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Superman too super a role model

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Superman is too good a role model. Fans of the man from Krypton unwittingly compare themselves to the superhero, and realise they do not measure up. And as a result, they are less likely to help other people.

Researchers made the discovery whilst examining how people's decision-making can be influenced by surreptitiously placed ideas, usually via seemingly unrelated questionnaires or word puzzles. For example, one study has shown that people primed with helpful words were more likely to help a friend pick up spilt pens.

Such effects usually last only up to a couple of weeks, but Leif Nelson at New York University and Michael Norton at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology wanted to see if it could last longer.

They asked students to list the characteristics of Superman, or alternatively superheroes in general, as part of a larger questionnaire. Later on, subjects were given the opportunity to volunteer for a fictitious community programme.

Students who thought of Superman volunteered much less of their time than those who thought about other superheroes. Furthermore, Superman-primed subjects were significantly less likely to show up at a meeting for volunteers held three months after they were initially asked to participate.

The reason, believes Nelson, is that asking people to compare themselves to an exceptional individual makes them realise their shortcomings. Whereas thinking about a general category encourages people to identify the strengths they have in common.

Journal reference: *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2004.08.003)

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