

## Arrogance Invites Loss, Humility Brings Benefit: Individual Psychological and Sociocultural Mechanisms

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### Abstract

Humility is an excellent quality and virtue advocated across both Eastern and Western cultures. Existing research has found that humility, as an important psychological attribute, has extensive positive effects on individuals' lives and work. These effects and their functional mechanisms can be summarized and analyzed from three perspectives: cognitive, motivational, and normative: the cognitive mechanism of "self-knowledge," the motivational mechanism of "social lubricant," and the normative mechanism of "traditional virtue." Future research should further explore the psychological structure of humility, analyze the potential boundary conditions for the manifestation of humility's functions, and investigate the neural basis of humility's functions.

### Full Text

## Modesty Brings Gain: The Mechanisms of Individual Psychology and Social Culture

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### Abstract

Modesty is a virtue cherished by both Eastern and Western cultures. Previous research has demonstrated that modesty, as an important psychological attribute, exerts broad positive influences on individuals' lives and work. These effects and their functional mechanisms can be synthesized and analyzed from

three perspectives: the cognitive mechanism of “self-knowledge,” the motivational mechanism of “social lubricant,” and the normative mechanism of “traditional virtue.” Future research should further explore the psychological structure of modesty, analyze the potential boundary conditions of its functionality, and investigate the neural underpinnings of modesty’s effects.

**Keywords:** modesty/humility; haughtiness invites loss, modesty brings gain; self-knowledge; social lubricant; traditional virtue

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## 1. Introduction

Modesty (or humility) represents a traditional virtue in Chinese culture and an esteemed quality across world civilizations. The earliest recorded discussion of modesty appears in the ancient text *Shangshu · Dayumo*: “Haughtiness invites loss, modesty brings gain; this is indeed the way of heaven.” The *I Ching* also dedicates a hexagram to modesty, using the image of “mountain within earth” —where the mountain lies beneath the earth, internal rather than external—to vividly illustrate the principle of modesty (Han Huiying, 2014). As the only hexagram in the *I Ching* with entirely auspicious lines, it is considered the perfect hexagram. The *I Ching* further states: “The modest gentleman can cross the great river; good fortune,” emphasizing the benefits of maintaining modesty in conduct. Confucius greatly admired the principle of modesty, regarding it as an essential virtue for the gentleman, as reflected in sayings such as “The gentleman is dignified but not arrogant,” “I was not born with knowledge, but love the ancients and diligently seek it,” and “Who can be full without overturning?” Daoist thought also places great importance on modesty, as seen in *Daodejing* Chapter 33: “Those who know others are wise; those who know themselves are enlightened,” and Chapter 22: “Not to display oneself is to be enlightened; not to assert oneself is to be distinguished; not to boast is to have merit; not to be proud is to endure. Only because one does not contend, none in the world can contend with them.” These principles of “self-knowledge,” “wisdom in knowing others,” “advancing through retreat,” and “non-contention” capture the essence of modesty (Cao Feng & Liu Yue, 2017). The emphasis on modesty in both Confucian and Daoist traditions has helped establish it as a universal virtue in Chinese culture. Similarly, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all esteem modesty, generally viewing it as reverence and submission to God, as well as a virtue of caring for others with kindness and compassion (Qiu Yexiang, 2013). The Bible states: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6), while the Quran declares: “The servants of the Most Merciful are those who walk upon the earth in humility.”

Since Driver (2001) proposed that modesty is a “virtue of ignorance,” discussions of modesty as a moral virtue have become a focal point in moral philosophy. However, for a long time, Western-dominated social psychology research emphasized egocentrism, self-enhancement, and narcissism—issues of excessive

self-preoccupation—while neglecting modesty as an important psychological attribute. Psychologists viewed self-enhancement as crucial for maintaining self-esteem and achieving happiness and success. With the flourishing of moral research and mounting evidence that excessive pursuit of self-enhancement and self-esteem harms individuals' physical and mental health and social interactions (Colvin & Griffo, 2008), researchers gradually turned their attention to positive traits such as modesty and gratitude. Positive psychologists distilled six universal virtues and 24 character strengths from classical works across global traditions (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Modesty, as an important character strength, not only enhances well-being (Zheng & Wu, 2020) but also helps individuals better cope with risks and difficulties (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Over the past two decades, scholars across various psychological subfields have conducted in-depth investigations into the conceptual structure, measurement, influencing factors, and functions of modesty, yielding significant progress. Numerous studies demonstrate that modesty plays important roles in accurate self-perception (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Tangney, 2000), building good interpersonal relationships (Van Tongeren et al., 2019), and team collaboration and leadership decision-making (Cojuharenco & Karelai, 2020; Porter & Schumann, 2018).

In real life, however, people's attitudes toward modesty are more complex than scholars' perspectives. Modern society does not value modesty as highly as fairness or honesty, because the beneficiary of modesty is often the individual, while immodesty itself does not cause serious harm to others and society in the same way that unfair or dishonest behavior does. For instance, research has found that younger generations in China are becoming increasingly narcissistic rather than modest (Cai et al., 2012). In certain contexts, particularly social atmospheres that emphasize competition and self-promotion, the value of modesty is increasingly questioned. Modest individuals may be perceived as insincere, hypocritical, weak, insecure, and lacking in confidence (Shimai et al., 2006).

What exactly is modesty? Is it important? How does it influence individual psychology and behavior? Addressing these questions holds at least two significant implications today. First, it helps people systematically and deeply understand the essence and mechanisms of modesty, providing insights for future psychological research on this topic. Second, as Chinese society undergoes transformation, with local and foreign cultures blending and profoundly influencing people's psychology and behavior, deeply exploring the traditional cultural value of modesty can provide empirical support for cultural confidence and cultural consciousness. Therefore, this article analyzes the mechanisms through which modesty influences individual psychology and behavior from perspectives of individual psychology and social culture, and proposes directions for future research.

## 2. The Conceptual Connotation and Characteristics of Modesty

Modesty is typically defined as an under-presentation of one's abilities, skills, achievements, and advantageous traits (Cialdini & De Nicholas, 1989). Modesty is not only an impression management strategy (Cialdini & De Nicholas, 1989) or a politeness principle in social interaction (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998), but also an important personality trait (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Costa & McCrea, 1992). As a personality trait, modesty constitutes an essential component of personality structure. For example, modesty is a sub-dimension of the "Agreeableness" factor in the traditional Big Five personality model (Costa & McCrea, 1992). The latest six-dimensional personality model (comprising Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience, abbreviated as HEXACO) not only includes the five factors of the Big Five model but also establishes "Honesty-Humility" as an independent dimension (Ashton & Lee, 2007). This dimension includes four facets: sincerity, fairness, greed-avoidance, and modesty, and has been shown to exist across multiple national populations. Moreover, it better predicts individual differences in generosity, fairness, prosocial behavior, and the Dark Triad (including psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism) than the Agreeableness factor of the Big Five model (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Lee & Ashton, 2004). The modesty subscale of this personality dimension can predict modest behavior (Afghani & Vernon, 2016). Individuals scoring higher on this questionnaire—those high in trait modesty—tend to exhibit low self-focus and unassuming behavior (Ashton & Lee, 2007). Compared to individuals low in trait modesty, those high in modesty hold moderate self-views regarding their abilities, achievements, and advantages, and do not exhibit a strong sense of entitlement or superiority in interpersonal relationships. For instance, a famous gymnast with modest traits, while aware of possessing highly skilled gymnastics abilities and outstanding achievements, would not believe they deserve special treatment or privileges. This demonstrates that modest individuals can recognize their positive traits or remarkable accomplishments but do not believe these features make them superior or entitled to more special treatment than others. The reason may be that modest individuals believe that special skills and achievements in one domain do not necessarily extend to other domains (Morris et al., 2005).

In summary, the trait of modesty encompasses the following characteristics: (1) **moderate self-perception**, referring to accurate understanding and appropriate evaluation of one's abilities and traits; (2) **low self-focus and high prosocial tendency**, including lack of superiority or entitlement, and respect and appreciation for others' value; and (3) **less self-promotion and unassuming behavioral tendencies**. These characteristics cover both intrapersonal and interpersonal features. Intrapersonal features include moderate self-perception, while interpersonal features include low self-focus, concern for others, and unassuming behavioral tendencies. In actual research, because intrapersonal features are difficult to identify and measure, researchers have focused on examining the

interpersonal features of modesty. Particularly in social and organizational contexts, modesty traits manifest more as characteristics at the interpersonal and relational levels. Researchers therefore define modesty as an interpersonal trait that implies a willingness to view oneself accurately, appreciate others' strengths and contributions, and remain open to new ideas and feedback (Owens et al., 2013). Woodcock (2008) argues that modesty is a prosocial tendency expressed by individuals out of consideration for others' well-being. Modest individuals tend to reduce threats to others by concealing their achievements, indicating they care more about others' feelings and welfare than about receiving praise for their accomplishments. Hu Jinsheng and Huang Xiting (2009) view modesty as an attitude of "self-deprecation and other-respect," encompassing both self-evaluation and attitudes toward others, manifested as a tendency to view oneself lower and others higher.

### 3. Specific Manifestations of "Haughtiness Invites Loss, Modesty Brings Gain"

#### 3.1 Positive Effects of Modesty on the Self

Modesty facilitates objective and accurate self-assessment, reducing self-enhancement bias. Self-enhancement describes a positive self-perception bias whereby individuals selectively attend to and exaggerate positive aspects of the self—such as abilities, intelligence, achievements, traits, interpersonal evaluations, and status—while downplaying their shortcomings and weaknesses. Self-enhancement manifests in various forms, including the "better-than-average effect" and "self-serving bias." Self-enhancers tend to believe they possess more positive qualities or fewer negative qualities than their peers, demonstrating the better-than-average effect (Alicke & Govorun, 2005), or they overestimate their performance on cognitive tasks (Dunning, 2005). Unlike self-enhancers, modest individuals are characterized by moderate self-evaluation, low self-focus, and unassuming behavioral tendencies. They can assess themselves and others accurately and appropriately, are willing to accept new ideas and suggestions, and lack strong needs for self-enhancement or dominating others (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Sedikides et al., 2007). Modest people have more objective grasp of their abilities and smaller perceptual biases about controllable environments (Baumeister et al., 1993; Sedikides et al., 2007). Shi et al. (2017) found that participants primed with modest virtues exhibited less self-positivity bias in self-evaluation compared to those primed with punctuality virtues. When attributing personal achievements, modest individuals tend to attribute success to external factors (such as others' help) and failure to internal factors (such as effort), displaying nonself-serving attribution bias (Wosinska et al., 1996).

Furthermore, modesty positively impacts mental health. Research indicates that modesty correlates with healthier behavioral regulation. Compared to self-enhancers, modest individuals are more likely to adopt low-risk behaviors, such

as not drinking from strangers' water bottles, avoiding unprotected sex, and refraining from illegal drug use (Sedikides et al., 2007). Modesty helps people transcend narrow self-interest, enhance experiences of universal love, and better defend against self-threats (Crocker et al., 2008). Modesty buffers the negative impact of stressful life events on well-being (Krause et al., 2016), with more modest individuals showing fewer depressive tendencies (Jankowski et al., 2013). Ke-sebir (2014) asked two groups of participants to recall either a pride-inducing experience (self-affirmation condition) or a modesty-inducing experience (modesty value-affirmation condition). Results showed that participants in the modesty value-affirmation condition experienced reduced fear and anxiety about death, along with fewer moral transgressions, religious prejudices, and desires resulting from mortality salience, compared to the self-affirmation condition. Zheng and Wu (2020) also found that individuals with higher modesty tendencies reported higher subjective well-being and lower depression levels, with trait emotional intelligence and self-esteem serving as serial mediators in the relationship between modesty and mental health. In clinical practice, modesty is employed as a psychotherapeutic approach, where clients through modesty training can address over-compensation behaviors, enhance risk identification, and improve interpersonal skills (Means et al., 1990).

### 3.2 Interpersonal Advantages of Modesty

Modesty also helps individuals succeed in interpersonal interactions. Specifically, modesty traits contribute to creating harmonious, stable, and high-quality social relationships, yielding positive social feedback. Modest people are more likable than self-enhancers and are more readily perceived as honest, friendly, and worth associating with (Davis et al., 2013). Banerjee (2000) found that 8-year-old children evaluated modest individuals more positively than self-enhancing individuals, and Chinese children, compared to their Western counterparts, held even more positive evaluations of modest behavior that does good deeds without seeking recognition—a tendency that becomes more pronounced with age (Fu et al., 2010). Ma et al. (2018) further demonstrated that Chinese children aged 7-11 considered modest people more trustworthy than immodest people (e.g., arrogant individuals). The positive function of modesty traits in interpersonal interactions has been confirmed in both Eastern and Western cultures (Bond et al., 1982; Cialdini & De Nicholas, 1989; Diekmann et al., 2015; Wosinska et al., 1996).

Modesty not only brings positive social feedback but also serves as an effective strategy for reducing interpersonal conflict and maintaining social harmony. Modest individuals avoid others' envy and negative evaluations by concealing their advantages, thereby alleviating interpersonal tension (Tal-Or, 2008). Field experiments show that when facing someone with poor academic performance, women tend to lower their estimates of their own academic achievements (Heatherington et al., 1993). Academically gifted students tend to adopt “camouflage” strategies to hide their superior abilities (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995). In

social comparison situations, individuals who display modesty tend to conceal their achievements, reducing threats to others' self-esteem and well-being, thus maintaining good interpersonal relationships.

### 3.3 Positive Effects of Modesty in Organizational Contexts

Increasingly, research has focused on the positive role of modesty in organizational settings. For employees, modesty traits can avoid threatening others and maintain harmonious team relationships. Employees high in trait modesty tend to attribute their success to team members' help and, when team tasks fail, can acknowledge their shortcomings and assume corresponding responsibility (Hareli & Weiner, 2000; Tetlock, 1980). Consequently, modest individuals are more likely to gain leaders' and colleagues' affection, positive evaluations, trust, and support, enjoying better status within teams (Davis et al., 2013; Diekmann et al., 2015; Wosinska et al., 1996). Modesty traits not only bring short-term benefits to employees (such as reputation and social acceptance) but also facilitate long-term development, such as career advancement and success. Blickle et al. (2012) examined the impact of modesty display on employees' career development in real work settings, finding that employees with high modesty behavioral tendencies experienced faster promotion and higher career satisfaction three years later. For teams, modesty enhances team cohesion, improves team collaboration effectiveness, and promotes team goal achievement (Sheldon & Bettencourt, 2001).

In leadership, modesty is also an essential quality and virtue, with humble leadership offering irreplaceable advantages in managing employees, teams, and organizations. Research shows that leaders' humble attitudes facilitate empowering leadership behaviors and top management team integration, enhance subordinates' identification with and affective commitment to leaders and organizations, and promote internal teamwork and long-term development (Ou et al., 2014). Humble leadership improves team performance by increasing team psychological capital and task allocation effectiveness (Rego et al., 2019). For example, Ridge and Ingram (2017) found that modesty displays among senior corporate managers positively predicted company performance. Humble leadership can also leverage employees' strengths, improving subordinates' performance (Owens et al., 2015), satisfaction (Owens et al., 2013), work engagement (Owens et al., 2013), voice and helping behaviors (Mao et al., 2017), and creativity (Liu et al., 2018), thereby promoting team integration and ensuring organizational adaptability to rapid environmental changes (Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004).

## 4. The Mechanisms of “Haughtiness Invites Loss, Modesty Brings Gain”

As demonstrated above, modesty brings extensive positive influences to individuals' lives and work. However, questions about how modesty exerts its effects and the underlying mechanisms remain insufficiently explained and experimen-

tally verified. Based on a synthesis and integration of previous research, this article analyzes the mechanisms of “modesty brings gain” from three perspectives: the cognitive mechanism of “self-knowledge,” the motivational mechanism of “social lubricant,” and the normative mechanism of “traditional virtue” (see Figure 1).

[Figure 1: see original paper]

#### 4.1 The Cognitive Mechanism of “Self-Knowledge”

As the saying goes, “There is always someone better; there is always a higher heaven.” Laozi stated: “Knowing others is wisdom; knowing yourself is enlightenment.” The Enlightenment thinker Rousseau observed: “Great people never abuse their advantages. They recognize where they surpass others and are aware of it, yet this does not make them less modest. The more their excellence, the more they recognize their inadequacies.” Self-knowledge refers to understanding one’s own situation and making correct self-assessments. According to self-motivation theory, humans have the motivation to evaluate themselves accurately, but due to cognitive biases such as self-enhancement and self-positivity, people often cannot recognize themselves objectively and accurately (Taylor & Brown, 1988), instead developing maladaptive personality traits like arrogance, narcissism, vanity, and self-centeredness (Twenge et al., 2008). The “Dunning-Kruger effect” describes this phenomenon of self-perception bias. Kruger and Dunning (1999) found through a series of studies that in many social and intellectual tasks, such as tests of humor and grammar knowledge, people tend to hold overly optimistic views of their abilities. This research reveals a cognitive bias: incompetent individuals not only make unfortunate choices and draw erroneous conclusions but also lack the competence to recognize their own inadequacies and identify incorrect behaviors.

From the cognitive perspective of “self-knowledge,” modesty represents an individual’s willingness to seek objective, accurate self-knowledge or the ability to correctly view one’s own strengths and weaknesses. These characteristics not only facilitate the formation of an accurate self-concept but also enable individuals to evaluate others’ abilities objectively and affirm others’ contributions. The cognitive mechanism of “self-knowledge” comprises two internal processes: metacognition and low self-focus. Metacognitive ability is essentially cognition about cognition, reflecting an individual’s self-awareness, self-reflection, self-evaluation, and self-regulation of their own cognitive activities (Flavell, 1976). From a metacognitive perspective, modesty involves not only static awareness and reflective evaluation of self-related information but also dynamic self-regulation processes. Individuals who are overly confident in the accuracy of their self-beliefs often fail to recognize limitations in their cognitive activities (Whitcomb et al., 2015), whereas individuals high in trait modesty can recognize that certain beliefs they hold may be wrong and acknowledge limitations in their knowledge. This cognitive characteristic of modesty traits is summarized as intellectual humility<sup>1</sup> (McElroy et al., 2014). Research has

shown that intellectual humility is an important component of general humility (Davis et al., 2015) and can positively predict individuals' cognitive openness and need for cognition (McElroy et al., 2014). Individuals high in intellectual humility tend to approach mistakes and learning new things with an open mindset and, when disagreeing with others, are more likely to change their fixed ideas and accept different opinions (Porter & Schumann, 2018).

<sup>1</sup> Also referred to as “cognitive humility,” “rational humility,” or “intellectual humility.”

The cognitive mechanism of “self-knowledge” is also reflected in modest individuals' low self-focus tendency, lack of entitlement and superiority, and ability to discover others' strengths and affirm their contributions. Individuals with high levels of entitlement believe they deserve special treatment and exhibit arrogance and obvious superiority in interpersonal relationships (Campbell et al., 2004). Modest individuals, by contrast, tend to view themselves from a dynamic, developmental perspective, more easily recognizing that a particular success only indicates an advantage in a specific domain at a certain stage, not necessarily superiority in other times or domains. Modest individuals often evaluate themselves from a broader perspective, situating the self within the vast natural environment and grand human history. Therefore, when achieving success, they more readily perceive the helpful contributions of factors beyond the self; when facing failure, they can more accurately identify the extent to which their own limitations caused the failure. This context-dependent evaluative perspective makes modest people more likely to recognize their own inadequacies and discover others' strengths, thereby avoiding self-centeredness. Stellar et al. (2018) partially support this hypothesis, finding that individuals in vast natural environments tend to experience awe, which in turn induces modest emotional experiences and behavioral tendencies. Brennan (2007) also notes that modest people tend to measure their current selves against “ideal” standards, thus always feeling they have not done well enough, while using more “lenient” standards when evaluating others, making it easier to discover others' advantages. The connotation of modesty advocated in traditional Chinese culture reflects rational wisdom and a progressive attitude full of dialectical spirit (Li Xiaoye, 2015). Sayings like “Be as open-minded as a valley,” “To know what you know and what you do not know, that is true knowledge,” and “When three people walk together, there must be one who can be my teacher” reflect a learning attitude of open-mindedness and eagerness to learn from others, as well as a spiritual essence of pursuing self-transcendence and self-improvement.

#### **4.2 The Motivational Mechanism of “Social Lubricant”**

The motivational mechanism of “social lubricant” focuses on the social nature of modesty, emphasizing its crucial role in creating, regulating, and maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships. Modesty is considered a politeness norm in social interaction, with modest behavior serving not only to enhance self-image (Bond et al., 1982; Wosinska et al., 1996) but also to protect others'

self-esteem and maintain interpersonal balance (Woodcock, 2008). Particularly in Chinese society, responding modestly to others' praise is considered appropriate behavior, such as actively hiding or avoiding public discussion of one's own strengths and successes (Han Guixiang, 2012; Chen et al., 2009; Han, 2011). Therefore, we propose that the motivational mechanism of "social lubricant" involves prosocial tendencies of caring for others and low self-focus.

In social interactions, modesty is a positive signal conveying friendliness, cooperation, and altruism. According to the "Big Two" theory of social cognition, individual perception, motivation, and personality can be divided into two fundamental dimensions: agency and communion (Locke, 2015; Pan Zhe et al., 2017). Agency, also called competence, refers to traits related to self-interest such as goal maintenance, utility, and intelligence (e.g., intelligent, incompetent). Communion, also called warmth, refers to traits related to others' interests such as pro/antisocial goals and social relationship maintenance (e.g., kind, mean). In social life, individuals first attend to communion traits and goals, such as others' intentions (friend or foe) and whether others might cause harm. Modesty is considered a low-agency, high-communion trait, reflecting individuals' motivation to pursue cooperative sharing and connection with others. Research has shown that modesty is closely related to agreeableness, gratitude, tolerance, and helping behavior (Fu Genyue & Chen Weiwei, 2001; Sedikides et al., 2007; Exline et al., 2004). Modest individuals improve relationship satisfaction among peers and maintain intimate relationships through keeping promises (Farrell et al., 2015) and expressing gratitude (Dwiwardani et al., 2018). Modesty also helps alleviate defensive attitudes of religious in-group members toward out-group members and reduces aggressive behavior (Van Tongeren et al., 2016). When religious belief-related disagreements arise, modest individuals are more likely to change their attitudes and acknowledge limitations in their own beliefs (Rodriguez et al., 2019).

Modesty typically presumes that a person has been or is currently successful, and that this success is publicly recognized (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Modest individuals are often those who perform more prominently in social comparisons, serving as upward social comparison targets for others. This relatively superior status can enhance self-esteem and bring positive emotional experiences, but it also exposes individuals to interpersonal risks such as hostility, negative evaluation, and envy (Exline & Lobel, 1999). Researchers have proposed the "Sensitivity about being the Target of a Threatening Upward Comparison" (STTUC) theory to explain this phenomenon. The theory posits that in social comparisons, the superior party (the outperformer) tends to adopt modest self-presentation strategies to avoid potential interpersonal risks, such as avoiding public discussion of their successes (e.g., Heatherington et al., 1993). Brigham (1996) manipulated false feedback to make college students believe their performance on a task was either comparable to or better than others'. In subsequent conversations, outperformers took longer to reveal their task scores than those who performed comparably. According to STTUC theory, when facing success or praise, modest individuals can not only suppress pride and avoid excessive

self-focus but also consider others' feelings and interpersonal relationships more carefully. People prefer those who outperform others but suppress their positive emotions over those who display joy when successful (Schall et al., 2016). In interpersonal interactions, modest individuals are better at “reading the room,” using appropriate verbal expressions, facial expressions, and body language to adapt to situations and effectively address and resolve interpersonal conflicts (Weaver et al., 2017; Diekmann et al., 2015). These social cognitive abilities help modest individuals build good interpersonal relationships.

Modest individuals can not only restrain their desires and impulses at the behavioral level but also promote fairness and justice at the moral level. Nuyen (1998) argues that modesty is a sense of justice individuals hold toward their own achievements—recognizing that their success also involves others' contributions, not just their own efforts. Ben-Ze' ew (1993) points out that modest people view their basic human value as equal to others' and consider the similarity of basic human values more important than differences in achievements across various domains. In this sense, modesty is essentially egalitarian (O' Hagan, 2018). Empirical research also shows that, compared to less modest individuals, more modest individuals exhibit more fairness and cooperation in economic decision-making games (Hilbig et al., 2015).

#### 4.3 The Normative Mechanism of “Traditional Virtue”

The normative mechanism of “traditional virtue” focuses on the cultural attributes of modesty, emphasizing the influence of sociocultural environmental factors on the formation and adaptability of modesty. Although both Eastern and Western cultures view modesty as a virtue, East Asian collectivist countries influenced by Confucian culture—compared to Western individualist countries—place greater emphasis on relationships, where maintaining interpersonal harmony is an important goal of social interaction, and thus advocate more strongly for modesty (Hwang, 2000). China, as a typical collectivist country, has valued modesty since ancient times. In Chinese society, modesty is not only a personal internal trait but also an important social norm influencing people' s behavior in social interactions. Violating modesty norms can easily provoke 反感, even hostility and ostracism (Bond et al., 1982). Modesty norms affect not only how individuals attribute their own achievements but also interpersonal attribution styles.

Han Guixiang (2010) notes that under the influence of social norms such as “do not boast” and “do not show off,” Chinese people tend to be more modest and conservative in interpersonal attribution, emphasizing environmental and others' contributions when attributing their own achievements. Han (2011) uses the dramatic concept of “script” to understand this modesty phenomenon. In Chinese society, modesty norms constitute a social script that defines what social behaviors individuals should perform in interpersonal interactions. That is, in daily interactions, Chinese people naturally know when to be modest and how to display modesty. For example, in a compliment situation, when the

complimenter praises the achiever, the achiever displays modesty by denying the compliment and appropriately self-deprecating. The complimenter then further praises the achiever's modest response, allowing the achiever to enhance self-esteem and maintain self-positivity through the complimenter's positive evaluation. Therefore, some researchers suggest that modesty is a way for Chinese people to achieve self-enhancement (Cai et al., 2011).

Modesty norms have different adaptability across different cultural and social contexts. Research finds that Western participants behave more modestly in front of friends than strangers (Tice et al., 1995; Yamagishi et al., 2012), while Chinese participants show the opposite trend. When facing close relationships, Chinese participants tend to include them as “insiders” with whom they can share joy and express themselves authentically; behaving modestly would instead seem distant and polite, creating uncomfortable feelings. Conversely, when facing non-close relationships such as strangers or acquaintances, being modest and unassuming is more appropriate behavior (Han Guixiang, 2012). Japanese participants tend to be more modest in their self-evaluations under natural conditions, but in monetary reward situations, they self-enhance similarly to American participants (Yamagishi et al., 2012). Individuals tend to be more modest in public settings but may self-enhance more in private settings (Kim et al., 2010).

Modesty as a social norm is not spontaneously formed but results from socialization. Generally, children only begin to understand the meaning of modesty and spontaneously follow modesty social norms after age 8 (Banerjee, 2000; Fu et al., 2010). As children grow older, they increasingly value peer relationships and have stronger motivation to seek social acceptance and recognition. The gradual maturation of cognitive abilities involving complex interpersonal reasoning—such as theory of mind, moral judgment, and emotion display and management—helps children understand and use modesty and other self-presentation strategies to obtain positive social outcomes across different contexts (Quintanilla & Giménez-Dasí, 2017). Additionally, parents' collectivist personality orientations and school education promote children's internalization and identification with modest self-presentation behavior norms (Fu et al., 2010). The *I Ching* states that “the modest gentleman humbles himself to cultivate virtue” and “modesty is the handle of virtue,” indicating that in Chinese society, modesty is a moral demand of the gentleman personality and an important source for nurturing other moral qualities.

These three theoretical perspectives analyze the mechanisms of “modesty brings gain” from different viewpoints and levels. They are both connected and distinct. Modesty is not only an individual-level psychological variable but also a sociocultural phenomenon. Modesty manifests in action through individuals' cognition and motivation, while being moderated by social and cultural factors. The “self-knowledge” and “social lubricant” perspectives focus on explaining modesty's functions from individual cognitive and motivational levels, whereas the “traditional virtue” perspective emphasizes modesty's cultural attributes,

elaborating its role from the social norm level.

## 5. Research Prospects

Modesty is a complex psychological phenomenon involving personality, cognition, culture, and society. This study provides only preliminary research on modesty's functions and mechanisms, with many questions requiring in-depth investigation from multiple angles and methods.

First, modesty is an extremely rich concept involving different psychological processes. Currently, researchers mainly explore modesty's connotation from a taxonomic perspective, with less examination of its psychological structural features from a holistic perspective. Gregg et al. (2008) used prototype analysis to investigate laypeople's understanding of the modesty concept, finding that lay understanding of modesty can be divided into three hierarchical structures: core features (e.g., humility, shyness, concern for others), peripheral features (e.g., sincerity, likability, avoidance of attention), and marginal features (e.g., not boasting, politeness, amiability). Weidman et al. (2018) defined humility as an emotion and used cluster analysis and factor analysis to explore humility's psychological structure. Results indicated that based on differences in eliciting events, cognition, emotion, and behavioral tendencies, humility's psychological structure has two distinct forms: appreciative humility and self-abasing humility. Appreciative humility refers to behavior tendencies oriented toward praising others, elicited by personal success events, and is associated with authentic pride, guilt, and prestige-based social status. Conversely, self-abasing humility refers to behavior tendencies including negative self-evaluation and avoidance of others' evaluation, elicited by personal failure events, and is associated with shame, low self-esteem, and submissiveness.

These studies provide preliminary validation for explorations of modesty's psychological structure, but researchers still need to improve content validity, structural validity, and discriminant validity. Moreover, modesty is a concept with strong cultural coloring, with different connotations and manifestations across cultural backgrounds. Whether modesty in Chinese culture also has the same two-dimensional structure as in Western culture is a question worth exploring. Therefore, future research could, on the basis of clarifying the conceptual structures of modesty and humility, construct a psychological structure of Chinese modesty from cognitive, reflective, motivational, and behavioral aspects.

Second, further investigate the potential boundary conditions of "modesty brings gain." The positive effects of modesty on self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and organizational management have received support from research across various psychological fields and related theories. However, under certain conditions and contexts, modest individuals also display maladaptive characteristics. For example, some researchers note that trait modesty positively correlates with depressive tendencies (Stankov, 2013). Modesty is both a stable personality trait and a self-presentation behavior. Do different modesty displays

and motivations produce different effects on individuals' self-evaluation, social interaction, and mental health? What are the boundary conditions for modesty to exert positive effects? Answering these questions will help us more comprehensively understand modesty' s essence and functions. Future research could combine the cognitive, motivational, and normative mechanisms of “modesty brings gain” to conduct targeted studies from the perspective of factors influencing internal processing. For example, from a cognitive perspective, modesty reflects a moderate self-view; does seeking accurate self-evaluation truly benefit mental health, and what factors moderate this effect? From a cultural norm perspective, what cultural and contextual factors influence modesty' s functional manifestation? In interpersonal interactions, Western individuals tend to maintain self-esteem through self-enhancement, while Chinese individuals interact according to modesty social norms. For Chinese people, seemingly “negative” modesty responses to achievements may bring an alternative social reward experience, thereby helping modest individuals maintain self-esteem. Future research could use experimental manipulations and large-scale longitudinal surveys to further explore modesty' s self-defensive function and its impact on mental health.

Third, explore the neural structural or functional basis of modesty traits or behaviors. With the development and widespread application of magnetic resonance imaging technology, increasing researchers have focused on the neural basis underlying stable personality differences, giving rise to personality neuroscience. Researchers have used structural MRI (sMRI) technology to verify the neural basis of the Big Five and other personality traits (Kanai & Rees, 2011). Compared to functional MRI, structural MRI has the advantage of not being limited to specific cognitive tasks; researchers need not construct experimental situations mimicking real-life circumstances, making it more suitable for detecting neural correlates of stable personality. The frontier “Culture-Behavior-Brain” theoretical model posits that sociocultural environments shape individuals' general patterns of cognition and behavior, which in turn influence changes in brain function and structure (Han & Ma, 2015). Many brain structural imaging studies have used voxel-based morphometry (VBM) analysis to examine correlations between Big Five dimensions such as extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism and regional variation in brain morphometry (main indicators include gray matter volume and gray matter density).

Zheng et al. (2017) used sMRI technology and VBM analysis to reveal for the first time the neural correlates of modesty personality in Chinese people. Results showed that higher modesty personality scores correlated with larger gray matter volume in the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (DMPFC), right dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), left superior temporal gyrus/temporal pole, and right posterior insular cortex. These results indicate that individual differences in modesty personality are related to brain regions involved in self-evaluation, self-regulation, and social cognition. These findings remained robust after controlling for individual self-esteem levels, indicating that modesty personality has unique brain structural correlates, providing neurostructural evidence for

individual differences in Chinese modesty personality. Modesty involves psychological components such as self-evaluation, self-control, and social cognition, but whether these three are necessary conditions for modesty, and their internal connections and processing mechanisms, lack empirical research. Future research could further examine the functional basis of modesty personality.

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