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On the Bravery and Courage of Heroes: Considering Gender

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ABSTRACT: Heroes are frequently described as both brave and courageous. Each adjective is often used interchangeably in public and academic discourse, despite historical and philosophical differences in their meaning. While research about heroes and heroism is burgeoning, little work has yet to provide a detailed analysis of specific hero features; indeed, there is a need for greater precision in our terminology and conceptual analyses of heroism. In the present article, we focus on two features of heroism, bravery and courage, and critically parse these terms and the pervasive gender stereotypes that are associated with each. We aim to spark critical discussions about the personal features, motivations, and behaviors associated with heroes and heroism, as well as to outline some directions for future heroism research. We extend our previous work on the central and peripheral features of heroism, and provide directions for considering the role of gender and gender stereotypes in developing future theory and research on heroism.

KEYWORDS: heroism, heroes, bravery, courage, gender stereotypes, gender

An individual is often described as a hero after a display of the prototypical features including bravery, moral integrity, courage, self-sacrifice, conviction, honesty, and a willingness to help and protect others (Kinsella, Ritchie & Igou, 2015a). Scholars and laypersons frequently use bravery and courage synonymously, but there are etymological differences in their meaning.

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Research on heroes and heroism is growing, but the lack of definitional precision is problematic. In this article, we explore historical and modern meanings of the terms bravery and courage, drawing from the literature on the psychology of bravery and the psychology of courage. We examine why bravery and courage *both* appear as central features of heroism (see Kinsella et al., 2015a) and what the implications are for person perception, the self, stereotype consistent behavior, and predicting heroic behavior.

In our analysis of these heroic features, we draw from a classic distinction in the leadership literature between agentic versus communal traits, which correspond well to the concepts of "masculinity" and "femininity" (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). Agentic traits are male-typed and include attributes such as strong, intelligent, determined, ambitious, tough, active, and brave (e.g., Bosak, Sczesny & Eagly, 2008). In contrast, communal traits are stereotypically feminine and include attributes such as unselfish, caring, friendly, compassionate, and willing to act on behalf of others (Bosak et al., 2008). According to social role theory, males and females learn different qualities through socialization processes and from role models during their formative years (Eagly, 1987). For example, males may learn to display and be socially rewarded for displaying agentic behaviors (including feats of physical bravery) and socialized against appearing in ways to be feminine (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), which may account for some of the apparent gender differences in the types of heroic behavior (Becker & Eagly, 2004). Using this lens to conduct a more nuanced analysis of bravery and courage, we can examine the role of gender and gender stereotypes in developing future theory and research on heroism.

What is Bravery?

Bravery is often described as the ability to confront danger or pain without fear. Dictionary definitions (e.g., Merriam-Webster online dictionary) indicate that bravery refers to feeling or at least showing no fear. Like valor, bravery refers to boldness or determination in facing great danger, especially in battle (www.dictionary.com). The etymology of the word brave derives from the Italian word *bravo*, meaning bold, wild, or savage (Oxford dictionary). Interestingly, when participants in our research study were asked to read a list of some prototypical heroic features (including moral, honest, self-sacrificing) and later given a surprise recall task, they tended to 'remember' the word brave 73% of the time even when it did not appear on the original list presented during the study (see Kinsella et al., 2015a). This false-positive memory error (e.g., Roediger & McDermott, 1995) was most likely driven by the fact that bravery is one of the most central features of a physical-risk heroism schema, including acts of martial heroism and civil heroism (Franco, Blau & Zimbardo, 2011).

Bravery often requires a person to decide to act impulsively, and without too much thought. For example, Westley Autrey was a 50-year old construction worker and navy veteran waiting for the New York subway with his daughters one afternoon in 2007. Nearby, a man collapsed during a seizure and fell onto the tracks between two rails, moments before the train was due to pass. Mr. Autrey observed what happened, leaped onto the tracks, and then laid on top of the collapsed man to protect him from being crushed by the train. Although five train carriages passed over the men, both were relatively unharmed. According to the New York Times (Buckley, 2007), Mr. Autrey was quoted as saying: "I don't feel like I did something spectacular; I just saw someone who needed help. I did what I felt was right." This example highlights the impulsive, proactive, and decisive nature of an act of bravery. Furthermore, it raises the question of whether bravery is an example of a temporary or cue-driven state, rather

than an enduring personality trait. Drawing from the classic state versus trait debate in psychology (e.g., Mischel, 1968), one might predict that if placed in a situation that requires heroic and immediate action, people who are naturally reserved and timid may be more likely than usual to intervene. This interpretation suggests that behavior is explained by understanding, not only personality, but also how people react to the environment and social context. It may be possible that one-time heroes find themselves in a state of heroism, which lends itself to the idea that everyone is a hero-in-waiting and that everyone has the potential for heroic acts of bravery (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006).

One could argue that a bystander is more likely to act in a risky situation if they feel competent and confident (Cramer, McMaster, Bartell & Dragna, 1988). A person who is physically strong, athletic, trained to respond to emergency situations, or skilful in a domain may feel more capable of brave actions compared to persons who do not feel skilled to help. For instance, a strong and capable swimmer will feel more equipped to intervene and behave heroically in a drowning rescue situation. In the previous example of bravery, it is possible that Mr. Autrey's training as a U.S. Navy Seal may have equipped him to intervene in emergency scenarios.

Through training and experience, a person may feel more competent in their own ability (self-efficacy; Bandura, 1977) to demonstrate bravery in situations that involve physical risk. One might expect that training to be a member of the civil defence, military, fire brigade, police force, flight attendants, and other protecting public services increase individual levels of bravery and competence to intervene in an emergency scenario, as well as confidence in the other highly-skilled group members who may be present. Future research will need to disentangle the interplay between situational factors, personality correlates, and self-efficacy that could influence a person's likelihood to intervene in a situation that requires bravery.

The term bravery fits well with the historical view of a physical-risk hero. Rankin and Eagly (2008) indicate that heroes are more traditionally represented as men, particularly in physical-risk and rescue scenarios due to their often greater physical prowess and strength. Indeed, these authors noted that commonly held views about physical-risk heroism were most associated with men rather than women. Bravery appears to be more related to agentic and masculine stereotypes, such as speed, strength, impulsivity, fearlessness, quick-mindedness, and dealing with consequences after the action, than to female stereotypes. These stereotypes have an impact on women and their likelihood for behaving bravely, but also, on men who feel that they cannot intervene in a physical-risk scenario and feel pressure to act.

A recent (2017) anecdotal example of the continued pushing of these gendered stereotypes was evident during a visit to a local department store in Ireland where young boys' t-shirts portrayed the slogans: *Superhero* and *It's a great day for an adventure*, while the girls' equivalent portrayed the slogan: *Looking cute*. The advent of the Supergirl series (Adler, Berlanti & Kreisberg, 2015) and associated merchandise do, perhaps, show a willingness to challenge and question traditional gender roles in at least some cultures and areas in the world. Yet, gender roles are still prominent. Clothing gives information to others about the social and economic situation of the wearer, as well as information about their occupation, nationality, and values (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013), and the slogans and text on clothing may also be internalized by the wearer. A direction for future research is to investigate the extent to which children may

think or behave differently when exposed to self-relevant messages about their capacity for heroic behavior.

What is Courage?

Courage is defined as the ability to confront a challenge despite the overwhelming presence of fear or disapproval (Oxford English Dictionary online), the mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty, and the moral strength to speak out against injustice when no one else will (Merriam-Webster Dictionary online). The etymology of courage is linked to *coeur*, the French word for heart. Courage is another prototypical characteristic of heroism (see Franco et al., 2011; Kinsella et al., 2015a). The essence of courage is the unyielding choice to fight and resist, but not necessarily in a physical sense, and to be proactive regardless of the possible consequences.

Courage stems from a connection to a cause, and is driven by motivation, love, devotion, compassion, or passion. For example, Irena Sendler is remembered as a woman who displayed courage during the Holocaust of World War I and managed to help 2,500 children to escape from the ghettos of Warsaw (see www.moralheroes.org). Ms. Sendler used her position as a social worker to obtain access to the protected ghetto and then organised a network of associates to help to rehome the children she planned to rescue. Every day she left the ghetto with children in the back of her vehicle, hidden under blankets. After one year of rescuing children, Ms. Sendler was arrested and severely tortured by the Gestapo, but still refused to give up the identities of the children (paperwork details of whom she had secretly buried) or her associates. She escaped execution and after the war tried to reunite the rehomed children with their Jewish families, many of whom were unfortunately dead. The harrowing details of Ms. Sendler's life and the circumstances that she and others endured make for difficult reading. However, Ms. Sendler's unrelenting determination to protect vulnerable children is inspiring.

Some other commonly cited examples of courageous heroes are Joan of Arc, Marie Curie, Martin Luther King Junior, Mahatma Ghandi, and Nelson Mandela. Unlike examples of bravery, lifelong heroes appear to demonstrate an enduring personality trait (rather than state) of courage. In other words, courage may represent an attribute that a person possesses and shows across different situations, rather than a fleeting state that is predominantly triggered by the situation.

Courage is central to social heroism (Martens, 2005), a heroism that serves social ideals and needs. Social heroes are "motivated to act to conserve a value or standard in society that is threatened, or they may act to create and instil a new set of values or behaviors that are not currently embraced by the society" (Csikszentmihalyi, Condren & Lebuda, 2017, p. 251). Examples of social heroism include whistle-blowers, scientific discoverers, odds beaters, and underdogs (Franco et al., 2011). Franco and Zimbardo (2006) suggest that while social heroism is often not as dramatic as physical-risk heroism, it can bear many risks to the heroic actor including loss of financial stability, lowered social status, arrest, torture, risk to family members, and sometimes death.

Individual values and belief systems about humanitarian and political issues are influenced by family, social, and cultural, among other contexts. Courage, caused by a deep connection to a cause, may provide the heroic actor with the motivation to act and to transcend

boundaries created by society and culture. Political prisoners, such as Victor Frankl, demonstrated the hardship and suffering that some individuals find the strength to endure in pursuit of a heart-felt cause across a lifetime (Frankl, 1959/1976). Displays of courage may inspire and motivate others to be proactive in their pursuit of a cause, perhaps empowering and inspiring others to behave heroically. Courage is both masculine and feminine, not tethered to a gender stereotypical behavior.

There is a temporal distinction in the expression of bravery and courage in the sense that a person showing courage has a time-tested understanding of the relevant matter, the rationale for such intended actions, and the possible consequences of such actions; whereas a display of bravery may involve a split-second decision to act with little consideration of the consequences, typically unplanned, and seemingly impromptu. Many heroes and leaders have demonstrated both bravery and courage, highlighting the sometimes-overlapping nature of these characteristics. For example, Rosa Parks is remembered for her refusal to move to the back of a segregated bus in 1955 in the city of Montgomery, Alabama, despite the bus driver's threats to call the police (https://www.biography.com/people/rosa-parks-9433715). At that time, African American passengers were required to pay their fare at the front of the bus and then re-board the bus at the back door. When seats at the front of the bus filled with white passengers, the bus driver would move back the sign separating black and white passengers and, if necessary, ask black passengers to give up their seats. On that day in 1955, Ms. Parks was arrested for violating city ordinances for failing to give up her seat to a white man.

In protest of her arrest, a city-wide boycott of buses by African-Americans ensued led by the President of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and after 382 days, the city of Montgomery lifted the law requiring segregation on public buses. Despite being fired from her job as a seamstress and receiving death threats after her bail release, Ms. Parks continued to collaborate with civil rights leaders, to be active in the Black Power movement and in the support of political prisoners in the U.S.

One could argue that Ms. Parks' actions reflected both bravery and courage; indeed, such attributes need not be mutually exclusive. Although Ms. Parks initially sat in the 'black section' of the bus, she made a split-second impromptu decision to not move when the black section of the bus was re-designated as more white passengers boarded the bus. This initial act of defiance to the bus driver required Ms. Parks to show boldness and determination in the face of immediate great danger (i.e., risk of physical violence and police arrest). Ms. Parks also showed a keen interest in matters of human rights and civil liberties. Since leaving school, Ms. Parks had been a youth leader and secretary to the president of the local branch of the NAACP. Given Ms. Parks longstanding involvement with the civil rights movement throughout her life, prior to the famous bus event, she illustrated the injustices that African-Americans had, and continue, to confront, as well as the possible short- and long-term consequences for resisting the status quo. For instance, eleven years before the famous bus event, in her capacity as secretary, Ms. Parks had investigated the gang-rape of a black woman from Alabama, and she launched a campaign for equal justice that received national media attention in the U.S. Ms. Parks, along with colleagues including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., showed courage by having the moral strength to withstand difficulty, as well as the moral strength to speak out against the injustices that they had perceived throughout their lives.

Stereotypes and the Heroic Self

Individuals are typically aware of and influenced by the characteristics, values, and norms of the social groups to which they belong (e.g., men, women, feminist, construction worker, nurse). Individuals characterize outgroup members in terms of their outgroup stereotype, and self-stereotype and adopt the attributes of their ingroup (*social identification*; Reicher, Spears & Postmes, 1995). Importantly, these stereotypes provide a sense of meaning to group members (e.g., Spears et al., 2004) and shape behaviour (Reicher et al., 1995). In times of uncertainty, individuals are even more likely to identify with social groups that are clearly defined and distinctive, and behave in ways that are consistent with those group identities (Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner & Moffitt, 2006). Reducing uncertainty is a well-documented means to re-establish meaning (e.g., Heine, Proulx & Vohs, 2006) and meaning-regulation processes such as these can affect perceptions of and identification with heroes (e.g., Kinsella, Igou & Ritchie, 2017; see also Coughlan, Igou, Van Tilburg, Kinsella & Ritchie, 2017). Thus, in times of uncertainty (typical of settings that require heroism), men and women may resort to behaving in ways that are consistent with their gender group stereotypes (e.g., weak, slow, strong, brave). Women may choose to define their heroism differently than men because this is in line with prevailing stereotypes that also reduce uncertainty and give their lives more meaning.

Many individuals and groups hold beliefs about how brave and courageous they are. These self-/group-perceptions provide mental scripts (Allison & Goethals, 2011) about how to behave when a situation arises. If a person thinks of one's self as brave, then that person is more likely to *do* brave things. Gender stereotypes influence self-perceptions and subsequent behavior in certain domains (Eagly, Beall & Sternberg, 2004; Eagly & Wood, 2013; Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999). Stereotype threat refers to one's risk of confirming a negative stereotype about one's social group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). When a salient group membership (e.g., I am a woman) is active in a context (e.g., a challenging math test) an individual's performance could be impaired due to the possibility of conforming to a negative stereotype associated with that social group (i.e., women perform below-average on math exams).

It is possible that acts of physical heroism and bravery are a gender-stereotypic domain. The likelihood that an individual shows bravery may be influenced by local gender norms that guide the appropriateness and acceptability of their behavior. The male expression of fear and avoidance is viewed as unacceptable in many cultures and as such, men are more likely to learn to behave bravely and proactively when faced with anxiety-provoking situations (Bem, 1981).

Researchers have examined the extent to which masculinity influences a man's decision to intervene in a physical-risk situation, and mixed results were found. In one study, men who saw themselves as strong and aggressive were more likely to help, especially when the person in need was a woman (Laner, Benin & Ventrone, 2001). Yet, elsewhere, men who felt lower feelings of masculinity were more likely to seek out opportunities to be heroic to reassert their masculinity (Holt & Thompson, 2004). Another study revealed that the risk of public embarrassment associated with a failed heroic action reduced the likelihood of heroic action in men who endorsed a strong masculine identity (Leone, Parrott, Swartout & Tharp, 2016). Given the complexity of an individual's willingness to act in a physical-risk scenario, more research is needed to address the extent to which masculine and feminine identities influence heroic behavior in emergency situations.

Research indicates that women experience higher levels of fear and are at greater risk of developing anxiety disorders (Bourdon et al., 1988; Weissman & Merikangas, 1986). However, evidence for biological or genetic differences between men and women in relation to fear and anxiety is inconclusive. To account for these inconsistencies, some authors argue that the shift towards negative affectivity and fearfulness begins to show differential affects between men and women during the period that gender socialization becomes evident (McLean & Anderson, 2009). If bravery is strongly associated with fearlessness, it follows that gender socialization influences perceptions and acts of bravery.

Courage refers to one's own commitment to proactivity in relation to a cause or causes: motivation, love, devotion, compassion, or passion, regardless of the possible consequences. Courage fits better with traditional descriptions of communal traits of compassion and concern for others. Given that, such concepts may be less gendered than bravery-related concepts. We contend that courage is less influenced by gender stereotypes; however, this is an empirical question deserving an empirical answer. In our own research, mothers and grandmothers were commonly named social heroes who were described as loving and protecting others, and sacrificing their own needs for their family. This is consistent with the dictionary definition of courage. The leadership literature suggests that women are disadvantaged because of the perceived mismatch between agentic traits associated with the prototypical leader and the communal traits associated with the female gender (see Eagly & Karau, 1991, 2002), however, it appears that the concept of a hero is flexible enough to accommodate both stereotypically masculine and feminine hero exemplars. Indeed, the prototypical features of a hero include both agentic and communal attributes (e.g., Kinsella et al., 2015a). Many individuals easily recall numerous historical examples of female social heroes (e.g., Joan of Arc, Rosa Parks, Marie Curie), but for others that might be more difficult. One challenge is that most modern education curricula do not highlight historical or modern examples of heroes (male or female) and perhaps miss opportunities to inspire younger generations and prepare them to act with courage and compassion in their own lives.

Development of Novel Research on Bravery or Courage

What predicts courage or bravery? To what extent are these heroic features rooted in biological foundations, cultural foundations, or their interactive relationships? At the neurobiological level, activity in certain brain regions (e.g., amygdala, basal ganglia), release of neurotransmitters (e.g., noradrenaline) and hormonal changes (e.g., release of oxytocin) may be associated with bravery and/or courage. At the social level, if an individual feels connected to another individual (e.g., loved one) or group (e.g., nation, comrades) they may be more likely to show bravery and/or courage in order to protect those individuals or groups under threat. At the cognitive level, an individual who believes they have a clear understanding of the environment and the threat (e.g., perhaps due to training or prior life experience) may be more likely to show bravery or courage. From each of these levels of analysis, it is possible to develop testable hypotheses for future research that will help us understand more about the psychology of bravery, courage, and heroism. It is not possible here to discuss each of these levels of analysis but, given our own area of research expertise, we outline ideas for future research that will consider the social factors influencing bravery and courage in more depth.

Clarifying the impact of salient masculine and feminine identities, and their subsequent influences on behavior, represent interesting lines of inquiry. For instance, future research could

examine whether bravery or courage are stereotypic domains. Under experimental settings, if a salient group membership (e.g., I am a woman / I am a man) is active in a particular context (e.g., an emergency situation requiring physical-risk bravery) it will be possible to assess whether men and women respond differently. Researchers will be able to assess whether any apparent behavioral differences are due to the possibility of conforming to a negative stereotype associated with that social group (i.e., women are weak / men are heroes).

Also, future researchers could consider the extent to which gendered identities (e.g., masculine, feminine) interact with other variables (e.g., skill level, expertise) to produce differing levels and types of heroism. Changing self-perceptions of bravery and self-priming by imagining oneself behaving heroically in future crises (Zimbardo, 2007) may increase the likelihood of future heroic behavior regardless of gender. To our knowledge, this has not yet been empirically tested. There may be opportunities to systematically examine the world of gaming to create simulated environments to explore one's own heroic potential, and to assess whether gaming behavior transfers to real-world settings. More broadly, the psychology of cowardice has not been examined (Parks, 2017), and the interaction of cowardice, gender, and heroism are not at all understood.

Closing Thoughts

It is worth noting that both bravery and courage require agency. In other words, an individual must have the capacity to act in any given environment. A person may wish to act heroically, or to show bravery and courage, but may be constrained by the social structure they are situated within. Those constraints could include gender norms, but also may include a host of other influencing factors such as poverty, poor health, corruption, or fear. Despite all the obstacles, some heroes find a way to challenge the very structures that stifle agency and democracy.

The motivation to be brave or show courage can vary greatly, and the motivation to be a hero is both difficult to discern and essential in defining heroism (Jayawickreme & DiStefano, 2012; Kinsella, Ritchie & Igou, 2017). In many contexts, heroes have a genuine desire to help, protect, or rescue others. Many humble heroes explain that they just did what anyone else would do (see Worthington, 2007); however, not all displays of bravery and courage can be attributed to prosocial motivations. Indeed, people may show courage in their commitment to a cause that does not promote the wellbeing of others. For instance, narcissism and psychopathy may account for some (small) proportion of bravery (Franco et al., 2011; Murphy, Lilienfield & Watts, 2017). Perhaps it is because some people want to be the hero of the situation, to bask in their own glory, and to have others bask in their reflected glory.

There is a long tradition of honouring acts of extraordinary heroism performed by soldiers, sailors, air force, and marines in America defined by the U.S. Department of Defence (http://valor.defense.gov/Description-of-Awards/). Yet in military contexts, physical-risk heroism may result from soldiers feeling over-confident in their own abilities to confront danger and perhaps take unnecessary risks (Swank & Marchand, 1946). For psychopathic individuals, reduced physical or social fears and impulsivity, emotional callousness, and reduced empathy may increase the likelihood of bravery in high-risk situations that call for acts of physical-risk heroism (Murphy et al., 2017). Here, the distinction between bravery and courage may be useful: a psychopathic individual may be more likely to show bravery and fearlessness in situations

requiring risk and proactivity, yet such a person may be unlikely to have the capacity to show courage associated with acts of social heroism, which often require perspective-taking, empathy, and concern for the welfare of others over an extended period.

In sum, while bravery and courage are central to the construct of heroism, either one of these features does not equate to heroism. There are other features, such as moral integrity, honesty, altruism, compassion, and humility, which give insight into the motivations and behaviors of heroes. An important direction for future research is to clarify the extent that gender bias impacts upon how researchers perceive hero concepts, methodology and measurement, and applications. The word hero is traditionally applied to males, and heroine is applied to women. Although the word heroine seems to be out of date and seldom used, the very existence of separate words for the same construct indicates gender typing. There are some basic questions which need to be addressed: *To what extent does differential highlighting of male and female heroes exist in the media, education, and among scholarly and corporate work? Is physical-risk bravery celebrated more than acts of non-physical courage and social heroism? Are men and women equally likely to receive an award or recognition for heroism? Do women have to achieve more to be recognised as heroes? To what extent does likeability influence people's judgements about female and male heroes?*

Of course, many other questions and concerns exist, and each of these questions can translate to large programmes of research. We suggest that now is as good a time as any to begin to assess the intersection of heroism and gender. More broadly, a key step for researchers, practitioners, and activists will be to work together to find ways to support young people, to help them develop the skills and confidence they will need to show bravery and/or courage for a common good in the situations that are unfolding in their lives.

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