Introducing humility in leadership: Identifying humble leadership passages for leader prototype interventions

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Introduction

Humility has been defined as an interpersonal characteristic composed of:
- (a) a willingness to view oneself accurately (i.e., self-awareness)
- (b) a displayed appreciation of others' strengths and contributions
- (c) teachability, or openness to ideas, feedback (i.e., willingness to learn).[1]

The benefits of leader humility on employee and organizational outcomes have been demonstrated.[1,2,3] However, humility is not a trait that readily comes to mind when thinking about organizational leaders.
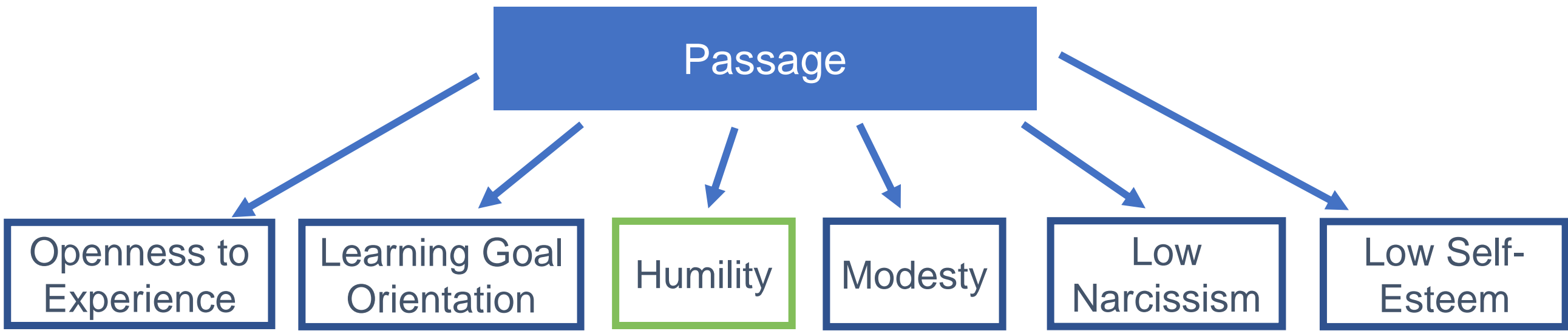
The Current Research

Through 2 studies, we integrate implicit leadership theory[4] with expressive writing research[5] to generate and test material useful for future leader humility interventions designed to increase humility in leader prototypes.

Method: Study 1A

Purpose: Select and validate humble leadership passages

Procedure: 30 passages with a theme of leader humility were selected from *The Governing Principles of Ancient China*. Participants (*N*=219) were given a definition of humility and related constructs and were asked to select the construct that best reflected the theme of each passage.

Passage → Openness to Experience | Learning Goal Orientation | Humility | Modesty | Low Narcissism | Low Self-Esteem

Results: Study 1A

We calculated substantive validity for each of our 30 passages, following the procedures outlined by Anderson & Gerbling (1991). [6]
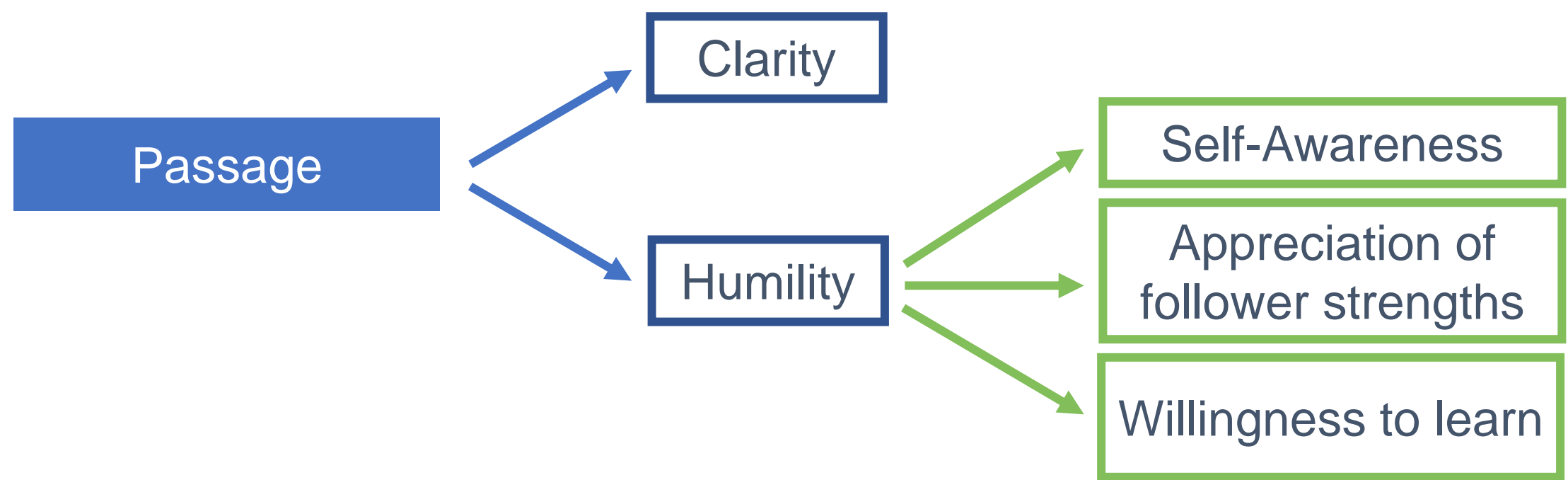
20 passages were validated as specifically reflecting a definition of humility rather than related constructs.

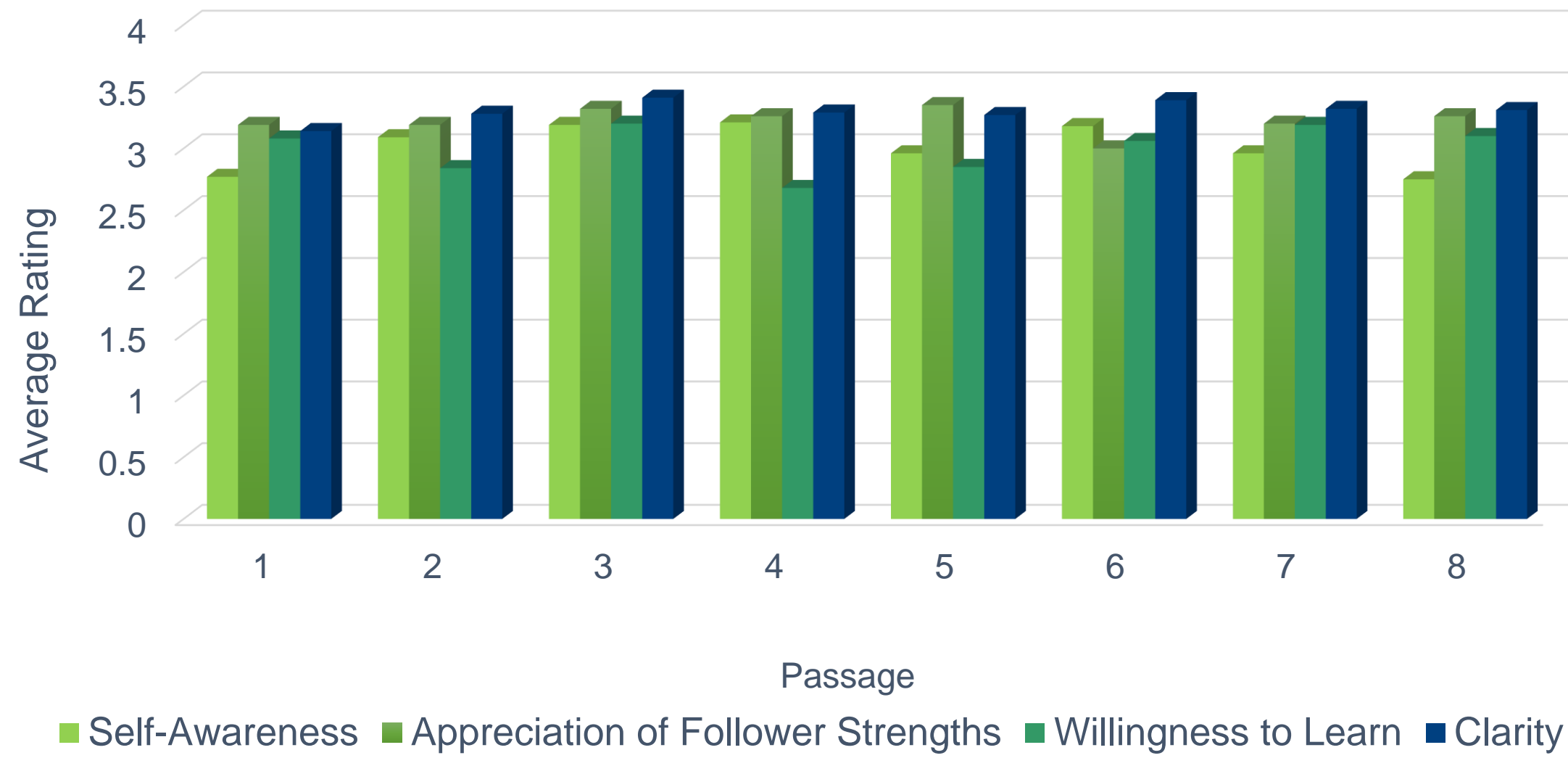| Example Passage	Psa	Csv	Critical Value
Confucius said: "When I walk along with others, they will serve me as my teachers. I will select their good qualities and follow them; but as for their bad qualities I will correct them in myself"	0.81	0.70	0.30

Method: Study 1B

Purpose: Further validate the passages retained in Study 1a

Procedure: Participants (*N*=186) were given definitions of humility and its 3 dimensions and were asked to rate the extent to which each passage validated in Study 1a fit the definitions of humility and its dimensions. They also rated the clarity of each passage.

Passage → Clarity; Humility → Self-Awareness | Appreciation of follower strengths | Willingness to learn

Results: Study 1B

■ Self-Awareness ■ Appreciation of Follower Strengths ■ Willingness to Learn ■ Clarity

Figure 1. 8 passages were rated as reflecting 2+ dimensions of humility and had an average clarity score greater than 3.

Method: Study 1C

Purpose: Select and validate transactional leadership passages

Procedure: 13 passages with a theme of transactional leadership were selected from *The Governing Principles of Ancient China*. Participants (*N*=149) were given a definition of transactional leadership and related constructs and selected the construct they felt best reflected the theme of each passage.

Passage → Laissez-faire leadership | Abusive Supervision | Transactional Leadership | Leader initiating structure
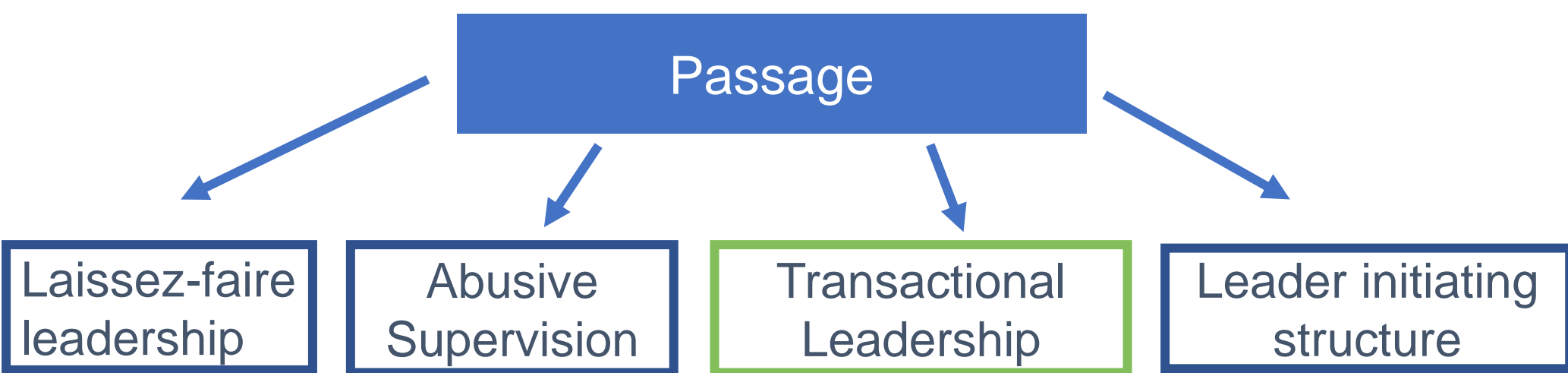
Results: Study 1C

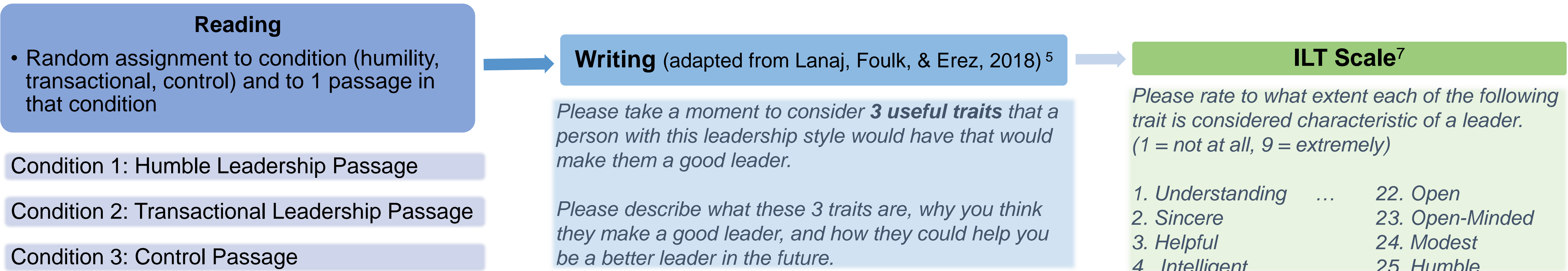We calculated substantive validity for each passage. [6]

3 passages were validated as specifically reflecting a definition of transactional leadership rather than related constructs.

Example Passage	Psa	Csv	Critical Value
If rewards are not given to the deserving individual, good people will lose their confidence and begin to doubt if their efforts are worthwhile. If punishments are not given to the perpetrators, evil people will disregard the laws and continue with their wrongdoings without any shame or fear.	0.81	0.70	0.30

Method: Study 2

Purpose: Pilot test a reading-writing intervention to increase the centrality of humility in leader prototypes

1) **Pre-screen** (*N*=462): Implicit Leadership Theories (LT) Scale[7] to assess the traits contained in leader prototype

2) **Pilot study** (*N*=229): Reading-writing intervention, ILT Scale[7]

Reading
- Random assignment to condition (humility, transactional, control) and to 1 passage in that condition

Condition 1: Humble Leadership Passage
Condition 2: Transactional Leadership Passage
Condition 3: Control Passage

Writing (adapted from Lanaj, Foulk, & Erez, 2018)[5]

Please take a moment to consider 3 useful traits that a person with this leadership style would have that would make them a good leader.

Please describe what these 3 traits are, why you think they make a good leader, and how they could help you be a better leader in the future.

ILT Scale[7]

Please rate to what extent each of the following trait is considered characteristic of a leader. (1 = not at all, 9 = extremely)

1. Understanding   …   22. Open
2. Sincere   23. Open-Minded
3. Helpful   24. Modest
4. Intelligent   25. Humble

Expected Results: Study 2

Analysis of Study 2 data is in progress; results are pending.

- We will use network analysis techniques[8] to estimate the network of traits in the average leader prototype of participants before and after the intervention

- We will calculate centrality estimates of humility in each network.

If our reading-writing intervention is successful, we expect to see an increase in the centrality of humility following the intervention.
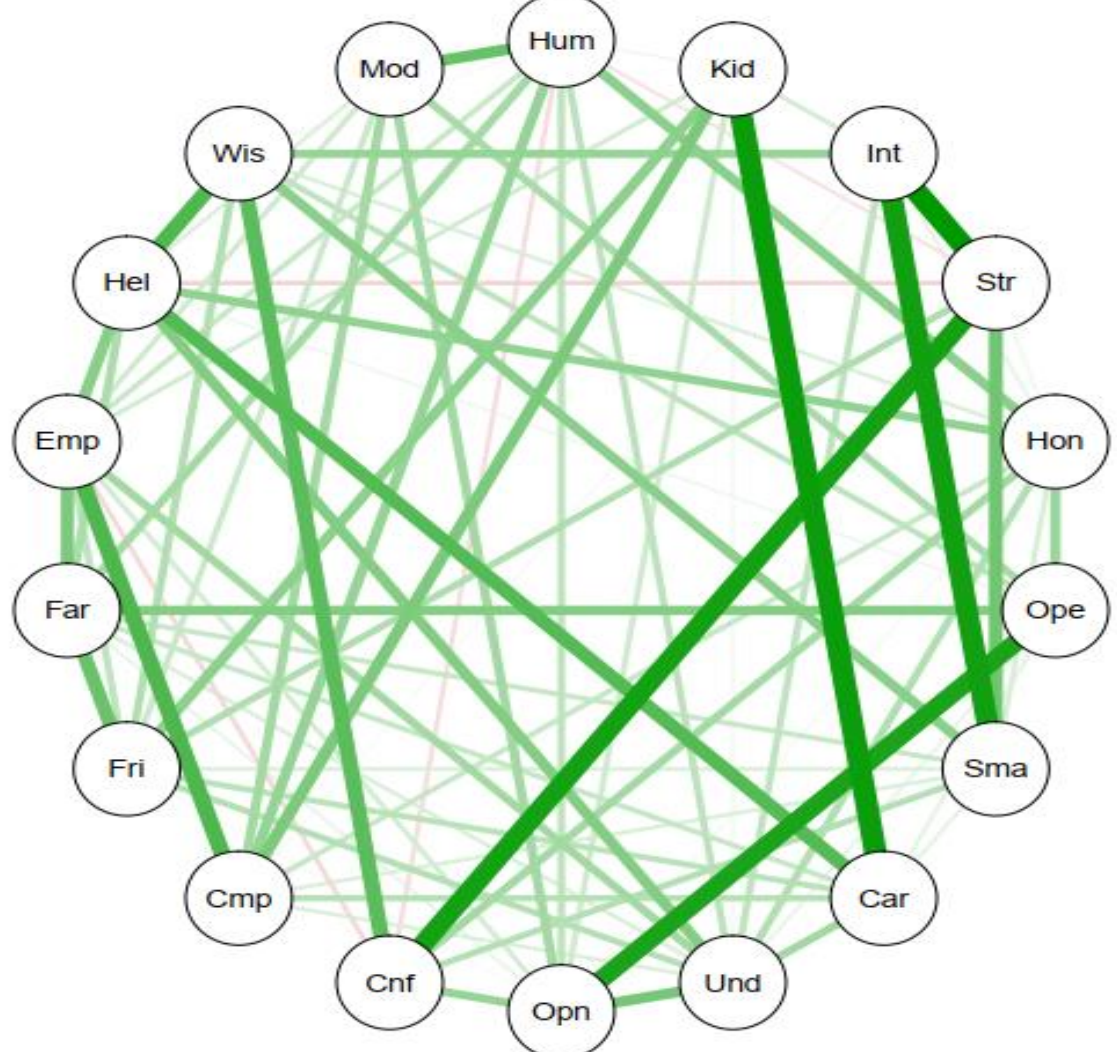
Figure 2. Theoretical example of a leader prototype network. Traits are represented as nodes, which are connected by edges representing the relationships between them.

Discussion

Humility is not a trait that typically comes to mind when thinking about organizational leaders. However, scholars have argued for its importance within leadership and organizational contexts.

We generated and tested material to be used in future interventions aimed to integrate more humility in leader prototypes. We validated 8 humble leadership passages (Study 1A, 1B) and 3 transactional leadership passages (Study 1C). In Study 2, we test whether a reading-writing intervention including these passages can increase the centrality of humility in leader prototypes.

These studies constitute a promising first step in the investigation of interventions to integrate more humility in leader prototypes.

References

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[4] Offermann, L. R., Kennedy, J. K., & Wirtz, P. W. (1994). Implicit leadership theories: Content, structure, and generalizability. *The Leadership Quarterly, 5*(1), 43–58.
[5] Lanaj, K., Foulk, T. A., & Erez, A. (2019). Energizing leaders via self-reflection: A within-person field experiment. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 104*(1), 1–18.
[6] Anderson, J. C., & Gerbing, D. W. (1991). Predicting the performance of measures in a confirmatory factor analysis with a pretest assessment of their substantive validities. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 76*(5), 732–740.
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