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## The State of the Art (and Science) of Heroism: Growth, Paradigms, and Future Directions in an Emerging Field

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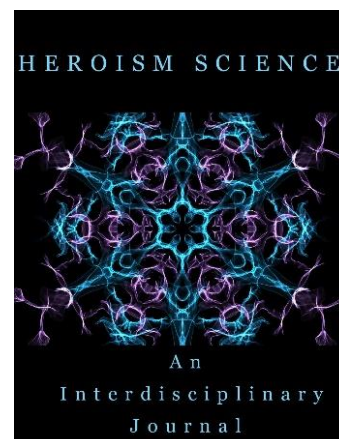
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# The State of the Art (and Science) of Heroism: Growth, Paradigms, and Future Directions in an Emerging Field



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**ABSTRACT:** Although less than a decade old, the nascent field of heroism science has enjoyed considerable growth in the form of publication output, a regular conference series, and a flagship journal. We briefly discuss the tradeoffs of heroism science's paradigmatic multiplicity. Moreover, we offer several observations about the future direction of heroism science, with emphasis on bridging gaps with allied field, embracing cultural diversity, taking a more critical stance, building academic rigor, and developing better measures of heroism. We conclude with a call for the formation of an international professional organization and for the stronger academic legitimation of heroism science.

**KEYWORDS:** *heroes, heroism science, heroism measurement, heroism paradigm*

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

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Since the journal *Heroism Science* was founded in 2015, the field of heroism science has undergone a tremendous growth spurt. In 2016, Murdoch University in Perth, Australia, hosted the inaugural heroism science conference. Scholars from around the world gathered for the first time, presenting their work and giving the nascent field a momentous boost. The conference was repeated at the University of Richmond, Virginia, USA, in 2018, and it is scheduled to be hosted by the University of Limerick, Ireland, in 2020, and by the University of Auckland, New Zealand, in 2022. There is a clear surge of interest in this conference series from academicians representing multiple disciplines worldwide.

The growth of heroism studies can also be seen in the stirring proliferation of articles and books on heroism (Franco et al., 2017). Although the concept of heroism is not new, few research studies existed on the topic 15 years ago. New research has illuminated the primary and secondary traits of heroes (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2015a) and the functions of heroes (Allison & Goethals, 2014; Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2015b). Over these years, research has increased and added to our knowledge about the internal and external factors that influence heroic behavior (Kohen, Langdon, & Riches, 2017), lay conceptions of heroes and their associated psychological functions (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2017), and the potential for heroic figures in promoting positive outcomes in themselves and others (Efthimiou, Allison, & Franco, 2018).

In early 2017, the *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership* was released, offering a thorough overview of the origins, types, and processes of heroism (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017). In addition, 2017 marked the appearance of a special issue on heroism in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, which showcased research on a wide range of phenomena related to heroism (Franco & Efthimiou, 2018). In 2018, a special issue on

“the art and science” of heroism appeared in *Frontiers in Psychology*, followed by an e-book of the same name (Allison, Beggan, & Efthimiou, 2018). Elizabeth Svoboda has released two outstanding books on heroism, *What Makes a Hero* (2014) and *The Life Heroic* (2019). Ari Kohen’s *Untangling Heroism* (2013) has made an important impact, as will his latest volume, *Unlikely Heroes: The Place of Holocaust Rescuers in Research and Teaching* (2019; see Fagin-Jones, 2019, for a review). Many other influential books and articles on heroes and heroism – more than we can mention in this brief editorial – have been appearing with greater regularity in the academic literature.

We should also note that our flagship journal in the field, *Heroism Science*, is thriving and has been upgraded as a result of our 2018 migration to *bepress*, one of the world’s largest academic publishers. *Heroism Science* has published outstanding work examining the science of war heroes (Rusch, 2016), trauma heroes (Keck et al., 2017), holocaust heroes (Fagin-Jones, 2019), collaborative heroes (Klisanin, 2016), underdog heroes (Goldschmied et al., 2017), fitness heroes (Beggan, 2016), posthuman heroes (Pascoe, 2019), therapist heroes (Bray, 2019), gender issues with regard to heroism (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2017), and psychological principles underlying Joseph Campbell’s monomyth (Martin et al., 2019), to name but a few examples. The number of submissions to the journal has been steadily rising and we anticipate continued increases in both quality and quantity of submissions in the coming years.

Has the growing quantity of scholarly products on heroism been accompanied by a similar increase in quality? Our science is still so young that it may be too early to render a verdict. There are at least two ways of interpreting the current neophyte status of heroism science. One way is to view our science through the lens of Thomas Kuhn’s (1962) model of scientific revolutions. Kuhn championed the idea that new sciences often lack a single paradigm and find themselves – for many years, possibly – stuck at the random fact-gathering

stage of scientific development. This pre-paradigmatic phase is where heroism science resides. From this Kuhnian perspective, heroism science is an immature field of study that is only beginning to gather facts and is doing so in a somewhat haphazard fashion. As of yet there is no single dominant research paradigm to guide us. Viewing our science as in its infancy can explain why we have such a long way to go with regard to defining heroism, explaining it, and producing it among members of society.

A second, more positive way of evaluating the state of heroism science is to view it through the lens of William James' (1899/1983) epistemological worldview. James believed that the only way to acquire a full and complete understanding of the "truth" about a phenomenon is to adopt multiple research paradigms along with their multiple theoretical and methodological approaches. From this Jamesian perspective, the absence of a single guiding research paradigm in heroism science is a strength, not a weakness. In fact, from James' point of view, the more research perspectives and paradigms, the better. James's philosophy was that science is best served when scientists not only remain open to fresh perspectives but actively seek them out. Indeed, James asserted that the scientists' goal is to always search for "more or less plausible pictures" (p. 143). The quest for multiple perspectives in science was important to James because "no philosophy can ever be anything but a summary sketch" or "picture of the world in abridgment" (James, 1909/1977, p. 9). Adopting a single scientific perspective about a phenomenon only limits what can be learned about it because "neither the whole of truth, nor the whole of good, is revealed to any single observer" (James, 1899/1983, p. 149).

Thus, although a single dominant paradigm may reveal many useful insights about a phenomenon of scientific interest, it represents only a single perspective and should never be viewed as the final or definitive word. Good science, according to James, consists of the endless search for new and different ways of looking at phenomena of scientific interest

(James, 1890/1983, p. 277; see also Allison, Beggan, & Midgley, 1996; Leary, 1990). For this reason, we encourage scholars of heroism science to boldly and creatively adopt as many different research approaches as possible.

## 2 STATE OF THE SCIENCE

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The surge in interest in heroism science may derive from the many pressing problems facing humanity and the need for heroic individuals to emerge who will help resolve these issues. The philosopher Yuval Noah Harari (2018) has identified three main challenges that human beings must resolve in the next thirty years. These issues are climate change, the nuclear threat, and the disruptive influence of info-technologies and bio-technologies. Without heroic vision and heroic action in these three areas of concern, humanity's future may be in grave danger. Our planet needs a thriving heroism science. Knowledge about the role of heroes, heroism and heroic influence has the potential to contribute to a range of human and societal challenges such as poor health, apathy, intergroup and intragroup discord, and political discord.

Heroism science is the ideal soil from which science-based heroic solutions to the many challenges facing humanity can germinate. There are many basic and applied research questions relating to heroes and heroism that remain unexamined, making this fascinating topic ripe for researchers to explore. The potential for interesting and impactful research is great and has yet to be realized. This interdisciplinary journal, *Heroism Science*, can play an important role in the developing of research related to heroes and heroism, bringing researchers together, and becoming the 'go-to' place for excellent research and thought-provoking reviews. To accomplish this objective, there are six points that are worth considering as we enter the next phase of hero-related research.

## 2.1 BRIDGING GAPS

The terms hero, heroic behavior, and heroism are terms which represent distinctive patterns of behavior. Yet, the literature and research on heroes and heroism is highly related to a range of other topics including but not limited to leadership, role models, mentors, social activism, risk-taking, moral exemplars, whistleblowing (speaking out), moral decision-making, altruism, political empathy, courage, resilience, activism, social influence, and exceptionality. To build our understanding of heroes and heroism, we need to read widely and draw from related topics, and build connections where it makes sense to do so.

Importantly, the topics of heroes and heroism offer useful lens through which to bridge topics which may have in the past been viewed as distinct (e.g., heroes often represent both agentic and communal traits). The term hero is viewed on a spectrum from highly positive to highly negative, depending on one's location in the world and historical associations with the term. Yet, we should not let semantic differences prevent us from studying the behavior and influence of exceptional others. Importantly, there is an opportunity for us as researchers, educators and practitioners to try to make connections widely to engage a wider audience and have an impact beyond our current networks.

## 2.2 CULTURAL DIVERSITY

While we are beginning to develop a picture of representations of heroes and their role in the lives of individuals, the picture is mostly informed by American, European, and Australian contexts. These studies have been helpful in providing a starting place, however, we need to challenge ourselves to examine heroes across different groups (both majority and minority), countries, and cultures. The nuances in our understanding of heroes and heroism in diverse contexts may ultimately lead to greater levels of intercultural awareness, inclusiveness, understanding and respect. We urge heroism scientists to draw from theories

and models of cultural variations, such as that of Hofstede (2011) who distinguishes among many important dimensions of cultural differences. These cultural variables include power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, long/short term orientation, and indulgence/restraint.

### **2.3 CRITICAL STANCE**

There is a need for us as researchers, educators and practitioners to not assume that interactions and interventions using heroes are inherently beneficial. Heroism promoter Matt Langdon is well-known for advancing the idea that the opposite of a hero is not a villain but rather a bystander (Heroism Promoters, 2016). Yet there are times when interventions are damaging, even with the best intentions. Encouraging others to behave heroically may have negative implications, and it may not always make sense to behave heroically in a particular context. We must question our own assumptions about heroes and heroic behavior, and strive to produce high-quality research that considers a range of theoretical standpoints. The insights gathered in relation to the influence of heroes on individuals and groups has the potential to contribute to our knowledge in areas such as terrorism, extremism and fanaticism.

### **2.4 ACADEMIC RIGOR**

The norms and best practice guidelines for science are changing and evolving. Heroism Science will need to consider ways to support and encourage researchers to promote research integrity through practices such as the Open Science Framework and transparent data reporting practices. We encourage researchers to explore a range of methodologies and methods to contribute new knowledge to this underdeveloped topic. There is a need to ensure that our quantitative studies are sufficiently powered to make claims about our data, which often requires larger sample sizes. Ideally, we need demonstrate support for our hypotheses



across multiple studies and over time. Our studies need to be reported with sufficient detail so that they can be replicated by other researchers working in different geographical locations. In the climate of reduced expenditure on research funding, a key challenge for us as hero researchers will be meeting the requirements of academic rigour often on a shoe-string budget. However, it is through our academic rigour that we will make ourselves more attractive as applicants to grant funding agencies. Indeed, we will need to educate funders about the importance of the topic and the quality of work that we are conducting.

## **2.5 THE CHALLENGE OF MEASURING HEROISM**

Related to the above points, there lies the profound challenge of measuring heroism. Elizabeth Heiner (2018) has published excellent work examining the effectiveness of hero training programs. From her analyses, students of these training programs exhibit significantly more self-reported courage compared to control groups who lacked such training. The limitation of this research is, of course, that these studies include measures of self-reports that psychologists have long known are fairly unreliable (Stone et al., 2009). Heroism is a behavior, or a long-term series of behaviors, aimed at enhancing the collective good. Behavioral measures are lacking in heroism research for the understandable reason that behavioral effects are difficult to capture in laboratory settings and require long-term longitudinal investigations. Until such temporally extended studies are conducted, we cannot be completely sure of the effectiveness of hero training programs in producing heroic action. Heiner's (2018) results are promising but it is obvious that heroism science has yet to shed definitive light on how behavioral heroism can be encouraged and developed.

## 2.6 CALL FOR A PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION: THE IHSA

With the field of heroism science burgeoning, we are nearing the time when it would be prudent to establish a professional organization, perhaps called the International Heroism Studies Association (IHSA). The multi-pronged mission of IHSA would be to advance and promote heroism in society; to further the science, teaching, and application of heroism; to gather the growing international cadre of heroism scholars under one united professional umbrella; to host the biennial conference series; and to sponsor our flagship journal *Heroism Science*. A well-run professional organization such as the IHSA would offer structure, direction, and guidelines for the operation of the field, its conference series, and its journal, and it would be useful and desirable for ensuring the long-term the health of heroism science.

## 3 A FINAL CAVEAT

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We conclude this editorial with a caveat or limitation that may bedevil heroism studies and impede its growth for the foreseeable future. The unfortunate reality of investigating heroism is this: To the best of our knowledge, there are no academic departments of heroism science, nor do there exist any schools of heroism studies, nor any undergraduate majors in heroism. Heroism researchers are born, bred, and exist in departments of established disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, leadership studies, English literature, and other branches of the academy. Heroism science is currently a fringe science, borrowing from many disciplines but lacking a core academic home. Our chief obstacle for growth lies in the absence of heroism as a distinct disciplinary endeavor that is recognized and supported by academic institutions. Lacking such an academic identity, we are at a significant disadvantage in grooming our students, placing them in jobs, and obtaining funding for our research. It is our hope that the continued maturation of our field will lead to a stronger legitimization of heroism science at universities worldwide.

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## 5 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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*The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*