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Perceptions of Moral Violations and Personality Traits Among Heroes and Villains

Allison Eden

*Department of Communication Science
VU University Amsterdam*

Mary Beth Oliver

*Department of Film/Video and Media Studies
The Pennsylvania State University*

Ron Tamborini

*Department of Communication
Michigan State University*

Allison Eden (Ph.D., Michigan State University, 2011) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Science at VU University Amsterdam. Her research interests include media psychology, entertainment effects, and morality.

Mary Beth Oliver (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1991) is a Distinguished Professor in the Department of Film/Video and Media Studies at The Pennsylvania State University. Her research interests include media effects, with a focus on media and emotion, and media and social cognition.

Ron Tamborini (Ph.D., University of Indiana, 1982) is a Full Professor in the Department of Communication at Michigan State University. His research examines both traditional and new media, with a focus on how characteristics of technology alter the psychological experience and influence of media.

Anthony Limperos (Ph.D., The Pennsylvania State University, 2011) is an Assistant Professor in the School of Journalism and Telecommunications at University of Kentucky. His research interests include media uses and effects and new communication technology.

Julia Woolley (Ph.D., The Pennsylvania State University, 2012) is an Assistant Professor in the Communication Studies Department at California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo. Her research interests include media effects, entertainment psychology, and communication and new media.

Correspondence should be addressed to Allison Eden, Department of Communication Science, VU University Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1081, Amsterdam, 1081HV, The Netherlands. E-mail: a.l.eden@vu.nl

Anthony Limperos

*School of Journalism and Telecommunications
University of Kentucky*

Julia Woolley

*Communication Studies Department
California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo*

This study investigates disposition-formation processes in entertainment by predicting perceptions of media heroes and villains by their behavior in specific moral domains. Participants rated self-selected heroes and villains from television and film along the moral domains of care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity (Haidt & Joseph, 2007) as well as along dimensions of warmth, competence, and duplicity used in impression-formation research (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Results show that heroes violate moral norms in domains of authority and purity, whereas villains violated moral norms in the domains of caring and group loyalty. Furthermore, these moral violations are associated with personality dimensions of warmth and competence differently for each character type, such that impressions of heroes are driven by their work in the care domain (i.e., saving or protecting people), whereas for villains, violation of purity norms is most strongly associated with subsequent impression formation processes.

INTRODUCTION

This study combines two theoretical frameworks to examine how audiences evaluate media characters: person-perception theory (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) and moral foundations theory (MFT; Haidt & Joseph, 2007). Both these frameworks use evolutionary mechanisms to explain universal social cognitive processes by which people perceive and judge others. Person-perception theory describes two universal domains along which we perceive others: warmth and competence (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). MFT suggests there are five universal domains in which moral judgments of right and wrong are clustered (Haidt & Joseph, 2007). These two frameworks have not yet been combined to examine how they may complement each other in terms of perceptions of others. This study does so in order to examine how viewers evaluate heroes and villains in popular entertainment. This combination may thus provide a starting point for our understanding of how viewers perceive and conceptualize these types of media characters in a comprehensive and universal fashion.

Mass communication researchers have worked to explain what drives the perception of particular media characters for several decades (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Hoorn & Konijn, 2003; Zillmann, 2000). One approach to achieving this goal has focused on identifying socially desirable and undesirable behaviors (cruel–kind, helpful–hurtful) used to make evaluative judgments about people in general and applying these judgments to media characters (cf. Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Sanders, 2005). Another approach has suggested that character evaluations are strongly based on personal moral values that shape moral judgments of others within the individual viewers' conceptualization of what is right or wrong (Zillmann, 2000). With both of these approaches in mind, it could be argued that the strongest extremes of social personality and morality judgments in entertainment media would be found in perceptions of heroes and villains (Raney, 2004).

Knowing how viewers conceptualize the personalities and moral traits of extreme characters like heroes and villains allows us to gain insight into the cognitive processes underlying all character judgments. With the exception of one study (Sanders, 2010) there is virtually no research that examines how audience members distinguish these basic character types along psychological or moral domains. The current study begins to remedy this shortcoming with an exploratory survey intended to investigate how violations across the moral domains highlighted in moral foundations theory combine with person-perception variables to shape judgments of heroes and villains. The rationale for the study is to combine recent understandings of moral evaluation processes with established person perception variables in order to gain a broader understanding of the manner in which moral judgments influence character perception and evaluation.

Morality in Character Judgment

The disposition theory of media enjoyment (Zillmann, 2000) suggests viewers form affective dispositions toward characters based on their evaluation of the morality of a character's actions. When a character acts in accordance with the viewer's sense of morality, the viewer's disposition toward the character becomes more positive, and when a character's actions deviate from the viewer's sense of morality, the viewer's disposition toward the character becomes more negative (Zillmann & Bryant, 1975). Although in these writings morality is never explicitly defined, from this perspective the most important element linking morality and character perceptions is a viewer's evaluative judgment regarding the appropriateness of behavior. As "appropriateness" is often situated within cultural norms, moral judgments in character perception can be considered a type of social judgment that functions to approve or disapprove of characters' behaviors based on a culturally normative code of conduct.

Although past research has investigated the character behaviors that affect viewers' dispositions toward characters (cf. Hoffner & Cantor, 1991), the majority of this research has focused on creating taxonomies of "good" and "bad" behaviors enacted by characters. For example Liss, Reinhardt, and Fredriksen (1983) found that children described characters displaying helpful behaviors as the "good guys." Himmelweit, Oppenheim, and Vince (1958) found that adolescents utilized domains of behavior to characterize heroes (polite, helpful, with good gun skills) from villains (gambling, drinking, starting fights, robbing banks) in popular westerns. Notably, Himmelweit et al. found that simple domains of "aggressive" versus "prosocial" behavior were not used as distinguishing factors, perhaps due to the use of violence by heroes. This finding suggests that, even from a very early age, we can recognize certain behaviors as good or bad, which has also been supported in recent research examining morality in infants (Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2010). This underscores the notion that morality is a "universal" judgment process and that it is involved in character perception.

In adults, Konijn and Hoorn (2005) demonstrated that viewer appraisals of ethics and realism increased viewer appreciation for heroes, whereas negative appraisals on these domains increased viewer distance from villains. Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel (2013) illustrated that the perceived motives of characters may also influence the effects of their behaviors on viewer appraisals. Yet, when involved in a narrative, few viewers are aware of consciously evaluating each character's morality or motives as they watch the story unfold, raising questions about the extent to which deliberative moral judgments govern these character perceptions.

Raney (2004) suggested that rather than deliberately evaluating each behavior, during the course of a narrative experience viewers make quick evaluative character judgments with minimal effort using heuristic tools called schemas, or "knowledge structures consisting of a network of interrelations between aspects of a stimulus that are thought to constitute our understanding of that stimulus" (Raney, 2004, p. 353). Raney argued that viewers use character schemas based on their knowledge of past narratives to quickly understand the role a character plays in a narrative drama. As drama generally revolves around a conflict between "good" and "evil" characters, hero and villain schemas would be particularly well practiced (Raney, 2004). As such, we might posit that focusing on heroes and villains can best aid our understanding of how all media characters are processed.

Past character perception research attempting to describe heroes and villains in terms of schema that viewers have toward these characters has applied the use of two trait variables: warmth (liking, trustworthiness) and competence (efficiency; Sanders, 2005). This built on work in person perception, which presented strong evidence that these two domains are

universal and are utilized in all types of interpersonal attribution processes (Fiske et al., 2007; Fiske et al., 2002). Although the process of character perception does not exactly match the process of person perception (e.g., in media, we are often made aware of a character's internal thoughts and behavioral motivations, which are lacking in interpersonal situations), the basic variables of person perception are the same (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Hoorn & Konijn, 2003). For example, Sanders (2005) found that viewers use domains similar to Fiske's person-perception domains to characterize media villains. Although Sanders (2005) examined only perceptions of villains (rather than villains and heroes), she demonstrated that viewers judge media characters using domains consistent with those used in real life.

The benefit of applying person-perception variables to explain the formation of character perceptions is that the use of heuristics can account for the manner in which audience stereotypes of characters can produce quick judgments. At the same time, however, total reliance on these personality-based perceptions do not account for the moral aspects of disposition formation central to previous entertainment research (Zillmann & Bryant, 1974; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). Therefore, it is important to consider the means by which viewers make moral judgments about media characters in the same quick and effortless manner as stereotype activation, and how these two processes are related.

MFT (Haidt & Joseph, 2007) may provide some insight into how moral judgments and stereotypes are related. MFT describes moral judgments as quick, intuitive "moral intuitions." These moral intuitions are gut reactions to stimuli, or "the sudden conscious appearance of a moral judgment, including an affective valence (good–bad, like–dislike) without any conscious awareness of having gone through steps of searching, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion" (Haidt, 2001, p. 818). As such, using these moral intuitions to judge characters would not be cognitively effortful or time consuming, and would function similarly to the quick, effortless judgments made by stereotyping. Notably, these moral intuitions are not unidimensional but fall into five broad domains of influence relevant to specific content areas referred to as *moral domains* that include harm/care (concerned with the suffering of others and empathy), fairness/reciprocity (related to reciprocity and justice), authority/respect (negotiating dominance hierarchies), ingroup/loyalty (dealing with common good and punitiveness toward outsiders), and purity/sanctity (concerned with contamination). We suggest that using moral intuitions to understand audience perceptions of media characters can improve upon previous understandings of the processes that govern character perception formation. Rather than focusing on the "good or bad" behaviors of characters, MFT focuses on the viewers' intuitive response to a behavior and the subsequent evaluation of the character based on these intuitions.

MFT holds that evaluations based on moral domains are immediate and are made specifically without cognitive deliberation. Applied to media settings, moral intuitions may be capable of influencing personality-based character evaluations by shaping a viewer's gut response to character behaviors that fall within one of the moral domains. This is well explicated in the model of intuitive morality and exemplars, which illustrates the reciprocal process between viewer morality and media content (MIME; Tamborini, 2012). To date, the value of using these domains to predict audience response to media entertainment has been shown in several studies (see Tamborini, 2012, for review). For example, in research focusing on violent media content, Tamborini, Eden, Bowman, Grizzard, and Lachlan (2012) demonstrated that the care and fairness domains could be used to differentiate the type of morality subcultures central to the study of disposition theory in narrative drama. Similarly, Tamborini et al. (2013) found that individual differences in the salience of these five domains predicted the enjoyment of short narratives that rewarded or punished behavior within these five domains. The MIME suggests that, at a basic level, these domains may also be helpful in understanding perceptions of characters.

Although this evidence from research on response to narrative drama suggests that the clearest differences between heroes and villains may be found along the fairness or care domains (e.g., heroes are justified, whereas villains are unjustified; heroes try to help people, whereas villains try to hurt them), it is easy to speculate how differences between heroes and villains may play out among each of the domains. For example, previous research suggests that villains are often characterized as dirty or "scruffy," whereas heroes are portrayed as clean and well dressed (Himmelweit et al., 1958). As cleanliness is an indicator of purity, such signals could be a systematic indicator of villains violating the "purity" domain and heroes upholding it. Villains are often characterized with an accent (Siegman, 1987), illustrating a violation of the ingroup domain, whereas heroes are often portrayed as stereotypical "everymen," thus upholding ingroup concerns. Heroes are often cops, law-makers, or sheriffs, who by their nature uphold the authority domain, whereas villains are lawbreakers, anarchists, or terrorists, thereby violating it. To be sure, these descriptions are gross oversimplifications of the manner in which viewers may judge these characters along these domains. Not all heroes will uphold, nor villains violate, every domain. Yet we may suspect that certain characters, or types of characters, have similar patterns of domain upholding or violation, and thus we should expect observable differences between heroes and villains in the general patterns of domain upholdings and violations.

This is in line with theorizing by Klapper (1960), who suggested that media act as a type of normative reflection of the shared values of a society. In terms of moral foundations, the MIME suggests that media production

influences, and is influenced by, the salience of the moral domains of the audience (Tamborini, 2012). This notion was tested in two studies by Mastro and colleagues, who found significant differences between the types of moral domains most common in U.S. versus Mexican-produced soap operas (Mastro et al., 2011; Tamborini, Enriquez, Lewis, Grizzard, & Mastro, 2011). Thus, it seems writers from specific cultures focus on the moral concerns specific to that culture when portraying heroes and villains in narrative. The MIME suggests that this stems from a reciprocal relationship between viewer perceptions of which moral domains are more or less acceptable for heroes and villains to violate, and normative content concerns by writers crafting heroic or villainous characters.

Combining understanding of media characters and moral psychology with person-perception domains may help us determine how stereotypes are related to perceptions of heroes and villains. The moral intuitions are instinctive and based in emotion, thus they are distinct from the personality dimensions just discussed. But it is possible that the moral intuitions are related in a systematic way to the personality dimensions, or underlay the formation of stereotypes regarding heroes and villains. By combining the moral domains of MFT and the person-perception domains of warmth, competence, and duplicity, we hope to get a fuller picture of how disparate information integrates to form character impressions.

It may be that warmth, competence, or duplicity evaluations are the result of broad-based upholding or violation of moral norms across all moral domains. That is, moral violations overall would be positively related to duplicity and negatively related to warmth. As heroes must uphold morals to be competent heroes, and villains must violate them to be competent villains, we would expect moral violations in general to be positively related to competence for villains and negatively for heroes. At the same time, however, one could reason that warmth, competence, and duplicity may instead be shaped by the specific moral domains in which the characters are portrayed as upholding or violating. For example it may be that heroes are shaped by their strong upholding of care concerns (i.e., sacrificing themselves to save others from hurt or acting from compassion to alleviate suffering) and that moral behaviors in this domain lead to perceptions of them as being particularly warm. On the contrary, villains may be perceived as particularly cold due to their violations of this domain. Although this is perhaps the clearest example, it could be that one or two main domains of morality are most important in determining particular social perception variables of competence and duplicity as well.

Understanding the pattern of association between person perception variables and moral domains, therefore, would allow for greater understanding of the ways in which heroes and villains are portrayed and perceived in contemporary media.

The Current Study

The current study was based on the reasoning that heroes and villains will differ along the five domains of Haidt's MFT. If our reasoning is valid, dispositional logic would hold that, in general, heroes will violate morality less across all domains than villains. With this in mind, we began with the following hypothesis:

- H1: When asked to rate heroes and villains along the five domains of MFT, respondents will rate heroes as having fewer moral violations than villains across the five domains.

Of course, this might demonstrate only that the domains are correlated with general perceptions of morality, rather than content-specific domains. Greater evidence that these domains distinguish heroes and villains would be apparent if the pattern of domain violations relevant to heroes is *distinct* from the pattern for villains. In other words, though heroes might have fewer moral violations across all domains, if the domains are *discrete* intuitions we might expect heroes to differ from villains less or more on some domains than others, which would indicate that although overall heroes are more moral than villains, within specific domains they may appear either closer or further apart. Therefore, we proposed the following research question:

- RQ1: Will the extent to which heroes and villains violate morality differ across the five domains of MFT?

In addition to examining the extent to which the five domains of MFT differentiate heroes from villains, we were also interested in exploring more general trait-based perceptions of heroes and villains. For example, Sanders (2005) showed that trait-based measures of warmth and competence factors (as well as a third factor specific to villains in her study, duplicity) could be used to describe media villains. In Sanders's study, duplicity was made up of terms such as "aggressive, dangerous, evil," specific to describing villains. Sanders did not examine, however, if these characteristics could be used to define heroes in addition to villains. Simple dispositional considerations might lead us to expect heroes and villains to differ on these domains. Specifically, heroes should be perceived higher on warmth and lower on duplicity than villains. This leads to our next hypothesis:

- H2: Respondents will rate heroes more highly on "warmth" and less highly on "duplicity" than villains.

Less clear are expectations of perceived competence. It may be that these character types are perceived as equally competent, and thus worthy of

being nominated as “heroes” or “villains.” One can think of exceptionally competent hero–villain pairs such as Sherlock Holmes and Moriarty or Batman and the Joker. It may also be that competence acts differently for heroes versus villains. For example, villains may need to be competent enough in order to be perceived as threats but not competent enough to vanquish the hero. How this plays out in perceptions of overall villain competence, however, is unknown. Similarly, heroes only need to be more competent than their adversary but may not be overly competent in and of themselves. Therefore, the following research question asks:

RQ2: Will heroes and villains differ on ratings of “competence”?

The purpose of including these trait variables in the current study was to explore how morality and trait variables are related in character perceptions. If the five moral domains are a useful tool for defining morality in narrative media and distinguishing characteristics of heroes and villains, we would expect that the correlation of traits with each domain should follow predictable patterns. By contrast, if the domains do not differ between heroes and villains (i.e., heroes are judged as unilaterally moral and villains unilaterally immoral) domain violations should, for both heroes and villains, be positively associated with duplicity and negatively associated for warmth. However, because we argue that the five domains represent *discrete* domains of morality, we would expect that the pattern of associations for warmth and duplicity would *vary* across the five domains, rather than being uniformly positively or negatively associated. With this in mind, we pose the following hypotheses:

- H3a: The association of duplicity with each of MFT’s five domains will vary for heroes versus villains.
- H3b: The association of warmth with each of MFT’s five domains will vary for heroes versus villains.

Because we have no rationale to predict how competence should be related to the moral domains, we posed the following research question:

RQ3: Will the association of competence with each of MFT’s five domains vary for heroes versus villains?

METHOD

Participants

A total of 291 undergraduate students (201 female) were recruited from Communication classes at a large public university in the northeastern

United States. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of this university. Students completed the questionnaire in exchange for a nominal amount of extra credit and were informed that they were taking part in a study designed to measure their attitudes toward media characters.

Procedure

Participants were administered an online survey that was designed to be completed within 30 minutes. Participants were randomly assigned to a condition in which they were asked to think of a hero/villain, in response to the following prompt: "Please think of a [movie/television]¹ character that you consider to be a particularly strong example of a HERO (or HEROINE)/VILLAIN (or VILLAINESS)." Next, participants filled out information about the source material of the character,^{2,3} as well as the age and gender of the character. Then participants completed both the Character Morality Questionnaire and the Character Trait Questionnaire in regards to this character. After completing ratings for one hero/villain, participants were

¹The film versus television distinction was part of a secondary research question investigating if heroes and villains would be evaluated differently for television versus film. There was a small three-way interaction among character role, media, and moral domain, $F(4, 286) = 3.31$, $p = .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$, which is why it is included in the present analyses. Notably, the main effect for media failed to reach significance, $F(1, 289) = 1.94$, $p = .33$, as did the two-way interactions of media with character, $F(1, 289) = 2.17$, $p = .14$, and media with domain, $F(4, 286) = .64$, $p = .63$. Visual inspection of the mean patterns in the three-way interaction suggests that film heroes violate the fairness, care, and purity domains less than TV heroes. By contrast, film villains are perceived to violate all domains more than are TV villains (although villains and heroes are very close on the loyalty domains). However, these differences are marginal. Examining the trait variables, the main effect for media failed to reach significance, as did the interactions of media with character, or media with trait (all $F < 1$).

²The 10 most frequently chosen heroes, with number of participants selecting character in parentheses, were Batman (60), Superman (51), Spiderman (22), Jack Bauer (13), Hercules (9), Harry Potter (7), House (6), Jack Shepherd (8), Iron Man (4), and Meredith Grey (3). Villains selected were The Joker (105), Lex Luther (12), Cruella DeVille (11), Ursula the Sea Witch (10), Spencer Pratt (8), Jafar (6), Plankton (6), Scar (6), Dan Scott (5), and Darth Vader (5).

³Seventy-six participants (26%) used "paired" hero/villains from the same content source. We ran an exploratory analysis using content source (same or different) as a between-subjects factor and domain and character as within subject. For moral domains, the only significant effect was in a three-way interaction with Character \times Domain \times Same Content Source, $F(4, 287) = 2.81$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, which is seen in a shift in domain ranking among villains such that authority violations were slightly lower and purity violations were slightly higher among villains from the same versus different content sources. There were no differences between person-perception variables in heroes and villains from same or different content, and the pattern of relationships between the personality trait variables and moral domains was similar independent of content source (all $F_s < 1$).

asked to complete ratings for a character of the opposite type. Whether participants were asked to select a hero or a villain first was counterbalanced across conditions ($n_{\text{hero first}} = 143$, $n_{\text{villain first}} = 148$).

Measures

Character morality questionnaire. Perceptions of the characters related to the five moral domains were measured using adapted items from the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ31; Haidt, Graham, & Hersh, 2006). We refer to this adapted questionnaire as the Character MFQ. The Character MFQ consists of 15 items beginning with the same stem “to what extent did this character...” and ending with specific moral violations in each moral domain (e.g., “This character acts unfairly”) rated along a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale.

As this scale is an adaptation of the existing MFQ, the measurement model for the Character MFQ was examined with confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS 17. We used criteria for model fit that include a minimum discrepancy statistic (CMIN) below 2.00, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) below .08 (Brown & Cudeck, 1993) and comparative fit index (CFI/*df*) above .90 (Bentler, 1990). For heroes, model fit indices were satisfactory for the specified model; although the CMIN/*df* = 2.12 was borderline, the RMSEA = .06 was acceptable, as was the CFI = .95. Reliability indices for this model indicated that four items should be dropped, leaving a total of 11 items with five factors. For villains, using the same 11 items also resulted in acceptable model fit with five factors (CMIN/*df* = 2.07, RMSEA = .08, CFI = .96).

The final scale included the following items, with reliability indices reported separately for both heroes and villains: authority (“show a lack of respect for authority,” “cause chaos or disorder”; $r_{\text{hero}} = .47$, $r_{\text{villain}} = .35$), care (“causes others to suffer emotionally,” “was cruel”; $r_{\text{hero}} = .57$, $r_{\text{villain}} = .53$), fairness (“denies others their rights,” “acts unfairly,” “treats some people differently than others”; $\alpha_{\text{hero}} = .80$, $\alpha_{\text{villain}} = .77$), loyalty (“shows a lack of loyalty,” “betrays his or her group”; $r_{\text{hero}} = .50$, $r_{\text{villain}} = .53$), and purity “does something disgusting,” “violates standards of purity and decency” ($r_{\text{hero}} = .49$, $r_{\text{villain}} = .44$). Although some of these interitem correlations are low, correlations of this size are not uncommon with two-item measures. Moreover, the specific inter-item correlations observed here are in line with work in this area (Tamborini et al., 2012). Based on these analyses, scales for the five domains were computed for both heroes and villains by averaging the items associated with each domain. Higher scores on these scales reflect perceptions of greater violation of each moral domain.

Trait variables. Participants were asked to rate how they would describe their character along a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale for 30 trait adjectives adapted from Sanders (2005) and Weber, Tamborini, Lee, and Stipp (2008). The items were theorized to be associated with warmth (such as tolerant, friendly, warm, gentle), competence (such as intelligent, clever), or duplicity (mad, tormented, violent, tragic, aggressive, dangerous, evil). The factor analysis and reliabilities associated with this measure are included in the results section with the discussion of H2.

RESULTS

Perceptions of Character Morality Across the Moral Domains

First, we compared respondent ratings of the moral violations of heroes versus villains in television versus film across the five domains. A 2 (TV/film) \times 2 (hero/villain) \times 5 (care, fairness, loyalty, authority, purity) mixed analysis of variance was conducted. Within-subject results are reported next. This analysis produced main effects for character role, $F(1, 289) = 1469.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .84$, 95% CI [0.80, 0.85], $\eta_G^2 = .71$, and domain, $F(4, 1156) = 53.39$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$, 95% CI [0.12, 0.19], $\eta_G^2 = .03$, and a two-way interaction between character role and domain, $F(4, 1156) = 85.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .74$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.27], $\eta_G^2 = .05$. The main effect of character role shows support for H1: Heroes ($M = 2.26$, $SD = .06$) violate all moral domains significantly less than Villains ($M = 5.89$, $SD = .06$). The main effect for domain was examined by inspection of overlap in the bounds for the 95% confidence intervals around the means for each of the five domains: care ($M = 4.14$, $SE = .05$), fairness ($M = 3.98$, $SE = .04$), authority ($M = 4.43$, $SE = .06$), loyalty ($M = 3.73$, $SE = .05$), and purity ($M = 4.10$, $SE = .05$). Inspection of 95% confidence intervals around each mean showed that perceived violations for the authority domain were significantly greater than for all other domains, care violations significantly greater than fairness and loyalty domains, and both purity and fairness violations significantly greater than loyalty for both character types.

More central to our interests is the two-way interaction between character role and domain. This interaction addressed RQ1, which asked if the extent to which heroes and villains are perceived as moral differed across the five domains. Table 1 shows the means and confidence intervals associated with this interaction.

Examining the means for heroes shows that heroes are perceived to violate authority and purity morals more so than other domains, and they violate loyalty significantly less than they violate care and fairness. By contrast, villains are perceived to violate purity less than they violate the other four domains. Notably, for villains, the perception of violation of purity is

TABLE 1
 Difference Scores, Standard Error, and 95% Confidence Intervals Around Module Violations

Character Type	Module Violation	M	SE	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Hero	Care	2.06 _b	.08	1.90	2.21
	Fairness	1.97 _b	.07	1.83	2.11
	Authority	2.87 _a	.10	2.69	3.06
	Loyalty	1.70 _c	.06	1.58	1.82
	Purity	2.69 _a	.07	2.56	2.83
Villain	Care	6.22 _A	.07	6.09	6.34
	Fairness	5.99 _{AB}	.07	5.85	6.13
	Authority	5.98 _{AB}	.07	5.84	6.12
	Loyalty	5.76 _{BC}	.08	5.60	5.93
	Purity	5.51 _C	.07	5.38	5.65
Difference scores					
Villain–Hero					
	Care	4.15	.10	3.94	4.36
	Fairness	4.01	.11	3.79	4.23
	Authority	4.07	.12	3.84	4.30
	Loyalty	3.10	.12	2.86	3.34
	Purity	2.81	.10	2.61	3.01

Note. $n = 291$. No subletter in common indicates that the upper and lower bound of the 95% confidence intervals do not overlap. Comparisons are within hero and villain conditions.

significantly less than the perception of violations of authority, fairness and care. Examining the difference scores for the modules (Villain–Hero difference scores; Table 1) it is clear that the individual modules distinguish between heroes and villains differently as well. There is a greater and similar amount of difference between heroes and villains in the domains of care, fairness, and authority compared to the domains of loyalty and purity. Given the scores within character type, it seems this is due to the relatively low amount of loyalty and purity violations by villains.

Structure of Trait Variables

We needed to identify a set of traits that characterize heroes similarly to the warmth, duplicity, and competence traits used by Sanders (2005) to characterize villains. We conducted a principal components analysis using Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization, which showed an overall similarity to Sanders's (2005) warmth, duplicity, and competence dimensions. Based on these findings, averaged composite scores for warmth, duplicity, and

competence were created from these items and used in analyses examining our remaining hypotheses and research questions.⁴ Five items measuring warmth (*tolerant, friendly, warm, polite, and gentle*) were averaged to form composite warmth scales for heroes and villains (heroes, $\alpha = .86$; villains $\alpha = .85$). Four items measuring duplicity (*mad, tormented, violent, and tragic*) were combined in the same way (heroes $\alpha = .77$; villains $\alpha = .76$). Three items measuring competence (*intelligent, clever, and stupid*) were averaged to form the competence scales (heroes $\alpha = .66$; villains $\alpha = .77$).

Differences in Traits Among Heroes and Villains

H2 predicted that heroes would be rated as more warm and less duplicitous than villains, and RQ2 asked if heroes and villains would differ on the competence domain. A 2 (film/TV) \times 2 (hero/villain) \times 3 (trait) mixed analysis of variance was employed to examine these trait-based character differences. Within-subject results demonstrated main effects for character role, $F(1, 578) = 17.52, p < .000, \eta_p^2 = .05, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.01, 0.06], \eta_G^2 = .005$, and trait, $F(2, 578) = 325.66, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .53, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.47, 0.57], \eta_G^2 = .31$. The main effect for media type failed to reach significance, $F(1, 289) = .82, p = .82$, as did the interactions of media type with character, $F(1, 578) = 2.93, p = .08$, or media with trait, $F(2, 578) = .51, p = .52$. For both our hypotheses and research question, however, the effect of greatest interest is the significant Trait \times Character Role interaction, $F(2, 578) = 744.03, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .72, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.68, 0.75], \eta_G^2 = .49$. As the findings in Table 2 show, heroes are judged higher on warmth than villains and lower on duplicity. Therefore H2 is supported. Notably, heroes and villains do not differ on competence ratings, although they do differ in the way competence is related to warmth and duplicity. For heroes, competence and warmth are not different, whereas for villains, warmth, duplicity, and competence are distinct.

⁴The following items were removed from the character trait scale due to inconsistencies between factor loadings for heroes and villains. For heroes the following items loaded with the competence factor: *a good person, helpful, devoted, evil, and a bad person*. *Vicious* loaded with the duplicitous factor. For villains the following items loaded with the warmth factor: *a good person helpful, good-natured, and sincere*; the following items loaded with the duplicitous factor: *crazy, dangerous, wicked, and aggressive*. All analyses reported in text were replicated with composites consisting of all items loading on each factor. None of the replicated results were different in any way (direction, magnitude, or interpretation), nor added any meaningful information from the results presented in text; therefore they were omitted from this report. They are available upon request from the first author.

TABLE 2
Means and Standard Errors of Trait Variables for Heroes and Villains

Trait	Heroes		Villains	
	M	SE	M	SE
Warmth	5.00 _{Aa}	.08	2.15 _{Bc}	.07
Duplicity	2.92 _{Bb}	.08	5.42 _{Aa}	.08
Competence	4.84 _{Bb}	.04	4.78 _{Aa}	.05

Note. $n = 291$. Means are unweighted. Within rows, means that share no uppercase subscript differ at $p < .05$. Within columns, means that share no lowercase subscript differ at $p < .05$.

Associations of Trait Variables with Moral Domains

H3a and H3b predicted that the manner in which warmth and duplicity would be associated with each of the five domains would vary for heroes versus villains. RQ3 asked similarly if the association of competence with each of Haidt's five domains would vary for heroes versus villains. Using six separate analyses regressing each moral domain onto warmth, competence, and duplicity, we found that trait domains are significantly and selectively predictive of specific social stereotype dimensions for both heroes and villains. See Table 3 for all regression coefficients.

For heroes, authority and care violations are predictive of person perception variables across several domains. Violations in these moral domains negatively predict warmth perceptions and positively predict duplicity perceptions. Perceived competence in heroes is positively predicted by violations of authority and negatively predicted by violations in the loyalty and purity domains. For villains, purity is the strongest predictor of all

TABLE 3
Regression Coefficients for Trait Variables of Heroes and Villains on Moral Module

	Heroes			Villains		
	Warmth	Duplicity	Competence	Warmth	Duplicity	Competence
Care	-.28***	.34***	.05	-.15	.10	.29*
Fairness	-.05	.16	-.25**	-.13	-.01	-.13
Auth	-.24***	.25***	.12**	-.01	.13	-.03
Loyalty	.07	-.09	-.25***	-.06	.05	.04
Purity	-.05	.02	-.01	-.21***	.42***	.23**
<i>F</i>	22.78	42.24	13.27	21.83	34.07	7.32
<i>R</i> ²	.27	.42	.18	.26	.36	.10

Note. $n = 291$. All *F* values are significant at $p < .05$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

three-person perception variables, with purity violations negatively predicting warmth perceptions and positively predicting duplicity and competence perceptions. Violations of care in villains positively predict perceptions of competence.

DISCUSSION

Our study began with the exploratory goal of examining how perceptions of media heroes and villains differ along domains of personality and moral psychology, and whether these dimensions could be associated in a meaningful fashion. Our goal was not to describe the manner in which audiences perceive all media characters along these domains of morality and person perception but to see if these domains may help us understand how these character perceptions are formed and to demonstrate the viability of this approach for evaluating characters in narratives more broadly. Our findings suggest that audiences have complex perceptions of the morality of heroes and villains much more multifaceted than the “white hat/black hat” assumptions of past character studies. The fact that being a hero is not merely “not being a villain” or “being good” and that being a villain is more than “not being a hero/being bad” is something that is often overlooked. As a first step in the direction of more specificity of characterizing character perceptions, these findings may be useful to entertainment researchers in several ways. In the following section, we discuss the importance of key findings to entertainment scholars, identify some limitations, and suggest future directions for this line of research.

Our first hypothesis that heroes and villains would be judged differently across the five moral domains was supported. Not surprisingly, heroes are considered more moral than villains across all five domains. More interesting, however, mean comparisons highlight differences that show both the relative importance of upholding the loyalty domain to heroes and the relative unimportance of the upholding the authority and purity domains for these same characters. That is, heroes may remain heroes even when violating moral norms, as long as those norms are in the domains of authority and purity.

Regarding the extent to which heroes and villains violate morality across the five domains, there is variation between the perception of the strengths of domain violations between heroes and villains. Furthermore, the rank orders of the moral violation are different for heroes versus villains, indicating that some domains are more relevant for viewers depending on the type of character being judged. Heroes were considered to violate authority and purity the most; by contrast, villains simply were perceived to violate purity less than the other four domains. This high ranking of heroic violations of authority and purity could speak to the stereotypical movie hero who fights

the man and yet is loyal to his friends, plays fairly, and cares about causing undo harm (or preventing undo harm by others). Indeed many participants selected *Batman* as their hero, a notoriously antiauthoritarian character who abhors killing, fights for justice, and is fiercely loyal to his city. Whether this pattern holds across a broad selection of characters, from a broad selection of content, remains to be determined.

These findings broadly support Haidt and Joseph's (2007) contention that variability exists within moral judgments and that there is more to heroes and villains than simple definitions of "good" and "evil." Thus, a more nuanced understanding of character intentions, behaviors, and justifications, grounded in an understanding of culturally determined moral norms, is needed to understand what makes a hero or a villain. For example, there is evidence that character behaviors and moral foci of plotlines vary between cultures. Mastro et al. (2011) found that soap opera characters for Mexican soap opera emphasized different degrees of domain salience than English-language counterparts. Therefore, cross-cultural research examining these characters may be quite useful for isolating the extent to which these moral domains are considered "heroic" to violate or uphold in different cultural settings. In addition, it is not hard to imagine that specific types of narratives require that the main characters portray specific types of morals. Some preliminary research suggests that broad moral concerns vary by genre (Daalmans, Hijmans, & Wester, 2013b) as do the moral behaviors of the characters featured within these programs (Daalmans, Hijmans, & Wester, 2013a). It may be that examining hero-villain "pairs" from specific genres such as horror, courtroom drama, and soap opera would reveal that different patterns of normative morality are demonstrated by the characters from these different genres.

The findings also support our hypothesis regarding the manner in which the associations between moral domains and person perception variables will vary for heroes versus villains. We were able to identify a set of traits that characterize heroes similarly to the warmth, competence, and duplicitous traits used to characterize villains in previous research by Sanders (2005). More important, however, we were able to detect both similarities and differences in the extent to which various trait and moral domains are associated for heroes versus villains. This information does more than simply reveal how audiences use these traits to rate characters, as it begins to unpack relationships between perceptions about characters that may determine our responses to media characters.

For example, the fact that authority and care violations are negatively associated with perceived warmth for heroes and positively associated with perceived duplicity, but that this same pattern of associations does not hold for villains, suggests that there is something about the context of heroic violations of these domains that is not true for villains. We suggested previously

that the care domain may be particularly important for defining heroes; this result suggests that this influence may be due to the care domain's influence on perceptions of warmth and duplicity. It also suggests that despite the high frequency of authority violations seen in heroes, these violations come at the expense of making a hero less *heroic*, that is, less warm and more duplicitous.

By contrast, the main moral dimension driving perceptions of warmth and duplicity for villains is purity. Based on the past conceptualizations of villains, and the high frequency scores in the care domain, we may have expected that care would be the most important moral domain for understanding villains. Instead it appears that the violation of purity norms is what drives perceptions of a villain's warmth or duplicity. The fact that villains were perceived to violate purity less than the other moral domains, and yet it is the strongest predictor of warmth and duplicity perceptions, suggests that purity can play a very strong role in perceptions of villains as good or bad people. Even small purity violations appear capable of having a strong effect on perceptions of villains.

It is important to note here that this does not mean that *all* villains must be perceived as impure. Nor would we argue conversely that all heroes must be perceived as pure. It does indicate that even very small violations of the purity domain have large effects on person perception of villains. This is in line with moral foundations theory, which defines the purity domain as behavior that avoids or eliminates disgusting actions (Haidt & Joseph, 2007). The emotion of disgust has been argued to be the first and most important underlying factor in basic moral judgments, as it underlies human aversion to contaminated food or persons, and thus protects the "body and the soul" from contamination (Rozin, Haidt, & McAuley, 2008). Disgust has been found to be a potent elicitor and justification for negative intergroup relations to foreigners, outgroups, and deviant individuals (cf. Rozin et al., 2008). It is not surprising, therefore, that villains are marked by small but potent purity violations. It would be important, however, to determine in future research how domain and perceived extremity of the violation are related, to determine what and how much disgust makes a villain seem impure.

In general, the manner in which moral domains are associated with warmth and duplicity in our study is as we predicted—moral violation is generally associated negatively with warmth, and positively with duplicity, for both heroes and villains. Competence, however, shows an interesting and unexpected pattern. For heroes, competence is positively predicted by violations of authority and negatively predicted by violations of fairness and loyalty. This seems in line with discussion regarding American film's veneration of the antiauthoritarian vigilante (e.g., Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*, Batman) who must fight a corrupt or ineffective authority in order to uphold fairness and loyalty for his loved ones. For villains, competence is

positively predicted by violations of care and purity. That is, the more harmful and more impure villains are, the more they are perceived as competent. This makes sense, logically: Villains are crafted to be feared. They inspire more fear when they are competent, and order to be competent at villainy they must, at the least, have intention to harm others.

Future research can attempt to disentangle these effects by modeling different types of characters and the attributes that are associated with each. For example, it may be that certain mixtures of moral and person perception attributes combine to form distinct character types in the minds of different audiences. One can think of the impure-but-competent hero (House, Don Draper) who may activate both moral and person-perception stereotypes in one instant by way of a schema associating these types of traits. It may also be that specific combinations of these traits and moral behaviors are more or less common for antiheroes, or complex villains, than for traditional white-hat heroes and black-hat villains.⁵ By attempting to model the co-occurrences of moral violation

⁵The selection of such impure-but-competent characters in this study raises questions regarding the extent to which our results represent perceptions of pure heroes such as Superman as opposed to antihero characters such as House and Don Draper. Recent research (Tamborini, Grizzard, Eden, & Lewis, 2011) suggests that that antiheroes can be distinguished from pure heroes and villains by the extent to which they uphold and violate moral domains. In line with the current study, pure heroes were perceived to score significantly higher than villains on upholding all moral domains. By contrast, antiheroes fell somewhere in between heroes and villains, scoring more below heroes on the upholding of some domains but not others. Although it was not our primary rationale for the present study, analyses were conducted to compare characters in the present study that we might think of as antiheroes with those we might consider pure heroes. The results of these analyses are in line with findings from Tamborini, Grizzard, et al. (2011). That is, antiheroes (using Batman, House, and Jack Bauer; $n = 79$) differed significantly compared to pure (all other heroes in our study; $n = 212$) on ratings of harm, $F(1, 289) = 17.94, p < .00$; fairness, $F(1, 289) = 11.10, p < .05$; and authority, $F(1, 289) = 8.90, p < .05$. The differences in loyalty and purity were not significant. The means for the significant results were consistent such that the antiheroes were always perceived to violate the moral domain more than the pure heroes.

These findings are presented in a footnote given the concerns stemming from the fact, in this analysis, the determination of whether a character was a hero or antihero was a post hoc determination by the researchers. We cannot assume that our categorization of these characters as hero or antihero would be the same as those participants. In addition, the comparisons we have made here go far beyond the purpose of the current study, which was to examine heroes versus villains rather than heroes versus villains versus antiheroes. Clearly, this is an important direction for research to take in the future. This study takes a first step in this direction by asking participants to name for themselves who their heroes are. Perhaps an equally interesting question is why, when asked to identify a hero, so many participants picked these types of conflicted characters. This issue goes beyond questions examined here (i.e., the extent to which these intuitive domains shape audience perceptions of heroes vs. villains) to consider whether these domains shape individuals' perceptions of heroes versus antiheroes. Although we may think this is true, this is a question for future research.

and person perception, for example, in a multidimensional scaling analysis of specific character types, we might be able to start disentangling the character schema that are used so effectively to convey information about characters in a media experience.

Limitations

The goal of our study was to determine whether moral domains and person perception traits could be used to model character schema. We began it knowing that the approach we used in this initial study would place some limits on the conclusions. First, the cross-sectional nature of this study makes it difficult to determine directionality. Thus, it is impossible to determine whether violations of care and purity make audiences perceive villains as competent, or competence at villainy makes audiences perceive characters as uncaring and impure. Research using different methodological approaches is needed to make these determinations.

Second, by asking respondents to think of heroes and villains, we have limited the character schemas we are modeling. We may have primed them to think about characters as “good” or “bad” and thus to make judgments based on moral designations. This approach may have limited not only the domains used to make judgments but also the type of media genres considered by our respondents in a manner that prevented the inclusion of those with morally ambiguous characters. This may have led to our results being dependent on the specific characters selected by respondents. Furthermore, the sample was predominantly female, which may also limit the generalizability of these specific patterns of moral and perceptual salience. When considering these limitations, however, it is important to remember that our intent was to demonstrate the viability of a moral domain and person-perception-based approach to character judgment, and determine how these methods of evaluating characters are related. Although the reliance on user-selected specific exemplars in a cross-sectional survey may have created limitations in this regard, we do not think interfered with our goal of determining the viability of this approach.

Third, the fact that the measurement model for the Character MFQ was modified to fit our data suggests the potential for problems with replication in future studies. Notably, although this remains a concern, it is lessened by recent work using this scale (Tamborini et al., 2012), which reported similar measurement modifications for improved model fit. Finally, this study relied upon a U.S. student sample, predominantly female, which may have led to restricted variance in our measurement. Evidence from MFT research has suggested that the salience of different moral domains may be restricted in student populations (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek,

2009); however, the patterns of differences that we saw were evident of adequate variance for our study.

Conclusion

The current study examined if and when perceptions of moral violations and trait variables differed for heroes and villains. This research shows that judgments based on mechanisms of moral intuition and person perception are particularly relevant to our understanding of character dispositions and that the use these domains of morality and person perception appears to be a valuable metric in predicting dispositions toward characters. Beyond the implications of our findings for disposition research, evidence that the moral intuitionist perspective, combined with person-perception processes, can help define media characters suggests the value of combining these perspectives in interpreting reactions to and perceptions of media characters. In addition, it may inform future research on impression formation and character schemas, as well as be extended to understanding cultural differences in heroism and villainy.

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