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April 13, 2007

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in The Journal of Positive Psychology on 13 Apr 2007, available online at:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/17439760701237962>

Pury, C.L.S., Kowalski, R.M., & Spearman, M.J. (2007). Distinctions between general and personal courage. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 2, 99 – 114. doi: 10.1080/17439760701237962

Abstract

How courageous is an action? Perhaps it depends on the comparison group, with crucial differences between *general courage*, or actions that would be courageous for anyone, and *personal courage*, or actions that are courageous only for the particular actor. To explore these possible distinctions, 250 undergraduates (151 female) wrote about a time they acted courageously, then made multiple ratings of the action including personal and general courageousness. Actions high in general courage were taken with more confidence, less fear, and fewer personal limitations: actions high in personal courage were taken with more fear, despite greater difficulty. Both ratings and narrative data support this fundamental distinction, which may increase the precision of future courage research and have implications for treatment.

Distinctions Between General and Personal Courage

Courage has appeared on most short-lists of human virtues, from antiquity (e.g., Aristotle, trans 1999) to the present. Most notably in recent years, courage has been lauded as one of the cardinal virtues of positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Despite these accolades, the actual construct of courage has received sporadic attention at best from scientific psychology (e.g., Lopez, O'Byrne, & Peterson, 2003). Aside from pioneering studies by Rachman and colleagues (e.g., Rachman, 1984), few systematic investigations have been conducted to determine emotional, cognitive, and situational correlates of courageous action.

One possible explanation for this dearth of research may be the lack of a standard definition. This may stem from the multifaceted nature of courage, an accolade for many different types of action. Shelp (1984, p. 354) defined courage as “the disposition to voluntarily act, perhaps fearfully, in a dangerous circumstance, where the relevant risks are reasonably appraised, in an effort to obtain or preserve some perceived good for one self or others recognizing that the desired perceived good may not be realized.” Peterson and Seligman (2004), in their discussion of bravery, emphasized several key features of this definition of courage: the action must be voluntary, involve overcoming fear, and must be directed at what is right and moral; the actor must be willing to take risks yet also understand that excessive risk may lead to undesired consequences; and danger or vulnerability must be present.

Although courage researchers have not agreed upon a consensus definition (Lopez et al., 2003), authors from Plato (trans. 1961) to Lopez et al. have agreed that there are different types of courage, or at least different types of situations that call for courage.

Putman (1997) posited three main types of courage: physical, moral, and psychological. He defined physical courage as action in the face of physical risk, moral courage as authenticity and integrity in the face of risk, and psychological courage as action taken despite risks to one's psychological well-being. Lopez et al. (2003) adopted two of Putman's (1997, 2004) types of courage (physical and moral) and replaced psychological courage with the related concept of vital courage. Vital courage, adopted primarily from work by Finfgeld (e.g., 1995, 1999) describes thriving in the face of physical or mental illness (Lopez et al.). One key component of vital courage is accepting negative information about one's self (e.g., "I have a terminal illness," see Finfgeld, 1999), with subsequent risks and emotional difficulties.

Research strategies have commonly examined courageous actions within only one of these domains. For example, Rachman's (1984) pioneering laboratory work examined decorated bomb disposal operators, Rothschild and Miethe (1999) investigated corporate whistle blowers, and Finfgeld (1999) studied patients nominated as having courageous traits by medical personnel.

In all three domains, researchers commonly examine a highly select population: individuals recognized by others for their courage in the specific area of interest. Becker and Eagly (2004) used a similar strategy to examine gender differences in heroism. They looked at records of a wide variety of individuals who undertook heroic action: Carnegie Medal winners, Holocaust rescuers, volunteers in the Peace Corps and Doctors without Borders, and living kidney donors. Again, a specific type of action, in this case risking death or serious physical consequences on behalf of one or more other people, was selected for study.

Note that all of these studies involve the study of a highly select group comprised of those who have been recognized by others for their extreme courage in specific situations. Although a few examples of studies of unselected participants exist (e.g., Woodard's (2004) study of courageousness and hardiness; Rachman's (1990) summary of the fearlessness of civilians bombed in WWII), courage researchers have primarily selected individuals identified as courageous in a given area, sometimes comparing them to controls (e.g., Rachman, 1990). Thus, the participants in most studies have been those whose actions were so courageous as to be noteworthy.

Definitions of courage in the literature also set a high bar for calling an action courageous. Miller (2000) noted, "There must be danger and hardship to overcome, real danger and hardship, publicly discernable, properly appreciated" (p. 282). Likewise, Peterson and Seligman (2004) stated "Bravery [their strength most closely related to courage as studied by others] requires the presence of danger, loss, risk, or potential injury. Without a sense of danger, risk, or vulnerability, there is no bravery in an act" (p. 214).

These notable, extremely courageous actions are examples of what one might call *monumental courage*. Acts of monumental courage are above and beyond the call of duty, and worthy of public notice. In fact, modern US monuments frequently praise the courage of the honorees. As praiseworthy as these monumental actions are, and as noble and deserving of public praise as the authors' find them, we suggest that limiting the label of "courageous" only to more extreme actions may hinder the scientific study of courage.

In addition to limiting the pool of potential participants, this high bar also creates a Catch-22 barrier to laboratory investigations of courage. Taking an extreme view of

Peterson and Seligman (2004), if there is not a real danger, then the action is not courageous. However, you cannot ethically create a dangerous situation for participants. Thus, courage cannot be studied in the lab using a high-bar definition. These high-bar examples of courage may also be very poorly suited to clinical applications of courage: there are few monuments to individuals who overcame their agoraphobia through their courageous exposure to supermarkets and bridges.

This need not be the case. Studying only monumental acts of courage may in fact be analogous to trying to understand depression by only studying deeply depressed individuals hospitalized for recent suicide attempts. Barring other evidence, it is highly likely that courage, like other psychological constructs, exists on a continuum. Studying only those on the extreme end not only makes it difficult to find participants, but also may produce an incomplete picture of the construct.

We also find ourselves in agreement with Rachman (1990), who suggested that one might speak of courageous actions rather than courageous actors. Rachman's argument derived from clinical observation of phobic clients persevering in exposure therapy. Indeed, Woodard (2004) developed a courage scale based on the definition of courage as "the ability to act for a meaningful (noble, good, or practical) cause, despite experiencing the fear associated with perceived threat exceeding the available resources," (Woodard, p. 174). A person who takes risks but does not experience fear is thus, by definition, not courageous.

However, this model seems at odds with the confident, fearless hero praised for his (less commonly "her") monumental courage. Thus, there seem to be two competing prototypes of courage. The monumentally courageous person is typified by people like

James "Jimmie" Dyess and Barbara Muller, who each were awarded the Carnegie Hero Medal for rescuing a drowning woman in rough surf off Sullivan's Island, SC in 1928. Many people tried and failed to rescue her before Muller and Dyess succeeded, at great risk to their own lives. (Smith, 2004).

The other prototype of courage, overcoming fear for a noble cause, may be culturally enshrined by the Cowardly Lion in the Wizard of Oz, who overcomes his own fear to do great things. In real life, it may be typified by people like the child described in the following letter to the editor published in *The Sun* magazine:

...[M]y nine-year-old had cried her heart out, saying over and over that she didn't want to go to school because they were being given a big Social Studies test that day. She was afraid her learning disabilities would get in the way, and she wouldn't even be able to read the questions, much less know the answers. Her fears grew and grew until they made her physically ill. It took me more than an hour to convince her to get dressed. When we arrived at school, she begged me not to make her go inside: "I just can't do it, Momma. I can't take that test." I was afraid I was going to have to physically drag her from the car when suddenly she wiped her tears, got out, and walked with me to the door. I marveled at her bravery Will anyone ever understand how much courage it takes for my little girl to face a simple test? (Abbott, 2006, p. 2)

The differences between Dyess and Muller risking their lives to save a drowning stranger and the girl with learning disabilities taking a test are several, but one of the most prominent is the degree to which one needs to understand the actors' individual experience to appreciate the courageousness of the action. Without any additional

information about Dyess and Muller, it is entirely possible to appreciate their courage in saving someone drowning in rough surf, especially after others had tried and failed. Such an action would be courageous for anyone, no matter what their personal circumstances or individual characteristics. Yet, to appreciate the courage needed for the girl to take her test requires a great deal of knowledge about her as an individual.

The difference between these two prototypes may lie in the comparison group. Would anyone taking this action be considered courageous, or is there some individual characteristic of the actor that makes it so? Dyess and Muller's actions may be extremely high in *general courage*, that is, the person acts courageously compared to how people in general would be expected to act in that situation; the risks involved would be present for anyone. In fact, Dyess and Muller succeeded in reaching the struggling swimmer when many others had tried but had been turned back by high waves (Smith, 2004). However, if Dyess and Muller usually acted this way, then saving someone from drowning might not have been particularly courageous compared to their own typical actions. Thus, it would be low in *personal courage*², actions which are only courageous given the context of the actor's personal limitations. A child going to school on the day of a test is an action most likely low in general courage, as this is a typical activity for school-aged children and one that most do not find very difficult. However, as the mother's comments make clear, for this particular child going to school on the day of a test takes a good deal of what we will call *personal courage*, as her learning disabilities make it extremely difficult for her to take tests. The first author recalls another instance of personal courage in a client with severe PTSD who experienced his major trauma during the week leading up to Christmas 25 years previously. Because of this event, he had never given his 18-

year-old child a Christmas present. During treatment, he wrapped a present for her for the first time – persevering despite flashbacks and intense fear. Like the above child taking a test, this client wrapping a present does not appear courageous unless you know the details of his life. Rachman (1990) describes such cases in therapy clients, and others who have worked in clinical, counseling, or rehabilitation settings may have similar recollections of personal courage demonstrated by clients facing fear or other limitations in pursuit of a noble goal. The same may be true of people with physical or other limitations, as well as those with any other reason why a specific action is especially challenging for them.

These acts of personal courage rarely win accolades outside of the person's immediate social circle, if that. Perhaps because of this private nature, personal courage has rarely been studied systematically by investigators (but see Finfgeld's 1995; 1999, work for a notable exception in the particular domain of treatment). However, actions high in personal courage and low in general courage may be more prevalent in an unselected sample. Thus, we believe that it is crucial for the field of courage research that similarities and distinctions between these types of courage are explored.

A related question is the necessity of fear for an action to be courageous. Although many psychologists define courage as requiring fear in some way (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2003; Rachman, 1990; Woodard, 2004), others do not (e.g., Becker & Eagly, 2004; Shelp, 1984). Miller (2000) posed an interesting philosophical exercise: if someone repeatedly risks his or her life for others yet feels no fear and believes he or she will survive unscathed, are his or her actions courageous? Psychologists interested in subjective emotional experience, perhaps drawing on clinical experience with clients

overcoming personal fears, typically have seen courage as requiring fear or the overcoming of fear. However, as Miller pointed out, the common person is highly likely to see the hypothetical fearless and confident hero above as quite courageous.

Relating both fear and confidence to courage goes back at least to Aristotle (trans. 1999), who viewed the subjective experience of courage as the mean of fear and confidence. In our model, we postulate that these two feelings, fear and confidence (or self-efficacy) are differentially related to personal and general courage. We might expect that personal courage requires fear, while general courage might be diminished by fear. On the other hand, confidence should augment general courage while diminishing personal courage.

Definitions of courage in the literature differ in many other ways as well. Yet, despite the lack of a formal definition, introspection suggests that it is relatively easy to think of diverse examples of courageous actions. One approach to defining constructs that are hard to define but easy to think of is to use a prototype approach and systematically collect examples. In the current study, we use just such a prototype approach and ask participants to tell us about a time that they acted courageously. We asked participants to tell us about their own courageous actions, instead of the actions of others, because we were primarily interested in the relationship of subjective states to rated courage. Because we were using a prototype approach, we specifically did not give participants a definition of courage. Instead, we asked them to provide us with an exemplar from their own lives. Because we were also interested in examining nonmonumental courage, we did not select people who have been exceptionally brave. Rather, we used an unselected sample of college students. We used the exemplars they

provided to examine differences in correlates of personal courage and general courage. We were also interested in developing a typology of courage, based on both the goal of the action and on the risks and difficulties encountered trying to reach that goal. These subtypes were compared to personal and general courage, as well as to typologies of courageous action proposed by Lopez et al. (2003) and by Putman (1997, 2004).

Because personal courage is hypothesized to be based on internal obstacles to be overcome, while general courage should be based on risks that exist for anyone, self-referential language in explaining why an action was courageous should be positively correlated with personal courage and negatively correlated with general courage.

The roles of both fear and confidence in courage were also examined. Both were hypothesized to be part of courageous action, although higher levels of fear were expected for actions higher in personal courage and lower levels for actions higher in general courage. Conversely, confidence may have a negative relationship with personal courage and a positive relationship with general courage. These hypotheses regarding personal and general courage are summarized in Table 1.

Method

Participants

Participants were 250 undergraduate students (151 female, 99 male, mean age = 18.8, $SD = 1.2$, range 17 - 26) at a medium-sized public university in the southeast who participated for course credit.

Procedure

Participants completed all items online via an anonymous data collection website. Participants were asked to “Describe a time in your life when you believe that you acted

courageously.” After describing this action, participants answered a variety of open-ended questions, including “Why do you believe that your action was courageous?” “How long ago was this incident?” “Was your courageous action in response to a specific situation or problem? Please describe the situation or problem.” (used to help code the action if needed) and “What sort of emotions or feelings did you experience JUST BEFORE your courageous action?” The latter was asked two more times using the timeframes “DURING” and “AFTER”.

Participants were also asked to make a variety of ratings of their own actions on a scale of 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*as much as I can imagine*), including “Compared to how you usually act, how courageous was this action?” (personal courage) and “Compared to the actions of most other people, how courageous was this action?” (general courage). Participants used the same scale to answer “How physically difficult was it for you to take this courageous action?” and asked the same question about how interpersonally difficult, emotionally difficult, and intellectually difficult the action was for them, “To what extent did you experience fear, nervousness, or apprehension JUST BEFORE your courageous act?” (and DURING and AFTER), “To what extent did you experience self-confidence, or a feeling of “I can do it” JUST BEFORE your courageous act?” (and DURING and AFTER). They were also asked to “Consider all of the possible outcomes of your courageous action, as they would have seemed BEFORE you performed your courageous act. In other words, take yourself back in time to just before you performed the courageous act you described above. To what extent was it possible that you would be in physical danger as a result of your action?” The last sentence was also reworded to ask about the possibility that “you would experience of physical discomfort”, “others

would think less of you”, and “you would need to accept something negative about yourself” as a result of the action. Outcome of the action was assessed by two questions: “To what extent did your courageous action change the situation for the better?” and “To what extent did your courageous action change the situation for the worse?” Finally, participants were asked to rate the question “To what extent was your courageous action taken to help yourself versus to help others?” on a scale from 0 (*totally taken to help myself*) to 10 (*totally taken to help others*).

Coding of Narrative Data

Narrative data were used to code three major variables: type of action, reasons why the action was courageous, and emotions experienced before, during, and after the action. For type of action, narrative data were coded by the authors and laboratory assistants in the following manner. First, answers for each question were read over and the entire set was discussed as a group. Categories were then discussed and created. Raters were given only the narrative answers to work with, not numerical ratings. Additionally, they were to start by considering only the answer to the first question, asking for the description of the action. If that answer was ambiguous, raters were next to consider the situation described by the person, followed by any other narrative data that might provide additional details. Four coders independently classified actions into one of the relevant categories. Coder agreement had a mean kappa of .76, with a range of .66 to .92; and with all but one coder pairing having a kappa > .70. Each respondent’s data was coded by three of the four coders. When two of the three raters agreed, their rating was used. When the three raters disagreed (6% of the cases), a fourth rater was asked to code

the data. The types of courageous action were then grouped into superordinate categories based on Putman's types of courage: physical, moral, and psychological.³

A similar strategy was used to code reasons why the action was courageous and types of emotions experienced. There were two major differences: categories were not exclusive: an individual answer could thus be assigned to more than one category, and disagreements were settled by conference between the raters until consensus was reached. Mean kappa for all categories prior to conference was .63. Types of emotions experienced were collapsed into coding for the presence of fear or anxiety, and for the presence of confidence.

The Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count program (LIWC 2001; Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2003) was also used to examine the reasons why an action was courageous. Specifically, the scores for self-referential pronouns and emotion words were computed for each response to the question "Why was this action courageous?"

Results

Personal Courage, General Courage, Gender, and Time Since Action

Personal and general courage ratings were moderately and significantly correlated, ($r = .26, p < .001$). A 2 x 2 ANOVA, with one within-participants factor (reference: personal or general) and one between-participants factor (gender) found a significant main effect of reference ($F(1, 248) = 4.94, p < .03$), moderated by a significant interaction with gender ($F(1, 248) = 9.85, p < .002$). Overall, our sample rated personal courage higher ($M = 6.3, SD = 1.9$) than general courage ($M = 5.8, SD = 2.3, t(249) = 2.89, p < .004$). General courage was higher for male participants ($M = 6.2, SD =$

2.0) than for female participants ($M = 5.5$, $SD = 2.4$, $t(248) = 2.36$, $p < .02$). There was no significant effect of gender for personal courage. Because of the gender effect on general courage, we added gender as an additional variable in all subsequent analyses. Unless otherwise indicated, the results of these analyses were parallel to those that did not include gender.

Of our total sample of 250, 248 participants gave usable estimates of how long ago the courageous action took place, with a mean of 3.3 years ago ($SD = 3.6$), a median of 2.0 years ago, and a mode of 1 year ago. Sixty-five (26%) of participants wrote about an event taking place within the past year. Years since action had a non-significant correlation with general and personal courage, both $r's = -.11$, $p's < .09$. An ANOVA comparing general and personal courage for those taking actions within the past two years ($n = 108$) to those taking action longer ago ($n = 140$) yielded similar results, with a nonsignificant main effect of age of action ($F(1, 246) = 2.73$, $p < .09$) and no interaction with type of courage ($F < 1$). Thus, more recent actions were rated nonsignificantly as more personally and more generally courageous.

Types of Risks and Difficulties

A factor analysis with a Varimax rotation of the eight ratings of difficulties and risks found three factors: Nonphysical Difficulty, Physical Risk and Difficulty, and Image Risk (see Table 2). These three factors accounted for 77% of the total variance, and are similar, but not identical, to the three types of courage (Vital or Psychological Courage, Physical Courage, and Moral Courage) discussed by Lopez et al. (2003) and Putman (1997, 2004). Questions were pooled according to these factors for subsequent analyses.

Female participants reported higher levels of nonphysical difficulty ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 2.8$) than males did ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 2.5$, $t(248) = 2.75$, $p < .01$). Conversely, males reported greater levels of physical risk and difficulty ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 3.0$) than did females ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 3.0$, $t(248) = 2.32$, $p < .02$). There were no gender differences in image risk ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 2.8$), which was relatively low for most participants.

Table 3 shows the correlation between personal and general courage ratings and types of risks and difficulties as well as differences between correlations with personal and general courage. While both personal and general courage had significant positive correlations with physical risk and difficulty, only personal courage correlated with nonphysical difficulty. Image risk was not significantly correlated with either type of courage. Adding gender as a variable in these analyses did not change the pattern of response.

Types of Actions and Altruism of Actions

Our coding of the narrative data found that nearly half of the courageous acts listed fell into one of three categories; each perhaps prototypical of the three superordinate action categories: preventing accidents (physical), standing up for what is right (moral), and trying something new (psychological). Table 4 presents the complete list of action types, examples of each type, as well as comparative data on risks and difficulties, percent helping mostly others, and gender balance. All but six (2%) of the responses fell into one of 16 categories.

Noteworthy among the gender effects were that only female participants mentioned dealing with a family crisis or performing in public. Proportionally more males than females reported standing up to others for what is right and helping an injured

person. Curiously, an equal proportion of males and females described saving someone from a physically dangerous situation. This is in contrast to findings from monumental samples such as Carnegie Medal winners, in which the vast majority of actors saving someone from a physically dangerous situation are male (e.g., Becker & Eagly, 2004).

For the most part, action categories did not translate into different ratings for personal and general courage. Of the 16 categories, only one, dealing with a family crisis, showed any significant effects on courage ratings. A 2 x 2 ANOVA, with one within participants factor (type of courage rating) and one between participants factor (if the action was dealing with a family crisis or another type of action) found a significant main effect of type of action, $F(1, 248) = 4.06, p < .04$, such that participants who took action in a family crisis rated themselves higher on both types of courage ($M = 7.0, SD = 1.1$) than did those citing other courageous actions ($M = 6.0, SD = 1.7$). Because only female participants supplied this type of action, gender effects could not be explored. For the remaining 15 types of actions there were no main effects of type of action or interactions between type of action taken and type of courage rating.

Superordinate action categories likewise were unrelated to personal or general courage. There was no main effect and no interaction for type of superordinate action category (physical, psychological, moral) and courage rating (personal or general); all F 's $< .7$. This was true for both the entire data set and for only those responses falling clearly into one of the superordinate categories. Paired planned comparisons between superordinate action categories on both personal and general courage likewise showed no significant effects, all t 's < 1.26 . Thus, personal and general courage seems to be capturing a different construct than that captured based solely on type of action.

Superordinate action categories had specific, expected relationships to type of risk and difficulty, see Table 4. Three ANOVAs were run on data sets falling into one of the superordinate action categories examining effect of type of action on risks and difficulties. Each was significant (minimum $F(2, 241) = 16.34, p < .01$). Post-hoc tests found physical risk and difficulty were rated higher for physically courageous actions than for morally or psychologically courageous actions (minimum $t = 4.30, p < .01$). Likewise, nonphysical difficulty was greater for both morally and psychologically courageous actions than for physically courageous actions (minimum $t = 4.35, p < .01$). Image risk was greatest for morally courageous actions (minimum $t = 3.64, p < .01$), although psychologically courageous actions were rated with higher image risk than physically courageous actions ($t(199) = 2.60, p < .02$).

Participant ratings of the extent to which the action was taken to help another person also was unrelated to personal or general courage (main effect and interaction F 's $(1, 248) < 1$).

Fear and Self-Efficacy Ratings

Fear and self-efficacy were evaluated with both responses to open-ended questions and with rating scales asking directly about fear and about confidence. For open-ended responses, our coding indicates a declining percentage of participants reported fear before (70.0%), during (42.4%) and after (7.6%) taking their courageous actions. Three 2×2 ANOVAs, with one within participants factor (type of courage) and one between participants factor (mention of fear) were conducted for each of the three time frames. Only fear mentioned during the action had any significant effect, with a significant interaction with type of courage ($F(1, 248) = 5.55, p < .02$). There was a trend

for participants who mentioned fear during the action to rate their general courage as lower than participants who did not mention fear during the action, $t(248) = 1.73, p < .09$), see Figure 1. There was no significant difference between the groups on personal courage, $t(248) = 1.09, p > .1$. Participants who mentioned fear during the action rated their personal courage significantly higher than their general courage, $t(105) = 4.12, p < .01$. There were no significant differences in personal or general courage for participants who did not mention experiencing fear during the action, $t(248) = .63, p > .1$. Although introducing gender as an additional factor weakened the effect to nonsignificance ($F(1, 246) = 2.42, p < .12$), the trend was in the same direction. There were no other interactions or main effects involving mention of fear.

Our coding of open-ended responses for themes of self-efficacy or confidence found an increasing percentage of participants reported confidence before (2.8%), during (11.6%) and after (18.0%) taking their courageous action. Parallel analyses to the mention of fear ANOVAs were conducted, and somewhat parallel results were found. Mention of confidence during the action had a significant interaction with type of courage ($F(1, 248) = 6.72, p < .01$), such that participants who mentioned confidence during the action rated their general courage higher than participants who did not mention confidence, $t(248) = 1.94, p < .05$; see Figure 1. Participants who did not mention confidence during the action rated their personal courage as significantly higher than their general courage ($t(220) = 3.68, p < .01$), while participants who did mention confidence during the action had no significant difference ($t(22) = 1.30, p > .1$). This interaction remained significant when gender was added as an additional independent variable ($F(1,$

246) = 6.01, $p < .01$). There were no other interactions or main effects involving mention of confidence before or after the action.

A similar picture emerged when participants were asked to rate their own level of fear and confidence. Figure 2 shows the decline in fear and the increase in confidence reported for before, during, and after the courageous action. All differences between time periods are significant (minimum $t(249) = 3.50$, all p 's $< .01$).

Participant ratings of fear and confidence were not significantly correlated before the action ($r = .04$, $p > .4$). However, once the action began, they were significantly and negatively correlated both during ($r = -.13$, $p < .05$) and after the action ($r = -.20$, $p < .01$). Thus, the more confidence the participant reported over time, the less fear they reported.

Most importantly, participant ratings of fear and confidence show a different pattern of correlation with personal and general courage. As can be seen in Table 5, fear at all three times correlates significantly and positively with ratings of personal courage but not general courage. The pattern is reversed for confidence, which correlates positively and significantly with general courage but not personal courage at all three times. General linear models, using fear or confidence ratings interacting with type of courage, confirm these differences, with several significant interactions indicating a different relationship between general and personal courage and fear or confidence. Specifically, the relationship of fear and personal courage was significantly stronger than the relationship between fear and general courage before and during the action; the relationship between confidence and general courage was significantly stronger than the relationship between confidence and personal courage before and after the action.

Reasons Why the Action Was Courageous

Reasons listed by participants for why their action was courageous were coded by study personnel into 10 non-exclusive categories, including a description of the action (40%), risk or danger (32%), need for the action (32%), a personal limitation of the actor (21%), preventing a negative outcome or leading to a positive outcome (18%), the voluntary nature of the action (15%), comparison to inaction by others (15%), overcoming negative emotions (14%), reflection about a universal or abstract statement about courage (7%), and taking the action automatically (4%). For each category, a 2 x 2 mixed design ANOVA was conducted, with one between-participants factor (type of reason was present versus type of reason was not present) and one within-participants factor (participants' own ratings of personal versus general courage). These analyses were re-run with gender as an additional factor, and these results will be reported only when gender changed the pattern of effects for the type of reason.

For reasons reflecting a particular characteristic of participants, there was a significant interaction between type of courage and type of reason given ($F(1, 248) = 6.53, p < .01$). As illustrated in Figure 3, participants who referred to their own personal characteristics rated their general courage as marginally lower than participants who did not refer to their own characteristics ($t(248) = 1.92, p < .06$). There was no significant difference for personal courage ($t(248) = 1.13, p > .2$). Adding gender to the analysis weakened the interaction to further nonsignificance ($F(1, 246) = 2.66, p < .10$), although the trend was still in the same direction.

For reasons reflecting emotion, a similar pattern emerges, with a significant interaction between type of courage and type of reason given ($F(1, 248) = 5.85, p < .02$).

As illustrated in Figure 3 participants who gave emotion as a reason why their action was courageous rated their general courage as lower than participants who did not ($t(248) = 2.98, p < .01$). As with personal characteristics, there was no significant effect on personal courage ($t(248) = .27, p > .7$). Adding gender weakened this effect to nonsignificance ($F(1, 248) = 2.15, p < .15$), although the trend is still in the same direction.

Mention of an abstract definition of courage also had a significant interaction with type of courage ($F(1, 248) = 7.92, p < .01$). As illustrated in Figure 3, participants who said their action was courageous because something about it fit an abstract definition of courage rated their personal courage as significantly lower than participants who did not ($t(248) = 3.24, p < .01$). There was no significant difference in general courage ($t(248) = .46, p > .6$). This interaction remained when gender was added to the analysis ($F(1, 248) = 7.11, p < .01$).

There was an interaction of gender and need for action on overall courage ($F(1, 248) = 4.46, p < .04$), with men who reported a need for action rating both types of courage higher (mean = 6.8, $SD = 1.3$) than men who did not report a need for action (mean = 5.9, $SD = 1.7, t(97) = 2.46, p < .02$). There was no difference in courage ratings for women ($t(149) = .45, p > .6$). There were no interactions with type of courage. There were no other significant interactions of type of reason and type of courage.

The LIWC program (2001; Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2003) was used to provide an alternate analysis of reasons why the action was courageous. Use of self-referential pronouns (self) and all emotion categories (positive emotion, positive feelings,

optimism, negative emotion, anxiety, sadness, and anger) were computed and correlated with personal and general courage.⁴

Significant effects were found for self-reference in reasons why the action was courageous (personal courage $r = .16$, $p < .01$, general courage $r = -.13$, $p < .04$). These effects were significantly different from each other ($F(1, 248) = 14.44$, $p < .01$). In other words, the more participants used self-referential pronouns in their explanation of why an action was courageous, the higher they rated their personal courage and the lower they rated their general courage.

For emotions, overall negative emotions ($r = -.14$, $p < .02$) and anxiety ($r = -.24$, $p < .01$) were significantly correlated with general courage. There were no significant correlations with personal courage (overall negative emotions $r = .05$, $p > .4$, anxiety $r = -.03$, $p > .5$). The differences in correlations between general and personal courage were significant ($F(1, 248) = 6.79$, $p < .01$ for overall negative emotions, $F(1, 248) = 8.34$, $p < .01$ for anxiety). In other words, the more a participant's reason reflected negative emotional states, especially anxiety, the lower the general courage rating. There were no significant effects of sadness, anger, or any positive emotions on courage ratings.

Outcome of the Action

Overall, participants rated their actions as highly successful, with participants rating the extent to which their actions made the situation better ($M = 8.1$, $SD = 2.3$) much higher than the extent to which their actions made the situation worse ($M = 0.9$, $SD = 1.8$, $t(248) = 36.17$, $p < .01$). Separate regression analyses on participants' ratings of personal and general courage, one using betterment and one using worsening of the situation as independent variables, found a significant main effect of betterment on

overall courage ($F(1, 248) = 6.14, p < .02$). The higher the rating for making the situation better, the higher the personal and general courage ratings ($r = .15, p < .03$). There were no interactions of betterment with type of courage, and no main effects or interactions for worsening the situation. Adding gender as an additional factor in the models did not alter the pattern of results. Thus, actions nominated as courageous are those which better the situation and do not make it worse, and the extent to which the situation is bettered has a positive correlation with both personal and general courage.

Discussion

Personal and General Courage

Overall, our findings suggest that personal courage differs from general courage in several important ways. First, our measurement of personal courage as a self-referenced measure and general courage as an other-referenced measure was supported by the types of reasons listed by participants. When asked why their action was courageous, participants who used more personal pronouns made higher personal courage ratings and lower general courage ratings. Participants who listed personal characteristics made lower general courage ratings, while those citing an abstract, generalized definition of courage made lower personal courage ratings.

More interestingly, personal and general courage differed in their emotional correlates. Greater fear was reported with both higher personal courage and lower general courage on a variety of measures. Personal courage had a positive correlation with ratings of fear at all three times. General courage had a negative correlation with negative and fearful emotional tone to the reason the action was courageous, and was lower for participants who mentioned experiencing fear during the action. Confidence showed the

opposite pattern, at least for general courage. General courage was positively correlated with ratings of confidence at all times measured, and was higher in participants who reported feeling confident during the action.

Thus, personal courage might alternatively be thought of as fearful courage, and general courage as fearless and confident courage. These emotional distinctions were first noted by Rachman and colleagues (Cox, Hallam, O'Connor, & Rachman, 1983; Rachman, 1984, 1990), who saw both lowered physiological and subjective measures of fear in decorated professional bomb disposal operators. By definition, an individual who has won an award for courage has demonstrated general courage on at least one occasion. If that person regularly performs courageous actions, it is likely that their personal courage for any given action may be low (e.g., "I save people from fires frequently: it's my job.") An alternate consideration is from Peterson and Seligman (2003)'s concept of danger or vulnerability: the presence of danger raises general courage while the presence of specific vulnerability raises personal courage.

In our study, personal courage was positively correlated with nonphysical difficulty, whereas general courage was not correlated with nonphysical difficulty. This factor of risk or difficulty seems to convey the notion of a struggle the person has with their emotions, with other people, and with their intellect. The greater struggle the person reports, the greater they rate their personal courage. These struggles might also be seen as unique to the person, thus raising personal courage. Additionally, although we did not ask it directly, it is quite likely that the most common emotional difficulty encountered was fear.

Perhaps in keeping with heroic male stereotypes (e.g., Becker & Eagly, 2004), men rated the general courage of their actions higher than women rated the general courage of their own actions. There was no gender effect for personal courage, suggesting that struggling against one's own demons is courageous for anyone. A related finding was that women reported greater levels of nonphysical difficulty and more frequently listed psychologically courageous actions, whereas men reported greater levels of physical risk and difficulty and more frequently listed physically or morally courageous actions. Noteworthy among other gender effects were that only female participants mentioned dealing with a family crisis. These gender effects parallel those found by Becker and Eagly (2004), who found more men in a sample of physical heroes and more women in samples of heroes taking extended risk or motivated by relationships.

Although personal and general courage appear to differ on fear, confidence, struggle, and perhaps even gender, there were many areas in which there were no differences. Despite the free responses of several participants indicating an abstract notion along the lines of "this type of action is always courageous," there were no differences in personal and general courage based on altruism or the type of action taken. In our sample at least, these variables were not related to the amount of courage an action demonstrated. Thus, this distinction may be orthogonal to Putman's (2004) typology of physical, moral, and psychologically courageous actions. The relationship of personal and general courage to vitally courageous actions, the third category in Lopez et al.'s (2003) typology, remains unknown as our sample included very few examples of vital courage. However, several scenarios for vital courage described by Finfgeld's (1999) discussion of courage as a process of pushing beyond the struggle to manage everyday

life may be a prototypical example of actions high in personal courage: the action is courageous only once one understands the individual's struggle.

Both image risk and the extent to which the situation was made worse by the action were also unrelated to any ratings of courage, but both of these variables had fairly low means and thus may have been subject to floor effects.

A further important point is that personal and general courage had a moderate and significant positive correlation. Thus, personal and general courage are not either opposite ends of a scale, nor are they orthogonal to each other. Rather, they appear to be two distinct but related dimensions of courage.

The Construct of Courage

There were some variables that were associated with increased courage of both types. Physical risk and difficulty had a small but positive correlation with both personal and general courage, as did changing the situation for the better. Thus, physically challenging actions and those that effected a positive change were especially courageous; both for the person taking them and for people in general.

The most universal effect for all data sets in this study was that courageous actions make a situation better and do not make a situation worse. The strength of this effect suggests that courageous actions, by definition, might need to involve making a situation better. Recent research in our lab (Hensel & Pury, 2005) suggests that these findings also hold true when considering the courageous actions of other people, both real and hypothetical. Hypothetical individuals who attempt a courageous action but end up worsening the situation are rated as less courageous as those who improve it. However, even these failed attempts were rated as at least somewhat courageous, suggesting that

success may not be a necessary feature of courage although it may be prototypical. Anecdotal evidence, too, suggests that success isn't always necessary: it is hard to imagine considering the actions of a firefighter entering the World Trade Center moments before its collapse as anything but courageous. Yet, his actions objectively would have done nothing to improve the situation. An intriguing but as-of-yet unanswered question is the nature of this prototypical feature: is it the actual success of the action; the motivation behind the action; or the wisdom to select the actions most likely to lead to success?

On a more methodological note, our data clearly indicate that one can study courageous actions in populations not selected as particularly courageous. Most of our participants wrote about an event that happened within the last three years; one quarter of our sample wrote about an event that took place within the past year. If courageous actions were rare within an unselected sample, one might expect participants would have written about more distant events. Additionally, these distant events might be more courageous, while our data shows a nonsignificant trend in the opposite direction. Of course, we did not measure the frequency of such actions in the participants' lives. If courage is in fact a property of persons as well as actions, we should expect to find that some people take courageous actions more often than others. Those individuals would likely rate their personal courage relatively low for any given action. Our findings suggest that they also might report more confidence, less fear, and find courageous actions less difficult to take.

Our data also have bearing on earlier definitions and classification frameworks for courage. The Aristotlean (trans. 1999) notion of courage as the mean of fear and

confidence is partially supported: both fear and confidence appear to be related to courageousness. As the action is occurring, fear levels decline and confidence levels rise. However, our data also suggest that actions taken in extreme fear may be high in personal courage and actions taken with extreme confidence may be high in general courage. Thus, future research examining the role of fear and confidence with ratings of courageousness should differentiate between personal and general courage.

In keeping with observers ranging from Plato (trans. 1961) to Lopez et al. (2003) and Putman (1997, 2004), a variety of different types of actions were nominated as courageous. Our risk and difficulty factors seem most supportive of Putman's (1997) philosophical distinction between physical courage, moral courage, and psychological courage. Physical courage clearly overlaps with our physical risk and difficulty factor. Putman's moral courage and its expression of authenticity may overlap with our image risk factor. This interpretation is supported by the increased image risk ratings made by participants who stood up for what is right. Finally, Putman's psychological courage may be represented by our nonphysical difficulty factor, at least to some extent. His notion of psychological courage involves threats to one's psychological well-being, while our factor focused on struggles the person may have in taking the action.

The most common types of actions nominated by our participants encompassed themes of physical courage (preventing an injury due to a dangerous environment, performing a physically risky action for the sake of the action), moral courage (standing up to others for what is right), and a theme not commonly mentioned in the literature, trying something new. There were limited themes of vital or psychological courage, if narrowly defined as dealing with threats to physical or mental health. Getting needed

treatment or helping in a family crisis were described by less than 10% of our sample. This may be partially explained by our sample of college students, young and presumably relatively healthy people. Perhaps these types of answers may be more common in an older or less healthy sample. However, overall themes of dealing with a specific situation despite personal limitations including fear was extremely common, especially when personal courage was rated high. Also in keeping with themes of overcoming fear, many of the categories of actions share features with the DSM categorization of anxiety disorders, such as social threats, animals, blood-injection-injury, and natural environment – particularly heights.

Future Directions

One possible explanation for these findings is as an extension of the shifting standards model (e.g., Biernat & Manis, & Kobryniewicz, 1997). Thus, given the same action, individuals who rate themselves cowards would score higher on personal courage than individuals who rate themselves heroes.

Research into specific types of courageous actions may benefit from considering the additional action of trying something new: a common theme in our results that has not been extensively researched. However, it is not difficult to think of paragons of this type of action: explorers, astronauts, and immigrants might be thought of as heroes in this context. In our study, this type of action was rated as especially high on nonphysical difficulty, and thus may be a prime area to find examples of personal courage.

One major limitation of our data is that this study relied upon retrospective self-report. Further investigations of courage should exploit natural settings for displays of courageous behavior and develop laboratory-based tasks calling for courage. We believe

that the development of such tasks may have been hindered in the past by the Catch-22 inherent in a high-bar definition of courage. Yet, our most basic finding suggests that courage exists in different degrees - it need not be monumental in nature. It also suggests that everyday people are able to report at least one prior courageous action - courage is not exclusively the domain of heroes. And, as researchers, we need not find heroes to study it.

Conclusion

Our findings support a fundamental distinction between general courage - actions that would be courageous for anyone to take - and personal courage - actions that are courageous only in the context of an individual's life. These dimensions are distinct from Putman's (2004) typology of physical, moral, and psychological courage, and have distinct psychological properties. Actions high in general courage are taken with much confidence and little fear. These actions are likely to be viewed by others as courageous, and may perhaps be more rewarded by society. These monumentally courageous actions, and related "submonumental" actions, have been especially prominent in courage research to date. Actions high in personal courage, on the other hand, involve acting despite fear, struggle, and personal limitations. Perhaps they are seen as especially noble by those who know the person well or who have a more an empathic view of others, such as trained psychotherapists. We believe that this distinction between personal and general courage can help advance the psychology of courage and may provide different pathways for interventions to increase courage.

Notes

- ¹ Address all correspondence to Cynthia Pury, Clemson University, Department of Psychology, 418 Brackett Hall, Clemson, SC 29634-1355, USA, or cpury@clemson.edu. We thank Elizabeth Adams, Candice Arnold, Kathleen Becht, Jacqueline Diehl, Angela Hall, Sherrill Horton, Katy Gregg., Erin Jenkins, Lauren Mickey, Jennifer Starkey, and Vera van der Vyver for their assistance with data coding, and several anonymous reviewers for their suggestions. Coding of the reasons why an action was courageous is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. SES-0353698. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.
- ² All evidence suggests that Dyess was dispositionally prone to courageous actions, at least to physically courageous actions. He was also posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for saving a group of Marines stranded behind enemy lines in WWII. The day following the rescue, Dyess was killed in action. He had refused to stay low under enemy fire, preferring instead to directly supervise the men in his command. He is the only person to have been awarded both the Carnegie Medal and the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest awards for civilian courage and military courage, respectively (Smith, 2004).
- ³ Putman's (1997) categories were used instead of Lopez et al's (2003) because initial inspection of the data suggested there were very few instances of vital courage.
- ⁴ Similar analyses were run using LIWC to parse the event descriptions, but no interpretable effects were found.

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Table 1. Proposed differentiation of Personal and General Courage.

	Personal Courage	General Courage
Comparison group	self	prototypical person
Why is action courageous?	personal limitation	obvious risk
Type of risk or obstacle	internal	external
Would action be courageous if performed by anyone?	no	yes
Fear present?	yes	no
Confidence present?	no	yes

Table 2: Varimax Loadings of Risk and Difficulty Questions

Item	Factor (% of variance)		
	Physical		
	Nonphysical	Risk or	
	Difficulty	Difficulty	Image Risk
	(29%)	(28%)	(20%)
How emotionally difficult was it for you to take this courageous action?	.88	-.08	.13
How interpersonally difficult was it for you to take this courageous action?	.87	.02	.14
How intellectually difficult was it for you to take this courageous action?	.77	.13	.19
To what extent was it possible that you would experience physical discomfort as a result of your action?	-.03	.92	.03
To what extent was it possible that you would be in physical danger as a result of your action?	-.14	.90	.02
How physically difficult was it for you to take this courageous action?	.30	.74	-.10
To what extent was it possible that others would think less of you as a result of your action?	.14	-.08	.88
To what extent was it possible that you would need to accept something negative about yourself as a result of your action?	.22	.05	.85

Table 3. Correlations Between Personal Courage, General Courage, and Types of Risks and Difficulties

	Personal Courage	General Courage	$F (1, 248)^1$	p
Nonphysical Difficulty	.30**	.04	8.78	.003
Physical Risk or Difficulty	.19**	.17**	.03	.86
Image Risk	.05	.03	.04	.85

¹ Results of general linear model interaction term with one between participant predictor (risk or difficulty factor) and one repeated measure (comparison group for courage ratings).

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 4: Types of Actions, Risk and Difficulty Ratings

						Risks and Difficulties (different superscripts denote differences between superordinate categories for each column)		
Superordinate Action Category	Type of Action	Sample Narrative	<i>N</i>	% of Total	Corrected % Female ¹	Nonphysical Difficulty	Physical Risk or Difficulty	Image Risk
Physical			114	46%	43%**	3.13^b (2.39)	5.55^a (2.52)	1.72^c (2.18)
	Preventing an injury due to a dangerous environment	Once I saved a child drowning in a pool.	50	20%	50%	2.40 (2.17)	5.29 (2.70)	1.43 (2.01)
	Helping an injured person	There was a car accident in front of my house, and I ran out to help the victims.	19	8%	28%*	2.72 (2.28)	3.82 (2.19)	1.47 (2.67)
	Preventing an assault, or aiding someone being assaulted	My friend was getting beat up by a neighborhood bully, so I ran over and pulled the bully off of him and punched him in the jaw.	14	6%	40%	4.98 (2.35)	6.55 (1.77)	2.32 (1.93)
	Confronting, escaping from, or fighting off a threatening animal	When I had to jump across a fence where a dangerous dog was in order to get a ball that was kicked over it when playing soccer.	12	5%	57%	3.08 (1.83)	6.00 (1.76)	1.54 (1.95)
	Performing a physically risky action for the sake of the action itself	I went skydiving out of an airplane.	11	4%	27%	4.33 (2.88)	7.00 (2.47)	3.00 (2.30)
	Continuing, or restarting, an action that was previously unpleasant	I was riding a horse and I was thrown off of him after barely clearing a jump. I got back on the horse despite being hit in the head extremely hard to the point	5	2%	30%	3.80 (1.56)	7.53 (2.06)	1.10 (1.67)

	Preventing crime, enforcing laws	I was seeing black splotches and feeling light headed. When I stopped a shoplifter from getting away.	3	1%	25%	4.11 (3.15)	5.89 (1.02)	2.50 (3.50)
Psychological			87	35%	64%**	5.03^a (2.80)	2.75^b (2.77)	2.63^b (2.78)
	Stepping outside one's comfort zone to try something new	Coming to college, when I didn't know anyone coming here and it was far away from home.	28	11%	62%	6.00 (2.42)	2.33 (2.25)	3.18 (2.43)
	Helping out in a medical crisis NOT caused by an accident	When I was 11 my dad had a heart attack and I called 911. I was very scared at this time because he was unconscious and at this young age I didn't know what to do.	16	6%	59%	2.98 (2.96)	1.81 (2.56)	2.72 (3.75)
	Dealing with a family crisis, such as death or divorce; or a similar crisis among close friends	I believe that I acted courageously when dealing with the death of my friend who died last summer in a car accident. It was an extremely rough time for all of my friends and myself, and I felt that I dealt with the pain as best as I could and honor her memory to this day.	13	5%	100%**	6.54 (1.97)	2.69 (2.63)	2.15 (1.93)
	Getting needed treatment, or getting someone else to seek needed treatment	When I decided to stay home from my second semester of college, because I had to go to a clinic for eating disorders. I was very sick and didn't want to leave school, but I knew it was best for me.	11	4%	53%	6.06 (2.26)	4.12 (3.44)	3.86 (3.31)
	Performing in public	I acted courageously when I would speak in front of my entire school. I have always been a	7	3%	100%*	4.43 (2.51)	3.19 (4.07)	3.14 (2.56)

	timid person, and it takes a lot of courage for me to speak in front of others.						
Dealing with being lost, or aiding someone who is lost	One time, my younger sister and I got lost in the woods....We were lost for about 4 hours... I had to be the strong one and try to lead us in the right direction. My sister was crying and I had to keep telling her that we were going to make it back home; that it was just a little farther. However, I felt that we weren't going to find our way back either, but I had to pretend that I knew where we were going and that we were going to make it back home. ...	6	2%	77%	3.06 (2.26)	2.22 (1.54)	0.42 (1.02)
Aiding the larger community	I set up a summer camp in my hometown for the inner-city children.	6	2%	57%	3.50 (3.24)	4.89 (2.83)	0.25 (0.42)
Moral		43	17%	39%*	5.02^a (2.49)	3.52^b (2.95)	4.59^a (3.11)
Standing up to others for what is right	Once, in high school, I overheard a girl in my class making fun of one of my friends. I turned around and asked her to stop and told her how hurtful making fun of people was.	36	14%	32%*	4.99 (2.55)	3.85 (3.02)`	4.53 (3.02)
Taking responsibility for a negative situation	I had disobeyed my parents severely and though they didn't know about it, I told them what I had done anyway.	7	3%	62%	5.14 (2.34)	1.81 (1.94)	4.93 (3.77)

Other	Any other action not covered above	I drove my grandma to _____. My grandma is a sweet old lady but doesn't shut her trap and is very opinionated about everything... she is always right and she needed a ride to a family event.	6	2%	77%	5.78 (2.69)	4.11 (4.30)	1.58 (2.60)
Total			250	100%	50%	4.18 (2.73)	4.19 (3.00)	2.53 (2.77)

¹ Estimated proportion if sample were 50% male, 50% female.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 5: Correlations of Personal Courage and General Courage with Fear and Confidence Ratings.

	Personal Courage	General Courage	$F (1, 248)^1$	p
Fear Before Action	.24**	-.02	9.55	< .01
Fear During Action	.28**	-.02	13.67	< .01
Fear After Action	.16*	.01	3.40	.07
Confidence Before Action	.04	.28**	12.09	<.01
Confidence During Action	.05	.16*	2.87	.09
Confidence After Action	.02	.19**	6.35	.01

¹ Results of general linear model interaction term with one between participant predictor (fear or confidence rating) and one repeated measure (comparison group for courage ratings).

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

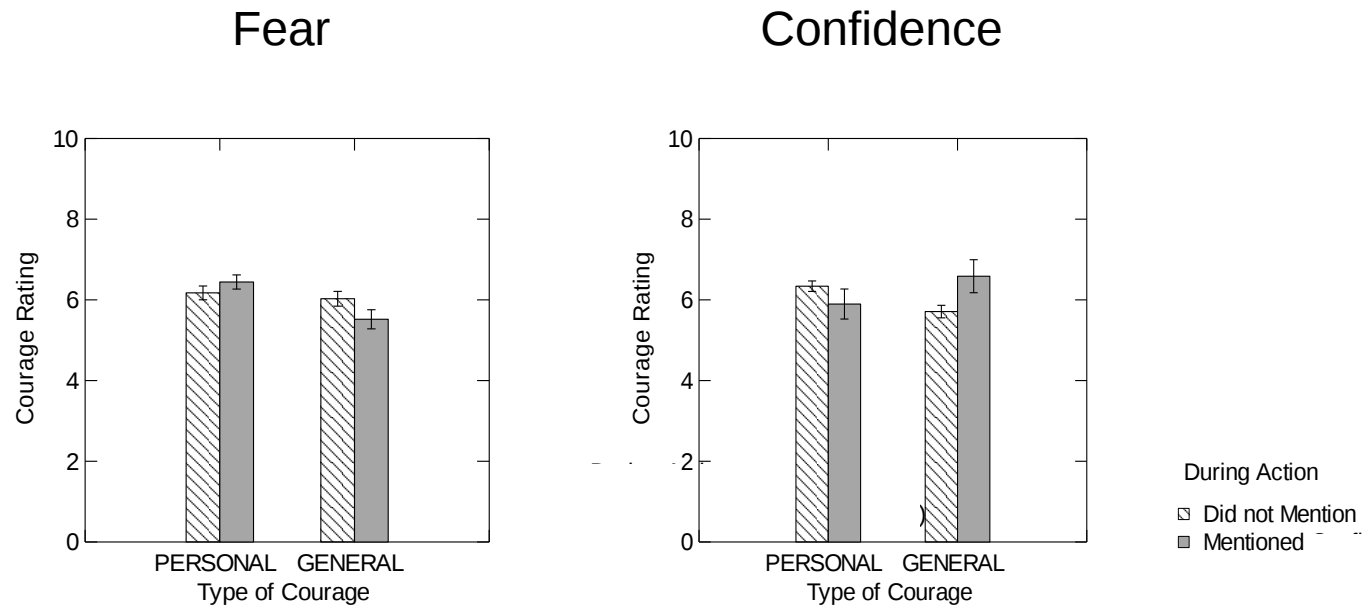


Figure 1. Mention of fear and confidence during action and type of courage rating.

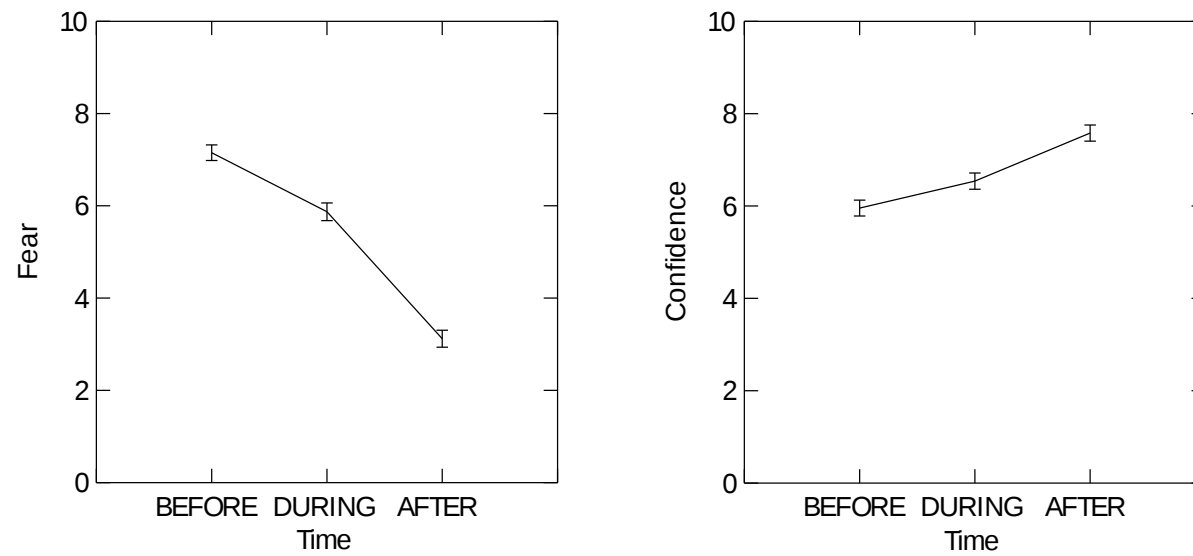


Figure 2. Ratings of fear and confidence for before, during, and after the courageous action.

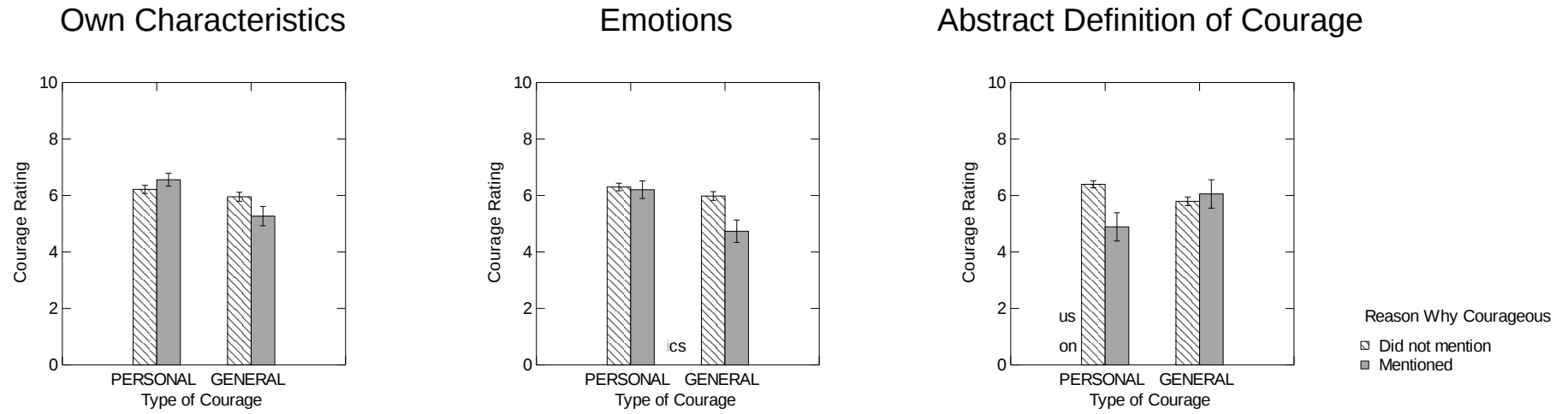


Figure 3. Mention of own characteristics, emotion, and abstract definition of courage as reason why action was courageous and type of courage.