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Intellectual Humility Development in Adolescence: The Role of Schools

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Abstract

Humans are not omniscient. Our knowledge is partial and our beliefs are not known beyond doubt. Appropriately reckoning with our intellectual limitations requires *intellectual humility*, or recognizing the limits of our knowledge. Intellectual humility predicts a range of adaptive outcomes in adults. Here, we describe why cultivating intellectual humility can support adaptive intellectual, social, and civic development in adolescence, and why advances in cognitive sophistication and self-understanding during this stage of life make adolescents capable of developing intellectual humility. Furthermore, rooted in evidence that experiences in school shape the development of intellectual humility, we argue that school is a key context for fostering intellectual humility in adolescence and identify several priorities for future work in this area.

Keywords: intellectual humility, adolescence, school, cognitive development, social development, civic development

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Humans are not omniscient. Our understanding is incomplete, as what any person knows is only part of all there is to know. Our understanding is also imperfect; sometimes we are mistaken. Appropriately reckoning with our epistemic limitations requires *intellectual humility*, recognizing that our knowledge is partial and that our beliefs are not known beyond doubt. Intellectual humility can guard against biases and errors in our own thinking and help us have more positive, open-minded interactions with other people, including those who have different views than ourselves (Hanel et al., 2023; Knöchelmann & Cohrs, 2024; Koetke et al., 2021; Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2020).

The developmental stage of adolescence is a time of explosive change that provides a window of opportunity for learning and development (Dahl, 2016; Tezler et al., 2022), including the development of intellectual humility. Nevertheless, headwinds to the development of intellectual humility also exist during this stage of life, including social needs for belonging (Crone & Dahl, 2012; Nelson et al., 2016) that can elevate the desire to appear confident, strident, and to avoid embarrassment. Further, many adolescents today are coming of age in an era where intellectual humility is often hard to find: Increasingly widespread populist and “post-truth” rhetoric advocates for sticking to one’s opinions and ignoring disconfirming evidence and expertise (Chinn et al., 2021; Kienhues et al., 2020; Noack & Eckstein, 2023). Polarized social and political contexts discourage us from listening to one another and looking for common ground (Boxwell et al., 2024). Negative emotions and outrage fuel social media engagement more than careful thought (Bellovary et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2024).

With many societal currents pulling the other way, here we ask: How might we encourage the development of intellectual humility in adolescence and why might it be valuable to do so?

We compile evidence for why cultivating intellectual humility in adolescence is important and possible. We then review recent research and propose that schools are a prime arena for shaping intellectual humility in adolescence, before identifying priorities for future work in this area. As a context for the current work, we begin by describing intellectual humility.

Intellectual Humility

Intellectual humility has been defined in many ways by psychologists and philosophers (Porter et al., 2021), but nearly all scholars agree that it is an attribute that involves recognizing the limitations of one's knowledge and beliefs (Ballantyne, 2021; McElroy-Heltzel et al., 2019; Porter et al., 2021; Van Tongeren et al., 2019). Intellectual humility varies across people and within people across situations. Some people tend to be more intellectually humble overall and others less so, but situations and particular issues can make it easier or more difficult to think and act in intellectually humble ways (Brienza et al., 2018; Hoyle et al., 2016; Jayawickreme & Fleeson, 2023; Zachry et al., 2018). High intellectual humility is characterized by acknowledging that our knowledge is partial and that our beliefs are subject to uncertainty. By contrast, low intellectual humility is characterized by an "unfounded insistence that [our] own beliefs are correct" (Leary et al., 2017, p. 794). Greater intellectual humility often manifests in hearing-out other people's perspectives, in part because other people may have knowledge that we do not (though listening to such perspectives does not require that we believe all claims). Intellectual humility can also be expressed to other people, for example, by deferring to those with more knowledge and by admitting when we do not know something or are mistaken.

Conceptually, intellectual humility belongs to a family of attributes that characterize excellent thinkers and learners (Baehr, 2017; Ratchford et al., 2024). Its uniqueness stems from its emphasis on recognition of intellectual limitations. By contrast, open-mindedness emphasizes

the fair consideration of different views and curiosity the desire to learn, both of which may or may not involve acknowledging one's limitations (Baehr, 2011; Clark et al., 2019). Nevertheless, though intellectual humility's hallmark is recognition of limitations, intellectual humility does not necessarily oppose conviction or confidence (Koetke & Schumann, 2024; Kidd, 2016; c.f. Hannon & Kidd, 2024). Rather, with greater intellectual humility, the strength of one's conviction and confidence will closely coincide with the evidentiary basis for a particular belief (Leary et al., 2017).

Intellectual humility has several adaptive correlates. Those higher in intellectual humility tend to be more curious and open to listening to opposing perspectives (Bowes et al., 2021; Leary et al., 2017; Porter & Schumann, 2018; Stanley et al., 2020), more willing to vet dubious misinformation and less likely to endorse conspiracy theories (Bowes et al., 2022; Koetke et al., 2021), and less hostile towards those who do not share their political positions (Bowes et al., 2020; Knöchelmann & Cohrs, 2024; Krumrei-Mancuso & Newman, 2020; Sgambati & Ayduk, 2023; Smith, 2023). From an interpersonal perspective, being intellectually humble can improve how other people view us (Fetterman et al., 2022; Haga & Olson, 2017; Karabegovic & Mercier, 2023) and increase social connection, for example, by reducing relational wear-and-tear when perspectives clash (Van Tongeren et al., 2019). Intellectually humbler people also tend to give greater weight to and subsequently follow evidence-based recommendations, even when such recommendations go against the dominant position of their group (Huynh & Senger, 2021; Jongman-Sereno et al., 2023; Ryu et al., 2023).

Intellectual Humility in Adolescence

Although intellectual humility could be encouraged at many phases of life, we make the case that cultivating intellectual humility is important in adolescence. During this period of

transition from childhood to adulthood that is often considered to span the second decade of life (Crone & Dahl, 2012; Patton et al., 2016; Telzer et al., 2022), cultivating intellectual humility can help youth succeed in several key developmental domains, including in intellectual, social, and civic arenas.

Intellectual Humility is Desirable during Adolescence

Intellectual development. Adolescents are tasked with growing as independent and autonomous thinkers as they become less reliant on parents and caregivers (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). Becoming more independent requires navigating complicated epistemic landscapes full of contradictory claims and emerging with reasonable beliefs. Adolescents' drive for independence and search for identity fuels epistemic exploration (Erikson, 1950/1993; Marcia, 1966), but it can also increase resistance to valid authorities (Bryan et al., 2016) and susceptibility to untrustworthy information (Noack & Ekstein, 2023), including falsehoods and misinformation readily accessible to youth in digital media. Indeed, youth may be even more vulnerable to conspiracy beliefs than younger children and adults (Jolley et al., 2021). Intellectual humility, which reminds us to check our biases and blind spots, is important for discerning the truth and making sound decisions, and especially desirable during this time of heightened epistemic vulnerability.

Intellectual humility can also promote learning in school. For many youth, the adolescent years are marked by declining grades and school failure (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Bowers, 2010; Eccles et al., 1993) – indeed, 20% of U.S. students fail to earn a high school diploma on time (McFarland et al., 2018). Academic failure has lifelong consequences for health and wellbeing (Autor, 2014; Patton et al., 2016). Research suggests that intellectual humility can help students succeed in school. Intellectually humbler high school students and undergraduates have been

found to invest more effort in learning, to persist more, to be more receptive to teacher feedback, and to earn higher grades (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2019; Porter et al., 2024; Porter et al., 2020; Wong & Wong, 2021). Cultivating intellectual humility in adolescence can therefore contribute to youths' intellectual gains and achievement in the classroom.

Social development. Adolescents can also benefit from growing in social competence amidst increasingly complex social challenges, including increased conflict with parents, development of romantic relationships, and increased reliance on peers for relational support (Crone & Dahl, 2012). Forming quality friendships can protect youth from various stressors (Berndt, 1992; Cuadros & Berger, 2016), but many youth struggle to establish and maintain close friendships during adolescence, contributing to unfavorable outcomes in adolescence and even adulthood (Allen et al., 2024; Berndt, 1992). Because intimacy requires sharing not only strengths but also limitations and vulnerabilities (Buhrmester, 1990), intellectual humility can help youth form close relationships by increasing the intimacy and depth of their connections with others. Likewise, intellectual humility can help youth navigate interpersonal conflicts, increasing the quality and quantity of youths' relationships at a time when such relationships are important determinants of health and wellbeing (Schwartz-Mette et al., 2020).

Civic development. Developmentally, adolescents also become more interested and capable of understanding how they fit in and can contribute to society (Wray-Lake & Ballard, 2023; Yates & Youniss, 1999). Contemporary pluralist societies bring together people with diverse life experiences, political and religious beliefs, identities, and histories (Kahne & Rogers, 2024). Youth can benefit from developing "civic muscles" that allow them to have constructive interactions with those who are different than them, who they are bound to encounter (Fishkin et al., 2021). Such skills are particularly needed given high levels of political polarization and

hostility seen around the world, even among youth (Boxwell et al., 2024; Laffineur et al., 2024; Oden & Porter, 2023; Tyler & Iyengar, 2023). Cultivating intellectual humility also has the potential to increase civic engagement in youth: Intellectually humbler U.S. undergraduates were more interested in joining a bipartisan political group during the 2008 presidential election than their less intellectually humble counterparts (Kross & Grossmann, 2012), and adults higher in intellectual humility reported greater interest in politics and less dislike of political discussion (Krumrei-Mancuso & Newman, 2020). Cultivating intellectual humility in adolescence has the potential to both equip youth with the skills to engage in civic discourse across difference and to increase their engagement in civic domains.

Adolescents are Capable of Intellectual Humility

Popular stereotypes characterize adolescents as self-centered, cocky, and careless (Telzer et al., 2022), attributes that, if true, would make having intellectual humility difficult, if not impossible. Counter to these stereotypes, research suggests that youth are fully capable of intellectual humility, owing to both increases in cognitive capacities and growth in self-understanding.

Cognitive sophistication. Intellectual humility requires higher-level cognitive processes, including *meta-cognition* (the ability to reflect on one's own thinking) and *social cognition* (the ability to understand and interact constructively with others). Even young children display impressive meta- and social cognitive capacities (Butler et al., 2020; Ghetti et al., 2013; Harris, 2012), but higher-level cognition grows with age and becomes increasingly impressive and sophisticated during adolescence (Crone & Dahl, 2012; Kilford et al., 2016; Kuhn, 1999; Metz et al., 2020; Moses-Payne et al., 2021). Youth can evaluate their own knowledge and that of other people, weigh opposing information, reflect on the strengths and limits of different information,

and discern what is trustworthy (Butler et al., 2020; Harris, 2012; Kuhn, 1999; Moses-Payne, 2021). In the socio-political domain, adolescents' increased cognitive sophistication allows for critical reflection and advanced perspective-taking related to moral, social, and political views (Flanagan, 2013; Metzger & Smetana, 2010; Seider et al., 2020), paving the way for intellectual humility in these arenas.

Self-understanding. Intellectual humility also requires people to understand that they have limitations. Whereas young children's self-concepts tend to be simpler and universally (often excessively) positive, older children and adolescents' assessments of themselves tend to be more complex, measured, nuanced, and accurate (Damon & Hart, 1982; Fandakova et al., 2017; Harter, 2012; van der Aar et al., 2018; van der Crujisen et al., 2018). Though youth, like adults, can be narcissistic (e.g., Peets & Hodges, 2023), a recent meta-analysis of longitudinal data found normative declines in narcissism starting at age 8 (Orth et al., 2024). In other words, youth do not tend to become *more* self-aggrandizing during their adolescent years. Rather, they are better able to integrate understanding of their limitations into their self-assessments, laying the groundwork for intellectual humility.

The Role of School

Among the many contexts that could influence youths' developing intellectual humility, schools deserve close attention. Schools share a goal of instilling the core values and skills that allow a society to operate cohesively and progress, making intellectual humility a plausible outcome for schools to try to cultivate (Valant, 2020). Schools also have ample opportunity for such cultivation: For example, U.S. adolescents spend more than 6 hours a day at school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008), making it a high-opportunity context to consider. School is also an important place where youth think, acquire knowledge, refine their

beliefs, and receive feedback that they are wrong (Chinn et al., 2021) – all important training-grounds for intellectual humility.

Evidence that Intellectual Humility is Shaped by Experiences in School

Adolescents can grow in intellectual humility when it is valued, modeled, and practiced in a classroom (Baehr, 2021; Soncini et al., 2022). For example, across several experiments and a longitudinal study, youth were more willing to express intellectual humility in class when a teacher modeled intellectual humility themselves (Porter et al., 2024). Likewise, middle school students whose teachers created a stronger “learning culture” where the main goal was to deeply understand the material increased in intellectual humility over the course of the school year and into the next (Porter et al., 2022). Directly teaching youth to question can also foster enduring dispositions towards curiosity and, possibly, intellectual humility (Clark et al., 2019).

Unfortunately, schools can also work *against* the development of intellectual humility. Just as “learning cultures” can encourage intellectual humility, “brilliance cultures”, in which high intellectual ability is perceived to be needed for success, can discourage it. Students in these contexts can come to believe that showing intellectual humility compromises one’s chances for success, or at least *looking* successful (Porter & Cimpian, 2023). Additionally, and ironically, many children learn early on that school rewards knowing answers more than asking questions (Ronfard, 2018). This likely contributes to widespread hesitancy to recognize and disclose ignorance and confusion in school during secondary school (Porter & Cimpian, 2023).

Areas for Future Research on Intellectual Humility in Schools

Nonetheless, we still know relatively little about how schools influence adolescents' intellectual humility. Beyond merely calling for more research, we identify several high-priority topics for future work in this area.

Youth today are attending school at a time of high polarization and when deep divisions exist about the purpose and content of education (James et al., 2010; Zimmerman, 2022). Such polarization is having a “chilling effect” on teachers' willingness to broach controversial topics, raising concerns that youth are missing opportunities to practice respectful discussion and disagreement (Doan et al., 2023; Kahne & Rogers, 2024). As one high school principal put it, “the kids [are] just so stuck in their trenches, they [aren't] even willing to listen to the other side” (Kahne & Rogers, 2024, p. 13). We lack understanding of how these contexts shape youths' intellectual humility. Collective intellectual humility – intellectual humility residing at the group, organizational, or contextual level – likely impacts individuals' intellectual humility (Dunning, 2023; Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2024), and thus entire schools that embrace or eschew intellectual humility could have a potent influence on the development of intellectual humility in their pupils. Study of student and educator perspectives on intellectual humility is also needed. What drawbacks or benefits to students and teachers perceive about intellectual humility? To what extent have teachers been prepared to use and model intellectual humility in their teaching and how can they be supported in using intellectual humility more? .

Educating for intellectual humility should be a multidisciplinary endeavor – all educators can use techniques like modeling intellectual humility and creating “learning” cultures. Still, research is needed that examines how to cultivate intellectual humility in different subject areas, especially science and social studies. As political commitments have been pitted against

expertise, we have seen a global increase in “post-truth” rhetoric, “alternative facts”, and science denial (Chinn et al., 2021; Kienhues et al., 2020; Noack & Eckstein, 2023). Deference to expert and scientific consensus can be an expression of intellectual humility, and refusal to reckon with evidence and expert opinion constitutes a lack of intellectual humility. Educators need techniques for helping students evaluate the credibility of sources they encounter, and for conveying that knowledge is limited without compromising the epistemic credibility of sound scientific, historical, and journalistic claims. Schools are uniquely positioned to teach young people how to evaluate sources, and how historians, journalists and scientists work together to create reliable and credible knowledge systems amid uncertainty and individual intellectual limitations (Chinn et al., 2021; Kienhues et al., 2020; Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2024).

Adolescents today spend a considerable amount of time on social media platforms (Vogels et al., 2022), using them an average of 4.8 hours per day by some estimates (Rothwell, 2023). In the absence of education, use of use of such platforms can work against the development of intellectual humility. For example, interacting with social media and the internet (e.g., searching and sharing information) can erroneously inflate our sense of how much we know (Fisher et al., 2015; Ward et al., 2023). Digital media platforms can also convince us that our understanding is unequivocally correct through algorithms that create echo chambers and lead us down “rabbit holes” rife with intellectual arrogance and hostility towards those with opposing perspectives (Cinelli et al., 2021). Researchers have identified ways to help teachers and students navigate online information more effectively (Breakstone et al., 2024; McGrew & Breakstone, 2023; Tseng et al., 2021; Wineburg et al., 2022). Yet to be leveraged, however, is how educating for intellectual humility might foster more constructive digital media use in adolescence. For example, generative artificial intelligence (AI) programs can help debunk

conspiracy beliefs (Costello et al., 2024). Could educators use such programs to promote intellectual humility and shore-up internet and digital media skills? Might anchoring media literacy instruction in personal ideals like intellectual humility be more intrinsically motivating and encourage youth to put good habits to use outside of the classroom (Chinn et al., 2021; Lapsley & Chaloner, 2020)? Moreover, the presence of misinformation and “deep fakes” – artificial text, images, and audio that look real, make it even more difficult to detect what is real. Might spending time on such “deep fakes” impact students’ intellectual humility and, if so, how could teachers ensure that such education does not lead to excessive skepticism? Overall, provided intellectual humility offers the same protection from misinformation to youth that it does to adults, we need to understand how intellectual humility might be fruitfully incorporated into digital literacy pedagogy.

Finally, perhaps nowhere more than in school do children interact with those from different socio-economic, racial, and ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Schools are important training grounds for navigating such differences and, as we have argued, intellectual humility can help with this. However, schools can also augment social injustices and inequalities (Brummelman & Sedikides, 2023). Pertaining to intellectual humility, philosophers and psychologists have raised concerns that students with less social advantage may be at greater risk of *underestimating* their knowledge, whereas those with more social advantage may be at greater risk of *overestimating* their knowledge (Battaly, 2023; Hazlett, 2017; McElroy-Heltzel et al., 2023; Tanesini, 2021). Such processes play out in societies in which some people’s knowledge is unjustly discredited (Callahan, 2023; Fricker, 2007). We must take care to educate for intellectual humility in a way that helps to remedy, rather than exacerbate, inequalities (McElroy-Heltzel et al., 2023). Indeed, virtues like intellectual pride, courage, and autonomy are needed alongside

intellectual humility (Baehr, 2017; Battaly, 2023; Hazlett, 2017; Ratchford et al., 2024).

Individualized approaches that prioritize intellectual assets for some students, and limitations for others, offers one strategy in theory (Battaly, 2023; Hazlett, 2017; Tanesini, 2021), though what this would look like in practice has yet to be worked out. Development and testing of such approaches are priorities for future work.

Conclusion

Threats to reason, truth, and the ability to work together are on the rise in many parts of the world. Cultivating intellectual humility can help combat these threats (Bowes et al., 2021; Knöchelmann & Cohrs, 2024; Koetke et al., 2021; Leary et al., 2017). We have argued that adolescents can benefit from intellectual humility and that they can develop it. Drawing on an emerging evidence base, we have also argued that schools are a good place to foster intellectual humility. Nevertheless, much about educating for intellectual humility during the second decade of life remains unknown. Studies at the nexus of intellectual humility, adolescence, and schooling promise to help us advance cohesion and progress, revealing specific strategies for aiding us in this quest.

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