Contact:
Elizabeth Hamilton
(909) 621-8280
ehamilto@scrippscollege.edu

Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience Michael Spezio Posits Humility as Key to Successful Community

Claremont, CA (14 Nov. 2018)— Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience Michael Spezio Posits Humility as Key to Successful Community

Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience Michael Spezio thinks a lot about humility: how it's exhibited, how others perceive it, and how it is a central aspect of liberal democracy. He's among a long and growing tradition of thinkers who have contemplated humility, from ancient philosophers to modern virtue scientists—those who use the scientific method to understand the human charcter traits.

As a concept, humility has a checkered history: It has been vilified as a vice, since it can so easily give way to excessive pride, or conversely, self-abasement. It has alternately been elevated as a virtue, since it can enable self-reflection and connection with others. Now, Spezio and his research partners, Gregory Peterson and Robert C. Roberts, posit an a updated understanding of humility as "openness to other persons." Openness, which the researchers call kenotic empathy, is the wellspring of humility; that is, *humility is interactive and interpersonal (empathetic), rather than intellectual*, *and involves affirming the value and dignity of human beings even and especially in the absence of shared understanding.*

To arrive at this understanding of humility, researchers compared the body of writing of Jean Vanier, the theologian and humanitarian who l'Arche—an international organization of intentional communities made up of people with and without intellectual disabilities—and a large textual corpus of Standard English. The idea was to test a definition of humility as openness (kenotic) by seeing if the writings that inform a fundamentally empathetic, intentional community supported this definition. Using quantitative semantic analysis, they found a close relationship between the concepts of humility and openness in the texts that they analyzed.

"L'Arche shows us how communities can actually transform lives for the better," says Spezio. "The people there overcome seemingly insurmountable barriers in ordinary life. From studying the way they talk about their work, we could turn to alternative visions of human life and possibility."

Spezio is a cognitive scientist who focuses on valuation science, social neuroscience, and moral action. He believes that this type of research is an early step towards reworking how we think about psychology, sociology, and human relations: "We in the field of psychology tend to look for the dysfunction and the disrepair; we focus on what's wrong. But we should be more actively and widely researching the dynamics that contribute to what makes people and organizations function and flourish. That's not to say we ignore their flaws, but they are transforming lives, bringing people into lives of hope and meaning," he says.

Kenotic empathy proceeds from the mindset of accepting people based upon nothing more than a shared humanity, rather than their relatability or acceptability, which are concepts rooted in "in-group/out-group" mentality. According to Spezio, a rejection of "in-group/out-group" thinking is central to the functioning of a liberal democracy: "A liberal democracy takes trust in others. Without trust that others are going to keep you 'in the in-group' or dominant circle, liberal democracy is going to break down—we are going to all seek ways of creating our own or finding the dominant circle, and then it all devolves into being about nothing but power."

"Yet," Spezio continues, "kenotic empathy is a technology that is free and widely available, and in regard to the current political moment, which is marked by harsh in-group/out-group bifurcations, there is transformative potential in accepting people based on their inherent personhood rather than only seeking points of relatability."

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