



# The Rise of The Anti-Hero: Comparison of Moral Ambiguity in Action Films

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## Abstract

Films have often defined the lines between heroes and villains by creating a clear distinction between right and wrong. There has been an increase in research that focuses on the moral grey areas seen in popular entertainment fiction. The grey areas of morality point to characters having a more ambiguous nature, commonly called anti-heroes. There is little research to date on the increased prevalence of the anti-hero archetype. The main goal of this content analysis was to discern how the morality of the hero-type character has evolved. A small longitudinal sample of American action movies (n=30) from the past 50 years was analyzed; discerned by total gross and popularity ratings. Morality-As-Cooperation Theory proposed by Curry et al. (2019) was used to determine the levels of the morality of the hero-type character in the coding schema. After each movie was coded, a percentage was computed for moral and immoral actions. The data was then interpreted to gauge whether the characters acted consistently good, showing a prototypical hero; or ambiguously, which would be consistent with an anti-hero archetype. Results of the study revealed that there was a strong positive correlation between the immoral actions of hero-type characters throughout the last fifty years. The findings should help to fill in the gap in the literature on the prevalence of anti-hero-type characters in movies.

*Keywords:* morality, anti-heroes, content analysis, longitudinal research, movies

## The Rise of The Anti-Hero

Films have traditionally established clear distinctions between heroes and villains, portraying a straightforward dichotomy between right and wrong. This portrayal has ingrained the notion that heroes and villains are positioned at opposite ends of the moral spectrum. However, recent studies challenge the validity of the belief in a simplistic white-hat/black-hat schema. A growing body of research has focused on exploring the moral gray areas depicted in popular fictional entertainment (Kleemans et al., 2017). These gray areas of morality highlight the presence of characters with more ambiguous traits, as exemplified in movies like *Suicide Squad* (2016), *Deadpool* (2016), and *Birds of Prey* (2020). This research aims to investigate the relationship between the increasing portrayal of morally ambiguous actions by characters typically seen as

heroes over the past five decades. While acknowledging potential contributing factors like film genre and content, the study counteracted these influences by selecting a diverse range of action films for analysis.

In the 1930s, Hollywood movies adopted a stringent standard of morality, enforced through the Motion Picture Production Code, which prohibited the depiction of any immoral acts in films (Nurik, 2018). This code served as the foundation for the current age-based rating system, empowering viewers to make their own choices regarding what they consider morally acceptable for themselves and their families. Attempting to establish a uniform definition of morality, Curry et al. (2019) explored global solutions to social problems, influenced by both biology and cultural cooperation. According to the Morality-As-Cooperation Theory (MACT) proposed by Curry et al. (2019), there are seven valences of cooperative moral behavior: family values, group loyalty, reciprocity, bravery, respect, fairness, and respect for property. For this study, elements were combined using the Motion Picture Production Code with the inverse meanings derived from Curry et al.'s (2019) MACT. This combination was used to define immoral actions as selfishness, disrespect, disregard for property, disregard for family, brutality, overt sexualization, and engaging in criminal behavior.

In films, a prototypical hero is portrayed as someone who upholds good moral values and may display altruistic attributes, often putting themselves at great personal risk (Franco et al., 2011). However, when a hero behaves in an immoral manner, it introduces a moral gray area or a sense of ambivalence that can manifest on multiple levels. Presently, most research employs the terms "ambiguous," "ambivalent," and "anti-hero" interchangeably, which complicates the ability to establish a unified definition (Yoshimura et al., 2017). Popular media employs the term "anti-hero" to depict characters with significant moral ambivalence (Eden et al., 2016). Although the term itself may be relatively recent, examples of characters displaying moral ambivalence can be found in early literary works, such as Odysseus in the *Odyssey* (Fitch, 2005). The distinction between a true hero and an anti-hero is that a true hero is a protagonist who exemplifies nobility through their actions and motivations (Mackey-Kallis, 2001). Conversely, an anti-hero is a "reluctant savior" who highlights the various flaws associated with being human (Fitch, 2005).

It is suggested that our attraction to anti-hero characters stems from how many of us struggle with our own moral dilemmas and hold onto the hope of potential redemption (Fitch, 2005). When we watch movies, we often do not analyze every moral aspect or behavior. Instead, we

rely on schemas and heuristic tools to conceptualize the character's actions (Eden et al., 2016). According to Affective Disposition Theory, viewers are expected to reject ambivalent heroes and experience reduced enjoyment of the film (Daalmans et al., 2013). Nevertheless, several studies have explored the enjoyment levels of watching movies featuring different archetypes of anti-heroes (e.g., Shafer & Raney, 2012; Eden et al., 2016) and investigated the personality types that predispose individuals to like anti-heroes (e.g., Black et al., 2019). Most of these studies have found that viewers are indeed drawn to morally ambivalent characters (Daalmans et al., 2013). Moreover, what is portrayed on screen can reflect societal norms and values (Daalmans et al., 2013).

There is little research to date that focuses on the trend of increased prevalence of the anti-hero archetype. The popular acceptance that there is a boost in characters with ambivalent natures is founded upon anecdotal evidence and critic speculation. So far, only one study by Daalmans and colleagues (2013) has attempted to investigate the question of whether there is an increase in the anti-hero. The researchers conducted a content analysis of prime-time television from 1985-2012. The sample size studied consisted of over 350 programs with 1,602 main characters that aired during that time frame. The study showed a prevalence of morally ambivalent characters ( $n = 1,020$ , 63.4%) with morally good characters amounting to a third of the sample ( $n = 513$ , 31.9%) and few that were categorized as bad ( $n = 75$ , 4.7%). Altogether, Daalmans et al. (2013) found that the amount of morally good characters decreased over time.

The present study was designed to discern how the representation of the hero-type character has evolved in American films in the past fifty years in terms of their moral acts. Based on the findings by Daalmans et al. (2013), it is predicted that there will be an increase in the immoral acts committed by heroes over the time period.

## **Methods**

### **Defining Morality**

The process of defining morality and immorality plays a crucial role in distinguishing between heroes and villains, while the characterization of antiheroes necessitates a closer blend of both moral and immoral actions. To operationalize the dimensions of morality, this study adopted the seven moral values derived from the Morality-As-Cooperation Theory, which are

believed to be universally applicable across cultures worldwide, choosing specific behaviors that corresponded to each of the seven values (Curry et al., 2019).

The concept of family values is rooted in the biological theory of kin selection, which explains the altruistic behaviors aimed at promoting the replication of genetic relatives (Curry et al., 2019). This is why caring for offspring and avoiding incest are considered morally good on a global scale. Ingroup loyalty builds upon game theory, emphasizing the mutually beneficial motives behind actions that are advantageous to the group, thereby being deemed morally good (Curry et al., 2019). Reciprocity is based on social exchange theory, illustrating why expressions of gratitude, making amends, demonstrating trust, and reciprocating favors are considered morally good (Curry et al., 2019). The values of bravery, respect, and fairness fall under Conflict Resolution Theory, further enhancing the concept of good moral values (Curry et al., 2019). Importantly, the study conducted by Curry et al. (2019) revealed that no societies regarded any of these values as morally bad. These central values, considered morally good in the study, are also common traits associated with heroes in other research (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Kinsella et al., 2015).

Immoral actions involve a clear transgression of moral principles, which may manifest as acts of selfishness, disrespect for others' autonomy, cruelty, or the infliction of harm. These immoral actions can be discerned through observable behaviors, words, or intentions that contradict established moral values. Indicators of immoral actions include anti-social behaviors, deviating from societal norms, sadism, and emotional apathy, which serve as key markers in identifying such actions (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2014). The Motion Picture Production Code played a significant role in establishing a framework for categorizing immoral behavior, particularly emphasizing categories such as brutality, overt sexualization, and engaging in criminal activities. In a similar vein, to operationalize immoral actions, the inverse of all positive moral attributes was employed to define and characterize these actions.

### **Research Design and Procedures**

A limited longitudinal sample of American action movies spanning the last 50 years was carefully chosen for analysis. The sample consisted of 30 American action films released between 1971 and 2021. Initially, a list of movies was compiled based on popular ratings and total box office gross. The selection was further refined by considering the availability of these

films on current streaming services to ensure accessibility for the study. Subsequently, a name-in-hat method was employed to randomly select five films from each decade, thus creating a randomized selection from the available options. The final list of selected films can be found in Appendix A. The key characteristics of the movies, including the movie title, year of release, and respective decade, were systematically coded for analysis.

### **Variables and Measures**

The unit of analysis and unit of coding was the moral actions of the main protagonist of the film. Coding measured morality either good or bad stated as moral or immoral respectively. Moral behavior was outlined into seven main categories. Table 1 shows the values and the subdivisions that are believed to be found in cultures across the world a.) family values, b.) ingroup loyalty, c.) reciprocity, d.) bravery, e.) respect, f.) fairness, and g.) respect for property (Curry et al., 2019).

**Table 1.** Coding categories of moral theme

Main Category of Moral Values	Subdivision of Moral Values
Family Values	-Caring for offspring -helping family members -avoiding inbreeding, -showing modesty
Ingroup loyalty	- forming friendships -participating in collaborative endeavors -favoring in-group -adopting local laws and conventions
Reciprocity	-trusting others -reciprocating favors -expressing gratitude -making amends
Bravery	-showing bravery -showing fortitude -showing skill -showing wit
Respect	-showing humility -respecting authority -submitting to someone's opinions or wishes -obeying commands/rules
Fairness	-dividing disputed resources -reaching a compromise -being fair
Respect for property	-respecting property -not engaging in theft -deferring to previous ownership

*Note.* Elements for the coding for moral acts were borrowed from Morality-As-Cooperation Theory proposed by Curry et al. 2019.

Immoral actions were defined and coded using a combination of the MACT (2019) and the Motion Picture Production Code. The categories of immoral acts were a.) selfishness, b.) disrespect, c.) disregard for property, d.) disregard for family, e.) brutality, f.) overt sexualization, and g.) engaging in criminal behavior. Table 2 shows each category and the subdivision to further explain the concepts.

**Table 2.** Coding categories of immoral themes

Main Category of Immoral Acts	Subdivision of Immoral Acts
Selfishness	-having a concern for one’s welfare or advantage at the expense of or in disregard of others -excessive interest in oneself
Disrespect	-having angry/rude outbursts -making verbal threats -being unreasonably critical of authority -making shaming/humiliating/demeaning comments -making threats or inflicting physical force -bullying
Disregard for property	-engaging in theft -damaging property -throwing objects
Disregard for family	-engaging in inbreeding/incest -disregarding the needs of family members/offspring/kin
Brutality	-Deliberating causing injury that causes disfiguration -needless/willful violence or damage -inflicting severe pain either physical or emotional -taking a life outside of self-defense -causing death or injury with excessive gore
Overt sexualization	-committing adultery -excessively lustful scenes -sex outside of a relationship -committing rape -showing nudity/suggestive costuming
Engaging in Criminal Behavior	-any crimes committed

Each codable act was recorded as moral or immoral, according to the definitions and the specified categories of a moral and an immoral act. The films were analyzed in full for each instance of moral or immoral action coded and totaled. After each movie was coded, a percentage was computed for moral and immoral actions per each film. The predictor variable was the year the film was created.

### Results

Table 3 shows the mean that was taken from each decade ( $N=30$ ,  $M=.683$ ). In the 1970s, good moral action averaged 77% ( $n=5$ ,  $SD=.12$ ). The 1970s showed the largest range of morally

good actions throughout the sample which varied from 97% to 65%. An incremental decrease in good moral actions was noted from the 1970s through to the 2010s. The beginning of the 2020s had a moderate decrease in morally good behaviors at 56% ( $n=5$ ,  $SD=.02$ ). A very slight difference in range (52%-58%) was noted during this period. The findings suggest that there was a decrease in the percentage of moral actions over the past 50 years.

**Table 3.** Mean of Moral Actions Throughout the Decades

Decade	Mean	Std. Deviation
1970	.771960	.1173458
1980	.752420	.0780387
1990	.723620	.0582348
2000	.696360	.0823653
2010	.595180	.0823653
2020	.556900	.0213178

Since the change in moral actions could not be linear, a Spearman's rank-order correlation was run to determine the relationship between the percentage of immoral actions and the years of the films. The results showed a strong positive correlation between the two variables and confirmed the study's prediction,  $r_s(28) = .662$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Table 4.** Relationship Between Immoral Actions and Decade

		Decade	Percent Immoral
Decade	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.662**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<.001
	N	30	30
Percent Immoral	Correlation Coefficient	.662**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	.
	N	30	30

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In sum, there has been a positive correlation between the immoral actions of heroes and the year the films were made. In earlier films, the hero-type characters showed the most morally good choices. However, as the decades progressed the hero demonstrated traits that are both



morally positive and negative suggesting a more ambiguous view of morality. The evidence found supported the hypothesis that there has been an increase in the relationship between immoral actions with hero-type characters over the past fifty years.

### **Discussion**

The study was conducted to determine if there has been an increase in morally ambiguous characters, or anti-heroes, in the past fifty years. The data showed a surge in the portrayal of anti-heroes determined by the increase of immoral actions committed by the hero-type character. To highlight the change of morality in films there are characters like the 1970's film *The Superman* which portrayed a pure hero character and the 2020's film *Deadpool* which portrayed a quintessential anti-hero. Superman was morally good throughout the entire film only committing minor immoral actions like the breaking of a door. Superman can be regarded as a symbol of pure heroism and embodies the prototypical hero archetype. He consistently strives to do what is right and uphold good moral values. He embodies the ideals of altruism and is depicted as selfless and guided by a strong moral compass. Superman's representation was 97% morally good. On the other end of the spectrum was Deadpool, whose immoral actions outweighed his moral actions. Deadpool falls into a morally ambiguous category. While he occasionally demonstrated heroic traits, his methods and motivations could be morally questionable. Deadpool engaged in violent actions, motivated by personal vengeance rather than pursuing justice for the greater good. Overall, Deadpool and Superman offer contrasting interpretations of superhero characters. Deadpool embodies an anti-hero persona, while Superman represents the classic archetype of a virtuous and unwavering hero. There is a disparity in the rating between Superman and Deadpool (which were rated PG and R respectively) reflect the differences in their approaches, tones, and target audience. Deadpool's irreverent humor may appeal to a specific demographic that appreciates its subversion of traditional superhero tropes, while Superman's more idealistic and aspirational nature may have had broader appeal at a time when superhero movies were more novel.

The movies sampled from the past few years had the highest consistency of immorality finding a close to equal split of moral and immoral actions. In contrast, previous decades showed a wider range of the morality of the hero. To determine if this was a short-term trend or indicative of a growing shift of moral ambiguity further research would be needed.

The strength of this study was that the sample included franchises and sequels of films based on the same characters but created at different time points, which provides data on the change in the moral behavior of the same characters over time within their cinematic world. For example, the *Star Wars* films were included in our sample in five of the six decades and revealed a 15% decline in the moral actions of the heroes between the 1970s and 2010. As the *Star Wars* saga progressed, particularly in the prequel trilogy, there has been an exploration of darker themes and morally gray situations. These characters blur the lines between good and evil, making their motivations and actions more complex. It could be argued that this exploration of the gray area between good and evil adds depth to the *Star Wars* universe by challenging notions of heroism and presenting intricate moral dilemmas.

One important weakness of the current study is that only a portion of the films produced between 1971 and 2021 was analyzed. However, the films were randomly selected which minimized any possibility of biases. Another potential weakness is that the coding of the present study entailed categorizing each relevant act as either moral or immoral, without any consideration for the magnitude of its goodness/badness. For example, stealing a pack of gum and taking a life would be considered and coded equally immoral in the present study, although most people would consider the latter as more egregious of the two. A study with a more in-depth coding process that considers the magnitude or the level of moral weight could uncover more nuances, and paint a more well-rounded picture of the scope of the evolution of moral content. Finally, one major limitation was that no inter-rater reliability was measured to gauge the level of reliability of codes.

Despite the limitations, the present study offers important empirical evidence to support the popular claim that there has been a rise in anti-heroes in American action films, comparable to the same trend found in the TV shows by Daalman et al. (2013).

One question that remains is why there is such a trend. Perhaps, the growing popularity of the anti-hero might be enjoyable and offers escapism from daily life. Related to that, viewers who enjoy watching such films may be morally disengaged and have a separate schema for the anti-hero trope which allows the viewers to separate their own moral values from the protagonist's (Shafer & Raney, 2012). Future research should focus more on the effects of such films on the viewer's own moral character and attitudes, and whether there is a generational change in people's views of morality and immorality.

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**Appendix A: Film List and Inclusion Data**

<b>Film</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Gross in millions</b>	<b>IMDb rating</b>	<b>Other inclusion data</b>
Omega Man	1971	8.7	6.4	#46 action Movie of the 80s Flickchart
Walking Tall	1973	40	6.9	#31 action movies of the 80s stacker.com
Brannigan	1975	27.1	6.1	#15 action movies of the 80s available to stream
Star Wars IV	1977	460.9	8.6	#1 action movie of the 80s Flickchart
Superman	1978	300.5	7.4	#8 action movie of the 80s Flickchart
Star Wars V	1980	538	8.7	#1 movie of the 80s on collider.com
Indiana Jones Raiders of the Lost Arc	1981	389.9	8.4	#2 action movie on IMDb
Die Hard	1988	139.8	8.2	#1 action movie on IMDb
Batman	1989	411.6	7.5	#14 action movie IMDb
Roadhouse	1989	61.6	6.7	#27 action movie IMDb
Robin Hood	1991	390.5	6.9	#28 top grossing movie of the 90s IMDb
Mission Impossible	1996	457.7	7.1	#11 Action movie of the 90s IMDb
The Fifth Element	1997	263.9	7.6	#22 best action movie of the 90s collider.com
Star Wars I	1999	1027	6.5	#3 top grossing movie of the 90s IMDb
The Matrix	1999	467.2	8.7	#2 Action movie of the 90s IMDb
Minority Report	2002	358.4	7.6	#20 best action movie of the 2000s Flickchart
Star Wars III	2005	868.4	7.6	#17 top Grossing movie of 2000s IMDb
Children of Men	2006	70.5	7.9	# 9 best action movie of the 2000s Flickchart
Iron Man	2008	585.5	7.9	#5 best action movie of the 2000s Flickchart
The Dark Knight	2008	1006	9	#1 best action movie of the 2000s Flickchart
Edge of Tomorrow	2014	370.5	7.9	#8 top action movies of 2010s IMDb
Star Wars vii	2015	2066	7.8	#13 top action Movies of 2010s IMDb
Deadpool	2016	782.6	8	# 4 Top action movies of 2010s IMDb
Captain America	2016	1153	7.8	#12 Top Action Movies of 2010s IMDb
Gemini Man	2019	173.5	5.7	Netflix top 10
Project Power	2020		6	Netflix top 10
Birds of Prey	2020	205.3	6.1	#1 best action movies of 2020s IMDb
Bad Boys for Life	2020	426.5	6.5	#2 Best action movie of the 2020s IMDb
The Old Guard	2020		6.6	Netflix top 10
Suicide Squad	2021	747	5.9	#7 best action movie of 2020s Flickchart