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Fostering the Heroic Imagination:

An Ancient Ideal and a Modern Vision

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It has been nearly 40 years since the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) demonstrated that even for people who are “normal” psychologically, the line between good and evil is permeable. Zimbardo’s landmark study, and a body of related research, demonstrated the penetrating accuracy of Hanna Arendt’s (Arendt, 1963/1994) concept of the “banality of evil.” Under specific conditions and social pressures, ordinary people can commit acts that would otherwise be unthinkable.

Yet, over the decades that have passed since the SPE, psychology’s fascination with exploring the psychology of evil led the field to neglect its opposite. Even with the recent growth of positive psychology, the ideas of heroism and bravery—behaviors that can be seen as the pinnacle of positive actions—are only given brief mention (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Snyder & Lopez, 2002). A small number of researchers, educators, and business people are focusing increasingly on the idea of heroism in an attempt to revitalize the original meanings of the word; yet they strive to modernize the concept so that it is accessible to the general public and can help guide prosocial behavior in the increasingly complex social structures that we are encountering at the outset of the 21st century.

Although the SPE had seemingly been laid to rest in recent years, its message of the power of certain situations to corrupt

ordinary, even good people, was thrust upon the world with the televised images in 2004 depicting the torture and abuse of prisoners held at the US military prison in Abu Ghraib. The similarities between the Abu Ghraib scandal and the SPE were obvious. In the SPE, guards engaged in increasingly sadistic abuse of prisoners. The Superintendent (Zimbardo) and others, including outside visitors, did nothing to stop the abuse. Finally, a whistleblower appeared, Christina Maslach (at that time a Stanford graduate student), who called into question the ethics of the study and brought it to a sudden halt.

Likewise, the guards at Abu Ghraib fell into a pattern of abuse as they became increasingly disconnected from the outside world, and the officers in charge of the prison did nothing to stop the torture. Ultimately Joseph Darby, a Military Army Reservist, decided to anonymously give a CD containing graphic photos of the abuse to a superior investigative officer. When the officer asked the unidentified whistleblower to step forward as part of the investigation, Darby was faced with a choice: reveal his identity and risk possibly life-threatening retribution or remain silent and allow the abuse to continue.

In revealing his identity to support the investigation, Darby took a courageous path at great personal cost. His life was threatened and he and his family were forced into

military protective custody for three years. Rather than being held up as a hero, he was villainized by many in his own hometown as a “snitch.” He knew that serious retribution for his actions was likely, and yet he decided to act anyway.

Reviewing this act and the acts of many others led Zimbardo, Franco, and other colleagues to wonder if heroes are really “Superman” or “Wonder Woman”—individuals with special talents that most of us could never achieve—or might they be average people who simply choose to act in a given situation? If an everyday person can be transformed into an agent of evil, might there also exist a “banality of heroism,” a set of conditions under which an average person is moved to action that is above the call of duty? To be consistent with the view that much evil is perpetrated by ordinary people seduced into situations that foster antisocial behavior, these researchers argued that most heroic deeds were similarly the civic actions of ordinary, everyday people who challenged the evil or faced up to the emergencies at least in part because of situational factors.

What is Heroism?

The historical view of heroism is one that confers God-like powers on a very few people—the *heroic elect*. From archetypes such as Achilles and Hercules, our understanding of what a hero is suggests something that is out of reach of the ordinary person—possessing physical prowess or talents that far exceed the norm. Others, like Socrates or Jesus, used their unusually strong personality and powers of reasoning to create dramatic social change and paid the ultimate price for their attempts to reform society.

In contemporary times, the concept of heroism has been muddled with related ideas—such as altruism, compassion, and empathy—and identified with popular celebrities, role models, and media-created “fantastic heroes” of the comic book genre. This modern interpretation of heroism runs the risk of diminishing the heroic ideal, while older definitions make heroism seem so remote as to prevent people from entertaining the possibility that they could act heroically if called upon to do so.

In order to address the concept of heroism more systematically, Franco and Zimbardo (2007) developed a working definition of heroism and a set of 12 situations in which heroic activity is called upon. This set the stage for further conceptual analyses

of posited interactions between individuals and these situations, which may serve as the catalyst for “everyday” heroic activity to occur (Zimbardo 2007; Franco & Zimbardo, 2006-07; Franco & Zimbardo, 2007).

In its operational form, the definition of heroism offered by Franco and Zimbardo has five key features: the act must be voluntary; the act must involve potential physical peril or profound social sacrifice; the actor must be willing to accept the consequence of her or his action; the act must be in the service of others; and the act must be performed without expectation of extrinsic gain (Franco & Zimbardo, 2007; Zimbardo, 2007). Heroic acts were also separated into discrete categories in this formulation. The first distinction made was between “physical-risk heroism” and “social heroism”. Physical-risk heroism can be separated into two categories: *martial heroism* (or heroism that occurs in combat-related military service and also extends to other duty-bound individuals, such as firefighters and police) and *civil heroism*. Civil heroism similarly involves physical peril but is not duty-bound (Franco & Zimbardo, 2007). In contrast, *social heroism* emerges as a distinct category with several subtypes. Socially heroic acts tend to be more long-term, sustained actions taken to uphold a specific value or belief. For example, Harriet Tubman—one of the key individuals associated with the Underground Railroad—was committed to the social ideal of abolition for her entire life at considerable personal risk.

Current Research

Beginning with this initial theoretical framework, this work has expanded through additional conceptual analyses and preliminary empirical research. Several of the ideas in Zimbardo’s recent book, *The Lucifer Effect* (2007) were further developed in an article for *Greater Good* magazine (published by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley) and a paper that was presented in Guangzhou, China (Franco, Pamlin, Langdon, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2007). As part of the scholarly discussion of these ideas, several important criticisms emerged which served to sharpen our thinking and encouraged us toward the next steps in this research.

The first criticism was that heroism is just a version of altruism, simply a more radical form of a fairly well-understood phenomenon. While this is a worthy critique, we felt

that it was not the whole story. There are a number of ways that heroism differs from acts of altruism not just in degree, but in kind. Altruism emphasizes selfless acts that assist others, which in most cases, involves little risk to the actor. But heroism entails the potential for a much deeper personal sacrifice and the ability to transcend the negative consequences of heroic action.

A second criticism is that much of what we have written focuses on male heroes at the expense of females who have also acted heroically (see, for example, a letter to the editors of *Greater Good* magazine; Burlingham, 2007). There is some empirical evidence that men and women engage in heroic activity in similar ways and at similar rates (Becker & Eagly, 2004). However, we are also aware that anecdotally, women may conceptualize heroism in ways that diverge from the model we proposed and may also engage in heroic acts that do not fit the male dominated archetype for this behavior. The criticism continues to ring true and will require much more effort in order to develop a meaningful understanding of how women view and engage in heroism.

A third area for thought is what we call the “dark side of heroism.” Adolf Hitler was considered heroic by many within Germany, and the individuals responsible for the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon may be considered to be heroic by some in the Middle East. As always, the power of good can easily be corrupted and turned into an instrument of evil—even the line between heroism and despotism can be thin.

In April of 2008, a research group led by Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo began collecting responses through the Internet to begin empirically addressing some of these questions and critiques of the rudimentary theoretical structure we had laid out. So far, over 3,000 people have participated in the survey from all over the world. Preliminary analyses are underway, and results of the study will be submitted for publication soon. One thing is clear from the data: There is an overwhelming consensus among the general public that a difference between heroism and altruism exists, which offers support for our view that these two phenomena are distinct. Most participants agree that heroism requires “something more” from the actor; that it requires a significant form of danger or risk to personal safety, and that it calls for greater sacrifice.

Fostering the Heroic Imagination

The concept of the heroic imagination (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006-07) is one first put forward as a tentative idea that we believe is worth pursuing further both in terms of basic research and applied efforts in psychology. At its core, the idea is simple: heroism is much easier to engage in if the individual has already considered some of the situations that might require heroic action, if the actor has anticipated what some of the barriers to that action might be, and if personal consequences have also been thought through and transcended at least to some degree. In this sense, developing one's heroic imagination primes the individual to take action if and when the time comes. In short, self-labeling, "I am a hero-in-waiting" should increase the probability of taking heroic action when a situation calls for such overt behavior.

In the past, the ideal of heroism was passed down through oral traditions in stories such as the *Iliad* or *Beowulf*. In feudal societies, honor codes encouraged knights and samurai alike to deeply consider what actions they would take in certain situations and to accept in advance the possibility of death. Further, until the beginning of the last century, heroic novels stirred young minds to contemplate the true meaning of heroism. In the aftermath of the First World War, the ideal of heroic military action (specifically, the idea of gallantry—fearless entry into the heat of battle) began to change; perhaps as a result of the mechanization of warfare and the dramatic increase in casualties.

For much of the world, military service is no longer compulsory, and the connection to traditions that encourage real bravery are fading. Throughout the last century, the diminution of the idea of heroism was evident; celebrity worship has increasingly been conflated with the heroic ideal. As we enter into the 21st century, we believe this is an important juncture to ask how will we continue to convey these ideas to a new generation of young people? How do we foster heroic imagination in the digital age? How can the idea of heroism best be sustained in a media-driven culture that at once co-opts the idea of heroism, presents new situations where evil can thrive, and yet also creates opportunities for individual and collective heroic action that were never before imaginable?

To that end, we have connected with

several groups that are involved in educating young people about the ideal of heroism in order to connect and translate our research into real-world action. For example, we have been working with Matt Langdon, director of the Janus Center's Hero Workshop program (<http://thejanuscenter.com/heroworkshop/>). Mr. Langdon presents the ideas of the hero's journey to school children across the nation, encouraging them to identify personal attributes that are needed for heroic action. In the program, children are asked to view themselves as "heroes-in-waiting" and to develop a habit of heroism in small ways. We think that through this process the "average, everyday person" may be inoculated against the inaction that allows evil to continue unchecked, and that individuals can gain the strength required to act with uncommon valor.

Zimbardo's recent lecture at the Technology, Entertainment and Design (TED) conference in Monterey, CA, moved from a discussion of the situational bases of evil to a call for research, new curricula, and worldwide encouragement of the heroic imagination and the nature of heroism. More than 150,000 people viewed the lecture from around the world and many have begun signing up to volunteer in a new Hero Corps. Zimbardo's Lucifer Effect website contains both a video of the 23-minute lecture and a sign-up form. We are encouraging both new research on the psychology of heroism and new curricular for schools, camps, organizations, and businesses that introduce, expand, and give new vitality to the concept that any one of us can act heroically when the time comes.

More information about this project can be found at the following websites:
<http://www.everydayheroism.org>
<http://www.lucifereffect.com>

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Kathy Blau is a doctoral student in clinical psychology at Pacific Graduate School of Psychology (CA). She is currently completing a clinical practicum at the VA Medical Center in Palo Alto, CA. Ms. Blau is a research assistant for a National Science Foundation's supported study examining how emergency managers improvise

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Zeno Franco is a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at Pacific Graduate School of Psychology (CA). He is completing a clinical internship at the VA Medical Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Mr. Franco is a former US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Fellow and conducts research in disaster management

through the National Center on the Psychology of Terrorism. His interest in heroism started with a review of efforts taken by scientists and bureaucrats to inform the public about health issues related to the World Trade Center collapse in the face of stiff political resistance. Mr. Franco and Dr. Zimbardo began collaborating on the topic of heroes in 2004 and have coauthored several theoretical pieces in this area. Mr. Franco's work supported the chapter on heroism in Dr. Zimbardo's recent book, *The Lucifer Effect*, and their work has appeared in UC Berkeley's *The Greater Good* magazine, published by the Greater Good Science Center.



Philip Zimbardo is internationally recognized as the "voice and face of contemporary American psychology" through his widely seen PBS-TV series, *Discovering Psychology*; his classic research, The Stanford Prison Experiment; authoring the oldest current textbook in psychology, *Psychology and Life* (in its 18th edition);

and his popular trade books on *Shyness*; and his recent exploration of the psychology of evil in *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. He is Professor Emeritus at Stanford University, professor at the Pacific Graduate School of Psychology, and the Naval Postgraduate School at Monterey, CA. Zimbardo has been the president of APA, the chair of the Council of Scientific Society Presidents (CSSP), and is now executive director of a Stanford center on terrorism—the Center for Interdisciplinary Policy, Education, and Research on Terrorism (CIPERT). His more than 350 professional publications and 50 books convey his broad range of research interests in the domain of social psychology, but branch out to education, time perspective, madness, political psychology, torture, terrorism, and evil.