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The heroic self under stress: Prospective effects on anxious mood in Israeli adults exposed to missile attacks

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ABSTRACT

Three aspects of heroic self-representations have recently been identified: *self-as-savior*, *self-as-conqueror*, and *heroic-identification* (i.e., linking oneself with heroes). In Israeli-Jewish society, heroism represents a convergence of the cultural myth of the *Tzabar* (the tough New Jew) with manic-narcissistic defenses that replace helplessness with exhilaration. We expected Heroic identification to epitomize the myth of the Tzabar, and thus to confer the greatest stress-related vulnerability. Israeli adults ($N = 812$) were assessed pre-and-post a prolonged exposure to missile attacks. Heroic identification prospectively predicted increased anxious mood, both as a main effect and under major stressful life events. *Self-as-savior* predicted an increased anxious mood under high levels of perceived-stress related to the missile attacks. Possible mechanisms of these effects are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The psychology of heroism has recently received extensive research attention (Jayawickreme & Di Stefano, 2012; Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou 2015a, 2015b; White & O'Brien, 1999). Heroes are characterized as protectors and saviors (White & O'Brien, 1999) and as promoting virtues such as bravery, altruism, and courage (Jayawickreme & Di Stefano, 2012; Kinsella, et al. 2015a, 2015b). Heroism is linked to perceived threat, such that dangerous acts are deemed more heroic than non-dangerous ones (Stenstrom & Curtis, 2012). Whereas heroism is frequently construed as *a positive* aspect of personality and behavior (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), some aspects of heroism and heroic acts constitute symptoms of psychopathology such as narcissism (Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011; Pallone & Hennessey, 1998).

Inspired by this and other lines of inquiry, Shahar (2013) identified three types of heroic self-representations: *self-as-savior*, *self-as-conqueror*, and *heroic-identification*. Identification of the first two -- *self-as-savior* and *self-as-conqueror* – was inspired by Blatt's two-polarities personality theory. According to this theory, personality develops in the context of parent-child relationships through the dialectic and synergistic interaction between the need to secure safe, supportive, and nurturing interpersonal relationships ("Inter-personal relatedness"), and the need to attain a coherent, clearly demarcated, and essentially positive sense of self ("self-definition"; see Blatt, 1974, 2004, 2008; Blatt & Luyten, 2009; Luyten & Blatt, 2013; Kopala-Sibley & Zuroff, 2014; see also Bakan, 1966, as a major source of inspiration for Blatt's theory, and Helgeson, 1994, as a fruitful application of this theory to health psychology).

In intact development, interpersonal relatedness and self-definition are posited to be harmoniously integrated into a person's personality, and are both expressed in behavior (notwith-standing minor emphases -- among some individuals – on one personality constellation at the expense of the other). In contrast, disruptions in early parent-child relationships lead to a situation whereby one of two personality constellations – relatedness or self-definition – is markedly emphasized *at the expense of the other*, in turn evolving into psychopathology (Blatt, 2008). Thus, disruptions in the ability to attain a healthy self-definition propel an overemphasis on interpersonal relatedness, in turn leading to *anaclitic-dependent* psychopathologies (e.g., depression centered around "object loss", anxiety disorders, somatization, and dependent and borderline personality disorders). Similarly, difficulties in the attainment of nurturing and supportive interpersonal relationships may lead to an overemphasis on self-reliance and self-worth, thereby translating into *introjective-self-critical* psychopathologies (e.g., depression centered around failure, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and obsessive and paranoid personality disorders).

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In a straightforward application of this theory to the issue of heroism, Shahar (2013) construed *self-as-savior* as a manifestation of an extreme emphasis on interpersonal relatedness at the expense of self-definition, albeit with a twist: Instead of *needing others,* I am experiencing others as *needing me.* Similarly, *self-as-conqueror* was construed as a manifestation of an extreme emphasis on self-definition, also with a twist: Instead of being *preoccupied with failure,* I am viewing the world *as a set of challenges* that I may overcome, a stance termed by Yalom (1980) as "compulsive heroism".

The third heroic self-representation, "heroic identification", was formulated based on social constructivism theory (e.g., Gergen, 1985; Harré, 1986), according to which cultural and societal norms and myths shape our cognition and emotion (Averill, 1982), personality (Sarbin, 1997), psychopathology (Sarbin & Mancuso, 1986), and psychotherapy (Owen, 1993). In general, societies and cultures highlight the myth of heroism, and encourage individuals to embrace heroic idols (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Campbell, 1949; Franco, et al., 2011; Sullivan & Venter, 2005; Zimbardo, 2007). Hence, the heroic identification dimension (Shahar, 2013).

1.1. Empirical findings and a theoretical upgrade

To date, only four empirical studies examined the three aforementioned heroic self-representations, and in all of these studies, heroic self-representations were measured via a 9-item self-report questionnaire (i.e., Shahar's Heroic Self Scale, *SHERS;* Shahar, 2013). Each of the three representations was measured via three items. Participants in these studies were all Israeli undergraduates (a total of 761 participants). The SHERS was administered alongside measures of personality, self-concept dimensions, stress, and psychological symptoms. In two studies, a cross-sectional design was espoused (Shahar, 2013, sample 1; Itamar & Shahar, 2014), whereas in two others, a short-term, two-wave prospective design was utilized (Shahar, 2013, samples 2 & 3).

Three robust patterns emerged from these studies. *First,* whereas self-as-conqueror and self-as-savior were positively associated with self-efficacy, heroic identification was not (Shahar, 2013, samples 1 & 3). *Second,* heroic identification was positively associated with measures of narcissistic traits and narcissistic personality disorder features, while self-as-conqueror and self-as-savior were not (Shahar, 2013, sample 3; Itamar & Shahar, 2014). *Third,* the associations between heroic identification and measures of psychopathology were decidedly stronger and more consistent compared with the equivalent associations involving self-as-conqueror and self-as-savior (Shahar, 2013, samples 1 & 3). Taken together, these patterns depict heroic-identification as a stronger dimension of vulnerability to stress than the other two measures.

Why is that? To answer this, we are upgrading Shahar's (2013) theoretical formulation by drawing from (1) Janoff-Bulman and Wortman (1977) distinction between characterological and behavioral reactions to trauma, (2) a social-constructivist account of the myth of the Israeli-Jewish *Tzabar,* and (3) *empirically-based* psychodynamic theory which focuses on manic and narcissistic defensive personality processes. The three theoretical sources and their impact on our reconceptualization of the heroic self are described below.

1.1.1. Characterological vs. Behavioral reactions to trauma
Shahar (2013) suggested that heroic self-representations are formed during adolescence as a revolt against unfavorable developmental conditions—resembling, in this context, the description of resilience-related constructs such as sense of coherence, hardiness, and posttraumatic growth (e.g., Almedom, 2005). This supposition is strongly tallied with Janoff-Bulman's (1979) distinction

between characterological vs. behavioral reactions to trauma. Specifically, Janoff-Bulman and colleagues (Janoff-Bulman & Wortman, 1977; Janoff-Bulman, 1979) identified *self-blame* as a natural reaction to trauma, and surmised that this reaction restores a sense of control over the traumatic situation. Yet, self-blame and related factors (i.e., self-criticism) have also been identified as serious risk factors for depression and other stress-related conditions (e.g., Beck, 1983; Blatt, 1995; Shahar, 2015a, 2016).

In an attempt to reconcile this apparent contradiction, Janoff-Bulman (1979) distinguished between *characterological* and *behavioral self-blame.* Characterological self-blame pertains to one's inherent inadequacy to deal with challenges. Conversely, behavioral self-blame is associated with a specific inability to deal effectively with a specific challenge, rendering it a less maladaptive response. Put differently, characterological self-blame is chronic, internal (i.e., reflected in core beliefs), and pervasive, whereas behavioral self-blame is acute (and transient) and is mainly reflected in action. Consequently, characterological self-blame is theorized to be much more maladaptive than behavioral self-blame. An abundance of empirical studies are consistent with this distinction, depicting characterological, but not behavioral, self-blame as increasing risk for trauma-related symptoms and problems (Delahanty et al., 1997; Janoff-Bulman, 1979; Koss, Figueredo, & Prince, 2002; Startup, Makgekgenene, & Webstrer, 2007). It should be noted, however, that both characterological and behavioral self-blame usually predicted trauma-related symptoms when the trauma was prolonged (Frazier & Schauben, 1994; Frazier, 1990; O'Neill & Kerig, 2000).

A distinction similar to this may be made with respect to the three heroic self-representations described above. Namely, whereas self-as-savior and self-as-conqueror describe specific behaviors that satisfy conditions for heroism, heroic identification is general, diffuse, and is likely to be chronic. Arguably, such chronicity is linked with a perceived sense of inadequacy: "I am identifying with heroes so as to absorb, from the outside, what I am lacking within". Accordingly, and akin to Janoff-Bulman's distinction, heroic identification is likely to be "characterological" – namely chronic, internal, and pervasive, hence maladaptive. Conversely, self-as-savior and self-as-conqueror are likely to be "behavioral", hence acute/transient, action-related, and either adaptive or at least less maladaptive compared with heroic identification.[1]

1.1.2. The Jewish-Israeli myth of the "Tzabar"
Tzabar (*Sabra* in English) is the Hebrew word for the cactus fruit, which is thorny on the outside, but sweet and juicy when its skin is removed. Likewise, the Tzabar, pertaining to "The New Jew", is tough on the outside, but is also warm and sweet once his/her guard is lifted (Almog, 2000). As the New Jew, the Tzabar constitutes a fierce reaction to the Old Jew of the diaspora, who is helpless and uprooted. As a mythical symbol, the Tzabar is epitomized by great military leaders, and has inspired countless works of art, literature, and film (Almog, 2000). Despite being criticized for sexist and ethnocentric (e.g., Ben-zvi, 2000; Kaplan, 2007), the myth is still profoundly influential (Sela-Sheffy, 2004).

The *Tzabar* is inherently heroic. A *conqueror* extraordinaire, he/she liberates lands and territories. Such conquests are often risky, thus the Tzabar is always up for challenges. Importantly, however, the myth of the Tzabar is rooted in a socialistic ideology that elevates solidarity and comradery, thus a real Tzabar is willing to scarifice him/herself in order to *save others.* Finally, the Tzabar is

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[1] We are deeply grateful for an anonymous reviewer of this manuscript for pointing out the relevance of our work to Janoff-Bulman's distinction between characterological and behavioral self-blame.