

# For a modest personality trait, 'intellectual humility' packs a punch

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With new research, the modest personality trait of 'intellectual humility' finally gets its moment in the spotlight. Credit: Jonathan Fuller

"Intellectual humility" has been something of a wallflower among personality traits, receiving far less scholarly attention than such brash qualities as egotism or hostility. Yet this little-studied characteristic may influence people's decision-making abilities in politics, health and other arenas, says new research from Duke University.

In a time of high partisanship, [intellectual humility](#) - an awareness that one's beliefs may be wrong - is nonpartisan. Researchers measured levels of the trait, and found essentially no difference between liberals and conservatives or between religious and nonreligious people.

"There are stereotypes about conservatives and religiously conservative people being less intellectually humble about their beliefs," said lead author Mark Leary, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke. "We didn't find a shred of evidence to support that."

As defined by the authors, intellectual humility is the opposite of intellectual arrogance or conceit. In common parlance, it resembles open-mindedness. Intellectually [humble people](#) can have strong beliefs, but recognize their fallibility and are willing to be proven wrong on matters large and small, Leary said.

The researchers, whose work is featured in the March 15 issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, conducted four separate studies to measure the trait and learn more about how it functions. In one study, participants read essays arguing for and against religion, and were then asked about each author's personality. After reading an essay with which they disagreed, intellectually arrogant people gave the writer low scores in morality, honesty, competence and warmth. By contrast, intellectually humble people were less likely to judge a writer's character based on his or her views.

People who displayed intellectual humility also did a better job evaluating the quality of evidence—even in mundane matters. For instance, when presented with arguments about the benefits of flossing, intellectually humble people correctly distinguished strong, fact-based arguments from weak ones.

The characteristic also affected people's views on politicians who "flip-

flop." Intellectually humble Republicans were more likely than other Republicans to say that they would vote for a politician whose position on an issue changed over time, due to new evidence. They were also less likely to criticize that politician for "flip-flopping." There was less variability among Democrats: Democrats, whether intellectually arrogant or humble, were generally less likely to criticize a politician for changing his mind.

Leary said intellectual humility bears further examination.

"If you think about what's been wrong in Washington for a long time, it's a whole lot of people who are very intellectually arrogant about the positions they have, on both sides of the aisle," Leary said. "But even in interpersonal relationships, the minor squabbles we have with our friends, lovers and coworkers are often about relatively trivial things where we are convinced that our view of the world is correct and their view is wrong."

The quality has potential benefits in the business world, too, he said.

"If you're sitting around a table at a meeting and the boss is very low in intellectual humility, he or she isn't going to listen to other people's suggestions," Leary said. "Yet we know that good leadership requires broadness of perspective and taking as many perspectives into account as possible."

Leary and his co-authors suggest that intellectual humility is a quality that could be encouraged and taught. And some of their colleagues hope to do just that. Leary's team worked in collaboration with other psychologists and philosophers to refine their studies. One of those philosophers helped launch a charter school in California, the Intellectual Virtues Academy of Long Beach, aimed at promoting qualities such as intellectual humility.

Leary applauds the effort.

"Not being afraid of being wrong - that's a value, and I think it is a value we could promote," he said. "I think if everyone was a bit more intellectually humble we'd all get along better, we'd be less frustrated with each other."

**More information:** "Cognitive and Interpersonal Features of Intellectual Humility," Mark R. Leary, Kate J. Diebels, Erin K. Davisson, Katrina P. Jongman-Sereno, Jennifer C. Isherwood, Kaitlin T. Raimi, Samantha A. Deffler and Rick H. Hoyle. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, March 17, 2017. [DOI: 10.1177/0146167217697695](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167217697695)

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