A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE
FEATURES AND
FUNCTIONS OF HEROES

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ABSTRACT

Abstract

This thesis documents a PhD research project, conducted over three years, that investigates the important features and functions associated with heroes. This programme of research was designed to add to the scant literature on this important topic. These novel findings, coupled with existing literature, provide the basis for a new model of heroic influence. These emerging theories and empirical findings facilitate future research and application on this topic, and are likely to be of interest to persons working to understand or instigate positive change in social, educational, organisational, and clinical settings.

There are different types of heroes—family members, humanitarians, fictional characters, religious figures, military and civil heroes, and political activists. The research presented in this thesis indicates that bravery, moral integrity, honesty, self-sacrifice, altruism, and conviction are the most defining features of heroic behaviour. The physical and psychological benefits that heroes provide to individuals map onto three dimensions: protecting, enhancing, and moral modelling. The results show that a hero is not the same as the average leader or role model. Overall, this thesis contributes new knowledge about the important characteristics and benefits provided by heroes, reiterating that heroism is a concept of psychological and social significance.
DECLARATION

Declaration

The ethical standards of the University of Limerick and the American Psychological Association (APA) were followed in the conduct of this PhD research.

This thesis is written in English and formatted according to the American Psychological Association (APA) style (6th edition) to conserve the original format of the included articles.

I declare that this thesis is my own original work. Any assistance or information I have received in developing the materials herein is duly acknowledged.

Limerick, August 17th 2012, Elaine Louise Kinsella
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It is with great pleasure that I take this opportunity to thank all who have helped me during my PhD journey.

My Mum, Anne Helena Kinsella, and I share many attributes. However, the fundamental differences between us are the profound opportunities that have been made available to me. I have been university educated (arguably for too many years), travelled the world, changed career paths, and been lucky enough to have a parent who recurrently told me that I could achieve anything I put my mind to. I wish to thank her for creating opportunities, sowing seeds of possibility in my mind as a child, and for reminding me to stop frowning. She provided me with the stable foundation from where I could begin my own adventure.

My Dad, Frank Joseph Kinsella, left his local school in Wimbledon at 15 years of age, but a few years later he began cycling 15 miles to ‘night school’ every evening after work. When he died, 13 years ago, he had successfully owned and managed numerous businesses, qualified as an Aeronautical Engineer, and had expertly skippered yachts all over the world. His determination, ambition, entrepreneurial spirit, and stubbornness live on within me. When I was a little girl I’d ask him, “Am I a toughie yet, Dad?” I feel confident that today he would answer affirmatively, yes!

Thank you to my outstanding PhD supervisors Tim and Eric, who have dedicated hours of their time to educating me. I can only begin to express my gratitude for their support and encouragement. Through the process, I have learned much about psychology, life, statistics, disappointment, hope, and the meaning of never giving up. Every time I leave Tim’s office I feel motivated, invigorated, excited, and (occasionally) overwhelmed by the possibilities. Truthfully, I cannot imagine a more inspiring supervisor. Eric has shared his expert research advice, genuine concern,
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etymology of names, and passion for social psychology. I have never felt unwelcome knocking on Eric’s door for help (even when he was knee-deep in paperwork). Both Eric and Tim are exemplary academics, hungry for knowledge, and display a love of seeking the truth through research. Overall, I have found our ‘hero team’ to be a highly rewarding and fun experience.

During the first days of PhD-dom, I met a fellow (unrelated) member of the Kinsella ‘clan’. Caitriona Kinsella and I have been two peas in a pod ever since. Living together, sharing an office, socialising (i.e. tea-drinking) together, exchanging (often drab) lists, swapping bird-avoidance techniques, and reassuring one another when needed. She has kept my feet firmly on the ground, or at least when floating I never felt alone! Also, she helped me to keep sight of what is important in life and to keep ‘fighting the good fight’ (Paulo Coehlo, The Pilgrimage).

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Cue #1. Music: (STING) BETTE MIDLER’S WIND BENEATH MY WINGS -- LET IT FINISH
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Chapter 1

Introduction
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Overview of this PhD Thesis

The present thesis investigates the central features and psychosocial functions of heroes from a multimethod perspective. The focus of Chapter 2 provides a detailed analysis of the central characteristics of heroes and heroic behaviour, and areas of convergence and divergence with other persons of influence. Chapter 3 outlines the results of exploratory studies on the functions provided to individuals who encounter heroes. Chapter 4 integrates historical and modern approaches to heroes, highlights the gaps in the literature, and synthesises empirical research findings on the topic. Finally, Chapter 5 summarises the key findings, limitations, future directions, and examines the research in the broader context of psychology.

The Topic of the Current PhD Thesis

Importance of Heroes in Everyday Life

The individuals I meet at conferences, social events, and on various modes of public transport are fascinated by heroes and heroic behaviour. One of these spontaneous interactions might begin with general questions: Where you are from? What do you work at? A PhD! What is the topic? When people hear the answer, the conversation typically tacks in a new direction: they ask insightful and interesting questions about heroism research, offer their personal reflections on heroes, and sometimes share details of significant life events triggered by the conversation. It is interesting to note that most psychological concepts begin life as everyday concepts, before they are refined into scientific ones. The research presented in this thesis pays due respect to everyday descriptions of heroes.

Survey data from one sample revealed that 66% of the participants reported having a personal hero (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2010). Additionally, people use the term ‘hero’ frequently (Goethals & Allison, 2012), which is reflected in public
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discourse and the news media referring to heroes on a daily basis (Sullivan & Venter, 2010).

Surprisingly, the topic of heroism has not received deserving attention in the social sciences (Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011; Sullivan & Venter, 2005). Authors have described the term ‘hero’ as ambiguous in contemporary usage (Gill, 1996) and emphasised a need to update the concept (Blau, Franco, & Zimbardo, 2009). Furthermore, very few researchers have considered whether and why individuals need heroes (Goethals & Allison, 2012). My observations of people, news headlines, and my systematic analysis of numerous empirical data sets have convinced me that heroism is an everyday phenomenon that is of empirical interest and psychological importance. My aim throughout this thesis is to clearly explain how I came to this conclusion, and to elucidate current knowledge about how individuals think about and are influenced by heroism.

Heroes have played important roles throughout history. The term hero was first used by Homer (circa 8th century B.C.E.) to define warriors, individuals of great ability, courage, skill and strength who were useful to their community. A classic Homeric example of a hero is Achilles, who was described as a skilful fighter and protector. Physical protection and strength, however, are not prerequisites for heroism in Homer’s view. For instance, Odysseus was an intellectual hero known for swaying the opinion of others and showing practical wisdom. The examples of Odysseus and Achilles highlight a useful distinction between physical-risk heroism and heroism in the service of ideas (recently made explicit by Martens, 2005; Franco et al., 2011). Some contend that heroism requires physical risk (Becker & Eagly, 2004), yet, others acknowledge that this definition is too narrow (Martens, 2005) to convey the many layers of meaning associated with heroism (Allison & Goethals, 2011). In fact, a number of authors have
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called for the modernisation and systematic analysis of the concept (Sullivan & Venter, 2005, 2010). The very fact that heroism is complex, pervasive, and multi-faceted makes it a particularly attractive and important topic for psychology researchers.

The Psychological Importance of Heroism

   Heroism is an important topic for psychologists for many reasons. Heroes pervade history, and modern life, suggesting that heroes influence individuals psychologically (Sullivan & Venter, 2005). Heroes and their associated sagas have been described as the “support for all human life and the inspiration of philosophy, poetry, and the arts” and function as “a vehicle for the profoundest moral and metaphysical instruction” (Campbell, 1949, p. 257). Campbell further suggests that the metaphors by which heroes live have been “brooded upon, searched, and discussed for centuries— even millennia: they have served whole societies, furthermore, as the mainstays of thought and life” (p. 256). Other scholars convey similar ideas about the ways that heroes shape and represent culture (Hegel, 1975) and act as source of social control (Klapp, 1954).

   Indeed, an examination of the heroes worshipped in a given culture reveals that culture’s most cherished values. Other philosophers emphasise hero-worship as a means to fill the void that is created by a loss of faith (Nietzsche, 2005), to re-establish meaning and idealism (Früchtl, 2009). Not only do heroes help people to survive physical dangers, but they typically evoke eudemonistic questions of “How should I live? What do I really want?” (Früchtl, 2009). Further still, individuals can achieve symbolic immortality and a meaningful existence by revering in the lives of their heroes (Becker, 1973). In an essay entitled “What makes a life significant?” James (1899) wrote:
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What excites and interests the looker-on at life, what the romances and the statues celebrate and the grim civic monuments remind us of, is the everlasting battle of the powers of light with those darkness; with heroism, reduced to its bare chance, yet ever and anon snatching victory from the jaws of death (p. 5-6).

Recently, heroes were described as agents of social influence (Goethals & Allison, 2012) who affect an individual’s emotions, thoughts, and actions. These accounts are fascinating and revealing. However, psychological research has not yet systematically and empirically assessed the social and psychological functions provided by heroes.

Why Study Heroism Now?

The discipline of positive psychology and related research on character virtues has gained traction over the past decade and continues to attract the sustained focus of researchers worldwide (Exline, Campbell, Baumeister, Joiner, Krueger, & Kachorek, 2004; Gilbert, 2006; Neff, 2003). However, beneath the wing of positive psychology the subject of heroism has—until very recently—been neglected by empirical psychologists. Evidently, writers have considered the influence of heroes for quite some time (Campbell, 1949; Jung, 1969; Klapp, 1969) yet there remains a scarcity of definitions and rigorous research. So far, there is little agreement among researchers regarding how to define a hero. There is even less consideration given to the functions that heroes serve in everyday life. Thus, the empirical programme of research assessing the features and functions of heroes presented in this thesis is useful, timely, and likely to contribute to the field of psychology. Further, the term hero is sometimes used interchangeably with other types of influential individuals, such as leaders and role models. Evidence is lacking about exactly what distinguishes each of these concepts from each other. Therefore, the present research program on the features and functions
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of heroes, leaders, and role models will contribute to the productivity of future research on each of these topics.

**Importance of the Current Research**

This programme of research is important and novel for several reasons. First, it presents more data on the subject—nine empirical studies—than have been published to-date. Since beginning this thesis, some researchers (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Franco et al., 2011; Sullivan & Venter, 2010) have been working in parallel. They aim to understand the characteristics of heroes, suggesting that heroism is a ‘hot’ topic, in need of empirical research. The contribution of those researchers is a very welcome addition to the sparse literature on heroes; it serves as a useful source of comparison with the findings presented here. Yet, throughout the present thesis I emphasise the various ways that the present research is novel, addresses gaps in the literature, and extends our understanding of heroes in ways that previous work has not. Importantly, at present, there is no published research examining the psychological and social influences of heroes. More than one product from the present thesis is such publications.

Second, the present research is not only innovative because it considers a topic that has been neglected in the social sciences, but also because of the multiple methods employed. One advantage of using a multimethod approach is that it provides more detailed in-depth results and converging perspectives (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). To fulfil these criteria, the programme of research presented here includes survey methods, reaction time paradigms, and free-recall to reveal the prototype of heroes, and analysis with Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001).

The validity of such methods is further enhanced by the fact that the research questions were considered using both open-ended, qualitative approaches and established, quantitative methods (Creswell, Clark, Guttmann, & Hanson, 2003).
instance, the open-ended approach helped to provide a detailed perspective on the important characteristics and functions of heroes, whereas the quantitative approach helped identify the core features and functions of heroes and to elucidate the relationship between heroes, other influential figures, and underlying psychological phenomena. In fact, this mixed-methods approach provides a synergy between capturing the complexity in meaning of heroism without losing the rigor required in the scientific approach.

Third, the present research is relevant and important for practitioners in mental healthcare, education, the workplace, community, and sports settings. To date, there have been interesting interventions that incorporate heroes. For example, personal heroes have been used as a tool for re-connecting with a person’s identity and goals following traumatic brain injury (metaphoric identity mapping; Ylvisaker, McPherson, Kayes, & Pellett, 2008). Heroes have also been used to model healthy coping behaviours among ethnic minority teenagers who are at risk of mental health problems (hero modelling; Malgady, Rogler, & Constantino, 1990).

The findings generated from the present research will inform similar interventions and inspire new hero initiatives by sharing knowledge about the characteristics and functions of heroism. With a greater understanding of the functions provided by heroes, practitioners can apply this knowledge to maximise the positive influence of heroes. Understanding the psychological processes associated with thinking about heroes will add value to the repertoire of effective, low-cost psychological well-being interventions.

**Structure of PhD Thesis**

In this thesis, the empirical chapters (chapter 2 and 3) come before (rather than after) the main theoretical chapter (chapter 4). This decision was influenced by the fact
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that psychological research on heroism, until now, has been limited. The empirical chapters in this thesis lay the foundation for the conceptual ideas that follow. The theoretical chapter integrates current knowledge about the psychology of heroism, proposes a new model of heroic influence, and orients the reader towards future research possibilities by drawing from the novel empirical research presented in earlier chapters.

Overview of PhD Chapters

Next a brief outline of each chapter is outlined. The methods and aims of each study are described.

Chapter 2: Superman, Mother Teresa, and Mom: What are Lay Conceptions of Heroes?

Six empirical studies were conducted to understand how people think about the characteristics of heroes, and decipher how those features compare with leader and role model characteristics. Research on everyday social phenomena is dependent on the availability of a conceptual definition (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). To meet this requirement, a theoretical definition must ensure rigor and coverage of the topic (Gregg, Hart, Sedikides, & Kumashiro, 2008). A method that balances both scientific rigor and captures the complexity of everyday phenomena is prototype analysis (Hassebrauck, 1997; Gregg et al., 2008). This method was therefore employed to identify how a hero is viewed and to characterise the features that are more or less prototypical of that person. The first step was to generate open-ended descriptions of heroes and heroic behaviour. These descriptions were later grouped together by independent coders if identical, semantically-related, or meaning-related. The second step was to identify which of these characteristics were most central to the concept of hero using ratings scales and memory paradigms. The third stage involved teasing apart the characteristics
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that were most closely associated with heroes when pitted against leaders or role models using rating scales. Taken together, these studies were designed to contribute to the psychological literature by increasing conceptual clarity of heroes and suggesting ways for measuring the construct.

Details of each study, as well as the findings and discussion, are discussed in Chapter 2. This research is presented in the form of a manuscript that has been granted a ‘revise and resubmit’ decision at the *Personality Processes and Individual Differences* section of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

**Chapter 3: On Lay Conceptions of Heroes, What are the Psychological and Social Functions of Heroes?**

Three empirical studies explore the psychological and social functions provided by heroes, and determine which functions are most likely to be provided by heroes versus leaders or role models. These studies represent the first attempt to identify the functions provided by heroes and thus, an open-ended approach was adopted. The objective was to identify the full spectrum of physical, psychological, and social functions that heroes provide to people in their daily life. Using these exploratory findings, coupled with an extensive review of writing on the topic of heroes, a three-factor model of heroic influence was predicted and validated using factor analytic techniques. Further, the extent to which heroes, role models, and leaders provide each of these functions was assessed using ratings scales. The findings provide a useful framework for future experimental research that investigates the influence of heroes.

The methods, findings, and results of these studies are provided in Chapter 3. This research is presented in the form of a manuscript that is currently under review in a top peer-reviewed psychology journal.
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Chapter 4: Faces and Boons of Heroism: An Integrative Review of the Features and Functions of Heroes

Chapter 4 takes the form of a conceptual review. This chapter provides an analysis of existing literature and research on the topic of heroism, highlights knowledge gaps, and proposes a model of heroic influence (see Figure 1, Chapter 4). This chapter integrates the findings of the main findings of the present research within the context of existing psychological literatures (e.g., self-regulation, memory, attention). In the first section of the chapter, the structure and form of heroes is considered. The factors that influence declarations of heroes—subjectivity, personality, and the potential ‘dark side’ of heroism—are considered in section two. Finally, in section three, the chapter focuses on the role of heroes in society and in the daily lives of people. The proposed model generates interesting and novel predictions about heroic influence. This chapter provides the basis for a conceptual review manuscript that will be submitted to a psychological journal later this year.

Chapter 5: General Discussion

Chapter 5 provides an overview of all the important findings that have emerged from the studies presented in this thesis. An overview of the limitations of the research is presented. The practical and theoretical implications of these findings are discussed. Then, all the findings are integrated to provide answers to the primary research questions upon which this thesis is based. Finally, possibilities for future research based on the findings of the current thesis and the model of heroic influence (see Figure 1, Chapter 4) are outlined.
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CHAPTER 2: WHAT ARE LAY CONCEPTIONS OF HEROES?

Chapter 2

Superman, Mother Teresa, and Mom:

What are Lay Conceptions of Heroes?
CHAPTER 2: WHAT ARE LAY CONCEPTIONS OF HEROES?

Abstract

Definitions of heroes have evolved in literature and popular discourse, yet, in psychology the characteristics of heroes remain unclear. The present research systematically investigates the prototypical features of heroes. In Study 1, lay persons ($N = 189$) generated open-ended descriptions of heroes, which were sorted into meaningful categories by independent coders. In Study 2, participants ($N = 365$) rated the centrality of these features, reliably classified as central or peripheral. In a reaction time paradigm, participants in Study 3 ($N = 33$) identified central features of heroes faster than peripheral features. In Study 4, participants ($N = 25$) remembered more central (vs. peripheral) features during a free-recall task. In Studies 5 ($N = 212$) and 6 ($N = 307$), participants typically rated heroes as more courageous and self-sacrificing than leaders or role models. These findings elucidate conceptual, definitional, and measurement issues, whilst suggesting directions for future hero research.

Keywords: hero, heroism, prototype analysis
CHAPTER 2: WHAT ARE LAY CONCEPTIONS OF HEROES?

Superman, Mother Teresa, and Mom: What are Lay Conceptions of Heroes?

Psychology has traditionally focused on the dark side of human behaviour—evil, aggression, prejudice (e.g., Miller, 2004)—but more recently positive concepts such as altruism, compassion, and empathy have emerged (e.g., Gable & Haidt, 2005). Heroism, however, remains a relatively unexplored domain of psychology (Blau, Franco, & Zimbardo, 2009; Becker & Eagly, 2004; Sullivan & Venter, 2005). Why should heroes be subject to scrutiny now? There are at least three good reasons to do so.

First, the prevalence of the concept of heroes suggests that it is of psychological importance to humankind (Sullivan & Venter, 2005). Recently, 66% of adults sampled across 25 countries admitted to having at least one hero (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2010). In fact, the pervasiveness of heroes in daily life (Sullivan & Venter, 2005) itself warrants further examination. Moreover, heroes provide important psychological functions, such as protecting, enhancing, and moral modelling (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2011, 2012a, 2012b). Many benefits provided by heroes, we propose, serve core human motives (e.g., Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006). Heroes, for instance, may provide self-regulatory resources when one is faced with a moral dilemma. Individuals who adhere to normative moral guidelines are more likely to be an accepted group member, thus, increasing the sense of affiliation for that individual. However, a full inquiry about the psychological influence of heroes seems premature until definitional disagreements are resolved.

Second, the sheer variety of heroes suggests their far reaching psychological utility. In the aftermath of disasters, those who rescue and rebuild communities are considered heroic. Celebrities and sports stars are often presented as heroes in the media. Privately, people regard family members as heroic. Zimbardo (2007) proposes 12 types of hero: duty-bound hero, civil hero, religious figure, politico-religious figure,
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martyr, political or military leader, adventurer, scientific hero, Good Samaritan, underdog, bureaucracy hero, and whistle-blower. Despite the diversity of heroes, it is expected that most will display the prototypical features of heroism identified in the present investigation.

Third, the concept of heroism has changed over generations. The word derives from the Greek *heros*, meaning *protector* (Harper, 2010). In Greek mythology, heroes showed extraordinary bravery and were willing to sacrifice themselves for others. Many myths feature heroes who perform displays of strength, boldness, or cleverness. Hercules is best remembered for serving as a model for human accomplishment. Penelope is revered for symbolising goodness and morality. The tradition of revelling heroes has continued for generations in the arts, media, and popular culture. The book, *A hero with a thousand faces*, outlines themes that are reflected in a hero’s journey, particularly facing severe challenges and returning with power to improve the world (Campbell, 1949). Some modern interpretations of heroes and celebrities are not distinguishable (North, Bland, & Ellis, 2005). Are we correct to worship people of great talent as our heroes, or should we reserve this right to heroes of a more traditional sense where there is a level of personal sacrifice and noble purpose? There is a need to clarify what is meant when people refer to heroes and heroines in the 21st century. In fact, the term hero has been described as “radically ambiguous” in contemporary usage (Gill, 1996, p. 98). Blau and colleagues (2009) emphasised the importance of modernising the concept of heroism. The present investigation aims to highlight the most prototypical hero features and thus, lay the foundation for future research in this area.

The topic of heroes has recently attracted the attention of researchers (Zimbardo, 2007; Sullivan & Venter, 2005, 2010), each defining the concept differently. Becker and Eagly (2004) defined heroes as those who are willing to risk and sacrifice for
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others. While Ko (2007) depicted a hero as multi-faceted and emphasised their persistence in the face of failure. Heroes, according to Zimbardo (2007), are the minority few who resist external pressures of conformity. McAdams (2008) argued that a hero is concerned with generativity, protecting and promoting the well-being of future generations. Schwartz (2009) contends that heroes demonstrate moral will, the desire to do good for others, and moral skill, the capacity to do the right thing in a particular situation. These definitions evidence the lack of consistency in conceptualising heroes within psychology.

Additionally, a review of psychological literature does not reveal the extent to which the terms heroes, leaders, and role models can be used interchangeably. Some people who occupy formal leadership positions are considered heroic (e.g., Dalai Lama). There are aspects of leadership research which may be important for understanding some heroes. For example, a transformational leader looks beyond self-interest and acts for the good of the group (Bass, 1990). This description shares elements with previous definitions of heroes (McAdams, 2008; Schwartz, 2009). Yet, heroes do not always occupy formal leadership positions or have the intention of leading a group of people towards a common goal (e.g., Rosa Parks, Albert Einstein). Leaders, in a traditional sense, have power over others (deWall, Baumeister, Mead, & Vohs, 2010), whereas the link between heroes and power is less clear. The present investigation aims to elucidate the differences between lay conceptions of heroes and leaders.

Role models have been defined as influential people who are geographically close, from the same generation, and share similar experiences to the follower (Brownhill, 2010). Singer (1991) suggests that role models, who are closer to their follower, are observed in detail and mimicked. Heroes, on the other hand, tend to be
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distant figures that have endured tremendous suffering and sacrifice for purposes of great nobility. One might expect, therefore, that role models will be characterised in familiar ways (similar to family or friends), research has not yet explored this. The present research examined the distinguishing features associated with heroes and role models in order to reveal clues about their respective influence.

The complex concept of heroes is an important topic that research has not yet fully investigated (Becker & Eagly, 2004; Blau et al., 2009; Sullivan & Venter, 2005). There is little agreement about the characteristics of heroes and hence a clear operational definition is lacking. We seized this opportunity to examine systematically lay conceptions of heroes as a means to address some of the inconsistencies among previous definitions of the concept.

Revealing lay conceptions of heroes: Prototype analysis

A prototype is a collection of the most representative features of a concept (Cantor & Mischel, 1977). A phenomenon may not be perceived as having a single unifying attribute, but rather as being fuzzy and involving elements that have a “family resemblance” relation to each other (Rosch, 1978; Wittgenstein, 1953). Therefore, any given instance does not qualify as a clear-cut example or non-example of the phenomenon; rather, it qualifies as a more-or-less representative exemplar of the phenomenon. A prototype is activated (to a greater or lesser extent) when an individual encounters an exemplar that (more or less) resembles the concept. Armed with an overview of a hero prototype, researchers will be able to predict and understand how people respond to more or less prototypical heroes. The prototype approach provides distinct benefits when compared to previous investigations of heroes. This method balances a rigorous scientific approach with broad coverage of heroes, and thus, contributes to a common understanding between researchers and participants. The
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central and peripheral features of heroism are revealed, enabling the activation the concept of heroism and promoting the use of hero characteristics in research or intervention. The hero features may provide the foundation for measurement of the construct. We expect that greater understanding of the concept of heroes will promote integration in research of a wide range of other topics (e.g., leadership, role model, altruism).

Why are lay conceptions of heroes important?

A systematic analysis of lay conceptions, we believe, is the most useful approach to clarifying these definitional issues for a number of reasons.

First, it is necessary to clarify lay persons’ understanding of heroes for the productivity of future hero-related research. Instead of relying on participants’ intuitive or implicit definitions, researchers will be able to operationalise the concept of heroes in a consistent manner. Understanding how an individual conceptualises heroes will be important when attempting to understand more about the ways heroes influence others (e.g., self-regulation, buffer threats). If a hero is described as inspiring this gives us an insight into what that person gains from thinking about that hero.

Second, an understanding of lay conceptions of heroes is likely to have implications for measurement of the construct. If hero-related scales are created by researchers, it is vital that their tool corresponds with what comes to mind when a participant thinks of a hero.

Third, a greater understanding how individuals outside of the research community conceptualise and derive benefits from encounters with heroes may help researchers to develop improved psychoeducational and therapeutic techniques featuring heroes to improve psychological well-being (e.g., Malgady, Rogler, & Constantino, 1990).
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To our knowledge, three studies have previously adopted a free-response format to understanding conceptions to heroes, none without limitations. Gash and Conway (1997) asked 700 children to identify the characteristics of heroes in Ireland and the USA. Participants named their hero and described their hero’s characteristics. The 24 features derived from this pilot work were: active, beautiful, brilliant, brainy, brave, caring, confident, dresses well, famous, friendly, funny, good, gentle, good-looking, helpful, honest, important, kind, loving, loyal, rich, skilful, strong, and warrior. These characteristics that children associate with heroes provide a useful source of comparison with our findings.

Sullivan and Venter (2010) asked US college students to identify one hero and provide descriptive words to explain why. Participants were provided with an example: “Hero: George Washington, US President; Reasons: Honest, intelligent, great leader, brave” (p. 475). The characteristics that emerged were as follows: intelligent, loving, religious, caring, leader, talented, hardworking, motivated, role-model, and creative. Demand characteristics may be reflected in the results due to use of this example prior to free-response elicitation. It is interesting that religious emerged as a top indicator of heroism, given that many heroes are not affiliated with religion.

Allison and Goethals (2011) asked US college students to list the traits that they use to describe heroes. Then, another group of students sorted the traits and revealed eight trait clusters: smart, strong, selfless, caring, charismatic, resilient, reliable, and inspiring. Many of these traits are likely to be highly descriptive of many leaders, and offer limited distinction between heroes and leaders. Remarkably, some characteristics—sacrifice, courageous, protection—that have long been associated with heroes were not mentioned.
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These findings are interesting, but a number of important questions remain unanswered: Which of these hero features are most important? Do some or all of these characteristics need to be present in order to activate the concept of heroism? How do these features differentiate heroes from leaders and role models? Also, it seems sensible to assess lay conceptions of heroes in other countries and cultures.

The present studies will contribute to new knowledge about heroes by conducting six empirical studies assessing lay conceptions of heroes. Multiple methods (free-response, rating scales, reaction time, and memory tasks) were employed to identify the prototypical structure of heroes and compare these conceptualisations with other people of influence. Participants were drawn from a large pool of countries and age-groups. In short, we are the first researchers to propose that, despite the multifaceted nature of heroes, lay conceptions are best represented as a prototype.

**The Present Research**

In six studies we examined empirically the features of heroes, and attempted to clarify the distinct characteristics associated with different persons of influence. Study 1 attempted to elucidate lay conceptions of heroes using a prototype approach. Study 2 gathered centrality ratings of the descriptions, obtained in Study 1, and distinguished between central and peripheral hero features. Studies 3 and 4 examined the processing of central versus peripheral features using reaction time and free recall methods, respectively. Study 5 and 6 examined the extent to which participants applied converging and diverging characteristics to describe heroes, role models, and leaders. We expected that central hero features would pertain to the influence of heroes on the self, and also, describe their exceptional abilities, as suggested by historical and literary accounts.
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Study 1

Study 1 aimed to garner a wide range of prototypical features of heroes. Our prototype analysis involved classification of the features obtained from participants, where some aspects of the concept were more central than others. This approach to conceptualising heroes was chosen as a means to balance rigor (empirical and coherent) and coverage (richness and complexity) of the topic. Prototype methods have been used successfully to examine a variety of psychological phenomena, such as relationship quality (Hassebrauck, 1997) and modesty (Gregg, Hart, Sedikides, & Kumashiro, 2008). We contend that heroes may be viewed as a prototype: A broad category with more and less representative features. The present study aimed to identify the central and peripheral features of heroes. It was hypothesised that some characteristics would be communicated more frequently (central) than others (peripheral).

Method

Participants

We recruited 189 participants (116 females, 73 males; M_age = 29.98 years, SD_age = 11.88, age range: 18–73 years) via Facebook™ and snowball sampling via email (n = 164), and in the local city centre (n = 25). Participants originated from North America (n = 90), Europe (n = 89), Asia (n = 6), Australia (n = 2) or Africa (n = 2).¹

Materials and Procedure

Informed consent was obtained from all participants (Studies 1–6). Participants completed identical materials either on paper or online. Those who completed the questionnaire online did not receive any compensation for their participation. Those who filled out the questionnaire in the city center received a coffee as a token of our appreciation. Participants were asked: “What are the characteristics that you associate
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with heroes and their heroic actions?” Responses were not timed. Participants were then thanked and debriefed (Studies 1–6).

Results and Discussion

A verbatim list of exemplars \((n = 657)\) was compiled. Exemplars comprised either one item from a list, or one unit of meaning (Joffe & Yardley, 2004) from responses that contained multiple connected statements. Each participant generated on average 3.5 exemplars. Two independent coders sorted the original exemplars into superordinate thematic categories (hereafter referred to as ‘features of heroes’). This was achieved by (a) grouping identical exemplars, (b) grouping semantically related exemplars (“courage” and “courageous”), and (c) grouping meaning-related exemplars into categories (“honest” and “truthful”) in accordance with previous studies (e.g., Hepper, Ritchie, Sedikides & Wildschut, 2011). The first coder identified 23 features, and the second coder identified 20 features. Inter-rater reliability was good (over 70%) but in order to reach full agreement it was necessary to break 20/23 feature categories into several new ones. For example, bravery and courage were divided into distinct feature categories. Third and fourth coders independently matched one of the 26 features identified by the first and second coders (category: selfless) to each of the original exemplars (exemplar: someone who’s character and actions are selfless). There was 87% consistency between the third coder’s ratings and the original coding. There was 76% consistency between the fourth coder’s ratings and the original coding.

Prototype Analysis of Hero Features

The coders identified 26 categories of hero features (see Table 1) from the original 657 exemplars. The most frequently mentioned features were brave, fearless, selfless, self-sacrifice, honest, strong, and moral integrity. These characteristics are consistent with heroes in Ancient Greek mythology, particularly bravery and self-
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sacrifice. These results highlight the incompleteness of previous definitions of heroes, defined only in terms of their exceptional talents and ability to inspire others (e.g., Sullivan & Venter, 2005). The characteristics are mostly consistent with children’s descriptions of heroes collected by Gash and Conway (1997): active, brilliant, brainy, caring, brave, helpful, honest, strong, skilful, friendly, loyal, kind, loving, important. However, unlike children, the adults in our study rarely described heroes as beautiful, dresses well, famous, rich, warrior, gentle or funny. According to this list, children seem to assume some form of bias of “beautiful people are good” (or in this case, heroic). This bias may be a result of fairy tales, cartoons, or movies where good (and perhaps to some degree heroic) persons are often displayed as beautiful (Eco, 2004; Klein & Shiffman, 2006).

Unlike previous investigations of lay conceptions (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Sullivan & Venter, 2010), the 26 characteristics listed here provide an empirical account of the full spectrum of prototypical features of heroes. There was no single feature (i.e. global characteristic) that was listed by every participant. The characteristics include themes that relate to heroes exceptional ability (e.g., talented), to their core values (e.g., moral integrity), and to their positive influence on people (e.g., inspiration). Participants completing the questionnaire online or via paper-and-pencil did not differ significantly with regard to the number of exemplars described ($t(187) < 1$).

**Linguistic Analysis of Hero Features**

All participant responses were subjected to analysis using the textual analysis software, Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count Version 2007 (LIWC; Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001). LIWC compares each word from each participant’s response against an internal dictionary that contains English words, and then, reports a proportion of words that represent a psychological theme. For example, one participant wrote “A
hero is someone whose actions are selfless and inspiring” and LIWC flagged the word inspiring as belonging to the positive emotion theme. The analysis revealed that, on average, participants’ descriptions of heroes consisted of 29% affective-process related words (e.g., happy), 28% positive emotion words (e.g., love), 15% cognitive processes (e.g., thought) and 10% social processes (e.g., talk). This analysis reinforces the idea that heroes are considered in overwhelmingly positive ways, which is consistent with ideas from Staats, Hupp, and Hagley (2008). This analytic tool is informative as a descriptive tool and provides a useful triangulation with the other methods.

Overall, lay conceptions present heroes as multi-faced (consistent with the ideas of Ko, 2007). Some characteristics were communicated more frequently than others, most likely indicating the centrality of these characteristics to the concept of heroes. The most commonly mentioned characteristics of heroes were brave, fearless, selfless, self-sacrifice, honest, strong, and moral integrity, consistent with early classical definitions of heroism.

Study 2

The aim of Study 2 was to ask an independent sample to rate the centrality of each of the hero features identified in the previous study. This method has been used by prototype researchers to define exemplar representativeness (Hassebrauck, 1997). It was hypothesised that some characteristics would be consistently rated higher (central) than other characteristics (peripheral).

Method

Participants

Participants (N = 365) were recruited in the city centre, on campus, and via a psychological research website (215 female, 150 males; $M_{\text{age}}$ 32.64 years, $SD_{\text{age}}$ = 12.48, age range: 18 to 67 years).
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Materials and Procedure

People recruited on campus or in the community were offered chocolate for taking part in the study. Participants recruited online were not compensated. Participants rated how closely each of the 26 characteristics related to their personal view of the characteristics of heroes. After each characteristic, some common exemplars were provided in brackets: “Brave (valour, feels fear but acts anyway)”, and “Honest (trustworthy, integrity)”. All ratings were indicated on a Likert scale that ranged from 1 (not at all related) to 8 (extremely related).³

Results and Discussion

The ratings (see Table 1) for characteristics range from 4.82 (personable) to 7.06 (brave). The median score was 6.04. Following previous prototype research (Gregg et al., 2008; Hassebrauck, 1997; Kearns & Fincham, 2004) we used a median split based on the ratings and labelled the highest 13 features as central (brave, moral integrity, courageous, protect, conviction, honest, altruistic, self-sacrifice, selfless, determined, saves, inspiration, and helpful) and the lowest 13 features as peripheral (proactive, strong, leader, compassionate, risk-taker, exceptional, humble, fearless, caring, powerful, intelligent, talented, and personable). We used this method to facilitate the use of experimental design in later studies (although essentially we believe that the prototypicality of hero features exists on a continuum).

Ratings for central and peripheral features in Study 2. Significant sex differences on ratings for three hero features were identified. Women (M = 5.15, SD = 2.12) rated the characteristic fearless lower than men (M = 5.64, SD = 2.29), t(362) = 2.13, p = .03, d = 0.22. Men (M = 6.30, SD = 1.74) rated the characteristics saves higher than women (M = 5.90, SD = 1.89), t(362) = 2.13, p = .034, d = 0.22. Men (M = 5.41,
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SD = 2.14) rated the characteristic powerful higher than women (M = 4.85, SD = 1.99), 
t(353) = 2.53, p = .01, d = 0.27.

On average, participants who completed the rated the hero features on paper (M = 6.19, SD = 0.57) rated all of the hero characteristics significantly higher than those who completed online (M = 5.77. SD = 0.73), t(50) = 2.34, p = .02, d = 1.37.
Specifically, participants who completed the scale on paper gave higher ratings than people who completed the scale online for the following characteristics: Strong, conviction, leader, fearless, proactive, determined, intelligent, risk, and powerful.

Elicitation of central and peripheral features in Study 1. Using this distinction, we examined the frequency of central and peripheral features reported by participants in Study 1. Participants from Study 1 (N = 189) reported more central features (M = 1.96, SD = 1.29) than peripheral features (M = 1.24, SD = 1.26).
There were no significant differences between online (M = 3.11, SD = 1.81) and pen-and-paper participants (M = 3.08, SD = 1.41) with regard to the number of characteristics described, t(187) < 1, p = .94. No significant differences were found between online (M = 1.86, SD = 1.28) and pen-and-paper participants (M = 2.24, SD = 1.01) for the number of central characteristics written, t(187) = 1.42, p = .16, d = 0.33.
There were no significant differences between online (M = 1.27, SD = 1.40) and pen-and-paper (M = 0.76, SD = .88) participants with regards to the number of peripheral words given, t(187) = -1.78, p = .08, d = 0.44.

There were significant differences for men (M = 1.67, SD = 1.15) and women (M = 2.12, SD = 1.31) regarding the number of central words described, t(187) = -2.47, p = .01, d = 0.37. There were significant differences for women (M = 1.41, SD = 1.53) and men (M = .98, SD = 1.09), t(187) = -2.21, p = 0.03, d = 0.32.
A two-way mixed ANOVA was conducted to test for differences between American and European participants (continent) regarding the number of central and peripheral features (prototypicality) reported. There was no significant interaction between prototypicality and continent (USA vs. Europe), $F(1, 177)$, 1.47, $p = .23$.

The results from Study 1 and 2 consistently reveal certain features as more central (brave, moral integrity, self-sacrifice, protect, honest, courageous) than others. These central features make heroes easily identifiable and are most likely to activate a person’s schema of a hero. It is important, however, not to dismiss the peripheral features of heroes as these are likely to capture a more complete spectrum of lay conceptualisations of heroes. Peripheral features such as humble and compassionate provide insight into the character and motivations of prototypical heroes. A hero who displays bravery without opportunity for recognition is quite different from a person who exhibits bravery that s/he knows will result in reward for the self. Interestingly, both the central and peripheral features of heroes consist of features that refer to a hero’s exceptional abilities (Campbell, 1949), influence on others (Caughey, 1984; Sullivan & Venter, 2005), and core values (e.g., to do the right thing).

Study 3

Study 3 aimed to determine whether the speed of classification of hero features is influenced by feature centrality. When a person’s prototype for a concept is activated, one should be quicker to recognise and classify features that are central to that prototype (Fehr, Russell, & Ward, 1982). Participants should be quicker to verify central (versus peripheral) characteristics that are related to heroes. The objective of Study 3, then, was to examine whether characteristics rated explicitly as central (Study 2) are also automatically verified more often and more quickly than characteristics rated as
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peripheral. We hypothesised that participants will more quickly verify central than peripheral features.

Method

Participants

Thirty-three undergraduate students\(^2\) participated in return for course credit (20 females, 14 males; \(M_{\text{age}} = 23.13\) years, \(SD_{\text{age}} = 9.57\); age range: 18 to 46 years).

Materials and Procedure

The study features a within-subjects design. The independent variable was the type of feature (central, peripheral, or decoy words). The dependent variable was the reaction time (RT) of each response.

Participants received instructions and followed the on-screen instructions to continue to the RT trials. Participants were asked to classify a series of words on a computer screen as quickly and as accurately as possible. Fifty-two words were presented on the computer screen in random order, including 26 features of heroes identified in Study 1 and 26 decoy words (e.g., juicy, freezing cold). The decoy stimuli were closely matched in number of letters and variation of word types (nouns, adjectives). Participants were instructed to click ‘M’ on the keyboard to indicate 'YES' this is a hero characteristic, or click ‘Z’ to indicate 'NO’ this is not a hero characteristic for all trials.

Results and Discussion

First, the data were cleaned by removing outliers that were found to be greater than 3 standard deviations above the mean (Ferguson & Bargh, 2004) for central, peripheral, and decoy stimuli. A total of 50 data points were removed from the original 1716 (3%), resulting in a total of 1666 usable data points for analysis. The data were no longer skewed.
Reaction Time. A mixed ANOVA was conducted to test if different words had an influence on the RT of participants and to test if there were variances in RT between different participants. The results show a main effect for differences in the way that participants react to central features, peripheral features, and decoy stimuli, $F(2, 1663) = 6.15, p < .05$. Participants identified central features more quickly than they did peripheral ones, $t(1663) = -63.41, p < .05, d = -3.11$. The mean RT for central features was 1038 milliseconds (ms) ($SD = 443$), whereas the mean RT for peripheral features was 1102 ms ($SD = 514$). The mean RT for decoy words was 1009 ms ($SD = 393$). Participants were slower to identify peripheral features than decoys, $t(1663) = 92.57, p < .001, d = 4.54$.

Error Rates. The results indicate that participants responded most accurately for central features (6.1% incorrect). Participants responded least accurately for peripheral features (15.2% incorrect). The error rate for decoy stimuli was 7.1%. A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to compare the number of incorrect responses for central features ($M = .79, SD = .98$), peripheral features ($M = 1.91, SD = 1.44$) and decoy words ($M = 1.76, SD = 3.43$). There was a significant effect for type of stimulus, Wilks’ Lambda = .55, $F = (2, 32) = 12.92, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .45$. Pairwise comparison reveals a significant difference between the number of errors for central and peripheral features; $t(33) = -4.85, p < .001, d = -0.90$. The difference between the error rates for central features and decoy words was not significant; $t(33) = -1.56, p = .13, d = -0.38$.

In sum, participants classified central features on a reaction time task more quickly and accurately than peripheral features.
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Study 4

Prototype theory (Cantor & Mischel, 1977) suggests that central exemplar categories of a construct are more readily encoded, and thus more successfully recalled, than peripheral ones. Therefore, participants should more accurately recall central characteristics (e.g., brave) than peripheral characteristics (e.g., humble). Building on the work of Roediger and McDermott (1995), a parallel aim of the present study was to investigate whether central features would be falsely remembered more often than peripheral words. The Roediger-McDermott paradigm predicts that words that are highly related to a concept (e.g., most prototypical) may be recalled by participants during a free-recall study even when those words are not presented during the task—known as a false-memory effect. In Study 4 we tested both correct recall and false memory effects by presenting a selection of central and peripheral words during a free-recall task.

Method

Participants

Undergraduate students 3 (N = 25) were recruited and received a lollipop in return (18 females, 7 males; \( M_{\text{age}} = 19.83 \) years, \( SD_{\text{age}} = 4.44 \); age range: 17 to 42 years).

Materials and Procedure

Students were asked to focus on a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation at the front of the laboratory. The instructions on the slides appeared as follows:

“You are about to see some statements about possible features of heroes. Please read each one as it appears on the screen. Please focus on the screen in front of you. You will be asked questions about heroes later on in the study. The statements begin on the next page . . . Heroes are…..”
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To facilitate the examination of both correct memory recall and false remembering, a selection of central and peripheral words were randomly selected (using an online web selection tool) as experimental stimuli. Participants viewed six peripheral features: *strong, compassionate, exceptional, fearless, powerful,* and *personable,* and six central features: *courageous, conviction, altruistic, selfless, saves,* and *helpful* appear on the screen for four seconds (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). Next, they completed a five-minute distractor task (neutral word-search). Participants were asked to recall (without prompts) as many words as possible in three minutes. It was predicted that central features of heroes would be more frequently (correctly) recalled than peripheral words. In addition, it was expected that central features that were *not* presented during the presentation would be more frequently (falsely) recalled than peripheral features due to the robust association with these words to the concept of ‘hero’.

**Results and Discussion**

**Correct Recall.** A chi-squared test indicated a significant association between each of the features and recall, $\chi^2(25, n = 676), p < .001$, Cramer’s $V = .66$. The most frequently correctly recalled features were *strong* (85%), *save* (81%), and *altruistic* (70%). The least frequently recalled features were *conviction* (27%), *powerful* (35%), and *personable* (38%). Other characteristics were recalled as follows: *compassionate* (65%), *courageous* (58%), *exceptional* (42%), *fearless* (50%), *selfless* (46%), and *helpful* (46%). A total of 84 peripheral features and 105 central features were correctly recalled by participants. These results are generally consistent with the hypothesis that central features would be correctly recalled more often than peripheral features.

**False Memory Effect.** The feature *brave* was recalled 73% of the time by participants despite the feature *not* appearing in the presentation (incorrect recall). The feature *protection* was incorrectly recalled by 4% of participants. The only peripheral
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feature that was incorrectly recalled by 8% of participants was caring. These results are consistent with the hypothesis that central features would be incorrectly remembered (false memory) than peripheral features. The mean percentage recall for types of features (and whether presented or not) are listed: central features (31%), peripheral features (25%), presented features (54%), not-presented features (6%), central presented features (55%), central not-presented features (11%), peripheral presented features (53%), and peripheral not-presented features (1.14%).

These results provide support to the view that prototypicality is reflected in information-processing features of heroes, specifically in the memory system. Participants correctly recalled more central features than peripheral features. Further, participants falsely remembered more central (versus peripheral) words when those words were not presented during the study. This suggests that participants may be engaging in a creative process of remembering critical non-presented features (Roediger & McDermott, 1995).

In Studies 3 and 4, we demonstrated that central and peripheral characteristics of heroes are processed differently during spontaneous classification and in memory.

Study 5

We noticed that some of the words that were used to characterise heroes (e.g. inspiring or talented) may sometimes be used to describe other persons of influence, particularly role models and leaders. Research has not investigated if there is, and how much, shared variance among each type of influential figures. Study 5 is the first, to our knowledge, that examines the characteristics that individuals associate with heroes, and decipher which features set them apart from role models and leaders. Participants were invited to freely select a hero, role model, or leader of their own choosing (whom they rated across 26 characteristics).
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Method

Participants

Postgraduate students 3 (N = 212) were recruited for this study (110 female, 102 males).4

Materials and Procedures

Participants completed an online questionnaire which required them to write down the name of either a leader (n = 55), a role model (n = 93), or a heroic individual (n = 64). Participants then rated the person of influence along 26 characteristics outlined in Studies 1–4. All ratings were indicated on a Likert scale that ranged from 1 (not at all related) to 8 (extremely related).

Results

The results revealed a multivariate effect for the relation between the type of influential person and the rated characteristics, in general, Wilk’s Lambda $F(52, 368) = 2.48, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .26$. Univariate tests (see Table 2) indicated that there were significant relationships between type of individual and ratings for bravery, selflessness, self-sacrifice, leadership, personable, fearless, saving others, risk-taking, courage, powerfulness, and helpful.

Also, the results revealed a multivariate effect for the relationship between the type of influential person and feature prototypicality (i.e., central or peripheral feature categorised in Study 2); Wilk’s Lambda $F(4, 416) = 4.18, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. Univariate tests revealed the characteristics that participants most (vs. least) strongly associated with each of the different types of influential persons. Heroes ($M = 6.72, SD = 1.18$) were rated higher for central characteristics than leaders ($M = 6.26, SD = 1.33$), $t(117) = 2.01, p = .05, d = 0.37$, and role models ($M = 5.47, SD = 1.26$); $t(155) = 3.15, p$
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<.01, \( d = 1.02 \). That is, heroes were rated as more courageous than role models and higher on self-sacrifice and saving others than leaders or role models.

On peripheral characteristics, participants rated heroes \((M = 6.19, SD = 1.24)\) and role models \((M = 5.93, SD = 1.22)\) approximately equally, \(t(155) = 1.27, p = .21, d = 0.21\). Participants rated leaders \((M = 6.20, SD = 1.15)\) and heroes approximately equally on the peripheral characteristics \((M = 6.19, SD = 1.24), t < 1\).

**Discussion**

The results indicated a statistically significant multivariate effect for the relationship between type of influential person and their rated characteristics. Heroes, role models, and leaders were not rated equally across the 26 characteristics. Heroes received the highest ratings on central characteristics. Heroes were rated as more courageous than role models, and heroes were rated higher on self-sacrificing and saving others than leaders or role models. Role models were rated as most personable. Leaders were rated as more powerful. These differentiating qualities underscore the importance of conducting further research on heroes rather than assuming they share the same characteristics as role models or leaders. Study 5 probes deeper than earlier research and is particularly interesting because each participant independently brought to mind an influential person prior to rating. Most experimentation does not allow for participant-selected stimuli, yet in this study, despite choosing this open-choice method, reliable patterns are evident in the data. In contrast, Study 6 assesses whether participants rate experimenter-selected images of popular heroes, leaders, and role models differently across the 26 hero characteristics.

**Study 6**

Study 6 examined the characteristics that people associate with heroes, and elucidate the features that set them apart from role models and leaders. This study
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attempted to replicate Study 5 using a different methodological approach. Participants rated controlled stimuli (images of influential people selected by the experimenters), in contrast to the participant-selected stimuli in Study 5. By representing information with brightly coloured, high-contrast images (high stimulus salience; Goldstein, 2008) we aimed to attract the participants’ attention to the visual cues of heroes, leaders, or role models. Further, by using human faces of popular influential people we aimed to activate the perceiver’s schema of heroes, leaders, or role models. It was anticipated that persons of influence would not be rated equally across the 26 hero characteristics (generated in Studies 1–4). We expected that heroes would be rated higher on the central hero features—brave, moral integrity, courageous, protect, conviction, honest, altruistic, self-sacrifice, selfless, determined, saves, inspiration, and helpful—than leaders or role models.

Method

Participants

Postgraduate students 3 (N = 307) were recruited for this study (163 female, 144 males).

Materials and Procedures

The design of the present study was between-subjects. Participants responded to an online survey which stated the following:

“Below there is a collage of images of [leaders/heroes/role models] who were recently named in a survey of popular [leaders/heroes/role models]. Keeping these images of popular [leaders/heroes/role models] in mind, please continue to the next stage of the survey where you will find 26 words or phrases. How closely do each of these words or phrases describe [leaders/heroes/role models]?”
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The influential people chosen for the survey were based on the most popular heroes, leaders and role models named in Study 5. In the leader condition \((n = 95)\), the collage contained images of President Barrack Obama (USA), Nelson Mandela (former president of South Africa), President Mary MacAleese (Ireland), and Michael O’Leary (CEO of Ryanair Ltd.). In the role model \((n = 104)\) condition, the images displayed Paul O’Connell (rugby player), symbolic images of parents and grandparents (man and woman with slogan “The Parents”), and Katie Taylor (boxing world- and Olympic-champion). In the hero \((n = 108)\) condition, the images depicted rescue workers from the attack on September 11th 2001 in the USA, Superman (superhero), Mahatma Gandhi (activist), and Mother Teresa (humanitarian). Participants then rated the person of influence along 26 features outlined in Studies 1–4. Participants used a Likert scale that ranged from 1 (not at all related) to 8 (extremely related).

**Results**

A multivariate General Linear Model revealed an association between the type of influential person and the rated characteristics, Wilk’s Lambda \(F(52, 558) = 6.21, p < .001\), partial \(\eta^2 = .37\). Univariate tests (see Table 3) indicated that there were significant relationships between type of individual and ratings for the following central features (in descending order based on Univariate F test results): bravery, moral integrity, self-sacrifice, determined, saves, altruistic, selfless, courage, and helpful. Univariate tests indicated that there were significant relationships between type of individual and ratings for the following peripheral features: talented, strong, leadership, personable, fearless, proactive intelligent, compassionate, risk-taking, caring, and powerful.

A multivariate General Linear Model revealed an association between the type of influential person and prototypicality of characteristic (central vs. peripheral); Wilk’s Lambda \(F(4, 606) = 16.97 , p < .001\), partial \(\eta^2 = .10\). Univariate tests revealed
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significant relationships between types of influential person and ratings for central and peripheral characteristics.

Heroes ($M = 6.52, SD = 0.89$) were given higher ratings on central characteristics than role models ($M = 6.13, SD = 0.81$); $t(201) = 3.81, p < .001, d = 0.46$. Heroes ($M = 6.52, SD = 0.89$) were rated higher on central characteristics than leaders ($M = 6.00, SD = 1.08$); $t(210) = 3.40, p < .001, d = 0.52$.

Leaders ($M = 5.77, SD = 1.00$) were rated higher across peripheral characteristics than heroes ($M = 5.36, SD = 1.16$); $t(201) = -2.70, p < .01, d = 0.36$. Role models ($M = 5.53, SD = 0.94$) were rated higher across peripheral characteristics than heroes ($M = 5.36, SD = 1.16$), $t(210) = -1.19, p = .24, d = 0.16$.

**Discussion**

Each type of influential person and their rated characteristics differed systematically: Heroes, role models, and leaders were not rated equally across the 26 characteristics. Heroes were rated the highest on central characteristics when compared to other persons of influence, particularly, on the following characteristics: brave, moral integrity, saves, willing to sacrifice, altruistic, compassionate, selfless, courageous, and protecting. Leaders were rated as the most powerful, strong, fearless, demonstrating conviction, displaying leadership, proactive, determined, intelligent, inspiring, and willing to risk. Role models were rated as more talented, honest, personable, exceptional, and humble than heroes or leaders.

In sum, these innovative findings show that the characteristics of popular heroes, leaders, and role models are not viewed as interchangeable. Asking people to rate images of influential people has helped to further elucidate the features that distinguish heroes, leaders, and role models. Once again heroes were more likely to be rated in accordance with the central hero features identified in studies 1–4.
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General Discussion

In Greek mythology, heroes were the skilful warriors who courageously fought for their community. In Homer’s *Iliad*, Hector displayed bravery, strength, integrity, and willingness to sacrifice himself throughout the Trojan War. In Victorian literature, heroes succumb to both moments of greatness and moral failing (Sifaki, 2009). Conceptions of heroes have changed, leading to confusion about modern interpretations of the concept (Gill, 1996).

Contemporary definitions of heroism range from a person who persists in the face of failure (Ko, 2007) to a person who takes risks in the service of others (Becker & Eagly, 2004) a person who resists external pressures of conformity (Zimbardo, 2007). There is general consensus among scholars that the topic of heroism has been devoid of empirical support for too long and requires modernisation as a psychological concept (Blau et al., 2009; Becker & Eagly, 2004; Sullivan & Venter, 2005).

The present investigation has contributed to such a resolution by examining lay conceptions of heroes and developing a foundation of the prototypical nature of this complex concept. In Study 1 we prompted participants for their conceptions of heroes and heroic behaviour in an attempt to identify a representative list of hero characteristics. In Study 2 we obtained ratings of these features to identify a core set of central features of heroes. In Studies 3 and 4 we examined information-processing of central versus peripheral features in terms of classification speed and memory. In Studies 5 and 6 we tested the extent to which individuals used the same characteristics to describe heroes, role models, and leaders. Overall, the findings suggest that laypersons view heroes in a way that is more consistent with Homer’s original ideas than with later definitions that focus only on the exceptional, sometimes supernatural,
abilities of heroes. Notably, heroes, leaders, and role models should not be assumed to be interchangeable labels.

**Do Heroes have a Prototypical Structure?**

There is no single defining feature that distinguishes heroes and heroic behaviour, rather, within this social category there are not rigid boundaries but fuzzy sets of features organised around prototypical category members (Fiske & Taylor, 2008). Studies 1–4 consistently supported the idea that heroes were conceptualised in this way.

**What are Lay Conceptions of Heroes?**

Our findings show that lay views of heroes appear to be multi-faceted, consistent with Ko’s (2007) view of heroes. In total, 26 characteristics of heroes were identified, including brave, courageous, moral integrity, conviction, and self-sacrifice as the most central features of heroes. Some of these features, namely, honesty, courage, empathy, and self-sacrifice were acknowledged by Staats and colleagues (2008). Many characteristics are consistent with children’s descriptions of heroes: active, brilliant, brainy, caring, brave, helpful, honest, strong, skilful, friendly, loyal, kind, loving, and important (Gash and Conway, 1997). These results converge with Blau and colleagues’ (2009) assertion that one of the key defining features of heroes is their willingness to sacrifice something important in the pursuit of a great cause. Some overlap (i.e., strong, selfless, and inspiring) between our 26 characteristics and 1) the traits identified by Allison and Goethals (2011) and 2) the characteristics outlined by Sullivan and Venter (2010) can be identified. However, many of the characteristics, identified as central to the prototype of heroism across six studies, do not appear on either of those previous lists. Bravery, moral integrity, courageous, protection, conviction, honest, altruistic, self-sacrifice, saves, determined, and helpful are not identified by those researchers.
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As expected, many of the identified characteristics of heroes reflect some core human needs (e.g., Heine et al., 2006). Heroes who protect and lead may help people to make sense of uncertainty in a similar way to myths and metaphors (e.g., Van den Bos, 2009). Heroes who model moral integrity, conviction, and honesty may help people to employ self-regulation strategies that promote affiliation with a group. This is the first step in understanding more about the influence of heroes, enabling future research to systematically reveal the needs that they fulfil for people.

In the studies presented here, lay conceptions encompass a wide range of heroes, from extraordinary individuals to ordinary ones. Hero characteristics may be grouped according to historical themes (Caughey, 1984; Campbell, 1949). Some features relate to a hero’s exceptional ability (e.g., talented, intelligent). Other characteristics refer to the hero’s core values (e.g., moral integrity, honesty). Another theme among the characteristics refers to the ways that a hero exerts a positive influence on other people (e.g., inspiration, protection). Taken together, these themes and characteristics suggest a modern definition of heroism (as requested by Becker & Eagly, 2004; Sullivan & Venter, 2005; Blau et al., 2009). These everyday conceptions of heroism help to inform theory and research about heroes. Further, we hope that an awareness of these heroic characteristics will promote correct usage of the term in everyday discourse, media communications, and in scientific research.

Studies 5 and 6 show that role models, leaders, and heroes were not rated equally across the 26 characteristics (Studies 1–4). Heroes were rated higher on self-sacrificing and saving others than role models or leaders. Furthermore, heroes were rated as more courageous than role models. These results provide empirical evidence that heroes, role models, and leaders cannot be assumed to share the same
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characteristics. Future researchers should continue to uncover the diverse and overlapping ways that persons of influence affect people.

Implications

These novel findings may inform definitional issues, measurement, theory, and future research on the topic of heroes. It is now possible to describe lay conceptions of heroes and heroic behaviour in a way that is scientific and encompasses the breadth of everyday perceptions. The Oxford dictionary (2011) defines heroes as “…a person, typically a man, who is admired for their courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities”. This definition contains the prototypical feature of courage and the reference to outstanding achievements may be synonymous with the prototypical feature of talented. This definition, aside from discriminating against female heroes, fails to encompass a substantial number of prototypical characteristics of heroes that were identified by the present research. These findings underscore the fact that a modern dictionary definition of heroes fails to capture the lay concept of heroes. Further, the findings provide an empirically supported psychological description of heroism than was absent in the dictionary definition.

Lay conceptions of heroes are now clearer to researchers and practitioners. This is likely to help psychologists to communicate more effectively to their students, research participants, and clients. In clinical settings, heroes have been a useful resource in metaphoric identity mapping (Ylvisaker, McPherson, Kayes, & Pellett, 2008). During this process, individuals map a sense of personal identity, drawing inspiration from the characteristics that the client associated with their hero (e.g., goals, values). The findings from the present research could assist in facilitating the selection of personal heroes. The heroic features could help to identify and clarify their hero’s distinguishing characteristics.
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Hero modelling has been used to foster ethnic identity, enhance the self-concept, and promote adaptive coping behaviour for teenagers at risk of mental-health disorders (Malgady et al., 1990). Heroes have been used to promote altruistic attitudes among young people (Gash & Conway, 1997). The prototypical features of heroes may be useful for teaching and promoting these constructive behaviours. Encouraging these positive attributes through social discourse may result in positive change at an individual, group, and societal level.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Thus far, we have developed a general prototype of the features of heroes based on open-ended responses from people who represented different nationalities and age groups. Typically participants placed greater emphasis on specific features (one participant wrote, “most of all bravery”), however, the core features of heroes described in our studies were consistently communicated by participants. Despite the novelty and clear patterns that emerged from our data, there are nonetheless some limitations with our approach. Due to the small numbers of participants in our sample from Africa, Australia, and Asia it was not possible to make generalizations across countries or continents. It would be fascinating to explore the differences between cultural representations of heroes. For example, it has been suggested that in Japanese culture individuals tend to cherish the suffering of their heroes (Benedict, 1946); whereas, in Western Cultures, there is a tendency to savor heroic efforts that result in a happy outcome (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999).

While the current list of features may not be exhaustive, we have captured the most important characteristics (bravery, self-sacrifice, moral integrity, conviction)—those which are central to recognising and differentiating heroes. These characteristics are useful for descriptive purposes and will contribute to the productivity of hero related
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research. We suggest that a viable future for hero research is the exploration of the
developmental, social, and psychosocial functions that heroic individuals provide.
When core needs of people (e.g., self-esteem, certainty, affiliation) are in question, it is
plausible to suggest that heroes may serve as a resource for coping with psychological
threats.

Conclusions

Heroism is an important concept that exists across cultures and age groups. This
manuscript lays the groundwork, by providing a set of relevant features, for how
researchers might explore and measure the concept of heroes. We believe that heroes
may serve as an important resource for people who are struggling with physical,
psychological, or social challenges. Further clarification about how and when heroes
provide positive benefits to people is likely to have implications for theory and practice.
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Footnotes

1 Asian participants \((n = 6)\), reported more central features \((M = 1.00, SD = 0.89)\) than peripheral features \((M = 0.83, SD = 0.75)\). African participants \((n = 2)\) described more central features \((M = 1.50, SD = 2.12)\) than peripheral characteristics \((M = 1.00, SD = 1.41)\). Australian participants \((n = 2)\) reported more central features \((M = 3.00, SD = 0.00)\) than peripheral features \((M = 1.50, SD = 0.71)\).

2 All students were recruited at the University of Limerick campus, Ireland.

3 Readability statistics were generated for the features of heroes and associated exemplars. The results are as follows: Flesch Reading Ease = 56.4\%, Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level 9.6.

4 Ages were not collected in this sample.
Table 1

*Features of Heroes, Sample Exemplars, Ratings in Study 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Exemplars</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Central</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brave</td>
<td>Bravery, valor</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>7.06</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Integrity</td>
<td>Fair, moral</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>6.94</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courageous</td>
<td>Courage, gall</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protect</td>
<td>Protects, defends weak</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>6.68</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conviction</td>
<td>Dedication, loyal to cause</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>6.48</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honest</td>
<td>Truthful, honor</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>6.44</td>
<td>1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruistic</td>
<td>Acts for greater good</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>6.44</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-sacrifice</td>
<td>Sacrifices</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>6.43</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selfless</td>
<td>Puts aside self-interest</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determined</td>
<td>Focused, hardworking</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>6.16</td>
<td>1.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saves</td>
<td>Life-saver, rescue</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>6.07</td>
<td>1.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspiration</td>
<td>Admired by others, inspiring</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>6.06</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td>Helping others, help</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>6.05</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Peripheral</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactive</td>
<td>Energy, initiative</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>5.98</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Mental / physical strength</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>1.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>Leader, charismatic</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>5.91</td>
<td>1.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassionate</td>
<td>Compassion, empathy</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>5.83</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk-taker</td>
<td>Willing to risk</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>5.72</td>
<td>1.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exceptional</td>
<td>Ability, wisdom, unique</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>5.57</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humble</td>
<td>Not arrogant, modest</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>1.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fearless</td>
<td>Feels fear but acts anyway</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>5.35</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>Counselor, care</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerful</td>
<td>Power, powerful</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>2.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent</td>
<td>Quick-minded, clever</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talented</td>
<td>Best, great, above and beyond</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personable</td>
<td>Nice, amicable, respectful</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>2.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Features are listed in order of Study 2 centrality ratings, using a scale from 1 (*not at all related to heroes*) to 8 (*extremely related to heroes*). Features rated above the median were classified as central, and those below the median as peripheral.
### Table 2: Ratings for Heroes, Leaders, and Role Models across the 26 Hero Features (Study 5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Hero M (SD)</th>
<th>Leader M (SD)</th>
<th>Role Model M (SD)</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>η²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brave</td>
<td>6.91b (1.68)</td>
<td>6.58c (1.67)</td>
<td>5.44bc (2.29)</td>
<td>12.03</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Integrity</td>
<td>6.77 (1.93)</td>
<td>6.35 (2.02)</td>
<td>6.83 (1.50)</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courageous</td>
<td>7.22b (1.06)</td>
<td>6.65c (1.54)</td>
<td>5.71bc (2.16)</td>
<td>15.14</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protect</td>
<td>6.34 (2.17)</td>
<td>5.98 (1.96)</td>
<td>5.69 (2.12)</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conviction</td>
<td>7.23 (1.26)</td>
<td>7.05 (1.58)</td>
<td>7.02 (1.30)</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honest</td>
<td>6.75 (1.95)</td>
<td>6.53 (1.75)</td>
<td>6.81 (1.53)</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruistic</td>
<td>6.59 (2.05)</td>
<td>6.36 (1.83)</td>
<td>5.99 (1.94)</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-sacrifice</td>
<td>6.81ab (1.80)</td>
<td>5.98a (2.08)</td>
<td>5.95b (2.19)</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Selfless</td>
<td>6.41b (2.05)</td>
<td>5.73 (2.10)</td>
<td>5.44b (2.18)</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determined</td>
<td>7.13 (1.50)</td>
<td>7.22 (1.27)</td>
<td>7.02 (1.40)</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saves</td>
<td>5.92ab (2.51)</td>
<td>4.67a (2.36)</td>
<td>4.46b (2.51)</td>
<td>7.12</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.64</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inspiration</td>
<td>7.06 (1.52)</td>
<td>6.84 (1.58)</td>
<td>6.72 (1.58)</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td>6.25a (2.03)</td>
<td>5.44bc (2.04)</td>
<td>6.17c (1.94)</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peripheral</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactive</td>
<td>6.48 (1.78)</td>
<td>6.78c (1.32)</td>
<td>6.11c (1.99)</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>6.95 (1.55)</td>
<td>6.98 (1.31)</td>
<td>6.49 (1.76)</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>6.48 (1.94)</td>
<td>7.09c (1.34)</td>
<td>6.34c (1.79)</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassionate</td>
<td>5.89 (2.39)</td>
<td>6.13 (1.78)</td>
<td>6.27 (1.92)</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk-taker</td>
<td>6.19b (2.02)</td>
<td>6.18c (1.78)</td>
<td>4.77bc (2.37)</td>
<td>11.52</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exceptional</td>
<td>6.45 (1.66)</td>
<td>6.29 (1.66)</td>
<td>6.68 (1.85)</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humble</td>
<td>6.39a (1.94)</td>
<td>5.56a (2.28)</td>
<td>5.86 (2.21)</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fearless</td>
<td>6.50b (1.80)</td>
<td>5.85c (1.60)</td>
<td>5.11bc (2.17)</td>
<td>10.08</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>5.31 (2.46)</td>
<td>4.93 (2.14)</td>
<td>5.43 (2.38)</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>.44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Powerful</td>
<td>5.31 (2.57)</td>
<td>6.09c (1.72)</td>
<td>4.89c (1.99)</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent</td>
<td>6.38 (1.87)</td>
<td>6.73 (1.67)</td>
<td>6.20 (1.69)</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talented</td>
<td>6.25 (1.94)</td>
<td>6.22 (1.63)</td>
<td>6.35 (1.69)</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personable</td>
<td>5.84b (2.33)</td>
<td>5.82b (2.10)</td>
<td>6.63ac (1.91)</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Features are listed in order of Study 2 centrality ratings, using a scale from 1 (not at all related to heroes) to 8 (extremely related to heroes). a Significant differences between hero and leader ratings. b Significant differences between hero and role model ratings. c Significant differences between leader and role model ratings.
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Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Hero</th>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Role Model</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>ηp²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brave</td>
<td>6.98^ab (1.37)</td>
<td>5.79^a (1.76)</td>
<td>6.07^b (1.66)</td>
<td>15.73</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Integrity</td>
<td>6.81^a (1.46)</td>
<td>6.21^ac (1.83)</td>
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<td>6.82</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courageous</td>
<td>6.61^ab (1.33)</td>
<td>5.94^c (1.55)</td>
<td>5.79^b (1.46)</td>
<td>9.74</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.07</td>
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<td>Protect</td>
<td>6.48^ab (1.51)</td>
<td>5.72^a (1.77)</td>
<td>5.81^b (1.75)</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
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<td>Conviction</td>
<td>6.60^b (1.41)</td>
<td>6.96^a (1.13)</td>
<td>6.78 (1.26)</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honest</td>
<td>6.38 (1.56)</td>
<td>6.32^bc (1.82)</td>
<td>6.78^c (1.33)</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruistic</td>
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<td>6.13^a (1.79)</td>
<td>6.75^b (1.63)</td>
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<td>.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-sacrifice</td>
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<td>5.57^a (1.67)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Selfless</td>
<td>6.38^ab (1.50)</td>
<td>5.34^a (1.79)</td>
<td>5.62^b (1.74)</td>
<td>10.78</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determined a</td>
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<td>6.89 (1.11)</td>
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<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saves</td>
<td>5.90^ab (1.75)</td>
<td>4.64^a (1.69)</td>
<td>4.65^b (1.83)</td>
<td>17.70</td>
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<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspiration</td>
<td>6.60 (1.67)</td>
<td>6.65 (1.38)</td>
<td>6.58 (1.45)</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td>6.21^a (1.53)</td>
<td>5.64^a (1.59)</td>
<td>5.86 (1.78)</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peripheral</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactive</td>
<td>6.14^a (1.52)</td>
<td>6.72^a (1.44)</td>
<td>5.88 (1.54)</td>
<td>7.93</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>5.74^a (2.00)</td>
<td>6.61^a (1.42)</td>
<td>6.18 (1.67)</td>
<td>6.44</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>5.88 (1.68)</td>
<td>7.23^ac (1.17)</td>
<td>6.23^c (1.60)</td>
<td>21.46</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassionate</td>
<td>6.16^a (1.59)</td>
<td>5.26^a (1.76)</td>
<td>5.88 (1.57)</td>
<td>7.76</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk-taker</td>
<td>5.33^b (1.81)</td>
<td>5.54 (1.67)</td>
<td>4.47^b (1.89)</td>
<td>10.05</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exceptional</td>
<td>5.30^b (1.94)</td>
<td>5.65 (1.60)</td>
<td>5.76^b (1.56)</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humble</td>
<td>5.67 (1.90)</td>
<td>5.36 (1.67)</td>
<td>5.72 (1.78)</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fearless</td>
<td>5.05 (2.16)</td>
<td>5.27 (1.74)</td>
<td>5.16 (1.91)</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>5.30^a (1.74)</td>
<td>4.34^a (1.80)</td>
<td>5.24 (1.85)</td>
<td>8.84</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerful</td>
<td>4.50^a (2.08)</td>
<td>6.05^a (1.85)</td>
<td>4.80 (2.02)</td>
<td>17.03</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent</td>
<td>4.59^a (1.88)</td>
<td>6.23^a (1.34)</td>
<td>4.92 (1.97)</td>
<td>23.91</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talented</td>
<td>4.93^ab (1.93)</td>
<td>5.42^a (1.63)</td>
<td>5.63^ab (1.85)</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personable</td>
<td>5.06^b (1.94)</td>
<td>5.34^a (1.85)</td>
<td>6.01^bc (1.68)</td>
<td>7.42</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Features are listed in order of Study 2 centrality ratings, using a scale from 1 (not at all related to heroes) to 8 (extremely related to heroes). a Significant differences between hero and leader ratings. b Significant differences between hero and role model ratings. c Significant differences between leader and role model ratings.
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Chapter 3

On Lay Conceptions of Heroes,

Their Psychological and Social Functions
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Abstract

Heroes are an enduring and potentially powerful source of psychological and cultural influence. However, the topic of heroes is underexplored in psychology and little understood. Adopting a complementary blend of qualitative and quantitative approaches, the present manuscript is the first to identify the specific types of functions that heroes provide to individuals. In Study 1, participants ($N = 189$) generated open-ended descriptions of heroic functions, which were sorted into 14 meaningful categories (e.g., to protect, to instil hope, to show morals, to motivate) by independent coders. In Study 2, another sample of participants ($N = 249$) rated the extent that each of the 14 heroic functions corresponded with their personal view of heroes. An extensive review of philosophical, sociological, and psychological writing about heroes shaped a prediction that the dimensions of heroic influence centre on three themes: protect individuals from physical or psychological threats (protecting), uplift and enrich the lives of others (enhancing), and promote morals and ethics (moral modelling).

Confirmatory factor analysis indicated that this three-factor model was a good fit to the data. In Study 3 ($N = 242$), participants typically rated heroes as more likely to provide a protecting function (e.g., to save, to do what no one else will, to help) than leaders or role models. The results support our hypotheses that heroes serve multiple psychosocial functions which are well represented on three dimensions. These findings provide an empirical and theoretical foundation for investigating approaches to provoke, sustain, and measure the positive influence of heroes.

Keywords: heroes, leadership, role models, functions
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On Lay Conceptions of Heroes, Their Psychological and Social Functions

Heroes are known for their psychological influence on individuals (Sullivan & Venter, 2005; Sullivan & Venter, 2010) and for exerting a lasting impact on society (North, Bland, & Ellis, 2005); however, these broad statements have not been the subject of empirical investigation. Surprisingly, heroism has received inadequate attention in the history of psychology (Becker & Eagly, 2004; Blau, Franco, & Zimbardo, 2009; Sullivan & Venter, 2005). Moreover, very few psychologists have considered whether and why people have heroes (Goethals & Allison, 2012). The accounts of heroic benefits that exist typically focus on one aspect of heroic influence, such as social control (Klapp, 1954), rescue from physical harm (Becker & Eagly, 2004), or symbolic immortality (Becker, 1973)—the result is a fragmented and subjective interpretation of the functions provided by heroes.

Fortunately, researchers are starting to take heed of this underexplored and important topic of heroism. In fact, empirical endeavours to understand this complicated topic are gaining momentum (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011; Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2012a; Goethals & Allison, 2012). A recent international survey, for example, evidenced an exceptionally varied list of personal heroes who share prototypical features such as moral integrity, courage, conviction, and willingness to sacrifice for others (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2010). Popular heroes (named in our research) range from the exceptional (e.g., Nelson Mandela or Aung San Suu Kyi) to the less well-known (e.g., a mother who works two jobs to support her children). In 2007, Zimbardo categorised 12 different types of heroes, a further reflection of heroic diversity. Given the fact that the concept of hero is multidimensional (Ko, 2007) and captures a diverse range of influential persons, it was expected that lay descriptions would reflect multiple heroic functions.
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Heroes have played an important role in society for centuries (Schwartz & Schwartz, 2010) and remain extremely prevalent in modern life (Sullivan & Venter, 2010). The longevity of the phenomenon indicates that heroes may fulfil some important human needs. Given that heroic influence occurs within the person (Klapp, 1969), it was felt that an open-ended, qualitative approach was the best method of exploration. Based on the fragmented descriptions of heroes in philosophy, psychology, and sociology, it was predicted that heroes protect people from physical or psychological threats (Becker, 1973; Hobbs, 2010), uplift and enhance the lives of others (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Campbell, 1949; Singer, 1991), and promote morals and ethics (Carlyle, 1840; Cohen, 1993). In fact, the present manuscript ties together loose descriptions of heroic influence that have been published over a number of decades. This effort contributes to the literature by linking previously unrelated descriptions according to themes and comparing those with an analysis of lay conceptions of heroic functions. The studies in the present investigation were designed to distil the breadth of functions that people associate with heroes and synthesise this information to provide a unifying framework of heroic influence. Furthermore, this investigation aims to illustrate the extent to which heroes influence people in a similar or distinct ways to other persons of influence (role models, leaders).

The Influence of Heroes

Heroes are often recognised for serving physical needs (Becker & Eagly, 2004) such as saving or protecting people from danger. While other authors call attention to heroism in pursuit of noble ideas (e.g., Martens, 2005; Sullivan & Venter, 2005; Zimbardo, 2007). Heroes who show bravery, sacrifice, conviction, and integrity for an honourable purpose are likely to provide psychological and social benefits for
individuals who encounter (or cogitate about) them, yet, our understanding of such benefits has been limited.

French and Pena (1991) suggested that the influence of heroes pertains to both society and to individuals. Heroes alleviate pain and suffering by shielding civilians from real or perceived danger. For instance, rescue and military workers often risk their own lives in the pursuit of saving others. Heroes create and promote doctrines, policies, values, or morals that they believe to sustain the greater good and human relations. For example, religious figures, martyrs, and political activists have proposed prescribed new ways of living for groups of individuals throughout history. Heroes have been described as upholding the values of society (Carlyle, 1840), acting as comparison targets for the masses (Pretzinger, 1976), and modelling virtues (Cohen, 1993). In fact, heroes may help children to understand the norms and roles within society (Erikson, 1977). Heroes promote social cohesiveness (Smith, 1976), instigate an interest in a cause, or prompt collective action (Klapp, 1954). The ideas, discoveries, and inventions of heroes change and improve the way a civilization operates. The inventions of the wheel, light bulb, and aircraft, for instance, have wielded a significant and long-standing impact that affects people globally; their respective inventors are often classified as heroic. Klapp (1969) proposed that people use heroes—collectively and individually—to direct choices towards approved norms. Other types of heroes are less tied with societal needs and more directly intertwined with an individual (Klapp, 1969).

Overall, heroes have been described as wielding a positive influence on others. This is interesting, given that other persons of influence (leaders, role models, celebrities) are sometimes described as having a negative influence on others. In fact, the literature has demonstrated how encounters with role models sometimes result in self-deflation (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Also, research suggests that ‘do-gooders’
can be threatening to the self and people will sometimes derogate do-gooders in an effort to feel better about themselves (Minson & Monin, 2012). There is a possibility that heroes, due to their exceptional accomplishments and moral integrity, will pose as a self-threat, however, this is not a theme that has emerged from the literature. If heroes are viewed as a self-threat, this is likely to be reflected in lay conceptions of heroic influence. To further understand the psychological and social influences of heroes, a core motives approach (e.g., Fiske, 2004) is used as a basis for identifying heroic functions that may, in part, fulfil basic human needs.

**Core Social Motives Fulfilled by Heroes**

Heroism is an important part of everyday life—shaping the emotions, thoughts, and behaviours of other people (Allison & Goethals, 2011). Given the widespread nature of the phenomena, it is expected that heroes fulfil some basic human needs. A useful approach to understanding the nexus between heroes and the self, we argue, rests in an examination of core human needs (e.g., Fiske, 2004; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006). We begin with positing theoretical links for three core needs—certainty, enhancement, and belonging—and it is expected that lay conceptions of heroic functions revealed in empirical studies will also reflect these motives.

**The Need for Certainty**

Making sense of personal uncertainty is a core human need (Heine et al., 2006). Uncertainty is often viewed as a negative or threatening experience (Fiske & Taylor, 2007). People are motivated to adopt strategies that reduce uncertainty, such as cultural worldviews and norms (Van den Bos, 2009). Interestingly, the etymology of the word heroes (from Greek *heros*) suggests a protective function (Harper, 2010). Some philosophers and psychologists have alluded to the idea that heroes protect against threats to a person’s perceptions about their own meaning or purpose in life. For
example, Hobbs (2010) suggested that heroes offer resources to adults who feel disillusioned. In a process of self-verification (e.g., Swann, 1983), a hero who shares similar characteristics, values, beliefs, may help to validate existing self-beliefs leading to greater clarity about the self. By sharing personal accounts of dealing with overwhelming life challenges, heroes may help others to feel stronger when coping with their own difficulties. Heroes help us to deal with uncertainty by serving as a reminder of goodness, making us feel safe, acting on our behalf, and ultimately, buffering threats such as stress and negativity.

People use powerful myths (Campbell, 1988) and metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) as tools to deal with uncertainty (Van den Bos, 2009). Heroes who uphold cultural values and norms may also serve as a resource for dealing with threats to uncertainty, meaning, or other existential dilemmas. A hero may offer a source of continuity and immortality, enabling the individual to transcend the dilemma of mortality (Becker, 1973). Similarly, individuals often strive to create a meaningful life based on society’s values (often modelled by heroes)—though this means, people create a lasting impact and achieve symbolic immortality (Goethals & Allison, 2012). If this is true, we expect lay conceptions to reflect heroes’ ability to offer protection against physical and psychological threats.

**The Need for Enhancement**

Self-enhancement is concerned with the efforts to create and maintain a positive sense of self (Sedikides, 1993). People have a fundamental need to feel good about themselves and are motivated to behave in ways that improve the self (Fiske, 2004). Individuals process and remember self-relevant information and present themselves in a way that increases positive feelings about the self (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Also, people make great efforts to avoid, minimise, and repair negative self-views (Hepper,
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Gramzow, & Sedikides, 2010). Heroes, often described as inspirational, motivating, exceptional, and talented (Kinsella et al., 2012), are likely to enhance the lives of others. In fact, heroes that behave in ways that benefit others, sometimes at great personal risk, are likely to increase positive feelings towards the hero and others, reminding people of the good in the world. For centuries heroic myths have been the inspiration for religion, philosophies, arts, and discoveries in science and technology (Campbell, 1949). People are often moved by influential people, arousing positive emotions such as awe, gratitude, or admiration (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Furthermore, people may experience positivity as result of being associated with their hero’s exceptional accomplishments (Allison & Goethals, 2011), this process is known as ‘basking in reflected glory’ (Cialdini, 2007).

Self-improvement fulfils the core motive to self-enhance (Fiske, 2004). Self-improvement refers to the motivated efforts by individuals to bring themselves closer to their personal ideal (Sedikides, 1993). Heroes are often known for their nobility (Singer, 1991), competence (Allison & Goethals, 2011), and most likely, their ability to trigger a period of evaluative self-focus (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). People often remark that heroes inspire them to be a better person, thus, increasing positive feelings about the self. An encounter with a hero may result in people being inspired to take action (Thrash & Elliot, 2004), for example, making efforts towards self-improvement. Heroes may enhance human’s feelings about the self via a motivational process of self-improvement. For instance, heroes raise awareness of ought or ideal selves (Klapp, 1969). Heroes perhaps illuminate a personal goal, such as modelling a future self, thereby facilitating the translation of that goal (Thrash & Elliot, 2004). In sum, it is expected that lay conceptions of heroic functions will be concerned with feelings of
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positivity (towards self and others), and the desire to embrace positive change (e.g., self-improvement).

Heroes may enable people to transcend, or move beyond, their current—potentially negative—psychological state (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Klapp, 1969). A paradigm shift may trigger a period of self-focus which naturally brings a self-evaluative frame of mind (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). Heroes help us to reframe what is possible or realistic in terms of setting standards (Flescher, 2003). This may result in a positive feeling where a person revels in their own accomplishments, or the exercise may inspire the individual towards making changes (Phillips & Silvia, 2005). Alternatively, some heroes uplift and direct our own ambitions away from “narrow, self-centred concerns” (Singer, 1991, p. 249). Such an encounter may trigger a period of world-focused savouring and social connectedness (Bryant & Veroff, 2007); evoking a sense of positive communion with nature and with others. Overall, we expect that lay conceptions will reflect the enhancing functions of heroes, for example, representing possible selves or helping others to transcend current situations.

The Need to Belong

The principle of belonging centres on the idea that individuals are motivated to form stable relationships with others (Fiske, 2004). Belonging has been associated with many positive outcomes, such as, increased well-being (Baumeister, 1991) and reduced likelihood of suicide (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000). The fundamental need for affiliation is facilitated by people’s ability to self-regulate, in other words, the human capability to override automatic tendencies (Bauer & Baumeister, 2011). Humans have the capacity to adapt their responses to achieve a desired goal (e.g., belong to a group).
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Heroes may offer self-regulatory resources—reminding individuals of societal morals, ethics, values, and norms, or steering individuals away from behaviours that may threaten group membership (e.g., cheating, stealing). Heroes have been described as displaying moral integrity (Kinsella et al., 2012), acting to do the right thing (Schwartz & Schwartz, 2010), and showing a noble purpose without selfishness (Singer, 1991). Also, Cohen (1993) noted that heroes model values for others to follow. Heroes prompt people to do what they can for those who need help, endorsing ‘other-regard’ (Flescher, 2003). In fact, most heroes meet Colby and Damon’s (1992) criteria for serving as ‘moral exemplars’ and will evoke elevation emotions in others (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). It may not be realistic to emulate heroes that show moral fortitude, but the encounter may evoke a period of introspection which helps individuals to avoid moral complacency (Flescher, 2003). Furthermore, encounters with heroes may instigate a shift of perspective where people feel a greater sense of connectedness to others and a greater responsibility to behave in ways that benefit others (rather than sabotaging valuable human connections). Overall, it is anticipated that lay conceptions of heroic functions will include themes of moral guidance and integrity.

To summarise, heroes and their influence have captured the imagination and attention of writers and readers for centuries. Heroes are likely to have a powerful influence on individuals and groups, but this topic has received very limited attention from researchers. Some authors acknowledge that heroes influence the emotions, attitudes, and actions of others (Allison & Goethals, 2011). While others suggest that heroes influence an individual’s emotional well-being, ability to self-regulate, and their self-concept (Schlenker, Weigold, & Schlenker, 2008), but offer limited analysis or empirical data. Other philosophers and sociologists have mentioned specific functions, such as social control (Klapp, 1969) or symbolic immortality (Becker, 1978), without
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considering the multiple functions that heroes provide. Other psychologists have mentioned heroes briefly (e.g., Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Singer, 1991) but have not generated sufficient ideas or data to generate a theory of heroism. Those authors that have given considerable attention to the topic of heroes (Becker & Eagly, 2004; Zimbardo, 2007), typically question when and how heroic behaviour occur, rather than examining heroic influence on others. Therefore, a systematic and empirical analysis of the functions provided by heroes is important and timely. Before moving on to a more detailed look at the present research, it is important to consider how other persons of influence, leaders and role models, have been defined in the literature.

A Look at Other Persons of Influence: Leaders & Role Models

Lay conceptions of the characteristics associated with heroes, leaders, and role models are not equivalent (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2011, 2012). Given these differences in schematic representation, we wondered if heroes, leaders, and role models serve distinct psychological and social functions.

Leaders are sometimes considered heroic. Allison and Goethals (2011) draw attention to the number of leaders who are represented on their list of popular heroes (p. 34). There are overlaps between the concepts of leaders and heroes, however, there also areas of divergence that need to be explored. When examining the schematic representations of heroes and leaders (Kinsella et al., 2012), heroes were rated the highest on the following characteristics: brave, moral integrity, saves, willing to sacrifice, altruistic, compassionate, selfless, courageous, and protecting. Leaders were rated as the most powerful, strong, fearless, demonstrating conviction, displaying leadership, proactive, determined, intelligent, inspiring, and willing to risk. These differences in cognitive representation reiterate the need to not assume both concepts are functionally the same. Leaders who display prototypical features of heroism (e.g.,
sacrifice, bravery) may influence people in different ways than other leaders. For example, transformational leaders are defined as leaders who raise followers to higher levels of effort by appealing to their morals and values (Chmiel, 2000). Heroes are likely to influence the morals and values of others too; this has not previously been explored in psychology. The current research aims to assess what functions people most associate with heroes and leaders.

Singer (1991) notes that heroes tend to be distant figures who have endured tremendous suffering and sacrifice for purposes of great nobility (that we would not wish to emulate). Role models, due to their accessibility to their follower, are scrutinised in detail and mimicked (Singer, 1991). These ideas are reflected in recent research that suggests that role models are generally physically close, from the same generation, and have comparable experiences to the follower (Brownhill, 2010). Previous research has found that lay persons tend to think of role models as more talented, honest, personable, exceptional, and humble than heroes or leaders (Kinsella et al., 2011). Researchers have found that altruistic role models increase the likelihood that those around them engage in prosocial behaviour (Bryan & Test, 1967). The power of heroes, Singer (1991) emphasised, is that they elevate our personal ambition towards a more noble purpose. Heroes may instigate a shift of perspective and direction, encouraging new goals and insights, rather than regurgitating more of the same. The current investigation aims to illuminate the functions that people most associate with heroes and role models.

**Lay Conceptions of Heroic Functions**

Surveys suggest that over 65% of people have at least one hero (Kinsella et al., 2010), therefore, asking people open-ended questions seemed a fruitful first step in understanding the variety of benefits heroes provide. An open-ended approach, based on
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the prototype methods (Cantor & Mischel, 1977), was chosen as a means to uncover the range of physical, psychological, and social functions provided by heroes in a systematic manner. Specifically, this method promotes a rigorous scientific approach while also conveying the richness and diversity of people’s experiences with their heroes. The analysis of lay conceptions of heroic functions was expected to provide an insight into associated psychological processes (such as self-regulation) and facilitate comparisons with other persons of influence.

The Present Research

The overarching goal of the present research was to identify the most important functions provided by heroes and compare those heroic functions with the benefits provided by other persons of influence (role models, leaders). Study 1 revealed lay conceptions about heroic functions using an open-ended approach, based on prototype methods (e.g., Gregg, Hart, Sedikides, & Kumashiro, 2008; Hassebrauck, 1997). Study 2 obtained ratings of the function categories (created in Study 1). These ratings provided information about the most important functions provided by heroes and facilitated the use of factor analytic techniques to assess the extent to which the ratings clustered together revealing fewer dimensions of heroic functions. Study 3 examined the extent to which participants associated the functions arising in Study 1 with heroes, leaders, and role models. This provided an objective method of assessing whether people associate similar benefits with each type of influential person. In accordance with existing literature (e.g., French and Pena, 1991), we expected that people would refer to the influence of heroes on both individuals and groups. Furthermore, we anticipated that participant’s descriptions would be indicative of core social needs—certainty, enhancing, and belonging (e.g., Fiske, 2004)—that heroes may (in some part) satisfy.
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Study 1

Study 1 examined how lay persons perceive the psychological and social functions that heroes provide. This information was obtained by asking participants to describe the benefits provided by heroes. The resulting exemplars were systematically analysed in accordance with prototype methods (e.g., Gregg et al., 2008). We expected participants to describe multiple heroic functions, including physical, psychological, and social benefits. According to prototype theory, the most representative functions provided by heroes would be communicated most frequently.

Method

Participants

Participants \((N = 189)\) were recruited (116 females, 73 males; \(M_{\text{age}} = 29.98\) years, \(SD_{\text{age}} = 11.88\), age range: 18–73 years) via Facebook™ and snowball sampling via email \((n = 150)\) and in the local city centre \((n = 39)\). Participants originated from America \((n = 90)\), Europe \((n = 89)\), Asia \((n = 6)\), Africa \((n = 2)\), and Australia \((n = 2)\).

Materials and Procedure

Informed consent was obtained from all participants (Studies 1–3). Participants completed standardised materials either on paper or online. Those who completed the questionnaire online did not receive any compensation for their participation. Those who filled out the questionnaire in the city centre received a coffee as a token of appreciation. Participants were asked: “What, in your personal view, are the functions that heroes serve?” Responses were not timed. Participants were then thanked and debriefed (Studies 1–3).

Results and Discussion

A verbatim list of exemplars \((n = 344)\) was compiled. An exemplar is defined as one item from a list, or one unit of meaning (Joffe & Yardley, 2004) from responses
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that contained multiple connected descriptions of heroic functions. Two research assistants sorted the original exemplars into superordinate thematic categories. This was achieved by grouping (a) identical exemplars, (b) semantically related exemplars (e.g., “give people hope” and “instil hope”), and (c) meaning-related exemplars into categories (e.g., “keep people safe” and “protect people from evil”) in accordance with the approach taken by previous research (e.g., Hepper, Ritchie, Sedikides, & Wildshut, 2011). In the first round, the first coder identified 12 categories and the second coder identified 13 categories. To reach full agreement it was necessary to create some new categories (e.g., the first coder’s category, to inspire and motivate, was split into two categories) resulting in a total of 14 function categories. Third and fourth coders independently matched each original exemplar (e.g., “Helping somebody to pave the way toward a personal goal”) with the 14 categories (e.g., to help) identified by the first and second coders. There was 76% consistency between the third coder’s ratings and the original coding. There was 57% consistency between the fourth coder’s ratings and the original coding.

Categories of Heroic Functions

The independent coders identified 14 categories of functions provided by heroes from the original 344 exemplars (see Table 1). The categories of functions that were identified are as follows: to help, to inspire, to motivate, to save, to be a role model, to protect, to instil hope, to improve morale and camaraderie, to make the world a better place, to do what no one else will, to remind people about the good in the world, to guide, to show morals and values, and to act against evil or danger. The most frequently mentioned functions were to help, to inspire, and to protect.

On average, people described two exemplars ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 1.30$). Of the original 344 exemplars, there was one ‘negative’ comment (“kill the bad guy”). There was no
significant sex differences between the number of exemplars reported, $t(187) = -1.01, p = .31$. There was no relationship between age and number of exemplars reported ($r = .07, p = .36$). There were no significant differences between USA and European participants regarding the number of exemplars provided, $t(178) < 1$.

### Linguistic Analysis of Hero Characteristics

To provide additional information about the exemplars, all responses were subjected to analysis using the textual analysis software, Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count Version 2007 for Windows (LIWC; Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001). LIWC compares each word from every participant’s response against an internal dictionary that contains English words, and then, reports a percentage of words that represent a psychological theme. For example, one participant wrote that heroes serve “to remind us of the human potential”, and LIWC flagged the word *human* as belonging to the *social theme*. The analysis revealed that, on average, participants’ descriptions consisted of 26% social (e.g., people, others), 20% affect (e.g., happy, positive), 19% positive emotion (e.g., love, optimism), 17% cognitive mechanism (e.g., ought, know), and 8% achievement (e.g., earn, win) themes. This analysis is consistent with the view that heroic benefits are described in positive ways, in particular relating to social topics, emotions, attitude formation, and taking action to pursue goals.

Overall, participants described heroes as providing physical (e.g., “helping a person in a car accident”), social (e.g., “provision of a social good”), and psychological (e.g., “provide an ideal to aspire to”) functions. Heroes were described as benefiting individuals (e.g., “something to use as a goal to obtain”) and groups (e.g., “set a good example to society”). Some heroes were described as enhancing positive feelings about the self and others (e.g., *to inspire, to motivate, increase morale*) and modelling morals (e.g., *to provide morals and values, to remind people of the good in the world*). Other
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Heroes were described as protecting people, either physically (e.g., “saving lives”) or emotionally (e.g., “to help people in a situation where they are in distress or despair and they are almost ready to give up”). The next stage of the investigation was to ascertain which of these functions are *most* typical for lay conceptions of heroes.

**Study 2**

Participants were invited to rate the relatedness of each heroic function (identified in Study 1) to their own personal view of heroes. Similar methods have been used by researchers to define exemplar representativeness of a prototype (e.g., Gregg et al., 2008). First, it was hypothesised that some functions would be consistently rated higher (most important) than other functions (less important). Based on the themes emerging from the literature and from exploratory factor analysis (EFA)\(^1\), it was expected that the ratings of some functions would cluster together into three categories (factors of a latent construct or constructs) of heroic functions—*protecting, enhancing*, and *moral modelling*.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants (\(N = 249\)) were recruited for this study in a local city centre, on the university campus\(^2\), and via a psychological research website (120 female, 129 male; \(M_{\text{age}} = 32.64\) years, \(SD_{\text{age}} = 12.48\), age range: 18–67 years).

**Materials and Procedure**

People recruited on campus or in the community were offered chocolate for their participation in the study. Participants recruited online were not compensated. Participants rated how closely each of the 14 functions of heroes related to their personal view of heroes. After each function category, some common exemplars were provided in brackets: “Inspiration (make you dream, show people what is possible,
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remind us of the human potential)” and “Shows morals and values (give us a set of values, conserve morals and values)”. All ratings were indicated on a Likert scale that ranged from 1 (not at all related) to 8 (extremely related).³

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

The ratings for heroic functions range from 6.48 (to make the world better) to 5.65 (to remind people about the good in the world), on an 8-point Likert scale. These results provide support to the idea that these 14 functions represent some of the most important functions provided by heroes.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to examine the three-factor structure that was predicted based on the analysis of existing literature on the topic of heroism and preliminary results that emerged from EFA¹. The analyses were conducted using LISREL 8.8.

In the CFA model, to save, to protect, to help, to do what no one else will, and to act against evil or danger were specified to be manifestations of the latent factor protecting. To motivate, to role model, to inspire, to instil hope, to provide morale, and to guide were specified to be manifestations of the latent factor enhancing. Finally, to remind people about the good in the world, to show morals and values, and to make the world better were specified to be manifestations of the latent variable moral modelling. Results confirm that this three-factor model has a good fit to the data, \( \chi^2(74, N = 248) = 232.82, p < .05 \), goodness of fit index (GFI) = .89, the non-normed fit index (NNFI) = .92, comparative fit index (CFI) = .94, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .08, and standardised root mean residual (SRMR) = .08. Bentler and Bonett (1980) recommended that measurement models have GFI, NNFI, and CFI of at least
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.90. According to Browne and Cudeck (1993), RMSEA between .05 and .08 represents a reasonably close fit, and, RMSEA > .10 represents an unacceptable model. In accordance with the variety of our participants’ responses, the data suggests that heroic individuals provide more than a single, overarching psychosocial function. Indeed, a one-factor model fit the data inadequately; $\chi^2(77, N = 248) = 584.73, p < .05$, GFI = .70, NNFI = .81, CFI = .19, RMSEA = .19, and SRMR = .11. None of the fit statistics for the one-factor model were at least .90 and the RMSEA was well above .10. Also, Hu and Bentler (1998) suggested that SRMR larger than .08 represents an unacceptable model fit.

These findings add empirical support to our original hypotheses that heroes are multi-faceted and provide a number of distinct psychosocial functions. We predicted three dimensions of heroic influence—protecting, enhancing, and moral modelling—based on a review of literature and EFA results, this model fit the data well.

Study 3

Studies 1–2 suggest a range of interesting benefits that heroes provide to people. Some of the heroic functions generated (e.g., to motivate, to inspire) could also be used to describe the influence of leaders or role models. In other words, is the lay concept of heroic functions distinct from role models and leaders? Previous research suggests that certain types of authentic leaders or transformational leaders may provide psychological benefits to their followers (e.g., Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005). Role models have previously been found to engage followers in prosocial behaviour (Bryan & Test, 1967) and inspire others (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Given the etymology of the word hero (meaning ‘protector’), we expect that heroes will be the best protectors of psychological and physical well-being. Study 3, therefore, aims to empirically examine whether...
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people rate the 14 functions (generated in Studies 1–2) equally for heroes, leaders, and role models.

Method

Participants

Postgraduate students² (N = 242) were recruited for this online study (136 females, 106 males; \(M_{\text{age}} = 30.60\) years, \(SD_{\text{age}} = 10.64\), age range: 18–66 years).

Materials and Procedures

The study followed a between-groups design. Participants completed an online questionnaire which required them to bring to mind either a leader (n = 73), a role model (n = 95), or a heroic individual (n = 74). Participants then rated the person of influence along 14 functions outlined in Studies 1–2. All ratings were indicated on a Likert scale that ranged from 1 (not at all related) to 8 (extremely related). The Bonferroni correction method was used to minimise inflation of family-wise error associated with multiple statistical comparisons.

Results

Rating Heroes, Leaders, and Role Models on 14 Heroic Functions

A multivariate General Linear Model evidenced a significant association between type of influential person and associated functions; Wilk’s Lambda \(F(28, 452) = 2.48, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13\). Univariate tests shows significant relationships between type of individual and ratings for the following: To help, to save, to motivate, to make the world better, to guide, and to do what no one else will do. Heroes were rated as more likely to help, to save, to protect, to make the world better, and to do what no one else will. Leaders were rated as more likely to motivate and to guide.

Heroes (\(M = 6.05, SD = 1.80\)) were rated as more likely to help than leaders (\(M = 5.01, SD = 1.90\)); \(t(151) = 3.38, p < .001, d = .56\). In addition, heroes (\(M = 6.76, SD = \))
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1.81) were rated higher on to do what no one else will than role models (M = 6.07, SD = 1.92), t(173) = 2.50, p < .01, d = .37. Heroes (M = 5.84, SD = 1.85) were rated as more likely to save than role models (M = 5.02, SD = 1.90; t(175) = 2.95, p < .01, d = .44.

Also, heroes (M = 5.84, SD = 1.85) were rated higher on to save than leaders (M = 4.95, SD = 1.72); t(151) = 3.20, p < .01, d = .50.

In comparison to role models (M = 6.19, SD = 1.88), heroes (M = 6.71, SD = 1.45) were rated higher on to improve morale and camaraderie; t(175) = 1.98, p = .05, d = .31. Also, heroes (M = 6.97, SD = 1.55) were rated higher on to make the world better than role models (M = 6.21, SD = 2.03), t(175) = 2.75, p < .01, d = .42.

Leaders (M = 7.16, SD = 1.28) were rated higher on to guide; t(140) = -2.82 , p < .01, d = .39, than heroes (M = 6.55, SD = 1.78). Leaders (M = 7.40, SD = 0.89) were also rated higher on to motivate in comparison with heroes (M = 6.73, SD = 1.53), t(124) = -3.30, p < .001, d = .54.

Rating Heroes, Leaders, and Role Models on Dimensions of Heroic Functions

Each heroic function was coded as belonging to one of the three dimensions from Study 2: protecting, enhancing, and moral modelling. A multivariate General Linear Model revealed an association between the type of influential person and the dimensions of heroic functions, Wilk’s Lambda $F(6, 494) = 3.07, p < .01, \eta^2 = .04$. Univariate tests indicated that there were significant relationships between type of individual and ratings for protecting. For instance, heroes were rated as more likely to save, to help, and to do what no one else will do.

There was a significant difference between ratings of protecting for heroes, leaders, and role models, $F(2, 249) = 4.07, p = .02, \eta^2 = .32$. The pairwise comparison revealed mean differences between heroes (M = 6.09, SD = 1.46) and role models (M = 5.60, SD = 1.56) was significant, t(175) = 2.17, p = .03, d = .68. Further, the mean
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differences between heroes ($M = 6.09$, $SD = 1.46$), and leaders ($M = 5.40$, $SD = 1.50$) was significant, $t(151) = 2.77$, $p = .01$, $d = .33$.

These results show that heroes, role models, and leaders can serve enhancing and moral modelling functions. However, heroes provide a protecting function compared to role models or leaders. This finding is consistent with the original meaning of the word hero as protector.

General Discussion

In Joseph Campbell’s description of the hero’s journey or monomyth (1949), the hero is called to action, suffers trials, defeats evil, and returns with specific benefits for people in society. In both historical and modern accounts, heroes are described in overwhelmingly positive ways. Despite the positivity associated with heroism in everyday language and the media, the psychosocial functions provided by heroes are surprisingly little understood. It was predicted that people would describe multiple functions provided by heroes. Specifically, analysis of existing literature suggested three key themes of heroic influence: protecting people from psychological or physical threats (protecting), making people feel good about themselves and others (enhancing), and serving as a moral exemplar (moral modelling). The results from the present research strongly support the hypotheses that 1) heroes serve a number of psychosocial functions and 2) the multiple functions of heroes are well represented on these three dimensions. In fact, most lay descriptions of heroes reflect the ways that heroes promote well-being by increasing positive experiences and simultaneously reducing suffering.

The primary goal of this pioneering investigation was to produce a systematic analysis of the variety of psychological and social functions that heroes fulfil for people. The inquiry began with an open-ended survey of lay conceptions about the benefits that heroes provide (Study 1). The analysis highlighted 14 important functions provided by
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heroes, for example, to inspire, to protect, to guide, to instil hope, and to motivate. To assess the relative importance of each of these functions, we asked another sample of people to rate each of the 14 function categories in accordance with their personal view of heroes (Study 2). The ratings enabled the use of factor analytic techniques to test the theory that heroic function fall onto three dimensions: protecting, enhancing, and moral modelling. The vast majority of the functions that people typically associate with heroes fall into one of these three categories. To clarify what benefits people derive from different types of influential persons, Study 3 requested participants to rate heroes, role models, or leaders across each of the 14 heroic functions. The results show that people rate the functions of heroes, leaders, and role models differently. Heroes are more likely to help, to save, to protect, to make the world better, and to do what no one else will. Leaders are more likely to guide and to motivate. Overall, heroes are more likely to provide a protective function than leaders or role models. These findings reiterate that heroes, leaders, and role models share some areas of overlap, but are independent social categories.

How do Lay Persons Describe the Functions Provided by Heroes?

In philosophy, psychology, and prose, heroes have been depicted as enriching and enhancing the lives of others (e.g., Campbell, 1949; Singer, 1991), shielding others from threats (e.g., Becker, 1973; Hobbs, 2010), or providing moral guidance to others (Carlyle, 1840; Cohen, 1993). It is interesting to contrast these perspectives with lay descriptions about the functions that heroes provide. From the original 344 exemplars described by participants, a total of 14 psychological, physical, and social functions were identified: to help, to inspire, to motivate, to save, to be a role model, to protect, to instil hope, to improve morale and camaraderie, to make the world a better place, to do what no one else will, to remind people about the good in the world, to guide, to show
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Morals and values, and to act against evil or danger. Lay conceptions reflected the influence of heroes on the self (e.g., identification with their values) and on groups of people (e.g., building a sense of camaraderie and community). Participants described links between heroes and feeling good (e.g., “heroes make me feel better about humanity”), dealing with external threats (e.g., “increasing feelings of safety by acting against danger”), and encouraging moral standards (e.g., “to serve as a moral benchmark”). Interestingly, heroes were described as motivating and inspiring, rather than self-deflating or threatening (cf. Lockwood & Kunda, 2007; Minson & Monin, 2012).

Certainty: Heroes Provide a Protecting Function

Lay conceptions suggest that heroes provide a protecting function, they shield people from physical and psychological threats. Heroes save, help, guide, protect, act against evil or danger, and do what no one else will do, restoring people’s positive feeling about others and buffering negative feelings about themselves. One participant described a hero who helped her in a car crash. Another participant wrote about a hero who assisted her “to get through the tough times” she struggled with, perhaps offering additional coping resources as suggested by Hobbs (2010). Heroes were frequently depicted as representing the “fight for good against evil” or “stopping the bad in humanity”. It is likely that people who believe that heroes are proactively taking action to combat evil or danger, will feel safeguarded (one participant said that a hero’s job is “making citizens feel safe”) and perhaps more certain about the future. A number of participants described heroes as offering guidance through the complexity of daily life. Perhaps heroes, similar to powerful myths (Campbell, 1988) and metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), are used as tools for dealing with uncertainty (Van den Bos, 2009). The findings also highlight that leaders and role models are less likely to provide
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A protecting function, reinforcing the idea that heroes not only provide all the benefits of encounters with a good role model or leader, but they also protect people from physical and psychological threats to the self. Overall, heroes promote psychological well-being by increasing perceptions of safety, buffer against threats to well-being, and reduce pain and suffering.

Enhancement: Heroes Provide an Enhancing Function

In the present research, heroes were described in overwhelmingly positive ways. Heroes appear to motivate, to be a role model, to inspire, to instil hope, to improve morale and camaraderie, and to guide others. Participants described feeling positive affect when thinking of heroes, “making them feel happy” and “helping people to live a happy life”. Heroes were frequently described by participants as making people “feel better about the world”, “more positive about humanity”, and reminding people of “the good in the world”. One person described heroes as “builders of self-esteem”. Heroes were portrayed by participants as elevating people, for example, “[they] elevate the rest of us to a place of courage” or “elevate the consciousness of others”. The findings suggest that heroes may provide enhancement by increasing positive affect and making people feel good about themselves and others. This dimension of heroic influence, enhancing, is likely to be linked to previous writings about heroes who instigate periods of transcendence (Klapp, 1969), induce a perspective shift (Allison & Goethals, 2011), increase the positive emotions experienced by others (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Singer, 1991), and increase social connectedness (Smith, 1976). Through these means, heroes promote psychological and physical well-being in others.

Belonging: Heroes Provide a Moral Modelling Function

Some of the functions attributed to heroes are abstract and symbolic: reminding people about the good in the world, showing morals and values, and making the world a
CHAPTER 3: PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF HEROES

In the present research, heroes were described by participants as “increasing positive feelings about humanity” and “confidence that there is good in the world”. Participants described heroes as “moral symbols to protect everyday innocent people”, “providing moral goals for society”, and that they “personify the things we cannot articulate”. Heroes appear to provide moral modelling to others: helping people to recognise the differences between right and wrong. Lay conceptions refer to heroes that make them “aware of the rest of humanity”, perhaps on occasion, shifting their focus away from individual concerns and redirecting towards a world-focus perspective (as suggested by Bryant and Veroff, 2007). Some heroes encourage people to behave more altruistically towards others, for example, one participant described how “heroes teach us that it is possible to be altruistic in an egocentric world” (as predicted by Flescher, 2003). Heroes may also serve to regulate the self towards more noble purposes (as suggested by Singer, 1991), even when those decisions may require courage, conviction, and integrity (e.g., whistle-blowing). Further, heroes help to regulate the self while co-existing with others in complex societal structure, to avoid excessive greed, hedonism, or other egocentric behaviours that may damage group relations. For example, participants described how “heroes help children to learn the difference between right and wrong”, specifically, “highlighting morals and values” within a particular society (in line with Cohen, 1993). In fact, a few participants noted that with the “decreasing importance of religion” in some societies, the respective influence of heroes is increasing. For instance, heroes teach lessons about ethics and moral integrity which reflect similar lessons taught in mainstream religions. Adhering to codes of moral practice, norms, and societal values, increases the likelihood that people are accepted into a given group or society. This dimension of heroic influence, moral
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modelling, suggests that heroes serve to guide us towards attitudes and behaviours that promote moral behaviours and facilitate harmonious group relations.

Are Heroes Viewed as Self-Threats?

Previous research has suggested that sometimes social comparisons with role models (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997) and do-gooders (Minson & Monin, 2012) result in perceived self-threats and self-deflation. However, heroes are described in the literature and the present investigations as making people feel better about humanity and the self. To deal with this question, it is important to note that within the social comparison literature there are indications that people actively seek out upward social comparisons in order to gain an accurate self-assessment and to self-enhance (see Collins, 1996). Interestingly, people sometimes consciously prevent upward comparisons from influencing their self-evaluations and choose to use that information to inspire, motivate, and promote positive affect instead (Taylor & Lobel, 1989). Exceptional and awe-inspiring heroic behaviour is typically impossible for others to replicate, therefore, it seems likely that people digest the information and use the encounter as a source of motivation and energy for their personal goals. Alternatively, the positive (and non-threatening) influence of heroes could be interpreted from a recent theory of inspiration. For instance, Thrash and Elliot (2010) note that people first appreciate the exceptional efforts of the inspirational target (resulting in feelings of transcendence and meaning) which in turn is translated into a personal desire to perform at a higher level in one’s own life (evoking feelings of self-responsibility and volitional control). Theories of social comparison and inspiration provide useful insights about heroic influence and taken together, these ideas lay the foundation for future research into the psychological processes associated with heroic influence.
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Contribution, Limitations, and Future Research Ideas

Writers have alluded to the psychological benefits derived from heroic encounters, yet this fragmented information has not been synthesised or empirically studied. Until this point, the functions of heroes have been dealt with in a relatively superficial and piecemeal manner. Authors have suggested that heroes have the power to shape person’s feelings, thoughts, and behaviour (Allison & Goethals, 2011) and influence self-regulation (Schkenker et al., 2008). These statements are interesting and insightful, but they have not been theoretically grounded or empirically investigated. The present research aimed to close the gap in our understanding of heroes by providing a detailed analysis of heroic functions. Given that the majority of people have a hero (Kinsella et al., 2012) and that the influence of heroes occurs within the person (Klapp, 1969), it was important to consider lay conceptions as a first stage of analysis. The results suggest that the influence of heroes is well represented on three dimensions: protecting, enhancing, and moral modelling—providing a parsimonious framework for future researchers to generate hypotheses about heroes and their impact on others. These dimensions form the basis for measuring the benefits provided by heroes. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that not only do heroes provide similar functions to some leaders and role models (enhancing, modelling morals), but they offer physical and psychological protection.

The present investigation lays the foundation for future research on heroes by summarising existing literature and proposing three dimensions of heroic influence that generate interesting and theory-generated hypotheses that have not been possible thus far in heroism research. The research is limited in the sense that it is primarily concerned with lay conceptions. The next phase of this research will be to demonstrate the effects of information about heroes on participants in lab settings. Specifically, there
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is a need to examine the protecting, enhancing, and moral modelling functions of heroes as dependent variables affected by exposure to heroes of heroic acts. With the existing framework in place, researchers can systematically assess the influence of heroes while simultaneously taking into account the type of hero, individual differences, and situational influences. So far, the functions listed for ‘known’ versus ‘unknown’ heroes have not been independently assessed. People’s relationship with their heroes varies widely and as a result they may derive different benefits from encounters. For instance, it is likely that people who have a personal relationship with their heroic grandmother will derive different benefits than a person who has developed a parasocial relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956) with Nelson Mandela. The types of parasocial relationships people have with influential people, such as heroes, celebrities, or sports stars, are underexplored.

Based on the exploratory work presented here, there are opportunities to assess each of the three dimensions of heroic influence in more detail. For example, preliminary data suggests that inspiration is a key enhancing function provided by heroes. Building on the foundations created by Thrash and Elliot (2003, 2004), we are investigating what types of encounters with heroes result in the processes of being inspired by or being inspired to. We predict that when people are inspired by a particular hero they will experience transcendence, whereas being inspired to will result in greater feelings of perceived control and a desire to take action (perhaps towards self-improvement goals).

Conclusions

The present research findings elucidate the types of physical, social, and psychological functions that people associate with heroes. Moreover, such heroic benefits include protecting, enhancing, and moral modelling. Those heroic functions are
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rooted in core human needs. Heroes appear to offer greater protection when compared to leaders and role models. Given the assortment of physical, psychological, and social benefits provided by heroes, it is understandable that one might offer “homage, commemoration, celebration, and veneration” in return (Klapp, 1954, p. 57).
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References Chapter 3


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London, UK: Marion Boyars.


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Footnotes

1 To reduce the number of categories of functions and summarise the patterns of correlations among the functions, EFA was conducted. An initial principal component’s analysis revealed three factors with eigenvalues over Kaiser’s criterion of one and in combination explained 65% of the variance. The scree plot also depicted three factors. We subjected the ratings of the 14 functions to an analysis involving principal axis factoring with oblique rotation (Promax). The results from the factor correlation matrix show that all correlations between factors are .32 or above, suggesting there is enough variance to warrant oblique rotation (Tabachnick & Fidel, 2007).

The results of the EFA suggested three factors that represent our respondents’ ratings of heroic functions. The ratings that loaded onto Factor 1 included to save, to protect, to help, to do what no one else will, and to act against evil or danger. It is likely that Factor 1 represents a construct that that enables people to get through and out of difficult situations, to help them confront difficulties, and to act on behalf of others. We termed this factor protecting. The items that loaded strongly onto Factor 2 were to motivate, to role model, to inspire, to instil hope, to provide morale, and to guide. This suggests a factor that refers to the way heroes help people to feel good about themselves and others. We call this factor enhancing. The items that loaded onto Factor 3 were to remind people about the good in the world, to show morals and values, and to make the world better. Factor 3 refers to abstract ideas about right and wrong, dreams about future good, and making salient current good. We named this factor moral modelling.

To summarise, exploratory factor analysis revealed three dimensions of heroic function: protecting, enhancing, and moral modelling.

2 All students were recruited on the University of Limerick campus, Ireland.
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Readability statistics were generated for the functions of heroes and associated exemplars. The results are as follows: Flesch Reading Ease = 67.6%, Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level 8.
### Table 1

#### 14 Heroic Functions and Relatedness Ratings in Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To make the world better</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>6.48</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To do what no one else will</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>6.47</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To help</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>6.46</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To instil hope</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>6.37</td>
<td>1.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be a role model</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>6.37</td>
<td>1.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To protect</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>6.29</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To save</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To inspire</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts against evil or danger</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>6.04</td>
<td>1.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To motivate</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>5.98</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To show morals and values</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>5.90</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To guide</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>5.83</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To improve morale</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>5.82</td>
<td>1.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To remind people about good</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>1.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Heroic functions are listed in order of Study 2 ratings, using a scale from 1 (not at all related to heroes) to 8 (extremely related to heroes).
Chapter 4

Faces and Boons of Heroism:

An Integrative Review of the Features and Functions of Heroes
CHAPTER 4: FACES AND BOONS OF HEROISM

Abstract

This chapter synthesises literature from psychology, philosophy, and sociology, and illuminates underexplored areas of heroism from a psychological perspective. In the first section of this chapter, the structure and form of heroes are considered. The problems with the many definitions of heroes that exist in the literature are highlighted. Meanwhile, the advantages of viewing the concept of ‘hero’ as a prototype are emphasised. Similarities and differences between heroes, leaders, and role models are discussed and grounded in theory. In section two, some considerations with regard to declaring heroes are identified, including the role of subjectivity, individual differences in hero choice, and the potential risks of labelling heroes. Section three examines the roles of heroes in society and the benefits that people derive from heroes. A conceptual model of heroic influence is presented (Figure 1). Three broad types of influence that heroes exert on the lives of others are outlined: enhancing, protecting, and moral modelling. The proposed model of heroic influence (Figure 1) provides a useful framework for understanding heroic influence and generates useful predictions for future research.

Keywords: Heroes, characteristics, leaders, role models, functions
CHAPTER 4: FACES AND BOONS OF HEROISM

Faces and Boons of Heroism: An Integrative Review of the Features and Functions of Heroes

Sometimes all it takes is a tiny shift of perspective to see something familiar in a totally new light. (Dan Brown, 2009, *The Lost Symbol*)

Heroism is a universal and uniquely human endeavour. The first heroic references date back to Homeric writing in Ancient Greece; however, the types of heroes and roles that heroes adopt have changed over time (Klapp, 1969). In fact, Schwartz and Schwartz (2010) note that certain types of heroes arise with greater frequency in some historical eras than others. In pre-Christian times demi-gods and warriors were celebrated. Architects, painters, and scientists were the heroes of the Renaissance. In the 19th century, the heroes were industrialists and explorers. It is easy to demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of heroes in human history, but, are heroes still relevant in the 21st century?

The present chapter aims to review current knowledge about heroes, underscore the paucity of research on the subject, and expose how recent research has progressed understanding of this important and complex topic. First, the form and structure of heroes is assessed. Second, factors that influence the declaration of heroes are discussed. Third, the role that heroes play in society and in the lives of others is considered.

This chapter builds upon recent work on heroism in psychology (Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011; Goethals & Allison, 2012) in a number of ways. Franco et al., (2011) helpfully highlight a number of paradoxes that surround heroism: 1) the tension between admiring the behaviour of heroes and punishing heroes who go against the status quo, 2) the fact that heroism is a social action but the decision to behave heroically is a private, interior process, and, 3) the outcome of altruism is generally
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positive whereas behaving heroically has the potential to lead to social alienation (e.g., where social networks rejects heroic behaviour that challenges social norms or power structures). Considerations of these paradoxes contribute to initial efforts to create a theory of heroism. However, Franco and colleagues (2011) primarily consider the topic from the perspective of why people behave heroically and place less emphasis on the audience for heroism. Such a perspective offers relatively little explanation about the influence of heroes on the lives of others. In fact, the conclusions drawn regarding the paradoxes about heroes are based on findings from studies that primarily that represent the views of white American young males. Those authors do, however, stress the importance of future research establishing the prototypical or central views surrounding the construct of heroes. In the present review, perspectives from classical literature and prior theorists are integrated with the findings from a novel research programme (conducted with diverse samples) on the prototypical features and functions provided by heroes.

Another recent article (Goethals & Allison, 2012) sheds light on previously unexplored territory, such as the concept of heroism, types of heroes, the decision to behave heroically, and the need for heroes. Their conclusions, however, came from research on ‘death positivity bias’ (i.e., where individuals form more positive impressions of dead people than those who are still living) and underdogs rather than from an extensive programme of research on the topic of heroes, such as the program presented in this thesis. Those authors also noted similarities between leaders and heroes; however, such comparisons did not have supporting data. Nonetheless, many of their ideas are complementary to the theoretical and empirical findings presented in this thesis. Such parallels are useful to the chapter. The present review considers existing
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literature about heroes, leaders, and role models in relation to novel findings about how people think about each of those social categories.

Throughout this chapter three core ideas about heroes are advanced. Firstly, heroes are multi-dimensional; they are not monolithic or characterised by a single trait. Second, heroes provide multiple physical, social, and psychological benefits to others, in other words, heroes can promote psychological health, are analgesic, and alleviate suffering. Third, heroes are not the same as role models or leaders. Throughout this chapter, evidence that supports or disputes each claim will be considered. By this means, it is hoped that the reader will gain a greater understanding of heroes and their psychological importance.

Information from a range of psychological disciplines, such as clinical, developmental, motivation, cognition, social, as well as perspectives from philosophy and sociology is considered. The primary aim is to champion an open-minded and flexible approach to the conceptualisation of heroes and their many purposes. For those who believe the topic of heroes to be abstract, irrelevant, or without tangible benefits, the aim is to offer a convincing alternative perspective. Indeed, heroism is both an epistemic and pragmatic issue, and hence it is worthy of attention and study. The present research may generate debate that promotes growth in research on heroes, influence, leadership, and role models.

Heroes in Everyday Life

An influential book about heroes, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (Campbell, 1949), reflects the inherent diversity of heroes. More recent observations indicate that people can declare athletes, civil rights activists, musicians, military figures, inventors, writers, and religious leaders (and so forth) as heroic. A survey of 214 university students (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2012a) revealed that, in their opinion, the terms
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‘hero’ and ‘heroic behaviour’ were relevant today (88%). Further, 82% of those students believed that heroes were more important during societal crises (Klapp, 1969).

Globally, people face great challenges and developments, such as environmental devastation, political conflict, economic collapse, religious extremism, and advances in military technology. It appears that since the Global Financial Crisis (2007-2012), there has been a noticeable increase in the number of initiatives that celebrate and promote heroism. Historically, many heroes—Buddha, Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi, Joan of Arc, and Nelson Mandela—have emerged during societal crises. Even though scholars have written about heroes for centuries, psychologists have studied heroes for a relatively brief length of time.

Part 1: The Structure and Form of Heroes

Multiple Definitions of Heroes

One key problem with starting to research the complicated topic of heroes is that multiple definitions exist. From a Jungian viewpoint, the hero archetype (synonymous with prototype; Halls & Nordby, 1973) represents a universal and pre-formed template of a hero that exists in ‘the collective unconscious’ which causes inner transformation and influences culture (Jung, 1969). Goethals and Allison (2012) suggest that humans have a predisposition towards admiration of the competent and morally advanced among us. Similar to other social categories, people are likely to use broad expectations of heroic characteristics to recognise and remember heroes. These broad expectations help storytellers and producers to create fictional characters that fit with the general public’s anticipation for heroes. Other writers warn that the heroic archetype most typically consists of physical risk (martial and civilian) heroes, rather than heroism in the service of ideas (social heroism; Franco et al., 2011; Martens, 2005). The heroic archetype is a complicated phenomenon to explain and understand. In fact, the term
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‘hero’ has been described as extremely confusing in modern use (Gill, 1996) due to the multiple ways that it is applied, for instance: A person who risk their life to save others from physical danger (Becker & Eagly, 2004), someone who persists in the face of failure (Ko, 2007), a person who protects and promotes the well-being of others (McAdams, 2008), someone who shows moral will and moral skill (Schwartz, 2009).

More recently, psychologists have realised that previously held narrow definitions provided by researchers fail to accurately convey the meaning of hero. A shift of attention towards analysing lay conceptions of heroes has ensued. In 1997, Gash and Conway found that children describe heroes with some characteristics associated with the original conceptions in Homer’s writing—brave, honest, strong, warrior—but also a number of physical attributes—beautiful, dresses well, and rich. University students in the USA were more likely to describe heroes as intelligent, loving, caring, talented, hardworking, a role model, creative, motivated, and religious (Sullivan & Venter, 2010). Elsewhere, USA college students highlighted eight traits of heroes: smart, strong, caring, selfless, charismatic, resilient, reliable, and inspiring (Allison & Goethals, 2011). Each of those researchers used a different method of eliciting and categorising these heroic features and there is a degree of overlap with the comprehensive analysis of lay conceptions of heroes presented in this thesis (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2012b). Nonetheless there are some crucial characteristics and nuances of heroism that were not identified by those previous studies. The features that need to be present in order to activate the concept of ‘hero’ in research were not identified. Those researchers did not identify which features of heroism are most central to the construct (e.g., bravery, integrity). To address these concerns, a series of empirical studies presented in this thesis using mixed methods (prototype analysis, rating scales,
reaction time and free-recall paradigms) were conducted to empirically and systematically reveal the full range of characteristics associated with heroes.

**Revealing the Hero Prototype**

Prototypes are invaluable for indicating essential elements of fuzzy, complicated constructs, “in logical terms they necessarily remain unsatisfactory because they involve indefinites, yet for everyday speech, for learning processes and inductive generalisation, which also means for science, they are fundamentally important” (Früchtl, 2009, p. 149). The concept of hero is complicated and does not contain a single distinguishing feature, yet, people appear to have a template or schema for thinking about heroes. The prototype method was chosen as a means to show the heroic prototype, incorporating a scientific analysis while capturing the full breadth of characteristics that are associated with heroism. Moreover, the labels of hero and heroic behaviour are typically applied when a blend of central (*brave, moral integrity, conviction, courageous, self-sacrifice, protecting, honest, selfless, determined, saves others, inspiring, and helpful*) and peripheral (*proactive, humble, strong, risk-taker, fearless, caring, powerful, compassionate, leadership skills, exceptional, intelligent, talented, and personable*) features are present (Kinsella et al., 2012b). These characteristics are diagnostic in the sense that they help us to recognise and distinguish heroes from other people.

Interestingly, most of these characteristics could be applied to the three broad heroic types: martial heroism, civil heroism, and social heroism (outlined by Franco et al, 2011). Peripheral characteristics are essential in order to capture the full domain of the construct. Typically, a hero shows many, but not necessarily all, of the prototypical features of heroes. Promoting the prototypical features of heroism reduces the likelihood of misuse of the term in everyday language. Also, these findings reiterate the multi-dimensional nature of heroes. In accordance with prototype theory, the central
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features of the prototype will activate the hero concept, opening a range of opportunities for hero research and application. These findings make the heroic archetype explicit that many previous authors have described but not defined.

Overall, heroes are described with positive and likeable attributes (e.g., inspiring, caring, honest, showing integrity), in fact, heroes appear to epitomise many people’s conceptions of goodness. Philosophers (e.g., Socrates, Aristotle) and psychologists (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004) have described similar virtues as highly valuable and desirable. Anderson (1968) notes that sincerity, honesty, trustful, and dependability are the most socially-desirable traits, these characteristics are similar to many of those identified as heroic by the lay persons in the present research. Psychologists have known for some time that the terms ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are some of the first concepts learned by children (e.g., Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), providing some rationale for the ease that children appear to grasp the concept of ‘hero’ (i.e., representation of good) from an early age.

Analyses of the prototypical heroic characteristics have provided two indications as to why heroes are so positively regarded and important in society. First, heroes promote the psychological and physical well-being of others by showing compassion and care, providing inspiration, motivating others to fulfil their own potential, and helping others to cope. Heroes are consistently described with positive attributes and exerting a positive influence on others. In fact, heroes exceed people’s expectations and bring joy because they remind them of the human capability for exceptionality and goodness. Furthermore, uncertainty about some elements of a positive event can actually prolong enjoyment (Ritchie & Bryant, in press; Wilson, Centerbar, Kermer, & Gilbert, 2005). Therefore, one factor which may further enhance the positive outcome of a heroic encounter is that heroes often display unexpected and extraordinary
behaviour that people cannot make sense of, therefore, prolonging their enjoyment of
the event. Second, heroes alleviate pain and suffering by having the courage and
conviction to protect and save others from harm. A hero’s willingness to sacrifice their
life, risk their own safety, and do what no one else will do is likely to increase
perceptions of safety and reduce threats to well-being. To illustrate, in the recent
Batman movie, The Dark Knight Rises, Jim Gordon (Batman’s ally) reminds the
viewers that in the aftermath of a period of terrorism and turmoil that “Gotham needed a
hero”, implying that promoting a hero would increase perceptions of security in the city
and provide the residents with a much needed boost of morale.

Revealing the prototypical features of heroes has been proved an important first
step in the empirical study of heroism. Before considering the physical characteristics of
heroes, it is interesting to consider whether the 26 prototypical psychological
characteristics of heroes map directly on to an established dichotomy in personality
psychology, warmth and competence.

What about Warmth and Competence?

Warmth and competence are universal dimensions in person perception (Fiske,
Cuddy & Glick, 2006). Judgements about politicians and leaders, for example, typically
involve perceptions of warmth and competence (Chemers, 2001). Deductions about
heroes may also rely on these dimensions. The central and peripheral characteristics of
heroes (Kinsella et al., 2012b) reveal that heroes are described as warm (and the closely
related dimension of moral; Wojciszke, 2005) and competent (Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, &
Glick, 1999). People who are judged to be warm and competent tend to evoke positive
emotions and behaviour in others (Fiske et al., 2006). Interestingly, admiration is the
emotional response that people experience following an encounter with someone who is
warm and competent (Cuddy, Glick, & Beninger, in press), giving clues about the
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psychological influence of heroes. Some prototypical features of heroes map onto the dimensions of warmth (e.g., helpfulness, trustworthiness, and moral integrity) and competence (e.g., intelligence, talent, exceptional). Other central heroic characteristics (e.g., protecting, self-sacrificing, saving, inspiring) fit less well within those two dimensions, reinforcing the idea that heroism is multi-dimensional and complex. Therefore, evidence of high morality/warmth and high competence are not sufficient for promotion to heroic status.

What are the Physical Characteristics of Heroes?

There may be certain physical characteristics associated with heroism. Research suggests that leaders who are taller, more attractive, and display a greater physique are more successful (Van Vugt & Ahuja, 2011), however, the physical features of heroes has not yet been considered. Research on face perception tells us that humans make instantaneous facial judgements about people and their intentions, often drawing conclusions about the trustworthiness of that person (Willis & Todorov, 2006). Recent evidence suggests that men with wide faces tend to be more sacrificial (Stirrat & Perrett, 2012). Other studies have shown that facial width-to-height ratio can be used to judge aggressiveness (Carré, McCormick, & Mondloch, 2009) and that people who have more Fuchs’ crypts on the surface layers of their iris are more likely to have warmer and trustful relations with others (Larsson, 2007). Drawing from the leadership literature, there is evidence to suggest that taller people with hair are typically more likely to succeed (e.g., Judge & Cable, 2004). Do humans make decisions about heroic or non-heroic people based on physical attributes? If so, to what extent do physical attributes correspond with actual heroic behaviour? Anecdotal evidence suggests that heroes are often described as strong, larger-than-life, someone to look up to, and standing out from the crowd—all of these phrases suggest that, at least in abstract terms, individuals
believe that heroes are larger than the average person. Heroes may appear larger due to their physical size or social size (fame, authority, prestige, social influence). Similarly, physical size typically correlates with strength (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980); therefore, if people consider heroes as ‘larger than life’ it is not surprising that associated adjectives of strength are common. These ideas are reiterated in heroic journeys of hardship and challenge (see Campbell, 1949) which call for physical and mental strength. When an individual encounters a hero directly, s/he may feel overwhelmed by their extraordinary behaviours resulting in an experience of awe and perceived vastness (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Considering the physical attributes of popular heroic figures may prove a fruitful and interesting direction for future research.

Researchers have begun to unveil the most essential features of heroism. Studying these findings further across cultures, religions, and age-groups will be an important next step. Existing research consistently shows that heroes are multi-faceted (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2012b; Ko, 2007; Sullivan & Venter, 2010). In each of the studies that have considered lay conceptions of heroes, the results conclusively indicate that there is no one defining trait of heroism—rather the term ‘hero’ refers to a multi-dimensional category which incorporates a mixture of central and peripheral features. Further, this multi-dimensional view of heroes incorporates social heroism in addition to physical risk heroism (as requested by Franco et al., 2011). While some heroes may be described with additional peripheral attributes that are not represented in the prototypical features of heroes (Kinsella et al., 2012b), the most important and diagnostic heroic attributes are represented in the 26 prototypical features of heroism. Overall, heroes were described as having a positive influence on others, reinforcing the idea that heroes promote health and alleviate
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suffering. To understand more about the structure and form of heroes, it is important to assess their characteristics in relation to other persons of influence.

Related but Not Synonymous: Leaders and Role Models

Leaders. Leadership receives a lot of attention in research and public life. A leader can be a person who exerts social influence on others to accomplish a common goal (Van Vugt & Ahuja, 2010) or at least shapes the beliefs, desires, and priorities of others (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011). In the 1970s, leadership traits and skills were identified as assertive, energetic, self-confident, dominant, persist, alert, and ambitious (Stogdill, 1978). However, the trait approach to leadership has been criticised this approach to leadership because it fails to take into account the diversity of leaders and interplay between the leader, the situation, and the followers (Haslam et al., 2011). If this is true, why would understanding heroic characteristics be an important first step in hero research?

To answer this question, it is essential to compare the attributes of leaders and heroes in more detail. Leadership positions are designated to certain individuals in government, business, religious institutions, charities, sports clubs, and other organisations. There can be great variety between those who are elected to a leadership position. Some will be successful while others will not; their common characteristic is that they are in a leadership position. Yet, people are not elected to the position of hero. To be classified heroic, an individual must first display heroic characteristics (e.g., bravery, self-sacrifice, moral integrity, conviction, and honesty). Another important point is that sometimes individuals who crave power, authority, or status may seek out leadership positions that fulfil their needs—some of those leaders will have a positive influence, others will have a destructive impact—becoming a leader can be a means in itself. Conversely, heroes do what they think is right in a given situation and assume the
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appropriate role to facilitate that goal. In fact, most heroes are motivated by a purpose (e.g., fighting for democracy, initiating a civil rights movement) and are deemed heroic along the way. Some leaders exude heroic characteristics. It will be interesting to uncover the influence of heroic leadership on their followers in future research.

The findings from the present thesis show that leaders were rated as powerful, strong, fearless, demonstrating conviction, displaying leadership, proactive, determined, intelligent, inspiring, and willing to risk more than heroes. It is reasonable to suggest that these are attributes of the ideal rather than typical leader, rather than the average (or bad) leader. It is unclear whether there is such a thing as an ideal or typical hero. Relative to leaders, heroes were rated as braver, more moral, willing to save others and sacrifice, altruistic, compassionate, selfless, courageous, and protecting. These discriminatory ratings of heroes and leaders are very interesting, suggesting that heroes and leaders are not considered equal, and begging further research about the differentiating characteristics and influence of these types of influential persons.

Although heroes are considered powerful, they are not rated as powerful as leaders (Kinsella et al., 2012b). This is interesting because it raises questions about the different types of power that exist. For instance, Robertson (2012) argues for two types of power: p power that is fuelled by ego and personal goals, and s power that is focused on goals for the group or society (and has found a neurological basis for this distinction). It may be the case that heroes show more of the latter. Robertson notes that people with greater levels of s power allow their behaviour to be guided by morals, sense of duty, and concern for others (recognisable features of heroism). Also, he stresses that the value of s powered individuals to dissolve the potentially harmful influence of people with p power. Heroes who display more s power and influence
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through altruistic routes are likely to play a role in diffusing self-centredness and greed that people with higher levels of power display.

Both leaders and heroes are likely to display the ability to lead and guide others. This is interesting given that many heroes do not occupy formal leadership positions. Formal and informal leadership theory (Gardner, 1995) may help to elucidate the different ways that persons of influence can lead other human beings. Traditionally, formal leaders pull a group towards a goal (e.g., doubling company profits within two years). Informal leaders (and heroes) are more likely to guide a new way of thinking or alternative perspective, being, or doing within a particular group, sometimes without a tangible outcome. Another interesting distinction is that a particular situation may call for spontaneous heroic behaviour (e.g., risking one’s life to save a drowning child). Leadership is rarely such a fleeting occurrence and tends to occur over time. The temporal element of heroism—the duration of heroic encounter, and the post-encounter impact on the individual—has not been researched.

Undeniably there are different types of leaders, some of whom are more related to heroes than others. Many leadership theories describe specific leadership behaviours and the influence on followers. Servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2002) for instance, is characterised by empathy, humility, sense of community, awareness of ethics, and a willingness to take on work which involves sacrifice for others. The missing element may be the heroic characteristics of protecting and saving others. Transformational leadership theory described a leader who inspires others and creates a future vision (Bass, 1990); this description could also be applied to many heroes.

Van Vugt and Ahuja (2010) identified six different types of leaders: the Warrior, the Scout, the Diplomat, the Arbiter, the Manager, and the Teacher. For the purpose of illustration, two of these leader types that are most similar to heroes are outlined here.
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The Warrior is strongly related to the protector theme of heroism, the Warrior’s role is to defend the group against physical threats. The authors described the Warrior as male, brave, competitive, dominant, and borderline psychopath, loyal, cold-hearted, and with a high threshold for pain. This type of leadership is most closely related to the Homeric hero, *Achilles*. Yet, the Warrior type of leader is not broad enough in scope to account for *psychological protection*. There are many examples of female and male heroes who have the capacity to protect physically, socially, or psychologically other people: A mother who fights with the strength and conviction of a warrior to protect her offspring against a bully, an employee who blows the whistle against corruption within an organisation. Unlike the Warrior leader-type, the words ruthless, competitive, and psychopathic are not typically associated with heroism.

Another leadership type identified is the Teacher (Van Vugt and Ahuja, 2011), sharing some overlap with heroism (and role models). That type of leader transmits important knowledge about people and the natural world to children and adults, promotes group cohesion, protects the culture of the group, and shows empathy to others. Examples include, the Pope, Oprah Winfrey, and Desmond Tutu (Van Vugt & Ahuja, 2010). Some leaders who fit The Teacher description may also be classified as heroes, particularly when their teachings include values, ethics, morals, and information about ‘right and wrong’ that promotes peaceful and harmonious relations with others.

One does not need to be morally competent in order to lead others, unlike heroism, where moral integrity is a central feature. In fact, Van Vugt and Ahuja (2011) draw attention to the fact that leadership can be “frequently amoral, even immoral, and incompetent” (p. 17). The same authors propose that those people who stand up to immoral leaders, namely whistle-blowers, are often considered heroic.
Leaders, unlike heroes, are not always celebrated for their positive contributions to society (obvious examples include Adolph Hitler and Robert Mugabe). One study showed that leaders score higher on histrionic, narcissistic, and compulsive personality than psychiatric patients (Board & Fritzon, 2005). Managers who doubt their own confidence to lead may be more likely to bully others (Fast & Chen, 2009). It is difficult to tell whether people who display these negative qualities elect themselves to leadership positions, or whether individuals actually believe that narcissism, confidence, dominance, authority, and self-esteem predict effective leadership (Nevicka, De Hoogh, Van Vianen, Beersma, & McIlwain, 2011). These negative characteristics of potentially dangerous leaders are very far removed from the category of hero.

In the study of leadership, it has been acknowledged that there are a number of sought-after virtues, such as generosity, fairness, and competence—personified by Kofi Annan, Nelson Mandela, and the Dalai Lamas (Van Vugt & Ahuja, 2010). The authors suggest a “universal psychological template of what a good leader is” (p. 156). This may be closer to the prototypical hero than was previously been recognised. One area which continues to fascinated researchers is how specific leaders have the ability to inspire and influence others to travel in a particular direction. Understanding more about the ways that heroes influence and inspire will help to understand more about leaders. Situational needs are likely to give rise to different types of influential persons. For instance, a leader who is exceptional during wartime (e.g., Winston Churchill) may not be so influential during peacetime. A hero who offers a new ideology during societal crisis may instigate more attitudinal change than during a period of growth. The overlap and boundaries of heroes and leaders need further empirical clarification.

**Role Models.** Recent efforts to locate a useful and consistent definition of the term *role model* in the academic literature have proved unrewarding and the few
existing definitions support the widely accepted view that role models are male (Brownhill, 2010). To address the lack of clarity, the same author researched the roles and responsibilities of role models and identified a number of themes: *Emulation/being looked up to/being copied or imitated, positive characteristics, well behaved, potential for learning ‘bad things’, sets a good example, positively impacts the lives and learning of others, gives good advice, spends time with others, demonstrates ‘good practice’, and someone who is real/normal* (p. 7). In recent studies (Kinsella et al., 2012b), role models where rated more talented, honest, personable, exceptional, and humble than heroes and leaders.

Singer (1991) contends that the concept of ‘role model’ is useful, but should not be confused with heroism where there is evidence of courage, greatness, and nobility of purpose. Many role models are proposed as worthy of emulation but few are deserving of heroic status (Zimbardo, 2007). In fact, Neiman (2012) argues:

> [that the term role model] doesn’t work the way the word heroes does: to inspire, to challenge, to light fires for (and under) people of whatever age who need to be reminded that there is more to their lives than they are taught to be resigned to (p. 12).

Researchers sometimes describe ‘heroes’ as people whom others wish to emulate (e.g., Van Vugt & Ahuja, 2011), when most likely they are referring to role models (and not heroes). Kelman (1958) suggests that people identify with celebrities and role models, their followers “adopt the actions, physical attributes, and behaviour, and attempt to mimic the overall worldview of the admired” (p. 79). Similarly, hero’s stories may be meaningful only to the degree that people can identify with the heroes’ struggles and anxieties (Artiano, 2012). A review of the literature points to two key conceptual themes that differentiate role models from heroes. First, role models tend to be in a
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A person’s direct social environment (e.g., Bricheno & Thornton, 2007), most likely because it is more difficult to emulate or compare oneself to a distant figure whose daily behaviour you cannot observe. Singer (1991) warns that “a role model's proximal reality encourages too close scrutiny and a destructive mimicry”, which essentially results in standing in another person’s shadow rather than “standing on the shoulders of the great heroes” (p. 291). Some heroes are geographically close, yet closeness is not a defining feature of heroism. Initial findings reveal that children are more likely to consider parents, friends, and teachers as role models than celebrities or sports stars (Brownhill, 2011). Lockwood and Kunda (1997) describe the ideal role model as someone who is older, slightly more advanced in their career, and who display the type of success that is hoped for by the individual. Further consideration to the notion of perceived closeness (due to online accessibility) and geographical closeness influence identification with heroes and role models is needed. Second, role models can impact on others in a positive or negative way (Brownhill, 2010). Van Vugt and Ahuja (2011) suggest that if people fail to gain a sense of belonging and leadership from family they will seek to satisfy this need to affiliate elsewhere, seeking out role models in religion, gangs, cults, celebrity culture, or other groups.

Role models (and heroes) enhance and inspire (Kinsella et al., 2012b; Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2012c; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Yet when role models exhibit unattainable behaviour in a self-relevant domain this results in self-deflation for the observer (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997, p. 61). Heroes, on the other hand, are consistently described as having a positive impact on the lives of others (Kinsella et al., 2012b) and are famous for displays of supreme greatness. It appears that role models influence via a process of social comparison (Festinger, 1954), they serve as reference points for behaviour against which individuals compare the self to be better or worse than. The
process by which heroes influence others is remarkably complex and may involve social comparison (Collins, 1996), inspirational processes (Thrash & Elliot, 2010), and marvelling such as when a person encounters natural beauty or work of art (see Bryant & Veroff, 2007). The topic of heroic influence is one that is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

To summarise, there are areas of similarity and disparity in lay conceptualisations of heroes, leaders, and role models. The present thesis has made progress in empirically testing those differences and grounding those findings in existing literature. In the next section, the process of declaring heroes is considered and important factors such as subjectivity, individual differences, and some potential risks of labelling heroes are identified.

**Part 2: Declaring Heroes**

**Subjectivity**

There is often a level of subjectivity when deciding who is heroic. After all, the concept of heroism is a social construction (Rankin & Eagly, 2008). Recognising other people, real or fictional, as heroic is a common human preoccupation—66% of research participants identify at least one hero (Kinsella et al., 2012). In ancient Greek-tragedy, heroes derived from royalty whereas the modern concept of ‘hero’ does not refer to a specific social class, race, age, occupation, or gender. In fact, the term ‘hero’ appears to transcend those boundaries. There are many sorts of heroes ranging from civil, martial, good Samaritans, politico-religious, whistle-blowers, and those who challenge problematic bureaucracies (e.g., Franco et al., 2011). A number of deserving heroes may not receive recognition (formal or informal) for their efforts (Franco et al., 2011), while others are not celebrated until after their death. For instance, Dr Martin Luther King Jr., though loved by many, was hated by enemies, and it was not until after his death was
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there some consensus about his heroic status. Klapp (1969) noted that historical heroes are particularly important during societal crisis where they “flatter the national ego” (p. 212). Some heroes are widely accepted (cultural heroes, Klapp, 1969; global heroes, Schwartz & Schwartz, 2010).

Popularly cited heroes in the programme of research presented in this thesis were as follows: Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, Dr Martin Luther King Jr, Aung San Suu Kyi, Superman, and Rosa Parks (this list is consistent with Allison & Goethals, 2011). Individual hero-selection processes are often private and subjective; a person’s choice of hero may reflect psychological interests such as intelligence, security, status, athleticism, power, equality, or musicality. The values, aspirations, principles, and moral beliefs of a person (or culture) may become evident upon an examination of their hero, particularly what is admired and how their behaviour is judged. Accounts of heroes have traditionally been communicated through stories, poems, myths, legend, and drama. More recently, heroes are more accessible through movies, media, videogames, social networking sites, blogs, in addition to more traditional methods of storytelling, music, and books, perhaps giving us more in-depth knowledge about heroes. In fact, Singer (1991) suggests that the media make the lives of heroes open to public scrutiny, and therefore, the target of criticism and deliberate attempts to tarnish their image. According to Singer, heroes have always been imperfect, but in previous decades people ignored their hero’s flaws and imperfections, and focused primarily on their greatness. Recent research on lay conceptions suggests that people still appear to focus on the exceptionality of heroes, yet there is a need for more research that considers the subjective process of declaring heroes.
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**Individual Differences**

Personality plays an important role in people’s daily lives and may play a part in hero-choice. One study found that people who rated themselves higher on integrity also chose heroes who were characterised by principled commitment, authenticity, beneficence towards others, non-self-absorption, and spirituality (Schlenker, Weigold, & Schlenker, 2008). People who self-reported with lower integrity evaluated their hero as intelligent, likeable, and similar to them. The authors concluded that the people with higher or lower levels of integrity use different criteria to judge the actions of others and decide who to admire. Furthermore, when asked to judge the behaviour of a central character, participants who were higher on integrity were guided by principles (ethical/not-ethical) rather than the outcome (successful/not-successful). These findings suggest that people who claim greater commitment to ethical principles are more likely to admire heroes with similarly high standards for integrity and values, even if the hero’s efforts are not objectively successful. Also, the authors proposed that people with heroes who model high moral standards are more likely to adopt their hero’s ethical ideologies and emulate the hero’s behaviour.

Humility varies from person to person—some people are more likely to feel humble more often than others. Humility is defined as an understanding of oneself through awareness of personal identities, strengths and limitations, as well as perspective of the self’s relationship with others (Nielsen, Marrone, & Slay, 2010). Humility enables a realistic assessment of one’s strengths and weaknesses (Ryan, 1983). Encounters with heroes who display extraordinary behaviours sometimes induce humility in onlookers. Humble individuals may seek out heroes in order to experience humility. For others, encounters with heroes are likely to provoke a humble state, at least temporarily. When experiencing humility as a result of a heroic encounter the
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An individual may be more likely to get an accurate sense of self (instigating a period of self-focus; Bryant & Veroff, 2007) that in their usual daily lives. This shift of perspective may help to motivate the individual towards personal goals and make people aware of what they need to do to achieve success; however, they might define it.

**Big five factors.** Examining the relationship between the Big Five personality factors (Big Five; Costa & McCrae, 1992) and hero selection is likely to yield interesting results. Extraverts may be more sensitive to potentially rewarding stimuli than introverts, due to differences in the mesolimbic dopamine system (Depue & Collins, 1999). This suggests extraverts will more intensely experience the benefits of a heroic encounter than introverts. Also, extraverts show more blood flow in the frontal lobes of the brain—anterior cingulate gyrus, temporal lobes, and posterior thalamus—which are involved in sensory and emotional experience (Johnson, Wiebe, Gold, & Andreasen, 1999). It is possible that when extraverts witness a heroic deed they will have a greater physiological reaction which motivates them to seek out future heroic encounters. Research may also help to uncover the various types of relationships, either reciprocal or parasocial (i.e., one-sided), that people have with heroes. Introverts and extraverts, for example, experience different effects of social networking (Internet paradox; Kraut, Kiesler, Boneva, Cummings, Helgeson, & Crawford, 2002). Perhaps there are individual differences in the ways that people like to communicate (directly or indirectly) with heroes. Extraverts may derive more energy from online encounters with their heroes, whereas an introvert who follows their hero on Twitter™ may not make contact with their hero directly and as a result may not derive social benefits in the same way as extraverts.

Neuroticism is associated with lower tolerance for stress and aversive stimuli (Eysenck, 1967). Indeed neurotic individuals show greater distress following negative
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life events (e.g., Creed, Muller, & Machin, 2001). If neurotic individuals are hesitant, vigilant, and nervous, it could be that they seek out heroes who make them feel safe, secure, and protected. Neurotic people are more susceptible to negative mood inductions than emotionally stable people (Larsen & Ketelaar, 1991). Heroes may buffer these negative threats to well-being; this is discussed in more detail in the third section of this chapter.

People low on conscientiousness may struggle to motivate themselves towards goals (Costa, & Mc Crae, 1992). Heroes who represent a person’s ideal or ought self may help them to override lower levels of self-control and develop the self-discipline needed to pursue their goals. In fact, heroes who inspire others to take action towards self-improvement goals may have a particularly motivating force on people with low levels of conscientiousness. People who are highly conscientious may be encouraged to take more risks, focus less on perfection, and evoke a more global mind-set where people are aware of others rather than focusing only on the details of specific task, future research will uncover such individual differences.

Agreeableness refers to people’s ability to relate to and understand others. People who are lower in agreeableness may need heroes to remind them of the value of human connections, empathy, taking alternative perspectives (e.g., world-focus perspective; Bryant & Veroff, 2007). Heroes who are extremely competent and talented may remind people who care too much for other people, to focus on the self.

Individuals who show low openness to experience are likely to benefit from encounters with heroes who encourage others to think creatively about problems, remind people of the incredible talent of others, avoid prejudice, and to imagine new possibilities. Individuals who score higher on openness to experience are also likely to score higher on various domains of creativity (Mc Crae, 1987). People who are more
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creative are thought to also show evidence of independence of judgement, self-confidence, attraction to complexity, aesthetic orientation, and risk-taking (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999). Creative people in their search for making sense of a complex world may draw upon heroic figures that represent particular values and ideals.

Fantasy prone personality (Wilson & Barber, 1981) is a trait that is characterised with a lifelong fascination with fantasy and is thought to relate to daydreaming and absorption. It is possible that superheroes, deities, myths, goddesses, or other fictional heroes may resonate most deeply with people who have a fantasy prone personality.

**Self-discrepancy theory and regulatory focus.** Mark Twain (1835–1910) famously claimed that “if everybody was satisfied with himself, there would be no heroes”, expressing unfulfilled needs that are projected onto others. The idea of regulatory foci has origins in self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) which suggests that during a person’s life self-guides (ideal or ought) are formed and provide the basis for self-assessment. Ought self tends to represent the duties and obligations that a person feels they should be going—when a discrepancy between one’s actual and ought self negative affect (anxiety) is likely to ensue. Conceptualisations of the ideal self tend to be associated with the achievements and aspirations of the individual. When a discrepancy between actual and ideal self occurs, the person will experience a sense of loss, most likely in the form of depression and disappointment. Heroes may serve to remind us of ideal or ought selves, perhaps motivating us to keep striving to continue to pursue personal goals.

According to regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) individuals are typically driven to strive towards making good things happen, maximising gains (promotion focus) or to avoid opportunities for negative events to occur, minimising threats (prevention focus). These two orientations influence the behaviours, emotions,
cognitions, and preferences of individuals and may also provide a useful lens for examining people’s identification with heroes. For example, people with a promotion-focus may be more attracted to heroes who show attributes which are similar to their ideal self. Promotion-focused individuals are concerned with values, ideals, goals—such a hero might be associated with accomplishment, advancement, and nurturance. Whereas people with prevention-focus may be more likely to choose a hero that reduces the discrepancy between ought and actual self—such heroes are likely to represent safety, security, duties, and obligations.

**Potential Risks of Declaring Heroes**

The labelling of heroes may pose some risks (Franco et al., 2011) because the person may not actually possess the traits or perform the roles which make her or him a ‘hero’ (Klapp, 1954). In some cases hero-worship is fervently disputed. Zimbardo (2007) highlights the example of Palestinian suicide bombers who are viewed by some as murderers, while others praise their sacrifice—celebrated and immortalised as inspirational heroes. People have a general sense of what is right and wrong (universal moral grammar; Hauser, 2006), but everybody has a tailor-made moral code which is influenced by family, friends, society, culture, religion, and so forth. It seems likely that if a hero breaks a personal moral code then an individual may stop considering that person as a hero; however, this process is little understood.

The role of the media in the labelling and promoting of certain heroes is important to consider. It is possible that the media labels certain individual as hero, leader, or role model, and it may thereafter become normative for other people to use that label. The concern regarding persons of influence is that “their only qualification for prominence is media ubiquity” (Van Vugt & Ahuja, 2011, p. 87). The label of hero is applied at least daily in the media (Sullivan & Venter, 2010), yet the media often use
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the word hero to describe sports stars and celebrities without evidence for courage, self-sacrifice, or moral integrity. Klapp (1969) suggested that the media capitalise on the desire for heroes and present heroes (and more often pseudo-heroes) in order to fulfil this need: “vainly do we make scores of artificial celebrities grow where nature planted only a single hero” (Boorstin, 1992, p. 76). Other authors similarly note that “the need for heroes is so strong that the media will manufacture pseudo-heroes to meet it” (Schwartz & Schwartz, 2010; p. 32). The impact of pseudo-heroism, celebrity culture, and negative role models is of serious concern for parents, educators, governments, and researchers. For instance, there has been a great deal of debate around the over-sexualisation of children and teenagers as a result of exposure to negative role models and the absence of real heroes who help others to move towards more noble purposes (Singer, 1991). If people need external reference points for goals, standards, and ways to behave (Schlenker, Weigold, & Schlenker, 2008), it is important to make salient heroes, role models, and leaders who serve as models for desirable conduct in a particular group.

So far, this chapter has highlighted the many faces of heroes, and compared that with leaders and role models. In addition, a number of hypotheses about the processes by which people select personal heroes have been specified. So far, the aim has been to provide greater concept clarity, the next section evaluates the role played by heroes in society and what benefits people derive from encounters with heroes.

Part 3: The Role of Heroes—Modelling the Good and Protecting from the Bad

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow [people]. (Campbell, 1949, p. 30)
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In this section of the chapter, the roles played by heroes in society, as well as the specific functions (or boons) that heroes provide to other people are discussed. While lay conceptions undoubtedly represent heroes as symbols of goodness, it is interesting that heroes often funnel (or redirect) attention to the bad in the world—perhaps helping people to avoid the source of danger, or approach it with a view to changing it (Baumeister et al., 2001). This is interesting because heroes often draw attention to a social cause (Klapp, 1969). Früchtl (2009) suggests that myths, symbols, and heroes do not deny struggles and contradictions in the world, but rather “cloaks, appeases them, thus rendering them (more) bearable” (p. 35). Rosa Parks (a hero named in research studies), for instance, acted with integrity and conviction (good) while simultaneously highlighting the horror of racism (bad). Research on selective attention in the domain of health psychology has shown that messages that are too threatening are ignored (Witte, 1992). This phenomenon has been coined as the Ostrich Effect, where people avoiding exposing oneself to information that may cause psychological discomfort (Karlsson, Loewenstein, & Seppi, 2009). Many people turn off the campaigns that raise awareness about child abuse, animal neglect, famine, war, or other horrors. However, when a hero is associated with a story, the message contains both good and bad news, perhaps making the message less threatening. The processes by which people attend to heroic behaviour and the social causes they represent have not been officially investigated.

Sometimes the role of the hero is to be present or to intervene while people are experiencing an immediate (or perceived) threat in the environment such as war, fire, natural disaster, disease, car crash, mugging, redundancy, bereavement, terrorism, evil, and so forth. Negative events seem to have a greater impact on a person’s life than positively valenced events of the same magnitude (Baumeister et al., 2001), although the authors do not suggest that bad will triumph over good, but rather people need many
good events to overcome the psychological effects of a single bad one. However, when
the negative event is self-related (e.g., being in a car crash, losing one’s job) people are
more likely downplay those bad experiences and focus on the positive aspects (e.g., a
hero who saves or motivates someone to start their own business after redundancy) of
an event (Fading affect bias: Ritchie, Skowronski, Wood, Walker, Vogl, & Gibbons,
2006).

On a related note, the ‘mobilization-minimization hypothesis’ (Taylor, 1991) suggests that when a negative event occurs there is a mobilisation effect on
physiological, affective, cognitive, and social resources to a greater degree than during
positive or neutral events, maximising response to threat. The literature suggests that
when facing stressful or negative events, people are more likely to turn to others in
order to ease the need for safety and protection (e.g., Bowlby, 1969). Reaching out to
others, particularly heroes, is likely to reduce feelings of threat and provide emotional
support. Once the immediate threat has subsided, individuals tend to minimise those
high-threat responses and offset the negative emotions with positive emotional
experiences (Taylor, 1991). After a hero rescues us from a threat, people are likely to
feel overwhelmed by positive affect such a relief and relaxation. Over time, those
negative effects are less accessible in memory. The Pollyanna principle suggests that
people are more likely to remember positive information (the hero who risked their life)
than the negative information (the thief who tried to steal a handbag), enabling us to feel
more optimistic about the future. Private rehearsal of positive effects enables people to
re-experience and savour the positive affect associated with those positive effects over
time (Bryant & Veroff, 2007).
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Heroes: How do they Influence Individuals?

Throughout history, people have been captivated by stories of heroes. Defined as those people who display courage, moral integrity, altruism, conviction, bravery, and self-sacrifice, what specific functions do heroes provide? The influence of heroism is not visible, occurring within the person (Klapp, 1969). Heroes can be encountered serendipitously, or people can actively seek them out in literature, movies, or myths. A number of writers have suggested psychological benefits derived from heroic encounters. Allison and Goethals (2011) suggest that heroes shape person’s feelings, thoughts, and behaviour. Other writers propose that heroes influence a person’s emotional well-being, ability to self-regulate, and their self-concept (Schlenker et al., 2008); however, research has not explored these processes. The purpose of this section of the chapter is to propose a new conceptual model of heroic influence (Figure 1) and consider empirical support for the model. Further, the usefulness of the model is assessed in light of an examination of previous writing on the functions provided by heroes.

A Model of Heroic Influence

The research presented in this thesis has provided a clearer understanding of the prototypical features and functions of heroes. Using this information, along with previous literature on heroes, it becomes possible to formulate a theory about the social and psychological influences of heroes. This information is synthesised in the form of a model of heroic influence (Figure 1) that attempts to capture the process by which heroes influence others.

A heroic encounter may be real, imagined, or recalled from memory. During and after these encounters, heroes are thought to provide three broad types of functions: enhancing, protecting, and modelling morals (Kinsella et al., 2012c). First, heroes make
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us feel good about ourselves and others (e.g., inspiring, motivating, and observing their exceptionality). Second, heroes protect others from physical and psychological threats (e.g., saving and protecting other people, risking and sacrificing for the greater good).

Third, heroes behave morally and remind us of ethical values, honesty, and altruism (e.g., showing moral integrity, honesty, and leadership). Typically, a hero encounter induces a perspective shift where the person may become more aware of the self (self-focus; Bryant & Veroff, 2007) or on the external world (world-focus; Bryant & Veroff, 2007). It is predicted that encounters will heroes will result in a number of possible outcomes for the self (e.g. well-being, coping, meaning, transcendence) or for the group (e.g., social order, moral guidance, social cohesion). In the next section, preliminary evidence about some of the components of the model is presented.

Support for Three-Dimensions of Heroic Influence

So far, a series of themes have been identified which are suggestive of the influence of heroes on well-established psychological processes. The next important stage in understanding the influence of heroes was to ask lay people to describe the benefits that their heroes provide to them and others. Empirical evidence suggests that heroes provide multiple functions for others (Kinsella et al., 2012c). Three dimensions of heroic influence are specified: protecting, enhancing, and moral modelling.

Protecting. Consistent with the etymology of the word, heroes are protectors (Becker & Eagly, 2004). The research presented in this thesis suggests that heroic functions reflect this theme: protecting, doing what no one else will, helping, saving, guiding, and acting against evil or danger (Kinsella et al., 2012c). At the most basic level, heroes may evoke approach and avoidance strategies, respectively (Klapp, 1954), where they invoke norms for self-judgement and roles for emulation or avoidance. The motivation to approach pleasurable stimuli and avoid unpleasant or painful stimuli is
essential for human survival (approach and avoidance motivation). Heroes make the dangers (objects, events, possibilities) in the immediate environment or on a more global level salient. They proactively work against forces of danger or evil, thus equipping people to distinguish between the forces of good and bad and reducing the threat of uncertainty. Military and civil heroes risk serious injury or death to protect others from physical danger. Heroes can provide psychological protection too, offering hope when individuals feel disheartened (Hobbs, 2010).

According to Zimbardo, heroes help individuals to have “the strength that forces connection to the larger universe and gives meaning to our actions and existence” (2007, p. 465), shifting one’s perspective to more noble purposes (Singer, 1991). Perhaps heroes buffer uncertainty, existential quandaries, and meaninglessness, helping to make sense of the environment (Fiske, 2004). Self-regulatory mechanisms help people to deal with the threats they encounter in their lives (e.g., Greenberg, Koole, & Pyszczynski, 2004). Heroes offer similar benefits. For instance, individuals draw upon a number of resources for dealing with uncertainty (Van den Bos, 2009), such as myths (Campbell, 1988) and metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Heroes represent societal norms and values which help people to find meaning and purpose in daily life. Becker (1973) suggested that heroes may serve as a buffer to existential threats, where a hero provides a source of continuity and immortality, enabling the individual to overcome concerns about mortality and reduce uncertainty. In a similar vein, Schwartz and Schwartz (2010) propose that heroes show that people can be remembered, suggesting that the need for symbolic immortality (Becker, 1973; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006) may be fulfilled by heroes. McAdams (2008) suggests that heroes are concerned with leaving a positive legacy for future generations which in turn provides a sense of meaning in life.
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Enhancing. Heroes have been called the “light that enlightens the darkness of the world” (Carlyle, 1840, p. 3), enriching the lives of others. People describe heroes as a source of positive influence on their lives (Kinsella et al., 2012c). Lay conceptions reflect the enhancing function of heroes: to motivate, to be a role model, to inspire, to instil hope, to improve morale and camaraderie, and to guide others. People often experience positive emotions such as awe, gratitude or admiration as a result of heroic encounters (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Experiencing these positive emotions associated with heroes impacts on current and future behaviour. For example, according to broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998), positive emotions widen focus, prompt engagement in activities, improve health, and broaden social networks. In laboratory experiments, participants who viewed positive video clips were more likely to have a global perspective than the control group. Heroes sometimes give their lives to something bigger than oneself (Campbell, 1949), inspiring others to shift to a world-focused perspective (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). Watching a hero push the boundaries of exceptional human behaviour motivates people towards new possibilities, boosts psychological well-being, and prompts a sense of human connection (most likely fulfilling enhancement and belonging needs).

A peak experience describes certain transpersonal and ecstatic states, where people find themselves in exciting and positive experiences where they feel wonder, happiness, awe, a sense of connectedness with others, and a period of transcendence, or awareness of a ‘higher truth’ (Maslow, 1970). Peak experiences are typically associated with religion, but may also help to understand the enhancing power of heroes. Maslow believed that peak experiences influence people in a positive and permanent way: uplifting, ego-transcending, releasing creative energies, affirm the meaning and value of existence, give a sense of purpose to the individual, and a feeling of integration to self.
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McDougall (1926) described admiration as a mixture of wonder and power. Heroes inspire, literally breathing life into others. Building upon the work of Thrash and Elliot (2003, 2004), people may be inspired by their hero, resulting in feelings of transcendence; alternatively, they may feel inspired to take more personal responsibility. People sometimes describe a transcending effect after an encounter with a hero where they see an old situation or problem with a fresh perspective (Klapp, 1969). The Irish philosopher Edmund Burke (1758–1794), explained that great literature, art, landscapes, or poetry can induce feelings of expanded thought; similarly, heroes appear to exert a similar broadening of mind. Heroes are often praised for helping others to consider an alternative viewpoint (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Flescher, 2003; Klapp, 1969).

Most likely, thinking about specific heroes on a regular basis will increase positive feelings about the self and self-esteem. Heroes influence a person’s self-concept (Sullivan & Venter, 2005) and therefore, an individual may feel good as a result of association with a particular hero (basking in reflected glory; Cialdini, 2007). Also, a hero demonstrates that an individual can be exceptional and thus, an individual may believe that they can feel special and valued too (Schwartz & Schwartz, 2010).

Self-esteem is the appraisal of one’s own self-worth. Incorporating personal heroes into one’s identity may increase of feelings of personal value. Self-esteem is thought to maintain well-being, savour positive experiences, demonstrate effective coping strategies, and set appropriate goals (Christensen, Wood, & Barrett, 2003; Creswell, Welch, Taylor, Sherman, Gruenewalk, & Mann, 2005; Sommer & Baumeister, 2002; Wood, Heimpel, & Michaela, 2003). The motivational components of encounters with heroes are likely to give people the drive to take action towards being the person they need to be in order to have worth as a person (another competent of self-esteem). Interestingly, these motivational components are similar to the
experience of being ‘inspired to’ where an encounter with an inspirational target boosts that person’s feeling of responsibility and volition to act (Thrash & Elliot, 2010). Positive experiences tend to activate the behavioural activation system (BAS; Fiske & Taylor, 2008). Positive encounter (real or imagined) activate an individual’s BAS, approaching other people and activities in the environment. People with BAS-orientation are more likely experience positive events and positive affect than people with behavioural inhibition system (BIS) orientation (Updegraff, Gable, & Taylor, 2004). BAS/BIS systems, along with other guiding systems, such as ought and ideal selves (Higgins, 1987) are essential for guiding the self’s behaviour. Furthermore, heroes who show what extraordinary accomplishments are possible may remind people that the occurrence of many good things lies within the realm of their personal control; thus, increasing expectations about their ability to complete specific tasks (self-efficacy; Bandura, 2006). Feelings of self-efficacy are linked to lower blood pressure and heart rate (Pham, Taylor, & Seeman, 2001), thus, promoting health and well-being.

**Moral modelling.** Concurrent with previously outlined themes about heroes, lay conceptions reveal that heroes are celebrated for their moral behaviour. People describe heroes in abstract and symbolic ways (Kinsella et al., 2012b; Kinsella et al., 2012c); they *remind people about the good in the world, show morals and values, and make the world a better place.* Schwartz (2009) argued that heroes demonstrate *moral will* (the desire to do good for others) and *moral skill* (the capacity to do the right thing in a particular situation). Heroes help people to focus on what is important in life (Schwartz & Schwartz, 2010), where self-focused concerns are of lesser importance (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). Heroes often reinforce particular ethics, principles, or roles needed to maintain social order (Klapp, 1969), and hence promote a sense of affiliation with others. As a result, heroes demonstrate that ‘old ideals’, such as selflessness and honour,
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are not extinct (Schwartz & Schwartz, 2010). Heroes personify a universal moral
grammar (Hauser, 2006). They provide us with general heuristics about what is right
and wrong. More specifically, an examination of the moral foundations theory (outlined
by Haidt, Graham, & Joseph, 2009) helps elucidate the types of moral behaviour
displayed by heroes. For instance, heroes who were described (Kinsella et al., 2012b) as
caring and compassionate (and other virtuous attributes) may represent the Harm/Care
category of moral foundations (Haidt et al., 2009). Heroes who act on behalf of others
or fight for equality or fairness map on to the Fairness/Reciprocity category of the
moral foundations. Heroes who behave selflessness and sacrifice themselves evidence
the moral dimension of Ingroup/Loyalty category of the moral foundations.

Alternatively, heroes who provide others with guidance and leadership may represent
the Authority/Respect category of the moral foundations. Interestingly, the moral
foundations theory (Haidt et al., 2009), proposes that the loyalty and authority
dimensions of morality promote a sense of belongingness; this is consistent with ideas
about heroes promoting a sense of belonging presented elsewhere in this thesis (Chapter
2; Chapter 3).

A principled ideology is “a commitment to a moral identity that facilitates
positive social activities and helps resist the temptation of illicit activities” (Schlenker,
2008, p. 1078). Heroes who model ethical ideologies—values, beliefs, standards, and
self-views—demonstrate how to manage the tension between expediency and
principles. They restore personal commitment to one’s principled ideologies. A recent
approach to morality involves the consideration of how people internalise of moral
goals, traits, and codes of conduct into the self-concept and the consequential influence
on behaviour (Aquino & Reed, 2002). A principled ideology may give purpose and
meaning (Schlenker, 2008). At times, heroes may provide role model functions: people
model their own moral behaviour on heroes (Wecter, 1941). An extensive body of research shows that individuals observe the behaviour of others and mimic that behaviour (Bandura, 1986). As noted earlier in this chapter, people with heroes who model high moral standards are more likely to adopt their hero’s ethical ideologies, mimic, and follow suit with their own behaviour. Although, Flescher (2003) noted that heroes demonstrate moral fortitude which may not be realistic for others to achieve, but the encounter may evoke a period of self-reflection which helps to avoid moral complacency and helps to think about a moral dilemma in a new way.

To summarise, the physical, psychological, and social benefits that heroes provide to others are best represented on three dimensions: protecting, enhancing, and moral modelling. The findings from the current investigation (Chapter 2; Chapter 3) suggest that the influence of heroes is complex; heroes cannot be described as providing one single function. Heroes promote psychological health by reminding individuals how to live in harmonious, connection relationships with others (boosting sense of belonging), ushering people away from harm or buffering the negative impact of threat (helping people to cope with uncertainty and threats), and uplifting individuals to a positive state of being where they can feel positive about the self, positive about others, gaining a new perspective, or motivating people towards new goals (enhancing and enriching their lives). In the next section of this chapter, existing themes in the literature on the topic of heroic influence are presented. These themes relate to intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits that have been associated with heroes, and are discussed in relation to the conceptual model proposed (Figure 1).

Intrapersonal Benefits Associated with Heroic Encounters

**Self-regulation.** Showing discipline and living morally are not easy endeavours. Each of these tasks requires a person to exercise control over their behaviour, thoughts,
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and emotions: self-regulation (Fiske & Taylor, 2008). In many ways the ability to self-regulate is automatic and guided by personal interests and long-standing goals. At other times people direct conscious effort to control their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours (e.g., situation cues, interactions with others). Heroes influence self-regulation in both automatic and conscious ways. If personal heroes are incorporated into an individual’s self-concept (Sullivan & Venter, 2005); the hero is likely to influence a person’s daily thoughts and actions without conscious effort. If the self-concept contains representations of hoped-for selves inspired by heroes, people will be motivated to do challenging tasks because “that’s the sort of thing that a me sort of person does” (Ylvisaker, Mc Pherson, Kayes, & Pellet, 2008, p. 715). The same authors note that possible selves are the cognitive underpinnings of motivation; giving meaning, organisation, and direction to instinctive hopes, fears, goals, and threats. Heroes who represent ideal or ought selves (self-discrepancy theory; Higgins, 1987) will become part of longstanding self-views. These possible selves serve to highlight discrepancies, model morals and values, and motivate behaviour towards self-standards.

A person may actively search for an inspirational encounter with a hero (e.g., watching a jaw-dropping TED™ talk) to help direct their own behaviour (e.g., writing a doctoral thesis). Consciously thinking about a particular hero may help motivate people to pursue personal goals, behave in ways that considering the well-being of others, or prevent people from quitting. Heroes, who remind individuals of ethical values and morals, may help people to not succumb to momentary distractions and stay on the committed path towards long-term goals (self-control dilemmas). If a student, for instance, feels bored or disinterested or negative they may decide to go to a party rather than finish an important class assignment. Anticipated short-term costs such as these elicit self-regulation efforts that attempt to reduce these short-term costs (Trope &
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Fishbach, 2000). If the student momentarily thinks about their values and long-term achievement goals (e.g., *me* with lots of money and a good job, *me* obtaining a scholarship for a postgraduate programme) they may decide to skip the party and finish the assignment. Self-control efforts, such as diverting the self from short-term distractions and re-focusing on the benefits of short-term efforts (Fiske & Taylor, 2008) may be further strengthened by evoking representations of personal heroes. With the power to activate behavioural approach and avoidance systems, heroes are likely to play a role in guiding actions, emotions, and thoughts in order to approach or avoid certain people or situations. Heroes, it seems, have the power to redirect attention inwards (self-focus) or to the external environment (world-focus). When heroes evoke a period of self-focus, people are more likely to evaluate their behaviour against a standard and subsequently adjust themselves towards the standard (self-awareness; Duval & Wicklund, 1972). During a period of world-focus activated by a hero, people may be more aware of other people and make decisions that more focused on the needs of others (and less hedonistic concerns).

Emotion regulation refers to the ability to concentrate on a particular task, suppress emotions that interfere with that task, and express the appropriate emotion in the appropriate circumstance (Fiske & Taylor, 2008). It is emotion regulation that enables people to stop themselves from laughing at a funeral or crying in the workplace. People adopt different strategies to regulate their emotions, such as thinking about the problem in a different way (reappraisal) and suppressing emotions. Emotion reappraisal is one form of perspective change. Thinking about a hero who has suffered sometimes reminds individuals that the current situation is not as bad as they think (reappraise the situation). Alternatively, thinking about a hero who coped with hardship in a creative
way may help them to consider creative ways to deal with current challenges (reappraise the problem).

**Coping.** To protect people from feeling bad and alleviate suffering, heroes can help people to cope (Hobbs, 2010). The literature indicates that people use many strategies to cope: escapism, seek social support, exert self-control, accept responsibility, positive reappraisal, and heighten positive experiences (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Reaching out to heroes may distract people from their own perceived reality, providing a means of escape. When dealing with stressful or negative effects, people turn to their social support network to help them reassess the situation and regulate their emotions (House, 1981). People may feel part of a larger social unit as a result of group hero-worship (see Klapp, 1969; the rallying function of heroes). Heroes remind individuals of the human capability for goodness and morality, perhaps providing additional resources to make decisions which benefit the greater good (rather than self-centred needs). This change of perspective may actually trigger a reappraisal of the current stressors. Over time people may remember more about a hero’s intervention rather than a negative experience or event. Individuals may minimise the negative informative associated with that time in history (mobilization-minimization hypothesis; Taylor, 1991) and remember the positivity associated with the hero (fading affect bias; Ritchie et al., 2006).

**Affect regulation.** Heroes reduce negative affect and generate positive affect. Textual analyses reveal that descriptions of heroic characteristics consist of 29% affect-process related words and 28% positive emotion words (Kinsella, et al., 2012b). Heroes may evoke positive affect during an actual encounter or afterwards individuals may rehearse the memory, or share the experience with others in order to experience positive affect. The specific types of emotions that people experience during or after a heroic
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encounter have not been researched. However, it is likely that the emotions range from pleasant (e.g., happy, warm-hearted, satisfied) to high positive affect (e.g., elated, excited, strong, enthusiastic). Other writers suggest that awe, gratitude, and admiration are the emotions typically experienced during heroic encounters (Algoe & Haidt, 2009).

Specifically, individuals experience admiration when they observe a hero who exhibits competence, and moral elevation. These ‘other-praising’ or self-transcendent emotions are those which are experienced when other individuals engage in acts of greatness, skill, or moral integrity (Haidt, 2003). Interestingly, Keltner and Haidt (2003) characterise awe as an experience of vastness and accommodation. Those authors describe vastness as what people experience when they look at the stars, see hurricanes and their aftermath. Individuals may experience vastness when they perceive heroes to go far beyond what they can imagine for themselves. Accommodation occurs when people are surprised in a way that challenges their comfortable mental structures, this change in perspective sometimes results in enlightenment and transcendence. A collective emotional orientation (Jarymowicz & Bar-Tal, 2006) may occur in response to shared experiences. Durkheim (1887) wrote that certain collective emotions are transformative, they change people’s attitudes, and inspire them to follow a new ideology. A hero who addresses a group may influence the well-being and outcomes of the entire group. Listening to the Dalai Lama speak in a crowded room may induce positive affect among individual listeners which may be intensified due to the collective orientation and feeling of shared experience.

Memory. There are a number of ways that heroes are relevant to the field of memory. The first is the memory a person has for their experiences, values, personality. Taylor said that in order “to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become and where we are going” (1989, p. 47). Heroes are an agent of
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continuity for individuals, groups, and for entire societies. Sometimes people have the
same hero throughout their lives; that hero is likely to provide self-continuity over time
and promoting psychological well-being. Some people have multiple heroes over the
course of a lifetime—storing this information within autobiographical knowledge base
(Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000), each representing a stage in development. More
generally, people who have an influence on the self or with whom one has been
emotionally involved are linked to the self through knowledge that maintains the unique
aspects of oneself (Fiske & Taylor, 2008). In fact, heroes link to the individuals’s
system of beliefs, ethics, and ethical principles it is likely produce greater accessibility
of relevant moral constructs in memory. People’s perceptions of their hero’s
characteristics and behaviours are integrated into cognitive schemas; which serve as
mental scripts for how to behave in a variety of situations (Schlenker et al., 2008).

Memory building (Bryant & Veroff, 2007) describes the ways that people
actively store mental images that are encoded for later recall. It is likely that some
people store mental images and stories about heroes which they call upon later to
prompt positivity or diminish negativity. Also, heroic encounters are likely to be shared
with other people. In fact, the desire to share positive experiences with others prompts
people to be mindful during a spontaneous heroic encounter (e.g., watching a rescue
operation) to ensure that they have enough information to recount the details to others
later (re-living feelings of protection, safety, inspiration, awareness of other’s
willingness to sacrifice their own life). Such information is stored in long-term memory
and it contributes to effective self- and emotion- regulation too. The emotions prompted
by memories of heroic events may not always be the same emotions that are prompted
by the heroic encounters themselves. For example, the people who were trapped in a
burning building were not experiencing positive emotions during their encounters with
the heroic rescuer but later on when they recall the event a surge of positive emotions towards the hero may ensue.

Based on what is known from research on the fading affect bias (see Walker & Skowronski, 2009), the intensity of emotions associated with positive autobiographical memories fades slower than those associated with negative autobiographical memories. Given that memories for heroes are positive, it is likely that individuals will remember heroic encounters for a long time after the event. Remembering these positive life events correlates with positive feelings about oneself, optimistic feelings about the future, and strengthening one’s connections with others (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Walker & Skowronski, 2009). The positive-event prompted emotions are likely to be further enhanced by the heroic content of the memory (e.g., giving hope, motivating, inspiring).

**Meaning.** People strive to make meaning in their lives. The ability to make sense of one’s life has a profound influence on psychological well-being (Wong & Fry, 1998). This sense of meaning can be derived from religion, abstract values, and identification with heroic persons. Bryant and Veroff (2007) suggest that meaning is dependent on a person’s ability to find “value, good, some sense of a moral, social, or natural force that exits in an important way independent of one’s material being” (p. 192–193); indeed, heroes offer reminders of goodness, values, and moral insight. The idea of connecting of self to a greater force outside of oneself is linked to previous writings about the transcending experience that people associate with encounters heroes (e.g., Klapp, 1969). During times of uncertainty, individuals try to make sense of the inconsistencies, question their existence, and wonder about how to make big ‘life-decisions’; heroes may guide others towards more noble purposes and alleviate the suffering associated with uncertainty. Powerful heroic encounters may be particularly
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attached to an individuals’ search for meaning in a similar way to the way many people have awe-inspiring religious encounters when people are confused about their life and existence as a result of personal tragedy, such as illness or bereavement (Bryant & Veroff, 2007).

Transcendence. Transcendence has been associated with heroes for some time (e.g., Allison & Goethals, 2011; Klapp, 1969). Peterson and Seligman (2004) defined transcendence as exceeding one’s usual limits so that a person can forge a connection to a larger perspective. Other writers defined transcendence as an awareness of something greater than the self (Morris, Brotheridge & Urbanski, 2005). Previous authors (e.g., Thrash & Elliot, 2003) have shown how people are sometimes inspired by people, objects or places, resulting in the positive feelings of transcendence (and most likely psychological well-being). Thrash and Elliot describe this as a component process where one appreciates and accommodates an evocative target, independent of one’s own motivational concerns. For example, one may feel inspired by an exquisite painting but feel no desire to create one of their own. This process of being inspired by is particularly associated with transcendence, where inspiration instigates a shift of focus towards something that is better or more important than previous musings. Some heroes may trigger this type of inspiration process; enabling people to transcend, or move beyond, their current psychological state. This type of inspiration has been associated with religion (which is interesting given that some religious leaders are also considered heroic), and has been associated with a number of positive outcomes: enhanced self, creativity, absorption, self-esteem, and optimism (Thrash & Elliot, 2010). Finally, the experience of transcendence and inspiration has been shown to improve psychological well-being and increase levels of creativity (Thrash & Elliot, 2003, 2004). Heroes have been associated with changes in perspective, paradigm shifts (Kuhn, 1962): “Heroes
suggest new schemas or scripts for people to follow, and they inspire their followers to adopt these new ways of thinking and put them into action” (Allison & Goethals, 2011, p. 173).

**Self and identity.** Heroes are closely related to the self (Allison & Goethals, 2011) and identity (Klapp, 1969; Yviskaker et al., 2008). Research has shown that people incorporate aspects of their hero into the self, much like they do for people who are close to them (Sullivan & Venter, 2005). These researchers found that heroic traits, values, and personality features were incorporated into a person’s self-concept. Earlier writers, too, believed that the concept of ‘hero’ is intrinsically linked to the self. Caughey (1984), for instance, defined a hero as a representation of one’s ideal self. Klapp (1969) believed that heroes influence personal identity, in particular, raising awareness of possible ought and ideal selves that guide a person’s behaviour towards their ideal/ought self and away from other temptations or immoral decisions. Heroes sometimes trigger a period of self-focus for an individual; in other words, they prompt a self-evaluative frame of mind (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). This may result in a positive feeling where a person revels in their accomplishments, or it may spur the individual towards changing their behaviour or current situation (Phillip & Silvia, 2005). In the research presented in this thesis, participants did not feel deflated as a result of thinking about a hero—rather they felt inspired and motivated to see themselves in a new light (Kinsella et al., 2012c).

Identity represents a person’s values, goals, action strategies, abilities, attitudes, impulses, and feelings associated with representations of the self (Rogers, 1974). This sense of self is the thread that ties all of life’s experiences together; offering a sense of continuity among information contained within episodic memory and is essential for psychological well-being. Heroes guide and motivate individuals to approach or avoid
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thoughts, attitudes, or actions that are relevant to their identity. Complex, mental representations of possible selves develop and change with life experiences, cultural and social influences (Markus & Nurius, 1986). A person’s sense of self is sometimes associated with meaningful metaphors, for example, a personally-meaningful hero, image, or symbol (Ylvisaker et al., 2008). People look to metaphors, myths, or symbols that unify their diverse experiences in order to give coherence to their lives (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In fact, the authors suggest that humans seek personal metaphors to highlight and make sense of the past, the present, and the future aspirations and goals. A novel metaphor may serve to create new understandings and new realities for the self. For example, a hero may be associated with a positive metaphor for an individual’s hoped-for selves or as a means to avoid feared selves. These metaphors are processed at an implicit level and are associated with the regulation of emotions and behaviour (Teasdale & Barnard, 1993). In other words, a heroic metaphor is inspirational or motivating (rather than processed as true or false). Ylvisaker and colleagues (2008) encourage the use of metaphors, in particular heroes, when making links between personal identity and goals. Markus and Nurius (1986) suggest that possible future selves may also play a role in satisfaction which is likely to positively influence well-being.

Neiman (2012) provides an interesting alternative perspective where heroes can be perceived as threatening (i.e., self-threats): “we like our heroes tragic because they give us excuses not to imitate them” (p. 15). In 1997, Lockwood and Kunda found that role models in a self-related domain displaying attainable levels of success provoke self-enhancement and inspiration in others. On the contrary, role models in a self-related domain who show success that is deemed unattainable for the self results in negative affect and deflation. However, Kinsella et al. (2012c) found that heroes are described by
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the general public in overwhelmingly positive ways. Given that heroes are often considered too extraordinary to compare to the self—it is unlikely that most people could ever reach their level of talent, conviction, struggle, or integrity. Admiring a hero evokes a sense of wonder or awe, in the same way as admiring extraordinary art or beauty (Bryant and Veroff, 2007). Sometimes the admiration of a hero propels people into action towards self-improvement goals, which may or may not be related to the hero’s behaviour. A role model, who is more competent in a relevant domain, may be perceived a self-threat, as shown by Lockwood and Kunda, 2007. For example, a postdoctoral researcher who feels less than competent about their academic abilities and whose feelings of inadequacy may be accentuated when in the company of a senior lecturer, their role model, whom they admire greatly (upward social comparison). Yet, if that researcher should watch a documentary about the heroic endeavours of a hero, say Aung San Sui Kyi, they may actually feel better, experiencing a sense of wonder and awe, and feelings about self are temporarily forgotten. This pause in self-centredness may help the individual to think differently about a problem or situation (Ritchie & Bryant, 2012). Alternatively, the documentary may be motivating, creating a surge of energy which propels the researcher towards their own self-fulfilment goals. Typically a hero does not make a person experience negative affect or deflation, in the same way that seeing tremendous waterfalls, beaches, sculptures, or cloud formations, do not make people feel bad or threatened, the more likely reactions are wonder, awe, inspiration, or humility (Bryant & Veroff, 2007).

Broadly, previous writing about heroes supports the idea that heroes enhance the lives of others, protect people from threats to well-being, and remind people about morals and values, specifically they boost to feel good, provide self-regulatory and
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coping resources, reduce negative affect, help people to transcend current problems, give meaning to daily life, and promote clearer self-views.

Interpersonal Benefits Associated with Heroic Encounters

Moral influence. Heroism and morality are concepts which are intricately intertwined. Heroes are sometimes described a moral exemplars, guiding the moral thoughts and decisions of other people. Hegel wrote about the heroic as embodiments of universality as an individual, “founders of states, so that right and order, law and morals come from them” (Hegel, 1975, p. 188). The idea that heroes keep us on ‘the straight and narrow’ is one which relates strongly to other themes of heroes acting as source of social control (Klapp, 1954) and the need for humans to coexist in relative harmony in groups (Fiske, 2004).

Culture provides messages to children and adults about social norms and morality through myths, fairy tales, history, and stories (e.g., Bettelheim, 1976). Many of these narratives include central heroes who personify powerful messages. Crossley (2000) highlights the fact that stories, dramas, and movies often display moral conflicts—enabling people to make meaning of the events and see the connections between the behaviour and outcome. Further, Kierkegaard (1813-1855) suggest that it is by telling narratives about ourselves and others that people become ethical beings and take responsibility for their lives. Observing scenarios where heroes confront moral dilemmas and internal conflicts may help people to make sense of complicated reality. Storytelling can take a central role in any culture built on moral example. Unlike heroes, celebrities are often criticised for failing to provide moral examples.

Social identity and cohesion. Social identity refers to the part of an individual’s self-concept which s/he derives from group membership. Haslam, Reicher, and Platow (2011) emphasised the importance of fostering a shared sense of identity with followers;
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this is likely to be relevant for heroes and leaders who are aiming to guide and lead others towards a common good. Heroes have been described as increasing feelings of social belonging (Smith, 1976). When a number of people relate to a specific hero, there is a greater chance that people rally around those heroes, creating a sense of shared identity with likeminded hero-worshippers (Klapp, 1969).

Heroes sometimes represent prototypical in-group members. For instance, there are some examples of prototypical in-group members who are classed as heroic of a specific group—national identity, culture, or class. Some Irish people, for example, view political heroes who fought for Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) as symbols of courage and freedom. It is likely that asking those people to think about those ‘war heroes’ may evoke a strong sense of Irish identity and pride. From a social identity perspective (e.g., Turner & Reynolds, 2010), one might predict that thinking about that hero who is a prototypical in-group member would increase in-group cohesion; this has not yet been explored in psychological research.

A hero who makes someone aware of a larger perspective is likely to redirect focus from the self to the outside world. For instance, savouring suggests that observing a great humanitarian act may trigger a period of world-focused savouring and social connectedness (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). Heroes uplift and direct an individual’s ambitions away from “narrow, self-centred concerns” (Singer, 1991, p. 249). Hence, a consequence of focusing on the world can to lead to a sense of positive communion with nature and with others (e.g., group cohesion), which in turn, have positive implications for the survival of the group and the well-being of each of its members.

Social order. According to the German philosopher, Hegel (1770–1831), heroes embody a Volksgeist, a culture’s spirit. Früchtl (2009) suggests that a heroic encounter inevitably becomes a story from where values emerge, linking history, and promoting
social integration and community among a family, a city, a people or a nation. For any society to exist and thrive there is a need to maintain a level of social order. In the social sciences, scholars have identified many different mechanisms of social order ranging from institutions, ideologies, culture, values, morals, and norms. These facilitate harmonious group living and boost the psychological well-being processes that are associated with social support and connectedness. There are values embedded within a culture, differing in their priorities, and in the way they define what is good or virtuous (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For example, an ideology promoted by a particularly influential person has the power to unite nations that are otherwise divided by language, religion or ethnicity (Van Vugt & Ahuja, 2011), fulfilling the human need to affiliate with others. Klapp (1969, 1954) proposed that heroes serve as a form of social control, either making people feel better or helping them to behave differently. In his view, heroes exert influence on others in three distinct ways: reinforcement, seduction, and transcendence.

First, heroes reinforce a person’s social role (Klapp, 1969). They promote societal values, norms, and behaviours that are valued within society. The individual does not feel coerced into conformity; instead they admire the hero and choose to model their behaviour on her/him. In fact, Klapp proposes that societies “use heroes as a character-building force to establish traits that help a person play expected or admired roles” (p. 220); making the choice of being ‘good’ easier because heroes are admired and respected. This type of influence is particularly relevant for heroes and role models who display virtuous characteristics within a given group. Second, heroes occasionally seduce people to behave in ways that violate social norms. For instance, heroes may encourage protesting, evading arrest, ignoring bans on free-speech, or acting against corrupt leaders in the pursuit of change and for the greater good. With regard to
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antiheroes (e.g., Robin Hood), leaders (e.g., Charles Haughey) or celebrities (e.g., Amy Winehouse) the seduction function may cause an individual to behaviour in ways that they previous believed to be immoral, destructive or socially unacceptable. This seduction function may a particularly interesting avenue of exploration for examining the social influence processes that an individual to convert to terrorist organisations, fanatical religious groups, or criminal gangs. Third, some heroes provoke an entirely new perspective of self and others, a creative process known as transcending experience (Klapp compares this to Nietzsche’s ‘transvaluation of all values”; p. 229). The person becomes aware of new values and experiences that were previously beyond their perspective; they may develop a new identity or an awareness of their many selves.

Overall, previous writing about the interpersonal benefits provided by heroes support ideas about the ways that heroes help others to feel more positive about humanity and other people, boost a sense of belonging, protect against isolation, and model moral values that enable peaceful group relations. Specifically, heroes promote a clear sense of individual and social identity, increase social cohesion, and act as a form of social control.

In summary, the first section of this chapter examined the structure and form of heroes was considered. Specifically, the problems with multiple definitions of heroes and the advantages of viewing the construct hero as a prototype are emphasised. Identifying the areas of similarity and difference between heroes, leaders, and role models serves to clarify each construct and build a theory of heroism. Further, this section of the chapter highlights the many questions left unanswered with regard to heroism, including the physical characteristics of heroes, individual differences in hero choice, and the potential risks of declaring heroes. In the second section of the chapter, the role that heroes play in society and the functions that they provide to others was
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examined. A new model of heroic influence is presented, representing three broad ways that heroes influence the lives of others; protecting, enhancing, and moral modelling. A literature review and new research on the topic of heroic influence is presented and discussed in light of the proposed model. It is expected that the model and surrounding literature review will provide a useful source of information for researchers with an interest in exploring this topic.

**Epilogue**

In the short history of hero-related research, researchers have begun to piece together the essential elements of heroism and differentiate it from related constructs. This chapter began with a number of questions about heroes; some of which have already been addressed empirically and there are other questions which cannot yet be answered in full, but one can make inferences based on associated literatures. An extensive review of the literature and available empirical evidence has reemphasised the fact that heroes are complex and multi-dimensional; they cannot be characterised by a single characteristic. There are many different types of heroes but most of whom display the prototypical features of heroism; courage, moral integrity, altruism, conviction, bravery, and self-sacrifice. Heroes are more likely to be described as brave, showing moral integrity, saves, willing to sacrifice, altruistic, compassionate, selfless, courageous, and protecting, than role models or leaders.

Second, heroes provide multiple physical, social, and psychological benefits to others. Heroes make people feel good about themselves, about others. Specifically, they evoke positive emotions, create positive memories, and motivate (and self-regulate) people towards their personal goals. Heroes promote psychological health and coping, are analgesic, and alleviate suffering by offering protection from threats such as physical danger, stress, and meaninglessness. There is evidence to suggest that the
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functions of heroes are best represented along three dimensions; protecting, enhancing, and moral modelling.

Third, heroes stand on their own as a social category; they are not the same as the average role model or leader. Leaders are immensely useful in military, corporations, governments and other contexts that benefit from guidance and a centralised figure head or spokesperson. Role models are crucial in a child’s development (social norms, ethical principles). In mentor or protégé programme in educational, clinical and work contexts, heroes can not only add to these important types of influence, the also do more by offering physical and psychological protection from threats. Overall, heroes are described in overwhelmingly positive ways, unlike role models or leaders who can be described as good or bad.

The primary intention is not to demystify heroism and make it ordinary; rather, the aim is to clarify the multiple ways that heroes influence their audience and identify ways of harnessing their positive power, and inspiring future human greatness. The human capacity for extraordinary accomplishments, greatness, invention, creativity, strength, and compassion has left people awe-struck since Ancient Greece—why would we think that heroic surprises and delights would cease now?
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Footnotes

1 Quote from “The Lost Symbol” book by Dan Brown, 2009, New York, Random House Inc., Copyright 2009 by Random House Inc. All rights reserved.

2 Examples of hero-related education initiatives include the Heroic Imagination Project (http://heroicimagination.org/), Local Heroes (http://www.rte.ie/localheroes/), Moral Heroes (http://moralheroes.org/), and The Hero Construction Company (http://www.theherocc.com/).

3 Participants were sampled from 25 countries.

4 An antihero as someone who “manifests largeness, dignity, power or heroism, [and is] petty, passive, clownish, or dishonest” (Abrams & Harpham, 2005, p. 12). Artiano (2012) defines the 21st century antihero is a response to the injustices of the modern world. These antiheroes often use violence to do what they think is right; the antihero is “willing to do whatever is deemed needed, including steal, kill, and cheat to protect the innocent” (p. 13).
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Figure 1: Visual Representation of a Proposed ‘Model of Heroic Influence’
Chapter 5

General Discussion
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The present thesis adds to the sparse literature on heroism by summarising what is known, underscoring what is left unknown, and outlining a wealth of ideas to inspire future research. The take-home messages arising from the thesis are as follows: heroes are multi-dimensional, not monolithic or characterised by a single trait; heroes provide multiple physical, social, and psychological benefits to others that seem to promote psychological health and alleviate suffering; and, heroes, role models, and leaders are distinct concepts.

What is a Hero and What Functions do they Provide to Others?

Two questions guided the present thesis: What is a hero? What functions do heroes provide for other people? Answering these questions from a psychological perspective was the overarching aim of the thesis. The main findings are summarised below.

Lay conceptions of heroic characteristics and functions are multi-faceted. In total, 26 characteristics of heroes were identified, including bravery, courage, conviction, moral integrity, and self-sacrifice as the most central features of heroes (Chapter 2; Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2012a). Heroes were rated higher on self-sacrificing and saving others than leaders or role models (Chapter 2). The findings from the present research elucidate the types of physical, social, and psychological functions that people associated with heroes. The analysis highlighted 14 important functions provided by heroes; for example, to inspire, to protect, to guide, to instil hope, and to motivate (Chapter 3; Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2012b). The vast majority of the functions that participants associated with heroes fell into one of these three categories: protecting, enhancing, and moral modelling (Chapter 2; Chapter 3; Kinsella et al., 2012b). Such functions may be rooted in core human needs (Fiske, 2004), such as, the
need to manage uncertainty, enhance the self, and feel a sense of belonging with others (Chapter 2; Chapter 3).

**Contributions and Implications**

The paucity of extant literature on heroism prompts more questions than it answers, especially on the characteristics and functions of heroes. Hence, the current research contributes substantially to psychological theory. Indeed, much still remains to be explored. The present research findings lay a foundation to generate a new theory of heroism. The research provides important clues about the influence of heroes on behaviour. Such clues could act as fuel for debate about these processes. An overview of the implications and contributions are provided in the paragraphs below.

**Prototypical Features of Heroes**

The present research findings inform definitional issues, measurement, theory, and future research on the topic of heroes. For instance, it is possible to describe lay conceptions of heroes and heroic behaviour in a way that represents the beliefs and views of a representative sample of adults, rather than the views from a lone theorist or from the academe. The present research offers a condensed lay conceptualisation of heroic individuals, and is based on scientific evidence. The core characteristics encompass the breadth of individuals’ everyday perceptions.

The key findings underscore the fact that a dictionary definition fails to capture the complexity of the lay conception of heroes. Further, the findings provide an empirically supported psychological description of heroism that was absent in the dictionary definition. Lay conceptions of heroes clarify the meaning of heroism for researchers and practitioners. The added clarity could help psychologists to communicate more effectively to their students, research participants, and clients.
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Functions of Heroes

The present research comprises a series of novel studies that investigated the functions that heroes provide for people. The studies provide an empirical foundation for future research to delve further into this important topic. The results show that the influence of heroes was well represented by the participants on three dimensions, namely, protecting, enhancing, and moral modelling. These functional categories provide a clear framework for future researchers to consider the related but distinct influences of heroes. Indeed, many types of heroes exist (Zimbardo, 2007), and most likely, each of type will serve a different function; surely all types do not provide identical benefits to others. Martial heroes such as fireman, armed forces, military, and rescue workers are likely to increase feelings of safety and protection among others (protecting). Martin Luther King Jr., an example of a politico-religious hero, is likely to motivate, inspire, instil hope, increase morale, and guide others (enhancing). Whistle-blowers serve as reminders that ‘good’ people exist, remind individuals to avoid moral complacency, and make the world a better place by reporting corruption, fraud, or other injustices (moral modelling). Understanding these dimensions of heroic influence enables researchers to generate hypotheses about heroes and their impact on others. These dimensions form the basis for measuring the benefits provided by heroes. Future research will most likely show that the protecting function of heroes is served by some subset of the 26 characteristics, whereas the enhancing or moral modelling function is buttressed by other unique subsets of characteristics.

Provoking New Debates: What are the Psychological Processes Evoked during Heroic Encounters?

At mentioned earlier, there have been few researchers who have considered the psychological and social functions provided by heroes. The present research contributed
new knowledge to the range of functions that were described by lay persons. Further, the present research proposes a three-dimensional model of these functions. This research suggests that there is no single heroic function. Many aspects of heroic influence are not yet understood. This thesis provokes debate about the psychological processes evoked during heroic encounters, and the psychological and social needs that such processes fulfil. In the next section, the extent that social comparison theory, basking in reflected glory, inspiration, and humility add to current understanding about the psychological influence of heroes is assessed.

**Heroic influence: A case of upward social comparison.** Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that individuals often look to other individuals as a reference for comparing one’s own behaviour. Downward social comparisons involve comparing the self to a person who is considered worse than the self on some attribute. Research has shown that downward comparison tends to enhance the self (Wills, 1981). Upward social comparison, on the other hand, involves comparing oneself to someone else whose abilities and attributes are better than the self. Upward comparisons have been shown to induce dissatisfaction (Emmons & Diener, 1985), deprivation (Martin, 1986), and reduced self-esteem (Tesser, 1988).

However, Collins (1996) reviewed research wherein participants actively seek upward social comparisons to promote self-evaluation and self-enhancement. For instance, dieters have placed images of thinner individuals on the refrigerator to remember dietary goals and desired changes (Helgeson & Taylor, 1993). That is, some people may seek out upward social comparisons to provide evaluative and improvement benefits that downward social comparisons cannot provide.

Further, some upward comparisons, and hence exposure to successful others (e.g., heroes), can be motivational, inspiring, and mood elevating (Taylor & Lobel,
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1989). For instance, Lockwood and Kunda (1997) noted that the relevance (i.e., ability to map the self onto the others) and the perceived attainability of similar levels of success are the influencing factors of social comparison: “if a superstar’s success seems unattainable, one will be discouraged and demoralized” (p. 93). They found that ‘superstars’ (i.e. exceptional teachers or accountants) provoked self-enhancement and inspiration when their success was viewed as attainable and relevant to the self; however, “models of unattainable success can be threatening and deflating” (p. 101). Given that heroes often model levels of unattainable success for the average person, it is interesting to note that heroes were never described as threatening or deflating in the studies presented in this thesis (Chapter 2; Chapter 3).

Importantly, social comparisons must be “cognitively digested, actively worked on, and made sense of” (Collins, 1996, p. 66). In this sense, research will need to uncover the extent to which the positive influence of heroes can be explained by social comparison theory. Key factors such as personal relevance, closeness to the self (Tesser, 1988), and individual differences need to be carefully assessed. Heroes may sometimes trigger a period of self-focus and self-improvement goals, but at other times heroes trigger an outward focus, where the individual is more concerned with others than the self (world-focused; Bryant & Veroff, 2007).

**Heroic influence: A result of basking in reflected glory.** Basking in reflected glory refers to a positive feeling that results in an affiliation with superior or successful others (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, & Sloan, 1976). The positive outcomes of basking in reflected glory include boosts in positive feelings and comforting self-appraisals (Tesser, 1988). This process may account for some of the positivity that people derive from thinking about heroes: “We love to associate with successful, heroic people because they make us feel good about who we are” (Allison &
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Goethals, 2011). It is likely that a person may derive positive benefits (e.g., positive affect, pride) as a result of having an association (reciprocal or parasocial relationship) with a hero. However, this has not yet been investigated.

**Heroic influence: A process of inspiration.** According to Thrash and Elliot (2004), inspiration is an appetitive motivational state that has three core characteristics: 1) transcendence (orientation toward something that is more important than one’s usual concerns), 2) evocation (inspiration is triggered rather than willed), and 3) motivations (expresses or acts on new ideas). There are two distinct components of inspiration, namely, to be inspired by and to be inspired to. When an individual is inspired (by someone or something) the experience of inspiration results in feelings of transcendence and meaningfulness (i.e. appreciating beauty or excellence). When inspired to act, a person may feel compelled to take personal responsibility and volitional control.

Empirical evidence suggests that exposure to the extraordinary competence (and, for most people, unattainable success) of Michael Jordan increased positive affect and self-reported inspiration (Thrash & Elliot, 2010). However, this research does not support the findings of Lockwood and Kunda (1997); in fact, the inspiration arose from the inspiration-to and the inspiration-by processes rather than from overt social comparison processes. Thrash and Elliot elaborated further: “One appreciates the intrinsic value of Jordan’s hard work, task mastery, or exceptional performance (i.e., one is inspired by); as a result of this appreciation, one desires to work harder, master a task, or perform at a higher level in one’s own life (i.e., one is inspired to). It is not necessary for both component processes of inspiration to co-occur (Thrash & Elliot, 2010, p. 503)”. That is, one might be moved by a hero, without feeling motivated to pursue an actionable goal, a sense of purpose, or even gratitude. The inspiring influence of heroes and the extent that individuals can translate this type of motivational
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encounter into a personally relevant goal, needs future empirical attention. The findings about inspiration are useful because they highlight the ways that heroes might instigate a world-focus perspective (e.g., I was inspired by the hurricane rescue teams as they helped the victims) or a self-focus perspective (e.g., I was inspired to help the hurricane victims myself). Inspiration has been linked to psychological well-being and creativity (Thrash & Elliott, 2010). Hence, the link between heroism and inspiration places heroism research in the domain of positive psychology and other disciplines that emphasise psychological well-being and enhance life quality.

**Heroic influence: The role of humility.** Humility refers to a willingness to understand the self (strengths, limitations, identities) in combination with a global awareness of oneself in relation to others (Nielsen, Marrone, & Slay, 2010). An outcome of humility is sensitivity about the self and one’s own relation to others. Humility involves an accurate perception of one’s own relatively small size and contribution in the world. After a humbling experience “there is no resistance to approval, no urgency to deny praiseworthy achievements, and no desperate need to defend self against criticism” (Ryan, 1983, p. 298). While in a humble state, an individual is focused on understanding a balanced truth about the self, rather than seeking to exaggerate the self positively or to self-deprecate excessively.

Other characteristics of humility include an “others” orientation and the ability to interpret life events in relation to the greater whole (Nielsen et al., 2010). In fact, Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski (2005) used the term ‘transcendence’ to refer to the consideration of a more complex sense of reality, where a person is less concerned with personal agendas and being superior to others. For example, an awe-inspiring experience triggered by a hero may induce a state of humility for a person. Such awe might result in the individual gaining an accurate perception of self in relation to the
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vastness of the world (e.g., prompt a narcissist toward a more realistic self-view). In a sense, the self-evaluation provoked by a heroic encounter will be moderated by humility, resulting in a balanced perception of one’s strengths and limitations and a balanced focus on the self and on others (i.e., neither too egocentric nor too compassionate).

Is there are dark side of heroism? As stated previously in this thesis, the heroes in the studies presented in this thesis were described by participants with only positive attributes and influences. Indeed, such descriptions exemplify adults’ lay conceptualisations of heroic individuals. However, a worthy future endeavour would be to consider the dark side of heroism. For instance, Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo (2011) proposed a number of objections to the ostensibly virtuous perception of heroes. First, there has been semantic links drawn between heroic action and psychopathology, as well as personality factors such as narcissism that may account for some examples of civil heroism. Authors have also drawn attention to research that illustrates how the military context may sometimes set a precedent for dramatic heroic behaviour that is unrealistic and reflects immense psychological pressure (Dinter, 1985; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Heroes fulfil the basic human needs to belong, manage uncertainty, and enhancement (Chapter 2; Chapter 3; Chapter 4), but what are the psychological processes that unpin an obsession with a particular hero or ideology? A deeper understanding of the heroic functions and the needs they fulfilled may provide insights into the processes associated with fanaticism and hero-worship, as well as symptoms of psychopathology, such as ‘delusions of grandeur’ and mania. More about the latter are addressed below.

In sum, the present research contributes new knowledge about lay conceptions of features and functions of heroes, giving clues about the associated psychological
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processes such as social comparison, basking in reflected glory, inspiration, or humility. Building on these foundations, future research can now study these processes in more detail and address many of the questions that have been raised in this thesis.

**Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

The new knowledge provided by the present research provides an important starting point for future research about the features and functions of heroes. Building on these findings, there are many opportunities for interesting and useful research in relation to this topic. A brief description of examples of future research directions is below.

**Priming with Hero Characteristics**

The present research did not focus on using the 26 characteristics of heroes to trigger or otherwise influence the emotions, attitudes, or behaviour of participants. Armed with a clear understanding of the central and peripheral characteristics of heroes, opportunities for explicit, implicit, or subliminal priming of heroic behaviour is now possible. Using various priming techniques (e.g., Bargh & Pietromonaco, 1982) it is possible to learn how heroes influence people’s physiological, cognitive, motivational, emotional, or behavioural responses. Previous research has shown that goals can be activated without the individual knowing about or intending it—either through subliminal, explicit, or implicit presentation of goal-relevant stimuli (Bargh, Gollwitzer, & Oettingen, 2010). Future research could assess how priming people with heroic images or characteristics might influence their internal states, goals, and behaviour. In fact, such techniques might also prime people to display their own heroic characteristics (e.g., strength, bravery, integrity, and self-sacrifice), if at least temporarily.
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Verification of Current Findings

In all the nine empirical studies that were conducted for the present thesis, data were garnered mostly for people’s memory about heroic experiences. Emotional content of memories and details of a situation can change over time (Schacter, 1999; Schmolck, Buffalo & Squire, 2000). The effect of biased emotional perception may only be minor (Schacter, 1999; Schmolck et al., 2000); however, small biases may exist in how people remember emotional experience during and after an event. Therefore, future research that is aimed at extending and verifying the current findings should consider the use of methods wherein individuals provide data about their present experience, such as while they view audio, visual, or written accounts of heroic behaviour. For instance, such studies may either be conducted in a laboratory setting or by using Experience Sampling Methods; each would provide useful information about encounters with heroes independent of memorial biases.

Extending Research on Heroic Functions

The present thesis identified 14 key functions of heroes, represented as three dimensions. The next step is to consider the extent that heroes enhance, protect, and provide moral modelling in a variety of lab scenarios. If heroes provide an enhancing function, then encounters with heroes should, on average, increase positive affect, positive self-views, and positive views about humanity. Encounters with heroes should boost feelings of psychological safety and security. If heroes provide a moral modelling function, it should be evident in the moral attitudes and behaviour of others, following a heroic encounter. Each of these functions should be assessed in different situations with different types of threat, a wide variety of heroes, and account for individual differences among the research participants.
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What are the Practical Applications for Heroes?

The topic of heroes is both epistemic and practical. As much of the previous sections focused on theory and conceptualisation, the aim of the next section is to focus on the pragmatic and usefulness of heroism research. There are numerous examples of practical applications for heroes in education, organisations, health settings, and therapeutic settings. It is hoped that these research findings will contribute to society by educating people on the ways they can use heroes to increase positivity in their daily lives, buffer against stress and other threats to well-being, and serve as moral exemplars. Below includes illustrative examples for clinical and educational purposes.

Clinical and Therapeutic Applications

Given the multiple positive psychological benefits that people gain from interacting with and thinking about heroes, it is reasonable to suggest that there is great potential to create interventions that promote positive emotions, well-being, growth, creativity, and social connections. Indeed, studies have shown that failing to adequately cope with stressful life events contributes to a variety of clinical disorders (Kross, Davidson, Weber, & Ochsner, 2009). Knowledge about the ways in which people use heroes to self-regulate may be important for people who work in mental healthcare, such as psychotherapists. Broadly, the findings from the present research could be used to inform the clinical therapists and others who work in mental healthcare for creating and refining psychological interventions that promote psychological well-being and positive affect.

For instance, Broad Minded Affective Coping (BMAC; Tarrier, 2010) is a technique that builds on Fredrickson’s (1998) broaden-and-build theory. The BMAC approach aims to promote positive emotions by prompting individuals to recall positive autobiographical memories for their own lives. Even brief, transient experiences of
positive emotions have been found to increase resilience (measured one month later),
suggesting a role for clinical interventions that foster positive affect. An adapted BMAC
technique would focus specifically on those autobiographical memories that involve
encounters with heroic persons. Such positive memorial activity may prompt
individuals to feel a greater sense of protection (from negative feelings), and
enhancement of positivity towards self and humanity, in addition to positive affect, in
general.

A second adaptation of the present heroism research involves Metaphoric
Identity Mapping (MIM; Ylvisaker, McPherson, Kayes, & Pellett, 2008). MIM is an
approach to identity construction and goal setting that draws up theories of possible
selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), metaphors, and interacting cognitive subsystems
(Barnard, 1985). This approach was designed to help people suffering from acquired
brain injury (ABI), so that such individuals could construct a new sense of identity, in
part, by identifying a hero that unifies the self and offers a sense of emotional power to
their strong characteristics, and opens up action strategies associated with the identity
schema (Ylvisaker et al., 2008). The action strategies purportedly identify meaningful
and realistic goals, overcome resistance and other obstacles that the individual is
struggling with.

One advantage of MIM is that the heroic metaphor unites the elements of a
person’s cognitive representation of the self into an organised unit of thought (e.g., hero,
symbol, metaphor). Although designed for people with ABI, the applications for the
technique in counselling or coaching for career decisions and transitions, adjustment
into retirement, back-to-work programmes from unemployment, coping with
employment redundancy, bereavement or other life changes. Indeed, life events that
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seriously impact on a person’s physical and psychological well-being sometimes require the adjustment of self-views, and the hero is poised to facilitate such adjustment.

Another approach, Appreciative Inquiry (e.g., Johnson & Leavitt, 2001; Martinetz, 2002), encourages individuals, organisations, or communities to contemplate and extend their most effective behaviours or practices rather than dwelling on the problems. The aim of this technique is to focus on the stories, metaphors, or symbols that inspire hope, change, purpose, joy, camaraderie, compassion, and innovation (e.g. Fitzgerald, Murrell, & Miller, 2003). Such aims are associated closely to the characteristics and functions of heroic influences. This approach opposes others that focuses on problems and difficulties; such negative foci can reduce motivation and persistence (e.g., Whitney, 1998). Extending Appreciate Inquiry further, individuals could be asked to contemplate heroic qualities or actions that they have witnessed in others or in themselves, and then share these observations with others. Individuals or groups work together to formulate plans to utilise, share, and remember these uplifting initiatives and practices. For instance, initiatives that promote gratitude promote positive emotions and psychological well-being (e.g., Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). As a personal development exercise, a person might write a letter of gratitude to each of the heroic people who have entered their lives. Such expressive writing may increase gratitude, and ultimately psychological well-being.

Further, savouring refers to strategies that individuals use to produce, maintain or enhance their positive experiences (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). Children or adults can learn savouring techniques to help them appreciate the more subtle aspects of experiences of marvelling, wonderment, and the awe that is sometimes triggered by heroes. A practical aspect of the savouring model is that it is sensitive to temporal focus. For instance, reminiscing about a past hero can trigger savouring in the present. The
pleasant thoughts and feelings that a former hero was associated with earlier in life may rekindle such comfort and security in the present. Savouring a present day hero opens the doors to relishing the moment by immersing oneself in the good that the hero does for the self and for others. Finally, anticipating a positive future is a third form of savouring. The discomfort of an uncertain future can be transformed into a delightful anticipation of what may soon occur. The hero can act as such a pillar in times of uncertainty.

Applications in Education

In educational settings, heroes can inspire, motivate, and offer moral guidance to students of all ages. For instance, the Hero Construction Company (http://www.theherocc.com) offers in-classroom presentations and large group assemblies that convey stories, images, and interactive discussion about heroes. The initiative aims to convince young students that they too are ‘heroes in waiting’ and have the potential to behave heroically when the situation arises. There are many other creative initiatives in schools, colleges, and universities that could promote and celebrate heroic behaviours. For instance, creating a whistle-blower campaign in a school, where people are encouraged to speak out against corruption, fraud, bullying, stealing, lying, and cheating.

Formal or informal initiatives to promote heroic behaviours, such as character-building, in educational settings should be a priority for governments, educators, and parents. For example, teaching students about the characteristics of heroes and sharing examples of heroic behaviour may help them to increase awareness of heroism at a young age. Images, videos, classroom discussions, keywords or quotes (i.e., environmental cues) could be strategically placed around the immediate and virtual learning environments. Such a heroic campaign would place heroism at the forefront of
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the minds of educators and learners. The present research illustrates that heroes provide a number of social and psychological benefits; hence, it is quite feasible to encourage students to identify and learn about heroes.

On a related note, the explicit instruction about the bystander effect, groupthink, and other social psychological phenomena that result in poor decision-making could increase the likelihood that students take action to intervene, to prevent potential malfeasance and even thwart disaster. If heroes characterise virtuous traits such as strength, bravery, integrity, doing what no-one else will, protecting others, and showing leadership qualities, then such qualities are worthy of instilling in young people. Teaching courses in ethics, morality, and heroism, starting in the early years of education, may encourage whistle-blowing that could positively impact on a school, community, and related institutions. Furthermore, action research (Lewin, 1946) or participatory action research on specific hero-related topics (e.g., speaking out against bullying, blowing the whistle on a student who cheats) could be invaluable to providing children with the relevant skills for solving real-life problems. The insights from the present research could be used in the developments of such educational and action research campaigns that are important to organisations and community training programmes.

Another potential area for application of heroes is building the self-esteem and self-efficacy of children and teenagers, for instance, by capitalising on the enhancing function of heroes. Research over recent years suggests that exceptional talent (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Roemer, 1993) is not simply the result of impressive genes; instead, such talent and success is the product of deliberate practice. Exposure to heroes who emphasise the role of effort (rather than innate ability) could positively influence students to try harder, regardless of their past performance on exams or
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achievement esteem. Introducing young people to fictional or real-life heroes who typically demonstrate their human side, share their struggles and overcome personal limitations is likely to be an empowering experience. Equipped with such information, exceptionally talented and resilient heroes may exert an even stronger positive influence on the motivational processes of others, and hence could propel young people towards the pursuit of their ideal self.

Also, there are many other outlets for incorporating the inspiring influence of heroes, such as in the workplace, unemployment centres, and in sport, to name a few. Further, more efforts should be made to incorporate heroic figures in history books and documentaries. Doing so would ensure that children grow up with an awareness of the heroes that have inspired previous generations. In sum, the findings of the present research will be useful for the development of a new theory about heroes and related practical applications. Also, the present research findings will be a catalyst for new research on the ways that heroes influence people’s thoughts, behaviours, and actions.

Conclusions

In sum, the present thesis has provided important insights that have practical and theoretical implication for understanding heroes and their impact on the thoughts, emotions, and behaviour of other people. Novel insights have been provided in relation to the following: 1) The prototypical features of heroes and heroic behaviour; 2) the features associated with heroes, leaders, and role models; 3) what the functions of heroes are; and, 4) how this new information about heroic influence fits in with the broader literature in psychology. It is hoped that the theories resulting from this research will contribute to the knowledge of people who can design creative initiatives to make use of the positive impact of heroes. This research has potential to generate debate and inspire a psychology of heroism. Finally, the present thesis has hopefully provoked
self-reflection among readers, regarding their own potential for heroic behaviour and ability to recognise and rejoice in the heroic behaviour that exists around them:

“Wishing for heroism and the spectacle of human nature on the rack, I had never noticed the great fields of heroism lying round about me, I had failed to see it present and alive” (James, 1899).
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