

Professional Courage: What Does It Mean for Practitioner Psychologists?

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Abstract

Are you a brave psychologist? Should you aim to be? What does courage even mean for psychologists? In this article, the concept of professional courage is explored with reference to literature from the fields of philosophy, sociology, management science and psychology. The definition of courage as intentional action towards a worthy goal despite risks to the actor (Rate, 2010) is adopted and applied to professional courage in the course of working as a psychologist.

A holistic process model of professional courage is developed and presented as a flow chart which can be used in supervision to help psychologists consider courage in their own practice. Importantly, professionals, including psychologists, may hold multiple worthy goals in mind, and one way of resolving situations calling for courage may be to reappraise the dominant goal and work towards one with fewer risks, therefore reducing the need for courage in the first place.

Introduction

Have you ever discussed your work with colleagues and heard one of them tell you that you were brave to act as you did? This article was prompted by just such a conversation, between professional educational psychologists on a Doctorate programme. As we discussed our working lives, we each related a dilemma and our solutions to it. Several times, the concept of courage came up, as we were impressed by each other's actions. I started to wonder what constitutes this kind of professional courage. Am I really brave? What makes people do brave things at work, or stops them? Is it always good to act courageously?

In this article, professional courage is defined, and concepts relevant to psychologists' practice are explored, including whether courageous acts must be selfless, whether courage is a personality trait or situational, how courage relates to the behavioural inhibition of fear and whether courage is always a good thing. Existing models of workplace courage are briefly evaluated in relation to psychologists' work. This background is then built upon to set out a holistic model of professional courage which may help psychologists' decision making. The aim of this article is not to provide a systematic or exhaustive review of the topic but to provoke thought and discussion among colleagues about when and how we should act with professional courage to benefit our clients and ourselves. While the author is an educational psychologist working in schools and in neuropsychology, it is hoped that this article will be equally relevant to colleagues in other branches of psychology and perhaps also in other helping professions.

Methodology

Literature was sought from published sources written in English. The search was deliberately inclusive because there is so little published on this specific topic, so all dates and types of text were considered. Initially, a literature search was conducted in August 2015 using PsychInfo. Using the search term “professional courage” resulted in only four hits, while “courage” and “professional” combined using the “and” function resulted in 349 hits. Very few of these texts were related to professional courage in the sense relevant to this article. Google Scholar was therefore used to broaden the search, along with following up citations in relevant texts and using the Google Scholar “cited by” function to find more recent articles. Feedback from colleagues and tutors indicated a further key article not identified through the search, which was also followed up by searching for other texts citing this article.

Rather than producing a systematic literature review, this article uses the existing literature thematically. No direct evidence from research on professional courage in psychologists could be found, so theoretical and empirical work from other related contexts is used.

Literature Review

Defining professional courage

The concept of courage draws on thinking from a range of domains, including philosophy, sociology and management science as well as psychology. There are numerous definitions of courage in this broad sense, dating back thousands of years, which are summarised in Rate, Clarke, Lindsay, and Sternberg (2007). Their concluding description of courage includes five elements:

- a. a wilful, intentional act,
- b. executed after mindful deliberation,
- c. involving objective substantial risk to the actor,
- d. primarily motivated to bring about a noble good or worthy end and
- e. despite, perhaps, the presence of the emotion of fear.

These elements were distilled to three by Rate (2010):

- a. a worthy goal,
- b. an intentional action and
- c. perceived risks or obstacles.

Courageous acts are defined by intentions, not outcomes: the bravery may or may not pay off, although in retrospective accounts it usually does (Pury & Hensel, 2010).

Although courage is associated with action, modern definitions (including that of Rate, 2010) all accept that sometimes the courageous path is not to act. Where an act is clearly immoral or will cause harm, resisting pressure to do it is courageous. For example, a psychologist saying no to managers directing them to take on a client who would be better served elsewhere would be “acting with integrity under social pressure” (Putman, 2010, p.14) and therefore courageous.

For psychologists, the concept of professional courage can be more specific than these accounts of courage in general. One relevant distinction would be general versus personal courage (Pury, Kowalski, & Spearman, 2007). General courage includes actions that most people would agree were brave, while personal courage is specific to that individual in that situation. The difference is largely in the element of risk: general courage is shown when the risk is obvious and would make anyone hesitate to act. Professional courage in psychology is usually personal: the same action may be

straightforward for one psychologist but be risky for another because of individual differences, such as experiences, skills, moral values, self-concept and organisational position.

Another typology of courage is that of Putman (1997; 2010), who describes physical, moral and psychological courage. These categories refer to the source of the risk being taken. Physical courage involves overcoming the danger of physical harm, the risk in moral courage is social or political disapproval and psychological courage is facing a loss of personal stability. Professional courage may involve any of these three areas, although we might hope that psychologists would rarely be in a position to show physical courage. The difference between moral and psychological courage appears subtle, but can be best understood in terms of whether personal shift is involved: in moral courage you stick to your guns, while in psychological courage you seek change and growth. Psychological courage might be implicated more in personal professional development, while moral courage is most relevant for professional problem solving.

A definition of professional courage, then, might be intentional action (or intentional inaction) towards a goal perceived as worthy in the face of perceived risk. Professional courage may be moral, psychological or physical (although rarely the latter for psychologists).

Must moral courage be selfless?

In order to show courage, a person must, therefore, prioritise a worthy goal over their own comfort or safety. Should the core definition of courage include selflessness?

Psychological courage involves change for the person pursuing the courageous act and, in that sense, is selfish rather than selfless. Although the person may go through difficult or frightening times as they destabilise their identity, one of their worthy goals is to restabilise as a better person. For example, a psychologist might show psychological courage by agreeing to deliver a training course on a topic they currently know little about. They take the risk of feeling deskilled and step out of their identity as a highly proficient expert but hope that they will be a better psychologist at the end of it.

Moral courage, on the other hand, involves acting with the expectation that others will disapprove, and with “no (or rare) direct rewards for the actor.” (Osswald, Greitemeyer, Fischer, & Frey, 2010, p.150) Moral courage may, therefore, be seen as requiring selflessness. There may be acts which appear to be brave but which are in fact only self-serving (e.g., relieving our own fear of being criticised if we do not do it), and these cannot be considered morally courageous (Putman, 2010). However, motivations are often complex, and people may consider a range of factors before deciding whether or not to act. We may weigh up the possible risks and benefits, and, even if there are some potential benefits to the actor, the act could be morally courageous if we believe that, on balance, the act is likely to “cost” us something (Sekerka, Bagozzi, & Charnigo, 2009).

Moral courage, like altruism (e.g., Batson & Powell, 2003), can therefore still exist if some benefits to the self result from the act. The keys are that the act is not motivated by self-interest and that the actor genuinely perceives that the action is likely to incur social costs.

Professional courage: trait or state?

Could professional courage be something that some people have more than others? Or is it context driven, so anyone might show professional courage in the right circumstances?

Courage has historically been seen as a virtue, back at least as far as ancient Greece (see, e.g., Putman, 2010). In modern times, courage has become part of the positive psychology movement and is one of six core human strengths valued across cultures (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). These perspectives see courage as a trait: an aspect of a person’s character which is

reasonably stable across time and contexts. In the management literature, courage is often described as a virtue (Harris, 1999). A slightly different view of professional courage sees it as a personal quality which can be developed, rather than a fixed trait (Comer & Vega, 2005; Rachman, 2010; Sekerka & Godwin, 2010).

Alternatively, is professional courage a state, driven by a complex interplay of circumstances? In a study of psychological courage to overcome a phobia, Norton & Weiss (2009) found that self-reported trait courage was not correlated with the individual's actual behaviour when presented with the phobic stimulus. This result suggests that courage might be more situational and transient than the trait model suggests.

A recent process model (Schilpzand, Hekman, & Mitchell, 2015) presents professional courage as just such a state, with little influence coming from the individual's personality. Instead, courageous acts are seen as a product of a person's response to a challenging event, moderated by their social identification with the people who would be affected by their actions, their perceived power and their perceived autonomy to take action. In this model, anyone could act courageously in the right circumstances.

Perhaps there is a middle ground: although each individual act of courage could be explained within a process model, there are trait-like aspects which are developed over time, with repeated experiences of taking risks successfully. Rachman's (e.g., 2010) work provides a framework for such a developmental model of courage. Rachman (1978) argues that "courageous behaviour is determined predominantly by the combination of competence and confidence and both of these qualities are strengthened by repeated and successful practice." (p. 248). So, while each situation is to be appraised individually and a decision made on whether to act courageously, a person may develop a disposition towards or away from courageous action, depending on their skills, confidence and experiences of taking such risks.

Hannah, Sweeney, and Lester (2010) take a cognitive psychology approach to explaining courage as a mindset, which places Rachman's ideas into a social information processing framework. They use the idea of cognitive–affective processing systems (CAPS; Mischel & Shoda, 1998) to explain how people may develop trait-like courage and yet show variability in brave behaviour across situations. Their model involves the activation of one or more CAPS units, moderated by prior experience, current situation and resources available. A courageous act driven by the most activated CAPS unit is then appraised by the individual and fed back to strengthen or weaken that unit (Rachman's successful and repeated practice).

Courage, fear and executive functioning

For some authors, courage is equivalent to fearlessness. Brady's (2005) account of Aristotelian courage asserts that a person who faces death with courage does so without fear. More broadly, Mowrer (1960) suggested that courage is "simply the absence of fear in situations where it might be expected to be present" (p. 435). For others, fear must be present and overcome; otherwise, the action is not courageous at all (Bauhn, 2003; Goud, 2005). A psychological analysis of emotions, including fear, helps us to resolve this apparent contradiction in the role of fear in courageous actions.

Emotions can be broken down into subjective experience, physiological arousal and behavioural manifestation (Bradley & Lang, 2000). These three aspects can be dissociated, and it is, therefore, possible that courage involves feeling fear subjectively but behaving in a way which is not driven by that fear (Rachman, 2010). This explanation of how elements of fear relate to courage has been demonstrated at the neural level by Nili, Goldberg, Weizman, and Dudai (2010).

If courage requires effortful emotional regulation, in order to feel the fear and still perform the brave action, it could be seen as an executive function (e.g., Hofmann, Schmeichel, & Baddeley, 2012). Executive functions, like the concept of courage itself, show individual differences in a trait-like manner which can be altered through training and practice (e.g., Diamond, 2012; Dowsett & Livesey, 2000). No literature could be found on this specific topic, but a reasonable hypothesis might be that executive functions such as response inhibition should correlate with the propensity to show courageous behaviours. If a person is good at inhibiting their dominant responses to produce an alternative goal-directed behaviour then they might also be good at inhibiting their behavioural responses to the subjective emotion of fear.

Is courage always a virtue?

Courage is often presented as a virtue or character strength (e.g. Peterson & Seligman, 2004), i.e. a Good Thing. But perhaps there are times when bravery is not the best course of action. Courage involves risk-taking, which means that there is a possibility that things might go wrong. Should we all try to be courageous all the time? Could someone be too courageous? The ancient philosophers provide some key ideas here.

Plato believed that we need diversity in a population:

Those who are careful, fair and conservative — those of a moderate temperament — are not keen; they lack a certain sort of quick, active boldness. The courageous on the other hand are far less just and cautious, but they are excellent at getting things done. A community can never function well ... unless both of these are present and active. (Plato, 311 BC, cited in Rorty, 1986)

Plato's views challenge the notion of courage as a virtue towards which we should aspire. Another philosophical approach comes from Aristotle (trans. 2011), who proposed that courage fell in the middle of a continuum, with cowardice and rashness at either end (Figure 1).

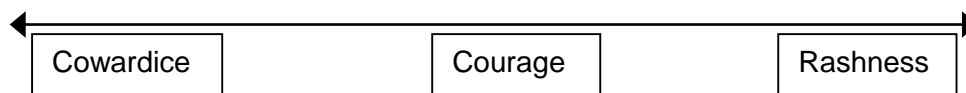


Figure 1: Courage as the middle ground of Aristotle's continuum

Aristotle's continuum appears to be one of behavioural activation ("getting things done", in Plato's language), with too much activation leading to rashness or recklessness and too little leading to cowardice. Rashness was discussed by Plato as an action either not commensurate with the level of skill required to complete it successfully or where the actor has not appreciated the level of risk involved (Gould, 1987). Too much courage would tip the level of behavioural activation into recklessness and therefore cease to be courageous.

The question then becomes not whether a courageous action is virtuous but whether the course of action being considered is courageous, cowardly or rash. Perhaps diverse communities as proposed by Plato enable courageous people to be more genuinely courageous as their more cautious counterparts help to pull them back from the brink of recklessness by pointing out the risks.

Another way in which courage might not be virtuous is in the choice of goals to be pursued. As discussed earlier, professional courage is usually personal rather than general courage (Pury et al., 2007), as the goals and risks tend to be subjective, varying between individuals. This kind of personal courage opens the possibility that an individual's goal, although they see it as worthy, is not considered worthy by the general population. Examples of this "bad courage" include terrorist acts and suicide attempts (Pury, Starkey, Kulik, Skjerning, & Sullivan, 2015). While these are extreme

examples, in which few (if any) others would share the actor's appraisal of the goal as worthy, professional life provides many examples of more nuanced situations, where there may not be consensus about the worthiness of goals.

The moral judgement about the right thing for a psychologist to do is often unclear. Many of our actions at work are reasoned choices among possible options, and there may be a number of worthy goals with differing risks to the self in acting towards them. Not all of our actions can be or should be judged as to whether they are courageous or not. Courage can only be applied in situations where the right thing to do is reasonably clear in one's mind, and we make the decision to do that despite personal risks. There may, therefore, be virtue in choosing goals and actions towards them which are less risky but equally worthy, thus reducing or removing the need for courage.

Models of professional courage

Existing models

There are very few attempts in the literature to produce a model of courage specifically in professional situations, and these are discussed here.

Koerner (2014) presents a model of professional courage as identity development. She sets out circumstances in which identity tension may occur, followed by courageous sense-making activities which lead to reconciliation of the identity tension. Koerner (2014) also sets out a sense-making category where no courage is shown, leading to shame, regret and frustration at the lack of successful resolution to the original tension. Koerner's (2014) model provides a helpful typology of courageous actions in workplace situations, but fails to account for how people come to take a particular path of action. It is not a process model of courage but rather a description of the effects of courageous action on the actor. In particular, the ways in which people formulate and select worthy goals is missing, as is an appraisal of their confidence or competence to carry out the intended action.

Sekerka and Bagozzi (2007) provide a process model which helps to elaborate some of the factors which influence whether or not a person will act courageously in a given situation. They include emotions, self-efficacy and social norms feeding into a desire to act, which is then tempered by self-regulation as the person makes a decision on whether to act. While Sekerka & Bagozzi's (2007) model takes into account a range of relevant areas, like Koerner's (2014) model it says nothing about the selection of worthy goals or the appraisal of risk in the situation. Sekerka & Bagozzi's model purely covers the distance between a person recognising the courageous thing to do and doing it. This model includes confidence, in the guise of self-efficacy, but misses out competence.

Two stages appear in the model proposed by Schilpzand et al. (2015): a decision about who bears responsibility to act and, if it is the self, a decision about whether to act. Like Sekerka and Bagozzi's (2007) model, it covers only the process of getting from a situation which calls for courage to acting courageously. Goal selection and risk appraisal is missing. Competence is present within "perceived relative power advantage", which explicitly includes formal authority, competence and resources (p. 59). The decision about who should act comes first in this model, followed by a decision about whether the person will act. However, this model does not seem to fit well with psychologists' work. Often, psychologists are working autonomously, so there may be nobody else to whom the challenging event applies: if I don't do it, nobody will. At other times, groups of psychologists may agree what needs to be done, but nobody puts themselves forward to do it. In these cases, the order is reversed from Schilpzand's model, and the question of whether action should be taken comes *before* the decision about who will act. Rather than having two stages to the model, the three enablers in the Schilpzand et al. (2015) model could, therefore, be seen as contributing to a sense of confidence. The enablers pertain to the person's own perception of competence, relatedness and

autonomy, and as such form the basis of human motivation to act (self-determination theory; e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2008). This confidence is different from the actual skills and resources that the person can access: perception and reality may or may not match up (demonstrated in helping professionals by Stewart et al., 2000).

Finally, although not a model of courage directly, Rest's (1982) four-component model is relevant as it concerns how people make moral decisions about their actions. The model was developed specifically with psychologists' work in mind, although it has since been applied to ethical practice in other professions (e.g., Bebeau, 2002). Rest (1982) suggests that the four components leading to moral actions are:

1. interpreting the situation: perceiving that something you might do may affect the welfare of someone else;
2. formulating the morally ideal course of action;
3. deciding what one actually intends to do, influenced by competing forces such as self-interest and social pressure; and
4. executing and implementing what one intends to do: requires perseverance and competence, which Rest refers to as virtues.

Rest's (1982) model adds to the previous descriptions of courageous actions by introducing steps at the beginning of the process which are implicit in the models discussed thus far. First, Rest (1982) identifies that the person must become aware that there is a dilemma to be resolved in the first place. This awareness will vary between individuals.

Rest (1982) goes on to address goal selection explicitly in his second component. He takes a developmental view after Kohlberg (1969), suggesting that individuals of different stages of maturity will make different decisions about what would be the right thing to do. Rest's assumption is that there would usually be a single most ethical course of action in a given situation, as operationalised by his use of the Defining Issues Test (Rest, Cooper, Coder, Masanz, & Anderson, 1974).

The third and fourth of Rest's (1982) components concern moving towards action. These aspects are more comprehensively covered by the other models of courage already discussed, and they cover situational, intrapersonal and social factors more thoroughly than does Rest. An element completely missing from Rest's four-component model is that of risk, which is not necessary for a discussion of ethical behaviour (as there may be no risk in taking an action), but which is a key part of courage according to Rate's (2010) summary of the field.

A holistic model of professional courage

In considering the existing models of professional courage, none of them covered the whole process of decision making about whether to act courageously. In particular, they all made assumptions that the goals and risks were already clear, and only addressed the factors involved in carrying out a courageous intention into courageous action. Rest's (1982) model of ethical decision making described how people might decide on a worthy goal but assumed that there would be only one ideal goal and did not address the evaluation of risk in achieving that goal.

The holistic model presented here (Figure 2) takes into account all three key aspects: worthy goals, risks and actions, which form the very definition of courage as set out by Rate (2010). It acknowledges that in many situations courage may not be required and that there may be a number of worthy goals held in mind.

Once the situation arises where the person has assessed the risks and decides that the goal they have in mind is worth acting towards anyway, the model of Schilpzand et al. (2015) is used to summarise the factors influencing a person's confidence to take that action. These factors, perceived competence, autonomy and relatedness, are couched in the language of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008) and are shown as inputs which would increase or decrease behavioural activation in the Aristotelian sense.

Placing confidence factors in this part of the model is different from the process proposed by Sekerka and Bagozzi (2007). They suggest that the desire to act is formed and then moderated by the person's values, traits and virtues. In the current model, such "automatic self-regulation" would come much earlier, in the formation of worthy goals. Conversely, Sekerka & Bagozzi (2007) place self-efficacy before the desire to act, whereas in this model it is named "perceived competence", in line with self-determination theory, and is placed after the person has perceived a tension between what is right and the risks of doing that.

If the person has weighed up their goal against the risks and has the confidence to carry out their intended action, the outcome depends on the congruence of that confidence with the person's actual skill level. This part of the model takes Rachman's (2010) and Plato's (trans. 1987) idea that actual competence is what distinguishes courageous from reckless actions. It extends Aristotle's (trans. 2011) behavioural activation continuum to include the outcomes of taking no action where this is appropriate. Hence we can have courageous action (high confidence and high competence) but also the courage to ensure that we practise within safe boundaries, which might involve courageous inaction (low confidence and low competence). In the current model, Aristotle's concept of cowardice has been renamed "missed opportunities", to avoid invoking connotations of shame.

Borrowing from Koerner's (2014) identity framework and the cognitive–affective processing approach to courage (Hannah, Sweeney, & Lester, 2010), there is a feedback loop in the current model. Once the person has taken a course of action (or inaction), their reflections on the process are likely to influence how they would approach a similar situation in future. Here, the feedback influences the person's perception of risks and of their own competence. However, it is possible that the person's appraisal of the process could influence other areas of the model, such as the goals they value in the first place or perceived relatedness.

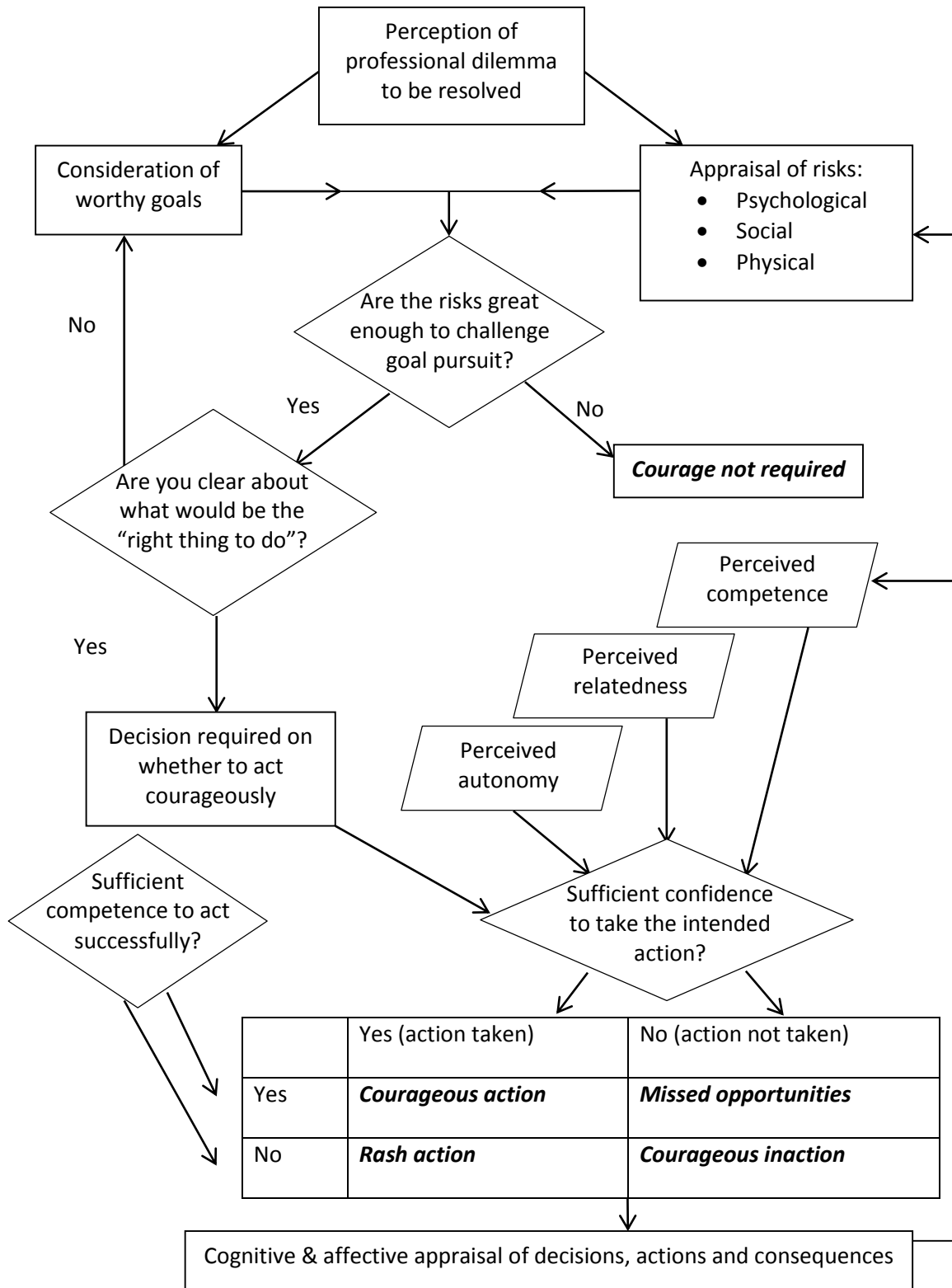


Figure 2: A holistic model of professional courage

The model presented here draws on aspects of all the published models of professional courage found, along with models of courage in a broader sense, the philosophical roots of the concept and the self-determination theory of human motivation. It takes a processing approach which allows for trait-like courage with state-like variations in behaviour depending on the situation. While this model is clearly about personal rather than general courage (general courage would have no need for the appraisal of goals and risks as they would be shared by most people), it can cover both psychological and moral courage. It may not be appropriate for physical courage, as the timescale required for decision making in a physically dangerous situation may not allow a person to think through the process as set out here.

Conclusions

A concise definition of professional courage could be the same as courage shown in other situations: intentional action (or inaction) towards a worthy goal, despite risks to the actor. An individual may hold multiple values and goals at the same time, and courage can only be truly shown when the person is clear about which goal they believe is most important in guiding their actions and they perceive personal risk to be involved in their course of action.

While professionals may develop a disposition to be more courageous or more cautious, their actions will vary in different contexts according to their consideration of worthy goals (which may conflict with each other), their appraisal of risks in different courses of action and their confidence in taking an action. Courage can, therefore, be thought of as a mindset, which can be developed through repeated successful practice.

An effective appraisal of one's own self-efficacy is key to courageous action. Where confidence is congruent with the actual risks, skills and resources, the actor can be courageous in choosing to act or not to act. If confidence outstrips competence, the result is rashness, and if competence is present without confidence, then courageous action is not taken and opportunities are missed.

Although courage is often presented as a virtue, Plato reminds us that communities need both courageous and cautious approaches in order to function well. It is possible that professional courage is not always to be encouraged; if we all acted courageously all the time we would lose the stability which enables us to work with mutual understanding and expectations. It might be more reasonable to say that it is always good to act in accordance with our values, which often requires no courage. Even this assertion, however, can be challenged by the concept of "bad courage" (Pury et al., 2015) in which a goal or intentional action may not be shared by many (or any) others.

Finally, a process model of professional courage has been presented which draws upon and extends existing frameworks. It includes the consideration of goals and risks, confidence and competence, with the results of our actions feeding back to influence what we do in future situations. The utility of this model might be tested through supervision to see if it helps to guide professional decision making and support reflection on decisions made.

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