Are Courageous Actions Successful Actions?

Cynthia L. S. Pury, Clemson University
Autumn D. Hensel
Abstract

When asked to describe a courageous action they have taken personally, people overwhelmingly describe an action with a successful outcome (Pury, Kowalski, & Spearman, 2007). Study 1 replicated these findings in observations of other people. Fifty participants described a courageous action taken by another person and made parallel ratings to Pury et al. Participants in Study 1 also described actions with overwhelmingly successful outcomes. In Study 2, 152 participants rated otherwise identical scenarios differing in success of outcome and attribution (internal vs. external) for outcome. Successful actions were rated as more courageous than unsuccessful outcomes, although this effect was attenuated for external attributions. Thus, we suggest that successful outcome is an unarticulated part of implicit theories of courage.

Key words: courage, values, attribution, success, implicit theories
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Courage is one of the most widely respected attributes in recorded human history (e.g., Dahlggaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). Despite this respect, psychologists have conducted only limited research on the psychology of courageous action (e.g., Lopez, 2007), and the definitional and prototypic features of courageous action are still under investigation (e.g., Rate, Clarke, Lindsay, & Sternberg, 2007). Recent studies have focused on lay and expert definitions of courage. Characteristics of courageous actions or actors commonly include: willfulness, intentionality, and deliberation; a noble or worthwhile goal or purpose; and overcoming personal threat, risk, or obstacles (e.g., Lopez, O’Byrne, & Peterson, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Pury & Woodard, 2009; Rate et al., 2007). In this paper, we argue that the success of the action, or making the situation better rather than worse, is part people’s implicit definition of courage.

Two distinct subjective states, fear and confidence, have been described as part of courageous states since Aristotle (Aristotle, trans. 1999). Fear diminishes during training for physical courage (Rachman, 1984; 1990) and while taking courageous action (Pury et al., 2007). While some authors maintain the importance of the presence of fear for the existence of courage (e.g., Rachman, 1984; 1990), others suggest that it is merely a common, but not necessary, feature (e.g., Pury et al., 2007; see also Rate et al. 2007). In any case, fear appears to be the likely subjective response to the personal threat or risk included in nearly all definitions.

In addition to fear, some authors also describe the importance of confidence for courage. Aristotle (trans. 1999) described courage as the midpoint of fear and confidence. Rachman (1990) found an increase in confidence during training for physical courage, and Pury et al. (2007) found increasing confidence during the course of a courageous action. A similar state,
hope, or having the ability to bring about desired outcomes, also is common in self-reported courageous action (Pury & Kowalski, 2007). It may be that this sense of confidence stems from seeing that one is succeeding in achieving his or her goals for the courageous action.

Facing a personal risk -- or its emotional outcome, fear -- are commonly mentioned in defining and characteristic features of courage (see Rate et al., 2007), and risk or peril is a commonplace part of actions praised by society as courageous (see Pury & Starkey, in press). But what about success? Is courage merely an attempt, or need it succeed? Success is rarely a part of formal definitions of courage. Of the 27 formal definitions reviewed by Rate et al., only a few mention success of the action, and then only obliquely. Cavanagh and Moberg (1999) describe courage as “the ability to endure what is necessary to achieve a good end, even in the face of great obstacles” (p. 2). Klein and Napier (2003) describe the path to rigor, one of their components of courage, as inventing disciplines and making them stick. Goud (2005) defines courage as including “appropriate action.” While these three definitions suggest that success is in some way a part of courage, Shelp (1984) describes the goal of a courageous action as something that might not be realized. Research on lay theories of courage paints a similar picture: courage lies in the attempt to overcome danger/fear/or risk for a good cause, but the outcome of that attempt is not mentioned (Rate et al., 2007).

Yet what people say they do and what they actually do can be quite different. The first author used to treat individuals with combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder and found that her clients were remarkably unwilling to apply the “courage” label to their own actions when a comrade died despite their (objectively) brave attempts to save him. The same picture comes from the typically successful efforts praised as courageous by society in the current day United States. For example, Pury and Starkey (in press) reviewed one year’s worth of actions for which
people have been awarded the Carnegie Hero Medal, the highest civilian award for bravery in the United States awarded for saving another person from extreme physical danger. The potential victims were rescued in 89% of the cases, with only 11% of the cases including an unsuccessful rescue attempt in which one or more of the victims died. All but one of those unsuccessful cases also included the death of the rescuer (and in that case two of three potential victims were rescued), while most of the successful rescues did not include the death of the rescuer. Pury and Starkey conclude that many awards for courage appear to have an implicit or explicit requirement of a successful outcome.

We propose that this apparent discrepancy between definitions and awards can be resolved if success is an unarticulated part of people’s implicit theories of courage. Implicit theories influence our behavior (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995) and have been investigated as a way to differentiate courageous pro-social actions from other prosocial actions (Greitemeyer, Osswald, Fischer, & Frey, 2007). Implicit theories also guide our recall of events (Ross, 1989). While recent research on implicit theories have examined them as equivalent to lay theories, which can be articulated by the individuals holding them (e.g., Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Franiuk, Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002), theoretically implicit theories can also contain unarticulated, perhaps nonconscious elements that shape behavior as well (e.g., Gilchrist, 2009; Rosenberg, & Jones, 1972). If success is part of implicit theories for courage, then we may recall actions with a successful outcome as more courageous than actions with an unsuccessful outcome, even they both were the result of similar psychological processes (see Pury & Starkey, in press).

Pury et al. (2007) report that when everyday people are asked to describe their own courageous actions, they overwhelmingly described as making the situation better and not
making the situation worse; in other words, succeeding. Because participants were reporting on their own actions, these findings might reflect impression management (e.g., Leary & Kowalski, 1990) or the better-than-average effect (e.g., Alicke, 1985), rather than an implicit requirement for success. In other words, the effect might occur because we either strategically try to make ourselves look better to others or we believe that we are in fact better than most people on a given dimension. Thus, when asked to give an example of a courageous action, participants select one with a successful outcome because it makes them look better or because they believe they are better. On the other hand, if success is part of an implicit definition of courage, then the same effect should be observed in participants who are asked to describe the courageous actions taken by others, as an implicit theory of courage would lead to disproportionate recall of successful actions taken by both self and by others.

In Study 1, we compared Pury et al.’s findings with a similar sample asked to describe a courageous action they observed in another person. If impression management or the better-than-average effect causes the success effect, it should be diminished in a sample asked to describe the courageous actions of others. If success is part of people’s implicit theories of courage, it should be present in the recall of the courageous actions of other people as well as in the recall of one’s own courageous action.

The relationship between confidence and success was also investigated. If the confidence described as part of courage is due to perceived success, then confidence ratings should be positively correlated with success in both conditions.

Finally, we hypothesize that there should be some differences between reports of one’s own courageous action and those of other people. These differences should be along dimensions that differentiate types of courage, but are not central to an implicit definition of all courageous
actions. Based on the different reference groups, courageous actions of others should be higher in general courage, or courageousness of the action compared to other people’s action, and lower in personal courage or the courageousness of the action compared to one’s own behavior (Pury et al., 2007). Additionally, describing the courageous action of another person is likely to be closer to a pure accolade view of courage (Pury & Starkey, in press), and thus more similar to a prototypic and heroic view of courage – higher in physical and moral courage compared to psychological (or vital) courage (see Lopez, O’Byrne, & Peterson, 2003; Pury et al., 2007).

Thus, participants in the Other condition should rate the action they describe as higher in the physical risk and difficulty associated with physical courage, higher in the image risk associated with moral courage, and/or lower in the nonphysical difficulty associated with psychological courage (see Pury et al., 2007).

Study 1

Method

Participants

Participants in the Self condition were the 250 undergraduate students (151 female, 99 male, mean age = 18.8, \( sd = 1.2 \), range 17 - 26) reported in Pury et al. 2007. Participants in the Other condition, whose data were collected for this study, were 50 undergraduates (38 female, 12 male; mean age 18.42, \( sd = 0.76 \), range 17 - 21). All participants were enrolled in a psychology course at the same medium-sized public university in the southeastern United States and participated online for course credit.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire distributed to the Other sample of students asked the same questions as the questionnaire used in Pury et al. (2007). Participants described a courageous action then
answered several follow-up questions about the action. In Pury et al., participants described a time they had acted courageously. In the Other sample collected for this study, participants described “a time in your life when you observed someone else acting courageously.”

Of specific interest to this report, participants were asked to rate *To what extent did the courageous action change the situation for the better?* and *To what extent did the courageous action change the situation for the worse?* Outcome data were analyzed as both ratings of the extent to which the action changed the situation for the better and for the worse, and as a categorization based on the difference between the ratings of better and worse: improving (positive value), equivalent (0), or worsening (negative value).

Participants in both conditions were asked to rate the extent to which the actor felt *fear, nervousness, or apprehension* and felt *self-confidence, or a feeling of ‘I can do it’* before, during, and after the courageous action.

They were also asked to rate other characteristics of the actions that might be expected to differ between one’s own actions and the actions of another. These included the personal courageousness (*Compared to how you believe this person usually acts, how courageous was this action?*) and general courageousness of the action (*Compared to the actions of most other people, how courageous was this action?* See Pury et al., 2007) and eight items assessing types of difficulty and risk from Pury et al. (e.g., *How physically difficult was it for the person to take this courageous action?*) Following Pury et al., risk and difficulty items were collapsed into three subscales: Physical Risk and Difficulty, Nonphysical Difficulty, and Image Risk, by taking the mean of all items on each subscale. Physical Risk and Difficulty includes foreseeable physical risks and experienced or presumed experienced physical difficulties in taking the action. Nonphysical Difficulty includes experienced or presumed experienced emotional, interpersonal,
and intellectual difficulty in taking the action. Image Risk includes foreseeable risks to one’s image with others, and to one’s view of the self. Nonphysical Risk and Difficulty have been shown to be elevated in situations demanding either moral courage or psychological courage, while Physical Risk and Difficulty is elevated in physical courage, and Image Risk is elevated in moral courage (Pury et al., 2007).

Participants in the Other condition were also asked to what extent they knew the actor, to what extent they talked to or communicated with the person about the action, and to what extent they were informed about the action by the media.

All ratings were made on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 10 (as much as I can imagine), and, as with Pury et al. (2007), participants in the Other condition completed the survey online.

Results

Relationship with actor and knowledge about the action in the Other condition: One participant did not answer questions about knowing the actor, thus the N for these data is 49. In general, participants in the Other condition reported that they knew the actor extremely well, with a mean of 7.2 (sd = 3.6) and a median of 9.0. They reported talking to the actor about the action at a significantly higher level (m = 4.6, sd = 3.7) than hearing about the action in the media (m = 1.4, sd = 2.4, t (48) = 4.66, p < .001, d’ = .67). Thus, participants in the Other condition generally rated actions taken by people they knew well and had talked about with the actor him or herself rather than actions taken by strangers and reported in the media. Of ratings of the actors’ subjective states of fear and confidence and the type of risks and difficulties faced, none were significantly correlated with knowing the actor and only experienced fear after the action was significantly correlated with talking to the actor about the act, r = -.32.
**Success of outcome:** A 2 x 2 mixed-design ANOVA, with one between-participants factor (group: Self or Other) and one within-participants factor (outcome: Better or Worse) found a significant main effect for outcome, $F(1, 298) = 938.31, p < .001, d' = 2.31$). As illustrated in Figure 1, there were no significant main effects or interaction based on group (main effect of group $F < 1$, interaction $F(1, 298) = 1.47, p = .23$). Contrary to the impression management or better-than-average hypotheses, the effect of outcome is slightly larger in the Other group ($d' = 2.42$) than in the Self group ($d' = 2.29$), but this trend was not significant.

Results using categories extrapolated from the difference between Better and Worse scores told a similar story. Courageous actions overwhelmingly improved the situation. Over 94% of actions (94.0% in the Other condition; 94.8% in the Self condition) were classified as improving the situation, while less than 2% (2.0% in the Other condition, 1.2% in the Self condition) worsened the situation. The remaining 4.0% in each condition described actions that had an equivalent effect. This represents significantly more actions that improved the situation compared to worsening it or having an equivalent effect (minimum $\chi^2 = 249.95, p < .001$), with no effect of condition ($\chi^2 = 0.20, p = .90$).

Inclusion of gender of participant or gender of actor did not alter the pattern of effects, nor interact with them (maximum $F(1,296) = 1.10, p > .2$).

**Relationship with fear and confidence:** A composite Improvement score was created by subtracting Worse scores from Better scores. As this measure was markedly skewed (skewedness = -1.07, $SES = .15$ for Self condition; skewedness = -1.57, $SES = .34$ for Other condition), scores were converted to ranks within condition. As can be seen in Table 1, confidence was positively and significantly correlated with Improvement at all three times for the Self condition, and after the action for the Other condition. Fear, on the other hand, was only
significantly (and negatively) correlated with Improvement after the action within the Self condition.

**Characteristics of Actions: Personal and general courage:** A 2 x 2 mixed-design ANOVA, with one between-participants factor (group: Self or Other) and one within-participants factor (type of courage: Personal or General) found a significant main effect of group ($F(1, 298) = 8.05, p < .005, d' = .74$) moderated by a significant interaction of group and type of courage ($F(1, 298) = 15.00, p < .001$). Participants in the Self condition rated the personal courage of their actions ($m = 6.3, sd = 1.9$) significantly higher than the general courage of their actions ($m = 5.3, sd = 2.3, t(249) = 2.89, p < .005, d' = .18$). In contrast, participants in the Other condition rated the general courage of the actions they described ($m = 7.3, sd = 1.9$) as significantly higher than the personal courage of the actions ($m = 6.3, sd = 2.2, t(49) = 3.24, p < .003, d' = .46$). There was no main effect of type of courage ($F(1, 298) = 2.17, p = .15, d' = .08$). Thus, as might be expected, participants in the Other condition described actions that were more courageous for the typical person, while participants in the Self condition described actions that were more courageous for them alone.

**Characteristics of actions: Risks and difficulties:** A 2 x 3 mixed-design ANOVA, with one between-participants factor (group: Self or Other) and one within-participants factor (type of risk or difficulty: Physical Risk and Difficulty, Nonphysical Difficulty, and Image Risk) found a significant main effect of type of risk or difficulty, $F(1, 298) = 50.79, p < .001$, which was modified by a significant interaction of type of risk or difficulty and condition, $F(1, 298) = 7.09, p < .002$. As hypothesized and as illustrated in Figure 2, participants in the Other condition rated Physical Risk and Difficulty of the action they described as significantly higher than participants in the Self condition, $t(298) = 3.33, p < .001, d' = .54$. Contrary to hypotheses, there were no
significant differences in Nonphysical Difficulty ($t(298) = 1.26, p = .21, d' = .19$) or Image Risk ($t(298) = 1.56, p = .12, d' = .24$).

Discussion

When asked to describe a courageous action, individuals overwhelmingly described actions that improved the situation. This effect was independent of whether or not the individual described their own action or the action of another person, and is more consistent with implicit theories of courage that includes success than with simple impression management or the better-than-average effects. Moreover, self-reported feelings of confidence and presumed feelings of confidence in others correlated significantly and positively with improvement to the situation. Confidence, thus, may be the subjective response generated by observations that one is succeeding.

One alternative explanation might be that individuals have a unitary view of courageous actions taken by themselves or by another person. In other words, we view our own courageous actions the same as we view the courageous action of another person. This interpretation is not supported by the data, however. As hypothesized, participants in the Other condition described actions that were higher on general courage than on personal courage, while the reverse was true for participants in the Self condition. Consistent with the hypothesis that participants in the Other condition would describe more prototypical acts of courage, participants in the Other condition also described actions that were higher on physical risk and difficulty than participants in the Self condition. In other words, compared to those in the Self condition, participants in the Other condition were more likely to describe acts of physical courage that would be courageous for anyone. This is in keeping with Pury et al.’s (2007) conceptualization of general courage as
applicable to anyone and personal courage as based on risks unique to the individual and thus less obvious to others.

Another set of alternative explanations is that in the Other condition, many participants knew or otherwise identified with the actors they wrote about. Thus, participants in the Other condition might be identified with successful actors (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, & Sloan, 1976) or extend their own better-than-average effects to close friends and family members. Actors may have engaged in impression management techniques in telling the story of their action to our participants. Recall may have been affected by a bias for positive memories, more likely produced by successful actions. All of these explanations are possible in Study 1 because participants selected a real-life courageous action from memory.

A more stringent test of the hypothesis that success is part of implicit lay theories of courage would be to eliminate the opportunity for participant selection of actor or action and instead ask participants to rate the courageousness of a given set of scenarios in which strangers take potentially courageous actions. Attributions for success and failure may matter in these judgments. People make different attributions for positive and negative behaviors in others, with positive behaviors typically attributed to social demands and negative behaviors caused by traits, although this effect may be due in part to the fact that negative behaviors are less normative than positive ones (Ybarra, 2002). Courageous acts, by many definitions are nonnormative (see Rate et al., 2007), and thus internal attributions for success or failure may have a greater effect on perceived courageousness than external attributions. Additionally, anecdotal evidence suggests that courage and wisdom may be closely linked virtues (Snyder & Lopez, 2006); acting unwisely in the face of danger may be better considered foolhardiness than courage. In the case of many courageous actions, it could be argued that wisdom lies in selecting the correct action, based on
not only the demands of the situation, but also on the actor’s own individual strengths and weaknesses. Thus, actors who succeed or fail based on their own abilities -- or lack of abilities -- may be judged as more courageous or less courageous than actors who succeed or fail due to unforeseeable circumstances.

Study 2

If success is part of an implicit definition of courage, as suggested by Study 1, then people should rate otherwise identical actions as more courageous when they have a successful outcome than when they do not. To the extent that this effect reflects the wisdom of the actor, it should be larger when outcomes are attributed internally rather than externally. Finally, we wanted to explore the relationship between any observed success effect and participant’s own definition of courage; thus we asked participants to provide us a definition of courage at the end of the experiment. If success is part of an unarticulated implicit theory of courage rather than an explicit lay theory of courage, then most participants should not include success of action in their stated definition of courage. Moreover, participants who do include success in their definition of courage should show similar differences between successful and unsuccessful actions compared to those who do not include it in their definition.

Method

Participants

Participants were 153 undergraduate students at a medium-sized public university in the Southeast. They received course credit in a psychology class or $7 for their in-person participation. Due to experimenter error, the responses of one female participant were removed from the data set, creating a total of 152 participants (103 female, 48 male).
Apparatus

We used the top three categories of courageous actions from Pury et al., 2007 -- facing physical danger, standing up for what is right, and trying something new -- to create 12 scenarios representing physical courage, moral courage, and psychological courage (Putman, 1997, 2004) respectively. Then, we wrote four different outcomes for each of the base scenarios: internally attributed success, internally attributed failure, externally attributed success, and externally attributed failure. See Table 2. An example base scenario from the moral courage condition follows:

*Brittany was walking down the street when she encountered a group of people teasing a mentally disabled person. The person looked distressed, unable to escape the crude comments. Brittany was intimidated by the crowd, but decided to do something to help the person out.*

The four different endings for the example scenario above were:

*She walked over to the crowd and told them to stop. Brittany had always been talented in dealing with large crowds and stood her ground. The harassers left the mentally disabled person alone.* (Internal Success)

*However, Brittany was not talented at persuasion, and after she told the crowd to stop, they didn’t react except to become more provoked. Consequently, they harassed the mentally disabled person even more.* (Internal Failure)

*She walked over to the crowd to tell them to stop. Some other people had noticed the situation and came to Brittany's aid. The crowd left at the sight of her and her companions nearing.* (External Success)
However, after she told the crowd to stop, a few of the harassers commented loudly that, "People need to mind their own business." The crowd became more provoked, and consequently they harassed the mentally disabled person even more. (External Failure)

Endings were blended seamlessly with the base stories, with each scenario one paragraph long. Each participant completed a questionnaire consisting of each of the 12 base scenarios with a single outcome, and with each scenario taken by a different actor. Thus, each participant read the above base scenario but only one of the four listed outcomes. The four outcome categories for each scenario were counterbalanced between participants, such that each participant read, for example, one moral courage scenario with its internal success outcome, a second moral courage scenario with its internal failure outcome, a third moral courage scenario with its external success outcome, and a fourth moral courage scenario with its external failure outcome. Each questionnaire was counterbalanced using a Latin-square arrangement to ensure that each participant received each of the four outcomes within all three categories.

To reduce carryover effects, three different randomized orders of each of the four counterbalanced questionnaires were created, for a total of 12 different order/scenario combinations. Additionally, because gender effects have been noted in some of the previous literature (e.g., Evans & White, 1981; Becker & Eagley, 2004), male and female forms of the 12 orders were written and participants were given scenarios with only same-gendered actors. There was no effect of gender on the pattern of results.

To ensure the validity of the questionnaires, a pilot study was conducted, using 10 interns from the Clemson University psychology department. They were asked how much effort each actor put into the potential courageous action, and to what degree the outcome was attributable to internal or external factors. Thus, we pilot tested the scenarios to be sure they only varied
according to internal and external attribution and not according to the effort of the individual described.

**Data Collection**

Participants were recruited via an online participant website, or emails and flyers on the campus. All questionnaires were completed in a group setting. Participants were instructed to read each scenario, without reviewing past scenarios. They then answered three questions about the level of courage shown by the actor in the scenario, derived from Jenkins and Pury (2007).

- **On a scale of 0 to 10, how courageous were ______’s actions during this scenario?**
- **On a scale of 0 to 10, to what extent did ______ rise to the occasion during this scenario?**
- **On a scale of 0 to 10, how brave were ______’s actions compared to the actions of most other people?**

The last page of the questionnaire asked for the age of the participant, as well as their own definition of a courageous act.

**Data Scoring and Coding**

Following Jenkins and Pury (2007), the responses to the three questions were combined to create one composite courage rating (*Cronbach’s alpha* = .82). Results were then analyzed using a 2 (outcome: success or failure) x 2 (attribution: internal or external) x 3 (action type: physical, moral, or psychological) within-participants ANOVA. Results from the first question (**How courageous were _____’s actions during this scenario?**) were also analyzed separately, however, results paralleled those reported for the composite score and are not reported here.

Definitions of courage were coded based on no mention of success of the outcome versus two explicit mentions of outcome: outcome must be successful for action to be courageous, or outcome does not matter for courageousness. Three coders placed each definition into one of
three categories: No Mention of outcome (e.g., “A courageous act is when someone puts themselves in danger or in an uncomfortable position for the betterment of someone else or themselves.”), Success Needed (e.g., “A courageous act is one in which a person takes a risk, stepping outside of what is comfortable to do something they know is right. However, I also think within courage is the presence of mind to not act when a person knows their act could make the situation worse.”), or Success Does Not Matter (e.g., “A courageous act is one in which a person risks their own well being for the sake of others, who stands for what they know to be right. The act may not be entirely successful, but the intention is there and that’s what makes the difference.”). Raters agreed with each other on over 90% of cases: when disagreements occurred they were resolved by majority categorization. Thus, three groups of participants; No Mention, Success Needed, or Success Does Not Matter, were created based on participants’ stated definition of a courageous action. Most participants (90%, n = 137) did not mention the success of the action in their definition of courage. Of the participants who did mention success, only one participant (< 1%) indicated that successful actions are more courageous, with 14 participants (9.2%) explicitly stating that courageous action does not depend on the outcome.

The same analysis was re-run adding a between-participants factor: Definition (No Mention vs. Success Does Not Matter). Data from the one participant in the Success Needed condition were excluded.

Results

All Participants: There were significant main effects for outcome \( (F(1, 151) = 141.80, p < .001, d’ = .97) \) and for action type \( (F(2, 302) = 310.92, p < .001) \). There were also significant interactions of outcome x attribution \( (F(1, 151) = 22.74, p < .001) \) and attribution x action type \( (F(2, 302) = 12.43, p < .001) \). All of these effects were modified by a significant triple
interaction of outcome, attribution, and action type, $F(2, 302) = 8.36, p < .003$. See Figure 3. Inclusion of gender as an independent variable did not alter the pattern of results, maximum $F < 1$.

For Physical Courage scenarios, there was a significant main effect of outcome ($F(1, 151) = 71.00, p < .001, d' = .68$) such that successful actions were rated higher on the composite scale than unsuccessful actions. There was also a significant main effect of attribution ($F(1, 151) = 26.99, p < .001, d' = .42$) such that scenarios with internal outcome attributions were rated as more courageous than scenarios with external attributions. There was no significant interaction ($F(1, 151) = 0.00, p = 1$).

For Moral Courage scenarios, there was a significant main effect of outcome ($F(1, 151) = 32.81, p < .001, d' = .46$) such that successful actions were rated as more courageous than unsuccessful actions. This was modified by a marginal interaction of type of outcome x attribution ($F(1, 151) = 3.36, p < .07$), with a slightly larger effect of outcome for internally attributed outcomes than for externally attributed outcomes. However, for both internal attributions ($t(151) = 5.02, p < .001, d' = .41$) and external attributions ($t(151) = 3.08, p < .003, d' = .25$), actions with successful outcomes were rated as significantly more courageous than actions with unsuccessful outcomes. There was no main effect of attribution ($F(1, 151) = .06, p > .80, d' = .02$).

For Psychological Courage scenarios, there was a significant main effect of outcome ($F(1, 151) = 51.52, p < .001, d' = 58$) such that successful outcomes were, once again, rated as more courageous than unsuccessful outcomes. There was also a marginal main effect of attribution ($F(1, 151) = 3.51, p < .07, d' = .15$). Both were modified by a significant interaction of outcome x attribution ($F(1, 151) = 34.55, p < .001$). Although internally attributed success
was rated as significantly more courageous than internally attributed failure \( t(151) = 8.97, p < .001, d' = .73 \), the difference between externally attributed success and failure did not reach significance \( t(151) = 1.55, p < .13, d' = .13 \). It was, however, in the same direction, with success rated as more courageous than failure.

Overall, Physical Courage scenarios were rated as more courageous on the composite scale than Moral Courage scenarios \( t(151) = 14.94, p < .001, d' = 1.21 \), which were rated as more courageous than Psychological Courage scenarios \( t(151) = 12.38, p < .001, d' = 1.00 \).

**Definition of Courage:** Despite stating that courage is not dependent on a successful outcome, data from participants who explicitly defined courage as not requiring success closely resembled data from participants who made no mention of outcome. Results of an ANOVA found no significant main effects or interactions with type of definition (maximum \( F(1, 149) = 1.00, p > .31 \)). Within participants effects followed the pattern described above.

Participants who did not mention outcome in their definition of courage rated successful actions \( m = 7.37, sd = 6.39 \) as significantly more courageous than unsuccessful action \( m = 6.38, sd = 1.24, t(136) = 11.35, p < .001, d' = .97 \). Parallel results were found for participants who explicitly stated success does not matter: despite their definitions, they also rated successful outcomes as more courageous \( m = 7.20, sd = 1.10 \) than unsuccessful outcomes \( m = 6.49, sd = .87; t(13) = 3.30, p < .006, d' = .88 \).

**Discussion**

Actions that have a successful outcome are rated as more courageous than actions with an unsuccessful outcome. While attenuated when an external attribution is present for moral and psychological courage, none-the-less the effect of success appears remarkably robust. Even participants who explicitly stated that the courageousness of an action is based on the actor’s
intent rather than the outcome show a bias for success. Moreover, a very small minority of participants even mentioned success in their definitions of courage. Thus, the effect of success on perceived courage may be operating at least partly out of conscious awareness, as would be expected if success is part of an unarticulated and implicit theory of courage.

Physically courageous situations were rated as more courageous than morally courageous situations, which were rated as more courageous than psychologically courageous situations. This may be due to the more prototypical nature of physical courage. Alternatively, the observed differences between types of action may also be due to differences in the magnitude or type of risk of the action, the worthiness of the goal pursued by the action (Pury & Starkey, in press), or the likelihood that the participants themselves have been in a similar situation. The specific effect of these differences is a question for future research.

External attributions attenuated the impact of success most for situations rated as less courageous overall, with no effect of attribution for physical courage, a marginal effect for moral courage, and a significant effect for psychological courage. Thus, the wisdom to know one’s own limitations might matter most for situations furthest from our prototypic view of courage or with the lowest risk or benefit levels.

General Discussion

These studies support success as an unarticulated component of implicit lay theory of courage. Although initial results from Pury et al. (2007) might have been due to impression management or the better-than-average effect, results of Study 1 suggest that this is not the case. Participants describing the courageous actions of another person described highly successful actions to the same extent as participants describing their own actions. Results of Study 2
demonstrate the success effect in a controlled experiment, and find the effect even in those who explicitly state that outcome does not matter.

Results of Study 2 also suggest that successful completion of an action is not required to think of an action as at least moderately courageous. Over 90% of participants who mentioned outcome of action in their definition of courage stated clearly that unsuccessful actions can be courageous. Unsuccessful actions were still rated as fairly courageous, with only internal failure of a psychologically courageous action rated as less than 5.0 on a 0 – 10 scale. However, results of both studies clearly indicate that successful actions are appraised as more courageous than unsuccessful actions. This was true even when the reason for success or failure has nothing to do with the actor. Thus, while success is part of an implicit theory of courageous action, it is not a necessary part.

Perhaps this link between courage and success reflects the relationship of courage and wisdom (e.g., Snyder & Lopez, 2006). Within psychology, this view may be most carefully articulated by Goud’s (2005) statement that “The courageous person is facile in using two other classic virtues: wisdom and judgment,” (p. 106). Successful actions are actions that accomplish their intended goals, unsuccessful actions do not. These outcomes might provide the ultimate test of the wisdom of following a specific course of action, and thus, by extension, its courageousness. Results of Study 2 suggest that the wisdom of knowing your own limitations might be more important for judgments of less prototypical courageous actions.

Of course, all of these judgments of courageousness were made for actions that had already occurred and for which the outcome was known: in reality for the real events recalled in Study 1 and in theory for the hypothetical events rated in Study 2. Future research should consider the role of likely success or failure in actions that are ongoing or yet to be initiated.
Additionally, popular media commonly describe the success of apparent underdogs against long odds as courageous. Do individuals who have internal characteristics indicating they should fail but who none-the-less succeed appear more courageous than individuals whose internal characteristics point toward success? If so, one might speculate that these successful underdogs will be viewed as having additional, unmentioned internal resources, but this too is a question for future research.

The correlation between confidence and improvement in Study 1 supports the possibility that confidence in courage is a subjective response to successful action. MacMillan and Rachman (1988) found a similar positive relationship between confidence and performance in trainee paratroopers. Fear and confidence, the two subjective states most strongly associated with courage (e.g., Aristotle, trans. 1999; Macmillan & Rachman, 1988) may reflect common subjective responses to personal threat and successful outcome; two dimensions we propose are key to understanding courageous action. The relationship between confidence and self-efficacy in the context of courageous action is a fruitful ground for further research.

A previous study has found that hope and persistence are two components of courageous actions (Pury & Kowalski, 2007). These two strengths may be particularly related to both a subjective sense of confidence and a successful outcome. Hopeful actions are taken with the belief that one has the ability and the drive to attain desired outcomes (Snyder, 2002). Persistence can mean acting with tenacity until one has achieved a goal, not giving up until the job is done, or finishing what you start (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In other words, hope requires a belief that one can succeed, and persistence describes working until one does succeed. Although we did not explicitly describe failed actors in Study 2’s vignettes as “giving up” (or successful actors as persisting), our results might reflect the hopeful and persistent nature of
courage. This raises the intriguing possibility that participants in Study 2 might have generated counterfactual actions for the failed actors that eventually did succeed – it is possible that these counterfactuals included continuing to pursue the goal using other strategies until all options were exhausted. If true, failed actions might reflect less willful pursuit of the goal, part of the existing identified lay theory of courage (see Rate et al., 2007). Future research is needed to examine this intriguing possibility.

Many instances of extreme and celebrated heroism, such as winners of medals for military valor, involve loss of life of the actor. In fact, loss of life of the actor reduces the pure altruism required for the Carnegie Hero Medal, an award for physical courage shown by civilians (Laskow, 2004). Rather than failing, however, we suspect that many of these deceased heroes did not fail in their goal: before his or her own death, each actor typically helped save the lives of others (see Pury & Starkey, in press).

It is notable that the devaluation of unsuccessful actions in Study 2 occurred even in those who stated clearly that courageousness is based on intent, not outcome. Even if we like to think that we judge courageousness based on intent alone, our evidence suggests that we do not. Future research on the effect of success operating on perception of courageousness outside of awareness should consider using techniques designed to examine implicit processing, such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT) or other tests of nonconscious processing, and more generally should examine the extent to which implicit theories contain nonconscious elements.

Notably, the importance of success, not intent, is present in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Eifert & Forsyth, 2005; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). The ACT approach to therapy directs clients to learn to accept unpleasantness in their lives (including the unpleasantness of anxiety symptoms, for example) and to commit to striving for life goals; an
approach that closely resembles Putman’s psychological courage (1997; 2004). Within this approach, clients are also asked to banish the word “try” from their vocabulary, and instead to commit to successful completion of exercises (Eifert & Forsyth, 2005).

Of course, the current data were collected from a limited United States college student population which had a skewed gender balance favoring female participants. Future investigations should explore if the success effect is present in other, more diverse groups, or when participants are asked to recall several instances of courage rather than just one or to rate actors of the other gender. Greater specificity of the determinants of success, its subjective correlates, and the relationship between perceived wisdom or judgment and success should also be investigated, and future research on recalled events should use longer scales as many of our measures in Study 1 were based on single measures.

Speaking about her own moral courage, Christina Maslach, the psychologist whose challenge ended the Stanford Prison Experiment, stated “When one complains about some injustice and the complaint only results in cosmetic modifications while the situation flows on unchanged, then that dissent and disobedience are not worth much” (quoted in Zimbardo, 2007, p. 458). Our results suggest that courage is not about simply taking risks in pursuit of a noble goal, but rather about taking risks and achieving that noble goal.
References


Notes

1This work was supported by the National Science Foundation and the Department of Defense ASSURE Program under Grant No. SES-0353698. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation or the Department of Defense. We thank Melissa Granger, Mary Jane Huey, Jen Kentera, and Tasha McRae for their assistance with data collection and coding.

2Given that more participants in the Other condition described the actions of those known to them, and given that people rate friends and family as superior to others (e.g., Suls, Lemos, & Stewart, 2002), we ran a repeated-measures ANCOVA on the 49 participants in the Other condition who indicated how well they knew the actor, with one within-participants condition (outcome: Better or Worse) and one covariate (the extent to which the participant knew the actor). The effect of outcome remained, $F(1, 47) = 179.43, p < .001$, while knowing the actor had no significant main effect, $F(1, 47) = 1.88, p = .18$, or interaction with the effect of outcome, $F(1, 47) = .004, p = .95$. Additionally, a within-participants t-test on the 8 participants who reported a 0 for knowledge of actor found an identical effect to the rest of the samples, $t(7) = 6.69, p < .001$, with a mean score for making the situation better of 9.2 ($sd = .7$) and a mean score for making the situation worse of 1.3 ($sd = 1.9$).
Table 1. Spearman rank order correlations between subjective ratings and improvement composite.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjective State</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Self (N = 250)</th>
<th>Other (N = 50)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>During</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After</td>
<td>-.12*</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>During</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.37*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05
** p < .01
**Table 2**

*Scenarios and Outcomes Used for Study 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Courage</th>
<th>Moral Courage</th>
<th>Psychological Courage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rescuing victim from fire</td>
<td>Stopping crowd from teasing disabled person</td>
<td>Studying abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rescuing victim from car wreck</td>
<td>Debating political beliefs with coworkers</td>
<td>Starting a new job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rescuing victim from dog attack</td>
<td>Befriending an alienated peer</td>
<td>Volunteering at a hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rescuing victim from rip tide</td>
<td>Getting an unfair professor to change a grade</td>
<td>Adjusting to a new school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure Captions

*Figure 1.* Mean ratings of the extent to which the courageous action changed the situation for the better (left bars) and for the worse (right bars). Scale is 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*as much as I can imagine*) Error bars represent one standard error.

*Figure 2.* Mean ratings of risks and difficulties in Self and Other conditions. Error bars represent one standard error.

*Figure 3.* Mean composite courage ratings by type of action, type of attribution, and type of outcome. Error bars represent one standard error.
Figure 1.

![Bar graph showing the outcome of situations under different conditions. The x-axis represents the outcome of the situation (Better or Worse), the y-axis represents the action made, and the bars indicate the condition (Other or Self).]
Figure 2.
Figure 3.