Millennials, heroes, and villains: The confluence of generational moral complexity

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Images posted on social media were harrowing. A large throng of angry white males holding torches in the air, wielding firearms, and shouting racial slurs, swarmed into Emancipation Park in Charlottesville, Virginia. Many of the torch-bearers were Millennials. The angry mob’s mission was to protest the city council’s mandate to remove the park’s statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. At one point during the clashes, a 2010 gray Dodge Challenger driven by a young Millennial, James Alex Fields, age 20, slammed into a crowd of counter-protestors, killing another Millennial, Heather Heyer, age 32. The murder set off a firestorm of politically charged rhetoric and ideological conflict within the United States over the issues of race relations, Black history, and the status of hundreds of remaining Confederate statues still on public display in America.
The fact that Millennials were fighting Millennials on that August day in 2017 is but one piece of evidence for the considerable heterogeneity within the so-called Millennial generation. There were certainly young adult heroic figures in Emancipation Park that day, and there were young adult villains as well. This book is about Millennial heroes and villains, with emphasis on the people whom the Millennial generation believes to be heroes and the people whom this generation believes to be villains. In this introductory chapter, I will first define heroism and villainy, drawing from relevant theory and research in the burgeoning field of heroism science. I will then describe what is known about the Millennial generation and about how Millennials are believed to differ from other generational groups. Next, I will describe social psychological theory and research bearing on the distinctions among the various generations, from the Silent Generation to the Post-Millennial Generation. Finally, I will provide an overview of this book and the student authored chapters that comprise it.

THE NASCENT FIELD OF HEROISM SCIENCE

For reasons that are beyond the scope of this chapter, social scientists did not begin turning their formal attention toward heroism and heroic phenomena until about a decade ago. The year 2011 was a pivotal launching point for the field of heroism science, a year when Allison and Goethals (2011) published their book on the psychology of heroism, and Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo (2011) published their seminal article offering the first conceptual analysis of heroism. Scholars define heroism as actions that are morally virtuous or are directed toward serving a noble principle (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017; Franco et al., 2011; Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2015). These moral actions must be exceptional, not minor or ordinary, and they must involve great sacrifice and significant risk. Franco et al. (2011) thus offered this definition: “Heroism is the willingness to sacrifice or take risks on behalf of others or in defense of a moral cause” (p. 13). Merriam-Webster’s definition of hero also adds that a hero involves admiration from others, a recognition element of heroism that Franco et al. acknowledge in their observation that heroism is a social attribution. Most objective attempts to define heroism, however, do not include this idea that heroes must be admired by others for their contributions to be considered heroic.
In addition to describing the pinnacle of human experience, heroism occupies a central place in humanity as well. Modern treatments of heroism emphasize that heroes serve fundamental human needs (Allison & Goethals, 2014, 2017; Kinsella et al., 2015), and that all of humanity – not just a select group of heroic elite – is capable of heroism (Franco et al., 2011). Heroes are “fascinating to people in everyday life” (Kinsella, Richie, & Igou, 2017), and they “literally command our attention” (Franco et al., 2011). So central to our humanity is heroism that it may even be our deepest biological imperative (Efthimiou, 2017). This view of heroism as accessible to everyone is now accepted as a truism within the field of heroism science (Franco et al., 2017).

Attempts to construct an objectively true definition of heroism have been challenged by heroism scientists who argue that most of the criteria for heroism listed above are open to considerable subjective interpretation. If heroism is good, who establishes what is good? How much good is a heroic amount? In addition, even if a standard of goodness were found and applied, how are we to determine the criteria for judging a heroic level of exceptional good, a heroic level of sacrifice, and a heroic level of risk? Proponents of the subjective approach to defining heroism claim that there exist no objective standards or criteria for determining a threshold by which sufficient levels of goodness, exceptionality, sacrifice, or risk can warrant a single “true” designation of heroism.

It may come as no surprise that there is a debate about objectivity and subjectivity in the study of evil and villainy. The subjective approach to evil has been endorsed by Roy Baumeister (2012), who provides evidence that evil is a label used by victims of crime but not by perpetrators. As a general rule, perpetrators of evil see their evil actions as a legitimate means for accomplishing a necessary good end. “It is therefore necessary,” wrote Baumeister, “to define evil as in the eye of the beholder, who may be victim or observer but is probably not the perpetrator.” Evil must therefore not be “strongly tethered to objective reality” (p. 374).

The list of people who are viewed as heroes by some but as villains by others is long and noteworthy. Joseph Campbell (1988) himself noted that during World War II, the Nazis were heroes to some and villains to others. Allison
and Goethals (2011) have noted that villains share five of the “great eight” traits of heroes – smart, strong, charismatic, resilient, and inspiring. The inescapable conclusion we can reach is that the subjective approach to heroism and villainy uncomfortably reminds us there exists a fine line between the two seemingly polar opposite constructs (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017).

Scholars who adopt the subjective approach to heroism focus less on attempting to define heroism themselves and more on studying how the average layperson perceives and defines heroism. As mentioned earlier, Allison and Goethals (2011) discovered the “great eight” traits of heroes by first asking a wide range of Americans to list the traits of heroes. These traits were then subjected to exploratory multivariate factor analyses and cluster analyses. The resultant factors and clusters revealed the eight traits of smart, strong, reliable, resilient, caring, charismatic, selfless, and inspiring. Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou (2015) built on this methodology by using a prototype analytic approach toward uncovering people’s intuitive understanding of heroic traits. Their analysis yielded 12 central characteristics of heroes and 13 peripheral characteristics. Kinsella et al.’s central characteristics are brave, moral integrity, conviction, courageous, self-sacrifice, protecting, honest, selfless, determined, saves others, inspiring, and helpful. The peripheral characteristics of heroes are proactive, humble, strong, risk-taker, fearless, caring, powerful, compassionate, leadership skills, exceptional, intelligent, talented, and personable. Allison and Goethals’ great eight traits and Kinsella et al.’s central and peripheral traits are not necessarily the actual characteristics of heroes. These traits represent lay-perceptions of heroes.

Perhaps the most famous description of heroes comes from the iconic contributions of Campbell (1949), who observed that virtually all mythic tales worldwide involve a hero undertaking a journey into a dangerous, unfamiliar world. The hero is presented with a daunting mission and receives assistance from unlikely social sources. There are formidable obstacles along the way and villainous figures to vanquish. After many trials and much suffering, the hero learns important truths about herself and about the world. Succeeding on her journey, the hero is forever transformed and returns to her original world where she bestows some type of gift to others. This gift to society is only made possible by her own personal journey of growth and
change. In short, heroes undergo a personal metamorphosis that culminates with a strong calling to serve others (Allison & Goethals, 2015, 2016; Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017).

The most recent development in heroism science is a strong push toward applying the principles of the science to the goal of training ordinary people to become heroes. Applied heroism science is seen in hero activist organizations such as the Hero Construction Company (HCC) and the Heroic Imagination Project (HIP). Two of HIP’s hero training modules are the bystander intervention module and the growth mindset module. The bystander training module teaches emerging adults observational skills, situational awareness, willingness to stand out, willingness to be a deviant, willingness and ability to overcome social influence effects, willingness to take responsibility, willingness to act, ability to act, and taking the heroic action itself. The growth mindset module teaches young adults a growth-oriented response to failure, healthy attributional styles in response to failure, healthy agency, self-efficacy, resilience, grit, and self-confidence. Preliminary data reveal that both the HCC and HIP are producing more heroic mindsets and more heroic behavioral tendencies in people who are exposed to their programs (Heiner, 2017).

**Millennials and the Human Need for Generational Categories**

This book focuses on heroism from the perspective of an entire generation of young adults commonly referred to as the Millennial Generation, also called Generation Y. Millennials are but one of a long sequence of generational designations which include the Greatest Generation, the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Post-Millennials. How and why do human beings feel the need to carve out generational boundaries? Clustering individuals into groups appears to be wired into us. Indeed, one of the most robust findings in social psychology is that people have a natural tendency to partition the individuals they encounter into distinct social groupings (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). When encountering unfamiliar individuals, people automatically apply the primitive categorizations of gender, race, and age (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). These primitive categories invariably activate pre-existing beliefs associated
with the category labels. Perceivers also tend to lump social targets into groupings based on similarity, proximity, and shared fate (Campbell, 1958). This strong tendency to cluster people into categorical units stems from the need to simplify and make sense of our complex social worlds. Designating people into “ingroups” and “outgroups” also gives us a sense of social identity, feeds our sense of belonging, and instills in us a sense of group pride (Haslam et al., 2010).

Social cognition researchers have also identified myriad negative consequences that arise as a result of making these group categorizations (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). One adverse consequence of social partitioning is the tendency to form stereotypical judgments about members of categorized groups. It is only a small leap from stereotypes to prejudice, and then from prejudice to discrimination. A concomitant phenomenon has been labeled the outgroup homogeneity effect (Brauer, 2001), which refers to the tendency to view members of outgroups as a monolithic group. A third consequence of ingroup-outgroup categorization is ingroup favoritism. Once we mentally separate ingroups from outgroups, we tend to believe that our ingroups are morally and intellectually superior to outgroups. This form of ingroup bias can then easily affect behavior, and studies have in fact shown that we show favoritism to ingroups by giving ingroup members higher evaluations and greater shares of valuable resources (Allison & Herlocker, 1994). When it comes to evaluating generational groups, it is highly likely that people show favoritism to members of their own generation and are negatively predisposed to members of outgroup generations.

Despite considerable debate about the exact time periods and durations of the various generational groupings, there is a fairly solid consensus emerging about the positioning of generations across the 20th and 21st centuries (Harvey & Clark, 2016). There is the Greatest Generation, born between 1910 and 1927; the Silent Generation, born between 1928 and 1945; Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964; Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980; the Millennial Generation (also known as Generation Y), born roughly between 1981 and 2000; and the Post-Millennials, born between 2000 and the present day (Serafino, 2018). The fact that Millennials clashed with each other in Charlottesville on that tragic August day in 2017 stands as testimony to the fact
that there are significant intra-generational differences within the Millennial generation. The same intra-group variability is also strongly evident within the Greatest Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Post-Millennials, but the human need to categorize and to maintain categories is so strong that within-group variability is often denied or downplayed. Moreover, between group differences are magnified, a fact of cognitive life that only reinforces the perceived need to maintain these categorical boundaries.

**Millennials: The Most Misunderstood Generation**

Millennials have quite possibly been the most maligned generation in human history. Consider these headlines, which have appeared in major publications over the past several years: *Millennials are Killing the Golf Industry, Millennials are Killing the Movie Business, Will the Millennial Generation Kill Home Depot?, Millennials are Killing Relationships, Are Millennials Killing the Running Trend?, Are Millennials Killing Wine?, Are Millennials Killing McDonalds?, How Millennials’ Lack of Manners is Killing Class, Millennials are Killing Off Paper Napkins, Are Millennials Killing the Car Industry, Millennials are Killing Chains Like Buffalo Wild Wings and Applebees, and Are Millennials Killing Credit?*

From these headlines, one might surmise that Millennials are psychopathic murderers intent on destroying everything that is sacred on our planet.

Other pejorative stereotypes about Millennials include the idea that they are entitled brats, they are insecure and need praise and recognition, they are cocky and more outspoken, they are “whiny snowflakes” who avoid hard work and are obsessed by status, they are more interested in posting selfies to social media than doing anything useful, they are likely to quit their jobs, they don’t stay loyal to one organization, they are needy and “high maintenance”, and they require constant feedback (Barnett, 2017; Huq, 2017). Millennials, it has been said, have been coddled by “trigger warnings” and “safe spaces” at school. Engagement in social media has decimated their attention spans, emotional well-being, interpersonal skills, and efficacy in the real world (Hulbert, 2018).
Fortunately, a contrasting view of Millennials is now emerging, a view focusing on the many positive attributes of the generation. In fact, there is a growing conventional wisdom about Millennials that emphasizes their enlightened and heroic qualities. Research shows that Millennials are more innovative and willing to push for bold, new ideas (Bleedorn, 2018). Millennials are more apt to “friend” people whom they meet while traveling abroad, giving Millennials a more veridical account of life in other countries. This willingness to connect with diverse people, coupled with a fluency with technology, gives Millennials a sophisticated worldview that makes them less likely than their elders to develop nuanced perspectives about race, religion, gender, and international relations.

Millennials are more likely than previous generations to embark on adventure travel excursions to Central and South America, Africa, and Asia. Millennials are much more likely to be nonwhite and multilingual as compared to past generations. Millennials are more likely to engage in conversations about race and the profound social consequences of slavery and colonialism. Millennials have a superb ability to connect to others, especially online, as compared to their elders. Most encouragingly, from a heroism perspective, a recent poll showed that 87% of Millennials would speak up if they saw that something wrong was happening (Today Show, 2017).

Millennials are more likely to seek employment in socially responsible organizations (Joseph, 2017). Emerging adults are striving for identity, showing existential courage (Kramer, 2017). The recent #MarchForOurLives protests about gun control completely contradict stereotypes of Millennials and Generation Z as selfish and lazy. In short, it is extremely misleading to categorize the Millennial generation as a monolithic group, just as it would be erroneous to assume homogeneity in Italians, dog-catchers, and fitness enthusiasts. Sixteen percent of Millennials are Hispanic, 12 percent are African-American, and 11 percent identify as other non-Caucasians. Twenty-four percent of Millennials have college degrees, and 35 percent of Millennial households have children. Millennials under the age of 25 are more interested in arts and entertainment, food and drink, and technology. Millennials over the age of 25 have greater interests in culture and religion, family and parenting, and travel and leisure (Condo, 2018).
The important take-home message about Millennials is similar to the bottom-line conclusion about any generational group: There is no “typical” Millennial any more than there is a typical European or typical left-handed person. Not all Millennials are egocentric, and not all millennials are enlightened. Remember, a Millennial member of the alt-right, James Alex Fields, ran his car into counter-protesters in Charlottesville, killing a left-leaning Millennial named Heather Heyer. Millennials are a heterogeneous group. As this book is about Millennial heroes and villains, we caution the reader about making any overly sweeping generalizations about Millennials based on our analyses and based on our studies of the heroes profiled in these chapters.

SELECTING THE CHAPTERS IN THIS VOLUME

The present volume is unusual in that it is authored entirely by undergraduates at the University of Richmond. Most importantly, this book about Millennial heroes and villains is authored entirely by Millennials. This volume represents the second student-authored book that I have edited; the first was an edited volume entitled Heroes of Richmond: Four Centuries of Courage, Dignity and Virtue, published recently (Allison, 2017). As in all of my student-authored books, none of the student authors in the present volume were familiar with theories and research in the field of heroism science until a few weeks before they composed their chapters. Although they were all new to the field of heroism science (Allison, 2015), the student authors of this book are like all of us in having spent their lives being mentored by heroes and inspired by heroes. Judging from my experience as their instructor, and based on the quality of their analyses of the 11 heroes contained in this book, I have no doubt that these young Millennial authors are poised to make heroic contributions in their own lives.

The 11 student contributors to this volume were enrolled in a Psychology Senior Seminar entitled Heroes and Villains at the University of Richmond in the Fall semester of 2016. Senior Seminars at Richmond are intensive examinations of a specialty area within psychology, with emphasis on close readings of primary texts, critiques of theory and research, and scientific writing. The method that my students and I used to select the heroes featured in this
book involved several stages. First, we brainstormed various possible ideas for book topics. When one student proposed that we provide an analysis of Millennials and villains, the class was nearly unanimous in pursuing the idea. Second, we decided to ensure that our book was research-based. We thus conducted an online survey of 202 Millennials across the United States. These Millennial participants were asked to indicate (a) the degree to which they believed that Millennials value each of the “great eight” traits in their heroes, (b) the names of individuals whom they believe Millennials would choose as heroes; and (c) the names of individuals whom Millennials would choose as villains.

The results showed that our Millennial participants believed that the “great eight” trait of “smart” was the most important quality for a hero to possess, with 55.94% of participants reporting it as crucial for heroism. The second-most important quality was judged to be “inspiring” (51.98%), followed by “strong” (49.50%), “charismatic” (42.08%), “selfless” (32.67%), “resilient” (38.71%), “caring” (22.77%), and “reliable” (16.34%). From these results, it appears that Millennials value strength and intelligence, perhaps because these qualities engender inspiration.

Our Millennial participants in the online survey also indicated that the following people were heroes of the Millennial generation: Barak Obama (listed by 63 participants), Superman (25), Steve Jobs (24), Parents (24), Bernie Sanders (22), Beyoncé (22), Bill Gates (15), Martin Luther King, Jr. (18), Hillary Clinton (12), Kim Kardashian (10), Spiderman (10), Kanye West (9), Lebron James (8), Mark Zuckerberg (6), Captain America (6), Michael Phelps (6), Oprah Winfrey (6), Drake (6), Elon Musk (5), Mother Teresa (5), Teachers (5), Siblings (5), Celebrities (5), and God (5). Thirty-two other heroes were named whom our participants listed fewer than five times.

Participants also listed the following individuals as villains of the Millennial generation: Donald Trump (107), Adolf Hitler (34), The Joker (30), Hillary Clinton (29), George Bush (26), Osama Bin Laden (22), Kim Jong-un (16), Parents (10), Martin Shkreli (10), ISIS (7), Saddam Hussein (7), Dick Cheney (7), Teachers (6), Lex Luthor (6), Satan (5), Darth Vader (5), Lebron James (5),
Brock Turner (5), and Kanye West (5). Twenty other villains were named whom our participants listed fewer than five times.

We discovered that 20 individuals (or groups of individuals) appeared on participants’ lists of both heroes and villains. Eight of these 20 individuals (or groups) appeared three or more times on both lists: Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, Kanye West, Kim Kardashian, parents, teachers, Edward Snowden, and Batman. As there were 11 students in our Heroes and Villains class, we needed to generate the names of three additional individuals whom Millennials consider to be both heroic and villainous. After considerable deliberation, our 11 Millennials in the class made the unanimous decision to add the following three names to complete the 11 chapters of this book: Mother Teresa, Severus Snape, and Mark Zuckerberg.

It is important to note that the individuals profiled in this book are not necessarily Millennials themselves, nor are they simply people deemed heroic or people deemed villainous by Millennials. Each chapter in this volume focuses on a person about whom Millennials have polarized opinions. This book centers on public figures identified by our online survey as heroes by some Millennials and villains by other Millennials. The fact that such polarizing figures exist underscores the subjective nature of defining heroism (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Allison et al., 2017).

**Final Thoughts Before We Get Started**

It is my deepest hope that this collection of essays about Millennial heroes and villains offers you, the reader, some illuminating insights about the people deemed the best and the worst by this intriguing generation. The chapters in this volume reflect the scholarly landscape of what we currently know about phenomena bearing on both heroism and villainy. With regard to heroism, these chapters address such diverse topics as courage, empathy, resilience, hope, meaning, purpose, spirituality, morality, altruism, character strengths, wisdom, development, regeneration, and transformation (Goethals & Allison,
With regard to villainy, the topics considered include the genesis of evil, crime, violence, aggression, and anti-social personality types.

You, the reader, may be left wondering how the same person featured in a chapter can be seen as representing supreme virtue to some Millennials and yet supreme moral darkness to other Millennials. Heroism and villainy are indeed in the eye of the beholder, a fact that may either leave you marveling at human perceptual malleability, or bemoaning it. If nothing else, this book will leave you pondering the final moral verdict – if there is one – for each of the eleven morally complex figures featured in this volume.

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