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Humbly Facing the Facts of Life: Humility and Existential Concerns

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Daryl R. Van Tongeren (Faculty Sponsor)

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Introduction

- Existential concerns give rise to anxiety (Koole et al., 2006)
 - Death, isolation, meaning, identity, and freedom are primary existential concerns
- People construct and defend worldviews that answer existential questions, reduce anxiety, and provide security (Pyszczynski et al., 2015)
 - Are there belief processes that lead to flourishing and decreased defensiveness?
- Humility involves an honest awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, keeping ego in check, and thinking of others.
- Existential humility is an ability to acknowledge one's limitations, remain open to new perspectives, admit that one might be wrong, and embracing a willingness to revise one's beliefs
 - Does humility serve as a belief process through which to manage existential anxiety?

With gratitude for grant support from:



Hypotheses

- **Hypothesis #1** - Existential humility will result in less defensiveness when confronting ultimate concerns.
- **Hypothesis #2** - Intellectual humility may be insufficient to manage existential anxiety, leading to poorer existential security and well-being.
- **Hypothesis #3** - Intellectual humility will moderate the effects of cognitively activating existential concerns, resulting in less defensive and more favorable outcomes.

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 3,800$) were drawn across five pre-registered studies through Qualtrics, an online research platform.

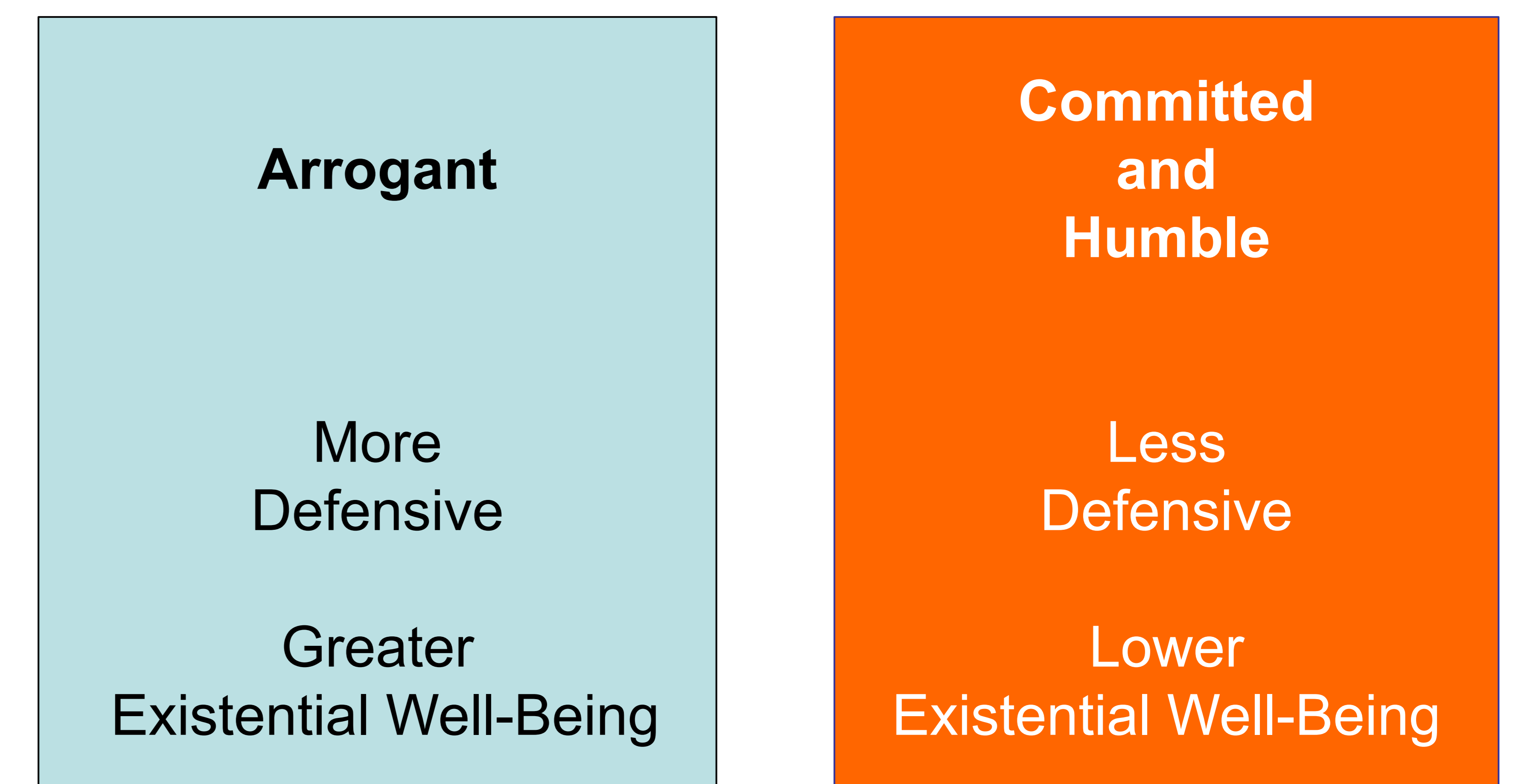
- **Study 1** - 807 adults (383 male, 415 females, 9 other)
- **Study 2** - 628 adults (221 male, 402 females, 5 other)
- **Study 3** - 787 adults (141 male, 564 females, 82 other)
- **Study 4** - 791 adults (384 male, 362 females, 45 other)
- **Study 5** - 787 adults (324 male, 402 females, 61 other)

Materials and Procedure

- Surveys contained different experimental conditions surrounding one of the five existential concerns.
 - Writing prompt regarding an existential concern (experimental condition)
 - Writing prompt regarding an aversive but not threatening topic (control condition).
- Participants completed assessments of flourishing, defensiveness, and measures of humility.
- Existential humility was assessed based on **commitment** to existential beliefs and **willingness to revise** those beliefs.

Results

- Existential primes did not reliably result in differences in responses (i.e., experimental conditions had no consistent significant effects).
- We used latent profile analysis (LPA) to form groups of respondents based on scores on the existential humility scale (commitment to beliefs and humility around beliefs), resulting in 2-3 groups per study.
- Across the five studies, the following group patterns emerged:



Conclusion

- Humility plays a role in managing existential concerns but comes with **significant existential tradeoffs**:
 - Holding beliefs arrogantly serves selfish motives: people are more defensive but have greater well-being.
 - Holding beliefs with commitment and humility is prosocial: people are less defensive but have poorer well-being
- This research suggests why cultural worldviews or ideologies that offer strong and conclusive claims often have broad appeal.