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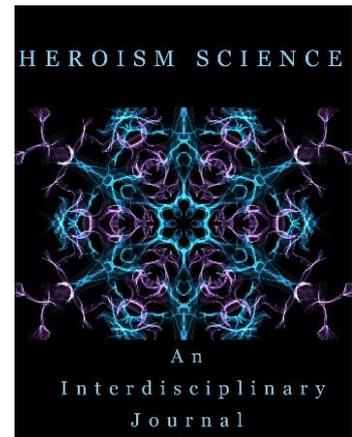
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Curb Your Heroism: How Larry David, an Old, Bald Misanthrope, Won the Hearts of Millions



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ABSTRACT: For eleven television seasons, viewers of the series *Curb Your Enthusiasm* have been witness to a main character in Larry David who paradoxically displays attributes that are both endearing and revolting. This article offers an analysis of Larry David's character with the goal of ascertaining his heroic nature, specifically focusing on whether he best meets the scientific criteria for a hero or for an antihero. Drawing from the literature of heroism science, we examine a large body of evidence from episodes of the series supporting arguments for both heroism and antiheroism in Larry's character. Consistent with definitions of heroism, Larry manifests deviance, humility, loyalty to principles, and a growth mindset. Yet consistent with antiheroism, Larry shows selfishness, social insensitivity, manipulateness, and resistance to growth. We conclude that any inconsistencies in his character can be understood through a consideration of *Curb Your Enthusiasm's* comedic goals and sensibilities.

1 INTRODUCTION

When *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (CYE) premiered with an hour-long HBO special on October 17, 1999, viewers were witness to one of the most complex and baffling protagonists in television history. The lead character, Larry David, had been represented before in the persona of George Costanza in the iconic series *Seinfeld* that David co-created in 1989. But the true colors of Costanza's character could not be fully developed within *Seinfeld's* four-person ensemble, and Costanza was arguably as much a reflection of actor Jason Alexander as he was Larry David. CYE offered a perfect forum for Larry David to play himself as the star and spotlight of the series, around whom the storylines could pivot and his behavioral values could be revealed in bold relief.

The CYE premier followed the life of Larry David, the co-creator of *Seinfeld* now in semi-retirement, searching for new work as a writer and stand-up comic. From the beginning, CYE has been innovative in featuring an improvisational dialogue among the cast members, who are only given a brief description of what needs to happen in a particular scene. Larry David has stated in numerous interviews that the Larry on the show is not quite the same as the real-life Larry (Chi, 2017). The latter Larry knows better than to say and do things that create the kinds of awkward conflicts that fuel the comedy in CYE. In our analysis of Larry David, we focus on the Larry as portrayed in CYE, the Larry whose unconventional pattern of social behavior can be, paradoxically, both baffling and beguiling.

The purpose of this article is to examine the character of Larry David in CYE with the goal of ascertaining his heroic nature, specifically focusing on whether his character best meets the scientific criteria for a hero -- or for an antihero. Drawing from the burgeoning field of heroism science, we will first explore the definition of a hero, as advanced by scholars. We then examine evidence from episodes of CYE supporting the argument that

Larry David's character in the series does indeed meet the requirements of a hero. We next examine the definition of an antihero and consider evidence from *CYE* that Larry David's character best exemplifies the definitional criteria of antiheroism. We opened this article by describing Larry as "complex" and "baffling", suggesting that Larry is no different from most human beings in harboring a myriad of contradictory attitudes and attributes (Markman & Duke, 2016; Phillips, 2002). After weighing evidence supporting both the heroic and anti-heroic elements of Larry's character, we conclude that it is a mistake to assign either label to Larry, citing reasons that will become apparent when we examine Larry's persona in the context of *CYE*'s comedic goals and sensibilities.

2 DEFINITIONS OF HEROISM

Scholars of heroism have differentiated between laypeople's definitions of heroism and scientific definitions. The first empirical effort to illuminate lay definitions of heroism was conducted by Allison and Goethals (2011), who asked participants to list their heroes along with the traits of these individuals. These heroic traits were subjected to exploratory factor and cluster analyses, and the resultant categories revealed the "great eight" traits of heroes: *intelligent, strong, reliable, resilient, caring, charismatic, selfless, and inspiring*. A few years later, Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou (2015) used a prototype analytic approach to identify 13 central characteristics of heroes and 13 peripheral characteristics. Kinsella et al.'s central characteristics are *brave, moral integrity, conviction, courageous, self-sacrifice, protecting, honest, selfless, determined, saves others, inspiring, and helpful*. The peripheral characteristics of heroes are *proactive, humble, strong, risk-taker, fearless, caring, powerful, compassionate, leadership skills, exceptional, intelligent, talented, and personable*. These lay definitions of heroism are consistent with those of dictionaries that describe heroism as "impressive and courageous conduct or behavior" (American Heritage Dictionary, 2020),

“conduct especially as exhibited in fulfilling a high purpose or attaining a noble end” (Merriam-Webster, 2020), “the display of qualities such as courage, bravery, fortitude, unselfishness” (Wiktionary, 2020), or “behavior directed toward achieving something very brave or having achieved something great” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020).

These lay and dictionary definitions of heroism overlap in some respects with scholars’ attempts to define heroism. A consensus has emerged among heroism scientists that heroism is extreme prosocial behavior that is performed voluntarily, involves significant risk, requires sacrifice, and is done without anticipation of person gain (Allison et al., 2017; Franco et al., 2018). Heroism differs conceptually from altruism, with altruism defined as purely selfless action and heroism centered on extreme risk and self-sacrificial prosocial behavior (Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011). Other scholars have emphasized the tendency of heroes to deviate from social norms (Efthimiou & Allison, 2017), to show exceptional humility (Worthington & Allison, 2018), to adhere to moral principles (Comerford, 2018; Spyrou, 2020), and to undergo transformation (Campbell, 1949). While most heroism scholars favor efforts to develop an objective definition of heroism, other scientists have pushed back against extreme objectivity, arguing that heroism is ultimately a mental and social construction, and thus in the eye of the beholder (Allison & Goethals, 2011). In our analysis of Larry David, we apply the perspectives of all these definitional elements, identifying instances of his heroic behavior as defined by scientists while also honoring the inevitability of subjective differences in interpreting Larry’s behavior.

3 LARRY DAVID’S HEROISM IN CYE

In our review of the 110 episodes of CYE spanning 11 seasons, we have identified five categories of heroic behavior displayed by the character of Larry David. These categories are consistent with the definitional criteria of heroism outlined above, and they include the

observation that Larry David is deviant, humble, loyal to principles, helpful, and growth-oriented. We explore Larry's demonstration of each of these heroic principles below.

3.1 LARRY'S DEVIANCE

One of the central traits of heroes is their tendency to display behavior that clashes with existing social norms (Efthimiou & Allison, 2017; Franco et al., 2011; Goethals & Allison, 2019). Social psychologists have long known that human beings show strong tendencies to conform to social norms (Asch, 1956). Conforming to behavioral norms offers individuals several benefits, including information about appropriate behavior (Asch, 1955) and an upper hand in gaining acceptance and approval from group members (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). In violating social norms, Larry David's character in *CYE* eschews social approval by bravely violating social rules to make a point, to preserve a principle, or to achieve a social good. There are a number of striking instances of Larry's heroic deviance in *CYE*.

Our first example of Larry's departure from social norms appears in Season 2, Episode 3 (*Trick or Treat*), in which Larry is handing out candy to trick-or-treaters on Halloween evening. He is doing so without incident until two 16-year-old girls without costumes come to the door asking for candy. Whereas most people would observe the custom of giving candy to the girls despite harboring misgivings about the girls' behavior, Larry refuses to comply with the Halloween tradition, confronting them about their age and their lack of appropriate costuming. This confrontation incites the anger of the girls. Larry and his wife Cheryl awaken the next morning and discover that their house has been TP-ed and the words "bald asshole" are spray-painted on their front door. Larry's decisions to be deviant always have negative consequences, often humorous, yet he never allows these consequences to deter him from performing future deviant behaviors. For example, in Season 4, Episode 2 (*Ben's Birthday Party*), Larry refuses to succumb to what he believes is the meaningless

tradition of engaging in a group singing of the *Happy Birthday* song to Ben Stiller. This omission contributes to a rift between the two men.

Larry's penchant for violating social norms may be most prominent in Season 8, Episode 3 (*Palestinian Chicken*), in which Larry earns the moniker, "the social assassin," by virtue of his willingness to be brutally frank in informing people of their annoying habits. In this episode, Larry dares to tell Suzie that her daughter Sammie doesn't belong at an adult-only dinner party; he refuses to give dessert to one of the guests who begs him for it; he informs a friend that her saying "LOL" is annoying; and he tells Suzie that her habit of smacking her lips after sipping a drink is an irritation. Another notable example of Larry's deviant behavior occurs in Season 9, Episode 5 (*Thank You For Your Service*). At a social gathering, Larry refuses to engage in the custom of thanking a military serviceman for his service when everyone else at the gathering has done so. Moreover, in Season 3, Episode 10 (*The Grand Opening*), Larry shouts a long, loud stream of obscenities at his restaurant's grand opening, but only to achieve solidarity with his head chef's Tourette syndrome-induced stream of obscenities. In this latter example, we see that Larry's deviance is not always in the service of remaining loyal to his own values. At times, his deviance also reflects more prosocial motivations.

3.2 LARRY'S HUMILITY

Heroes show considerable humility (Worthington & Allison, 2018) and even tend to deny they are heroes (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006; Klein, 2020). At first blush, it may seem odd for us to argue that a self-declared narcissist (e.g., Season 9, Episode 3, *A Disturbance in the Kitchen*) manifests a notable streak of humility. Yet there is an unmistakable humility in Larry David that sometimes veers toward self-deprecation. The latter tendency can be seen several times in Larry's observation that he hates himself and would prefer not to be related

to his family of origin. In Season 4, Episode 1 (*Mel's Offer*), the opening scene features a flashback to when Larry and Cheryl are deciding to get married ten years earlier. Larry appears to be trying to talk her out of the marriage. "I don't want to be a David; I have to be a David," he says. "If you don't have to be a David, why be a David?" In a later episode (Season 9, Episode 7, *Namaste*), Larry says, "I'm not prejudiced in any way, toward any group, except my own." Larry's self-effacing ways are on full display in the HBO pilot episode for the series (David & Weide, 1999). Here, Larry agrees to do one hour of stand-up comedy for an HBO special. Larry's lack of ego is made clear when he balks at the large venue, appearing to be intimidated by it and feeling unworthy of a massive audience. His insecurities and sense of undeservingness lead him to cancel the performance.

The very first episode of CYE in Season 1 (*The Pants Tent*) features Larry and his family and friends trying to get a table in a crowded restaurant. When informed by the hostess that there are no available tables, Cheryl and Larry's manager Jeff Greene implore Larry to use his fame as the co-creator of *Seinfeld* to wrest a table. But Larry refuses. Cheryl tells him, "You know what, Larry? You should just tell her who you are." Larry humbly replies, "Yeah. Who am I? I'm a guy without a table." Larry's humility is also manifest in Season 2, Episode 1 (*The Car Salesman*), in which Larry's status as a famous multimillionaire does not deter him from attempting a new vocation as a car salesperson. Cheryl and Jeff both express their incredulity at Larry's behavior, pointing out that he need not engage in such a relatively low-status activity. Larry, however, sees himself at home in the ordinary world. In a later episode, Larry works temporarily as a chauffeur (Season 6, Episode 5, *The Freak Book*). We should also note that Larry recoils at blatant displays of hubris in other people, especially in his friend Ted Danson. In Season 6, Episode 2 (*The Anonymous Donor*), Larry and Ted both donate large sums of money to a museum. Larry learns that Ted donated his money anonymously and then observes Ted revealing his identity

as the anonymous donor to friends. Outraged at Ted's false humility, Larry confronts Ted with rather comic results, and the resultant enmity between the two men lasts several seasons of the series.

3.3 LARRY'S LOYALTY TO PRINCIPLES

Heroes are known for their commitment to principles of virtuous conduct, even under conditions in which such conduct puts their own well-being in jeopardy (Comerford, 2018). There are several CYE episodes highlighting Larry's devotion to honoring noble principles of behavior. Larry, for example, is a strident monogamist who at first tries to talk Cheryl out of offering him the opportunity to have a sexual fling with another woman as a tenth anniversary gift (Season 4, Episode 1, *Mel's Offer*). He also expresses his disdain toward people who are unfaithful to their partners, including friends such as Leon Black (Season 7, Episode 4, *The Hot Towel*) and an ex-girlfriend whom Larry dates whilst not knowing she has a partner (Season 7, Episode 2, *Vehicular Fellatio*). In addition to practicing monogamy, Larry is a staunch proponent of leaving notes on cars that he has accidentally hit in parking lots (Season 9, Episode 7, *Namaste*). In this episode, Larry leaves the note while invoking the golden-rule based "do unto others" principle, which we also see Larry endorsing in Season 9, Episode 6, *The Accidental Text on Purpose*.

Larry's loyalty carries over to his steadfast support for his friend Leon, who first appears in Larry's life when Cheryl and Larry decide to bring the Black family into their home as refuge from a devastating hurricane (Season 6, Episode 1, *Meet the Blacks*). Leon did not live in the hurricane-affected area, yet Larry and Cheryl permit him to join his family members in their home. The Black family stays with Larry and Cheryl far longer than expected, and during their stay Larry divorces Cheryl and begins dating Loretta Black. A pivotal moment occurs when all the members of the family leave Larry's home in a rush

when they are under the false impression that Larry has cheated on Loretta. Larry fully expects Leon to leave with them, but Leon – who is an underemployed freeloader – makes the decision to continue living in Larry’s home. Remarkably, Larry accepts Leon’s presence and financially supports him for many years. The two men enjoy a strange and alluring chemistry, with Larry often exasperated at Leon’s strange and selfish antics but willing to tolerate them for the company and friendship that Leon offers. Larry’s loyalty to Leon is far from pure altruism, as Leon occasionally does favors for Larry and teaches Larry contemporary African-American customs and slang.

We should emphasize that these first two examples of Larry’s heroism – his deviance and his loyalty to principles – both require the heroic trait of courage. Earlier we noted that the attribute of courage appears in scientific definitions of heroism and is especially emphasized in lay definitions (Kinsella et al., 2017). It takes considerable guts to be the person who scolds a dinner host for serving bad-tasting tap water to her guests (Season 9, Episode 6, *The Accidental Text on Purpose*) and who dares to call people “pig parkers” directly to their faces for parking their cars over the painted lines in a parking lot (Season 8, Episode 5, *Vow of Silence*).

3.4 LARRY’S HELPFULNESS

Heroes show kindness, helpfulness, and selflessness in their social interactions with others (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2015). We witness this streak of generosity in Larry’s treatment of Leon over the years. Throughout ten seasons of CYE, Larry David shows many acts of kindness to others. He helps a blind man move furniture (Season 1, Episode 4, *The Bracelet*). He supports a friend by accompanying her to an incest support group (Season 1, Episode 10, *The Group*). He attempts to save a man whom he thinks is drowning (Season 2, Episode 9, *The Baptism*). Despite initially being hesitant, Larry donates his kidney to his

friend Richard Lewis (Season 5, Episode 10, *The End*). He offers food to his chauffeur and later assumes the chauffeur's job when the man gets drunk (Season 6, Episode 5, *The Freak Book*). He helps a prostitute drum up business (Season 9, Episode 2, *The Pickle Gambit*) and he comes to the defense of a man who is verbally berated for cutting the line to get a second helping of food at a buffet (Season 9, Episode 8, *The Tribunal*). After Larry accidentally soils a Klansman's hate-robe, he feels obligated to clean it for him (Season 11, Episode 4, *The Watermelon*). Moreover, he intervenes to help a struggling doctor acquire more patients (Season 11, Episode 6, *Man Fights Tiny Woman*).

It is true that with the exception of Larry's kidney donation, few of these acts of kindness meet the heroic qualification of "extraordinary." Still, some scholars, including Phil Zimbardo, have contended that a heroic life is composed of many small heroic acts (Aguilera, 2019). It can be argued, moreover, that Larry's willingness to allow the Black family to live with him for several years, and Leon for well over a decade, constitutes a significant sacrifice for Larry. It is true that Larry is rich, yet he is generous with his money, more often than not picking up the tab for expensive meals with his other wealthy friends. He even offers to pay for his young cousin Schyler's university education at a cost of \$100,000 USD or more (Season 7, Episode 7, *The Black Swan*).

3.5 LARRY'S OVERCOMING OF TRAUMA

In his model of the stages of the hero's journey, famed mythologist Joseph Campbell (1949) argued that mythic heroes in storytelling throughout the ages are compelled to overcome dangerous obstacles and endure significant suffering. The hero is transformed by this suffering, becoming his or her best self (Allison et al., 2019). Two examples of Larry's trauma are notable for demonstrating his suffering and his overcoming of it. First, in Season 8, Episode 9 (*Mister Softee*), Larry recounts a traumatic experience in his childhood

involving his budding relationship with a young girl, the daughter of an ice cream truck driver. When the girl's father discovers that Larry is playing strip poker with his daughter in the truck, he forces Larry to leave the truck, naked, in front of every significant person in his neighborhood – his family, friends, and total strangers. He endures taunts and teasing, and the resultant emotional scars lead Larry to pursue psychotherapy. His therapist, moreover, turns out to be unethical in disclosing personal information about his clients, exacerbating Larry's trauma. Despite these events, we are informed that Larry is able to surmount his difficulties and lead a productive life.

There are a number of episodes of *CYE*, particularly in the early seasons, that contain allusions to Larry's shaky relationship with his abusive mother. We are presented with the possibility that Larry's insecurities and self-deprecating tendencies likely had their origins in the emotional pain that he suffered from his less than nurturant upbringing. We get a hint of the kind of verbal attacks that Larry had to withstand from his mother in Season 5, Episode 10, *The End*. In this episode, Larry dies from complications associated with his kidney donation to Richard Lewis. He is sent to heaven where he encounters his mother, who sees Larry and blurts out, "What kind of schmuck are you? Idiot! I'm not done with you, buster!" Larry's ability to overcome his mother's abusive nature and become a successful television writer and comic is consistent with the growth pattern of the mythic hero's journey as outlined by Campbell.

4 DEFINITIONS OF ANTI-HEROISM

We next explore the degree to which Larry David in *CYE* embodies the characteristics of an antihero. Heroism scientists have defined an antihero as "an individual who is flawed, behaves heroically in some but not all situations, and does not consistently demonstrate heroic characteristics in their interactions with others" (Ulquinaku, Sarial-Abi, Kinsella, &

Igou, 2020, p. 1). Antiheroes are characters who share traits with both heroes and villains, demonstrating extreme selflessness in some circumstances but equally extreme selfishness in others. Antiheroes occupy morally grey terrain, doing enough good in the world to attract our admiration while also curiously exhibiting dark aspects of their nature (Kuyon, 2016; Michael, 2013; Shafer & Raney, 2012). Allison and Smith (2015) have argued that heroes can show antiheroic tendencies yet still retain their heroic status if, in the end, they do the right thing. In this way, narcissistic and emotionally troubled comic book superheroes such as Iron Man and Deadpool, who engineer positive societal outcomes, can be considered heroes despite saying and doing things that a more purely heroic figure such as Superman would find abhorrent.

Whereas dictionary definitions of heroism are fairly consistent with scholarly and lay definitions of heroism, dictionaries appear to fall short of capturing scholarly definitions. We see this deficiency in their tendency to define antiheroism in terms of the absence, rather than the presence, of key qualities. For example, Merriam Webster defines an antihero as “a protagonist or notable figure who is conspicuously lacking in heroic qualities” (Merriam Webster, 2020). The American Heritage Dictionary defines an antihero as “a main character in a dramatic or narrative work who is characterized by a lack of traditional heroic qualities, such as idealism or courage” (American Heritage, 2020). In contrast, research psychologists Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, and Crysel (2012) propose that antiheroes possess the *Dark Triad* of personality traits, composed of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. From this perspective, antiheroes are selfish, remorseless, and manipulative. Ulquinaku et al. (2020) offer compelling data suggesting that antiheroes are also associated with the trait of high sensation seeking. Allison and Smith (2015) note that antiheroes resist the kind of growth-oriented transformation that heroes undergo when traversing Campbell’s (1949) hero

monomythic journey. Our analysis of Larry David's antiheroic characteristics in *CYE* focus on these attributes of the antihero.

5 LARRY'S ANTI-HEROISM IN *CYE*

In our review of *CYE*'s 110 episodes, we have identified four categories of antiheroic characteristics displayed by the character of Larry David. These categories, derived from our review of definitions of antiheroism, include the observation that Larry David is (a) selfish and narcissistic; (b) insensitive to others' feelings and needs; (c) manipulative and exploitative of others; and (d) resistant to personal growth and transformation. We next explore each of these four antiheroic qualities.

5.1 LARRY'S SELFISHNESS

Narcissism is one of the three trait dimensions of the Dark Triad of personality (Jonason et al., 2012) and has been identified as a central attribute of antiheroes (Shafer & Raney, 2012). Research has shown, moreover, that narcissists typically do not hesitate to self-identify as a narcissist (Konrath, Meier, & Bushman, 2014). Larry David in *CYE* does not try to hide his narcissistic tendencies. In Season 9, Episode 3 (*A Disturbance in the Kitchen*), Larry confesses his narcissism when confronted by Suzie about his self-centeredness. Suzie tells him, "You have no compassion, have no caring about another human being," to which Larry replies, "There's some partial truth to that. It's an illness for sure. I don't know why I have it, but I definitely do." Another confession of narcissism occurs in Season 8, Episode 8 (*Car Periscope*), when Larry exclaims, "I always think of nice things, but I never act on them." This admission of selfishness suggests that Larry at least considers the option of doing the right thing before eschewing it in favor of selfishness. At best, Larry can be morally lazy, and at worst he is a narcissist.

Consistent with the narcissistic personality disorder, Larry believes that the rules of society should be constructed to benefit him over other people. For example, in Season 1, Episode 5 (*The Interior Decorator*), Larry arrives at a doctor's office before another patient, but this other individual is seen by the doctor before Larry because she has an earlier appointment time. When Larry complains to the receptionist about the policy, she makes an accurate observation about Larry: "It's not about the policy, it's about you going first." Larry then completes her next statement for her: "So if you go first," she begins, "that's a good policy," Larry finishes. Larry's selfishness is on full display during the majority of the episodes in *CYE*'s fifth season, which consist of Larry's attempts to avoid sacrificing one of his kidneys to save the life of his friend Richard Lewis. When Larry finally agrees to part with his kidney, he attempts without success to rescind his offer on the operating table. Subsequent medical complications that almost kill him only corroborate his selfish philosophy: "This is what you get when you do good deeds," says Larry.

5.2 LARRY'S INSENSITIVITY TO OTHERS' NEEDS

Psychopathy is also one of the three trait dimensions of the Dark Triad of personality (Jonason et al., 2012) and has been described as a defining feature of antiheroes (Allison & Smith, 2015). Psychopaths tend to lack empathy and a conscience, often showing little regard for the feelings of others. Consistent with this description, the Larry David that we see in *CYE* makes a habit out of uttering cringe-worthy observations to people. The real life Larry David – if we can believe him – once expressed his surprise that his blunt insensitivity on *CYE* made some viewers uncomfortable. "When I was told that there were moments in the show that made people cringe, I was shocked. It never occurred to me," Larry said in a 2020 interview (Wolf, 2020).

There are far too many examples of Larry's insensitivity to list here, but we can mention Season 1, Episode 3 (*Porno Gil*) when he visits someone's home and refuses the host's request to remove his shoes at the front door. There is also Season 3, Episode 1 (*Chet's Shirt*), when Larry visits a grieving widow and expresses no sympathy for her loss while badgering her about where her recently deceased husband purchased his shirts. In Season 8, Episode 2 (*The Safe House*), Larry shows no sensitivity to the plight of a crying, battered woman; instead, he wants her to step aside so that he can reach his ice cream. And in Season 11, Episode 2 (*Angel Muffin*), he allows a dog to get hit by a car because he cannot bring himself to shout the dog's name, Angel Muffin, which he finds repugnant.

Perhaps the most vivid instance of Larry's psychopathic insensitivity to another individual's pain occurs in Season 5, Episode 8 (*The Ski Lift*). In this episode, Larry's selfishness is most striking when he schemes to avoid having to donate one of his kidneys to his friend Richard Lewis. To spare his own kidney, Larry plots to ingratiate himself to the keeper of the kidney donor list whose daughter Rachel enjoys skiing. Larry and Rachel go skiing and become stranded on a stalled ski lift, high above the snowy ground. Rachel's devout adherence to Jewish tradition prohibits her from being alone with another man after sunset. With sunset fast approaching, she asks Larry to jump off the ski lift, and he declines, knowing that such a fall would be bone-breaking. Rachel is thus forced to hurl herself off the ski lift, and she descends with a heavy thud. While Larry is not wrong to refuse to harm himself for the sake of preserving her religious purity, it is Larry's response to Rachel's fall that reveals his callous insensitivity. Larry sees her hit the ground and expresses no concern whatsoever for her well-being. Rather than use his phone to contact an ambulance, he nonchalantly calls Richard to inform him that the scheme to place his friend's name atop the kidney donor list has failed.

5.3 LARRY'S MANIPULATIVENESS

The third trait dimension of the Dark Triad, Machiavellianism, refers to the tendency of people to further their own interests by manipulating, deceiving, and exploiting others (Jones & Paulhus, 2009). Machiavellians tend to be callous and indifferent to moral codes, and they achieve their selfish aims by using people and bending any rules that could stand in their way. We mentioned above Larry's aim to manipulate the head of the kidney donor list. On another occasion, Larry schemes to break up with Loretta Black by pretending, in front of a doctor, that he is childish, disruptive, and controlling (Season 7, Episode 2, *Vehicular Fellatio*). Larry's goal is to convince the doctor to urge Loretta to break up with Larry. In other episodes, Larry manipulates Ted Danson by pretending to be a chronic "side-sitter" (Season 10, Episode 3, *Artificial Fruit*), and he manipulates a friend into believing that he has the depth of character to date an unattractive woman (Season 8, Episode 8, *The Car Periscope*). Larry spends much of Season 11 romantically courting a woman on the city council only because she can repeal a law that may keep Larry out of major financial trouble and prison (Season 11, Episode 7, *Irma Kostroski*).

Perhaps the most manipulative actions ever taken by Larry were in the service of attempting to reconcile with Cheryl shortly after she leaves the marriage (Season 6, Episode 9, *The Therapist*). In this episode, Larry and Cheryl are each pursuing individual counseling, with Larry's therapist coaching him on how to win Cheryl's heart again and Cheryl's therapist helping her navigate Larry's romantic overtures toward her. Larry comes to realize that his best chance at reconciliation lies in persuading Cheryl's therapist that he is a good person. He arranges for his own therapist, Dr. Bright, to pretend to mug Cheryl's therapist and take her purse. Larry then becomes the hero by stopping the mugging and returning the purse to the therapist. As in all instances of Larry's manipulateness, this scheme backfires

on him in humiliating ways. Larry never seems to learn from his failed attempts to manipulate others, a personality flaw that we turn to next.

5.4 LARRY'S RESISTANCE TO GROWTH

Earlier we noted that heroes in the classic mythic journey are charged to overcome dangerous obstacles and endure significant suffering as they transform into their most heroic selves (Campbell, 1949). We give Larry credit for overcoming abuse as a child and growing into a successful and fairly high functioning adult. While we acknowledge Larry's ability to overcome obstacles, we must also balance this perspective by noting that on numerous occasions Larry also demonstrates an inability to grow and a tendency to demonstrate regressive, childish behaviors. In virtually every episode of *CYE*, Larry seems to engage in a needless spat with someone over trivial matters, beginning in the very first episode (Season 1, Episode 1, *The Pants Tent*), when Larry argues with Richard Lewis's girlfriend when she doesn't give him enough room to slide by her in an aisle of a movie theater. Other examples include Larry arguing with a woman in line at an ice cream parlor because she requests too many free tastes of ice cream flavors (Season 8, Episode 5, *Vow of Silence*), and Larry arguing with Mocha Joe about the softness of a scone and the wobbliness of a table (Season 10, Episode 1, *Happy New Year*). We give Larry credit for the heroic tendency to bravely confront people who need confronting, but Larry takes this positive quality to a negative extreme. Larry seems unable to fathom that these confrontations invariably produce adverse consequences for him. Larry never appears to learn, preferring to be "hoisted on his own petard" (Season 7, Episode 7, *The Black Swan*) in nearly every episode.

We can even argue that Larry David's inability to grow and to learn from his mistakes reduces him to a human anachronism. There is no better illustration of Larry's anachronistic ways than in Season 4, Episode 7 (*The Surrogate*), in which Larry is tasked with purchasing a

baby shower gift. He decides to buy a doll but the only remaining doll in the toy store is of biracial descent. Despite being told by a store employee that the doll is biracial, Larry insists on using the offensive term “mulatto”. Despite being informed that the expression is outdated and insulting, Larry continues to use the term, even at the baby shower where his slur attracts disapproving looks from party guests. Another example, in Season 11, Episode 6 (*Man Fights Tiny Woman*), centers on Larry expressing preferences for which gender should pursue specific occupations. Guest star Seth Rogan castigates Larry for his offensively sexist remarks but Larry is undeterred. Overall, we see that Larry is incapable of growing and keeping current with contemporary moral sensibilities. For Larry David in *CYE*, there is no hero’s journey, no growth, nothing learned, and no transformation to his best self. In this way, Larry is arguably an antihero.

6 CONCLUSION: HERO OR ANTIHERO?

What are we to conclude about Larry David’s heroic nature in *CYE*? To answer this question, we turn to a recent conceptualization of heroism offered by Beggan (2019), who describes what he calls *the grey zone of heroism*. Beggan makes the rather provocative assertion that the heroic response is not always the best response, and that there are many social situations in which it is not clear whether a heroic action is necessary, desired, or even heroic. There may be good reasons why people should not act in a heroic manner, as when someone donates his kidney to his friend and then unexpectedly dies from medical complications. This fate nearly befell Larry, and thus in hindsight it could be argued that Larry’s selfish desire to preserve his kidney was morally sound. Beggan’s analysis also suggests that Larry’s role as a “social assassin” can be seen as either unnecessary meddling in others’ personal business, or as helpful behavior directed toward achieving a social good. Larry David appears to spend much of his life in the grey zone of heroism, occupying that

space between heroism and villainy by taking actions and intervening in ways that sometimes help and sometimes hurt himself and others.

It is also important to remember the obvious fact that the Larry David we see in *CYE* is a television character and not the real Larry David. As such, the Larry in the TV series is the product of Larry David the writer's comedic instincts. What do we know about the real Larry David's comedic writing philosophy? In a 2014 interview, actor Jason Alexander revealed that Larry David's highest priority as a television writer is maximizing the humor in any given situation (Foundation Interviews, 2014). "The belief [on *Seinfeld*] was that 'funny trumps'", said Alexander. "Funny trumps story, funny trumps character, funny trumps everything." According to Alexander, this philosophy of television writing is unusual, with most writers of both comedy and drama placing the highest priority on remaining true to a story or to a consistent characterization. Alexander explains: "If I were ever to say to Larry or Jerry [Seinfeld], 'My character would never say or do that,' they would say, 'Let's make him. Let's force him.' Because it was funny."

From this perspective, Larry the character's contradictions and inconsistencies can be explained as products of Larry the writer's emphasis on creating humor at all costs, even at the expense of consistent characterization. The Larry David we see in *CYE* is a highly intelligent man who makes a remarkable sacrifice of his time and money to reunite with his ex-wife Cheryl, yet when she is ready to return to him, he does something that only a colossally stupid man would do: he drives her away by making a kerfuffle about a coffee stain that she left on a wooden table (Season 7, Episode 10, *Seinfeld*). In short, the Larry David that we see in *CYE* is a Larry who defies characterization as either a hero or an antihero, because his character is written to be funny rather than consistently either good or bad, or smart or dumb. Larry has spent eleven seasons of *CYE* being hoisted with his own petard, and sometimes the petard has heroic aims while other times the petard has dubious

ones. *CYE* is a television series that explores and maximizes the comedic value in both the hoisting and in the petard, with little interest in any scholarly conclusion about the lead character's heroic or antiheroic status.

Nowhere is Larry's inconsistent status as both hero and antihero more amplified than in Season 8, Episode 6, ironically entitled *The Hero*. The episode begins with Larry assuming the role of an accidental hero when, tripping over his shoelaces, he saves a flight attendant from an abusive passenger. Everyone except his nemesis Suzie Green believes him to be a legitimate hero, and Larry soaks up the adulation and uses his elevated status to date an attractive woman. When Suzie exposes him as a fraud, the woman dumps him and begins dating another man, Ricky Gervais, whom Larry has accurately pegged as more shallow and selfish than Larry himself. Larry follows the couple onto a New York subway, where he witnesses them being mugged at gunpoint. In this situation, one would expect Larry to relish their victimhood and simply walk away. But *CYE*'s central goal is to engender ironic humor, and thus Larry attacks the mugger with a loaf of bread that Ricky Gervais earlier criticized as being "too hard" to eat. Larry thus proves to the woman that he is indeed a real hero.

This same episode ends on a very telling note. Having beaten the mugger into submission, Larry exits the subway car but gets his shoelaces caught in the subway door as the train is exiting the station. His moment of triumph ends in humiliation, which is a common occurrence in *CYE*. Larry may be a misanthropic curmudgeon, but he appears to have won the hearts of millions because he embodies the TV trope of *the everyman* (TV Tropes, 2020). Despite being rich and famous, Larry is all too human. He is bald and wears his baldness like a badge of honor. In nearly every episode of *CYE*, there are unflattering camera angles of Larry's head, often with the camera positioned directly behind his scalp, showcasing his ever-receding and every-greying hairline. Larry is old, and with each passing season of *CYE*, what little hair remains is becoming more unruly and ridiculous. Larry is the

everyman who loses the girl and can't get her back. He often speaks of his ineptness with women (e.g., Season 4, Episode 1, *Mel's Offer*, and Season 10, Episode 2, *Side-Sitting*) yet we, as the audience, are witness to Larry's charm and wit with women. Larry's shortcomings are obvious to us and yet eminently fixable if only he were more self-aware.

Many episodes end with Larry running away from angry mobs (Season 2, Episode 7, *The Doll*), jealous boyfriends (Season 7, Episode 4, *The Hot Towel*), assassins (Season 9, Episode 10, *Fatwa!*), and terrible legal trouble (Season 7, Episode 9, *The Table Read*). Like many of us, Larry is his own worst enemy. His efforts to address his problems only seem to amplify them. He suspects he's smarter than most people yet he suffers more than most, and the suffering is almost always of his own doing. Larry may be clever, rich, and famous, but like most of us, his life is a constant struggle for love, self-respect, and achievement.

This latter observation begs the question: How do audiences perceive Larry? Does our analysis of his heroism translate to audiences who are unlikely to critique the series and the character in the way that we have as heroism scientists? Although there are no direct data connecting CYE's audience experience with their perceptions of Larry's heroism or antiheroism, we can make two observations based on social media posts and comments from fans of Larry and the series. First, it is evident from users' comments on CYE YouTube videos that fans appreciate Larry's courageous ability to break social norms of politeness by confronting people about their questionable behavior. One such video is aptly named, *What if Everyone Had Their Own Larry David* (Late Night with Seth Meyers, 2020). In the video, Larry confronts people in amusing ways about their dubious actions, engaging in interventions that most of us think about doing but rarely do because of normative constraints. Users' comments on this video clearly illustrate fans' appreciation of the comic genius of Larry and also their observation that Larry has the heroic ability to speak the hard social truths that most people lack the courage to say. Future researchers may wish to conduct

content analyses of viewers' YouTube comments to corroborate this pattern of heroic admiration for Larry's social courage.

Second, we believe that a rich source of audience data about Larry and CYE resides in Reddit, a massive online social news community on which people post opinions, interests, links, and images on every topic imaginable. In their analysis of Reddit's impact on social science research, Proferes, Jones, Gilbert, Fiesler, and Zimmer (2021) have documented the rapid growth in the use of Reddit as a data source, the range of disciplines using Reddit, how researchers are accessing Reddit data, the characteristics of Reddit datasets that researchers are using, the subreddits and topics being studied, and the kinds of analyses of Reddit data that researchers are employing in their scholarship. Our informal review of Reddit discussions of Larry David and CYE reveals thousands of posts and comments from fans. We encourage future research to mine these data in ways suggested by Proferes et al. (2021) with the goal of assessing audience reactions to the heroism and antiheroism of Larry David.

We conclude with one final observation about the close conceptual ties between heroism and villainy. Allison and Goethals (2011) argued that a fine line exists between a hero and a villain, with good and bad actors displaying overlapping characteristics of intelligence, strength, resilience, charisma, and inspiration. Larry's complexity as a character may reflect this fine line. Just when we are convinced that Larry is a lovable everyman hero, we are witness to his antiheroic tendencies of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. Perhaps Larry in CYE is a reminder to us that heroic and antisocial personalities are "two twigs off the same branch" (Smith, Lilienfeld, Coffey, & Dabbs, 2013, p. 1). Studies have shown that heroism is positively associated with the impulsive component of psychopathy and sociopathy. Antisocial personalities, according to Stout (2020), "live outside of the social contract that binds the rest of us, are uniquely destructive, and will never be able to engage in authentic personal or work relationships with anyone" (p. 1). This is an

apt description of Larry's life on *CYE*, with the exception of Larry's bond with his manager Jeff and his buddy Leon. Larry thus straddles the line between heroism and antiheroism in ways that highlight his endearing everyman quality and yet also honor *CYE*'s overarching goal of squeezing as much comedy as possible from Larry's antics. The famed poet Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "Every hero becomes a bore at last" (Emerson, 1850). Larry David, the writer, appears all too aware of this potential boredom and thus gifts us with a Larry David on *CYE* who displays enough heroism for us to like him and enough antiheroism for us to relate to him and laugh at him. This is the Larry David who defies simple heroic labeling and who has beguiled, frustrated and entertained us over eleven award-winning television seasons.

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8 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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.