

# Exploring connections between awe and humility development: a case study of undergraduate students' perceptions of awe-inspiring experiences in leadership education

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study was to explore how experiences of awe contribute to the development of humility among students in a leadership education context.

**Design/methodology/approach** – We adopted a qualitative case study and phenomenological approach to explore how students in an introductory leadership course experienced awe and humility. Qualitative data were collected through an open-ended survey from  $n = 61$  students, based on their prior knowledge of humility, awe and leadership from a module introduced earlier in the semester. Coding followed two strategies based on the assignment prompt, the type of awe and inductive approach, drawing on students' words and phrases.

**Findings** – Our findings suggest a notable connection between awe and humility, as evident in the students' responses. Students described experiences that fit under each of the “eight wonders of life,” such as moral beauty, collective effervescence, nature and epiphany. Findings also show that these awe-inducing experiences challenged students intellectually, causing them to reconsider their perspectives and be open to thinking about their lives in new ways. These experiences also inspired gratitude and encouraged a deeper focus on others and the community.

**Originality/value** – Going beyond teaching the theories of leadership and toward virtues, character and self-transcendent emotions may allow students to go deeper in their leadership education and gain more holistic and introspective insights into their motivations, desires and values that drive their leadership.

**Keywords** Leadership competencies, Leadership education, Teaching and learning of leadership

**Paper type** Research article

## Introduction

In recent years, the significance of humility as a cornerstone of effective leadership has gained widespread traction in academic, professional, psychological and cultural dialogues (Lekas, Pahl, & Fuller Lewis, 2020; Walters & Diab, 2016; Yang, Zhang, & Chen, 2019). Humility is derived from *humilitas*, which traces its roots to the Latin word *humus*, meaning “the earth beneath us” (Argandona, 2015; Sietsma, n.d.). Historically, humility has been associated with qualities such as self-sacrifice, feelings of unworthiness, low self-esteem, holding oneself in low regard, dependence or perception of weakness, all of which have been shaped by philosophical, theological and psychological perspectives (Davis et al., 2015; Hill & Sandage, 2016; Ziaran, 2015). However, more recently, humility has emerged to reflect an accurate understanding of oneself, which involves recognizing one's strengths and limitations realistically without overestimating or underestimating them (Tangney, 2000). Similarly, humility has been recognized as a dynamic quality essential for leaders navigating

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increasingly complex and interconnected challenges and systems, particularly enabling leaders to “get on the balcony” and address challenges from a holistic perspective (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009; Sowcik & Muscato, 2021).

The growing influence of humility in leadership research reflects its attribution to qualities like vulnerability, self-awareness and openness to feedback and has been connected to several major leadership theories like adaptive leadership, shared leadership and transformational leadership (Chiu, Owens, & Tesluk, 2016; Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005; Sowcik, 2022). Leadership experts like Jim Collins underscore humility’s transformative potential, describing the most effective leaders as “Level 5 Leaders” with a profound sense of humility and professional will (Collins, 2001; Reid, Bud West, Winston, & Wood, 2014). Beyond popular writings, empirical research on humility in leadership corroborates these claims. Scholars have linked humility to a variety of positive leadership outcomes, including enhanced follower creativity, empowering leadership behaviors, stronger learning and performance outcomes, promoting employee voice, strengthening interpersonal relationships and fostering emotional well-being and forgiveness (Nielsen & Marrone, 2018; Siachou *et al.*, 2025; Ye, Tung, Li, & Zhu, 2020). While scholarship and research on the benefits of humility continue to increase, significant gaps remain in understanding how humility develops, particularly within the context of leadership education.

Within the line of inquiry regarding humility development, the interplay between awe and humility has received little attention in leadership education studies. Awe, a profound emotional response to the vastness that transcends one’s current understanding, has been shown to inspire humility by shifting focus away from the self toward an understanding that life is dependent upon a variety of “interacting forces” that are out of one’s control (Keltner, 2023). It is a sense of wonder and amazement experienced when encountering something immense or “awe-inducing” that surpasses one’s current understanding (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Stellar *et al.*, 2018). Piff, Dietze, Feinberg, Stancato, and Keltner (2015) found that awe, as an emotional response to vast stimuli, promotes ethical decision-making, generosity and enhances prosocial helping behavior. However, little is known about how awe might be intentionally leveraged for educators seeking innovative approaches to prepare students for the complexities of leadership. This research paper seeks to address these gaps by examining student perceptions of awe-inducing experiences and their relationship to humility, contributing to the broader discourse on cultivating these qualities in future leaders.

## Review of literature

### *Humility*

Historically, the origins of humility can be traced to the spiritual practices, writings and beliefs of nearly all the world’s major religious traditions, including Christianity (Proverbs 11:12, Luke 14: 7–11), Islam (Qur’an 11:23, Qur’an 7:55) Judaism (Numbers 12:3), Hinduism (Bhagavad-Gita 13:7) and Buddhism (Sowcik & Council, 2018). Each of these verses and writings emphasizes different aspects of humility, including one’s capacity to be humble in the presence of the divine, putting others before oneself, freedom from conceit and allowing one to achieve wisdom (Porter, Gardiner, Davis, & Baehr, 2019). Additionally, humility, long regarded as a virtue in philosophy, has been seen by Socrates as a byproduct of subordination to God and by St. Thomas Aquinas as a moderating force over one’s desires and concerns (Roberts & Cleveland, 2017). Outside of religion and philosophy, humility has been notably classified by psychologists Peterson and Seligman (2004) as a character strength connected to the virtue of temperance, or those “positive traits that protect us from excess” (p. 431).

Further, while an agreed-upon modern definition of humility does not exist, professor and psychologist June Price Tangney (2000) has provided one of the more foundational ways to conceptualize humility in the social sciences which has been referenced by numerous scholars and researchers, particularly in the context of leadership (Kelemen, Matthews, Matthews, & Henry, 2023; Leary *et al.*, 2017; Owens & Hekman, 2012). Evolving from traditional views of

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humility as self-disparagement and low self-esteem and drawing from theological, philosophical, and psychological literature, Tangney concluded that humility involves: (1) an accurate appraisal of the self, which includes both strengths and weaknesses, (2) the capacity to comprehend one's shortcomings in knowledge or recognizing mistakes, (3) being open to other ideas or information that challenges one's beliefs, (4) keeping a perspective about abilities and accomplishments or one's "place in the world," (5) self-forgetfulness and possessing an understanding that one is part of a bigger universe and (6) gratitude for the value of everything, including people and how they contribute to the world.

In the context of leadership, humility has gained significant attention in both scholarship and research. For one, the virtue is seen as a cornerstone and servant leadership (Sousa & Van Dierendonck, 2017) and research suggests explicit connections between humility and authentic leadership (Council & Sowcik, 2021). In their seminal work "Bringing humility to leadership: Antecedents and consequences of leader humility," Morris *et al.* (2005) proposed that traits like narcissism, Machiavellianism and low and high self-esteem predict lower levels of humility, while high emotional intelligence and management capability predict higher levels of humility. In turn, leader humility fosters supportiveness, prosocial use of power and participative leadership. The authors also define humility similarly to Tangney (2000) in three distinct areas: (1) *self-awareness* or understanding one's strengths and weaknesses; (2) *openness*, or the ability to acknowledge one's limitations or gaps in knowledge, and being open to new ideas and information, and (3) *transcendence*, or one's ability to contemplate a larger reality; a connection to something bigger. Sowcik (2022), builds upon this definition by concluding that humility is the "proper perspective of oneself, one's relationship with others, and one's connection to something bigger" (p. 81). Based on Tangney's (2000) understanding, the conceptual model presented by Morris *et al.* (2005) and Sowcik's (2022) definition, these three areas of humility contribute to a significant shift in recent scholarship.

*Humility development.* Although a significant amount of research and scholarship has been published on the benefits of humility, less has been researched and published about empirical ways humility can be developed, especially among leaders. Peterson and Seligman (2004) proposed that secure attachment in one's relationships, realistic feedback about strengths and weaknesses, awe-inducing experiences, pedagogical approaches that emphasize the limits of human understanding, and experiences of failure or dissatisfaction all could potentially develop humility. Additionally, Collins (2001) suggests that having a mentor, practicing self-reflection, or significant life experiences such as near-death experiences, strong religious belief, or conversion can provide pathways to humility among leaders. While scarce, a few studies have explicitly looked at humility development. A study conducted by Dwiwardani *et al.* (2014) found that secure attachment in one's relationships and resilience, or the ability to bounce back from a significant failure or setback, develops humility among individuals. Additionally, Stellar *et al.* (2018) found that awe-inducing experiences led to higher levels of perceived humility among undergraduate students. As we have seen in literature and scholarship, awe has appeared in several articles with empirical research findings, however, little is known about this concept, how it relates to leadership, and how it serves to promote leader humility.

### Awe

According to Keltner (2023), "awe is the emotion we experience when we encounter vast mysteries that we don't understand" (p. xvi). "It is the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world" (p. 7). Awe is classified as a positive emotion, and is distinct from threat-based awe, which is more of a mixed emotion including both fear and awe together (Chaudhury, Garg, & Jiang, 2022). Awe experiences are complex emotions that can be characterized by two phenomena: "perceived vastness" and a "need for accommodation" (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Perceived vastness emerges from feelings of wonder when observing a physically large object or, in a theoretical

sense, such as being presented with a complex idea. On the other hand, “need for accommodation” is when awe exceeds individual comprehension, expectations, or feelings of amazement when encountering something profound that challenges and attempts to change one’s existing understanding (Allen, 2018; Chirico & Yaden, 2018). From a physical standpoint, we often express awe through a pattern of movements in our facial muscles, which include things like raised inner eyebrows, the widening of eyes, opening or slightly dropping our jaw, extending the head forward and inhaling deeply (Shiota, Campos, & Keltner, 2003). Awe can even cause goosebumps appearing on our skin (Quesnel & Riecke, 2018). Additionally, Keltner (2023) has classified varieties of awe-inducing experiences including moral beauty, or the “courage, kindness, strength or overcoming” seen in others (p. 11) collective effervescence, an experience that “merges people into a collective self or tribe,” (p. 13) nature, music, visual design, spirituality and religion, life and death, and epiphany, or “suddenly understanding essential truths about life” (p. 17).

Research on awe has grown considerably in recent years, with studies exploring its psychological, social, mental and organizational impacts (Monroy & Keltner, 2023; Nelson-Coffey *et al.*, 2019). A study by Stellar *et al.* (2017) found that awe is linked with prosocial behavior, including generosity and a greater willingness to donate time to assist others. Awe also fosters a sense of belonging within cohesive groups by diminishing individuals’ perception of their own importance. Similarly, awe has been shown to reduce self-focused tendencies and increase feelings of connectedness and interdependence (Piff *et al.*, 2015). These findings suggest that awe can help leaders create environments that prioritize collective goals over individual gain. From a neurological and psychological perspective, studies indicate that awe significantly impacts neurophysiology, self-perception, prosocial behavior, social connection and a sense of meaning, influencing overall psychological health and fostering personal growth in young adults (Monroy & Keltner, 2023; Oberoi & Bhabri, 2024). In educational contexts, awe has been linked to increased curiosity, open-mindedness and motivation to learn, making it a valuable tool for leadership development (Colantonio & Bonawitz, 2018; Rudd, Hildebrand, & Vohs, 2018).

*Awe and humility.* The connection between awe and humility lies in their shared capacity to reduce self-centeredness, facilitate a follower-leader relationship and promote interconnectedness and relationships with others and the larger world (Chirico & Yaden, 2018; Stellar *et al.*, 2018). Awe, by highlighting the vastness of profound experiences, naturally promotes humility, diminishes our sense of self and facilitates self-other inclusion, drawing attention away from personal concerns and interests (Wu, Cui, Han, Wu, & He, 2024). In the same vein, humility displayed by leaders allows team members to emulate this humble behavior, which fosters creativity, innovation and interaction within the team (Owens & Hekman, 2016; Zhu, Chen, Asante, Zhu, & Xu, 2022). In leadership development, integrating awe-inspiring experiences can encourage future leaders to embrace humility and other established leadership traits, including empathy, creative and critical thinking, prosocial behaviors, self-efficacy, social connections and handling uncertainty (Stellar *et al.*, 2017; Thompson, 2023). Awe is a powerful emotion with profound implications for leadership and humility. Its ability to foster perspective shifts, reduce self-centeredness and enhance connectedness makes it an invaluable asset in leadership education (Bai *et al.*, 2017; Wu *et al.*, 2024).

There are a few research studies that directly look at humility and awe; however, some published studies indicate a significant relationship. Specifically, the study by Stellar *et al.* (2018) found that awe plays a critical role in cultivating humility. Through five separate studies, awe was measured involving peer reports, an awe-inducing video, reports of awe in daily life, recalling awe-experiences in relation to emotional states, and self-reports of awe while overlooking a clock tower. The results of the study indicated that individuals with a tendency to experience awe were seen by their peers as humbler, and brief moments of awe in daily life were linked to increased feelings of humility. Another study conducted by Lin, Hong, Xiao, and Lian (2020) examined the Honesty-Humility personality trait as it relates to

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dispositional awe, which “refers to the tendency or trait of awe that is universal and complex” (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; as cited in Lin *et al.*, 2020, p. 1) along with a mediating factor of the Zhong Yong thinking style in Confucianism. Zhong Yong is a way of thinking in Confucian culture where the practitioner opens themselves to diverse perspectives and demonstrates actions and behaviors that reflect the entirety of the situation (Wu & Lin, 2005; Yang, 2001; as cited in Lin *et al.*, 2020). Sampling a population of 2,377 Chinese undergraduate students, the researchers found that Honesty-Humility was positively correlated to dispositional awe; however, there was a gender gap, with Honesty-Humility showing no significant correlation with dispositional awe among males. In addition to promoting humility, awe, when combined with other evidence-based resilience practices, can ignite inspiration in leaders, encouraging them to approach emerging challenges with creativity, practicality and sustainability (Thompson, 2022).

## Methodology

### *Purpose*

In this study, we explore how experiences of awe contribute to the development of humility among students in a leadership education context. Specifically, we investigate how these constructs individually and collectively shape students’ perceptions of leadership experiences. This study addresses a research gap related to understanding how student perceptions of awe directly relate to humility development. The study aimed to contribute to the broader discourse on incorporating awe-inspiring experiences and humility development into leadership education curricula to better prepare students for future leadership roles in a complex world.

### *Research design and course context*

We adopted a qualitative case study approach to explore the intersection of awe and humility across three different sections of an introductory leadership course during the fall of 2024 at a large public land-grant university in the southeastern United States (IRB# 23–887).

The case study design allows for an in-depth investigation of student perceptions and experiences within leadership education, providing rich, detailed insights into the phenomenon. This design incorporates elements of both phenomenology and case study methods. From a phenomenological perspective, our approach to the study emphasizes students’ lived experiences regarding awe and humility and fosters philosophical discussion around these concepts. Likewise, due to the context of the course, its specific time frame, curriculum and participants, a single case study design was adopted, with the case defined as the course and its associated components (teaching modalities, learning outcomes, assignments, materials, and students). The course where the research was conducted is an introductory leadership course that focuses on the language, concepts, and competencies of leadership studies, with a primary learning objective of describing fundamental theories and concepts of leadership, as well as components of the Social Change Model (SCM) of Leadership Development.

### *Data collection and analysis*

Qualitative data were collected using an open-ended survey from  $n = 61$  students in the fall semester of 2024 from the three sections of the class. Data were collected through an extra credit assignment based on students’ prior knowledge of humility, awe and leadership from a module that was introduced earlier in the semester. For this survey, students were asked to describe an awe-inspiring experience they had in recent memory and explain how this experience contributed to their development of humility. We incorporated a thematic analysis to examine student responses. Each researcher independently reviewed the data and identified common themes, focusing on two aspects of the assignment prompt (awe and humility). The prompt is as follows:

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Awe is defined by Keltner (2023) as “. . .the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world.” After completing the online module “Humility & Leadership” and participating in our class discussions, reflection opportunities, and activities, please describe an awe-inspiring experience you’ve had in recent memory. How did this experience personally contribute to your development of humility?

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Coding was completed using two different classifications based on the assignment prompt. For the type of awe, we coded the responses using Keltner’s (2023) classifications of awe, while for the second part, we used an inductive approach and drew on students’ words and phrases. The inductive technique was used to develop codes based on recurring words or phrases mentioned by the students. From there, larger themes were developed for the responses.

Data analysis was iterative and involved a step-by-step process of (1) repeatedly reading student responses to gain familiarity, (2) identifying phrases that were developed into codes, (3) reaching consensus on frequently repeated codes until saturation and (4) developing overarching themes that aligned with the research question. Following the constant comparative method, we repeated these steps multiple times until both of us reached a common agreement. We subsequently engaged in multiple rounds of review and discussion to ensure agreement on codes and themes, refining interpretations to capture the broader implications of student responses. Overall, the study achieved a response rate of approximately 73% ( $n = 61$  participants) out of 84 students surveyed. Participants represented diverse undergraduate majors across the university. The primary aim of the analysis was to derive meaningful insights from student reflections and connect them to the research question, ultimately shedding light on the interplay between awe, humility and leadership development. The study was approved by the institution’s review board (IRB# 23–887).

## Findings

This study explored how awe-inducing experiences contribute to the development of humility and shape students’ leadership perspectives. We categorized the students’ awe experiences based on Keltner’s (2023) types of awe, or as he refers to them, “The Eight Wonders of Life” (p. 10) (Table 1). Additionally, the findings from the humility development connection were categorized into four broad themes: (1) perspective shift, (2) self-transcendence, (3) gratitude and (4) inspire action and service, each reflecting distinct dimensions of the relationship between awe and humility.

### *Types of awe*

While each of the eight types of awe was identified in the data, four major types surfaced: (1) moral beauty, (2) collective effervescence, (3) nature and (4) epiphany. It is also important to note that our qualitative analysis revealed that some students described multiple types of awe in the same experience (e.g., nature and epiphany).

*Moral beauty.* Moral beauty is defined by Keltner (2023) as “other people’s courage, kindness, strength, or overcoming obstacles” (p. 11). Our students described experiences of awe that included witnessing acts of moral virtue, a profound individual’s behaviors, or interactions with their role models (Table 1). Students noted that these were awe-inspiring encounters with individuals whose actions or characters left a profound impact on them. For example, one student mentioned an experience they had visiting an organization and meeting two women who made them feel in awe:

The women were so nice and they spoke so highly of EY, with a genuine tone, that I instantly believed them. I stayed behind and talked to them more about EY and learned a little bit about them. I saw pure leadership in these women and I was actually inspired to be in their position one day.

**Table 1.** Analysis of students' awe experience based on Keltner's (2023) types of awe

Types of awe (Keltner, 2023)	Definition	F	%	Emerging concepts
Moral beauty	The exceptional character, virtue, and ability of others	12	19.6	"Interactions with certain role models like high school teachers, piano teachers"
Collective effervescence	The feeling of a large group of people moving in unison	13	21.3	"I was in awe of how much we could do to help our community," Helping out the community is such a rewarding experience."
Nature	The physical beauty of landscapes	17	27.8	"An awe-inspiring experience was watching the sunrise over Mount Kilimanjaro."
Music	Experiences at concerts, chanting in religious ceremony, or simply singing with others	1	1.6	"Attending a live concert where the energy of the music created an indescribable sense of connection."
Visual designs	Buildings, dams, and paintings	2	3.2	"Getting to see the Gateway Arch in person in St. Louis, Missouri."
Spiritual experiences	Mystical awe; classic religious conversion stories	4	6.5	"Being closer to God", "A religious moment where I felt the presence of God."
Epiphany	Learn something unexpected that changes our worldview	27	44.2	"Arriving at college and feeling tiny compared to the huge number of students around me."
Life and death	The beginnings and endings of life	2	3.2	"Seeing my little cousin born"

**Note(s):** F = Frequency, % = Percentage of each type of awe. The table shows the analysis of students' experience of awe based on Keltner (2023) categorization. The emerging concepts which include excerpts from students' responses give a broader explanation of the awe types

**Source(s):** Created by the authors

Further, one student described their experience as a substitute teacher at an elementary school, observing the moral beauty of a student: "There was a boy there the last time I subbed who was deaf and did not know English. His ability to do well and be successful in the classroom was awe-inspiring for me."

*Collective effervescence.* Collective effervescence, a concept coined by French sociologist Émile Durkheim, is the feeling we have when "we are buzzing and crackling with some life force that merges into a collective self, a tribe, an oceanic 'we'" (Keltner, 2023, p. 13). Students described an experience of awe that involved shared, collective action, or being in community with others (Table 1). These students often expressed feelings of awe in situations where they collaborated with others for a common cause. For example, one student described going to a catholic church for the first time:

I got to experience what it was like to be in such a beautiful community for the first time with the same goal and it made me realize that I am just one part of something so much larger and more complex than just my actions and thoughts.

Another student described being at awe while in a crowd and what that was like: "My first football game at [Land Grant University] was awe-inspiring because I felt like part of the bigger picture in life."

*Nature.* Many students noted an experience of awe that was evoked by the vastness and beauty of nature. These moments inspired reflections on appreciating nature and the feeling of smallness and connection to remarkable experiences. For example, one student mentioned, "Recently, I had an awe-inspiring experience hiking in a national park, where the vastness of

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the landscape left me feeling both small and connected to something greater.” Another student reflected on a recent internship involving nature: “I saw my first Big Tree for my internship. It was the oldest and first tulip-poplar discovered and uploaded on the VA Big Trees website back in the 70s.”

*Epiphany.* The fourth and most common form of awe noted by our students was epiphany, which is described by Keltner (2023) as “when we suddenly understand the essential truths about life” (p. 17). Most students experienced awe through moments of sudden insight or realization. For some students, awe arose from life-changing epiphanies, such as “arriving at college and recognizing their small place in a larger academic community.” One student reflected on an epiphany moment while traveling at an airport: “There are so many people there and the realization that they all have their own lives and own problems hits me every time. We are all just people who are doing our best. It makes me feel very small in regards to the world.”

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### *Humility development*

The second part of the prompt asked students to describe how the awe-inducing experience they shared contributed to their overall development of humility.

### *Theme: perspective shift*

The first major theme was developed by student data showing how awe-inspiring experiences help develop a person’s sense of humility through challenging them to think beyond their existing knowledge, beliefs and assumptions, sparking intellectual curiosity and causing a re-evaluation of how they see the world. For example, the following student shared an experience of awe working with a student, which challenged the view they had of themselves:

At work I work children with disabilities and the other day something one of my kids had struggling with for a really long finally click and it made me in awe of them because I realized if they can learn something hard so can I. This experience made me more humble to myself and others when struggling to learn something.

### *Theme: self-transcendence*

Another major theme that surfaced when students described how awe relates to humility development was how the awe-inducing experience fostered a sense of interconnectedness and a recognition of their relative insignificance in the larger scheme of things. We utilized existing literature and research to name this theme *Self-Transcendence*, which Achenbaum and Orwoll (1991) as “a disposition to move through and beyond personalistic issues to more other-directed, universal concerns” (p. 21). This theme highlights how awe reshaped students’ perceptions of their role in the world, fostering humility and a deeper appreciation for the collective. Two subthemes emerged from *Self-Transcendence*, including (1) bigger picture and (2) ego diminishment.

*Bigger picture.* Experiences of awe often caused students to think beyond their immediate concerns and consider their place within larger systems and communities. This broader perspective encouraged them to appreciate the complexity and interconnectedness of the world, reinforcing the importance of collective action and shared responsibility in leadership. For example, one student reflected on an awe-inducing experience while visiting the beach and observed the ocean waves and surrounding nature: “The experience made me reflect on leadership. True leadership, I realized, involves recognizing our interconnectedness with all life forms and the importance of stewardship.” Another student described an experience of awe while visiting a friend in California, recognizing the bigger picture of things: “It humbled me because I live in my little bubble, but the world is so larger than I could truly imagine.”

*Ego diminishment.* Many students described how experiences of awe diminished their sense of self-importance, making them more aware of their limitations and the vastness of the world around them. One student described an awe-inspiring experience while interning for Congress led to their ego diminishment and fostered humility: “I would say it taught me humility in a profound way; it showed me how small and insignificant I was within our government. It also showed me how, in public service, one’s duty is to the greater good rather than personal ambition.” Another student shared a deeply spiritual experience recognizing God/The Divine, causing a shrinking of their ego:

An awe experience I had recently was a religious moment where I felt the presence of God. This experience contributed to my development of humility because this moment made me feel tiny. I felt like a speck of dust, and was in awe of how great and awesome God is.

These recognitions challenged students’ egocentric tendencies and reinforced the importance of humility and focusing on aspects of leadership outside themselves, including their relationships, communities and the world around them.

*Theme: gratitude*

Our analysis revealed that several awe-inspiring experiences described by students prompted them to express gratitude. For students, these experiences provided a foundation for humility by reinforcing their application for life’s blessings and leadership responsibilities. For example, a student mentioned a recent awe-inducing experience while studying abroad in Ireland: “It contributed to my development of humility because I remembered how lucky I was to be able to experience this moment and to be humble and grateful about my personal experiences.” In a more interpersonal sense, one student described a deeply meaningful awe-inducing experience where their son expressed love to them, causing both gratitude and recognition of humility:

I felt a deep sense of gratitude and humility. It reminded me of how pure and unconditional love can be, and how fortunate I am to experience it daily. It also made me realize how much I still have to learn about love and connection, and how these moments, however small, shape who we are and how we lead our lives.

*Theme: inspired action and service*

Lastly, several awe-inducing experiences seemed to both inspire students and motivate them to act with purpose and contribute to the well-being of others. This theme highlights how awe encouraged students to embrace leadership roles that emphasized service and a commitment to making a difference based on significant people or experiences they’ve had. For example, one student described how their mother inspired them to make the world a better place: “This experience personal contributed to humility because it made me understand the person I need to become to make sure future generations and the current one all live the lives they have always dreamed of.” Another student reflected on a volunteering experience at a local pumpkin festival, echoing themes of serving others: “. . .this taught me that real humility in leadership is about serving others in ways that let them have their own moments, which helped me appreciate the impact of small acts of support.”

**Discussion**

Our study explored (1) the types of awe-inspiring experiences leadership students encounter and (2) how these experiences shape their sense of humility. The data show that there is a noticeable connection between awe and humility. This aligns with prior research (Stellar *et al.*, 2018) that awe “offers one path to greater humility” (p. 258) as well as Shiota, Keltner, and

Mossman (2007) who found that awe is associated with “a sense of the smallness of the self and the presence of something greater than the self, as well as some disengagement from awareness of the self” (p. 960). The authors also concluded that awe clarifies a person’s self-concept and helps them understand themselves in relation to a bigger picture or “greater whole.” Students described experiences that fit under each of Keltner’s (2023) “eight wonders of life,” with moral beauty, epiphany, nature and collective effervescence being the most common.

Furthermore, our findings align with Tangney’s (2000) foundational work on humility, especially our themes of *self-transcendence* and *perspective shift*. Tangney (2000) writes that humility involves the “ability to acknowledge one’s mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations” as well as being open to “new ideas, contradictory information, and advice” (p. 73). Our students directly commented on these aspects of humility when they described their experiences of awe whether it was being in nature, observing the moral beauty of another person, participating in a collective effort or having a moment of epiphany; each of these awe-inducing experiences challenged them at an intellectual level causing them to change their minds and be open to thinking about their lives and situations in new ways, which points to intellectual humility, or “recognizing that a particular personal belief may be fallible, accompanied by an appropriate attentiveness to limitations in the evidentiary basis of that belief and to one’s own limitations in obtaining and evaluating relevant information” (Leary *et al.*, 2017, p. 793).

Many of our students commented on how their experience of awe caused them to rethink a particular viewpoint and acknowledge that they have much more to learn. Additionally, scholars’ contributions on the larger, transcendent dimension of humility were found in our data (Sowcik, 2022; Tangney, 2000). For example, Tangney (2000) concludes that humility involves “keeping of one’s abilities and accomplishments—one’s place in the world—in perspective” and “recognizing that one is but one part of a larger universe” (pp. 73-74). Sowcik (2022) also concludes with similar themes of humility, as a “proper perspective of something greater”. We found connections through the data in the subthemes of *ego diminishment* and *bigger picture* that encompassed this larger area of humility, where experiences of awe provided the opportunity to step back and see oneself as connected to a bigger picture, a larger whole and grounding them in that reality.

Lastly, we also found that within the relationship between awe and humility, students noted experiences that caused them to become more grateful for what they have and a general focus toward others and their communities in the themes of *gratitude* and *inspired action and service*. The literature points to both awe and humility having correlations with these prosocial themes. For example, Stellar *et al.* (2017) theorize that awe and gratitude make up “self-transcendent emotions” that help people solve problems associated with “caretaking, cooperation, and group coordination in social interactions” (p. 200). Further, Exline and Hill (2011) found that humility predicted more generous behaviors among participants, such as charitable donations and motivations of kindness toward others, including both strangers, close relationships and enemies. Our students shared about how awe-inspiring experiences made them feel “lucky”, “fortunate” and “extremely grateful” while also seeing the need to “serving others” and that leadership is about “giving back to the community.”

### Conclusion and recommendations

The findings from our study highlight the impact awe-inducing experiences can have on a student’s leadership development journey, particularly in developing their sense of humility, a positive leadership virtue that has gained significant recognition in leadership scholarship. Our students gave detailed accounts of various awe-inducing experiences like being in nature, seeing the moral beauty of another person’s character and how they see the world, epiphanies causing shifts in their perspectives, and being part of a collective. These types of experiences have much to teach leadership education programs at large. We provide the following

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recommendations for leadership educators who may have included awe and humility in their curriculum and to those who haven't.

First, students should be given the opportunity to experience awe while they are learning about leadership in a formal program. Awe could be paired with a learning module on emotional intelligence, since it is defined as a complex set of emotions (Keltner, 2023). Experiential learning opportunities such as study abroad trips, service-learning projects, internships, being in nature and other high-impact practices appear to facilitate awe among students. They also give students an opportunity to step back and see themselves in connection to something bigger, helping to create more other-oriented rather than self-focused leaders. While these could be bigger experiences that involve traveling, much of the work of Keltner (2023) points to "everyday awe", that is, being able to notice, reflect and appreciate awe in our daily interactions. *JOLE* readership could benefit from these findings by potentially infusing awe-inspiring experiences – paired with intentional leadership reflections – in their curricula. For example, bringing in leadership concepts such as a shared vision and navigating resiliency as a team may provide the context for students to connect a concept like awe to their leadership education.

Further, if we want to help prepare our students to tackle wicked problems such as climate change, systemic racism and income inequality, providing them with opportunities to get outside of their bubbles and focus on a larger problem in a bigger context (e.g., local, state, regional, national, etc.) can only help the process. As David Brooks writes in his 2011 *New York Times* article "It's Not About You", "Most successful young people don't look inside and then plan a life. They look outside and find a problem, which summons their life" (para. 10). Additionally, we believe humility and awe could be more directly taught in leadership education programs among other prosocial topics related to self-transcendence. Going beyond teaching the theories of leadership and toward virtues (e.g., humility, courage, etc.), character and self-transcendent emotions (e.g., awe, wonder, gratitude, etc.) may allow students to go deeper in their leadership education and gain more holistic and introspective insights into their motivations, desires and values that drive their leadership.

### Limitations and future research

The present study included several key limitations that are worth mentioning. For one, there was bias involved in the data collection process due to students in the course already learning about the research behind awe and humility. Additionally, the prompt that was given assumed students would be able to make this connection; however, in retrospect, a more appropriate question following the awe prompt might have been more objective (e.g., Did this experience help develop your overall sense of humility? If so, how? If not, why?). Further, our sample included students in a class we were teaching, and the survey was for extra credit. This could have interfered with the authenticity of student responses since, generally speaking, the motivation for completing an extra credit assignment is to improve one's grade in the course. Lastly, we (the researchers) were instructors of this course; thus, potential bias could have interfered with the validity and reliability of the data collection and analysis process.

In terms of future research, there are many possibilities. Something we would like to look at in the future is which specific awe-inducing experiences are *most* correlated with higher humility levels. Our research indicated the four most common types of awe in our students, but which ones develop the highest levels of humility was unclear and would need quantitative data to be more conclusive. On that note, conducting pre- and post-measurements of awe-inspiring experiences and humility using quantitative scales (e.g., Honesty-Humility and Dispositional Awe) after a certain type of leadership experience (e.g., being in nature, profound intellectual talk, service-learning opportunity, etc.), have students reflect on it, and analyze both strands of data could provide more insight. Lastly, while this study and many others focused on *positive* experiences of awe, future research could explore threat-based

experiences of awe and if those, too, lead to humility development and what nuances exist between the two.

In conclusion, our research provided in-depth insights into how awe-inspiring experiences develop humility, but more research is needed, particularly in leadership education, to understand these unique phenomena better. Perhaps we should listen to the words of [Mary Oliver \(2017\)](#) from her poem “Sometimes” to guide future studies: “Instructions for living a life. Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.”

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