

“Democracy needs Humility: How acknowledging gaps in knowledge can help overcome political divisions.”

An essay by Larissa Knöchelmann [English translation of the German original]

Imagine you meet someone who you know has very different political views to you, for example on whether immigration to Germany should be made easier or more difficult. Now you are faced with the challenge of striking up a conversation with this person and exchanging ideas. If this scenario makes you feel uncomfortable and raises your pulse, you are not alone. Some political issues have the potential to stir up emotions among many Germans. Such issues can cause people to feel strong emotions and tend to idealize those who share their views and devalue those who think differently—a phenomenon known as affective polarization. Affective polarization is based on social identification, i.e., feelings of belonging to a particular camp of opinion. This kind of “us against them” thinking can result in strong rejection of groups of people with different opinions. In my dissertation, I focused on opinion-based polarization, which refers to groups of people in the population who differ in their political opinions. Here, it can be said that there are a number of controversial issues in Germany that have the potential to divide society. In the past, this has been demonstrated, for example, by debates on compulsory coronavirus vaccination, the use of gender-neutral language, and climate protection measures such as the expansion of wind power plants.

Affective polarization among the population is evident in aggressive comments on social media, escalating discussions at family gatherings, and, in the worst case, violent breaches of democratic norms such as the storming of the Capitol in Washington in January 2021. Of course, disputes, conflicts, and opposition are part of democracy. Moreover, the Federal Republic of Germany has already experienced more violent political times, such as the election campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s. Nevertheless, democracy is under pressure: violence against local politicians is on the rise, verbal aggression on platforms such as X is increasing, and many people avoid political discussions among their acquaintances in order to avoid conflict. But it is precisely this avoidance of political discussions that is problematic for our democracy. In a democratic society, people must exchange opinions and weigh up arguments with each other, both in politics and among the population, even if they belong to different parties or camps. Only in this way can compromises be found that contribute to solving social challenges.

The aim of my dissertation research was to find ways to strengthen a pluralistic and democratic society in which individuals with different opinions can argue about issues but still accept and value each other. In doing so, I focused on acknowledging gaps in knowledge and the limitations of one's own knowledge, referred to as intellectual humility.

“I don't know,” “I'm not sure,” or “Oh, that's interesting, I didn't know that” – when was the last time you heard or even said such a sentence in a political discussion? In political talk shows, for example, the invited guests rarely admit that another person has just had a good idea. Debated as a virtue in philosophy for hundreds of years, intellectual humility has long been neglected in psychology. Perhaps because in Western cultures, many people define their self-worth through strength, and admitting ignorance is seen as a weakness. Instead, in everyday life, you are more likely to hear advice such as “fake it 'til you make it” – according to the motto: just cover up your insecurity and convince others of your omniscience. However, a growing body of research shows that intellectual humility is associated with many qualities that can be valuable in a political context.

Intellectually humble people more often seek out and read information that may contradict their own opinions. They are more interested in politics and better at distinguishing good arguments from bad ones, and they are able to formulate more convincing arguments themselves. In addition, they question the validity of their beliefs and are willing to change their minds in the face of convincing counterarguments. Furthermore, intellectually humble individuals are committed to protecting fundamental political rights and believe in the equality of all people. It can therefore be argued that intellectual humility forms a crucial basis for constructive public discourse. But to what extent is this the case in Germany? Can intellectual humility address the problems of affective polarization in Germany? To answer this question, my co-authors and I examined three specific issues, each of which we wrote a scientific journal article about.

“I question my opinions, viewpoints, and perspectives because they could be wrong.”

To what extent would you say that this statement describes you as a person? My co-authors and I asked these and many other questions to nearly 700 people in an online survey. We found that intellectual humility can also be measured in Germany using questionnaires. At first glance, the creation and statistical analysis—also known as validation—may sound somewhat technical and dry. However, it is extremely important to carry out such validations before attempting to transfer research from one cultural context to another. This was the case for us, as previous research on the intersection of intellectual humility and affective polarization had been limited to the US. In order to investigate the extent to which intellectual humility is also associated with positive characteristics in Germany, good survey instruments first had to be developed and tested. To this end, we translated three established English-language questionnaires into German. We then conducted a large online survey in which we tested the three translated questionnaires and an existing Swiss German questionnaire for measuring intellectual humility against a series of statistical quality criteria. In order to achieve the highest possible significance for the German context, the sample consisted of fluent German speakers living in Germany and was representative in terms of gender, age, and education. The results showed how important it is to adapt questionnaires to the cultural context. The existing Swiss German questionnaire did not achieve sufficiently good statistical parameters in our study, possibly due to the linguistic and cultural differences between the two countries. However, two of the three translated English-language questionnaires achieved good results. This enabled us to transfer the concept of intellectual humility to the German context. In particular, one questionnaire showed the best statistical properties, measuring intellectual humility in relation to specific political issues, such as the introduction of rent caps or the avoidance of plastic waste in supermarkets. We then used this questionnaire in experiments to find out to what extent intellectual humility can also lead to causal effects.

“I want to find out more about Alex.”

In a series of experiments, we were able to show that the intellectual humility of other people can causally lead to people wanting to interact with them. This finding is promising in terms of counteracting the avoidance of political discussions in the context of affective polarization. Using the questionnaire tested in the first project, which measures intellectual humility on specific topics, we assessed the intellectual humility of the participants in the experiments. In addition, we varied the intellectual humility of fictional potential interaction partners, such as “Alex” or “Maxi,” using diary entries, social media profiles, and imagined situations. We portrayed these individuals as either highly humble or less humble with regard to politically charged debates—e.g., the introduction of mandatory COVID-19 vaccination or the use of gender-neutral language. Such variations in

experiments can help answer the question of cause and effect. Previous research on the interface between intellectual humility and affective polarization has been limited to the use of correlational designs, which can only provide information about correlations, but not about causal sequences. Four online experiments with a total of 1,668 participants showed that intellectual humility was associated with less affective polarization toward groups of people with different opinions. Intellectually humble people showed less hostility toward members of other opinion groups. Furthermore, intellectual humility on the part of both the fictional interaction partners and the participants was always helpful in making the participants want to find out more about the people portrayed, rather than avoiding them. Sometimes, a higher willingness to interact even depended on both the people portrayed and the participants being intellectually humble. When an interaction partner was portrayed as intellectually humble, this generated more positive expectations among participants regarding a possible political exchange, as well as a higher perceived level of sympathy. We have now used these promising results to develop training programs aimed at increasing intellectual humility.

“I am interested in talking to someone who has a different opinion on a political issue.”

People are more likely to admit that they don't know something if they have learned beforehand that admitting this makes their counterpart more open to their point of view. We came to this conclusion in a project in which we investigated how intellectual humility can be increased through short training sessions – so-called psychological interventions. This knowledge is relevant for applied contexts such as educational institutions, where effective and evidence-based political education programs are needed to make political dialogue more constructive. In our study, we conducted an “intervention tournament” with around 1,500 people, in which we compared the effectiveness of five training approaches for increasing intellectual humility. We randomly assigned the participants to one of the training groups or one of the comparison groups. We were able to determine the effectiveness of the training sessions by comparing the training groups with the control groups, in which participants read an apolitical text about architecture, for example. The most successful text was an informational text in which we explained the advantages of intellectual humility to the participants: Participants read a text about our study results, which showed that intellectual humility is helpful for political exchange. This text led participants to be more willing to admit their knowledge gaps and limitations on various political topics than individuals who had been randomly assigned to one of the comparison groups. However, the training did not lead to an increased willingness to interact with people who hold different opinions. Therefore, follow-up studies are necessary to determine the extent to which this intervention could be suitable for preparing people for actual political exchange. More intensive training formats may be required here, e.g., the use of an informational film, or additional interventions such as a reflection task after reading the text.

Looking to the future – open questions for further research

The research in my dissertation shows that intellectual humility can be a valuable basis for democratic exchange. But is intellectual humility a “medicine without side effects”? In the future, it should be tested whether intellectual humility could also have negative consequences, such as a reduced willingness to engage in politics. Even well-intentioned interventions can “backfire,” triggering undesirable effects in people. In this context, possible interactions between power relations and intellectual humility in the context of structural inequality should also be considered. Previous research shows that people with lower social status (e.g., women or people of color) are expected to be more intellectually humble than people with higher status (e.g., men or white people) and are perceived negatively if they do not behave as expected. Similarly, in a school context, a

teacher's intellectual humility may make it easier for the class to ask questions, but a student's intellectual humility may be perceived by the teacher as incompetence and thus lead to a poor grade. Such effects should be scientifically investigated before large-scale interventions to promote intellectual humility are implemented, such as in political education in schools.

Future research should also focus on the media. Nowadays, it is easy for individuals to consume media such as newspapers, radio, television, or social media that align with their own political views. This selection process is even facilitated by the algorithms used by these platforms. The media has a major influence on shaping discourse and social norms surrounding political debates and contributes to political polarization. Claims such as “Germany is divided” or “society is polarized” are often presented without contextual information or nuanced reporting. Such narratives can reinforce citizens' belief that the electorate is polarized, which could fuel aversion to political fringe groups and further avoidance of political exchange. When it comes to changing the norms of intellectual humility in political conversations, politicians could serve as role models for constructive debate, for example in political talk show formats on television. Here, viewers could learn more about different perspectives if the invited political actors showed intellectual humility. Intellectual humility could potentially make political actors more accessible and the offerings of democratic parties or organizations more appealing, thereby inspiring young people to engage with democracy.

In the future, research and practice should be even more closely intertwined. Only the synthesis of application and science is profitable in developing effective interventions that enable political debates in the context of affective polarization. Researchers can help evaluate interventions, and experts in political education can inform researchers about which practices can be effectively implemented. In addition, researchers should exercise intellectual humility when writing recommendations for the application context. Instead of writing what should work in theory, they should base their recommendations on scientific findings. Such work can help promote objective and solution-oriented exchange, strengthen social cohesion, and thus counteract extreme political polarization.

In summary, my dissertation shows that intellectual humility is also a relevant factor in Germany in terms of people wanting to engage in political dialogue in the context of affective political polarization rather than avoiding it. Furthermore, the finding that intellectual humility regarding political issues can be promoted through an informational text is promising for the future design of training courses and programs in political education. In the long term, the intervention could be carried out, for example, before debates on political issues in schools or events that bring together people with different political views. Perhaps this would make people feel less uncomfortable when asked to engage with people who disagree with them on a politically charged topic, and their pulse would remain in the calm range. After all, constructive exchange between people of different views in the population is essential for social cohesion and the preservation of liberal democracies.

The results of the dissertation were published in these scientific articles:

Knöchelmann, L., Kemmer, J.A., & Cohrs, J.C. (2025). Intellectual Humility: Validation and Comparison of Four Self-Report Scales in the German Context. *Social Psychological Bulletin*.
<https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.16506> [open access, no paywall]

Knöchelmann, L., & Cohrs, J.C. (2024). Effects of Intellectual Humility in the Context of Affective Polarization: Approaching and Avoiding Others in Controversial Political Discussions. *Journal of*

Personality and Social Psychology. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/pspi0000462> [preprint without paywall: <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/vrdma>]

Knöchelmann, L., Janssen, A., Dörbaum, J., Heck, D.W., & Cohrs, J.C. (2025). Enhancing Intellectual Humility about Political Topics: An Intervention Tournament Including Five Conceptual Replications. *European Journal of Social Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.3177>