Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

Understanding Heroism: The Role of Social Influence in Shaping Perceptions

DİLARA SURU

dilarasuru@gmail.com

Haliç University

Gökhan Arslantürk

Selçuk University

Research Article

Keywords: heroism, normative social influence, conformity, social norms, prosocial behavior, moral judgment

Posted Date: September 10th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10534087/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

This research investigates how social influence shapes individuals' perceptions of heroism. Across two complementary studies, we examined the ways in which social norms and majority opinions guide the evaluation of heroic behaviors. In the first study, we conducted semi-structured interviews in which participants shared stories of heroic actions. The narratives collected were then subjected to thematic analysis, revealing patterns in how heroism is perceived and evaluated. In the second study, we extended these findings by testing the role of group consensus in reshaping pre-existing judgments of heroism, demonstrating that conformity pressures can both enhance and diminish perceived heroism depending on the normative context. Taken together, these findings highlight that judgments of heroism are not solely based on individual moral reasoning but are dynamically shaped by social influence. The study contributes to the growing literature on social influence by showing that even moral constructs such as heroism are sensitive to normative pressures, with implications for understanding collective decision-making, leadership, and prosocial behavior.

Introduction

Heroism represents one of the most compelling and paradoxical expressions of human morality and prosociality. While acts of kindness and cooperation are relatively common in daily life, heroism involves extraordinary actions performed voluntarily, often at great personal risk, and motivated by moral or altruistic principles rather than external rewards (Franco et al., 2011; Kinsella et al., 2015; Zimbardo, 2007). From a psychological standpoint, heroism has been defined as "the pursuit of prosocial goals despite personal danger or cost" (Franco et al., 2011) and as an extreme form of altruism that transcends normative helping behavior (Batson, 1991; Tomasello, 2009).

Theoretical discussions on heroism have drawn from a broad range of perspectives. Campbell's (1949) *monomyth* framework portrayed the hero as a cultural archetype who embarks on a transformative journey, symbolizing both personal and collective growth. Building upon this, contemporary research has emphasized the social construction of heroism, suggesting that heroic behavior is not solely determined by the actor's intent but also by societal recognition and cultural context (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Kinsella et al., 2017). Heroes often embody virtues such as courage, self-sacrifice, integrity, and moral conviction (Franco, 2016

Goethals & Allison, 2012), serving as moral exemplars that guide and inspire others (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Empirical studies have categorized heroism into distinct subtypes—*civilian, military, social, and moral*—each reflecting different contexts and motivational structures (Becker & Eagly, 2004; Franco et al., 2016; Kinsella et al., 2015). For instance, social heroes engage in activism and collective welfare, while moral heroes demonstrate resistance to unjust authority (Haslam et al., 2019; Zimbardo, 2007). These forms converge on a shared psychological foundation: The integration of prosocial motivation, empathy, and

moral reasoning (Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2014; Dovidio et al.; Pfattheicher et al., 2021; Zaki & Mitchell, 2013).

The developmental origins of heroism have also been explored through prosocial and altruistic frameworks. Research indicates that human cooperation and helping behaviors are deeply rooted in evolutionary mechanisms promoting group survival (Tomasello, 2009; Warneken & Tomasello, 2009). Similarly, prosocial behavior—encompassing helping, sharing, and comforting—has been linked to moral emotions such as empathy and compassion (Batson, 2011; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). These affective processes contribute to the moral elevation and admiration people experience when witnessing heroic acts (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Nakamura & Graham, 2016).

From a social psychological lens, heroism is further shaped by social norms, cultural expectations, and group dynamics. The recognition of a behavior as "heroic" depends heavily on collective judgments and normative influence (Asch, 1951; Bond & Smith, 1996; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). What one society views as heroism may be interpreted differently in another, reflecting variations in cultural values, moral schemas, and social narratives (Sun et al., 2023). In this regard, heroism functions as both an individual moral act and a social construct negotiated within shared cultural meanings.

Taken together, these theoretical and empirical perspectives suggest that heroism is best understood as a multidimensional phenomenon—simultaneously moral, social, and cultural. It embodies prosocial motivation and moral courage but is also subject to the powerful shaping forces of social influence and collective validation. Understanding how individuals conceptualize and evaluate heroic behavior, therefore, requires not only examining personal traits and moral reasoning but also the normative frameworks through which societies recognize and reward such acts.

Acts in which individuals place themselves at risk to help others are generally classified under prosocial behavior or, more specifically, altruism. Observed across cultures and societies, such behaviors enhance interpersonal relationships, foster social cohesion, and highlight humans' inherently social nature (Tomasello, 2009). Batson (1991) defined altruism as instinctive behavior aimed at benefiting others, emphasizing intentional prosocial acts that may entail personal cost. While prosocial behavior and altruism are closely related, research distinguishes them based on the cost to the helper: altruistic acts involve a personal sacrifice, whereas prosocial behaviors may confer broader social benefits without significant personal risk (Dovidio et al., Pfattheicher et al., 2021; Zaki & Mitchell, 2013).

Prosocial behaviors vary depending on situational factors, such as cost, motivation, and effectiveness (Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2014; Penner et al., 2005). In this context, prosocial behaviors have been categorized into helping, altruism, volunteering, and cooperation (Schroeder & Graziano, 2015), with altruism viewed as a subset requiring interpersonal interaction. Heroism can similarly be conceptualized as an extreme form of altruistic prosocial behavior, characterized not only by benefit to others but also by heightened personal risk and courage (Franco et al., 2011; Kinsella et al., 2015).

Historically, the psychological study of heroism traces back to Joseph Campbell's (1949) work on mythological heroes, later expanded by Zimbardo's investigations into ordinary people's capacity for both cruelty and heroism (Blau et al., 2009; Zimbardo, 2007). The question of whether heroism arises from situational factors or inherent personal traits remains central. Equally important is the examination of heroism perception, recognizing that social evaluation plays a critical role in defining heroic acts. Social influence—through group norms, authority figures, or peer approval—can significantly shape individuals' judgments of heroism, sometimes amplifying or diminishing perceived heroic behavior (Asch, 1951; Baron et al., 2006; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

Despite growing interest in heroism as a socially constructed and culturally embedded phenomenon, surprisingly little research has examined how people come to recognize and label an act as heroic in the first place. Existing research has primarily focused on the characteristics of heroes, the functions of heroes, and the dispositional antecedents of heroic action (Franco et al., 2011; Kinsella et al., 2015, 2017). Although scholars have acknowledged that heroism is socially recognized and culturally negotiated, there is almost no experimental evidence demonstrating whether judgments of heroism themselves are susceptible to social influence processes. Consequently, an important question remains unanswered: Are perceptions of heroism primarily the result of individuals' independent moral evaluations, or are they socially constructed through collective judgments and normative cues? Addressing this question is theoretically important because it shifts the focus of heroism research from the characteristics of heroic actors to the social processes through which heroism is recognized, validated, and collectively constructed.

Although the present research focused on cross-sectional data, prior experimental and correlational studies on heroism and social influence suggest that individuals' evaluations of heroic acts are shaped not only by the perceived moral and prosocial value of the act but also by social norms and the reactions of others. Specifically, social psychological models of normative influence (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004) Indicate that people's judgments about morally valued behaviors often align with perceived majority opinions. In the context of heroism, these processes imply that the perceived social approval or disapproval of a heroic act may guide individuals' evaluations of its moral worth.

The present research consisted of two complementary studies designed to examine how people understand and evaluate heroic behavior. Because heroism is a multifaceted concept encompassing moral, social, and emotional dimensions, the first study aimed to explore how individuals conceptualize heroism in their own terms. By analyzing participants' spontaneous descriptions of heroic acts, this study sought to identify the core features—such as self-sacrifice, moral courage, and concern for others—that constitute lay perceptions of heroism. Establishing these foundational dimensions was essential to clarify how people define and interpret heroism before testing how these perceptions may be shaped by social factors.

Building on these qualitative findings, the second study experimentally investigated the influence of social norms on heroism evaluations. Specifically, we examined whether exposure to normative cues

(suggesting social approval or disapproval of heroic behavior) affects individuals' perceptions of heroism and whether this effect depends on the type of story presented (heroic vs. neutral). Through this two-part design, the overall aim was to understand both the content of heroism perception and the role of normative social influence in shaping it.

Previous research suggests that people attribute higher levels of heroism to events that clearly align with culturally or morally valued actions. Thus, we first predicted that participants who read a heroic story would evaluate the event as more heroic than those who read a neutral story.

In addition, social influence theory indicates that individuals tend to adjust their evaluations in line with the perceived opinions of others. Therefore, we predicted that participants exposed to normative approval (i.e., social influence suggesting the act is heroic) would rate the story as more heroic than participants exposed to disapproval cues.

Finally, we expected an interaction between story type and normative influence. Because the interpretation of ambiguous situations is more susceptible to social influence, we anticipated that the effect of normative approval would be stronger in the neutral-story condition compared to the heroic-story condition.

Formally stated:

H1. Participants who read a heroic story will evaluate the event as more heroic than those who read a neutral story.

H2. Participants exposed to normative approval will evaluate the story as more heroic than those exposed to normative disapproval.

H3. The effect of normative influence on heroism evaluation will depend on story type: the difference between approval and disapproval conditions will be greater in the neutral-story condition than in the heroic-story condition.

Study 1: Qualitative Phase

Participants

The qualitative phase included 58 participants (28 female, 30 male) across three age groups: 12–18 years (n = 19), 18–35 years (n = 20), and 35–60 years (n = 19). Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in age, education, and occupational backgrounds. Three additional interviews were excluded due to ineligibility. Fifty-five participants were interviewed face-to-face and three online. Written informed consent was obtained from all adult participants; for adolescents, parental consent was secured.

Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, guided by a set of open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' perceptions and definitions of heroism (see Appendix). Questions focused on identifying examples of heroism, qualities of heroes, and personal interpretations of heroic behavior. Interviews were conducted individually in quiet settings, lasting between 10 and 40 minutes. With adolescents, questions were simplified, and additional time was allowed to facilitate comprehension. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent.

Data Collection Process

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee (Approval No: E-20292139-050.01.04-2300002142, 07.07.2023). The researcher first introduced the study to participants, clarified confidentiality, and obtained consent for participation and recording. Care was taken to avoid interviewer bias, including minimizing facial expressions or verbal cues that might influence responses. Probing questions such as *"Could you elaborate?"* or *"Would you like to add anything?"* were used to gather richer data.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed using the Transkriptor application and re-checked by the researcher for accuracy. Data were analyzed through inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with the support of MAXQDA 24. Coding began with in-vivo codes derived directly from participants' words, which were then grouped into categories, sub-themes, and broader themes. Separate analyses were conducted for each age group, resulting in three overarching themes: heroic actions, heroic characteristics, and hero examples. Reliability was enhanced through peer debriefing with an experienced qualitative researcher, and coding decisions were documented in a researcher diary.

Trustworthiness

The study followed the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

- **Credibility**: Achieved through prolonged engagement, in-depth interviews, and repeated reading of transcripts.
- **Transferability**: Ensured by including participants from diverse demographic backgrounds.
- **Dependability**: Supported by systematic documentation of coding and theme development using MAXQDA, as well as peer debriefing.

- **Confirmability**: Enhanced through reflective researcher notes and transparent reporting of analytic decisions.

Results

Thematic analysis revealed three overarching themes across all age groups: heroic actions, heroic characteristics, and hero examples. While the content of these themes varied by age, commonalities such as sacrifice, courage, and prosocial intent were evident (Table 1).

- **Adolescents (12–18 years)**: Frequently emphasized direct, action-oriented forms of heroism, such as rescuing others, fighting evil, and sacrificing for family or nation. Their hero examples often included fantastical or religious figures alongside parental role models.
- **Young Adults (18–35 years)**: Highlighted leadership, sacrifice for the nation, and protective roles. Heroic characteristics included courage, morality, and patriotism. Their hero examples extended to military, religious, and social leaders.
- **Adults (35–60 years)**: Focused on helping, saving lives, and devotion to family and state. They valued sacrifice, morality, determination, and compassion. Their hero examples were more diverse, including familial, scientific, religious, and military figures.

Table 1
Themes and Categories of Heroism Perceptions by Age Group

Age Group	Heroic Actions	Heroic Characteristics	Hero Examples
12–18	Helping, rescuing, self-sacrifice, protecting the nation, fighting evil	Strong, leader, resilient, altruistic, intelligent	Fantastical, religious, parental, military, leaders
18–35	Leadership, sacrifice for nation, protection of family, rescuing, helping, perseverance	Determined, ordinary, intelligent, moral, patriotic, courageous, altruistic, leadership-oriented	Military, religious, social, family-related, professional, physical
35–60	Helping, saving lives, devotion to state, perseverance in cause	Altruistic, leader, compassionate, courageous, moral, determined, intelligent	Family-related, scientific, religious, military, leaders, fantastical

Study 2: Quantitaive Phase

Participants

Forty-four undergraduate students (28 female, 16 male; age range 18–65) from Selçuk University participated in the study. Psychology majors were excluded to minimize hypothesis awareness. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions (n = 11 per group) following

a 2 × 2 between-subjects factorial design. The required sample size was determined a priori using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007), indicating that N = 40 was sufficient to detect medium-to-large effects (f = .40) with 95% power at α = .01. Inclusion criteria required participants to be between 18 and 65 years old, unfamiliar with the study's purpose, and unrelated to any confederate. Ethical approval was obtained from researchers' University's Ethics Committee (E-20292139-050.01.04-2300002142, 07.07.2023), and all participants provided written informed consent prior to participation.

Experiment Design

The experiment employed a 2 (Scenario Type: Heroic vs. Neutral) × 2 (Social Influence: Affirmation vs. Denial) between-subjects factorial design. Each participant was exposed to one scenario type and one influence condition, resulting in four experimental groups. The dependent variable was the Heroism Appraisal Score (HAS), rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not heroic at all, 5 = very heroic). This factorial design enabled examination of both main effects and their interaction while minimizing carry-over and practice effects through independent group assignment (Haerling & Prion, 2020).

Materials

Stimulus materials consisted of ten short vignettes (five heroic, five neutral) derived from the thematic categories identified in Study 1. Heroic vignettes described prosocial actions involving risk or sacrifice (e.g., disaster rescue, saving others from danger), whereas neutral vignettes depicted personal achievements or everyday challenges without moral or altruistic content. Each vignette was matched in length, structure, and readability. Religious, political, or culturally sensitive themes were avoided to ensure experimental control.

The *Heroism Appraisal Scale* required participants to rate each vignette's perceived heroism on a 5-point Likert scale. Mean ratings were calculated to create an overall Heroism Appraisal Score per participant.

Procedure

The study was conducted in a controlled psychology laboratory setting. Participants were scheduled individually and seated with seven trained confederates, who posed as fellow participants. The seating arrangement ensured that the real participant always responded just before the final confederate. Confederates consistently provided either "heroic" or "non-heroic" ratings to create social affirmation or social denial conditions.

Each participant evaluated five vignettes in randomized order using a Latin square design to counterbalance presentation order and minimize sequence effects. To maintain ecological validity and enhance social influence strength, responses were provided aloud in sequence, allowing participants to

clearly hear others' judgments (Bond, 2005). The entire session lasted approximately 20 minutes. After completion, participants were debriefed and compensated with a gift voucher redeemable on campus.

Confederates (N = 24 in total) were carefully selected based on prior research emphasizing group similarity and credibility as key moderators of social influence (Asch, 1951; Hogg & Hardie, 1992). All confederates were trained to act naturally, maintain consistency in tone and expression, and avoid revealing the study's true purpose.

Manipulation Check

Because the manipulation involved direct social influence, a conventional manipulation check risked undermining internal validity by drawing attention to the study's purpose. Instead, an *attention control procedure* was implemented (personal communication, September 12, 2024). Following the experiment, participants answered brief questions assessing task engagement and awareness (e.g., "How would you describe the purpose of this study?", "Did you notice anything unusual during the session?"). None of the participants reported suspicion about the confederates' role or the true aim of the study.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 25.0. Preliminary tests confirmed normal distribution, homogeneity of variances, and independence of observations. A two-way ANOVA was performed to examine the main and interaction effects of Scenario Type and Social Influence on heroism appraisals. All assumptions for parametric analysis were met, supporting the use of factorial ANOVA.

Results

Descriptive Statistics. Means and standard deviations of HAS across conditions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Heroism Appraisal Scores by Scenario Type and Social Influence

Scenario Type	Social Influence	n	M	SD
Heroic	Affirmation	11	4.29	0.47
Heroic	Denial	11	2.66	0.66
Neutral	Affirmation	11	3.33	0.92
Neutral	Denial	11	2.04	0.45

ANOVA Results. A two-way ANOVA revealed significant main effects of Scenario Type ($F(1,40) = 6.84$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2 = .15$) and Social Influence ($F(1,40) = 53.64$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .57$). Participants rated heroic scenarios as more heroic than neutral ones, and scenarios affirmed by others as more heroic than those denied. However, the interaction effect was not significant ($F(1,40) = 0.02$, $p = .897$).

Table 3
Two-way ANOVA Results for the Effects of Heroism Scenario and Social Influence on Perceived Heroism

Source	***df***	***F***	***p***	**η²**
Heroism Scenario	1,40	6.84	.013*	.15
Social Influence	1,40	53.64	.001**	.57
Heroism Scenario × Social Influence	1,40	0.02	.897	.00

Discussion

The results of the two-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of scenario type, indicating that participants rated heroic scenarios as significantly more heroic than neutral scenarios. A significant main effect of social influence was also observed, demonstrating that participants' heroism appraisals were strongly influenced by group consensus. However, the interaction between scenario type and social influence was not statistically significant. The complete results of the two-way ANOVA are presented in Table 3.

The findings of the present study indicate that both scenario content and social influence significantly shaped participants' heroism appraisals. As expected, heroic scenarios elicited higher ratings than neutral ones, supporting the hypothesis that explicit heroic content activates moral and prosocial schemas. This aligns with prior work suggesting that heroism is cognitively associated with moral exemplarity, self-sacrifice, and prosocial intent (Franco et al., 2016; Kinsella et al., 2015). Participants appeared particularly sensitive to cues of altruism and risk-taking, confirming that the mental prototype of a "hero" remains grounded in moral courage and self-transcendence rather than in mere achievement or competence.

Consistent with classic conformity research (Asch, 1951; Bond & Smith, 1996), participants' judgments were also powerfully shaped by normative social influence. Even when the narrative contained no explicit heroic content, group consensus dramatically shifted participants' heroism ratings. This finding supports the second hypothesis, which predicted that conformity pressures would affect moral appraisals regardless of contextual cues. It also extends the scope of traditional conformity research by showing that social influence operates not only in perceptual or factual judgments but also in moral and evaluative domains (Crutchfield, 1955; Skitka et al., 2021). The results suggest that individuals' moral perceptions are socially calibrated: people tend to align their evaluations of virtue and heroism with group norms, highlighting the inherently social nature of moral judgment.

Although the present research combined qualitative and experimental approaches, the discussion primarily centered on the quantitative findings. This was partly because the qualitative phase (Study 1) served an exploratory and preparatory function—its purpose was to reveal the underlying conceptual structure of heroism and to inform the design of experimental stimuli. Nevertheless, integrating qualitative insights more explicitly with the experimental results could enrich the interpretation of how people construct and evaluate heroism. For instance, the thematic patterns identified in Study 1—particularly the emphasis on self-sacrifice, courage, and altruism—help contextualize why participants in Study 2 rated heroic scenarios more favorably. These qualitative themes also illuminate the moral schemas that likely guided participants' judgments, suggesting that heroism is not only recognized through objective features of a story but also through culturally learned prototypes and values. Future studies might employ a mixed-methods design that directly links narrative meaning-making processes with experimental manipulations, thereby providing a more holistic understanding of how individuals and groups co-construct the concept of heroism.

Interestingly, the absence of a significant interaction between scenario type and social influence invites further interpretation. One possible explanation is that both manipulations were strong and independently effective, leaving little variance for their combined effect to emerge—a ceiling effect. When both the narrative cues and the social context strongly guided moral appraisal, participants may have relied equally on both, producing robust main effects but no synergy. Alternatively, normative social influence may operate at a broader, domain-general level, shaping evaluative processes even when moral cues are salient. Once individuals are exposed to a group consensus, they might prioritize social alignment and belongingness over autonomous moral reasoning (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). From an evolutionary perspective, maintaining group cohesion has adaptive value; moral conformity may thus reflect a trade-off between personal conviction and social harmony (Boyd & Richerson, 2005).

The finding that conformity pressures generalized across both heroic and neutral contexts is theoretically significant. It implies that social validation processes can redefine the perceived moral value of an act, even when that act objectively lacks heroic qualities. This parallels evidence from social intuitionist models of morality (Haidt, 2001), which emphasize that moral evaluations often emerge from rapid, socially mediated intuitions rather than deliberate reasoning. In this light, the perception of heroism may not stem solely from an individual's internal schema but from collectively constructed meanings negotiated within cultural frameworks (Monroe, 2008; Walker & Frimer, 2015). Heroism, then, can be seen as both a moral and a relational phenomenon—one whose recognition depends as much on social validation as on individual virtue.

Moreover, these findings expand the scope of heroism science by integrating it with social influence theory. While previous studies have conceptualized heroism as an extreme form of prosocial behavior driven by dispositional factors such as empathy, courage, and moral identity (Franco et al., 2011; Kinsella et al., 2015), the current research highlights the importance of collective interpretation and social framing. Acts become "heroic" not only through the intention of the actor but through the shared

acknowledgment of observers. This aligns with sociocultural approaches that view moral meaning as constructed through discourse and group consensus (Vygotsky, 1978; Haidt & Graham, 2007). In everyday life, this mechanism may explain why public recognition, media portrayal, and group norms play such a decisive role in determining who is remembered as a hero.

While the hypotheses were largely supported, the lack of an interaction effect raises intriguing questions for future research. One possibility is that individual differences moderate conformity effects in moral judgment. Traits such as moral conviction (Skitka, 2010), collectivism (Triandis, 1995), or need for social approval (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960) may determine the extent to which individuals yield to group norms. It would also be valuable to examine whether personal moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002) buffers against conformity in contexts of moral evaluation. Experimental designs using stronger moral manipulations—such as life-and-death rescue scenarios or moral transgressions—might reveal boundary conditions where personal conviction overrides group pressure.

Beyond theoretical implications, these findings carry practical relevance. Understanding that heroism recognition is socially malleable has implications for moral education, crisis response, and civic engagement. In contexts such as disaster relief or social movements, cultivating group norms that celebrate altruism and prosocial behavior could enhance collective resilience and encourage moral courage. Conversely, awareness of conformity pressures may help prevent the uncritical glorification of actions merely because they are socially endorsed. Educators, media practitioners, and policymakers can use these insights to promote more reflective and authentic recognition of heroic behavior.

Naturally, the present research is not without limitations. The experimental study relied on a relatively small and homogenous sample of university students, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, laboratory-based vignettes necessarily simplify the moral complexity of real-life heroism. Future studies could adopt cross-cultural or longitudinal designs to examine how social influence interacts with cultural norms and individual values over time. Including physiological or neural measures could also shed light on the affective mechanisms underlying conformity in moral appraisal. Finally, dyadic or group-based designs could reveal how collective deliberation shapes moral judgments in real social contexts.

In conclusion, the present research demonstrates that heroism is not merely an individual act of valor but a social judgment deeply shaped by group dynamics. By showing that normative influence can redefine perceptions of moral worth, this work bridges two longstanding areas of psychological inquiry—social conformity and moral evaluation. Heroism, in this view, emerges not only from extraordinary behavior but also from shared meaning-making within communities. Recognizing this dual nature of heroism—both moral and social—invites us to see courage not as an isolated virtue but as a reflection of collective moral life.

Theoretical Contributions. By integrating qualitative and experimental methods, the current research bridges heroism literature with social influence theory. While prior work has conceptualized heroism as the “extreme form of prosocial behavior” (Franco et al., 2011; Kinsella et al., 2015), our findings

emphasize the importance of social dynamics in shaping how such behaviors are recognized and valued. Heroism is thus best understood not only as an individual act of courage but also as a judgment negotiated within social contexts.

Limitations and Future Directions. This research is not without limitations. The experimental study relied on university student samples, which may limit generalizability. Additionally, the vignettes were necessarily simplified, and real-world heroism is often more complex and multifaceted. Future research could examine cross-cultural differences, longitudinal patterns, and the neural or emotional mechanisms underlying conformity in moral domains.

Ethics Statement. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee. All ethical standards and procedures for research involving human participants were fully applied throughout the study. This study was approved by the **Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University** All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Declarations

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Funding Statement

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent Statement

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University, Graduate School of Education (Approval Number: E-20292139-050.01.04-2300002142; Meeting Date: 07 July 2023; Meeting Number: 2023/06). All participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Conclusion

Ultimately, our findings demonstrate that heroism is not only a matter of individual valor but also a reflection of collective social dynamics. By showing how normative influence shapes the recognition of heroism, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of prosocial behavior and highlights the interplay between individual morality and group processes in shaping human responses to extraordinary acts.

Beyond reaffirming the social nature of moral judgment, these results also invite a reconsideration of how societies define and sustain moral exemplars. Heroism, traditionally conceptualized as a solitary expression of courage or altruism, appears to be deeply contingent upon shared beliefs about what counts as “heroic.” This underscores the importance of viewing moral evaluations not as stable cognitive appraisals, but as fluid and context-sensitive constructs negotiated within social networks and cultural frameworks.

The findings further suggest that public perceptions of heroism may be influenced by collective narratives and social validation processes. Media portrayals, institutional recognition, and group consensus could all act as amplifiers of perceived heroism, shaping not only who is celebrated but also which actions become moral prototypes. Recognizing this socially mediated dimension of heroism may help explain why certain prosocial acts gain prominence while others remain unnoticed, revealing a subtle yet powerful link between conformity pressures and moral visibility.

In a broader sense, this research highlights the reciprocal relationship between individuals and their social environments in the construction of moral meaning. Just as group norms guide individual moral appraisal, individuals collectively reproduce and redefine these norms through their shared judgments. This dynamic interplay suggests that cultivating inclusive and prosocial group climates could reinforce moral courage and social cooperation on a community level.

Taken together, the current findings provide both empirical and conceptual groundwork for future investigations of the social psychology of morality. By situating heroism within the broader framework of normative social influence, this study contributes to the growing recognition that even our most celebrated moral ideals are embedded in collective systems of meaning. Continued research in this area may deepen our understanding of how societies recognize, reward, and reproduce moral excellence — a question central not only to social psychology but to the moral fabric of human communities.

References

1. Aquino K, Reed A, II. The self-importance of moral identity. J Personal Soc Psychol. 2002;83(6):1423–40. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.83.6.1423.
2. Allison ST, Goethals GR. Heroes: What they do and why we need them. Oxford University Press; 2011.
3. Algoe SB, Haidt J. Witnessing excellence in action: The 'other-praising' emotions of elevation, gratitude, and admiration. J Posit Psychol. 2009;4(2):105–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760802650519.
4. Asch SE. Effects of group pressure upon the modification and distortion of judgments. In: Guetzkow H, editor. Groups, leadership, and men. Carnegie; 1951. pp. 177–90. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520313514-017.
5. Baron RA, Byrne D, Branscombe NR. (2006). *Social psychology* (11th ed.). Pearson.
6. Batson CD. The altruism question: Toward a social-psychological answer. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 1991.
7. Batson CD. Altruism in humans. Oxford University Press; 2011. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195341065.001.0001.
8. Becker SW, Eagly AH. The heroism of women and men. Am Psychol. 2004;59(3):163–78. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.59.3.163.
9. Blau K, Franco Z, Zimbardo P. Fostering the heroic imagination: An ancient ideal and a modern vision. Eyes Psi Chi. 2009;13(3):18–21.
10. Bond R, Smith PB. Culture and conformity: A meta-analysis of studies using Asch's line judgment task. Psychol Bull. 1996;119(1):111–37. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.119.1.111.
11. Bond R. Group size and conformity. Group Processes Intergroup Relations. 2005;8(4):331–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430205056464.
12. Boyd R, Richerson PJ. The origin and evolution of cultures. Oxford University Press; 2005.
13. Campbell J. The hero with a thousand faces. Pantheon Books; 1949.
14. Cialdini RB, Goldstein NJ. Social influence: Compliance and conformity. Ann Rev Psychol. 2004;55:591–621. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.55.090902.142015.
15. Crowne DP, Marlowe D. A new scale of social desirability independent of psychopathology. J Consult Clin Psychol. 1960;24(4):349–54. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0047358.
16. Crutchfield RS. Conformity and character. Am Psychol. 1955;10(5):191–8. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0040237.
17. Deutsch M, Gerard HB. A study of normative and informational social influences upon individual judgment. J Abnorm Soc Psychol. 1955;51(3):629–36. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0046408.
18. Dovidio JF, Piliavin JA, Schroeder DA, Penner LA. The social psychology of prosocial behavior. Psychology; 2006.

19. Eisenberg N, Miller PA. The relation of empathy to prosocial and related behaviors. Psychol Bull. 1987;101(1):91–119. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.101.1.91.
20. Eisenberg N, Spinrad TL. Multidimensionality of prosocial behavior: Rethinking the conceptualization and development of prosocial behavior. In: Padilla-Walker LM, Carlo G, editors. Prosocial development: A multidimensional approach. Oxford University Press; 2014. pp. 17–39.
21. Faul F, Erdfelder E, Lang A-G, Buchner A. G*Power 3: A flexible statistical power analysis program for the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences. Behav Res Methods. 2007;39(2):175–91. https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03193146.
22. Franco Z, Blau K, Zimbardo P. Heroism: A conceptual analysis and differentiation between heroic action and altruism. Rev Gen Psychol. 2011;15(2):99–113. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022672.
23. Franco Z. Heroism in times of crisis: Understanding leadership during extreme events. In: Allison ST, Goethals GR, Kramer RM, editors. Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership. Routledge; 2016. pp. 1–18.
24. Goethals GR, Allison ST. Making heroes: The construction of courage, competence, and virtue. Adv Exp Soc Psychol. 2012;46:183–235. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-394281-4.00004-0.
25. Haidt J. The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. Psychol Rev. 2001;108(4):814–34. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.108.4.814.
26. Haidt J, Graham J. When morality opposes justice: Conservatives have moral intuitions that liberals may not recognize. Soc Justice Res. 2007;20(1):98–116. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-007-0034-z.
27. Haslam SA, Reicher SD, Van Bavel JJ. Rethinking the nature of cruelty: The role of identity leadership in the Stanford Prison Experiment. Am Psychol. 2019;74(7):809–22. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000483.
28. Haerling KA, Prion S. Assessing experimental research designs: Traditional versus nontraditional approaches. Clin Simul Nurs. 2020;42:32–9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecns.2019.12.004.
29. Hogg MA, Hardie EA. Prototypicality, conformity and depersonalized attraction: A self-categorization analysis of group cohesiveness. Br J Soc Psychol. 1992;31(1):41–56. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.1992.tb00954.x.
30. Kinsella EL, Ritchie TD, Igou ER. Lay perspectives on the social and psychological functions of heroes. Front Psychol. 2015;6(130):1–12. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00130.
31. Kinsella EL, Ritchie TD, Igou ER. Heroism and the pursuit of a meaningful life. J Humanistic Psychol. 2017;57(5):500–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167816675839.
32. Lincoln YS, Guba EG. But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation. New Dir Program Evaluation. 1986;30:73–84.
33. Milgram S. Behavioral study of obedience. J Abnorm Soc Psychol. 1963;67(4):371–8. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0040525.

34. Monroe KR. The heart of altruism: Perceptions of a common humanity. Princeton University Press; 1998.
35. Nakamura J, Graham L. The impact of heroism on heroes and observers: Stories of elevation and personal change. In: Sørensen AB, Smith MJ, Johnson CR, editors. Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership. Routledge; 2016. pp. 21–38.
36. Penner LA, Dovidio JF, Piliavin JA, Schroeder DA. Prosocial behavior: Multilevel perspectives. Ann Rev Psychol. 2005;56:365–92. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.56.091103.070141.
37. Peterson C, Seligman MEP. Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification. Oxford University Press; 2004.
38. Pfattheicher S, Nielsen YA, Thielmann I. Prosocial behavior and altruism: A review of concepts and definitions. Curr Opin Psychol. 2021;44:124–8. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.08.021.
39. Schroeder DA, Graziano WG. Prosocial behavior: The development of prosocial behavior. In: Schroeder DA, Graziano WG, editors. The Oxford Handbook of Prosocial Behavior. Oxford University Press; 2015. pp. 3–31.
40. Skitka LJ. The psychology of moral conviction. Soc Pers Psychol Compass. 2010;4(4):267–81. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2010.00254.x.
41. Skitka LJ, Bauman CW, Mullen E. Morality and social justice: Examining social influence on moral conviction. Curr Dir Psychol Sci. 2021;30(4):332–8. https://doi.org/10.1177/09637214211006714.
42. Sun Y, Kinsella EL, ve Igou ER. On cultural differences of heroes: Evidence from individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Pers Soc Psychol Bull. 2023;49(3):299–313. https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672231151540.
43. Tomasello M. Why We Cooperate. MIT Press; 2009.
44. Triandis HC. Individualism and collectivism. Westview; 1995.
45. Walker LJ, Frimer JA. The science of moral personality: On the cultivation of the moral self. In: Mikulincer M, Shaver PR, editors. APA handbook of personality and social psychology, Vol. 3: Interpersonal relations. American Psychological Association; 2015. pp. 581–605. https://doi.org/10.1037/14344-025.
46. Warneken F, Tomasello M. The roots of human altruism. Br J Psychol. 2009;100(3):455–71. https://doi.org/10.1348/000712608X3790617.
47. Vygotsky LS. Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. Harvard University Press; 1978.
48. Zaki J, Mitchell JP. Intuitive prosociality. Curr Dir Psychol Sci. 2013;22(6):466–70. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413492764.
49. Zimbardo P. The Lucifer effect: Understanding how good people turn evil. Random House; 2007.