

The role of intellectual humility in education and the possibilities of its enhancement

Rola pokory intelektualnej w edukacji oraz możliwości jej wzmacniania

DOI 10.25951/14048

Introduction

Among many factors influencing the education process, the desire to learn is beyond doubt a critical one and encouraging students to develop the virtue of lifelong learning has a large impact on making them good scholars. Obviously, a world full of wise, intellectually humble and open-minded people would be a better world, and we should try to find a way to foster peoples' ability to acquire knowledge; however, the question arises whether it is an obtainable goal. In this article I present a psychological perspective on intellectual humility and consider its main characteristics. I also present different ways of thinking about intellectual humility and reflect on its meaning in the process of acquiring knowledge. In the end, I consider whether it is possible to foster the virtue of intellectual humility in our daily lives.

Intellectual humility – definition

Scholars' interest in intellectual humility has started with the work of Roberts and Wood (2003) and, since the first empirical research published by Kross and Grossmann (2012), its popularity has grown dramatically. However, the conceptual grounding for intellectual humility begins in philosophy, specifically the intellectual virtue literature. It can be classified as an epistemic virtue which promotes how to be a good knower (Brady & Pritchard 2003; Stafford 2010; Church & Barrett 2016). The definition of intellectual humility developed by members of an interdisciplinary group that involved philosophers and psychologists

characterize it as “recognizing that a particular personal belief may be fallible, accompanied by an appropriate attentiveness to limitations in the evidentiary basis of that belief and to one’s own limitations in obtaining and evaluating relevant information” (Leary 2018). There are several definitions of intellectual humility, all of which imply that an intellectually humble person can recognize that his or her beliefs might be wrong (Leary 2018), does not feel threatened by the awareness of his or her intellectual fallibility (Krumrei-Mancuso & Rouse 2015) and has respectful attitude toward people even those who are less knowledgeable (Lilienfeld 2020; Rowatt et al. 2006; Leary 2018).

Over the last few years, intellectual humility has become a topic of articles in philosophy, theology and psychology in order to define intellectual humility and measure it (Baehr 2012; Davis et al. 2016; Gregg et al. 2017; Roberts et al. 2003; Samuelson et al. 2015; Whitcomb et al. 2015). Psychological research has brought 18 different questionnaires to measure intellectual humility (Porter et al. 2020) and its several definitions (Church & Barrett 2016; Hopkin et al. 2014; Krumrei-Mancuso & Rouse 2015; Leary et al. 2017; Porter & Schumann 2018; Samuelson et al. 2012; Whitcomb et al. 2015).

Main characteristics

Intellectual humility is fundamentally a cognitive phenomenon. According to literature, the intellectually humble people not only recognize that their beliefs might be wrong but also spend more time seeking information and take careful consideration while forming beliefs and making decisions (Leary 2017), scan for limitation in their knowledge (Deffler, Leary & Hoyle 2016) and interact more with opposing views (Krumrei-Mancuso & Newman 2020; Porter & Schumann 2018). They are deeply interested in understanding others’ people point of view and the reasons that someone disagree with them (Porter & Schumann 2017). Therefore, we can imagine a person, who will be more objective while assessing facts and will be constantly truth-seeking, even at the expense of their own way of thinking.

Deffler et al.’s (2016) findings indicate that individual differences in intellectual humility may affect processing information, which means that intellectually humble individuals process information more deeply. Thus, intellectual humility have significant implications for people’s functioning in an array of settings, especially education. In this context it is crucial to focus on motivational and behavioural components of intellectual humility. Intellectual hu-

mility manifests itself in a proactive, inquisitive approach to knowledge (Leary 2017). This intellectual proactivity is an important feature of an intellectually humble person, and should foster the educational process. Undoubtedly, there are links between intellectual humility and epistemic curiosity as well as epistemic motivation, more specifically intrinsic motivation, which is described as simply enjoying an activity or seeing it as an opportunity to explore, learn, and actualize our potentials (Coon & Mitterer 2010, p. 339). Those connections seems to be worth investigating in the future.

What is more, intellectually humble individuals are motivated to seek knowledge and new experiences. Their careful and deliberate thinking leads to better understanding and greater depth of learning. Thus, we are presented with the image of a person, who is eager to get more in-depth knowledge about the world and for whom acquiring new knowledge has an immeasurable value. Individuals with high level of intellectual humility are life-long learners who enjoy learning and are highly motivated to acquire knowledge (Haggard et al. 2018; Krumrei-Mancuso et al. 2020). Intellectual humility involves thinking beyond rules and schemas and as such, has always been a way of thinking of explorers and scientists.

Recognising one's beliefs as fallible is not a new concept in philosophy. An almost identical idea can be found in William Hare's works (1987), where he writes about another intellectual quality, open-mindedness: "to be open-minded is ... to be critically receptive to alternative possibilities, to be willing to think again despite having formulated a view, and to be concerned to defuse any factors that constrain one's thinking in a predetermined way" (p. 9). According to this, an open-minded person identifies the possibility that their judgments and opinions are false, and this attitude is demonstrated behaviourally in a willingness to reconsider their views. The closed-minded person, on the other hand, refuses to consider the possibility to study and evaluate countervailing evidence and arguments. An open-minded person tends to be less dogmatic and more likely to revise their beliefs.

Not surprisingly, scores on measures of intellectual humility correlate with measures of dogmatism (Altemeyer 2002; Rokeach 1960). Intellectually humble people tend to be tolerant toward other beliefs and the people who hold them. A bit of light on this aspect has been thrown by multiple research regarding relationship between intellectual humility and the Big Five traits (Krumrei-Mancuso & Rouse 2016; Leary et al. 2017; McElroy et al. 2014; Meagher et al. 2015).

Intellectual humility and personality traits

Researchers suggest that intellectual humility is a relatively stable disposition; therefore, compare it with different personality traits. This comparison takes place mostly during the development and validation of new measures of intellectual humility. As a consequence, a number of correlations have been found between intellectual humility and the five-factor model of personality (Bak et al. 2021).

Porter and Schumann (2018) showed weak, but statistically significant correlations between intellectual humility and agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience. Similar relationships have been found in McElroy's et al. (2014) and Leary's et al. (2017) studies. Krumrei-Mancuso and Rouse (2016) focused exclusively on openness to experience and found a moderate relationship between openness and intellectual humility ($r = 0,40$). Their study also supported a hypothesis that intellectual humility is an independent predictor of openness to experience. Haggard et al. (2018) settled correlations between intellectual humility and conscientiousness ($r = 0,49$) and neuroticism ($r = -0,49$).

The extent to which intellectual humility manifests as a personal trait may depend on cultural and developmental factors. Research suggests that in collectivist societies, humility is often perceived as a social virtue linked to deference and respect for elders, whereas in individualistic cultures, it is viewed as a cognitive strength promoting independent reasoning (Hook et al. 2017). Moreover, studies indicate that intellectual humility may develop with age, as older individuals tend to exhibit greater cognitive flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity (Zmigrod et al. 2019). These factors should be considered when interpreting findings on intellectual humility's role in education.

To conclude, studies proved correlations between intellectual humility and the Big Five traits, particularly with agreeableness, openness to experience and conscientiousness. Interestingly, negative correlations between intellectual humility and neuroticism have been found which present an emotional aspect of intellectual humility and seems to be an interesting direction for future research.

Intellectual humility and education

Why are some students engaged in classroom activities, asking questions and showing interest in a subject, while others seem to be completely oblivious to any kind of learning activities? Probably every teacher has asked this question at least once in their career. One possible answer is that not every student has

an intrinsic desire to learn new things, gain knowledge and broaden their intellectual horizons. According to research, intellectually humble people see gaps in their knowledge and are interested in filling them; it is not an annoying duty but a real value they pursue: they simply love to learn new things (Haggard et al. 2018). Krumrei-Mancuso et al. (2020) define it as an “intrinsic tendency to seek and enjoy cognitive activities”.

The roots of the concept of open-mindedness and intellectual humility go back to Aristotle's ethics, according to which, there are other intellectual virtues which enable people to acquire knowledge and form true beliefs. It is intellectual humility that makes us aware of our epistemic fallibility, and open-mindedness which makes us more willing to consider an alternative perspective on various issues. But curiosity causes us to ask questions, to wonder and seek out understanding, and thanks to intellectual courage we challenge our assumptions based on new learning, understanding and insights (Spiegel 2012; Taylor 2016).

The study confirmed links between intellectual humility and intellectual curiosity, specifically motivation to seek out knowledge and new experiences. This “attitude of mind” seems to guide our thinking in all areas of life. An intellectually humble person is not inclined to jump to conclusions and they take deeper consideration about encountered facts. Deffler et al.'s (2016) research revealed that intellectually humble participants who read sentences about controversial topics spent more time reading sentences that expressed views contrary to their own opinions than participants low in intellectual humility.

The outcome of intellectual humility is connected with enhancing knowledge and gaining insight into one's areas of incomprehension, and this leads to the open, curious attitude towards knowledge outlined above. Since some authors regard intellectual humility as encompassing respect for others' views (Hook et al. 2017; Krumrei-Mancuso, Rouse 2015) it is also worth mentioning that a respectful attitude towards disagreement and different opinions can also lead to gain a deeper understanding and new knowledge. Intellectually humble individuals find that kind of situation a challenge and all problems seem to be worth discussing. Considering oneself as superior or inferior may cause an arrogant or submissive behaviour, but this is not an issue with intellectually humble people. A wealth of knowledge is available for them through exchanging views with other people and through respectful discussions on given topics.

Although theoretically intellectual humility (as well as other intellectual virtues) should support achieving academic success, empirical data are inconclusive. Krumrei-Mancuso et al. (2020) proved that although intellectual humility is associated with more general knowledge, it is also connected with slightly

lower GPA – the score obtained by students during standard American exam. Undeniably intellectual humility is associated with a range of abilities important during educational process such as reflective thinking, need for cognition, intellectual engagement, curiosity, intellectual openness, and open-minded thinking (Krumrei-Mancuso et al. 2020), nonetheless its importance seems to be related rather to the process of acquiring knowledge than to the student's effectiveness in the process of testing it.

Therefore, can intellectual humility be helpful in answering the question why some students crave knowledge, whereas others do not show enthusiasm for it? Partly yes, for sure. Researchers proved intellectual humility to be important factor influencing students attitude toward new ideas, acquiring knowledge as well as open-minded attitude towards discussion and disagreement. Intellectually humble students strive towards gaining new knowledge and actively seek new information (Porter & Schumann 2018). In comparison to the less intellectually humble students, they are more open-minded and pay greater attention to the evidentiary basis of their judgements (Krumrei-Mancuso & Rouse 2016; Leary et al. 2017). Although, more advanced research is needed in the area of the role of intellectual humility in acquiring knowledge evidently intellectual humility is one of the factors contributing to greater knowledge acquisition and we should reflect on possibilities of enhancing it in our students and society.

Fostering intellectual humility

Since a growing literature has been reporting the benefits of intellectual humility in academic achievements (Rowatt et al. 2006), an important question arises whether we can do something to foster it in our students. Is it possible to instil the value of intellectual humility and rekindle a child's curiosity and willingness to learn new things?

Porter and Schumann (2018) reported that intellectual humility can be enhanced, at least temporarily. Participants of their experiment who were primed with the idea of a growth mindset of intelligence had significantly higher levels of intellectual humility than those primed with a fixed mindset in response to disagreement. But it is not all – experimentation is an essential part of learning and it means that a learner needs to make mistakes in order to gain new knowledge. Therefore, we can predict that an intellectually humble person does not mind or fear failure because of his desire to improve. He believes that his success is based on hard work, a never ending aspiration to flourish, even

at the cost of a few failures. A contrary, fixed mindset implies that intelligence cannot be changed, and every mistake made during tests, tournaments or just a discussion reflects our unchangeable intellectual possibilities (Ehrlinger et al. 2016). That is why people with a fixed mindset dread failure and are less likely to continue working hard when experiencing setbacks. This attitude towards an individual's potential to learn and develop intellectual skills can be reshaped and a fixed mindset can be replaced with a growth mindset under certain conditions. That being so, enhancing a growth mindset may have a positive impact on fostering one's intellectual humility, whereas intellectual arrogance may be considered as an effect of an overwhelming influence of a fixed mindset.

A chance to develop intellectual humility may also be the development of correlated variables. One that is worth considering is cognitive flexibility. Correlational analysis revealed that cognitive flexibility is significantly positively correlated with intellectual humility, especially with those aspects associated with intellectual identity, such as the feeling of being threatened when contradicted and a conviction that one's own beliefs are superior (Zmigrod et al. 2019). If we consider intellectual humility as mostly a cognitive phenomenon it seems to be valuable to reflect on the possibilities of enhancing it through developing the ability of flexible thinking and applying this ability to the process of thinking about one's own beliefs and the beliefs of other people.

However, some researchers disagree with this mostly cognitive approach towards intellectual humility. According to Pitchard (2020), we should focus our attention on the fact that intellectual humility is an other-directed virtue and comprises a genuine intellectual concern about others and without that we can only have an open-minded, self-confident individual aware of his intellectual superiority and who act accordingly. That is why fostering intellectual humility should involve (1) developing good practices for getting the truth as well as (2) creating an attitude of intellectual respect for others. A dismissive attitude towards people who are less knowledgeable does not sound like an intellectually humble individual but rather an arrogant one. The importance of this aspect of intellectual humility has also been emphasized by Lilienfeld (2020). He claims, that intellectual humility should become a guiding credo of sceptical movement which should be focused not only on addressing scientifically unjustified assertion and reflecting on thinking processes, but also on a respectful attitude toward others' views. These fascinating interpretations show us a rather unexpected direction of thinking about fostering intellectual humility, which is more concerned with social life and respect towards others rather than improving one's own intellectual attitude.

It is important to note that attributing intellectual humility to oneself can cause a contradiction – such praise can easily make one proud of being intellectually humble and focusing attention on it simply breaks one out of it (Robinson & Alfano 2016). Therefore, it is worth considering whether it is possible to foster intellectual humility by teaching about it explicitly. According to Robinson et al. (2016), intellectual humility must be intrinsically motivated and for that reason we should not encourage people to be intellectually humble in order to reap the rewards for humility. It should be enhanced implicitly, without drawing attention to it and pointing out the benefits of being an intellectually humble person. Hence, the way to foster it is by teaching the value of critical feedback from the early stage of life, encouraging children to face opinions of others and, as a consequence, considering their beliefs and judgments from a different point of view.

Conclusion

Intellectual humility has proven itself to be an interesting subject of psychological research, and a growing body of literature documents its benefits in many forms, including academic achievements (Krumrei-Mancuso 2020; Rowatt et al. 2006). Although it is mostly a cognitive phenomenon based on the ability to recognise that one's beliefs might be fallible (Church et al. 2017; Hopkin et al. 2014; Krumrei-Mancuso et al. 2016; Leary et al. 2017; Porter et al. 2017; Samuelson et al. 2012; Whitcomb et al. 2015), a great amount of research indicates that intellectually humble individuals own their intellectual limitations by looking for possibilities to address them; they enjoy thinking and learning new information (Leary 2017). Even though this is an interesting point of view, it may cause problems in identifying defining characteristics of the construct. Perhaps considering other intellectual values such as open-mindedness, intellectual curiosity, intellectual courage or love of truth as co-occurring yet separate constructs may address this issue in future.

Much research shows a significant impact of intellectual humility on learning and acquiring knowledge (Deffler et al. 2016; Leary et al. 2017; Haggard et al. 2018; Krumrei-Mancuso et al. 2020; Rowatt et al. 2006). Intellectually humble individuals are more open-minded, consider ideas from different angles and feel comfortable when they meet opposing views. Their willingness to discuss perspectives of other people allows them to broaden intellectual horizons and avoid the pitfalls of dogmatic thinking (Hopkin et al. 2014; Krumrei-Mancuso 2018). In a world of ubiquitous arrogance and irreconcilable conflicts, it seems to be the cure we need.

While studies demonstrate significant correlations between intellectual humility and traits like openness to experience and conscientiousness (Krumrei-Mancuso & Rouse 2016), these relationships should not be interpreted as causal. It remains unclear whether intellectual humility fosters openness or whether individuals who are naturally open-minded simply score higher on humility scales. Moreover, although intellectual humility has been linked to curiosity, motivation, and knowledge acquisition (Haggard et al. 2018), its direct impact on academic performance remains debated. Some studies suggest that intellectually humble students engage more in deep learning and reflection, but this may not always translate into higher GPA scores (Krumrei-Mancuso et al. 2020).

At the same time, numerous studies highlight the positive role of intellectual humility in learning and decision-making; however, it is essential to consider methodological limitations. Many of these studies rely on self-report measures, which may introduce social desirability bias (Deffler et al. 2016). Additionally, different research teams use varied scales to measure intellectual humility (Porter et al. 2020), raising concerns about comparability. Furthermore, the predominance of WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) samples (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan 2010) limits the generalizability of findings to non-Western contexts, underscoring the need for broader, cross-cultural research.

The answer to the question whether it is possible to foster intellectual humility and if so, to what extent, is not yet complete. Predictions are optimistic, though. Enhancing growth mindsets and teaching the value of getting constructive feedback and confronting our views with others in discussions can increase the level of intellectual humility. It seems to be especially consequential in forming the minds of young people. Beyond doubt, the role of education in instilling an intellectual values into the student (Pitchard 2020) and one of the most fundamental intellectual values is intellectual humility. It plays an important role in the pursuit of knowledge, and its practical implications may contribute to educational systems, help people to accept their intellectual limitations, decrease the tendency to overestimate intellectual strengths and rekindle curiosity and the willingness to learn and broaden intellectual horizons.

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SUMMARY

A growing body of research has demonstrated the role of intellectual humility in acquiring knowledge. In this article I present main conceptualisations of intellectual humility and introduce a perspective of co-occurrent concepts of open-mindedness, curiosity, intellectual courage and love of truth. The research on intellectual humility in learning activities shows correlations with better recognition memory, openness, curiosity, tolerance to ambiguity, low dogmatism, thinking beyond rules and an inquisitive approach to knowledge. Therefore, I consider different ways to foster intellectual humility as it seems to be significant in the educational process and has been proved to be possible, at least temporarily.

KEYWORDS: intellectual humility, education, acquiring knowledge, open-mindedness, curiosity

STRESZCZENIE

Rosnąca liczba badań pokazuje, że w procesie edukacji i zdobywania wiedzy istotną rolę odgrywa pokora intelektualna. W niniejszym artykule prezentuję konceptualizację pojęcia pokory intelektualnej, a także wprowadzam powiązane z nią konstrukty, takie jak otwartość umysłu, ciekawość i odwaga intelektualna oraz umiłowanie prawdy. Badania nad pokorą intelektualną w kontekście aktywności związanych z uczeniem się pokazują jej związki ze zmiennymi, takimi jak: pamięć, otwartość, ciekawość, tolerancja niejednoznaczności, dogmatyzm, myślenie wybiegające poza schemat oraz dociekliwość intelektualna. W związku ze znaczeniem pokory intelektualnej w procesie edukacji, w końcowej części artykułu rozważam możliwości jej wzmacniania. Odwołuję się przy tym do badania, zgodnie z którym możliwe jest zwiększenie poziomu pokory intelektualnej.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: pokora intelektualna, edukacja, zdobywanie wiedzy, otwartość intelektualna, ciekawość

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Przysłano do redakcji / Received: 24.05.2023

Data akceptacji do publikacji / Accepted: 10.12.2024