

Humility, Overconfidence, and Leadership in Agricultural Education

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Priority seven of the American Association for Agricultural Education National Research Agenda (Roberts, T. G., Harder, A., & Brashears, 2016, p. 61) suggests, “Our ability to be exercise empathy, model humility, and practice the idea of accompaniment, where we seek to understand those we are working with and those we are attempting to serve before seeking to be understood and attempting to implement solutions, will be paramount as we attempt to create the solutions our world needs most.” This focus on practicing humility to address and mitigate complex problems is essential to the future of the field.

However, humility does not come easy. Although human behavior is complex and often unpredictable, one of the more consistent findings in social-psychological research is that people often see themselves to be better than others on different personal characteristics (Myers 1995). For example, in 2002 research conducted by Rowatt, Ottenbreit, Nesselrode and Cunningham found that significantly more than 50% of individuals estimated they were above average on desirable traits and below average on undesirable traits when comparing themselves to others. This is in line with Myers (1995) research who found that 90% of college faculty rated themselves as superior to their average colleague.

These findings are troubling, especially when they are compared to recent research supporting humility as an important personal and professional characteristic. Even though humility has received very little attention in the social science research, the construct has gained more attention lately in Positive Organizational Psychology and the study of leadership. Collins (2001), in his book *Good to Great*, found that leaders in the most enduring successful companies demonstrated a blend of determination and personal humility. These “Level 5” leaders, as he called them, were better able to entertain different perspectives, manage others emotions, and connect back to the organizational goals than those who had low levels of humility. Furthermore, recent research suggests that humility predicts prosocial behaviors such as generosity (Exline & Hill, 2012; LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, Tsang, & Willerton, 2012) self-esteem (Exline & Geyer, 2004), better performance on the job (Exline, 2012) and forgiveness (Powers Nam, Rowatt, & Hill, 2007). The research presented in this poster will explore the perceptions of individuals across the United States and the impact overconfidence and optimism bias has on individual’s perception of leadership and humility. Additionally, this research will address overconfidence as it relates to leadership, work performance, ethical behavior and our ability to address complex adaptive problems.

Method

Two hundred and fifty-five Americans (126 male and 129 female), with ages ranging from 18 to over 60, participated in the survey. The online survey tool *Survey Monkey* (www.surveymonkey.com/) was used to house the online survey and to gain access to a diverse population of Americans throughout the United States. The survey consisted of five demographic questions and eight questions comparing the perception of one’s own personal characteristics, work performance, ethical character, leadership and humility to the average person. Responses were measured on a Likert scale from 1-5, where 1 indicates far less or far below average and 5 indicated far more or far above average on the individual questions.

Results

In the study, overconfidence was addressed by comparing the perception of one's own personal characteristics, work performance, ethical character and leadership to the average person. The data suggests that people are overconfident in all areas of personal characteristics, work performance, ethics behavior and leadership. A series of one-sample hypothesis tests were performed and in each case there is enough evidence to support the corresponding hypothesis from the research.

Analysis of Individual Overconfidence Measures

	Mean	Test Statistic (z-value)	P-value for one-tailed test
(a) Intelligence	3.78	15.72	< 0.0001
(b) Attractiveness	3.26	4.32	< 0.0001
(c) Performance at work	4.18	22.79	< 0.0001
(d) Performance at work vs. coworkers	3.78	15.51	< 0.0001
(e) Ethics	3.89	16.21	< 0.0001
(f) Likelihood of ethical behavior	4.20	22.75	< 0.0001
(g) Leadership compared to manager	3.49	7.63	< 0.0001

Discussion

The importance of humility is laid out in priority seven of the American Association for Agricultural Education National Research Agenda. The purpose of this research is to better understand the overconfidence that exists throughout our society as it pertains to personal characteristics, leadership, work performance, and ethical issues. The researched affirmed that, as individuals, we believe that our own personal characteristics, work performance, ethical character and leadership are more or better than the average person.

Additionally, the purpose of this research is to start the discussion of ways to educate those in Agricultural Education about the perils of being overconfident, while still holding onto all the benefits of being over optimistic. This is extremely important if we are going to work across disciplines to address the complex problems associated with agriculture and natural resources. As Myers (1995, p. 203) suggests, "Optimism beats pessimism in promoting self-efficacy and persistence when facing initial failures. Nevertheless, a dash of pessimism can save us from the perils of unrealistic optimism... The moral: success in school and beyond requires enough optimism to sustain hope and enough pessimism to motivate concern." It could be argued that Myers has the right idea, however, instead of a dash of pessimism, we all need a heavy dose of humility, as outlined in the research agenda. This is especially important when it relates to our capacity to utilize humility as a lens to address our most pressing problems in agriculture and natural resources.

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