

What makes a hero?

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(PhysOrg.com) -- New research at Newcastle University shows that it's not enough to be noble and do a courageous act to be considered a hero. Studying the reactions of the public to five tales of heroism, researchers at Newcastle University found that off-duty emergency service workers were judged more harshly than their civilian counterparts.

Dr Joan Harvey who led the research, says: "We found that people were making judgements on how heroic a deed is based on whether it was personal - so involving a neighbour or children, whether they could empathise with the situation and whether the person worked for the emergency services or not.

"It seems that people consider someone a hero if they go beyond the call of duty - but in the case of the emergency services, that duty never seems to stop."

The work is published in the *Journal of Risk Research* today, Thurs 30th July.

The Newcastle University researchers found that people appeared to think that those who worked for the emergency services were trained to deal with difficult situations - even if they were off-duty - so therefore they were in a position to apply their knowledge before acting. Psychologists describe this as being able to cognitively appraise the situation.

In the case of 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre, Dr

Harvey says: “The fire-fighters were trained to cope with fire and smoke but they weren’t trained to judge when a building might collapse from 80 floors up. This may influence how the public perceives them - they are considered heroes - and our admiration of them may have increased because they made judgements based on their knowledge but they didn’t have the correct knowledge about the building.”

Given five real-life scenarios to read, members of the public rated the heroism of the acts and indicated whether it was a risk worth taking. A clear difference emerged when there was a successful outcome and people were rescued but also between the perception of the public about professionals (fire fighter and off duty police officer) and lay-people.

In one scenario, an off-duty police officer stops two young men trying to steal a car but as a result is stabbed in the chest with a screwdriver. The public perceived this as a risk not worth taking (a mean score of 3.47 out of 10) and he received average admiration as a hero (5.41).

In another scenario, an accounts clerk rescues two children and a baby from his neighbour’s burning house. The public perceived this as a risk worth taking (8.05) and he received a high level of admiration as a hero (8.90).

More information: Academic paper: How do we perceive heroes? Joan Harvey, George Erdos & Lisa Turnbull. Published in: Journal of Risk Research. Vol 12 Issues 3-4 2009 Pages 313 - 327, [DOI: 10.1080/13669870802519430](https://doi.org/10.1080/13669870802519430)

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