

Identification, Creation, and Social Perceptions of Superheroes among Southern California University Students

Michelle Alfaro, Chelsea Corgan, Ana Dominguez, Amanda Gurtis, Kourtney Hicks, Monique Sheppard, and Catalina Zech
University of La Verne

INTRODUCTION

Identification with a Superhero

The following study examined Southern California University students' perceptions of superheroes. Previous studies have examined if children self-identify with superheroes, and if demographic characteristics (gender, ethnicity, etc.) impact whom children identify with (Galbraith, 2007). Very few studies have examined if young adults continue to identify with these fictional heroes. Research has suggested that superheroes can influence a child's development and moral values. Several studies have been done to analyze the relationship between a child and their superhero idols. Such studies include research on the role of superheroes and morality, education, team work, society and responsibility. Findings have suggested that there is a relationship between how a child might feel about her or himself and how they feel about their superheroes.

Identification and Behaviors

In a study conducted by Justin, F. Martin (2007), it was explored whether children's familiarity with popular superheroes and superheroes prosocial behaviors, influenced their own prosocial behaviors. Significant correlations were found between the self-ratings and the ratings of the superheroes. Children indicated that they should help and treat others fairly, do the right thing, show forgiveness, not cheat, respect others and that they should work hard. The ratings for the superheroes were also the same. The correlation between children's self-rating and their superhero ratings support the belief that it is possible for children to learn values from superheroes and that they may be used as a tool to educate children.

Self-Identification with Heroes

Almost everyone in society can identify someone whom they admire or respect, as well as qualities they find desirable. Children's and adolescents' choices in whom or what they admire are particularly influenced by popular culture, historical figures, their family and peers. As a result, those parts of a child's life are greatly reflected in their choices in a role model.

Three different Norwegian studies were published that examined the choices children and adolescents make in whom they would most like to emulate. One was done in 1914, and the other 2 were done in comparison to it, in 2000. In 1914, many children chose religious figures, their parents, as well as historical figures as people they would choose to emulate (Teigen, Normann, Bjorkheim & Helland, 2000). Rarely, did the adolescents surveyed mention themselves or traits that they possess. The two studies done in 2000 showed dramatically different results. High school students frequently noted family members as people they would like to emulate as well as traits that they had as those they found desirable. Junior high students cited public figures and themselves. Boys more frequently mentioned people of the same sex as those they would prefer to be like, unlike girls in the sample (Teigen, et al., 2000). What is significantly different from the 1914 study is that children in the more recent study frequently mentioned themselves as those they would prefer to be like. This shows historical as well as cultural factors that influence these choices.

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Hypothesis

It was hypothesized participants would create a superhero that was similar to them on the following demographics: gender, age, ethnicity, religious and spiritual background, and sexual orientation.

METHOD

Participants

There were a total of 248 participants (82 males, 165 females). The sample was composed of Southern California college students. Participants were chosen via convenience sampling. The only exclusion criteria used in sampling was that participants had to be at least eighteen years old. The ethnic background of the participants was Latinos (43%), Caucasians (26%), African American (11%), Biracial (9%), Asian (7%), and Other (4%).

Measures

The 7 page survey consisted of 12 demographic questions, 5 questions to establish previous superhero exposure/knowledge, 4 questions on individual perceptions about superheroes, 15 questions on identifying superheroes in the media, and 12 questions on creating a superhero to assess if participants self-identified. All items were designed by the researchers.

Procedure

Participants were asked to read and sign consent forms and complete the 48-item survey that evaluated three aspects: individual perceptions about superheroes, identifying superheroes in the media, and creating a superhero. The researchers examined if participants' demographics would match those of their created superhero and evaluated the following demographic characteristics: sex, socioeconomic status, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and age.

RESULTS

Pearson's Chi-Squares analyses were conducted to test the hypothesis that superheroes would be created based on the participant's gender, age, ethnicity, spiritual background, and sexual orientation. The results of the tests were significant for sex, $X^2(1, N=245) = 77.25, p = .000$. Seventy-seven percent of women female and 81% of men superheroes that were similar to them in gender. Effect size for this pattern of differences was large, $\eta^2 = .60$. Results also supported the hypothesis concerning age, $X^2(1, N=239) = 7.86, p = .000$. Effect size for this pattern was also large, $\eta^2 = .60$. Results supported the hypothesis that participants created superheroes based on their own ethnicity, $X^2(1, N=202) = 4.62, p = .000$. See Table 1 for percentages by ethnicity. Additionally, participants chose similar religious and spiritual backgrounds for their superheroes as themselves, $X^2(1, N=236) = 4.18, p = .000$. Effect size was large, $\eta^2 = .54$. Finally, participants chose similar sexual orientations for their superheroes as for themselves, $X^2(1, N=244) = 1.53, p = .000$.

Table 1. Percentages of Participants choosing similar ethnic superheroes

DISCUSSION

Participants chose heroes that were similar to them on the following demographic characteristics: gender, age, religious and spiritual orientation, and sexual orientation. Patterns of choices on socioeconomic status was not statistically significant because participants chose a higher socioeconomic status for their hero than they themselves had. For the most part, the study found that participants chose similar characteristics for their heroes that reflected themselves. Further evaluation needs to be conducted to better understand why individuals pick certain characteristics. Previous research reveals a good amount of information as to how children's and adolescents' ideals have changed over time with the progression of society. However, there is not enough information as to why subjects would choose media and sports heroes as those they would like to emulate, and moreover why they would choose individual traits they find desirable that are more reminiscent of the qualities of family or peers. Also, the trend of children choosing themselves as someone they emulated denotes changes in relationships to authority and conformity to societal norms. More research is needed in order to determine exactly what shapes these choices and how differently children choose their role models now, from those that have been chosen in prior research. This particular study examined college students' identification with heroes and found that students characterized them to be similar to themselves. In comparison to previous studies on children's choices, our findings indicate that as individuals grow and mature, their views of heroes move from those who are in the media, to family, to self identification. Further evaluation would need to be conducted in order to understand why this shift occurs. Limitations of the study include unequal male and female participants, small sample size, and should have surveyed at more universities.