



Brief Report

The personality profile of brave exemplars: A person-centered analysis

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ABSTRACT

What accounts for the actions of people who exhibit exceptional bravery, voluntarily risking their lives to save others? Previous research on this topic has been restricted to the variable approach. Here, we examine this phenomenon via the person approach, by deriving a personality profile distinctive of exceptional bravery. A cluster analysis, based on a broadband assessment of 11 personality variables, revealed that awardees for bravery were distinguished from comparison participants on the basis of their personality composition, challenging a situational explanation for their actions. The cluster corresponding with exceptional bravery embodied an expanded worldview (epistemic development, early advantage), positivity (redemption), and efficacy (dominance and agency). These findings inform understanding regarding the psychological factors underlying brave action.

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1. Introduction

Exceptional bravery, defined here as voluntarily risking one's own life to save the lives of others, has long been an enigma for psychologists (Lord, 1918) and continues to baffle and inspire us (Miller, 2000). Why would someone risk their life by fighting off a cougar that had attacked a child, or by rushing into a burning house to save an elderly, incapacitated man? Such are the remarkable actions of some of the participants in this study. How is such bravery best explained?

In an early attempt to answer this question, London (1970) examined the personalities of individuals who, during the Holocaust, rescued Jews from the Nazis. He reported that rescuers tended to possess a heightened sense of adventurousness, as well as the existence of a role model, one with whom they were securely attached. Building upon this research, Oliner (2003) undertook a series of qualitative case studies of Carnegie Medalists, observing that these individuals possessed heightened levels of personal efficacy and optimism, as well as an accentuated concern for the welfare of others. Although collectively this research provides a helpful commentary regarding the characteristics of brave exemplars, the absence of objective methodology and comparison groups limits the inferences that can be drawn.

Recognizing these limitations, Walker and Frimer (2007) examined individuals who had received a national award for their dangerous, life-saving attempts (in contrast to a demographically matched comparison group). Participants' personalities were assessed through reliance on McAdams's (1995b) multi-level

conception of personality, wherein behavioral traits, characteristic adaptations (e.g., developmental variables, goal motivation), and integrative life narratives are recognized as distinct personality "levels." Exemplars were found to differ from comparisons in terms of their integrative life narratives. Relative to comparison participants, brave exemplars exhibited a heightened degree of motivation (manifest in terms of agentic and communal themes) in their personal stories. Brave exemplars also recalled a greater number of securely attached relationships, were more redemptive (construing negative experiences as leading to something positive), and described a greater number of personal helpers, relative to comparison participants. These differences are particularly noteworthy in light of the finding that exemplars and comparisons were indistinguishable at the other personality levels considered.

Despite the diversity present in the brave actions considered in past research, this literature is largely bound by its reliance on the variable approach, one in which mean-level differences between groups on individual variables are paramount. In contrast to the variable approach lies the person approach, wherein the *structure* of variables within the person is of principal interest. Arguing for the latter approach, Magnusson (2003) stressed that "the psychological significance of a certain component for the functioning of an individual cannot be understood ... out of its context with other, simultaneously operating components of the individual" (p. 11). It follows that considerable insight into the personological basis for bravery may be gained through a consideration of its distinctive personality *composition* (Jayawickreme & Di Stefano, 2012).

A hierarchical cluster analysis (HCA) is an analytic procedure particularly conducive to the person approach. This procedure works in a manner analogous to factor analysis, save for the fact that cases (e.g., participants), rather than variables, are grouped

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together in “clusters.” These groupings are created in the interest of maximizing homogeneity within clusters and heterogeneity between clusters. Once the appropriate number of clusters has been derived, the defining combination of personality characteristics associated with each cluster can be explored by way of a discriminant function analysis (DFA). When conducting such a DFA, the composition of variables used to determine the clusters is considered, and the subset of variables most descriptive of each cluster is identified (see Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 2009).

Adopting this combined HCA/DFA approach, Walker, Frimer, and Dunlop (2010) sought to identify differing personality compositions associated with moral excellence by considering in tandem the personalities of brave and caring (i.e., individuals who had dedicated decades of their lives to the betterment of others) exemplars. First employing a HCA, three clusters were found. Follow-up DFAs revealed that two of these clusters exhibited noteworthy personality compositions, characterized by heightened levels of communal and deliberative variables, respectively; the nature of the third cluster, however, was relatively ordinary (i.e., this personality composition did not exhibit heightened levels of any of the personality variables considered, relative to the other exemplary clusters). Of relevance to the current discussion, this third group was also predominantly populated by brave (rather than caring) exemplars. Given that this “brave” cluster was found wanting with respect to noteworthy personality characteristics, Walker and colleagues speculated that, in contrast to the long-standing prosocial behavioral pattern observed among caring exemplars, the one-off behaviors of brave exemplars may be driven predominantly by situational, rather than personal, factors. Such a conclusion aligns with the situationist perspective (Zimbardo, 2007) which argues for the banality of heroism, contending that contextual factors primarily instigate action.

The results of Walker et al. (2010) speak to apparent differences between exemplars of various sorts. A question unaddressed by this research group, however, is whether these exemplars are distinguished from non-exemplary individuals on the basis of personality composition alone. Considering only the “simultaneously operating components of the individual” (Magnusson, 2003, p. 11), are exemplary and comparison individuals represented by different clusters and, if so, what subset of variables is most responsible for this division? This question sits at the very heart of the person approach because it concerns the ability of the interplay among personality variables to distinguish among different types of people (rather than mean-level differences between preselected groups).

Dunlop, Walker, and Matsuba (2012) examined whether there was a personality composition distinctive of care exemplars across the adult lifespan. They did this by assessing the personalities of exemplary and comparison younger and older adults. Once again adopting a combined HCA/DFA approach, though this time considering exemplars and comparisons within the same analysis, it was noted that, within both age groups, care exemplars were distinguished from comparisons on the basis of personality composition.

In the current project, we adopted the approach used by Dunlop et al. (2012) to the study of brave exemplars, in the interest of determining whether they are also characterized by a distinctive personality profile. This required assessing the personalities of a group of brave exemplars and demographically matched comparison participants at each of the descriptive levels of personality. Assuming that brave exemplars and comparisons could be distinguished on the basis of personality composition, we were also interested in determining the collection of personality variables responsible for this distinction. The current efforts stand to inform understanding regarding the nature and source of exceptional bravery.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

2.1.1. Brave exemplars

Our group of brave exemplars comprised 25 recipients of the Canadian *Medal of Bravery*, a national award bestowed upon individuals who have risked their lives to save others.¹ Recent awardees were contacted and invited to take part in a study examining “positive human characteristics,” and were offered a \$50 honorarium. These participants (18 men and 7 women) averaged 40.7 years of age ($SD = 8.5$, range = 23–58) and 13.8 years ($SD = 2.1$) of education. They were primarily Euro-Canadian in their ethnic background (96%).

2.1.2. Comparison participants

The 25 comparison participants were recruited from a large pool of interested community members. On a case-by-case basis, they were matched to the brave exemplars in terms of age, education, ethnicity, and gender. Comparison participants were similarly informed that the study examined “positive human characteristics” and offered a \$50 honorarium (for additional details, see Walker & Frimer, 2007).

2.2. Procedure

Participants were first mailed a battery of personality inventories, including Wiggins's (1995) revised interpersonal adjective scales and Emmons's (1999) personal strivings list. Subsequent to the return of these questionnaires, participants completed an audio-recorded interview of about 2 h, typically in their own home, entailing a measure of epistemic development (Fowler, 1981) and a life story interview (McAdams, 1995a).

In total, 11 variables spanning the three levels of personality description identified by McAdams (1995b)—behavioral traits, characteristic adaptations, and integrative life narratives—were considered. Our selection of variables was driven by (a) the desire to provide a sufficiently broad assessment of personality and (b) a precedent established by previous research on moral excellence (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; Walker & Hennig, 2004). Specifically, in this earlier research relevance has been noted of the “moral” behavioral dispositions and goal motivations, sociocognitive abilities and optimistic and agentic elements of the life story (McAdams et al., 1997; Walker & Frimer, 2007). Where relevant, interrater reliability was determined by a second rater who coded 24% of the data.

2.2.1. Revised interpersonal adjective scales (IASR; Wiggins, 1995)

Behavioral traits were assessed by the two fundamental dimensions of the interpersonal circumplex: *dominance* and *nurturance*. Participants responded to the 64-item IASR on an 8-point scale. Circular statistics were used to derive dimension scores for dominance and nurturance (α s for the octants comprising the circumplex ranged from .72 to .89).

2.2.2. Personal strivings list (PSL; Emmons, 1999)

The PSL taps individuals' goal motivation as a central form of characteristic adaptations. This questionnaire prompts participants to list the 10–15 things that they are “typically trying to do.” Responses were entered in a single spreadsheet and randomized to allow for blind coding. Raters identified strivings reflecting motivational themes of *affiliation/intimacy*, *identity/personal growth*, and *power/achievement*. Interrater reliability for these three variables was substantial with ICCs = .95, .89, and 1.00, respectively.

¹ For additional information regarding this award, see <http://www.gg.ca>.

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