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Heroism Research: A Review of Theories, Methods, Challenges, and Trends

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Abstract

Heroism as an expression of self-actualization and a pinnacle social state is of fundamental interest to humanistic psychology and the field more broadly. This review places the growing discussion on heroic action in a humanistic perspective, as heroism aligns with ethical self-actualization in its highest form, personal meaning making, and social good, and can also involve profound existential costs. This review is organized in four major sections: First, the historical and philosophical underpinnings of heroism are examined, moving from ancient Greco-Roman perspectives, to more modern interpretations of Continental philosophy, and to Freud and Le Bon. Second, the article summarizes in detail a renaissance of interest in the psychology of heroism that began in the early 2000s, moving from a modern re-theorizing of heroism toward empirical exploration. This renewal of interest is described as six overlapping phases: theory building and exploration of operational definitions of heroism, taxonomic

approaches to heroic figures, implicit theories of heroism, social ascription of heroic status, social influence of heroes, and internal motivations for heroic action. Third, key methodological challenges in studying heroism are discussed. Finally, the renewed interest in heroism is considered as a social movement involving not just researchers but also the broader public.

Keywords: heroism, moral courage, humanistic psychology, existential psychology, social psychology, social movements

Introduction

Long ignored by modern scholars (Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011), the phenomenon of heroism is finally attracting the serious attention of scientists from multiple disciplines, especially psychology (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017). The mythic views of heroism examined by Joseph Campbell (1949) resonated with the general public, and also influenced humanistic and existential psychology during the peak of the Third Force movement in psychology through the incorporation of mythic and personal narrative in psychotherapy, research, and philosophical inquiry (see, e.g., Feinstein, Krippner, & Granger, 1988; Warmoth, 1965; Washburn, 1990). Starting in the early 1980s, APA Society for Humanistic Psychology's (SHP) former Division President, Frank Farley, suggested that small acts of everyday heroism also deserved attention and study (Farley, 2011). Another APA SHP President, Sara Bridges, later touched again on heroism as a key area for exploration in invited addresses (Bridges, 2010a, 2010b). But beyond these ties to myth and fleeting mentions of the importance of bravery as a character strength found in positive psychology texts (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), very little theoretical or data-driven inquiry into heroism occurred in the last century, despite an almost overwhelming interest in the psychology of evil (Franco & Zimbardo, 2016).

The purpose of this article is to provide a review of a renaissance of interest in heroes and heroism. In doing so, we offer a brief history of scholarly work beginning with the ancients' views of heroism and examining current treatments of heroic behavior. We then survey the theoretical work on heroism that began in the early 1980s, gradually accelerated at the turn of the millennium, and became increasingly data driven in the past 5 years. Next, we explore the many methodological challenges of studying heroism. Finally, we consider heroism studies as a social movement integrating both research and application, seeking to bring about social change that is within the reach of the public, communities, and governments.

Historical Overview

Stories of heroes and heroism are as old as the earliest written work in Western civilization, perhaps best known in Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. The most admired Greek hero, Achilles, demonstrates the ways in which the exemplary battlefield legend presents a challenge to his commanders while also highlighting the *pathos* of a young man who understood his own mortality and could personally identify with his enemies. This complexity yielded the earliest scholarship on heroes and heroism; through Socrates, the Platonic dialogues suggest that anyone seeking to foster military virtue in the ideal soldiers of a city would need a different view of the ideal of heroism than what was found in Homeric times (Bloom, 1991). Thus, contemporary scholars understand the Platonic view of Socrates as a hero to build on earlier conceptions of heroic activity, but expanding the notion to include a social form of heroism that was also within reach (Kohen, 2013).

Ancient heroism was also the theme of modern European philosophers such as David Hume (2007) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (2005). Hume concluded "that heroism is not only socially useful but also admirable in itself, even if destructive" (Jackson, 1989). Rousseau examined in careful detail the ways in which heroes might be either beneficial or destructive to a society, comparing and contrasting the ancient heroes before ultimately arguing that the virtue associated with the hero is "strength of soul" (Rousseau, 2005). He recognized, too, the power of stories about heroism for making good citizens, arguing that emulation of great examples from the past engenders "that patriotic intoxication which alone can raise men up above themselves, and without which freedom is only a vain name and legislation only an illusion" (Rousseau, 2005, p. 222). Like Machiavelli before him, Rousseau recognized a potential difficulty that heroes pose to their societies that has largely fallen away in contemporary scholarship on the topic, namely, that heroism and morality are not necessarily bound up with one another (Cameron, 1984; Kelly, 1997). As Kelly (1997) writes,

It would be reasonable, then, to expect Rousseau to urge others to regard heroes with respect coupled with wariness, much as they would look upon unstable explosives: indispensable on certain occasions, but to be avoided whenever possible and kept under lock and key when not in use. (p. 354)

The phrase *hero worship* first appeared in Thomas Carlyle's classic (1841) volume in which he proposed that all human history is a product of great

individuals who were gifted with supreme vision and action. These gifts, Carlyle (1841) argued, made it one's duty to worship heroes and that "worship of a hero is transcendent admiration of a Great Man" (p. 19). Max Weber argued that great men are endowed with charisma which he called "a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" (Solomon, Cohen, Greenberg and Pyszczynski, 2008, p. 46)

In a similar vein, Freud (1922) noted that the leader of early human groups

at the very beginning of the history of mankind, was the *Superman* whom Nietzsche only expected from the future. . . . The leader himself need love no one else, he may be of a masterly nature, absolutely narcissistic, but self-confident and independent. (p. 52)

These "primal horde leaders," observed Freud, become deified in death. Because we respond to charismatic leaders with reverence and awe, leaders who invoke religious feelings and ideation are viewed as especially charismatic. Freud argued that people in groups crave heroic leadership but that those who would be leaders must not only be powerful and charismatic, they must themselves "be held in fascination by a strong faith (in an idea) in order to awaken the group's faith." He expanded on Gustave Le Bon's (1896) crowd theory, suggesting that "leaders make themselves felt by means of the ideas in which they themselves are fanatical believers" (p. 5).

Heroism Research This Century

Heroism science gained momentum around the turn of this century. In particular, academic dialogue has provoked discussion and empirical research that aims to unveil the contemporary meaning of the term *hero*. The notion that heroism is a topic worthy of scientific inquiry was reinforced in both public and academic spheres with the publication of book, *The Lucifer Effect* (Zimbardo, 2007). In this book, Zimbardo flipped his seminal ideas about the human capacity for evil, to exploring the human possibilities for heroism. Zimbardo pointed out that

we care about heroic stories because they serve as powerful reminders that people are capable of resisting evil, of not giving in to temptations, of rising above mediocrity, and of heeding the call to action and to service when others fail to act. (p. 461)

Shifting our focus away from the horrors of human nature, Zimbardo reminds us that heroism represents what is right with human nature. At this time, Franco and Zimbardo (2006) introduced two helpful ideas to the literature. First, the idea that acts of everyday heroism can be carried out by all and are not reserved to an elite minority (encapsulated in the phrase, “the banality of heroism”). This idea crystalizing the notion of “small-h heroism” offered by Farley in the 1980s (Farley, 2011) also reflected the more democratic view of heroism offered by Plato. Second is the idea that it is possible to nurture a mind-set to help others in need, care for others compassionately, and to develop confidence in one’s own ability to take heroic action (the “Heroic Imagination”; Franco & Zimbardo, 2006). Zimbardo’s 2008 TED talk about the human capacity for both evil and heroism has, at the time of writing, attracted more than five million views—further reinforcing the idea that heroism occupies a central place in human experience (Allison et al., 2017).

As researchers in this arena have taken a set of first steps toward empirical research, a progression has emerged, focusing first on developing a theoretical model for heroism that sets it apart from other related psychological constructs; second, exploring possible operational definitions of heroism that can guide research; third, on the development of taxonomies of heroic types; fourth, explorations of implicit theories of heroism held by the lay public; fifth, examining the process of social ascription of heroic status; and sixth, delving into the internal motivations of heroic actors. Each of these somewhat overlapping phases is detailed here, along with currently available findings.

Psychological Theories Framing Heroism

Heroism was gradually distinguished from theories of altruism, pro-social behavior, and risk-taking behavior (Franco et al., 2011), and empirical research demonstrated that the terms *heroes*, *leaders*, and *role models* are not synonymous in meaning (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2015a, 2015b). However, while distinct, heroism necessarily overlaps with these topics in psychology and ideas in other fields. In a recent comprehensive overview of the psychological frameworks related to heroism, Franco and Zimbardo (2016) noted that heroism can be examined from pro-social perspectives, including leadership (Allison & Goethals, 2014; Bennis, 2007), grit (Von Culin, Tsukayama, & Duckworth, 2014), high-velocity improvisational action (Latané & Nida, 1981; Mendonça, Beroggi, & Wallace, 2001; Rand & Epstein, 2014), altruism (Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008; Oliner & Oliner, 1988; Staub, 1991), time perspective (Zimbardo & Boyd, 2008), and also, just as compellingly, from deviance-based perspectives (Smith, Lilienfeld, Coffey, & Dabbs, 2013), including risk taking (Fischer & Smith, 2004), impulsivity (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1978), and psychopathy (Pallone & Hennessy, 1998).

Definitions of Heroism

In 1996, the word hero was described as radically ambiguous (Gill, 1996). Over the next decade, discussions of what constituted heroism began in earnest. For example, in 2004, Becker and Eagly defined heroes as individuals who choose to take physical risks on behalf of one or more people, despite the possibility of suffering serious consequences, including death. Others rejoindered that physical-risk heroism is not broad enough to encompass the many forms of heroism (Martens, 2005). Physical-risk heroism has been further divided into martial heroism (actioned by military personnel) and civil heroism (actioned by civilians; Franco et al., 2011). Expanding the definition further, social heroism involves heroic action in the service of ideals, and as a consequence the hero may experience lowered social status, lost credibility, financial instability, social ostracization, arrest, torture, risks to family members, and, on occasion, death (Franco et al., 2011; Franco & Zimbardo, 2006).

A definition that perhaps spans both physical-risk and social heroism refers to heroes, paraphrasing Kohen (2013), as “people who faced the fact of their mortality, who took serious risks and/or overcame major hardship, and who did so in the service of a principle”. A person who behaves in accordance with Kohen’s definition may be declared a hero by one or more onlookers and thus *become* a hero.

Simply identifying and settling on a mutually acceptable operational definition of heroism has proven difficult, as some researchers insist that heroes incur no real benefits from heroic action (actually often suffering for these actions), while others argue that it is difficult to conceive of any action that does not offer some form of reward.¹

Exemplars and Taxonomies of Heroes

Zimbardo (2007) offered an *a priori* taxonomy of heroic subtypes and exemplars derived from extensive review of news and media accounts of heroic actors. This list had 12 categories including two categories involving physical risk (military and civil heroism) and 8 categories of social heroism, with detailed heroic exemplars for each category. Allison and Goethals (2011) offered insight into lay perspectives of heroes by asking members of the public to offer names of heroes and working to create preliminary categories for these individuals. Responses fell into three overall categories, fictional heroes, family members as heroes, and nonfictional heroes who were also not family members. This last category included teachers, pastors, heads of state, athletes, artists, explorers, and survivors of tragedy.

Later, Allison and Goethals (2013) refined these taxonomy-based approaches to differentiate heroes on the basis of the type of influence they have on others.

The authors suggest that heroes influence others along various dimensions including weak–strong, short-term or long-term, widespread–limited, waxing–waning, hidden–exposed, or constructed–authentic (Allison & Goethals, 2013), and further suggest 10 subtypes of heroes including traditional heroes (e.g., Irene Sendler, Dalai Lama) and transparent heroes (e.g., everyday heroes such as fire fighters and nurses).

Implicit Theories of Heroism

Using these definitions and taxonomies as a starting point, attention turned toward unpacking and making explicit the meaning of the term *hero* (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Kinsella et al., 2015a, 2015b; Sullivan & Venter, 2010), with a particular focus on lay conceptions given the role public perceptions of the idea of heroism play in influencing human decision-making, social judgments, and everyday behavior (Allison et al., 2016). Sullivan and Venter (2010) conducted a study that asked participants to identify a personal hero and to explain the reason for their hero status. In that study, heroes were described as intelligent, loving, caring, talented, hardworking, a role model, creative, motivated, and religious. Improving on the previous study by controlling for demand characteristics, Allison and Goethals (2011) asked college students to list the traits of heroes, and another sample of students sorted the traits into groups based on how similar or different the traits were to each other. The results indicated eight trait clusters of heroes: smart, strong, caring, selfless, charismatic, resilient, reliable, and inspiring (the “Great Eight”; Allison & Goethals, 2011).

Franco et al. (2011) collected data from more than 3,000 participants in an Internet-based study examining public perceptions of the *a priori* taxonomy of 12 heroic subtypes offered by Zimbardo (2007). Using a Latin Square design to control for question order effects, 20 different generic situations that might be regarded as heroic were presented. These situations were categorized as fitting into the general ideas of duty-bound, physical risk (e.g., military/first responders), and non–duty-bound, physical risk (civil bravery), or social risk. Participants were asked to categorize each situation as predominantly heroic, altruistic, or neither heroic nor altruistic in nature. Despite media emphasis on military heroism, non–duty-bound physical risk scenarios were viewed as most purely heroic. Four social risk hero types, politico-religious leaders, good Samaritans, bureaucracy heroes, and whistle-blowers were viewed as predominantly heroic. Interestingly, religious figures, scientific leaders, underdogs, martyrs, politico-military leaders, and explorer categories were not viewed as predominantly heroic, again despite media portrayals that often cast these roles in a heroic light.

Kinsella et al. (2015a) used a rigorous prototype methodology to examine lay conceptions of heroes across seven studies, and the results indicate some overlap with the Great Eight traits. The most central (i.e., prototypical) features of heroism were identified as bravery, moral integrity, conviction, courageous, self-sacrifice, protecting, honesty, selfless, determined, saves others, inspiring, and helpful. Less common than the central features but frequently included peripheral features were proactive, humble, strong, risk-taker, fearless, caring, powerful, compassionate, leadership skills, exceptional, intelligent, talented, and personable. These studies of lay conceptions illuminate contemporary meaning of an ancient concept and can guide academics in their inquiry about why heroes remain such an important part of modern life.

Social Ascription of Heroic Status

Heroes usually view their actions as the result of a flow of natural decisions, attempting to “take the next right action” (Franco, 2016) and do not view their actions as heroic (Worthington, 2007). Instead, heroic status is ascribed by others. This process of conferral of the heroic mantle by witnesses to the act, and by groups who learn about the act second hand remains poorly understood. *Post hoc* multivariate analysis of data from an initial study of lay perspectives of heroism gives some insight into this phenomenon (Franco, et al., 2011). Heroic subtypes were recategorized to explore the relationship between physical and social risk, as well as justified and unjustified risk taking as a possible predictors of social acknowledgment of heroism. The regression model found that despite the authors’ assertion that social risk taking is just as central to heroism, in fact, physical risk was more strongly associated with the ascription of heroic status, explaining about 46% of the variance. Furthermore, conferral of heroic status was associated with individuals who do not simply take risks, but who take risks that are difficult to justify. Unjustified risk explained an additional 9% of the variance. These results suggest that heroic actions are often initially controversial and only later come to be seen as heroic as observers contextualize the activity.

Social Influence and Social Function of Heroes

People appear to be intrinsically motivated to seek out heroes, most likely because heroes serve fundamental human needs (Allison & Goethals, 2014; Kinsella et al., 2015b). Analyses of lay conceptions indicate that heroes are viewed as providing three important psychological, social, and physical functions: enhancing and uplifting others, modeling morals, values and ethics, and protecting the

physical and psychological well-being of others (the hero functions framework; Kinsella et al., 2015b). Franco and Zimbardo (2016) explicitly tied the activities of heroes to the views on social justice advanced by Prilleltensky (2014), suggesting that heroes serve as a shield to others who are unable to defend themselves, acting to preserve human dignity (i.e., act as a psychological shield), and effect mercy (i.e., act as a physical shield). The next step in this line of research will be to ascertain whether different types of heroes serve distinct functions. Allison and Goethals (2014) recently proposed a new model, the heroic leadership dynamic, to underscore the notion that people need heroes and that one's developmental stage and current life circumstance influences which hero is needed.

Internal Motivation Toward Heroic Action

Another important and growing line of research considers the internal and situational factors that give rise to heroic behavior—focusing on the heroic actors themselves. One reason that physical-risk heroes intervene when others do not may be due to individual differences in altruism (e.g., Feigin, Owens, & Goodyear-Smith, 2014), the need to self-actualize (e.g., Maslow, 1943; Allison et al., 2017), impulsivity (Franco & Zimbardo, 2016), or, controversially, because they are less concerned with the social implications of their actions, which is one facet of psychopathy (Smith et al., 2013). In a novel and thought-provoking line of transdisciplinary research, Efthimiou (2015) considers whether there is a biological basis for heroism. Situational factors and group-level influences on heroic behavior, including those predicted by the social identity approach, have not yet been fully explored. Individual cognitive and decision making factors predicting heroism have also not been examined in detail.

Methodological Challenges

Fundamental methodological issues in studying heroism have been identified (Franco et al., 2011), which will continue to force researchers to apply novel modifications to their strategies and study paradigms. First, retrospective bias is a significant problem, as heroes are often viewed as controversial in the moment until a new narrative emerges. Using social/cognitive methods to understand how heroes are perceived by the public is particularly vulnerable to these shifting perceptions. Second, examinations of personality after heroic act/status may not capture an individual's state prior to the event, as it is quite possible that the heroic action, the event that engendered that action, and its consequences, have enough emotional power to profoundly change a hero's

outlook (both positively and negatively) and may even create long-term character change. Third, using the public ascription of heroic status as a selection criteria for studying “true heroes” will necessarily bias future studies as individuals who acted heroically in private or whose actions remain controversial at the time of the study (and are later socially determined to be heroic) will be excluded, thus giving a lopsided picture of the motivations of the hero. Fourth, experimental studies on heroism seem a logical next step in moving toward understanding the actual motivational, cognitive, and social predictors of heroes. But the level of risk involved in situations calling for exemplary selflessness creates significant regulatory problems, as institutional regulatory boards are unlikely to approve studies that accurately simulate environments where heroic action might occur. The next generation of data-driven research in this area will require novel paradigms and systematic borrowing of methods from other disciplines that find themselves in similar positions (e.g., epidemiology) in order to fully explore the phenomenon of heroism.

Final Thoughts: Heroism as a Social Movement

Not only did Franco and Zimbardo’s (2006) article on the banality of heroism jumpstart much of today’s research on heroism, it also inspired lay audiences worldwide.

It described heroism as it related to the modern world, and it communicated a hope for further study on the topic as well as ideas for teaching everyday heroism. Zimbardo gave a presentation about his journey from evil to heroism at the 2008 TED event. Members of the audience that day, and millions of online viewers in the years following, have asked what they could do to spread the ideal of everyday heroism in their communities. Since then, a number of organizations, conferences, and training events have sprung up with the explicit purpose of further democratizing the idea of heroism as within the reach of anyone with the right mindset and tools needed to act pro-socially in complex, often challenging situations. These include the Heroic Imagination Project founded by Dr. Philip Zimbardo, the Heroic Construction Company and Hero Round Table conference sponsored by Matt Langdon, and the Heroism Science Conference organized by Olivia Efthimiou. Trainings designed to encourage heroic action have generally focused on encouraging a growth oriented rather than fixed mindset, developing a deep understanding of the Bystander Effect, exploring and challenging prejudice and group perception, developing adaptive attributions to reduce stereotypes, improving situational awareness, and heightening participants’ understanding of the power of social conformity in reducing the

likelihood of one taking heroic actions that challenge group norms. Initial findings showing the impact of some of these “hero training” approaches are provided in this special issue. However, several open questions also remain about these trainings, including, for example, the ethical considerations in teaching the idea of heroic risk-taking to children and providing evidence that those who are trained are more likely to act heroically in the face of actual crisis events, not just hypothetical scenarios.

The ideal of heroism in this modern form is something that is accessible to all, although its most profound expression remains rare and awe-inspiring. This view of heroism as a personal, communal, and societal responsibility in the face of evil is an expression of decades of humanistic and existential thought, research, and action.

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Note

1. Notably, many of these discussions have taken place privately during article reviews and are therefore not openly available.

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Author Biographies



Zeno E. Franco has authored several articles and chapters on heroism credited with generating renewed interest in heroics as a serious topic of research in psychology. He is an assistant professor in Family & Community Medicine at the Medical College of Wisconsin. His current work focuses on examining heroic leadership in crisis events, military heroism, and our connection to the unknown. He serves as chair of the board of directors for the Heroic Imagination Project and is on the editorial boards for *PLOS: Currents: Disasters* and *Information Systems for Crisis Response and Management*.



Scott T. Allison has authored numerous books, including *Heroes* and *Heroic Leadership*. He is a professor of psychology at the University of Richmond where he publishes on heroism and leadership. His other books include *Heroic Humility*, *Reel Heroes and Villains*, *Conceptions of Leadership*, *Frontiers in Spiritual Leadership*, and *The Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*. His work has appeared in *USA Today*, *National Public Radio*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Slate Magazine*, *MSNBC*, *CBS*, *Psychology Today*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*. He has received Richmond's *Distinguished Educator Award* and the Virginia Council of Higher Education's *Outstanding Faculty Award*.



Elaine L. Kinsella is a lecturer/assistant professor at the Department of Psychology at the University of Limerick, Republic of Ireland. She began her career as a work and organizational psychologist, and she holds academic qualifications from Queen's University, Belfast (BSc), Liverpool John Moores University (MSc), and the University of Limerick (PhD). Her primary research interests include heroism, leadership, and social influence, as well as relations between identity, memory, and psychological well-being.



Ari Kohen is the Schlesinger Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the Forsythe Family Program on Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs at the University of Nebraska– Lincoln. His most recent major work, *Untangling Heroism: Classical Philosophy and the Concept of the Hero*, was published by Routledge in 2014. His first book project, *In Defense of Human Rights: A Non-Religious Grounding in a Pluralistic World*, also from Routledge, was published in 2007. Recent articles have appeared in *Human Rights Review*, *Journal of Human Rights*, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, *Social Justice Research*, *Politics*, and *Polis*.



Matt Langdon is the founder of the Hero Round Table and the Hero Construction Company. He sits on the board of the Heroic Imagination Project and the Pop Culture Hero Coalition. His work focuses on encouraging regular practice to create preparedness for heroic acts. He has worked extensively with academic researchers from psychology and other disciplines to bring the ideas of heroic action into wider public discourse in the United States and internationally.



Philip G. Zimbardo, professor emeritus at Stanford University, has served as President of the American Psychological Association and designed and narrated the award winning 26-part PBS series, *Discovering Psychology*. He has published more than 50 books and 400 professional and popular articles and chapters. He currently lectures worldwide and is actively working to promote his nonprofit, The Heroic Imagination Project (www.heroicimagination.org). His current research looks at the psychology of heroism. He asks, “What pushes some people to become perpetrators of evil, while others act heroically on behalf of those in need?”