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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Value of Goal Predicts Accolade Courage: More Evidence that Courage is a Taking a *Worthwhile* Risk

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ABSTRACT

Is courage more than just facing fear? We tested the hypothesis that perceived value of the goal, in addition to the perceived riskiness of the action, predicts the extent to which an action is rated as courageous. Participants (300 US undergraduates and 1,254 US residents recruited online) read about either Caitlyn Jenner's public gender transition or Kim Davis's refusal to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Participants then rated how courageous, risky, and valuable the action was. They also completed a Moral Traditionalism scale. Results indicated that across both samples and both conditions, courage was significantly predicted by the value of the goal, with risk of the action a smaller but mostly significant predictor. Adding Moral Traditionalism as a predictor did not alter these patterns. Results of this study support the inclusion of goal value as an important component of accolade courage.

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Courage; goals; values; risk; accolade courage; virtue

Is courage solely a matter of standing up to fear, or does it go beyond that? Although research stemming from clinical psychology defines courage as being willing to take action in the face of fear (Norton & Weiss, 2009; Rachman, 1990, 2010), research on implicit theories of courage (Rate, 2010; Rate et al., 2007) offer a broader conceptualization. These studies provide evidence that courageous actions must be taken (a) voluntarily, (b) despite risk to the actor, and (c) in pursuit of a worthwhile or noble goal. Pury and Saylor (2017) summarize these defining features as *taking a worthwhile risk*. Inherent in this definition is the notion that courageous actions are more than just risky (or fear-provoking) – they are also value-laden.

We argue that perceptions of an action's worthiness matter not just for individuals who decide to behave courageously; they also matter when observers judge the courageousness of actions taken by others. Thus, values underlie expressions of both *accolade courage* (evaluating an action as courageous or not, including evaluations by others: Pury & Starkey, 2010) and *process courage* (an individual taking a worthwhile risk).

To be sure, Rate's (2010; Rate et al., 2007) three defining features of courage apply differently in process courage and accolade courage. In process courage, higher levels of risk inhibit the likelihood of acting, while in accolade

courage, higher levels of risk – to a point¹ – make individuals more likely to assess an action as courageous. We contend that the perceived value of the action's *goal* matters in both process and accolade courage such that it will have a strong positive correlation with either taking an action or labeling it as courageous.

The extent to which observers agree that an action is (1) risky and (2) worthwhile presumably is similar for most prototypical courageous actions. Saving a baby from a house fire, for example, is likely seen as both risky and noble by most people. However, assessments of the risks and the value of the goal do not overlap as well for other sets of circumstances. In this context, consider personal courage (Pury et al., 2007), in which the risks of taking an action are quite specific to the individual, such as when someone with a phobia confronts their feared situation. Another example is bad courage (Pury et al., 2015), where risks are taken for reasons that most people apart from the actors view as objectively wrong.

In this study, we test the novel hypothesis that individual differences in observers' ratings of the risk and value of an action predict the perceived courageousness of the action. We use two contexts to test this hypothesis. In 2015, two American women won accolades – from voices on different partisan sides – for behaving

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courageously. Celebrity Caitlyn Jenner made headlines for gender transitioning after decades in the spotlight as a champion male athlete and public personality (Bissinger, 2015). Separately, Rowan County (Kentucky) clerk Kimberly Davis made news for her steadfast refusal to issue marriage licenses to same-gender couples following the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling legalizing same-gender marriage across the country² (Blinder & Fausset, 2015).

Sociopolitical circumstances in the U.S. today reinforce divergent points of view concerning the worthiness of a wide range of actions. Over the course of several decades, cultural divisions, fueled by political rhetoric and various social media, have increased to such an extent that ordinary Americans tend to exist in one of two deeply polarized partisan echo chambers (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019).³ People on both sides rely on 'partisan-motivated reasoning' when evaluating issues and actions to ensure their own views square with their preferred party's positions (Druckman et al., 2013). Attitudes about LGBTQ+ rights have long been polarized along partisan lines (Brewer, 2008), and despite the general increase in social acceptance of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, Republicans remain cool toward transgender individuals (Lewis et al., 2017). Indeed, previous studies hint at the impact of partisan-motivated reasoning on divergences in public opinion about the public actions of both Caitlyn Jenner (Miller et al., 2020) and Kim Davis (Williams, 2018).

We capitalized on the fact that the actions taken by Jenner and Davis were naturally occurring instances of actions being lauded as courageous by some – but not all – observers to test the relevance of the value of the goal in courage attribution (accolade courage: Pury and Starkey (2010). Participants read a description of either Jenner's coming out or Davis's refusal to issue same-gender marriage licenses. Next, they completed a survey that included questions about the courageousness, risk, and value of the woman's action, as well as relevant attitudes including support for traditional moral values in family and personal life. We expect that higher accolade courage will be predicted by both higher ratings of the risk of the action to the person taking it and agreement that it was a good or noble action. Moreover, increased belief in traditional values should predict agreement with the worthiness of the action (and subsequently, accolade courage), such that there should be a *negative* correlation between traditional values and ratings of meritoriousness and courage for Jenner's action but a *positive* correlation between traditional values and ratings of meritoriousness and courage for Davis's.

Method

Sample

Data were collected from two samples. The Undergraduate Sample consisted of 305 undergraduate students from a midsized-large residential university in the Southeastern United States. They were offered course credit for participation. Of those, 300 provided a complete survey and are included in our analysis (by virtue of answering both Courage of Action questions and at least two of three items each for Risk of Action, Value of Action, and Moral Traditionalism). The Online Sample consisted of 1,254 U.S. residents who were recruited by Amazon Mechanical Turk and offered \$2.72 USD for their participation. Of those, 1,243 provided a complete survey and are included in the analysis.

All participants were asked open-ended questions requesting gender and race/ethnicity; Online Sample participants were also asked for their age range and highest level of education completed. These demographics are presented in Table 1. As can be seen, participants in both samples most frequently reported their gender as female and their race as white. The largest single age group in the Online Sample was 25–34, and the modal educational attainment was a 4-year college degree.

Materials

Target Participants read either a scenario about Caitlyn Jenner's public gender transition or Kim Davis's refusal to issue marriage licenses to same-gender couples. These scenarios were drawn from the Wikipedia and related popular press articles about each woman retrieved on 17 September 2015; these appear in Appendix 1.

All survey response sets were Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neither Agree nor Disagree (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1).

Accolade Courage Accolade Courage was measured with the mean of two questions developed for this study and asked immediately after respondents read the scenario. For participants who read about Caitlyn Jenner, Courage items were 'Caitlyn Jenner's public gender transition was a brave thing to do' and 'Caitlyn Jenner is courageous for her public gender transition.' For participants who read about Kim Davis, items were 'Kim Davis's refusal to issue marriage licenses was a brave thing to do' and 'Kim Davis is courageous for her refusal to issue marriage licenses.' Cronbach's alpha for Accolade Courage items was .91 for our Undergraduate Sample and .97 for our Online Sample.

Table 1. Sample Demographics by Sample and Target (Caitlyn Jenner or Kim Davis).

		Undergraduate Sample		Online Sample	
Total		Caitlyn Jenner 137	Kim Davis 163	Caitlyn Jenner 618	Kim Davis 625
Gender	Agender/genderfluid	0	0	2	3
	Female	93	109	271	275
	Male	44	52	179	193
	Blank or refused	0	2	166	154
Race	Asian	8	11	38	25
	Black	13	12	26	36
	Hispanic	1	2	20	22
	Multiracial	4	3	16	18
	Other	0	0	3	3
	White	110	134	372	398
	Blank or refused	1	1	143	123
Age	18–24			73	75
	25–34			214	225
	35–44			106	118
	45–54			54	42
	55–64			20	36
	65–74			10	7
	75–84			1	1
	Blank or refused			140	121
Education	Some high school			3	1
	High school graduate			54	51
	Some college			130	136
	2-year degree			41	53
	4-year degree			193	191
	Professional degree			48	62
	Doctorate			9	10
	Blank or refused			140	121

Risk of Action and Value of Goal Risk of Action and Value of Goal were assessed with three items developed for this study. They all began with the stem 'By transitioning publicly, Caitlyn Jenner ...' or 'By refusing to issue marriage licenses, Kim Davis ...' as appropriate. Risk of Action items were '[name] has faced serious risks,' '[name] has placed herself in a dangerous situation,' and '[name] is putting herself in harm's way.' Cronbach's alpha for Risk of Action was .85 for our Undergraduate Sample and .90 for our Online Sample. Value of Goal items were '[name] has done the right thing,' '[name] has acted admirably,' and '[name] has done something of great value.' Cronbach's alpha for Value of Goal was .91 for our Undergraduate Sample and .94 for our Online Sample.

Moral Traditionalism Both Jenner's and Davis's actions were controversial because, like most matters concerning LGBTQ+ rights (Brewer, 2008), they struck at competing perceptions of morality. Therefore, we include a Moral Traditionalism scale in our analyses consisting of three items drawn from the Moral Traditionalism section of the American National Election Studies (Jacoby, 1998): 'This country would have many fewer problems if there

were more emphasis on traditional family ties,' 'The newer lifestyles are contributing to the breakdown of our society,' and 'The world is always changing and we should adjust our views of moral behavior to those changes' (reverse coded). Cronbach's alpha for Moral Traditionalism was .63 in our Undergraduate Sample and .85 in our Online Sample.

A complete list of the measures given to participants, including other individual difference items relating to religious and political beliefs not analyzed here, are available from the authors by request.

Procedure

All participants completed all parts of the study via an online questionnaire. Following consent, they were randomly assigned to the Target (Jenner or Davis) manipulation. Within each manipulation, presentation of target scenarios and their ratings were counterbalanced with presentation of individual difference measures, such that participants were randomly assigned to read and rate the target scenario first or to complete the individual difference measures first.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for all variables (all on a scale of 1–5) by Sample and Target Condition.

Target	Undergraduate Sample		Online Sample	
	Caitlyn Jenner <i>n</i> = 137	Kim Davis <i>n</i> = 163	Caitlyn Jenner <i>n</i> = 618	Kim Davis <i>n</i> = 625
Accolade Courage	3.3 (1.2)	3.3 (1.2)	3.6 (1.2)	2.7 (1.4)
Risk of Action	3.2 (0.9)	3.7 (0.7)	3.3 (1.0)	3.5 (1.2)
Value of Goal	2.9 (1.0)	2.9 (1.1)	3.2 (1.1)	2.1 (1.3)
Moral Traditionalism	3.1 (0.8)	3.3 (0.8)	2.6 (1.1)	2.6 (1.2)

Results

Descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Table 2, and zero-order correlations in Table 3. As predicted, Value of Goal had a strong positive correlation with Accolade Courage for both targets in both samples, while Risk of Action had a less consistent, but generally positive correlation with Accolade Courage. Moral Traditionalism had a negative correlation with Accolade Courage and with Value of Goal for Caitlyn Jenner coming out, but a positive correlation with Accolade Courage, Risk of Action, and Value of Goal for Kim Davis's refusal to issue same-gender wedding licenses.

Multiple regression analyses, reported in Tables 4 and 5, consistently found Value of Goal to be a consistent, strong, and positive predictor of Accolade Courage, even when accounting for Risk of Action (Table 4) and Risk of Action and Moral Traditionalism (Table 5). Risk of Action and Moral Traditionalism emerged as weaker, and sometimes non-significant, predictors of Accolade Courage.

Discussion

This study provides evidence that instances of accolade courage may be driven more by agreement with the goal of the action than they are by the belief that the action was risky for the actor. Across two samples, actions by public figures consistent with the values of

opposite ends of the polarized political spectrum were rated as courageous based primarily on the extent to which participants agreed with the goal of their action rather than the extent to which they saw that figure as taking a risk. This result suggests that there may be influence of partisan-motivated reasoning in respondents' attitudes concerning the courageousness of Jenner and Davis. Agreeing that Jenner was courageous in coming out as transgender might attest to one's sociopolitical identity as a progressive, while agreeing that Davis was courageous in choosing jail over issuing marriage licenses to same-gender couples might reflect seeing oneself as a conservative. More globally, it highlights the importance of agreement that a particular goal is valuable as a driver of accolade courage.

Clinically based researchers (e.g., Norton & Weiss, 2009; Rachman, 1990) often define courage as some variety of standing up to fear (or risk) without consideration of the goal of the action. This is likely due to the careful selection of goals for courageous action within the context of mental health treatment – goals that are likely to be seen as worthwhile by most people. Results from the present study, however, support a broader definition of courage, i.e., taking a worthwhile risk (Pury & Saylor, 2017) and incorporating the value of the action's goal as a determinant of courage (Pury & Starkey, 2010; Rate, 2010). Rhetoric concerning courage is a feature of

Table 3. Zero-order correlations between all variables by Sample and Target.

	Undergraduate Sample							
	Caitlyn Jenner (<i>n</i> = 137)				Kim Davis (<i>n</i> = 163)			
	Courage	Risk	Value	Traditionalism	Courage	Risk	Value	Traditionalism
Courage		.08	.75**	−.40**		.30**	.77**	.51**
Risk			−.01	−.10			.25	.34**
Value				−.55**				.58**
Traditionalism								
	Online Sample							
	Caitlyn Jenner (<i>n</i> = 618)				Kim Davis (<i>n</i> = 625)			
	Courage	Risk	Value	Traditionalism	Courage	Risk	Value	Traditionalism
Courage		.32**	.72**	−.44**		.44**	.72**	.59**
Risk			.23**	−.10			.38**	.31**
Value				−.54**				.72**
Traditionalism								

***p* < .01

Table 4. Regression of Risk of Action and Value of Goal on Accolade Courage by Sample and Target.

Undergraduate Sample										
Caitlyn Jenner ($n = 137$), Adjusted $R^2 = .57^{**}$						Kim Davis ($n = 163$), Adjusted $R^2 = .60^{**}$				
	β	Std. Error	Standardized β	t	p		β	Std. Error	Standardized β	p
Constant	0.376	0.320		1.175	.242	Constant	0.364	0.303		.231
Risk of Action	0.117	0.077	0.086	1.519	.131	Risk of Action	0.187	0.080	0.119	.021
Value of Goal	0.886	0.067	0.752	13.310	<.001	Value of Goal	0.801	0.055	0.742	<.001

Online Sample										
Caitlyn Jenner ($n = 618$), Adjusted $R^2 = .54^{**}$						Kim Davis ($n = 625$), Adjusted $R^2 = .55^{**}$				
	β	Std. Error	Standardized β	t	p		β	Std. Error	Standardized β	p
Constant	0.594	0.132		4.513	<.001	Constant	0.279	0.125		.026
Risk of Action	0.182	0.033	0.155	5.551	<.001	Risk of Action	0.235	0.036	0.190	<.001
Value of Goal	0.749	0.031	0.685	24.475	<.001	Value of Goal	0.736	0.033	0.652	<.001

** $p < .001$ **Table 5.** Regression of Risk of Action, Value of Goal, and Moral Traditionalism Values on Accolade Courage by Sample and Target.

Undergraduate Sample										
Caitlyn Jenner ($n = 137$), Adjusted $R^2 = .56^{**}$						Kim Davis ($n = 163$), Adjusted $R^2 = .60^{**}$				
	β	Std. Error	Standardized β	t	p		β	Std. Error	Standardized β	p
Constant	0.094	0.578		0.162	.872	Constant	0.228	0.323		.481
Risk of Action	0.123	0.078	0.090	1.579	.117	Risk of Action	0.163	0.083	0.104	.051
Value of Goal	0.913	0.080	0.774	11.347	<.001	Value of Goal	0.759	0.065	0.703	<.001
Traditionalism	0.059	0.101	0.040	0.586	.559	Traditionalism	0.105	0.088	0.074	.236

Online Sample										
Caitlyn Jenner ($n = 618$), Adjusted $R^2 = .55^{**}$						Kim Davis ($n = 625$), Adjusted $R^2 = .56^{**}$				
	β	Std. Error	Standardized β	t	p		β	Std. Error	Standardized β	p
Constant	0.924	0.197		4.683	<.001	Constant	0.130	0.134		.335
Risk of Action	0.185	0.033	0.158	5.645	<.001	Risk of Action	0.229	0.036	0.185	<.001
Value of Goal	0.706	0.036	0.646	19.554	<.001	Value of Goal	0.645	0.045	0.571	<.001
Traditionalism	-0.077	0.034	-0.072	-2.241	.025	Traditionalism	0.141	0.048	0.114	.003

** $p < .001$

everyday political discourse in these polarized times when praising one's supporters as courageous while vilifying opponents is commonplace (McCoy & Somer, 2019; for an extreme example of this, see Restuccia & Hughes, 2022).

Limitations of this study that might be addressed in future research include broadening the target actions to include less well-known or even fabricated examples, but also to consider other domains about which individuals may hold divergent opinions about the value and risk of an action. This study also relied on convenience sampling. Any measure of the general level of agreement on the courageousness of a particular action would need to be more representative.

What does it mean to call an action courageous? In line with viewing courage as taking a worthwhile risk (Pury & Starkey, 2010), these findings support the idea

that it means not only that the actor took a risk, but also that the actor took that risk for the sake of something with which the *evaluator* agrees.

Notes

1. If the risk is much greater than the value of the goal, the action is likely foolish rather than courageous (Pury & Starkey, 2010).
2. *Obergefell v. Hodges* 576 U.S. 644 (2015).
3. This is so in part because partisanship effectively subsumes many other politically salient identities including race, religion, socioeconomic status, and place of residence.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix A: Target scenarios used in the study

Caitlyn Jenner Target Scenario

Caitlyn Marie Jenner, formerly known as **William Bruce Jenner** and **Bruce Jenner**, is a retired American athlete known for winning the men's decathlon at the 1976 Summer Olympics. She is currently starring in her own reality show *I Am Cait*, which focuses on her gender transition. Multiple publications have described her as the most famous openly transgender person in the world since she came out in 2015.

After intense training, Jenner won the 1976 Olympic decathlon title, gaining fame as 'an all-American hero'. A third successive world record led to the unofficial title of 'world's greatest athlete', which traditionally goes to the winner of the Olympic decathlon. Jenner subsequently established a career in television, film, auto racing and business. A few months after divorcing her third wife, Jenner revealed her gender identification as a trans woman in an April 2015 interview with Diane Sawyer.

Quotes from Caitlyn Jenner:

To be able to wake up in the morning, be yourself, get dressed, get ready to go out, and just be like a normal person. That's a wonderful feeling to go through life. I've never been able to do that.

Even my son, actually, Burt said that to me one time. He goes, 'To be honest with you, I think Caitlyn is a lot better person than Bruce.' And I really have to – I think he's right, because Bruce always had to tell a lie, he was always living that lie, every day, he always had a secret from morning till night. Caitlyn doesn't have any secrets.

It's not about the fanfare, it's not about people cheering in the stadium, it's not about going down the street and everybody giving you 'that a boy, Bruce,' pat on the back, O.K. This is about your life and about who you are. And the last few days have been absolutely amazing, you know, I never thought, you know, that someday I'd be able to do this.

If I was lying on my deathbed and I had kept this secret and never ever did anything about it, I would be lying there saying, 'You just blew your entire life,' 'You never dealt with yourself,' and I don't want that to happen.

Sources:

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caitlyn_Jenner (retrieved 9/17/2015 2:20 pm)

Kim Davis Target Scenario

Kimberly Jean Bailey Davis is the county clerk of Rowan County, Kentucky. In 2015, Davis gained national media attention after defying a federal court order requiring that she issue marriage licenses following the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which held that there is a right to same-sex marriage guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.

After the Supreme Court decision, Davis began refusing to issue any licenses, either to same-sex or opposite-sex couples. The U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Kentucky ordered Davis to issue licenses as required by law. Davis continued to defy the court order and deny marriage licenses, saying she was acting 'under God's authority'. Davis was subsequently jailed for contempt of court, then released five days later. When she returned to work, she stated she would not interfere with her deputies, who had begun issuing licenses according to the court order.

Quotes from Kim Davis:

I never imagined a day like this would come, where I would be asked to violate a central teaching of Scripture and of Jesus Himself regarding marriage. To issue a marriage license which conflicts with God's definition of marriage, with my name affixed to the certificate, would violate my conscience. It is not a light issue for me. It is a Heaven or Hell decision. For me it is a decision of obedience.

I have no animosity toward anyone and harbor no ill will. To me this has never been a gay or lesbian issue. It is about marriage and God's Word. It is a matter of religious liberty.

Our history is filled with accommodations for people's religious freedom and conscience. I want to continue to perform my duties, but I also am requesting what our Founders envisioned - that conscience and religious freedom would be protected. That is all I am asking. I never sought to be in this position, and I would much rather not have been placed in this position.

I have received death threats from people who do not know me. I harbor nothing against them. I was elected by the people to serve as the County Clerk. I intend to continue to serve the people of Rowan County, but I cannot violate my conscience.

Sources:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kim_Davis_\(county_clerk\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kim_Davis_(county_clerk)) (retrieved 9/17/2015 2:19 pm)
<http://www.lex18.com/story/29933844/kim-davis-releases-statement>