. For instance, one respondent stated: "I don't see why it would mean something different. Humility… leader humility … integrity…most of these kinds of moral behaviors are universal. You can go [anywhere] and they will understand the same thing."

However, a relatively larger subset (52%) of participants suggested that the value placed on humility in Singapore may be greater than in Western cultures or that the definition of humble behaviors may depend on underlying cultural values. For instance, one

Table 1

Coding dimensions, first-order codes and example statements of leader humility.

No	Code for humble leader behavior	First-order codes and example statements
1	Having an accurate view of self	Self-aware and truthful about own competency and weakness (e.g., acknowledging that he/she is only human and has flaws too.)
2	Recognizing follower strengths and achievements	Enabling followers to act and inspiring them to do greater things, recognizing others for their accomplishments (e.g., a humbler leader acknowledges contributions from his/her followers when he/she succeeds.)
3	Modeling teachability and being correctable	Accepting feedback regarding his/her own performance, even from subordinates and using that feedback to change his/her behavior (e.g., a humble leader is one who is willing to listen and learn from followers.)
4	Leading by example	Leading by example and being a hands-on leader (e.g., a humble leader is someone who is willing to do the things that he/she is asking his/her follower to do, even things like taking minutes of meeting, doing PowerPoint slides etc.)
5	Showing modesty	Willing to let his/her teammates shine, someone who does not prefer to be in the limelight all the time (e.g., a humble leader is someone who keeps a low profile even when successful.)
6	Working together for the collective good	Being able to work together with his/her staff to achieve a common goal (e.g., a humble leader would stay late with his/her staff to help complete a project)
7	Empathy and approachability	Understanding, showing empathy and leading with high emotional quotient, being available for staff to share problems (e.g., a humble leader would be kind and caring for his/her followers.)
8	Showing mutual respect and fairness	Treating others with respect (e.g., a humble leader must also be impartial in treatment towards his/her followers.)
9	Mentoring and coaching	Approaching leadership through mentorship, guidance and empowerment (e.g., a humble leader is able to coach employee on their personal developments.)

Table 2
Study 1 frequency with which each dimension was mentioned; overall, by gender, age and organizational level.

	Categories									Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Overall (N = 25)	23	24	39	22	54	14	113	26	22	337
	6.82%	7.12%	11.57%	6.53%	16.02%	4.15%	33.53%	7.72%	6.53%	
Gender										
Female (n = 11)	8	10	20	10	35	4	50	11	7	155
	5.16%	6.45%	12.90%	6.45%	22.58%	2.58%	32.26%	7.10%	4.52%	
Male (n = 14)	15	14	19	12	19	10	63	15	15	182
	8.24%	7.69%	10.44%	6.59%	10.44%	5.49%	34.62%	8.24%	8.24%	
Age										
≤32 (n = 13)	9	9	22	9	33	7	48	6	10	153
	5.88%	5.88%	14.38%	5.88%	21.57%	4.58%	31.37%	3.92%	6.54%	
>32 (n = 12)	14	15	17	13	21	7	65	20	12	184
	7.61%	8.15%	9.24%	7.07%	11.41%	3.80%	35.33%	10.87%	6.52%	
Organizational Level										
Upper-management (n = 9)	7	13	15	13	22	4	50	14	7	145
	4.83%	8.97%	10.34%	8.97%	15.17%	2.76%	34.48%	9.66%	4.83%	
Middle-management (n = 5)	7	8	10	3	3	3	19	6	7	66
	10.61%	12.15%	15.15%	4.55%	4.55%	4.55%	28.79%	9.09%	10.61%	
First-line supervisor (n = 6)	6	1	10	3	9	1	29	4	5	68
	8.82%	1.47%	14.71%	4.41%	13.24%	1.47%	42.65%	5.88%	7.35%	
Non-management (n = 5)	3	2	4	3	20	6	15	2	3	58
	5.17%	3.45%	6.90%	5.17%	34.48%	10.34%	25.86%	3.45%	5.17%	

Categories: 1. Having an accurate view of self, 2. Recognizing follower strengths and achievements, 3. Modeling teachability and being correctable, 4. Leading by example, 5. Showing modesty, 6. Working together for the collective good, 7. Empathy and approachability, 8. Showing mutual respect and fairness, and 9. Mentoring and coaching.

respondent noted that: "I think culturally, there're a lot of differences. I've worked across regions. …Singaporeans are not very gracious… I guess when you work across cultures… maybe in Singapore when you talk to a local, when you tell somebody to do something you can be more direct. Maybe we understand each other more. When you talk to an American or to a British person, maybe they will interpret [humility] as being bashful…"

Respondents also noted that it is difficult to determine whether certain behaviors are inherently more or less humble because underlying cultural assumptions guide particular behaviors. For instance, leaders in the East may be more reserved than leaders in the West, who are more vocal. But these leaders may be equally humble. These respondents suggested that humility depends more on the "intent of the behavior" or the "mental attitude" that underlies a particular behavior.

Interestingly, one participant noted that there may be generational differences in how humility is perceived in Singapore. This person argued that older generations would expect leaders to be decisive and to have all of the answers; thus, humility would not be expected from leaders. However, younger generations expect leaders to be more people-oriented and to treat subordinates with greater consideration, in essence, they expect more humility. This is also in line with our findings regarding how age differences affected our relatively younger participants' view on the conceptualization of leader humility.

Study 1 discussion

Although our primary aim was to compare the dimensions that emerged in this study with those of Owens and Hekman's (2012) leader humility conceptualization (given that we both focused on expressed leader humility), the nine dimensions that emerged from our data also generally overlap with the theoretical and empirical definitions found in the humility literature (e.g., Morris et al., 2005; Tangney, 2000a). Our results replicate Owens and Hekman's (2012) three dimensions of leader humility, however, the nine dimensional structure identified by our Singaporean participants is much broader. For example, our participants mentioned that they view humble leaders as kind, available, caring, and understanding of the problems of their subordinates (i.e., "empathy and approachability") or as avoiding the limelight and letting their followers shine (i.e., "showing modesty") even though these dimensions have not been identified in other taxonomies of humility. "Leading by example" was another unique dimension our participants associated with leader humility in Singapore as was "mentoring and coaching" subordinates.

Finally, we also explored whether individuals in one culture (Singapore) believe that humility differs across cultures. In particular, we were interested in examining what Singaporeans thought about the cross-cultural (in)variance of humility in terms of its conceptualization or behavioral manifestations. In terms of explicit beliefs about whether Singaporean humility was different or unique in some way, the lack of consensus among our participants seems to reflect a similar lack of consensus in the literature around the universality of humility.

We conducted a second study with a much larger sample of Singaporean managers. Our aim was to test the generalizability of our results as well as validate (and refine if necessary) our nine dimensions that emerged in Study 1. Below, we present this study as well as a comparison of our nine-dimensional structure with existing Western taxonomies of humility.

Study 2

In Study 2, we assessed the appropriateness of the nine dimensions that emerged in Study 1 and whether our results would generalize to a broader population of managers working in Singapore. We also compared our dimensions to existing (largely Western) operationalizations of humility.

Participants

307 Singaporean supervisors participated in Study 2. Participants were 91.5% Chinese, 1.0% Malay, 3.3% Indian, and 1.3% Eurasian with one participant not reporting her race. The mean participant age was 42.23 years ($SD = 11.08$; 20.52% of participants did not report their age) and 53.7% of participants were male (2 participants did not report their gender). Participants worked an average of 47.64 ($SD = 13.01$) hours per week and were supervising an average of 15.40 employees ($SD = 39.93$) at the time of data collection. Participants worked in a variety of industries and occupations (24.4% service industry, 21.17% financial industry, 11.7% government, 9.8% manufacturing industry, 3.3% human services, 2.9% transportation industry, and 26.7% other).

Procedure, coding and analysis strategy

Using an online survey, we asked a broad open-ended question requesting the participants to "describe what you think it means to be a humble leader, including what behaviors a humble leader may exhibit." Two of the authors independently chunked the responses into meaningful statements. These two researchers met and resolved any disagreements about what constituted a meaningful statement. This process resulted in 688 separate statements for further coding.

Two independent, naïve coders (doctoral students in Organizational Behavior and Human Resources) who were different from the independent coders in Study 1, sorted the 688 statements into our nine dimensions. Before sorting, the first author met the coders to explain the definitions of the nine dimensions that emerged in Study 1. The independent coders also were instructed to alert the first author if they were unable to categorize a statement into any dimension. The independent coders were able to categorize a total number of 637 statements into the nine dimensions that emerged in Study 1 with a high level of agreement (Cohen's κ = .87; Cohen, 1960). Following this, the first author met the independent coders to resolve all disagreements as well as to discuss whether uncategorized statements could be clustered together into any new dimension. Although the independent coders successfully resolved all of their disagreements, the 51 uncategorized statements (e.g., being precise, determined) did not cluster into any meaningful new dimension and thus were removed from the analysis.

Results

Humility frequencies

As can be seen from the frequencies (see Table 3), each of the nine dimensions were mentioned a minimum of 29 times, ("working together for the collective good" was mentioned with the lowest frequency). However, there were some noticeable differences in frequencies, with three dimensions mentioned most often. In contrast to Study 1, the clear dominant dimension in this sample was "modeling teachability and being correctable", accounting for 35.48% of the statements across all respondents. While "empathy and approachability" was the most frequently mentioned dimension in Study 1, it was the second most frequently mentioned dimension (13.81%) in this second study. "Showing mutual respect and fairness" accounted for the third highest percentage of statements (13.50%). These results overlap to some extent with our results from Study 1 (the same two dimensions are among the top three across both samples: "modeling teachability and being correctable", and "empathy and approachability"), but in our Study 2 sample, "showing mutual respect and fairness" was mentioned more often than "showing modesty" (13.50% and 6.28% respectively).

As in Study 1, we first examined whether there was a pattern of differences in frequencies by gender. The frequencies of each dimension of leader humility were generally similar across gender with the exception that female respondents were more likely to mention "having an accurate view of self" than males (9.28% and 3.99% respectively). Female participants were also more likely to mention "recognizing follower strengths and achievements" more than males (11.38% and 5.98% respectively). On the other hand, males were more likely to cite "empathy and approachability" than females (17.61% and 10.18% respectively). This is in contrast to our findings from Study 1 in which "showing modesty" was the dimension more heavily weighted by female respondents.

Next, we examined differences by age. Due to our larger sample size, we were able to classify our participants into four age groups (instead of two as in Study 1). These four groups were: 1) participants in their 20's, 2) participants in their 30's, 3) participants in their 40's, and 4) participants in their 50's or greater. Across all age groups, "modeling teachability and being correctable" was the dimension of humble leader behaviors mentioned most frequently. However, the frequencies of "having an accurate view of self" and "empathy and approachability" also follow an interesting pattern. The older the participants are, the less frequently they mentioned, "having an accurate view of self", but the more frequently they mentioned, "empathy and approachability". Although the remaining dimensions' frequencies (by age group) did not show a clear pattern, our data do suggest that age can be an important factor affecting participants' perceptions of leader humility on at least three dimensions of behavior.

We also explored whether there was any effect for the type of industry on the frequencies. "Modeling teachability and being correctable" was the clear dominant dimension across all industries. However, aside from that there were some differences in the frequency with which other dimensions were mentioned across industries. For example, for respondents in manufacturing industries,

Table 3
Study 2 frequency with which each dimension was mentioned; overall, by gender, age and type of industry.

	Categories									Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Overall (N = 307)	43	56	226	32	40	29	88	86	37	637
	6.75%	8.79%	35.48%	5.02%	6.28%	4.55%	13.81%	13.50%	5.81%	
Gender										
Female (n = 142)	31	38	121	12	15	18	34	42	23	334
	9.28%	11.38%	36.23%	3.59%	4.49%	5.39%	10.18%	12.57%	6.89%	
Male (n = 163)	12	18	105	20	25	11	53	44	13	301
	3.99%	5.98%	34.88%	6.64%	8.31%	3.65%	17.61%	14.62%	4.32%	
Age										
20–30 (n = 45)	10	10	36	3	5	2	7	14	7	94
	10.64%	10.64%	38.30%	3.19%	5.32%	2.13%	7.45%	14.89%	7.45%	
31–40 (n = 66)	8	8	53	5	9	7	21	16	6	133
	6.02%	6.02%	39.85%	3.76%	6.77%	5.26%	15.79%	12.03%	4.51%	
41–50 (n = 55)	8	13	48	3	8	4	18	15	12	129
	6.20%	10.08%	37.21%	2.33%	6.20%	3.10%	13.95%	11.63%	9.30%	
>50 (n = 77)	4	10	40	8	11	11	27	24	6	141
	2.84%	7.09%	28.37%	5.67%	7.80%	7.80%	19.15%	17.02%	4.26%	
Type of Industry										
Government (n = 36)	8	9	26	3	4	1	5	14	2	72
	11.11%	12.50%	36.11%	4.17%	5.56%	1.39%	6.94%	19.44%	2.78%	
Service (n = 75)	8	14	54	5	11	8	24	24	7	155
	5.16%	9.03%	34.84%	3.23%	7.10%	5.16%	15.48%	15.48%	4.52%	
Manufacturing (n = 30)	1	7	25	1	4	2	10	3	6	59
	1.69%	11.86%	42.37%	1.69%	6.78%	3.39%	16.95%	5.08%	10.17%	
Financial (n = 65)	10	8	43	7	6	8	20	18	9	129
	7.75%	6.20%	33.33%	5.43%	4.65%	6.20%	15.50%	13.95%	6.98%	
Transport (n = 9)	1	1	8	1	0	1	4	2	3	21
	4.76%	4.76%	38.10%	4.76%	0.00%	4.76%	19.05%	9.52%	14.29%	
Human services (n = 10)	3	2	6	1	4	1	2	2	1	22
	13.64%	9.09%	27.27%	4.55%	18.18%	4.55%	9.09%	9.09%	4.55%	
Other (n = 82)	11	4	28	6	2	4	9	5	1	70
	15.71%	5.71%	40.00%	8.57%	2.86%	5.71%	12.86%	7.14%	1.43%	

Categories: 1. Having an accurate view of self, 2. Recognizing follower strengths and achievements, 3. Modeling teachability and being correctable, 4. Leading by example, 5. Showing modesty, 6. Working together for the collective good, 7. Empathy and approachability, 8. Showing mutual respect and fairness, and 9. Mentoring and coaching.

"empathy and approachability" accounted for the second largest percentage of statements (16.95%) whereas for respondents in governmental positions, "showing mutual respect and fairness", was the second most important dimension (19.44%). Thus, it appears that the perception of humble leadership behaviors also changes slightly across different industries in our sample.

Dimensional overlap

In an effort to determine the extent to which there was conceptual overlap between the dimensions that emerged in our two samples with the most recent inductive empirical study of leader humility (Owens & Hekman, 2012), we thematically sorted our dimensions into Owens and Hekman's (2012) three dimensions. In their conceptual model, Owens and Hekman (2012) listed 10 basic themes which they conceptually ordered into three higher-order factors of expressed leader humility: 1) admitting mistakes and limitations, 2) modeling teachability, and 3) spotlighting follower strengths and contributions. In our coding, these three dimensions also emerged from the data (see Table 4). However, conceptually the "admitting mistakes and limitations" and "modeling teachability"

Table 4
Comparison of existing models of (leader) humility.

	The current study	Owens & Hekman (2012)	Ou et al. (2014)[†]	Tangney (2000a)[†]	Morris et al. (2005)[†]
1	Having an accurate view of self			✓	✓
2	Recognizing follower strengths and achievements	✓	✓	✓	
3	Modeling teachability and being correctable	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Leading by example				
5	Showing modesty				
6	Working together for the collective good				
7	Empathy and approachability				
8	Showing mutual respect and fairness	✓	✓	✓	
9	Mentoring and coaching				

✓ indicates that the dimensions identified in this current study are also included in the existing models by the authors.
[†] indicates that these models of leader humility include "transcendence" as a dimension, which did not emerge in this current study.

higher order factors of Owens and Hekman (2012) collapsed into one dimension of "modeling teachability and being correctable" in our data. In addition to these dimensions, six additional dimensions emerged from our sample, not present in either Owens and Hekman's (2012) 10 themes or three basic dimensions. These were: 1) "having an accurate view of self", 2) "leading by example", 3) "showing modesty", 4) "working together for the collective good", 5),"empathy and approachability" and 6) "mentoring and coaching". Please note that our dimension "having an accurate view of self" is related to Owens and Hekman's "admitting mistakes and limitation" although they are slightly different such that we view our dimension as being slightly broader. Specifically, just because one admits mistakes and limitations does not mean that one accurately perceives oneself.

In sum then, several of our dimensions are included in Owens and Hekman's (2012) three dimensions of expressed leader humility. Our nine dimensions also capture the "self-awareness" (Morris et al., 2005), "viewing oneself accurately", and "awareness of one's abilities and accomplishments" (Tangney, 2000a) dimensions present in other major theoretical models. Finally, our findings in both Study 1 and Study 2 reveal five unique dimensions that are not mentioned in any of the existing models of (leader) humility.

Discussion study 2

In Study 2 we replicated the nine dimensions that emerged in Study 1 with a broader sample of working Singaporeans. Similar to Study 1, "modeling teachability and being correctable", and "empathy and approachability" were two of the most frequently mentioned aspects of leader humility, while "working together for the collective good" was the least frequently mentioned dimension of leader humility in Study 2.

In addition, there were some gender differences in the frequencies of reported dimensions. For example, female respondents were more likely than males to mention, "recognizing follower strengths and achievements" as an important indicator of leader humility. Age also appears to be a factor influencing our participants' definition of leader humility. Specifically, in two dimensions "having an accurate view of self" and "empathy and approachability", relatively older participants differed from their younger colleagues in their ratings. Finally, the industry in which our participants work marginally affected how much emphasis they put on different dimensions of leader humility.

Overall, our results in Study 2 validate the nine dimensions that emerged in Study 1 and support their generalizability to a broader Singaporean sample. Of these nine dimensions, five do not fully overlap with existing taxonomies of humility and suggest that either previous taxonomies are deficient or that there are cultural differences between Western and Eastern definitions of humble leader behaviors.

Overall discussion

Across two studies we replicated the three major dimensions found in previous research on expressed leader humility in a different cultural context (albeit with only two of our own dimensions; e.g., Owens & Hekman, 2012). The dimension of "modeling teachability and being correctable" (a dimension common to the most prominent models of humility) seemed particularly salient to the largest number of our participants. In addition, our participants identified five unique dimensions of behaviors that were indicative of leader humility to a Singaporean sample. Interestingly, our dimensions do not include the "transcendence" construct identified by earlier theoretical conceptualizations of humility (and Buddhist/Taoist philosophies) while the concept of modesty was repeatedly highlighted by our participants. Overall, there seemed to be an emphasis on the "humane" or follower-centered aspects of leader humility such as showing empathy, consideration and respect that was particularly important to our sample, but is not covered by extant definitions and measures of leader humility (e.g., Ou et al., 2014; Owens & Hekman, 2012; Owens et al., 2013).

Our dimensions of humility in Singapore: what is new?

Though our nine dimensions of humility were consistent across two samples, the percentages of those who mentioned each dimension varied as a function of gender, age, organizational level, and type of industry. In particular, with regard to gender, it seems that females are more likely than males to mention having an accurate view of self and recognizing the strengths and achievements of others. Thus, it seems that females are more likely to define humility as understanding one's actual contribution in a team setting by realizing that others are often integral to one's own success. On the other hand, males seem to disproportionately define humility as an interpersonal style characterized by being friendly, approachable, and caring. Although we believe the conceptualization of humility does not differ by these factors, the relative importance of dimensions may differ.

Four of our dimensions overlap considerably with previous conceptualizations of humility. However, we also identified five relatively unique dimensions of humility across our two samples. Thus, it is possible that previous conceptualizations of humility are deficient, or differ because of their cultural contexts. Four of these unique dimensions involve an apparent leadership style that de-emphasizes one's own status and organizational level, something that is less common or expected in high power distance cultures like Singapore (Hofstede, 1980). For example, being modest, being approachable, and showing empathy to subordinates is something that is not as common in cultures where people accept inequalities in power as a normal and expected aspect of relationships. Similarly, leading by example was often described as a way of leading subordinates without using one's status to give directives. Participants mentioned that those who lead by example would not ask employees to do something that they themselves would not do. Finally, working together for the good of the collective is a way to show solidarity and equality with one's subordinates. Thus, a

common theme among our unique Singaporean dimensions is that of not abusing one's status and of willingness to cross hierarchical levels. We believe this theme is likely to hold in other Asian countries where power distance is often a salient aspect of work life. These results seem to support Chiu et al.'s (2012) proposal that humility in a Chinese context should include "showing courtesy" or "understanding the importance of respecting others".

One relatively surprising finding is that transcendence did not clearly emerge in our interviews or open-ended question. Tangney (2000a) defined transcendence as low self-focus, a "forgetting of the self", while recognizing that one is but a part of the larger universe, a self-transcendence. Similarly, Chiu et al. (2012) proposed that transcendence should be emphasized in Asian definitions of humility. It should be noted that Ou et al. (2014) included dimensions related to a sense of transcendence in their conceptualization; however, the definitions for these dimensions were developed deductively. It seems likely that such transcendent cognitions and motivations are difficult for people to appraise in others and these beliefs likely manifest themselves indirectly in behavior, which is perhaps why it has not emerged in primarily inductive approaches like our own. Nevertheless, though we did not find direct evidence for this dimension in our data, there are elements of transcendence in some of the dimensions we did identify. For example, our "showing modesty" dimension posits that humble leaders do not aspire to be important or praiseworthy in the eyes of others. Inherent in this worldview, modesty seems to be an understanding of one's small place in the world. Similarly, those who mentioned working together for the collective good often emphasized a leader's understanding that working towards a goal that is larger than oneself is a sign of humility. This is not particularly surprising given that Singapore is a highly collectivist society.

Singaporean beliefs about isomorphism

When asked directly, there was a lack of consensus among our Singaporean respondents regarding whether leader humility means something different in Singapore relative to the West. This contradiction mirrors the lack of consensus in the broader humility literature. As stated earlier, humility is seen as a virtue almost universally. As such, it is not surprising that many of our respondents came to that conclusion. At the same time, however, it seems reasonable that culture, given its emphasis on values and prescribed ways of behaving, should impact something about humility; how it is defined, how it is enacted, or how heavily it is emphasized. This impact seems to be reflected in our data. The model proposed by Owens and Hekman (2012) emerged in our studies, but the presence of our six unique dimensions suggests that humility may be more complex and include a greater number of dimensions for our Singaporean respondents.

Limitations and future directions

As with any study, ours it not without limitations. Given that these were two exploratory qualitative studies, our dimensions should be interpreted with caution until they can be validated with quantitative studies. The next steps in this process should involve developing a quantitative measure of the dimensions that emerged from our interviews. Further cross validation of these results is necessary to determine if the factor structure holds and if our dimensions predict incremental variance in leader effectiveness above and beyond the existing measures of humility.

Additionally, our sample provides a Singaporean view on humility, distinct from existing Western conceptualizations. We attempted to couch these findings within the broader context of Asia and believe that there is good reason for doing so. However, there may be idiosyncrasies about Singapore that temper our ability to make this comparison. As such, future research should test the generalizability of these findings in other Asian countries. We speculated in our discussion that some of our unique dimensions could be due to the prevalence of power distance in Asian cultures. It would be useful for future research to directly assess the effect of power distance (or of other cultural elements) on the structure of humility.

Finally, findings in both studies suggest that how leader humility is conceptualized varies by age and gender. These variables affect both the behaviors our participants identify as humble and what they expect from humble leaders. These findings fit with recent research on generational differences in employees (Gen X, Gen Y) suggesting that different generations expect and want different things from their organizations and leaders (Howe & Strauss, 2000). It may be fruitful in future studies to empirically explore how the importance of humility varies by age and gender as well as culture.

Acknowledgements

Appendix A. Interview Questions and Probes

1. How do you define leader humility?
    a. Possible probes:
        i. Think of a leader you view to be humble. Why do you consider this leader to be humble?
        ii. What does it mean for a leader to be humble?

2. *Part a*: What behaviors do you associate with humble leaders?

Part b: For each behavior, why would you consider this behavior to be humble?

  a. Possible probes:

    i. Describe 2–3 situations where you observed a leader behaving humbly.

    ii. What specifically did the leader do when behaving humbly?

    iii. Anything else? (**target 4–6+ behaviors**)

3. *Part a*: Does leader humility mean the same thing to Singaporeans as it does to non-Singaporeans? If not, what are some differences?

Part b: Can you think of leader behaviors that might be considered humble in Singapore but not considered humble in other cultures?

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