

PASTS Proposal, September 2023: Moral Humility and Affective Polarization

Affective polarization is rooted in part in conflicts and divisions over values and morality (Brandt & Crawford, 2020; Enders & Lupton, 2021; Graham et al., 2009; Jost et al., 2022). Given this backdrop, we reasoned that moral humility might be one character virtue that help cut against the polarizing climate stemming from moral disagreements. We define moral humility as the awareness and acknowledgement of the limitations of one's moral self and being respectful of others' moral strengths (Smith & Kouchaki, 2018). In our past work ($N=5400$), we have developed and validated a new scale to measure moral humility and consistently found it to be associated with less affective polarization, less support for anti-democratic candidates, less misperceptions about political outgroup, less perceived outgroup threat, higher perceived morality of outgroup, and more support for more political compromise. In contrast, measures of intellectual humility are inconsistently related to these same constructs, suggesting that morality humility is a key type of humility for reduced affective polarization and related constructs.

However, our work has only used convenience samples (college students, Prolific participants) and we have not tested moral humility's association with cognitions and behaviors that might facilitate less polarizing outcomes. Theory suggests that a moral learning orientation might be one route to moral humility's positive outcomes (Smith & Kouchaki, 2018). In line with this, moral learning emerged as a factor of the moral humility measure in our own work. Thus, our proposed study has two aims: (i) replicate if moral humility is associated with reduced affective polarization, anti-democratic attitudes, and misperceptions in a representative sample and (ii) extend our work to test if moral humility is associated with moral learning using a selective exposure task (Frimer et al., 2017). We hypothesize that people higher in moral humility will express more willingness to learn about a range of moral topics from people who disagree with them and will express lower levels of affective polarization, anti-democratic attitudes, and misperceptions.

The proposed project will further our understanding of moral humility and the nature of polarization. In combination with our other work, this will help set the stage for future studies testing how moral humility can help reduce polarization and increase compromise. First, by replicating the relationship between moral humility and affective polarization, anti-democratic attitudes, and political misperceptions in a representative sample, it will lend strength to our idea that moral humility can be a promising character virtue for depolarization. This will serve as a confirmatory study necessary before building interventions. Second, this project will help us identify if moral learning is one mode of cognition and behavior that can help build bridges between people who disagree politically.

More indirectly, studying moral humility gives the field additional information about the role of moral and value conflicts and differences in polarization. These differences are often given less attention when designing interventions as compared to political identity, despite evidence suggesting that values serve as the glue that connects people's political attachments (Lupton et al., 2020). Focusing on political identity is understandable, however, because political identities are largely stable overtime (more stable than personality traits; Brandt & Morgan, 2022; Vaisey & Kiley, 2021) identifying routes to depolarization that do not invoke political identities will be fruitful.

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