

Heroes or victims? Public perception of essential workers in the pandemic

December 7 2021, by Brian Flood



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Essential workers on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic have been praised—and rightfully so—as heroes since the very beginning of this global crisis. But how are they faring? Does the perception of

essential workers as heroes overshadow their own suffering?

The pandemic has infiltrated lives across the world for almost two years and a new study from the University of Illinois Chicago College of Business Administration evaluates public perceptions of essential workers.

The goal of the study, which is published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, was to compare the implications of portraying essential workers as heroes (i.e., working on the frontlines of the pandemic) versus victims (i.e., suffering from inadequate support and protection).

"The concern with the widespread heroism narrative is that as essential workers are portrayed predominantly as heroes rather than as victims, this may inadvertently lead third parties such as the general public to overlook their suffering. Our cultural construction of a [hero](#) is someone who is willingly making self-sacrifices. Therefore, in calling essential workers heroes, we may go down the slippery slope of taking for granted their sacrifices and suffering," said Zhenyu Yuan, UIC assistant professor of managerial studies and lead author on the paper.

Through a series of surveys, Yuan and his colleagues tested whether portraying essential workers as heroes would desensitize observers regarding the workers' difficult work situations.

The researchers found that portraying essential workers as heroes led to lower levels of perceived injustice, sympathy and outrage, compared with acknowledging essential workers as victims of inadequate support. Further, observers who considered essential workers as heroes were less likely to take political action to support them.

"Our findings suggest that portraying essential workers as heroes creates the risk for observers to overlook their sacrifices and suffering. What we

ultimately want to emphasize from this research is that in addition to portraying essential workers as heroes, we should take effective measures to support them. Otherwise, the uplifting heroic stories will not do much to help improve their work conditions," Yuan said.

The researchers hope the findings can help lead to a more balanced and empathetic understanding of essential workers, but also bring about resourceful [support](#) for them and others operating in different occupational and family roles during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

"At a broader level, we hope to provide a cautionary note regarding the cultural practice of normalizing individuals in certain occupations (e.g., essential workers in the COVID-19 [pandemic](#); teachers paying for equipment out of their own pocket) and roles (e.g., moms as superwomen) as heroes and expecting them to make personal sacrifices, as such subtle cultural perceptions may contribute to inequality and only add to their burden," the researchers write.

More information: Zhenyu Yuan et al, Sacrificing heroes or suffering victims? Investigating third parties' reactions to divergent social accounts of essential employees in the COVID-19 pandemic, *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0000981](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000981)

Provided by University of Illinois at Chicago

Citation: Heroes or victims? Public perception of essential workers in the pandemic (2021, December 7) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-12-heroes-victims-perception-essential-workers.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.