Angels everywhere? How beliefs in pure evil and pure good predict perceptions of heroic behavior

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ABSTRACT

We examined the effects of belief in pure evil (BPE) and belief in pure good (BPG) on perceptions and evaluations of a stereotypically altruistic (vs. egoistic) hero who apprehended a criminal perpetrator. Overall, participants appreciably supported formal, public accolades for the altruistic hero because they more greatly deified (i.e., venerated) the altruistic hero. Greater levels of BPG were associated with greater deification only of the altruistic hero, and levels of BPG did not predict support for awards or rewards for either hero. Levels of BPE were not associated with deification of either the altruistic or egoistic hero, although greater levels of BPE were associated with greater support for rewarding the hero because such individuals more strongly believe that rewards foster prosocial behavior. Ultimately, characterizing others as altruistic meaningfully impacts perceptions of their heroic behavior, but preexisting beliefs about good and evil importantly appear to impact such perceptions as well.

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Oskar Schindler was a German industrialist and Nazi Party member who saved approximately 1200 Jewish people (appropriately named now *Schindlerjuden*) from certain death in the Holocaust during World War II. Ultimately, he spent his entire fortune on bribing officials and purchasing black-market supplies for his workers. Perhaps most people would see Schindler as a hero (Beckett & Eagly, 2004; Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011): engaging in behavior that involved risk (being discovered by the Germans) and that fulfilled a socially valued goal (saving human lives).

But there are still individuals, even in his hometown, that still see Schindler as a spy and an opportunist (Deutsche Welle, 2008). Indeed, at first, Schindler's business ventures did play "the war and the holocaust to his advantage… before this practice started weighing on his conscience, and he quickly began using his…position to help Jews" (Tate, 2016). Schindler's reasons for helping seemed to evolve from being egoistic (in which people help to benefit themselves) to altruistic (in which people help to benefit others, with no expected gain for themselves; Batson & Powell, 2003; Franco et al., 2011). Thus, a heroic action is not necessarily an altruistic action (Franco et al., 2011). But do people really care *how* or *why* heroes help as long as they are fulfilling a socially valued goal?

Accordingly, in the current study, we manipulated a hero's level of altruism: we created two conditions in which a hero acted in a stereotypically altruistic vs. egoistic manner in his apprehension of a suspected murderer. To our knowledge, our study is the first to manipulate a hero's

altruistic motivations/behavior. Then, we measured the extent to which participants "deified" the hero (i.e., the extent to which participants viewed the apprehender as upstanding and moral), as well as how much they supported giving the hero formal public awards and monetary rewards (c.f. Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). We also examined the extent to which participants believe such rewards increase prosocial behavior.

We predicted that participants would more greatly deify an altruistic (vs. egoistic) hero because, cross-culturally, societies seem to highly value citizens who embody more altruistic qualities; for example, *justice* ("strengths that underlie healthy community life", including fairness), *humanity* ("interpersonal strengths that involve 'tending and befriending' others"), and *temperance* ("strengths that protect against excess", including self-control; Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005, p. 205; see also: Hanke et al., 2015; Pizarro & Baumeister, 2013). From a theoretical perspective, deification (venerating someone to a somewhat "superhuman" status) is the opposite of dehumanization/demonization (stripping away human qualities; Haslam, 2006; c.f. Boesak, 2014). As greater *demonization* results in greater punishment of criminals (e.g., Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975; Webster & Saucier, 2015), greater *deification* should lead to greater awards/rewards for heroes, particularly altruistic heroes.

Nonetheless, we reason individuals' perceptions about whether altruism actually exists play an important role in evaluating heroic behavior. Webster and Saucier (2013) created an individual differences scale assessing *belief in pure good* (BPG), which includes at its core a belief in altruism: BPG consists of the perception that there are individuals, however rare, that selflessly (without expectation of intrinsic or

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extrinsic reward) and impartially (without discrimination) help others, resorting to violence as an absolute last resort. Historical examples of "purely good" individuals may include Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Theresa (Hanke et al., 2015).

Using terminology from the justification-suppression model of prejudice (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003), not believing as strongly in pure good may serve as a justification for *not* helping others (c.f. Saucier, Miller, & Doucet, 2005): "denying the possibility of pure altruism provides a convenient excuse for selfish behavior. If 'everybody is like that'… we need not feel guilty about our own self-interested behavior or try to change it" (Lichtenberg, 2010). Thus, as people believe *more* in pure good, they should be *more* likely to deify those who engage in prosocial actions, particularly when such actions are stereotypically altruistic. Additionally, people who believe more in pure good also are more attributionally complex (Webster & Saucier, 2013); that is, they think more deeply about the causes for other people's behaviors, which should include how and why a hero helps in any given situation.

Thus, we predicted that people who more strongly believe in pure good should more greatly deify the stereotypically altruistic hero only (i.e., greater BPG should predict greater deification, but only in the altruistic hero condition). When it comes to more formal recognition for heroic actions, we hypothesized that BPG would not be associated with greater support for monetary awards for heroes, because material rewards fundamentally violate "purely good" principles—of being selfless, in particular. However, would people who score higher in BPG be more amenable to giving public accolades? Expecting public praise from others still seems to violate the selfless principle, but arguably does so in a less overtly extrinsic manner; thus, we were more equivocal about how BPG associated with support for giving public awards to the hero.

Further, participants' perceptions about whether pure *evil* exists in the world also likely play an important role in perceiving heroic behavior, too. Webster and Saucier (2013) define belief in pure evil as the perception that there are individuals in the world who are predisposed to intentionally harm others for sheer pleasure and to create chaos in the world. People who believe more in pure evil see the world as an extremely dangerous place and believe that the best way to better the world is to eliminate "rotten apples" by *any means necessary*, including preemptive aggression, jail time, or execution, regardless of how "evil" perpetrators actually appear (Webster & Saucier, 2013, 2015). Moreover, people who believe more in pure evil also more generally exhibit lower attributional complexity; that is, they think much less about the causes for others' behaviors (Webster & Saucier, 2013; see also Webster & Saucier, 2015). Thus, we predicted that individuals who more greatly believe in pure evil will care less about *how or why* individuals help (i.e., whether egoistically vs. altruistically), as long as a socially-valued goal is fulfilled (i.e., the criminal is apprehended).

Accordingly, we expected people who score higher in BPE to report no differences in deifying the altruistic vs. egoistic hero (i.e., BPE would not predict hero deification in either the egoistic or altruistic conditions). We also reasoned that people higher in BPE would support the hero receiving formal accolades and a monetary reward, regardless of the motivation for the hero's behavior. It seems like people who score higher in BPE favor any means necessary to promote actions to eliminate evildoers from the world, even when such actions may harm the perpetrator or when such actions result in a monetary reward for the apprehender.

We also assessed the extent to which participants' believed that awards/rewards promote helping behavior. We reasoned that BPG would be unrelated (or even negatively related) to such beliefs given that helping should be selfless endeavor according to BPG principle. Alternatively, people who believe more in pure evil may support a "mercenary-like" system where people are awarded and rewarded for helping, because—again—we need to do everything in our power to squash evil.

In sum, our predictions were:

H1. Participants would more greatly recommend formal awards/rewards for the more altruistic (vs. non-altruistic) hero because they would more greatly deify the altruistic hero.

H2. Higher levels of BPG would be associated with higher levels of deifying the altruistic hero more than the non-altruistic hero, but not be strongly associated with formally rewarding/awarding the hero.

H3. Individuals scoring higher in BPE would not report any difference in deifying the altruistic vs. non-altruistic hero, but would support awarding/rewarding the hero regardless. We also reasoned that people who score higher on BPE would more strongly endorse the belief that awards/rewards promote prosocial behavior.

In sum, the current study will help test the contributions of the person (individual differences in BPE and BPG) and the situation (manipulating a hero's motivations) in predicting perceptions and evaluations of heroic behavior.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

In total, 212 (84 men and 128 women; *M* age = 20.01, *SD* = 4.23) primarily White (88.7%) general psychology students completed the following materials online to partially fulfill a course requirement.[1]

1.2. Materials and procedure

Participants first completed Webster and Saucier's (2013) BPE (22 items, $\alpha = 0.92$) and BPG (28 items, $\alpha = 0.89$) scales in the beginning of the Spring 2012 semester. Later in the semester, these participants were allowed to participate in an ostensibly separate study (conducted a minimum 30 days later to help eliminate any demand characteristics) in which they read an allegedly real newspaper article from the *Kansas City Star* (http://www.kansascity.com/) about a murder[2] that occurred in Kansas City in the past two weeks and the perpetrator's apprehension by a neighbor (c.f. Rosenblatt et al., 1989). We randomly assigned participants to read about a stereotypically altruistic or egoistic hero. (All materials may be obtained from the authors.)

In the stereotypically altruistic condition, the apprehender ("Mr. Carter") used force as a last resort as to avoid hurting the perpetrator ("Mr. Beatty"), did not consider himself a hero or want anything in return, and volunteered around town; this hero embodied "purely good" principles: doing good without extreme aggression and without expectation of awards/rewards. In the egoistic condition, the hero liked using force, gloated about his actions, and enjoyed the benefits of his celebrity status, but was described as an overall nice guy.

After reading the newspaper article, participants completed measures assessing their reactions to the hero. Unless noted, participants responded to items on a 1 (*disagree very strongly*) to 9 (*agree very strongly*) Likert-type scale, and all measures were scored as the average response per item with higher mean values reflecting higher levels of the construct of interest.

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[1] This is the same sample that Webster and Saucier (2015) used to examine how BPE and BPG predicted perceptions and evaluations of a stereotypically evil criminal; however, the current study examined relationships between novel variables; that is, there is no redundancy between the current study and Webster and Saucier (2015).

[2] Webster and Saucier (2015) also manipulated the evilness of the criminal and assessed how BPE and BPG predicted perceptions and evaluations of the criminal. Given that the current study's focus is on the "hero", and that evilness condition did not predict any of our primary outcomes, we do not discuss the evilness manipulation further.