Why and How Groups Create Moral Heroes

Ari DeCeter-Frain, Ruth Vanstone, and Jeremy A. Frimer

Tenzin Gyatso is no ordinary man—he is a living, breathing moral hero. Gyatso, also known as His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 for his leadership role in the non-violent struggle for Tibet’s independence from China (Aarvik, 1989). A community of 100,000+ exiled Tibetans look to Gyatso for guidance and view him as their spiritual champion. Even Americans approve of the Dalai Lama more so than any other world leader—including their own (Corso, 2013). Drawing crowds of more than 10,000 people at a time, the Dalai Lama’s sustained plea for compassion draws in his followers, giving the impression that the Dalai Lama has an inner glow or a “special something.”

The Dalai Lama’s story raises the possibility that moral heroism is earned. Perhaps moral heroes have their standing because of their sophisticated ability to reason through complex moral problems (Kohlberg, 1984) or narrate heart-warming life stories about their lives (Colby & Damon, 1992; McAdams & Guo, 2015; Walker & Frimer, 2007). This notion that moral heroes have an inner greatness has seemed self-evidently true to both the public and scholars ( Carlyle, 1840; Woods, 1913).

We propose an alternative explanation for the existence of moral heroes. Rather than thinking of moral heroes as superb individuals that followers discover, we propose that followers manufacture the perception of moral heroism in rather ordinary individuals. That is, followers may turn these ordinary individuals into moral heroes in the eyes of followers by shaping followers’ perceptions. The idea that moral heroes are “Great Men” may overestimate the inner goodness of these leaders, and underestimate the active role of followers in the perception of the moral hero’s greatness. We will set out the view that moralistic groups create moral heroes out of surprisingly ordinary persons.

Once again, the Dalai Lama’s story is apt. His beginnings as a spiritual leader were hardly earned in any meritocratic sense. Rather, they were astonishingly arbitrary. The 13th Dalai Lama died in 1933. According to Buddhist tradition, when a Dalai Lama dies, he reincarnates to another body. His followers’ task is to find that body. A search team followed a series of symbols, which led to a house. There, they found a two-year-old boy (Aarvik, 1989). The search team tested the toddler, for example, by presenting him with a series of two items, one of which the previous Dalai Lama had owned. His task was to select the correct one. Two-year-old Gyatso correctly identified every object (Thondup & Thurston, 2015).

The Dalai Lama’s followers anointed him at age four, and he became the official political leader of Tibet at age 15, almost a decade before he completed his education in Buddhist
philosophy (Marcello, 2003). That is, he had ascended to the rank of spiritual and political leader of his people without having achieving expertise in his people's politics and philosophy. Hence, at least some of the Dalai Lama's influence may have arisen not from his own intellectual and moral greatness, but rather through social processes—such as arbitrarily granting of titles like “his holiness” to a 2-year-old toddler.

We suggest that groups may catapult relatively ordinary individuals into moral heroism. To our knowledge, no experimental evidence exists that directly establishes that groups do create moral heroes. However, we rely on a circumstantial approach by describing the motive and mechanism by which groups might do so. Followers may elevate relatively ordinary individuals into the role of symbols of moral heroism by giving them titles and awards, propagating heroic portraits, and encouraging them to give inspiring speeches. Creating a moral hero may benefit a tribe by giving its members a rallying point around which to unite and fight. Finally, we explain how impressing a few can lead to population-wide endorsement.

Definitions and Theoretical Underpinnings

We define heroes as symbols, and leaders as agents. We see heroism as a perception in the eyes of followers, one that symbolizes the desires and values of the collective they represent. Heroes need not necessarily act on any of these values; the defining feature of heroism is that followers attribute symbolic status to them. In contrast, we characterize leaders by their engagement in concrete acts of leadership. Leaders actively manage people, give advice, make decisions, and so on. In this way, heroism and leadership are independent; leadership is possible without heroism, and heroism is possible without leadership. CEOs illustrate the independence of heroism and leadership. To their executive team, CEOs act as leaders by chairing meetings, delegating tasks, and making critical decisions. To the broader organization, CEOs can function as heroes by symbolizing the values of the organization, giving inspiring speeches, and appearing on the cover of the organization's annual report.

Heroes can be of different sorts, ranging from celebrities (e.g., Michael Jackson) to athletes (e.g., Michael Jordan) to social leaders (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr.). We distinguish heroes that are known for their competence, ability, and agency (e.g., celebrities and athletes) from those who are known for both their agency and their communal focus (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr.) by labeling the latter kind “moral heroes.”

Our approach to understanding heroism aligns with follower-centric approaches to heroism. Social constructivist approaches posit that the hero is a construction in the minds of the observer. Followers play an active role in selecting and shaping an individual into a symbol of the goals of the group, and the qualities that the followers deem ideal (Adams, 2006; Gardner & Avolio, 1998). Guiding this process is the hero schema, a shared notion of what the prototypic hero is like as a person and that which he/she represents. Followers' schemas can influence both the discovery of heroes, and shape the development of a hero embedded within a group of followers (Goethals & Allison, 2012).

This notion of active followership is also consistent with social identity theory. Followers may recognize a prototypical quality in a certain group member and elevate that individual to hero status (Hogg, 2001). Even within organizational settings, people may have a romanticized notion of leadership whereby groups over-attribute success and failure to leaders and under-attribute outcomes to followers (Pfeiffer, 1977; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985; Bass & Bass, 2009). Following in these traditions, our approach aims to specify a set of specific social processes by which followers elevate individuals into heroic status.
Moral Heroes Benefit from their Group Standing

Moral heroes derive material and psychological benefits from their role. In many societies, prestigious people are both wealthy, reproductively successful, and happy (Frimer & Brandt, 2015; Irons 1979; Borgerhoff Mulder, 1988). Nobel Prize winners tend to live longer than Nobel nominees (Raben & Oswald, 2008).

Moral heroes can influence adherents’ behavior to benefit the group, but also to the benefit of their own personal interests (Bligh, Kohles & Pillai, 2011). The story of Blake Mycoskie illustrates how a hero can benefit from a prosocial cause. Mycoskie is the founder of the company TOMS, a for-profit shoe company. TOMS’s policy is to donate one pair of shoes to impoverished children for each pair they sell. Some consumers may approve of the company’s model because they regard it as a charity. Despite its charitable appearance, Mycoskie recently sold half of the company for $300 million (O’Connor, 2014). While some may think of Mycoskie and TOMS as an exemplar of corporate morality, he is also a multi-millionaire, reaping financial benefits from his station.

Groups Benefit from having Moral Heroes

Groups also benefit from having moral heroes. As the global population grows and competition for finite resources increases, belonging to a cohesive moral community becomes increasingly important for individuals to survive and thrive (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004). Group belonging confers physical and psychological resources to members. People with a strong sense of belongingness tend to be physically and emotionally healthy (Begen & Turner-Cobb, 2015; Hagerty et al., 1996; Hale, Hannum, & Espelage, 2005). Simply belonging to an online dating community may satisfy a physical need by increasing an individual’s number of potential mates. The existence of heroes may benefit group members in three ways.

Heroes Strengthen Ingroup Ties

Groups become more productive and members feel greater belonging when they bind together into a tight-knit moral community (Haidt, 2012). The presence of a hero may strengthen the bonds among group members. Occupying the leadership position may help maintain the group’s social structure (Fiske, 1992). Their position at top of the hierarchy grant heroes sacred status, just as religious groups sacralize deities (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004). Sacralizing mundane objects, practices, or people binds people together (Tetlock, 2003).

Heroes may also bind groups together simply by bringing attention to a dividing characteristic between “us” and “them,” such as when Ronald Reagan referred to the Soviet Union as the “evil empire” and highlighted philosophical differences between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.: the Soviet leaders have openly and publicly declared that the only morality they recognize is that which will further their cause, which is world revolution... they must be made to understand: we will never compromise our principles and standards. We will never give away our freedom.

(Reagan, 1983)

Drawing attention to more superficial distinctions between the ingroup and outgroup is sufficient to create group behavior. Mere preferences, such as a preference for one painter’s work over another, are sufficient to establish group identity (Tajfel, 1970; see Diehl, 1990 for a review). By describing themselves and their followers as belonging to the same team, and drawing attention to some other group of non-like-minded outsiders, moral heroes may stoke ingroup favoritism.
Heroes Enforce Cooperation

Moral heroes play a critical role in promoting large-scale group cooperation by punishing free riders, both directly and indirectly (Richerson & Boyd, 1998). Punishment need not be physical or even aggressive. When in the role of leader, moral heroes may simply express disappointment or withdraw resources and opportunities from followers who are not behaving appropriately. And the mere presence of moral heroes as symbols may cause some followers to enforce group norms by punishing misbehavers. Without individuals that punish selfish individuals, group cohesion breaks down. A classic example of this comes from research in public goods. The reciprocal tit-for-tat strategy suffices to establish norms of cooperation in dyads (Axelrod and Hamilton, 1981). Prompt and limited retaliation works because, in effect, each person punishes the other’s selfishness, and thus encourages a return to cooperation. However, in larger group interactions, direct reciprocity becomes insufficient to sustain cooperation (Boyd & Richerson, 1992) because punishing a selfish group member has the side effect of punishing all the other group members, the cooperative ones included. The result is social entropy, leading to outcomes like the “tragedy of the commons.” Groups can achieve generalized reciprocity and maintain cooperation by adopting a moralistic model, in which a small number of punishers (e.g., moral heroes) exact rents from selfish group members. With the addition of just one punisher, cooperation eventually becomes the norm within the group (Boyd & Richerson, 1992; Fehr & Gächter, 2002).

Taken to the extreme, punishment can lead to fascism. However, heroes can use gentle (social, rather than physical) disincentives to reduce selfishness (Richerson & Boyd, 1998). Like punishment, the threat of gossip and ostracism induce cooperation (Feinberg, Willer, & Schultz, 2014). Followers may augment the threat of disincentives for selfishness by demanding obedience to authorities who share their ideology (Frimmer, Gaucher, & Schaefer, 2014). By enforcing pro-group behavior, moral heroes solve the “free rider problem” and maintain cooperation among group members. Without enforcement, prosocial behavior would be limited to instances of dyadic, and therefore direct, reciprocity.

Heroes Model Behavior that Followers Copy

Heroes inspire followers to act as they do. When asked to list the traits that describe heroes, people consistently list eight traits: smart, strong, selfless, caring, charismatic, resilient, reliable, and inspiring (Allison & Goethals, 2011). Followers emulate these traits, which signals their commitment to the group (Gardner, 2003). Regardless of the behavior of other group members, the addition of a single person who contributes consistently to the group’s welfare can cause generosity to spread (Weber & Murnighan, 2008). Gandhi’s non-violent resistance to British rule encouraged similarly non-violent resistance from followers. For example, along with Gandhi, 78 citizens marched for weeks to the sea to collect their own salt, an act forbidden by the British government. The march attracted more than 1000 followers, and inspired other Indian citizens to protest against unjust laws in a peaceful manner (Engler & Engler, 2014).

Hero Creation

How do individuals become moral heroes? Is most of the action in the hero, with the hero raising awareness of a cause and mobilizing (otherwise passive) followers for action? Or might followers play a more active role in the emergence of heroes? We entertain the latter possibility, positing that group members create the perception of moral heroism in their leaders.

People tend to have a romantic notion of their leaders, over-attributing the success of a group to the leader’s actions (Meindl, 1985). Rather than being primarily responsible for the group’s
success, moral heroes may exist within a complex, bidirectional relationship between the leader and his/her followers. Leaders’ messages may simply put into words an existing, widespread moral sentiment within a group. Reactions from followers may trim off the messages that resonate less, and reinforce the messages that resonate more with the movement. In this way, followers may play an active role in sculpting the hero’s message (Howell & Shamir, 2005). Exerting this influence over their leaders may also enhance followers’ sense of agency (Avalio & Reichard, 2008), which makes followership feel volitional (Stech, 2008).

Followers may create the perception of moral heroism in their leaders by giving them titles and awards, propagating heroic portraiture, and encouraging their leaders to give heroic speeches. Whether followers are aware of the social effects of these actions remains unclear, and worthy of future research.

**Titles and Awards**

The Dalai Lama’s official name is Jetsun Jamphel Ngawang Lobzang Yeshe Tenzin Gyatso, which translates to Holy Lord, Gentle Glory, Compassionate, Defender of the Faith, Ocean of Wisdom, Tenzin Gyatso. Heroes’ titles can signal to followers that the hero has moral virtue and will bring about important changes for their followers. Awards can have a similar effect, such as when Barack Obama won the Nobel Peace prize in 2009, with the closing date for nominations being just 12 days into his presidency. Asked why Obama received the prize, Nobel Committee head Thorbjorn Jagland explained that “it was because we would like to support what he is trying to achieve … It is a clear signal that we want to advocate the same as he has done” (BBC, 2009). Obama’s Nobel Peace Prize was less so a recognition for a past achievement than it was a mandate to help Obama carry out his vision in the future.

Does receiving such an award succeed in changing the recipient’s behavior? Or does it merely elevate other people’s perception of the leader? We are aware of no evidence that directly addresses this question. However, research on the effects of awards in other social arenas tentatively suggests that awards enhance reputation, but do little to the recipient’s behavior. For example, winning a teaching award bolsters teachers’ reputations but does not change their behavior; moreover, teaching awards seem to have little effect on the teacher’s students (Huggett et al., 2012). Future research should test the effects of moral titles and awards on recipients’ behavior and reputation. One possibility is to examine changes in behavior and reputation of winners and nominees of awards for youth activism.

**Portraits**

Followers may create the perception of heroism by propagating heroic images of their leaders. The quintessential posture of the moral hero depicts the hero looking up and to the viewer’s right (Frimer & Sinclair, 2015; see Figure 7.1 for examples).

Internet images of moral heroes (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr.; Mother Teresa) tend to portray them looking up and to the viewer’s right more often than one would expect if their gaze varied at random, and also more often than did non-heroic celebrities such as Brad Pitt and Elvis Presley (Frimer & Sinclair, 2015, Study 1). One explanation for this curious occurrence is that moral heroes adjust their posture when posing for photographs. That is, the action may be in the hero. Another possibility locates the action in the hero’s follower. Evidence supports this latter possibility. When tasked with selecting a portrait of a leader for promotional materials, people selectively choose the up-and-right posture (Frimer & Sinclair, 2015, Study 2).

Followers may select the up-and-right posture because it depicts the leader as calm and rational. In the up-and-right posture, the subject’s right side of the face is more visible than the more emotionally expressive left side. The right cerebral hemisphere, which controls the hidden
left side of the face, processes more emotional information than the left cerebral hemisphere. As a result, the displayed right side of the face is less emotionally expressive than the left (e.g., Sackeim, Gur, & Saucy, 1978). The up-and-right posture may conceal the more emotionally expressive side of the face, and thus give the impression that the moral hero is calm and levelheaded, and thus ready to make sound decisions.

A second explanation for why followers select portraits of their leaders looking up-and-right is that these images activate a network of conceptual metaphors that connect direction with personal virtue. This network and its prescriptions about directionality are evident in the term *upright citizen*. The word *right* connotes correctness whereas the origin of the word *left* is an old English term meaning *idle*, *weak*, or *useless*. In Latin, the word *sinister* means left. Terms like *uplifting* and *heaven above* imply morality and strength to the upward direction (Haidt & Algoe, 2004). Social status also implies vertical elevation. For example, seeing the word *king* causes people to search the top of their visual field, whereas the word *servant* has the opposite effect (Zanolie et al., 2012). Resultantly, posing in the up-and-right posture makes a person look warm, proud, and future-minded (Frimer & Sinclair, 2015, Study 3).

A recent example of the social consequences of the hero pose was Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign. Shepard Fairey’s stylized portrait of Obama—with Obama gazing up and to the viewer’s right—came to symbolize hope, progress, and change, and enhance the hysteria surrounding his presidential campaign. The origin of the image is telling about the active role of followers in the emergence of the hero. Fairey’s iconic image was the product of the artist selecting a particular image, cropping out most of it, and stylizing the rest. Mannie Garcia, working for the Associated Press, took the original image in 2006, depicting Obama apparently listening to someone speak while sitting beside George Clooney at a media event. Obama’s attention seems to focus entirely on the speaker, and away from the photographer, suggesting that Obama was not posing for the photograph. Rather, evidence of active followership is in abundance, for instance in Fairey’s selecting this particular image and cropping out George Clooney. Other followers contributed to the hysteria as well. The media presented the portrait frequently. And posters, stickers, and T-shirts displaying it sold by the hundreds of thousands. We
suggest that part of the hysteria and Obama's resultant electoral success was his followers selecting and propagating heroic imagery.

**Speeches**

Speeches represent a third way in which groups create the perception of moral heroism in their leaders. Some of the most meaningful and salient memories followers have of their heroes are associated with speeches. For example, when people think about Martin Luther King, Jr., the following words likely come to mind:

> I have a dream that one day ... the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood ... I have a dream that my four little children will one day ... not be judged by the color of their skin.

*(King, 1963)*

Hearing or reading these words leaves an impression—the man who uttered these words was a good man.

Warm, charismatic language leaves a lasting impression about the speaker, as a person. But are these impressions accurate? That is, do audiences draw meaningful inferences about the speaker's underlying character from the words they hear? We suggest that they may not. Language may be a surprisingly poor means of learning about a person's underlying traits. For example, narcissists do not talk about themselves more often than non-narcissists do (Carey et al., 2015). And people who describe prosocial personal goals do not behave especially generously toward strangers (Frimer, Zhu, & Decter-Frain, 2015).

This dissociation between language and inner disposition may be a consequence of the correspondence bias, wherein audiences erroneously think that people's words correspond to their inner personality. In the classic illustration of the correspondence bias, audience members read pro-Castro speeches and guessed the true attitudes of the speaker. Even when the audience learned that the speaker was told that he/she had to write a pro-Castro speech, the audience still made pro-Castro attitudinal attributions to the speaker (Jones & Harris, 1967). Audiences fail to fully take into account the pressures that unseen situational pressures exert on people speaking, and mistakenly think that people's words are telling of who they are as people.

While not particularly telling of the inner character of the speaker, language can have a powerful persuasive effect on audiences. Movement leaders may intuit this and carefully select charismatic orators as movement leaders. For example, key movers within the Democratic Party—Jack Corrigan and Mary Beth Cahill—chose Barack Obama to give his 2004 Convention speech because of his youth, African American roots, and oratory charisma (Bernstein, 2007). Followers may also encourage moral heroes to focus on certain themes in their speeches.

The persuasive effect can be so profound that audiences sometimes endorse leaders whose ideology conflicts with their own. This may be because the speaker's warm, fuzzy language induces the audience to endorse the speaker without knowing precisely the speaker's ideological stance. A poignant illustration of this is the widespread American approval of the Dalai Lama (64% according to a 2013 Harris poll). However, the Dalai Lama openly identifies as a Marxist, an ideology that just 11 percent of Americans feel should be implemented as system of government (Rasmussen Reports, 2011). That is, the vast majority of American Dalai Lama supporters do not actually support his objective.

Charismatic speeches follow a formula, which include: threat, personal sacrifice for sacred values, agency, and communion. The narrative goes as follows: Something is terribly wrong *(threat)*. Something that we hold dear is under threat—we must defend it at any cost *(personal
sacrifice for sacred values). Everyone will have to work hard (agency) to make the world a more fair, compassionate place again (communion).

Threat

Heroes often make reference to a threat or conflict in their speeches. For example, Ronald Reagan launched his political career in 1964 when he described how national debt and Communism threatened American freedom:

We’re at war with the most dangerous enemy that has ever faced mankind in his long climb from the swamp to the stars, and it’s been said if we lose that war, and in so doing lose this way of freedom of ours, history will record with the greatest astonishment that those who had the most to lose did the least to prevent its happening. (Reagan, 1964)

Moral heroes on the political left also identify threat. The day before his assassination, Martin Luther King, Jr. raised an alarm about the state of the world in his “mountaintop” speech: “The world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around” (King, 1968).

Moral heroes may signal threat because leaders become increasingly influential during times of crisis (Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl 2004). When people feel threatened, they accept their (low) position in the social hierarchy (Jost, Banaji & Nosek, 2004) and seek protectors (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004; Klapp, 1948). Reminders of one’s mortality make people feel antipathy toward opposing views, as well as support for those who validate one’s own beliefs (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011). Hence, when heroes make reference to outside threat, they may strengthen group members’ allegiance to the group and their willingness to follow their leader.

Sacred Values

Can heroes raise the alarm about threats to anything of value? Or must the threat be to a specific subtype of values? To illustrate, imagine that the government raised taxes on almonds. Almond-growers aside, most people are unlikely to react strongly because they merely value almonds, thinking of them as a means to an end (of eating nuts) and interchangeable with other nuts (such as pecans). In contrast, raising taxes on a single racial group (e.g., African Americans) would elicit a much stronger reaction, especially from the political left. Raising taxes on gun purchases would have the same effect on from some people on the political right.

A key distinction is between values and sacred values (Tetlock, 2003). Values are things that are important to a person because they are useful. A valuable thing is a means to an end. As a result, people will sacrifice them when the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs. A sacred value is a type of values that is not a means to an end, but rather an end in itself. People treat their sacred values as not open to trading off or exchanging for other goods, even when doing so makes sense.

A common example of a sacred value in Western culture is life, which the U.S. Declaration of Independence enshrines as an “inalienable right.” Most Westerners would feel disgusted at the thought of sacrificing one ill child to harvest his organs to save five other ill children. Pro-lifers cite the “sanctity of life” as a consideration that trumps all others in the abortion debate. And modern healthcare practices aim to keep alive terminally ill patients, even when they desire to die. However, not all cultures (e.g., radical Islam) thinks of life as sacred.

Sharia Law is sacred to radical Islamists. Life is sacred to Westerners. Personal freedom is sacred to libertarians. And social justice is sacred to liberals. The cultural relativity of sacred values serve
a functional purpose—their unique correspondence to a particular tribe enhances their fidelity as signal of group identity. Their costly, irrational (i.e. not amenable to rational cost/benefit calculus) and often outlandish nature (e.g., sacred cows) raises their fidelity as a signaling device. No one in his or her "right mind" would accidentally defend another group’s sacred values. Sacred values are like a secret password: they function like a high-fidelity signal as to whether a person is an insider or an outsider.

To become a symbol for the group’s struggle, moral heroes signal their allegiance to the group’s sacred values. Ronald Reagan communicated his commitment to protecting American freedom from escalating debt and Communism in his first inaugural address:

The economic ills we suffer have come upon us over several decades. They will not go away in days, weeks, or months, but they will go away. They will go away because we as Americans have the capacity now, as we’ve had in the past, to do whatever needs to be done to preserve this last and greatest bastion of freedom.

(Reagan, 1981)

Left-wing heroes also defend sacred values, such as social justice and the environment (Frimer, Tell, & Haidt, 2015). While on trial for treason for waging guerrilla warfare against the apartheid government, Nelson Mandela appealed to the Left’s sacred value of social equality:

During my lifetime I have dedicated my life to this struggle … I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society … It is an ideal for which I hope to live for … But, My Lord, if it needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

(Mandela, 1964)

**Personal Sacrifice**

The quotes from both Reagan and Mandela highlight how the defense of sacred values requires personal sacrifice. Reagan called for the American people to “do whatever needs to be done” (Reagan, 1981), and Mandela expressed his willingness to die for the cause. Personal sacrifice is common in the stories of moral heroes. Like Mandela and Reagan, Martin Luther King,Jr. also declared his willingness to become a martyr for the cause of social equality in a speech the day before his assassination: “Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will” (King, 1968). Similarly, Malala Yousafzai’s rise as a moral hero came after she survived an assassination attempt.

Enduring personal hardship for the cause may make people seem like moral heroes for several reasons. First, martyrs no longer have the opportunity to fall from grace, and so they cement their legacy when they die. To illustrate, the public consistently rates John F. Kennedy more favorably (~70th percentile among presidents) than they do George W. Bush (~20th percentile). However, examining their public approval ratings (Figure 7.2) suggests that the two presidents were on a similar trajectory—their public approval ratings correlate positively and strongly ($r = +.58$). Both Kennedy and Bush faced an outpatient threat (the Cuban Missile Crisis and September 11th attacks, respectively) early in their presidencies. And then public approval began to decline as fear dissipated and day-to-day governance commenced.

Whether Kennedy’s plunge in public approval would have continued as Bush’s did is not clear. However, the steep downward trajectory of Kennedy’s approval ratings at the time of his death suggests that his legacy as a great American president may, in part, be because he died young.

People generally rate heroes who were assassinated at a young age as the most influential heroes of their time (Allison & Goethals, 2011). The longer heroes remain in the spotlight, the more likely they are to reveal their banality. Illustratively, Nelson Mandela’s performance as
Figure 7.2 Public approval ratings of Presidents John F. Kennedy and George W. Bush show a similar pattern.

The president of South Africa was surprisingly lackluster. And once elected, Barack Obama could no longer merely symbolize his message of hope. By both expert and public opinion, his presidency has been about average.

Without some criteria for discriminating between genuine and selfish/manipulative leaders, groups remain vulnerable to exploitation. Sacrifice is a high-fidelity signal of commitment to the group. Natural selection may have shaped cultural learning such that people pay greater attention to messages containing themes of personal sacrifice (Henrich, 2009). Hence, humans may have evolved a means by which to grant greater credence to people who set aside their own self-interest in the name of the cause.

Audiences attend more closely to those who demonstrate their commitment to a cause through self-sacrifice. Speakers that set aside their own interests are more convincing than ones who displays their vested interest (Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978; Newman & Cain, 2014; Walster, Aronson, & Abrahams, 1966). Impressing upon an audience that the speaker him/herself behaves charitably enhances the success of pleas for charitable donations (Bryan, Redfield, & Mader, 1971).
Suicide bombers represent a salient contemporary example of self-sacrificial behavior, and the motive behind it. While researchers originally hypothesized that pathology was responsible for suicide bombings, attempts to identify any such pathologies have come up empty (McCuaey, 2007). Moreover, suicide bombers are not necessarily of a low socio-economic status (Krugler & Maleckova, 2002). People who are ready to self-sacrifice for a cause tend to be committed, passionate and altruistic, but not necessarily depressed, suicidal, or fatalistic (Belanger, Caouette, Sharvit, & Dugas, 2014). Suicide bombers understand their actions through a moral lens, seeing it as a necessary and justifiable means to an end of defending their sacred values and family (Atran, Sheikh, & Gomez, 2014; Whitehouse, McQuinn, Buhrmester, & Swann, 2014). Motives for suicide attacks may seem rational within the perpetrator’s worldview (Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009; Wintrobe, 2006). A normal individual, placed in exacting circumstances, can end up a martyr.

Agency and communion.

When communicating a call for action, moral heroes explain how the group will succeed (agency) as well as the social objective (communion). Agency and communion are the two primary dimensions of social judgment (Bakan, 1966; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). Agency refers to a striving to get ahead, and concerns competence, intelligence, skill, empowerment, and creativity. Barack Obama’s rallying cry to voters, delivered during the 2008 New Hampshire Primary Race, illustrates agency in the hero’s speech:

For when we have faced down impossible odds, when we’ve been told we’re not ready or that we shouldn’t try or that we can’t, generations of Americans have responded with a simple creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can. Yes, we can. Yes, we can.

(Obama, 2008)

Communion refers to the desire to get along and concerns friendliness, helpfulness, sincerity, interpersonal warmth, trustworthiness and morality. Communicating a communal message induces others to come to one’s aid (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). An example of communion in the hero’s speech is the Dalai Lama Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech (1989). The Dalai Lama received the prize for his continued efforts to achieve a non-violent, conciliatory resolution between China and Tibet. In his speech, he shared a communal message:

Although I have found my own Buddhist religion helpful in generating love and compassion, even for those we consider our enemies, I am convinced that everyone can develop a good heart and a sense of universal responsibility with or without religion.

(Dalai Lama, 1989)

Folk conceptions of heroes (Allison & Goethals, 2013) draw from both agency (smart, strong, resilient, charismatic, and inspiring) and communion (selfless, caring, and reliable). Brands portraying both agency and communion belong to the “golden quadrant” of marketing success. The absence of either dimension elicits negative emotions in consumers. Brands lacking agency elicit pity, whereas brands lacking a communal message elicit envy (Aaker, Garbinsky, & Vohs, 2012).

While moral heroes’ speeches may have the greatest influence when they integrate both agency and communion (Frimer, Walker, Dunlop, Lee & Riches, 2011; Frimer, Walker, Lee, Riches, & Dunlop, 2012), communion is the primary dimension of social judgment (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). Communal language is among the most powerful tools of mass social persuasion. For example, a text analysis of all the words spoken in U.S. Congress over the past 20 years found that levels of communal language strongly predicted public approval 6 months
later, even when controlling for exogenous factors such as the 9/11 attacks and the economy (Frimer, Aquino, Gebauer, Zhu, & Oakes, 2015). Warm, communal language was a stronger predictor of public approval than more substantive factors, such as the economy and the productivity of Congress. Warm, fuzzy words work.

Social Contagion

Would-be heroes give speeches, appear in iconic portraits, and win awards. Yet, sometimes only a few people hear the speeches, see the images, or are present for the award ceremony. How then does leaving an impression on just a few people in the audience have an upward spiraling effect on a larger group? To illustrate the problem, consider the following words:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in ... to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

(Lincoln, 1865)

To many people living in the year 2015, these words are familiar. Yet, for a person living today to have heard the original speaker utter these words, they would have to be at least 150 years old. Abraham Lincoln delivered these words to sum up his post–Civil War agenda in his second inaugural address. Given that the oldest person alive is 116, not a single person living today ever heard Lincoln utter these words. Yet these words remain etched in memory. Social contagion is likely at play.

Social contagion refers to the viral spreading of an emotion, message, or behavior throughout a group (Levy & Nail, 1993). Contagion works because group members interact regularly. One person changes another, who changes another, and so on until a whole group has changed. In the contemporary era of social media, a hero’s message can spread quickly and recruit millions of followers in days. This process was evident when Invisible Children launched a video titled “Kony 2012,” which became the most viral video in history, quickly accumulating more than 50 million views, causing Invisible Children’s annual donations to nearly double, from $14 million in 2011 to $27 million in 2012 (Invisible Children, 2014). Similar social contagion was at play in various Arab Spring movements.

People often become followers after hearing of or witnessing a hero standing up against an external norm (e.g., segregation laws in the U.S.). Heroes differentiate themselves by their refusing to conform to external norms, and thus establishing a new set of acceptable practices. A new norm spreading within a group can resolve inner conflicts that group members feel about whether to conform to the old or new norm—an effect called disinhibitory contagion (Levy, 1992).

Asch’s (1952, 1956) seminal conformity paradigm demonstrates how disinhibitory contagion works. Participants viewed a target line and were tasked with identifying which among a series of lines of varying lengths matched the target. Performance on the task was excellent. However, when confederates were present and consistently selected an incorrect line, participants’ performance plummeted, in conformity with group norms. Conformity was but one solution to the conflict between responding correctly or as the rest of the group responded.

The disinhibiting power of a nonconformist became evident when Asch had one of the confederates give the correct answer while all of the others continued to give incorrect ones. The presence of this single nonconformist decreased incorrect answers by a factor of four (see Bond & Smith, 1996 for a review). A single individual deviating from the norm was sufficient to resolve most participants’ conformity conflict, thereby helping them undertake the more honest behavior.
Rosa Parks is an example of a moral hero who performed the function of disinhibitory contagion. Her refusal to sit at the back of a Montgomery, Alabama bus represented a key moment for the American Civil Rights movement. Parks may have become symbolic of the movement because she resolved people’s inner conflict about a practice that they understood to be unjust, yet felt compelled to do to fall in line with popular norms. Other passengers on the bus and other people who heard about the incident may have experienced a resolution of a conflict, which spiraled upwards into protest against racial inequality. Rosa Parks receives much credit forcountering and eliminating segregation laws, and many think of her as the moral hero for doing so.

Emotional contagion can also bolster a hero’s popularity. The earliest contagion research focused on the spread of emotion through crowds (McDougall, as cited in Levy & Nail, 1993). However, the spread of mood and emotion via contagion occurs across species, including in pigs (Reimert, Bolhuis, Kemp, & Rodenburg, 2015) and dogs (Yong & Ruffman, 2014; Sümeği, Oláh, & TopáI, 2014). An illustrative moment of social contagion is when a speaker finishes speaking. If some members of the audience begin a standing ovation, the result can be social contagion if a cascade of people begin to stand up as well.

Social contagion also occurs over social media. Emotional content of people’s Facebook news feeds causes corresponding changes in the content of their own status updates in both positive and negative valence (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014). A leader giving a charismatic speech may initiate a first wave of emotional elevation. The wave propagates when followers attribute their emotions to the hero’s moving rhetoric.

Critical players in social contagion.

Contagion may spread non-uniformly through a social network. That is, certain individuals tend to contribute more than others to the growth of a hero’s popularity. To illustrate this, consider the recent case of Malala Yousafzai. In 2012, Yousafzai (aged 15) was promoting girls’ education in Pakistan when a Taliban militant shot her in the face at close range. She survived the attack and quickly became a modern day moral hero, winning the Nobel Peace Prize two years later. The prize, however, came at the end of a complex social drama that involved two types of critical players in social networks—mavens (trusted experts) and connectors (Bailey, 2014).

The BBC’s editorial staff acted as mavens when they first published Yousafzai’s diary entries (under the alias Gul Makai) in 2009. The New York Times’ Adam Ellick, who made a documentary about her, was also a maven. Archbishop Desmond Tutu then publicly recognized her greatness by nominating her for the International Children’s Peace Prize in 2011.

Following her assassination attempt, connectors like celebrities Angelina Jolie and Madonna spread the word about Malala with slogans like “we are all Malala.” By the time the Nobel Committee cemented Malala’s legacy as the youngest Nobel Peace Prize laureate, the mavens and connectors had already done their work.

Mavens

Trusted experts—or mavens—play a critical role in manufacturing a hero. Mavens are knowledgeable, curious, critical, and prone to gossip (Boster, Kotowski, Andrews, & Serota, 2011; Feick & Price, 1987). Because of their expertise, mavens are often the first in a group to recognize a new hero and spread word of them. Mavens are quite unlike scientists trying to discover a new species in that mavens’ political agenda plays a critical role in their “discoveries.” Mavens “discover” heroes that can give a face and a voice to their own ideology. Illustratively, consider the mavens Jack Corrigan and Mary Beth Cahill. Seeking a young, charismatic, African American to deliver an optimistic Keynote address in 2004, they “discovered” Barack Obama.
And Edgar Nixon was a maven. After Rosa Parks’ arrest, he sought a young civil rights advocate with a history free of antagonizing the white establishment to lead the Montgomery bus boycott. He “discovered” a reverend named Martin Luther King, Jr.

Mavens may influence followers by sharing information about the newly discovered moral hero. They may also create opportunities for the moral hero. Early speeches, awards, and portraits may give rise to invitations to speak again, more awards for greatness, and more images. In this way, mavens may start a snowball effect, wherein the hero’s greatness becomes increasingly well known and exaggerated.

Connectors

Connectors are the cool kids; they have and maintain large numbers of acquaintances by, for example, sending Christmas cards to their entire address book (Gladwell, 2000). Some people center their lives are “strong ties,” a small set of people whom to trust and share one’s life. Connectors’ insight is their dedicated maintenance of many “weak-tie” relationships, which involve minimal, sometimes superficial communication but often bridge gaps between social groups (Granovetter, 1973). For example, connectors may have friends of a multitude of interests, which allows them to propagate information from one social group to another (Boster, Carpenter, & Kotowski, 2015; Boster, Kotowski, Andrews, & Serota, 2011; Flynn, Goldsmith & Eastman, 1996). Connectors play a similar role in multiple domains, including fashion, marketing, and public affairs (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

Connectors have often served as powerful agents of change. In the early 1990s, when the AIDS epidemic was beginning, connectors facilitated one of the first successful community-wide AIDS prevention interventions. Kelly et al. (1992) entered primarily gay bars and identified the patrons who conversed with the most different people and received the most greetings. They then educated and trained these individuals on AIDS prevention. Three months later, bar patrons reported significantly more use of condoms and significantly less engagement with multiple sexual partners. In comparison locations, condom usage declined over the same time period. Three years later, bar patrons showed further increases in condom use (St Lawrence et al., 1994).

The critical role of connectors also became evident in Travers and Milgram’s (1969) small world experiment. Letters mailed from all over the United States to a particular home in Omaha reached their destination in an average of six steps. Of the letters that reached their destination, half of them traveled through just three connectors—a neighbor and two colleagues. Their widespread influence makes connectors critical to the development of the hero’s reputation.

Conclusion

Are moral heroes innately glowing people? Or might groups create moral heroes? In this chapter, we provided evidence of motive—groups benefit from turning one of their own into a moral hero. The presence of moral heroes increase group cohesion, enforce cooperation, and inspire group members to live up to their standard. We have also described three mechanisms—titles and awards, portrait images, and charismatic speeches—along with an explanation of how local efforts can have a global influence.

However, we have not provided a “smoking gun.” To our knowledge, no existing experimental evidence establishes that groups create moral heroes out of ordinary persons. However, we anticipate that such evidence will be forthcoming in the coming years. Under the right conditions, a group of like-minded people may spontaneously catapult a group member into the role of leader, and deify the leader as a moral hero.
References


Carey, A. L., Brucks, M. S., Kühner, A. P., Holtzman, N. S., Große Deters, F., Back, M. D., & ... Mehl, M.


