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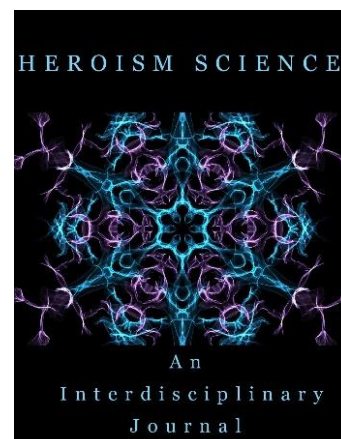
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# On the Downside of Heroism: Grey Zone Limitations on the Value of Social and Physical Risk Heroism

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**ABSTRACT:** Implicit lay views of heroes are overwhelmingly positive and do not focus on the potential problems that may result from heroic behavior. Similarly, a rarely challenged assumption of heroism research is that heroic behavior represents a social good that should be rewarded, encouraged, and even taught. Yet it is not difficult to demonstrate empirically that heroic behavior, regardless of how well intended, can backfire and hurt, rather than help, the would-be helper, the target of helping, and third parties in the background. By extension, training programs that promote heroism can be of questionable value to the extent that they encourage individuals to engage in heroic behaviors that subsequently produce a negative effect. A two-dimensional action-impact matrix is presented that crosses whether or not a hero acts heroically and whether or not he or she has a positive impact to identify four possible actors: the classic hero, meddling hero, meta-hero, and failed hero. Using famous characters from fiction such as Superman and the officers on *Star Trek*, as well as real life incidents and case studies, the dynamics of the action-impact matrix are identified in order to explore the reasons why a person should not intervene in some instances.

**KEYWORDS:** heroism, downside of heroism, *Star Trek* heroism, Superman

## Article history

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## INTRODUCTION

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Implicit lay views of heroes are overwhelmingly positive and do not focus on the potential problems that may result from heroic behavior. Similarly, a rarely challenged assumption of heroism research is that heroic behavior represents a social good that should be rewarded, encouraged, and even taught. Very little, if any, academic focus has questioned the value of heroism. In an analysis of the German epic poem *Nibelungenlied*, Classen (2003) wrote that “scholarship has not paid much attention to the downside of heroism” (p. 298). Yet it is not difficult to demonstrate empirically that heroic behavior, regardless of how well intended, can backfire and hurt, rather than help, the would-be helper, the target of helping, and third parties in the background. By extension, training programs that promote heroism can be of questionable value to the extent that they encourage individuals to engage in heroic behaviors that subsequently produce a negative effect. The purpose of this paper is to explore this *grey zone* of heroism: Heroism is not necessarily the appropriate behavioral response to a given situation. There may be good reasons for why people should not act in a heroic manner or intervene in the lives of others. An exploration of the reasons why a person should not intervene is the key contribution of this article.

## DEFINING SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL RISK HEROISM

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Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo (2011, p. 101) observed that “situational factors involved in heroism had not received sufficient attention.” They identified 12 heroic subtypes and the situations that call for heroic action. They noted two situations that require physical risk (martial and civil heroism). In a comprehensive model of heroic transformation, Allison and Goethals (2017) considered real individuals who engaged in heroic action and whose stories can be understood in terms of a heroic journey. Humphrey and Adams (2016) examined the

heroism of military personnel who put themselves at risk to assist others. Franco et al. (2011) recognized a remaining 10 situations that involve social heroism, which can be defined as a sustained effort in pursuit of an ideal. The efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr. to challenge racism can be viewed as an excellent instance of social heroism (Fagin-Jones, 2016), although it should be noted that many of his efforts, such as protests and marches, incurred elements of physical risk.

Regardless of whether we consider physical risk or social heroism, as asserted by Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou (2015a), the definition of a hero is complex. They suggested that the hero concept should be viewed as a fuzzy set of features organized around prototypical category members. Their prototype-based analysis identified characteristics associated with bravery, moral integrity, and self-sacrifice. More specifically, they found that the more prototypical characteristics were bravery, moral integrity, courageous, protecting, conviction, honest, altruistic, self-sacrificing, selfless, determined, saves, inspiring, and helpful. In summary, lay representations of heroes are very positive. These favorable views are consistent with the idea that thinking about heroes can serve protective psychological functions for the individual including goals such as personal enhancement, moral modeling, and threat protection (Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou, 2015b).

Goethals and Allison (2012) reinforce the idea that the attributes of heroes are quite positive. Like Kinsella et al. (2015a), they included a morality component and cited the 1950s *Adventures of Superman* series that described Superman as fighting for “truth, justice, and the American way.” The morality element of heroism relates to a focus on the needs of others and, as a result, characterizes heroes as willing to accept costs to help, protect, and promote the well-being of others (Becker & Eagly, 2004; McAdams, 2008). Kinsella et al. (2015a) found that heroes were consistently described as having a positive effect on others’ lives. A second attribute identified by Goethals and Allison (2012) involved competency: Heroes are

highly competent individuals who achieve their goals at crucial moments. One way to conceptualize competency is a definition of heroes as individualists who can resist conformity pressure (Zimbardo, 2007) and, as a consequence, are willing to engage in what they perceive as morally correct behavior even in the face of conflicting social pressure (Schwartz, 2008). Although some heroes seem larger than life, Goethals and Allison (2012) noted that in many cases, heroes struggle through dark periods in a quest for redemption, an analysis that is consistent with Campbell's (1949) concept of the hero's journey. As such, it is possible to simultaneously be heroic and an underdog who achieves greatness after a period of transformation. Finally, Goethals and Allison (2012) suggested that heroism is often associated with sacrifice, with the ultimate sacrifice being the loss of one's own life in the completion of a heroic action.

## THE IMPACT OF HEROIC ACTION

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Table 1 contains a four cell matrix that considers a potential hero's action and the impact of that action. For simplicity, I have dichotomized the hero's choice to either act (or not act) in a heroic manner as well as the consequences as either positive or negative.

The cells in this matrix labeled classic hero and failed hero represent outcomes consistent with prototypic heroic behavior. The cells labeled meddling hero and meta-hero represent outcomes that are often downplayed or outright ignored by both lay and academic conceptions of heroism. These error quadrants represent the focus of the present paper. They represent situations where the hero, through his or her heroic action, actually causes harm and where not acting actually produces a benefit.

**Table 1: Action-Impact Matrix**

	<b>Behave Heroically</b>	<b>Behave Non-Heroically</b>
<b>Has Positive Impact</b>	Classic Hero	Meta-Hero
<b>Has Negative Impact</b>	Meddling Hero	Failed Hero

## CLASSIC HERO

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The most prototypic case in the action-impact matrix is the *classic hero* whose heroic behavior provides a benefit to someone. My assertion is that when heroism scholars as well as lay observers consider the nature of *heroic behavior*, they implicitly have this particular situation in mind, one that is high in *heroic opportunity*, which I define as a circumstance where the benefits of heroic action are high, the costs are low, and there is a clear-cut path toward heroic action. The question of whether or not to intervene does not appear difficult to answer. The classic hero fulfills the role identified by Kinsella et al. (2015b, p. 8) as an individual who can “motivate, act as a role model, inspire, instill hope, improve morale and camaraderie, and guide others.”

One of the best examples of a classic hero, albeit fictional, who engages in unambiguous acts of heroism is Superman. With Superman, the value choice traditionally involves intervention in order to save a human life. Because Superman is more than human, his risk for helping is low, which then creates a greater moral imperative for heroic action, especially when the benefit to others is high (e.g., saving lives). In the iconic origin story, Superman is an alien from the advanced planet Krypton who is rocketed to Earth as an

orphaned infant and raised in Smallville to learn and adhere to the virtues of the heartland of America (“truth, justice, and the American way”). For Superman, the classic heroic situation is someone in a burning building yells, “Help me!” Superman swoops in to save them. At first pass, it is hard to argue that Superman did not do the right thing.

In the real world, first responders such as police officers and fire fighters are classic heroes. Only in the most rarified philosophical discussions would people debate whether catching criminals and putting out fires are morally ambiguous actions. Chelsey “Sully” Sullenberger—the US Airways captain who emergency landed in the Hudson River—was deemed a hero; few would challenge the value of saving a plane full of people (Smith, 2016).

## FAILED HERO

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The flipside of the classic hero is the *failed hero*. The failed hero is someone who experiences discomfort because of his or her failure to assist another. When Spider-Man fails to stop a thief (due to a lack of heroic empathy), and that thief later kills his Uncle Ben, Peter Parker fails as a hero. This failure and the realization that “with great power comes great responsibility” becomes the *raison d'être* for Spider-Man’s existence. The failed hero exists as a counterpoint to the classic hero; as such, the failed hero reifies the validity of the concept of hero.

But consider a different example. Consider the victim who does not want help and the potential hero who does not help. A good example of this situation is the Christian Scientist with an illness that could be readily treated by modern medicine. But the person uses his or her own methods which by modern standards are viewed as completely ineffective. A medical doctor observing such a patient would want to act but would be unable to do so. In this case, the doctor represents a failed hero in that he or she does not rescue the victim. But

at another level, is this person a hero because he made a decision consistent with the religious beliefs and treatment wishes of a patient? This question serves as a challenge to the concept of a classic hero, helps transition to the idea of social heroism, and motivates the next section by illustrating the concept of the grey zone of heroism.

## CHALLENGES TO HEROISM

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In the case of Superman swooping in to save someone from a burning building or a medical doctor frustrated by a patient's unwillingness to accept treatment, there is a clear path between what the hero does (or fails to do) and a consequence. No one would argue that a healed patient or unburned person represents an undesired outcome, mainly because the helping contexts—high in heroic potential—make the choices very clear and unambiguous.

But a central thesis of this paper is that other heroic situations are not so unambiguous. As such, they represent a grey zone where judgments about what represents the correct decision are not as clear. The remaining two cells of the action-outcome matrix play into the inherent complexity of judgments about other types of heroic actions.

## MEDDLING HERO

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The lower left side of Table 1 identifies the *meddling hero*, someone who intervenes with an unwanted heroic behavior. I suggest that this situation tends to go unrecognized by heroism scholars, as well as lay conceptions of heroism. The story of Kim Brooks and her son perfectly illustrates unwanted heroism which could easily be termed interference (Brooks, 2018). She left her four-year-old son alone in a car for a few minutes while going into a store. In that span of time, someone videotaped the boy, called the police, and gave them her license plate number. Ultimately, she was charged with contributing to the delinquency of a



minor, assigned 100 hours of community service, and forced to live through a two year legal nightmare brought about because an anonymous individual had tried her “help” her son, who ultimately became fearful that his mother would be taken away.

Another example of the meddling hero involves Brian Krzanich, who resigned from his position as Intel CEO after it was revealed that he had had a consensual sexual relationship with a subordinate in violation of Intel’s policy on non-fraternization (Ortutay, 2018). The relationship, which ended in 2013, violated a policy put in place in 2011 which banned managers from having sexual and romantic relationships with people who report to them, either directly or indirectly. The reason that affair became public was because a third person—a meddling hero—reported it, not because either involved party was dissatisfied.

By intervening, the meddling hero explicitly or implicitly imposes his or her own set of values on the recipient of unwanted heroism. The potential importance of the concept of the meddling hero is illustrated in an unlikely source: One of the most conceptually important Superman stories where an advanced alien race known as the Guardians of the Galaxy (not the same characters as in the Marvel Studios movie from 2014) force Superman to confront an underlying assumption of his life. The story “Must there be a Superman?” was written by Elliot Maggin and appeared in the January 1972 issue of *Superman*. This example is doubly important because Superman represents a form of physical risk rather than social heroism. Yet the implications of his behavior as action hero have implications for fundamental social processes of human culture.

The story begins with Superman seriously injured in deep space after fighting a generic but destructive creature. His unconscious body is rescued, and he is healed by the Guardians. When he talks to them after he has recuperated, they raise an unsettling idea. One Guardian says to Superman, “Surely you must realize that your presence on Earth directly

contributes to the Terrans' cultural lag." (p. 7). Ultimately, Superman doubt himself. He says, "Am I...a disturbing force on Earth's natural progress...?" and, "For years I've been playing big brother to the human race! Have I been wrong? Are they depending on me too much...too often...?" (p. 9).

Let me offer one caveat before resuming this story. An earlier comic book that addressed certain aspects of the morality associated with heroic action was *Green Lantern* #76 (published April 1970), two years before the Superman stories cited in this paper. The story, written by Denny O'Neil and drawn by Neal Adams, has been credited with creating a new wave of social relevance in comics (Riesman, 2018). Green Lantern is a human being who is part of an interstellar police force. He has an immensely powerful ring that allows him to channel his willpower to do virtually anything that he can imagine. In contrast, Green Arrow is more prosaic, merely an incredible marksman with a bow and arrow. Green Lantern can use his ring to literally fly to the stars. Green Arrow fights more conventional levels of crime, such as drug dealers and gangsters, and lives in a tenement. In the story, Green Lantern is the voice of conservatism and Green Arrow adopts the liberal perspective. The story opens with Green Lantern rescuing an overweight man in a suit from a group of ruffians. Rather than receive the acclaim he expects, people nearby throw garbage at him. Green Arrow explains that the man he saved is actually a notorious slumlord. By the end of the story, Green Lantern, his eyes now open, has helped to get the slumlord arrested. Despite the earlier appearance of the *Green Lantern* issue, I've chosen to use Superman given his greater prominence in popular culture.

Back on Earth, Superman visits a poor village. When he arrives, "Within moments, a crowd of hero-worshippers swarms the visiting celebrity...." One villager thanks God that Superman has come and says, "Now you can solve all our problems--!" Inspired by the words of the Guardians, Superman makes a surprising statement: "...what I'm going to do is—

nothing! Nothing at all!” Unfortunately for Superman’s new noninterference policy, an earthquake occurs right then, and Superman feels constrained to repair the damaged homes of the villagers.

The story ends with the Guardians recognizing that Superman “...is troubled somewhat by an idea that never crossed his mind before—the fact that people of Earth must progress unaided by outsiders from other worlds...” (p. 17).

The meddling hero may be resisted from the very beginning. *The Incredibles* movie (Bird, 2004) plays this issue for laughs but raises a morally complex issue because a person Mr. Incredible saves from committing suicide sues him, alleging that injuries he received because of being saved cause him daily pain. Mr. Incredible defends himself by saying, “I saved your life,” to which the would-be victim responds, “You didn’t save my life; you ruined my death.”

The meddling hero may be recognized as such only after he or she performs a misguided act of heroism. One example is the lawsuit (*Van Horn v. Watson*) where Alexandra Van Horn alleged that injuries from a car accident that left her a paraplegic were exacerbated when Lisa Torti pulled her “like a rag doll” from the wrecked car (Williams, 2008). The Supreme Court of California ruled that Good Samaritan laws did not protect Torti because her actions were not providing medical care (Stateman, 2009).

It is also possible that a Good Samaritan might do more harm to themselves than good for the other person. A famous example of what would be considered physical risk heroism occurred in 1987 when paramedic Robert O’Donnell crawled through a narrow tunnel and freed 18-month-old Jessica McClure, the baby who had gotten stuck 22 feet underground in an abandoned well. What was a heroic moment for McClure and all the other people who

aided in her rescue became a sad spiral of misguided fame, greed, and ultimately suicide for O'Donnell, who killed himself in 1995 by shooting himself in the mouth (Belkin, 1995).

Unfortunately, it is not too difficult to find other examples of the misguided hero whose interventions may create self-harm as well as harm to others. In one instance, a dairy farmer working in a poorly ventilated manure pit was overcome by breathing methane gas fumes (Brubaker, 2007). A hired hand, the farmer's wife, and two daughters also entered the pit to try to help and all of them died from inhaling the odorless but toxic gas which is a by-product of liquefied manure.

In the real-world examples above the temporal distance between heroic action and subsequent negative event is only a few seconds or minutes. Perhaps it took a few days for Alexandra Van Horn to be told that her rescue may have caused her additional injury. In the case of Robert O'Donnell, eight years passed between his moment of glory and his tragic suicide. It might be reasonable to assume in hindsight that pulling an injured woman from a car is not the best strategy for someone untrained in medical science. The idea that a brush with fame might have unhealthy psychological consequences is not surprising.

But in some cases, all the relevant details associated with a heroic action may not be knowable because it is impossible to predict what negative consequences might result from well-intentioned heroism. As the noted philosopher Alan Watts observed: "The whole process of nature is an integrated process of immense complexity, and it's really impossible to tell whether anything that happens in it is good or bad — because you never know what will be the consequence of the misfortune; or, you never know what will be the consequences of good fortune" (Popova, 2015). The problem with the meddling hero is that it may be difficult or impossible to know the full implications of what appears to be a heroic action.

The person saved by a hero today may inadvertently cause a disaster in the future, the classic dilemma illustrated by Ray Bradbury's (1952) short story "A Sound of Thunder" where the death of a butterfly millions of years ago creates troubling changes in modern times. The temporal component of the meddling hero reverses the time travel trope of killing Hitler as a baby. No one would argue that infanticide is a noble action. But in Hitler's case would doing so avert World War II? Or would something even more horrific transpire to replace it?

This issue is brought into play in an ironic way in the classic *Star Trek* episode "Mirror, Mirror" (Roddenberry & Bixby, 1967). In the story, several members of the Enterprise crew are exchanged as the result of a transporter accident with the corresponding crew of an alternative universe Enterprise where the Federation is replaced by a warlike Empire. Through a complicated series of events, the bearded Mr. Spock of the alternative universe becomes aware of the true identity of Captain Kirk and works with him to return everyone to their rightful universes. In one of the final scenes, Kirk tries to convince Spock to work against the Empire. Kirk says, "What will it be? Past or future? Tyranny or freedom? It's up to you....In every revolution, there's one man with a vision." Spock responds, "Captain Kirk, I shall consider it."

Although Kirk is the epitome of the physical risk heroism, in this case he actually encourages Spock to engage in social heroism by pressuring him to challenge and change the culture of the Empire.

We never encounter what has been termed the mirror universe again in the original series, but it reappears in *Deep Space Nine and Enterprise*. Unfortunately for the people in the mirror universe, Spock does in fact engineer the changes Kirk encouraged. He rises to power and proposes reforms to make the Empire less like a dictatorship, including

disarmament. The Empire then finds itself unable to defend itself against an attack from a Klingon-Cardassian alliance and both Terrans and Vulcans are enslaved. From the perspective of the mirror universe, our Kirk's heroic intervention brings ruin to humans and Vulcans, a fact that the characters (as well as the spectators in the real world) do not discover or foresee for decades.

## META-HERO

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The meta-hero represents the quadrant that most challenges the conventional definition of heroic behavior, either as physical risk or social heroism. The meddling hero is someone whose hero-like action produces an unforeseen negative consequence. In contrast, a meta-heroic behavior is one in which by not acting, the individual acts appropriately or does the right thing. The meta-hero acts heroically by not acting heroically, at least in terms of a more narrow definition of heroic action. In this case, the right thing may actually create hardship and moral ambiguity.

Surprisingly given its identity as an action-adventure show, the Federation of Planets and Starfleet culture described in *Star Trek* included an element that, if used properly, undermines the portrayal of conventional heroism by drawing attention to and in some ways glamorizing the meta-hero. The challenge to the value of both physical risk and social heroic action within the *Star Trek* universe is the Prime Directive, which states that members of Starfleet are forbidden from interfering with the natural development of the alien civilizations they encounter. In the original *Star Trek* episode "The Omega Glory" (Roddenberry, 1968), Kirk records in his log, "A star captain's most solemn oath is that he will give his life, even his entire crew, rather than violate the Prime Directive."

In the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode “Symbiosis” (Lewin, Manning, & Beimler, 1988), the crew of the Enterprise encounters two cultures living on two different planets in the same solar system. The two cultures live in a delicate balance in that one produces a drug that is required to prevent plague symptoms experienced by the other. Ultimately, Captain Picard discovers that the drug thought to prevent the plague is actually a highly addictive narcotic. In contradiction to the desires of the ship’s doctor, Captain Picard invokes the Prime Directive and does not reveal the truth. He could reveal the deception but doing so would interfere with another culture’s way of life and, in the end, chooses to honor the Prime Directive of non-interference.

Episodes of *Star Trek* that involve the Prime Directive tend to involve social, rather than physical risk, heroism. The reason is that violating the directive involves a deliberate, premeditated decision rather than a heat-of-the-moment action.

The Prime Directive can be viewed as a technique to move certain episodes of *Star Trek* from fiction to metafiction because it allows the show to comment on its own narrative tropes. Under certain circumstances, the Prime Directive requires the hero to be heroic by becoming a man (or woman) of *inaction* rather than action. Within the framework of certain episodes, however, characters demonstrate even greater heroism (of conventional physical risk form) when they violate the Prime Directive in order to achieve what they define as a greater good, risking punishment from Starfleet for doing so. Of course, due to the conventions of episodic television, in the end their violation is forgiven or justified in some manner because the star of the show cannot be court martialed. Paradoxically, when characters on *Star Trek* violate the Prime Directive they are actually behaving in a more cowardly, non-heroic fashion by the ethics and morality established within the framework of the show.

The dynamic of the meta-hero also operates in the real world. In particularly poignant case, the anthropologist Rachel Burr (2002) reports on field work she conducted in Vietnam. At the time, the authorities with whom she coordinated her research did not believe that children could contract HIV. As a result, they refused her requests that the teenage boys who were subjects in her research be tested. Later, she determined that 90% of the boys in her research had contracted the virus. Her hands were tied by her role as an anthropologist researcher/observer and also by the pragmatic recognition that if she had tried to somehow force testing, she would have been refused and lost the goodwill of the local authorities overseeing her research. Burr behaves in accord with the ethical requirements of her profession—and the reality of her situation—and as a result an uncertain number of boys were infected with HIV who might not have been had she somehow intervened.

## WHY THE GREY ZONE OF HEROISM IS OVERLOOKED

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Scholars of heroism seem disinclined to focus on the potential downside of providing assistance perhaps in part because the culturally shared prototypical scenario of heroism does not include elements of harm. It is also the case that heroes and heroic action aid people in the search for meaning and avoidance of boredom in their lives (Coughlan, Igou, van Tilburg, Kinsella, & Ritchie, 2019). They see heroic action in the form of bystander intervention as admirable and yet it is not difficult to find counterexamples where the downside of heroic action is readily visible. One reason for this reluctance may involve the centrality of the hero's journey to the experience of being a human being. According to Joseph Campbell (1949) the concept of the hero's journey as a call to action, transformation, and return can be used to understand mythology, as well as fiction and real world situations (Allison & Goethals, 2017). As examples of the breath of application, Palumbo (2008) used the concept of the hero's journey to interpret the science fiction film *The Terminator*; Goldstein (2005)



interpreted being a teacher as a hero's journey. One reason why the grey side of heroism may be overlooked is because so much storytelling and mythology focuses on the hero and the hero's journey.

Another reason may involve people's tendencies to look for the confirmation of their expectancies rather than for evidence that contradicts them (Nickerson, 1998). Similarly, we think of heroes as people who act rather than people who refrain from acting. In another story in *Superman #247*, legendary writer Denny O'Neil (1972) offered a story titled "When on Earth..." which appeared in a feature called "The Private Life of Clark Kent." In the story, Jimmy Olsen warns Clark that a co-worker's brother—who has "fallen in with an ugly crowd"—is in the process of joining a gang planning a war with a rival gang. Rather than try to stop the problem as Superman, Clark decides to defuse it as a normal human being. The gang finds Clark, but he fails in his attempt to reason with them, and is hit over the head from behind. He feigns unconsciousness. In the meantime, the brother is given the test of shooting an unarmed, plainclothes cop. Rather than stop him, Clark gives the brother a chance to refuse to kill the cop, which is what happens. This display somehow persuades the gang members to go home and "go have a long think" (p. 8). Clark realizes: "I've proven something to myself tonight! There are times when not even Superman needs...violence..." (p. 8). The moral of the story is that by not interfering Superman has allowed someone to become a hero on his own. Had Superman stopped the brother, the brother would have either been arrested for conspiring to commit murder, or else he would not have ever known what his true response would have been. Superman acts as a meta-hero by *not* intervening.

A third reason why the grey side of heroism has not received much attention among heroism scholars is that both scholars and lay individuals tend to think of situations that are high in heroic opportunity when they think about heroic action. Presumably heroic action would be repressed in contexts where heroic opportunity is low and as a result a would-be

hero might do more harm than good, but these situations are infrequently considered in the heroism literature.

In the prototypic heroic action situation the motives of the would-be hero are benign. And yet it is not hard to find situations where someone appears helpful to gratify some self-serving motivation. Consider, for example, Linda Tripp's role in the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky sex scandal. There were two elements of the scandal. The first was that Bill Clinton, who was married and also President of the United States, had a consensual affair with a young intern. The second, more serious, was that he lied about the affair under oath so technically committed perjury.

Although Linda Tripp argued that her motives for exposing the affair were patriotic, it is important to note that she began taping Lewinsky's conversations about having sex with Bill Clinton on the advice of her literary agent Lucianne Goldberg. More recent observers (e.g., Milback, 2018) have suggested Tripp was motivated by a dislike for Democrats. Milback wrote, "Tripp is being modest. The information she gave Ken Starr transformed the sleepy Whitewater land-deal investigation into a lurid exposé about sex and lies. She helped move American politics toward the tawdry carnival it has become. She alleged corruption but exposed oral sex; the "crime" undergirding impeachment was Clinton's lying about the affair after Tripp's "whistleblowing"."

Ultimately, Monica Lewinsky did not feel that Linda Tripp had rescued her. According to Borger (1999), Lewinsky's "sense of betrayal was one of the personal dramas at the heart of the impeachment crisis." At the end of her testimony before a grand jury, she said with tears, "I hate Linda Tripp" (Jackson, 1998).

## THE PUSH TO CREATE HEROES

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Axiomatically, heroes represent the best that a culture has to offer and can serve as role models for how average people should live their lives. Heroism scholars have promoted heroism as a social good and have even developed programs to encourage heroic behavior.

The *bystander effect* is the tendency for an individual to be less responsive in a helping situation if other, passive bystanders are also present (Fischer, Krueger, Greitemeyer, Vogrincic, Kastenmüller, Frey, Heene, Wicher, & Kainbacher, 2011). In response to an awareness of the bystander effect, heroism scholars and activists have started programs to train people to be heroes, i.e., they have created a *meta-bystander effect* that responds to an inhibition of helping produced by the presence of others by prophylactically making people aware of the bystander effect and teaching ways to combat it. Meta-bystanders are not actually present to help; rather they are social engineers who promote heroism by educating potential heroes about the inhibitory influence of the bystander effect. In other words, their influence is a distal force that remains dormant until it can be unleashed in the presence of an emergency.

Two such projects are the Hero Construction Company and the Heroic Imagination Project. The underlying rationale for this line of work is that "...people's decision to take heroic action can be taught. Heroism is not the province of caped crusaders, but a trainable, cultivatable mindset that plays itself out in everyday situations. By explicitly teaching individuals the principles of social psychology, namely the degree to which the parameters of a situation influence how people act, we can prime our minds to recognize and overcome our natural tendencies to go along with an action-reluctant group norm, and instead unleash our personal potential for courageous social action" (Zimbardo, Franco, & Allison, 2017).

Ari Kohen, Matt Langdon, and Brian Riches (2019) promoted the idea of facilitating heroic behavior in individuals by increasing their ability to experience empathy and by developing what they called the “heroic imagination,” which refers to individuals’ preparatory behavior—a form of mental rehearsal—prior to encountering a heroic opportunity.

Banyard, Plante, and Moynihan (2004, p. 62) suggested that encouraging bystander intervention can help people “become more sensitive to issues of sexual violence and teach them skills to intervene with the intent to prevent assaults from occurring and provide support to survivors who may disclose.” Miller (2017) indicated that bystander training with regard to sexual harassment prevention can be effective. Coker, Fisher, Bush, Swan, Williams, Clear, and DeGue (2015) conducted evaluation research that found lower violence perpetration rates among males who attended college where a program to prevent sexual violence was incorporated into campus life.

## THE RISK OF PROMOTING HEROIC ACTION

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On the surface, it seems that training people to become heroes would be seen a noble, prosocial activity. If we dig below the surface, hero training seems to be fraught with risk. Part of the danger would stem from potential legal liability. What happens if I train someone to be a hero, this person heeds my training, and then at some future point intervenes and gets killed or injured or causes the person he or she was trying to help to become harmed? What legal, moral, or ethical responsibility do I have with regard to this injustice? Should there be second order Good Samaritan Laws that indemnify those who teach people to help as well as those who do the actual helping?

Taking on an unwarranted risk would seem especially unwise when the targets of training are children. Despite this seemingly obvious caution, Heiner (2019) reported results of a study conducted with fourth- and fifth-grade students that assessed a training program developed by the Heroic Construction Company in order to foster heroic behavior in children. Children exposed to a presentation on heroism displayed a higher level of courage, relative to a pretest, as assessed by the Courage Measure for Children. The assumption of the study was that an increase in courage might eventually be manifested by a willingness to enter into a challenging situation, presumably with the goal of helping. Of course, the downside of hero construction in children is that children's understanding of the real world is limited and it is not unreasonable to expect that encouraging them to behave heroically might inadvertently cause them to take dangerous risks. There is some case study evidence that wearing superhero costumes may encourage children to engage in extreme risk taking behavior (Davies, Surridge, Hole, & Munro-Davies, 2007).

Curiously, the idea that individuals should be held accountable for intervening and protecting others parallels arguments put forward by individuals and groups *against* restrictions on handguns as a means of preventing mass shootings. The proposed solution is to arm bystanders who can then intervene in an emergency. However, the empirical evidence to support this argument seems sparse or non-existent. The Editorial Board (2016) of the *Washington Post* addressed the concept of the "good guy with a gun" in a statement about preventing mass shootings. In reference to the event where Micah Xavier Johnson began shooting people, the article stated, "The solution to a bad guy with a gun, it is often said, is a good guy with a gun. Yet according to Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings (D), there were 20 to 30 good guys openly carrying guns among the protesters whom Dallas police were supervising last Thursday night...In fact, the presence of so many guns could have made Thursday's massacre worse. Officers did not know where the shooting was coming from, how many

people were involved or what kinds of weapons they were facing. Innocent protesters publicly toting guns became immediate suspects. Their presence fed the confusion and amped up the danger.”

As noted by Alyssa Rosenberg (2018), some of the victims of mass shootings are police officers who are killed in the line of duty trying to protect civilians. They are by definition “good guys with a gun” who are trained and officially sanctioned to intervene in an emergency and yet they too are only human and are often just as helpless as anyone else against the challenge of an unexpected, heavily armed shooter.

## THE HARM OF THE HEROISM NORM

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If heroism is good, then helping people to become heroes should be doubly good. Franco et al. (2011, p. 111) noted that an underlying message of the Heroic Imagination Project is that “every person has the potential to act heroically.” Arguing for the “banality of heroism” (that heroic action should be viewed as potentially a common behavior in which everyone—not just a select group of heroes—can engage) promotes a norm of heroism that works to establish helping as a necessary rather than optional choice. Banyard et al. (2004) tout that one of the advantages of bystander training is to create new heroism norms and increase a sense of felt responsibility on the part of the potential hero. However, it is possible to argue that reinforcing the norm of heroism can subsequently punish non-heroes. These non-heroes can be hurt in the eyes of others, or in their own opinions of themselves.

In spite of the good intentions behind promoting a heroism norm, consider the tragic case study of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas school shooting and issues it raised regarding dealing with that type of crisis where responsibility for the flawed response was directed toward “inadequate training and unclear procedures in the school district” (O’Matz, 2018).

Deputy Scot Peterson was on duty, in uniform, and working as the resource officer. In the aftermath of the shooting, video emerged that showed him arriving at the school but not entering the building (Woodall, 2018). He resigned his position rather than be suspended. He was sued by the father of one of the teenagers killed in the shooting and has been called a coward by many (Kornfield, 2018). While it is true that Peterson's job may have defined him as someone who was supposed to help, he is only human and the scope of what he was asked to do may have been overwhelming. It is perhaps unfair to apply a norm of heroism to someone caught in the middle of a highly stressful, uncertain, life-and-death dilemma.

In the case of a school shooting, many issues do not have a clear solution. For example, during a lock down, should a teacher open classroom doors for students trapped in the hallway? Opening their own doors put relatively safe children at risk; but not opening the doors dramatically increases the likelihood that children in the hallway will be shot. Another issue was whether older children should be instructed to fight back, a sentiment consistent with the idea of constructing heroes but also at odds with the realities of how people—especially teenagers—could be expected to react in an emergency.

While a noble goal, heroic helping can potentially work against the instinct for self-preservation (Muraven & Baumeister, 1997). To the extent that heroic action puts the hero at risk, it flies in the face of the logic of evolutionary theory which suggests that behaviors that reduce fitness should be eliminated from the population through the reproductive advantage afforded those who choose not to help. In fact, a great deal of effort has been devoted to explaining the paradox of altruism, i.e., behavior that appears to produce greater costs than benefits for the self, such as rescuing others (Doebeli, Hauert, & Killingback, 2004). Solutions have argued that there is no paradox because behavior that appears other-focused actually has a self-serving component through processes such as reciprocal altruism and kin selection (Rushton, 1989).

Mrs. Grundy is a figurative name for an extremely conservative and judgmental person. The character of Mrs. Grundy is from Thomas Morton's (1798) *Speed the Plough*. Ultimately, the name became so ingrained in culture that in Samuel Butler's 1872 novel *Erewhon*, the goddess Ydgrun, whose name is an anagram for Grundy, governs social norms. To the extent that we legitimize the role of the hero, we indirectly legitimize the role of the intruder into our lives who polices our behavior. To the extent that we become fearful of being monitored and our lives interfered with, we engage in what Zuboff (1988) called "anticipatory monitoring." Jeremy Bentham (1791) proposed the concept of the *panopticon* (or inspection house), a prison designed in such a way that the guards can observe the prisoners at any time but the prisoners will be unaware if the guards are watching them. The power of such a structure in shaping behavior is that fears of being punished make the prisoners control their own behavior.

If we make people vigilant to the potential wrongs around them, they may become heroes who save the day or Mrs. Grundys who impose their own systems of belief on others. When does benevolent mindfulness of one's surroundings metastasize into the despot of self-regulation caused by the reality of continuous monitoring through the panopticon? Heroism scholars should take care to avoid creating an environment that is inadvertently bullying, especially with regard to instances that fall outside the boundaries of morally unambiguous situations high in the opportunity for heroic action.

The title of Latane' and Darley's (1970) classic book is *The Unresponsive Bystander* and the sub-title is *Why Doesn't He Help?* If we ignore the default masculine pronoun common at the time and, instead, focus on the way the subtitle is framed, the problem the book addresses is explaining why someone would choose not to help. This frame normalizes helping. Not helping is seen as problematic. We want to understand why someone chooses to be unresponsive. I could retitile the book *The Responsive Bystander: Why Does He Help?* In



this hypothetical title, not helping would be considered normal. From a statistical point of view, not helping is normal because—as many heroism scholars note—in most cases, most people do not help. Maybe there are at least some good reasons why they don't.

## AN UNORTHODOX CONCLUSION

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In an influential review article of heroism studies, Zeno E. Franco, Scott T. Allison, Elaine Kinsella, Ari Kohen, Matt Langdon, and Philip G. Zimbardo (2018) describe being a hero in a positive fashion. They further identify the way in which it was possible to think about everyday opportunities for individuals to engage in behavior that could be considered heroic and to develop interventions to encourage heroism in everyone. In another paper, heroism was described as "...an expression of humanity's highest good and its most important values" that "can engender psychological, physical, and societal health and flourishing" (Efthimiou, Allison & Franco, 2018, p. 3).

Curiously, despite the popularity of considering heroism through the narratives provided by *Star Trek* (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Comerford, 2018), one lesson noticeably missing from these examinations is that of the Prime Directive governing noninterference in other cultures. Heroism scientists seem to feel that it is an important goal to intrude in the lives of others (a working definition of being a hero), even to the point of developing formal training systems to empower third parties to act as heroes, i.e., to actively meddle in the lives of others.

Little, if any, focus has been directed toward the potential downside of acting in what appears to be a heroic manner. One reason is that what I have defined as the prototypic heroic opportunity is biased toward framing heroism in a positive light. The heroic situation directs

the potential hero toward a simple, straight-forward act lacking in moral ambiguity which provides an immediate justification for taking action.

By focusing on possible problems associated with heroic behavior, the present paper raises a critical point: When should heroic action and heroism be encouraged and when should it be discouraged? One relevant factor concerns the motivations of both the person engaging in heroic action, as well as social perceivers of those actions. Heroism is axiomatically a good thing, at least in the minds of storytellers who use the hero's journey as the basis for much of fiction and heroism researchers who view heroism as a form of altruism. But another word for heroism is interference. When we think about someone who has fallen into the path of a train or is suffocating in methane gas, my arguments make me seem like a gadfly and a misanthrope. But if we consider people like Kim Brooks—who had her life ruined by a busybody who took exception to the way she was raising her children—then helpfulness can seem more like intrusion. In the context of social heroism, do my attempts at social reform represent a threat to someone's religious convictions?

Clearly, heroes, heroic acts, and heroism give meaning to people (Kinsella, Igou, & Ritchie, 2019) and guide how people think about and evaluate their lives and goals. Is the valuing of heroic action a means for people to absolve themselves of social responsibility? By elevating heroes on a pedestal, an individual social perceiver increases the status difference between hero and observer and can justify not acting in a prosocial manner, i.e., a person can say, "I'm not a hero, so there's nothing I can do."

In some cases, valuing heroes may occur for misguided or unhealthy motives. Should we at least entertain the possibility that heroic action could also be a sign of dysfunction? There is evidence that heroic behavior is correlated with psychopathy and other forms of antisocial behavior (Smith, Lilienfeld, Coffey, & Dabbs, 2013). In the real world, a masked

vigilante like Batman would be considered a villain not a hero. Superman and Spider-Man are acting out their survivor's guilt. People may affirm heroes as a means of finding meaning in their own lives (Kinsella et al., 2019) or even to avert boredom (Coughlan et al., 2019). In some cases, can various forms of hero worship represent an unhealthy form of escapism? In extreme cases, when hero worship ends up directed at the wrong person, it may lead to a glorification or glamorization of evil (Zimbardo, 2007). As noted by Allison, Goethals, and Kramer (2017, p. 6), "...there exists a fine line between heroism and villainy."

Students of heroism science have asked the question, "Why do we need heroes?" It is a fair question to ask, "Why do we study heroes?" Although Conley, Matsick, Moors, and Ziegler (2017) identify some of the hazards associated with making assumptions about researchers on the basis of their chosen research topic, it is worth at least considering in a self-reflexive manner what goals motivate scholars to pursue the study of heroism. Do they purposely seek out a positive view of people? Are their studies motivated by a bias toward optimism? Would such optimism influence the way that they look at research problems or make sense of their data?

The present paper can operate to reign in the unbridled pursuit of heroism by helping scholars and lay individuals realize there is a grey zone of heroism. People need to acknowledge that sometimes important work gets accomplished by people whose behavior would not be considered atypical or heroic. Another way in which a Pollyanna view of heroism can be tempered is by promoting the idea that in some cases individual actors may cause more damage than harm, or that the glamorization of heroism represents the expression of a value that might not be universally held. It is important to consider the idea that legal factors might work to discourage heroism (such as the threat of liability) and that well-meaning people may lack the necessary tools to be effective heroes. Although it flies in the

face of the hero's journey and the nobility we ascribe to heroes, in some cases, heroic behavior should be recognized as not the correct action.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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*The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*