

“Research & Practice” features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Social studies education often includes individuals who are portrayed as heroes or villains. Cathryn van Kessel’s research focuses on the effect these portrayals may have on students. Here, I invited her to share her research as well as the work of other scholars. She describes the problems she sees with many current practices, and then offers concrete teaching suggestions and thoughtful advice for social studies educators. Educators at all levels should find her work relevant to their pedagogy.

—Patricia G. Avery, “Research and Practice” Editor, University of Minnesota

Deindividualizing Evil and Good in Social Education

Cathryn van Kessel

IN Western societies, people tend to understand successes and failures as the result of individual traits that are isolated from broader societal processes—for example, attributing personal triumphs to individual hard work, while assuming that those who are struggling fail because of their lagging work ethic. Such simplifications of successes and failures lead us to imagine exceptional individuals divorced from their social context, rather than ordinary people enmeshed in their communities.¹ Yet relying solely on a systemic analysis (i.e., thinking about society and institutions) is not the answer either. As Elizabeth Minnich notes: “It does not work to focus only on individuals ... it also does not work to give all agency over to systems, whether conceptual, moral, political, and/or economic. We need to think through experiences as we find them in reality.”² Part of this task is to think about the evils of the world, and the fights against those evils, as the domain of ordinary people entangled in their communities and institutions—not extraordinary individuals divorced from the systems that shape how people think and act in the world.

Social educators are faced with the challenge of how to navigate the points of intersection between societies and individuals—the macro and the micro—within and beyond the curriculum. Such an approach is to help us all “re-cognize” (i.e., recognize and also re-think) our own roles in our very real

surroundings, even in the most taken-for-granted situations.³ In other words, the very idea of “common sense,” needs to be interrogated.⁴

The Problem of Heroes and Villains

In and out of the classroom, humans seem to be drawn

to heroes (e.g., Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr.) and villains (e.g., Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin). While tempting to see such figures as polar opposites, heroes and villains are similar in terms of being (in)famous and extraordinary. Those who appear to transcend normalcy may leave immortal legacies (and, especially with hindsight, these legacies are revealed as good or evil), and consequently, they can help us find meaning, purpose, and significance in our own lives.⁵ The horrible irony is that an over-reliance on larger-than-life figures simultaneously can subvert a sense of personal agency because the heroes and villains of the past and present become unrealistic and thus unrelatable.⁶

Heroification creates larger-than-life, perfect heroes separated from their community context, while *villainification*

shifts our perspective away from systemic (or structural) harms to the individual evil-doer.⁷ In both cases, complex and enmeshed processes between and among individuals, communities, and broader society are flattened into a focus on one person. This flattening does a disservice to the past, present, and future. Heroification and villainification narratives not only misrepresent historical processes, but they can deflate a sense of personal agency and responsibility. These narratives are particularly unhelpful in social education, in which defined goals often include civic agency and active participation,⁸ as well as preventing future violence.⁹ Students (and their teachers) learn that good (e.g., positive social change) occurs through the heroic actions of individuals rather than broad, coordinated mobilization, and evil occurs at the whim of a madman rather than through everyday actions that support injustice.¹⁰ As neither heroes nor villains, students may come to see themselves only as bystanders.

Heroification vs. Ordinary Heroism

Heroification flattens the nexus of individual, community, and societal factors that have made the world a better place into a single, perfect individual.¹¹ These uncomplicated icons cannot possibly be emulated in real life. Although educators may craft such narratives to provide inspiration, heroification narratives can actually cause disengagement by



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The heroification of individuals like Helen Keller (pictured here in 1917) can lead students to think they are too “ordinary” to accomplish a public good.

turning “flesh-and-blood individuals into pious, perfect creatures without conflicts, pain, credibility, or human interest,” such as Helen Keller, George Washington, or Dwight Eisenhower.¹² Students do not consider these to be people like themselves, with flaws and complications. They see “chosen ones,”¹³ and thus feel that they are too “ordinary” to accomplish a public good, such as actively fighting for civil rights like Martin Luther King Jr.¹⁴ The attitude that making significant social progress is unattainable to ordinary people is inaccurate and can hinder students from seeing their own possibilities as civic actors.

There is a need to emphasize the underlying mundane

normalcy of what might be considered heroic. One possible point of entry is Hannah Arendt’s conceptualization of *action*. Arendt was a German political theorist of Russian-Jewish ancestry, whose experiences during and after the Second World War shaped her commitment to understand evildoers and those who oppose and thwart them. In her foundational work, *The Human Condition*, Arendt articulated a conception of politics based on an innate human capacity to do something new, something unexpected.¹⁵ Arendt dubbed this as *action* and an example would be the resistance movements against the Nazis during World War II. Individuals did the unexpected. They



Political philosopher Hannah Arendt, 1958.

interrupted their routine private activities to create a new public space to (re)claim some freedom and to serve as an exemplar for future action. It is this public space that underlies the thrust and significance of *action*—our interconnectedness with each other.

Importantly, anyone can take *action*. No special powers, status, or genealogy is required. Also drawing from ancient Greek thought, specifically Homeric literature, Arendt believed that a hero can be an ordinary person. There is not really any such thing as heroic qualities, and even the word “hero” originally was simply a name given any free man who participated in the Trojan War. Everyone is technically capable of *action*, but not everyone will take it. What is necessary for

this public thinking is a sense of interconnection among us, to work collectively to make the world into a place suitable in which to dwell.

Although humans cannot take *action* every moment of their lives, it is imperative that we know that we are capable of taking *action*, which is one of the reasons why heroification is so troubling. Heroification narratives can stifle students’ feelings of civic agency and self-efficacy. Furthermore, these narratives minimize the importance of communities that mobilize to create social change.¹⁶

Villainification vs. Ordinary Evil

Villainification is a process that leads to blaming a single actor for an evil outcome instead of

the multitude of people and structures that are responsible. Similar to heroification, this process is not only incorrect (given the historical record), but also can thwart attempts to understand the evils of the world, therefore preventing societies from adequately countering those evils.

Like *action*, everyone is equally capable of evil-doing. Such agency is not reserved for exceptional individuals. In her later work, Hannah Arendt revealed how humans can perpetuate evil without intending to do so¹⁷—an idea expanded upon by one of her students, Elizabeth Minnich.¹⁸ On the other hand, Ernest Becker, a Jewish American cultural anthropologist, explained why sometimes equally ordinary people can purposely do evil deeds.¹⁹ Like Arendt, Becker was shaped by his experience in World War II and its associated Nazi horrors, as well as his activism alongside his students against the Vietnam War and in support of the Civil Rights Movement.

In order to provide more nuance and structure to Arendt’s idea of the banality of evil, Minnich identified two types of evil: *intensive and extensive*.²⁰ Intensive evils are concentrated—one or a few people significantly harm others. These are the extraordinary sadists who are easy to sensationalize (e.g., serial killers). Extensive evils also produce significant harm, but are perpetuated by many different people—some of whom would be just like you and me—and

are also extended over time (e.g., enslavement, genocide, abducting and training child soldiers).

Villainification is a process where extensive evils are treated like intensive ones, and thus culpability is narrowed and many of those who contributed to significant harm are not discussed. To be sure, sadists can and do take part in extensive evils, but the vast majority of those involved would not be considered as such. Indeed, some historical figures may have embodied intensive evil, while more ordinary folks perpetuated extensive evil. Historical records also reveal a fuzzy spot between extensive and intensive: Ordinary people (i.e., not psychopaths) can become eager killers, even of their former friends and neighbors, as was documented in the Rwandan genocide of 1994.²¹

To understand this liminal area of evil-doing, the insights of Ernest Becker are helpful. He identified a process of *fetishizing evil*. In order to cope with some of the anxieties inherent in the human condition, people can localize their fears into a single (and thus more manageable) source (e.g., scapegoating a marginalized group); and then eradicating that supposed evil becomes a heroic quest. Evil can be fetishized into a particular person, group, a cause, or an ideology. One's own group is "pure and good" and the evil others are "the real animals, are spoiling everything for you, contaminating your purity and bringing disease and weakness into your vitality."²²

This psychological process lays the groundwork for a sort of *necropolitics* in which killing (supposed) enemies of the state or nation can become a "cultural sensibility" and "an extension of play."²³ In short, ordinary people can be active supporters of, and participants in, horrific violence (e.g., some of the discourse about the Israeli government's actions in Palestine). Furthermore, as educators it is important to know that it is psychologically comforting for us and our students to fetishize evil in a singular villain in lieu of a more nuanced analysis. An anti-villainification approach invites educators and students to consider their own (potential) responsibility and culpability as a particular manifestation of "anti-complicity pedagogy."²⁴

Anti-Villainification and Anti-Heroification Approaches

There is a likely irresolvable tension between an innate love of stories about exceptional humans and the potential such stories have to disempower us. As such, the task is not necessarily to find a *balance*. Instead, educators might seek just the right amount of *tension*, like an acrobat on a tightrope; the rope cannot be too slack, nor can it be too tight. With this tension in mind, what follows are five intertwined suggestions that educators can employ as they plan anti-heroification and anti-villainification educational experiences for their students. These recommendations are offered in the context of high school social education, but



American cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker.

could be adapted for younger students, given attentiveness to age-appropriate vocabulary and phrasing:

1. *Discuss Good and Evil Thoughtfully.* Using the active voice and naming a nexus of contributors (and contributing factors) gives a better sense that many different people were responsible. In this way, the banal mixes with the extraordinary, allowing teachers to emphasize sustained collective assertions of values, rights, and a collective better way. In the case of anti-villainification, teachers can name a variety of perpetrators—the sadists as well as the ordinary people—as the subject of the sentence (e.g., "Nazi officials as well as local collaborators forced Jews, gays, Roma people, and others into transports to concentration and death camps" instead of "Jews, gays, the Roma, and others

were forced into camps”). In the case of anti-heroification, ensure that famous figures are contextualized in their communities (e.g., “Rosa Parks was a seamstress, a member of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, and trained in civil disobedience. Her arrest for noncompliance helped spark action by the Women’s Political Council and the Montgomery Improvement Association”). Clear language (e.g., active instead of passive phrasing) makes agency more visible, and even a brief naming of a variety of contributors prevents oversimplification of history into a hero or villain.

Elementary and middle school teachers may want to engage with comparative situations from either students’ day-to-day lives or popular media to illustrate the concept of how good and evil come to pass. For example, an instance where members of the school organized an activity to help the school or broader community could be tied to a curricular topic like the struggle for school integration. Another example would be how a fictional villain was not able to carry out evil deeds without others helping or being complicit (e.g., Voldemort in the *Harry Potter* series could not do what he did without collaborators and bystanders) could then be tied to discussions about the Holocaust.

2. Develop “Throughline” Inquiry Questions. Thoughtful inquiry questions evoke a sense of responsibility and invite

students to think through ethical issues. Throughline questions have four characteristics: they have clear connections to the issue; they cannot be answered by “yes” or “no”; they are interesting and engaging; and they have an unavoidable ethical dimension.²⁵ For the issue of globalization, a throughline question might be: “What similarities and differences exist between the colonial exploitation of the past and globalization in the present, and what part do I play in these processes?” With younger students, these questions can be shorter, with simplified language, and broken up into smaller, digestible questions. In middle school, an example might be: “How have U.S. trade and military relations with other countries affected communities differently? How might these relations affect me and my actions?” In elementary, teachers might ask: “How can communities help and hurt each other? What can I do to support different communities around the world, as well as my own?”

3. Discuss Human Capacities for Good and Evil. A combination of theorists is helpful when discussing how ordinary people are the driving forces of change, both for good and for evil. As discussed earlier in this article, if teachers felt it appropriate, they could discuss Arendt, Minnich, and Becker’s ideas with students. If not, the basic ideas could be conveyed, bolstered by illustrative examples that are relatable to the students’ age level and

context. The hope is to discuss the effects any of us can have on each other, society, and the world.

4. Make Those Assumed to be Heroes or Villains More Ordinary. Teachers can, for example, show pictures of these individuals doing ordinary things. Students can do an Internet search for Hitler smiling, talking on the phone, and other images that illustrate how he was more like “us” than the usual stoic photos reveal. For a hero like Martin Luther King Jr., biopic films like *Selma* can help students see beyond the famous speeches; and for younger students, a properly selected picture book (elementary) or graphic novel (middle school) can show these individuals as ordinary people nested in their communities. Humanizing these figures can illustrate how everyday people can contribute to good or evil.

Another approach would be to examine complex characters from popular culture to complicate the concept of “good versus evil” (e.g., Darth Vader’s backstory in *Star Wars*; Voldemort in *Harry Potter*; or anti-heroes like Loki from Marvel Comics). Instead of debating whether fictional or historical figures are heroes or villains, students can discuss how they might be both (or something in between).²⁶ Here, it is important to choose fictional characters from books, film, and television that have been popular recently with students.

5. *Analyze Resources with Students.* High school (and some middle school) teachers can ask students to evaluate an article or an excerpt, perhaps from a curricular resource already in use. Textbook authors and resource developers face impossible choices when it comes to creating materials for classroom use, given the constraints of time and space.²⁷ Consequently, even otherwise excellent resources might fail to provide appropriate nuance and social context to historical figures.²⁸ One activity, then, can have students undertake their own analysis of an existing classroom resource.

With an anti-heroification and anti-villainification lens, students assess the extent to which responsibility is placed on an individual, a vague nod to society, or something more nuanced (i.e., a nexus of individuals and societal forces). An inquiry question for this task could be: *To what extent are ordinary processes and everyday people discussed and/or depicted in images?* Building off this initial exploration, students would assess the extent to which that resource invites them to weigh their own role in ongoing, parallel contemporary processes (e.g., climate change, food insecurity, gun violence, health care disparities, missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, police brutality, rape culture, voting rights). To this end, teachers might ask students:

- Who is considered responsible for the

harm inflicted or the achievement?

- Is the sentence in the active or passive voice? Is the agency clear?
- Are individuals, groups, or communities named? Is there a sense of nuance within any of the groups discussed?
- Are similar processes in contemporary society discussed or implied?
- Is there a sense that the harm or achievement is committed by an individual or due to broader policy? Are ordinary people “like us” implicated?
- What images accompany these descriptions? What might these images convey to the reader?
- Are readers asked to consider only simplistic facts or is there an invitation to engage with self-reflection?

Such questioning of written classroom materials can also be applied to field studies, such as a thoughtful engagement with museum displays, as well as media such as film and television.²⁹

A Thoughtful Education

Heroification and villainification narratives mislead students into believing that social change occurs through the actions of extraordinary individuals rather than

ordinary people and communities taking *action*.

Arendt noted that the Nazis of the 1940s “possessed neither the manpower nor the will power to remain ‘tough’ when they met determined opposition.”³⁰ Thus, when the Nazi forces encountered resistance from groups of ordinary people (such as the majority population of Denmark), the slaughter of Jews in that area was thwarted. As social educators, how might we tell the stories that encourage similar collective efforts against evil?

From psychology, it is known that witnessing examples of appropriate disobedience can help people stand up for justice, and so curricular examples like the Danish resistance are important.³¹ Teachers need to also consider how their daily classroom practices can encourage (or discourage) *action*, such as seeing authority figures and governments as capable of mistakes, discussing reasons for rules and regulations (and, in some cases, exposing related injustice), and providing opportunities for students to disagree with each other and their teacher.³²

Both good and evil occur because of ordinary humans. Thus, part of education (as opposed to mere schooling) is to provide students with opportunities to see their own capacities for good and evil. As Minnich implored: “Education has rarely centered on practicing individual and collaborative thinking *in, about, [and] for* our shareable worlds and their systems. We desperately need it to do so and to include as many differing people as we possibly can.”³³ ■

Notes

1. For example, Robert Audi, *Action, Intention, and Reason* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993); Anthony L. Brown and Keffrelyn D. Brown, "Strange Fruit Indeed: Interrogating Contemporary Textbook Representations of Racial Violence Toward African Americans," *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 1 (2010): 31–67; Jan Löfström, "How Finnish Upper Secondary Students Conceive Transgenerational Responsibility and Historical Reparations: Implications for the History Curriculum," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 46, no. 4 (2013): 515–539.
2. Elizabeth Minnich, "The Evil of Banality: Arendt Revisited," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 13, no. 1–2 (2014): 161.
3. *Ibid.*, 162.
4. Kevin Kumashiro, *Against Common Sense* (New York: Routledge, 2015).
5. Ernest Becker, *Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973).
6. Ashley N. Woodson, "We're Just Ordinary People: Messianic Master Narratives and Black Youths' Civic Agency," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 44, no. 2 (2016): 184–211; Cathryn van Kessel and Ryan M. Crowley, "Villainification and Evil in Social Studies Education," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 45, no. 4 (2017): 427–455.
7. James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007); van Kessel and Crowley, 427–455.
8. See, for example, National Council for the Social Studies, "National Standards for the Preparation of Social Studies Teachers" (Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 2017) and *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 2013), both available at www.socialstudies.org.
9. Melissa J. Marks, "Teaching the Holocaust as Cautionary Tale," *The Social Studies* 108, no. 4 (2017): 129–135.
10. Kent den Heyer, "Mapping the Shadow: Bringing Scholarship and Teachers Together to Explore Agency's Shape and Content in Social Change," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 40, no. 3 (2012): 292–323.
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12. *Ibid.*, 11.
13. Woodson, 200.
14. Derrick P. Alridge, "The Limits of Master Narratives in History Textbooks: An Analysis of Representations of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Teachers College Record* 108, no. 4 (2006): 681.
15. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University

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Deadline to submit applications is December 1, 2022



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- of Chicago Press, 1998, Orig pub 1958).
16. Terrie L. Epstein, "Tales from Two Textbooks: A Comparison of the Civil Rights Movement in Two Secondary History Textbooks," *The Social Studies* 85, no. 3 (1994): 121–126.
 17. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006, Orig pub 1963).
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 19. Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: Free Press, 1975).
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 21. For example, Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak*, Trans L. Coverdale (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006, Orig pub 2003).
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 25. Kent den Heyer, "Implicated and Called Upon: Challenging an Educated Position of Self, Others, Knowledge and Knowing as Things to Acquire," *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices* 3, no. 1 (2009), 30.
 26. For these and other lesson ideas, see this open educational resource: Cathryn van Kessel, "The Grim Educator" (Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta, 2018–2021), <https://OpenEducationAlberta.ca/GrimEducator>
 27. Rosalie Metro, "The White Gunman, the Anti-Semitic Automaker, and Other Dilemmas of a History Textbook Author," *Social Education* 83, no. 3 (2019): 138–141.
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 31. For example, Stanley Milgram, "Liberating Effects of Group Pressure," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1, no. 2 (1965), 127–134.
 32. Mordechai Gordon, "Arendt and Conrad on the Banality of Evil: Some Implications for Education," *Journal of Thought* 34, no. 2 (1999), 15–30; Don E. Hamachek, "Removing the Stigma from Obedience Behavior," *Phi Delta Kappan* 57, no. 7 (1976): 443–446.
 33. Minnich, 162 (emphasis added).



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