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Torrie Williams
University of Richmond

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Need-Based Heroism: The Motivation to Assign Heroic Status to Others

Senior Honors Thesis

Torrie Williams

University of Richmond

Abstract

This study was looking to determine whether people are more likely to look for heroic qualities in others in an emergency situation where a hero is needed, compared to a situation where nothing is wrong. This study also sought to find whether strangers in non-emergency situations will be seen as more villainous and more threatening than strangers in emergency situations. The hypotheses were supported. Participants found an ambiguous stranger to be more heroic in an emergency scenario, compared to a non-emergency. Additionally, in the situation where no hero was needed, the participants found an ambiguous stranger more threatening than in a situation where a hero was needed.

Need-Based Heroism: The Motivation to Assign Heroic Status to Others

People need heroes and role models (Allison & Goethals, 2011). It has been argued that in every human being exists the potential to develop kindness or cruelty, through the desire to achieve universal human needs. The fulfillment or frustration of these needs can lead to the development of positive or hostile behavior, which can in turn lead to perceived heroism or villainy (Miller 2005).   Research in psychology has shown that children, in particular, need positive role models in their lives as part of their normal, healthy development (Sternheimer, 2006).

Heroes are influential in the adoption of healthy lifestyles, life goals, and appropriate behavior. Numerous studies have shown that children who grow up with healthy adult heroes are more likely to achieve positive life outcomes such as acquiring good jobs, entering healthy marriages, and living longer lives (Goethals & Allison, 2012). At the same time, influences by villains can have adverse effects.

Allison and Goethals (2011) conveyed that humans have mental lists, models, or images of heroes and villains that we may be born with, and that also are influenced by the real and fictional people and stories that we encounter throughout our lives. They compiled a list of the "Great Eight" traits that people most regularly attribute to heroes-smart, strong, selfless, caring, charismatic, resilient, reliable, and inspiring. People tend to deem those characters heroes who best fit these qualities and this concept (Allison & Goethals, 2011).

Characterizing villains is often more challenging, and people are more hesitant to label figures as villains. Villain attribution depends on people's views of morality, and there are different beliefs such as moral nihilism, moral relativism, and moral

universalism. Nihilism is the idea that there is no such thing as good or bad. Relativism is that people's judgments of morality are culturally based, and universalism is that there are some values that are common across cultures (Allison & Goethals, 2011). Depending on where people's morality beliefs fall, they may be more or less likely to consider different figures heroes or villains.

Goethals and Allison (2012) established "seven paradoxes of heroism" which related to ironies in their findings about how we perceive and construct the category of heroes. One paradox conveys that "we don't choose our heroes; they choose us," meaning that humans may be wired with universal hero structures, which provide a basis for the qualities we look for in heroes, and whom we consider heroes. Another paradox is that we love the heroes most when they are gone. This paradox reflects the death-positivity bias, in which people are more likely to attribute heroic qualities to people once they have passed away, conveying an idea that we internalize their memory in a more positive way than when they were actually alive. This finding could influence different historical figures and the degree to which society perceives them to be heroic or villainous.

Becker and Eagly (2004) defined heroism as actions undertaken to help others, despite the possibility that they may result in the helper's death or injury. Taken more generally, heroism may also be perceived as actions to help others that may put the helper at some sort of risk or negative outcome. Becker and Eagly (2004) studied perceived gender differences in heroes, partially based on culturally held attitudes throughout history. Early creation myths of Western cultures included both male and female deities. The reasoning behind this hero duality is that many of the early myths centered on heroic

figures who brought fourth humans and who endowed humans with the wisdom and ability to cope with their environments. As women are associated with procreation, it is understandable that the early myths featured both men and women as heroic figures.

With the development of monotheism, the idea of multiple deities vastly diminished. These changes in religion in conjunction with chivalric code altered the focus of heroism onto ideals of male behavior to convey courageous service to others (Hearnshaw, 1928; Keen, 1984). Now, the accepted idea of heroism is that it consists of a combination of risk taking and service to a socially accepted goal (Becker & Eagly, 2004). As certain traits are considered to be heroic, Williams and Best (1990) conducted a cross-cultural study of gender stereotypes and found that the traits of daring, adventurous and courageous were associated more with men than with women in all 25 nations that they surveyed.

Becker and Eagly (2004) analyzed the heroic contributions of men and women throughout different events, including rescuing Jews during the Holocaust, living kidney donors, and volunteering in the Peace Corps and Doctors of the World. When examining gender differences, Becker and Eagly (2004) found that holocaust rescuers were an equal representation of men and women. This type of heroism is extremely risky because the holocaust rescuers faced execution if caught. Further, in situations that involved physical risk but little risk of dying, women more often were heroes. These situations included donating a kidney to a person with renal disease, volunteering for the Peace Corps, and volunteering overseas with Doctors of the World. Heroism represented by women evidently is seen in many diverse areas. Therefore, it is important to consider that both

men and women can be heroes if given more opportunities in social roles, and that both men and women should be considered when researching heroism.

There are different ways of reacting to an emergency situation, or a crisis. Weick (1988) described crises as low probability and high consequence events that threaten the most fundamental goals of an organization. Because they are not likely to happen often, these events defy interpretations and impose severe demands on making sense of the event and on decision-making. Ever since the infamous murder of Kitty Genovese in 1964, when allegedly multiple neighbors heard her in distress and did nothing to help, multiple studies have examined the bystander effect, and what are the circumstances under which bystanders are more or less likely to help someone in need. Schwartz and Gottlieb (1976) discussed "evaluation apprehension," the idea that the presence of others may make the bystander apprehensive about reacting to the situation, regarding others' expectations and evaluations of their behavior, which may prompt as well as inhibit helping.

Schwartz and Gottlieb (1980) found that in response to a crisis, bystanders who were anonymous were significantly slower to respond than known bystanders. Their study was also the first to convey the idea of "diffusion of responsibility," where an individual is less likely to respond to an event if there are others present, and assumes that others are responsible for action or have already acted. These findings indicate that others can influence how a person responds in a situation that could require acts of heroism.

Unconscious thoughts could also have an impact on our judgments and actions in an emergency situation. Malcolm Gladwell discussed the immediate judgments of our

thoughts in "unconscious reasoning" in his book "Blink" (Gladwell, 2005). Gladwell

argues that human instincts are often more accurate than qualitative analyses taking place

over a long period of time. People engage in "thin slicing," which entails noting certain

aspects of a person, or conversation, to make it easier to form conclusions more quickly.

For example, he used the example of a trained consultant was able to predict married

couples' likelihood of getting divorced from a brief conversation between the couple.

Further, Gladwell suggests that the subconscious looks for subtle, small cues

while enabling the conscious to work on the problem at hand, the general issue. He cites

the Implicit Association Test, that people generally have associations between two

subjects and may not even be aware that they do. He cited the "Warren Harding error,"

the public's election of Warren Harding based off of implicit traits that were associated

with being successful or presidential: he was tall, dark and handsome. The public

subconsciously attributed these qualities to a good president, and elected Warren Harding

as president even though he was not particularly successful or intelligent, and did not

accomplish very much during his years in office.

Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz (1998) investigated the assumption regarding

the implicit association test, that associations can be distinguished by "mapping two

discrimination tasks alternately onto a single pair of responses." They confirmed the

idea, as participants were more successful when associating compatible categories than

non-compatible categories. Performance was consistently superior when the categories

of flowers and musical instruments were paired with positive-meaning words as opposed

to negative words, as flowers and musical instruments are more often given positive

associations.

Wilson, Lindsey, and Schooler (2000) argued that people may have dual attitudes toward objects, one implicit and one explicit. Supporting this argument, Karpinski and Hilton (2001) found that correlations between the implicit association test and explicit attitude measures were low, and that the two measures predicted different aspects of behavior. These findings support Greenwald and Banaji's (1995) suggestion that implicit attitudes shape people's automatic reactions and their subsequent interactions with the objects.

It is important to further study heroism in emergency situations, and how people respond to these situations. Based on the findings about the bystander effect, bystanders may note certain attributes when determining if others will respond to the situation. They also may implicitly attribute heroic qualities to bystanders who may be about to intervene. Very little research has been conducted addressing the question of whether people will more likely attribute qualities of heroes to a stranger if they are motivated in some way to find a hero.

It is hypothesized than in an emergency situation where a hero is needed, that people will be more likely to attribute qualities characteristic of heroes to an ambiguous stranger, compared to in a situation where no hero is needed. It is also hypothesized that in an emergency situation, that people will implicitly associate the figure with words connected to the concept of heroism, and will answer the word completion as "brave" and "help" compared to other words not connected to heroism.

STUDY 1

Method

Participants

Participants were college students in an introductory-level psychology course at a small, private university in Virginia. They received credit in their course for completing the study. The signed a consent form informing them that the study was about social perception, and indicating that all of their responses would be kept confidential and only be reported in group form.

Measures

There were two scenarios, each with an experimental and control condition. Participants were randomly assigned to either experimental or control conditions for both scenarios, and completed both the short questionnaires for both scenarios. Half of the participants read one scenario first, and half read the other scenario first. The questionnaires were on a Likert scale from 1 to 7.

One scenario involved a situation of driving down a highway. In the control condition, the subject stops to take pictures by the side of the road, and a pickup truck approaches. In the experimental scenario, the car breaks down and the subject must pull over to the side of the road and wait for help, and then a pickup truck approaches.

The other scenario involved a commute to work on a subway platform. In the control condition, the scene is typical and nothing bad happens, when a stranger approaches. In the experimental condition, a mugging takes place on the platform, and the person who was mugged is yelling for help, when the stranger approaches.

After reading the scenario, the participant answered a series of questions about the stranger, and how likely the stranger was to be a hero. The participant also did a word completion of a word that was said to be on the stranger's sweatshirt. In the car scenario, it was ""HEL__" and in the subway scenario it was "BRA__.""

Results

For the subway scenario, the ambiguous stranger in the emergency situation (M=5.00, SD=) was seen as more helpful than the ambiguous stranger in a non-emergency situation (M=3.44, SD=), $F(1, 23)$ =, p< .001. The ambiguous stranger in the emergency situation (M=5.08, SD=) was seen as more courageous than the ambiguous stranger in a non-emergency situation (M=3.61, SD=), $F(1,23)$ =, p< .001. The ambiguous stranger in the emergency situation (M=4.58, SD=) was seen as more likely to become a hero than the ambiguous stranger in a non-emergency situation (M=3.17, SD=), $F(1,23)$ =, p< .01.

Discussion

Participants perceived an ambiguous stranger to be more helpful, courageous, and more likely to become a hero in a situation where a hero was needed, compared to during a typical day where nothing is going wrong. There was no significant difference between how threatening the ambiguous figure was perceived to be in the different conditions. Further, there was not a significant difference for the word completion task of participants writing hero related words or non-hero related words in the different conditions.

These findings show that people tend to look for heroes during emergencies, and that they may attribute heroic qualities to an otherwise random and unidentifiable stranger. The results only convey significant data for the subway scenario as opposed to the broken down car scenario. The reason for this difference is that we adjusted the original two scenarios to fit more of a pilot study, and looked for more basic and concrete

findings. Therefore, in the second round of the study, only the subway scenario was given to participants, and the broken car scenario was left out.

STUDY 2

Method

Participants

Participants were University of Richmond students found in the library or other common meeting places around campus and approached to take the survey. They were not compensated and they were told that participation was voluntary, and that it would take only a couple of minutes.

Measures

There was one scenario with an experimental and control condition. Participants were randomly assigned to either the experimental or control condition. The questionnaires were on a Likert scale from 1 to 7.

The scenario involved waiting at the bus stop on a typical morning workday commute. In the experimental condition, a man begins choking on his breakfast burrito, and a red-haired man starts to approach the choking victim. In the control condition, the man is not choking, and the red-haired man approaches the man who is eating the burrito. Both conditions see an image of the red-haired man before answering the questions.

Results

The ambiguous stranger in the emergency situation (M=5.54, SD=0.88) was seen as more helpful than the ambiguous stranger in a non-emergency situation (M=4.09 SD=1.45), $F(1, 23) = 9.11$, $p < .01$. The ambiguous stranger in the emergency situation (M=5.62, SD=1.45) was seen as more courageous than the ambiguous stranger in a non-

emergency situation (*M*=4.27, *SD*=1.56), F(1,23) = 4.80, p< .05. The ambiguous stranger in the emergency situation (*M*=5.38, *SD*=1.11) was seen as more likely to become a hero than the ambiguous stranger in a non-emergency situation (*M*=4.81, *SD*=0.84), F(1,23) = 5.67, p< .05. The stranger in the non-emergency situation (*M*=3.91, *SD*=1.45) was seen as more threatening than the stranger in the emergency situation (*M*=2.23, *SD*=0.83), F(1,23) = 12.64, p< .01.

Discussion

In this study, participants also saw the ambiguous stranger as more helpful, courageous, and more likely to become a hero in the situation where a man was choking and needed help from a hero, as opposed to during a typical day at the bus stop. Further, in the control condition where nothing was going wrong, the red-haired man approaching the burrito-eating man was seen as more threatening than in the hero condition where the man was choking on his burrito and needed help.

This second study was very similar to the first, but it added the dimension of an image. The image was meant to be neutral, so that the red-haired man in the photo could be perceived as either villainous or heroic, depending on how the participants are primed. The addition of the image made the results even stronger and more significant. In this study, dependent variable of "threatening" emerged. It is possible that the reason that this ambiguous figure was seen as more threatening than the ambiguous figure in the subway scenario is that in this scenario, the figure is approaching the man eating the burrito, whereas in the subway scenario, the figure is simply coming down the stairs of the subway, an act that many other people were probably also doing around that time and that is not a questionable thing to do.

Because in this situation, the action was more direct toward a person, it may have been perceived as more dangerous. Another possibility is that the image added to the extremity of the views, and that once the man was perceived to not be a hero, the image created more of a perception of threat, and the participants more identified menacing qualities about the ambiguous stranger through the photo.

General Discussion

These two studies imply that in an emergency situation where a hero is needed, people are more likely to attribute heroic qualities to an ambiguous figure than in a normal situation where nothing is going wrong. The two hypotheses were supported. First, in an emergency situation where a hero is needed, people see a stranger as more heroic than in a regular daily occurrence. Second, in a normal situation where nothing is going wrong, a stranger approaching is seen as more threatening than a stranger approaching in an emergency situation where someone needs help.

These studies provide more insight into social psychology, and how people act a certain way given one set of factors, and act differently given another set of factors. Since people need heroes, they will often look to find them on a regular basis throughout their lives. It is important to note under what circumstances people will believe a stranger will act heroically or not (Allison & Goethals, 2011). Just as we characterize heroes, we also characterize villains, which helps to explain why participants labeled the stranger in the control condition as more threatening, when he was approaching a person at the bus stop for no reason.

Creating these categories helps people to navigate their world more easily. All of the judgments that the participants made about the characters in the scenario were made

after only a few sentences of description, and a very brief amount of time to form an opinion of someone. This further suggests the already accepted idea that people make very quick judgments about others, and the whole process can only take a couple of seconds to form a first impression of someone. This quality is perhaps based in evolution, as our ancestors needed to form fast impressions for survival.

This study also raises the question of the bystander effect. How would the participants have responded when asked questions about their own behavior and qualities in that situation? Would they have determined themselves to be the one to step in, save the day and be the hero? Much previous research implies that oftentimes, people will be less likely to act if there are others around, and that there is a diffusion of responsibility, where individuals feel less responsible when more people are present.

This phenomenon could be the case in the subway and bus stop scenario. Because there are several other people around, individuals watching the scene may not feel as personally responsible to help a choking victim or a person about to get crushed by a subway train. They may look to others to be the heroes. However, it is just as important for individuals to decide to be heroes themselves, because anyone can become a hero, or a villain, for that matter.

Further research could frame the questionnaire to ask participants how they would respond given the emergency scenario. Further research could also compare participants' answers about how they themselves would act in the situation compared to how they think an ambiguous stranger might act, drawing everything together. There were a couple limitations with the study. It was a pilot study, and like many first studies, the data from the original participants' survey responses was not significant, and we had to

go back and make the questionnaire and scenario more basic and to the point, to find where the significance would be. At that point, we did achieve significance for the different factors we analyzed, but they were more simplistic than later studies could be.

Therefore, future studies could take the basic ideas formed from this thesis and expand on them. This study implies that people look for heroes in a situation where a hero is needed, and find a stranger to be more threatening when a hero is not needed. Future studies could manipulate a few different variables and see if the outcome is still the same. For example, in this study, we described the ambiguous stranger to be a young man in his twenties. However, that description was mostly for logistical purposes, to distinguish him characteristically from the stranger who had fallen on the tracks so as not to confuse the participants with the two different people.

That description held no other real purpose, and so it would be interesting in future studies to change certain qualities about the stranger to see if the outcome is different. Studies could analyze a stranger who is a female, different age group, or specify other qualities about the stranger to analyze how people are reacting to this character, and whether it stays constant or is subject to change. Another study could change the qualities of the victim, the choking person or the person falling on the tracks. It would also be interesting to track the demographics of the participants such as gender, age, and ethnicity to determine whether the qualities of the participants in turn influence their judgments of the characters in the scenario.

Overall, this research has been a pilot study, finding that people seek heroes among strangers in situations where someone needs help, but that they also are quick to find villainous qualities in those same strangers given different circumstances. There is

ample opportunity to take the results of this study and to apply it to our world to see how people interact and perceive strangers. Hopefully, through more research, we can determine what qualities people will look for in themselves, so that everyone will look not only to others, but to themselves, to step up and be a hero when the time comes.

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