



High ideals: the misappropriation and reappropriation of the heroic label in the
midst of a global pandemic
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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to offer an alternative, more nuanced analysis of the labelling of frontline workers as heroes than originally proposed by Cox (2020). Here we argue that the hero narrative in itself need not be problematic, but highlight a number of wider factors that have led to the initial rise (and subsequent fall) in support for labelling frontline workers as heroes. Through our related work, we have gathered similar stories from frontline workers where they feel betrayed, let down, or otherwise short-changed by the hero label, and we have sought to make sense of this through understanding more about how the hero label is used rather than what it means. In this article, we propose a way forward where there is greater discussion around the hero label in this context where individuals can be heroes but still struggle, still fail, and still feel vulnerable, and where heroism is viewed as a state of interdependence between heroic actor and the wider group. It is true that heroes can inspire, lead, guide, and build morale and camaraderie, but collective responsibility is held with us all. We can draw hope and energy from our heroes, but we must dig deep and be proactive, particularly in the face of adversity. In doing so, we support the heroes to lead from the front and ensure that even though we cannot physically help; we are not making their situation worse.

Keywords: Frontline workers, heroes, healthcare workers, COVID-19, pandemic

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Throughout history, human beings have told each other stories about heroes¹ who overcome great obstacles. In a pre COVID-19 pandemic era, the term hero was applied and used on daily basis (1), and since the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the search term of ‘hero’ has almost doubled in popularity². This is not surprising given our psychological need to have heroes (2-5). Heroes inspire, model morals, and protect others from psychological or physical harm (3), and our psychological need for heroes is greater in times of threat (6) so it seems natural that it would rise during a global pandemic when threats are omnipresent.

Dictionary definitions of heroes are often overly simplistic, so it is more useful to conceptualise heroes as individuals who demonstrate many of the prototypical features of heroism including bravery, showing moral integrity, self-sacrificing, protecting others, and showing conviction and courage (3). Heroism can take place momentarily or sustained action over time. Understanding the prototypical features helps to make sense of why frontline workers, and in particular, healthcare workers have been labelled as heroes. Unfortunately, hero labelling has been somewhat of a poison chalice for these workers.

The case of the global pandemic has provided an interesting context to examine the impact of sustained heroic behaviour over time³. There was initial appreciation from many frontline workers in their being hailed as heroes⁴, yet over time, the shine from this particular

¹ The word hero comes from the Greek word *heros*, meaning protector

² <https://www.google.com/trends>

³ see the CV19 Heroes Project www.cv19heroes.com

⁴ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/liz-bonnin-pays-tribute-to-healthcare-heroes-after-mother-s-death-from-covid-19-1.4450559>

<https://inews.co.uk/inews-lifestyle/people/meet-the-covid-heroes-on-the-new-years-honour-list-818898>

<https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/covid-heroes-who-gone-above-19436240>

<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/covid-heroes-2020-captain-tom-moore-marcus-rashford-b1779049.html>

<https://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/your-covid-heroes-incredible-care-19425915>

label wore off (see: 7). Indeed, the labelling of frontliners has been highlighted as problematic (8). Firstly, frontline workers have worked in often-intolerable conditions for almost a year. For healthcare workers, the complexity of their work has been compounded by the shortages in personal protective equipment (PPE), overcrowded clinical conditions, and increasing criticism from proponents of pandemic conspiracy theories. Those working in community supply chains have also had to deal with lack of PPE and the inability to control their working environment due to relying on the public to maintain good health behaviours, and encountering hoarding behaviour. Those working in civil defence have had to continue with daily duties such as dealing with antisocial behaviour in close quarters, often without PPE, alongside additional strains of demonstrations, and the weaponization of coughing. Second, many of these individuals have been doing heroic work for their entire career but have only recently been lauded as heroes. Third, many of these individuals feel trapped in a situation where they feel they cannot stop working in their essential roles, either due to their sense of duty, financial obligations, and sense that ‘heroes’ cannot give up. Fourth, the nature of their work – particularly for healthcare workers – is such that they often “fail” in their duties, in the case where patients die, which is common in the current context. This feeling of failure in their trained skills, despite the fact that they are dealing with a novel pathogen for which there are limited known treatments, flies in the face of being labelled as a hero. This, coupled with the traumatic and lonely manner of death in COVID-19 patients, means that even those healthcare workers that are well-adapted to losing patients are unable to provide the dignified death their patients deserve. Fifth, the labelling of frontliners as heroes has also coincided with other gestures such as Clap for the Heroes and the awarding of medals, which over time have become viewed by many frontline workers as disingenuous — particularly

where the appreciation does not lead to real action to improve their working conditions, or worse, when the apparent appreciation gestures are coupled with blatant disregard of public health advice making these conditions deteriorate (solidarity appraisal: 9). Despite these evident challenges, we argue that the hero narrative is not the real issue (as indicated by 8), but that the hero narrative retains its utility and can confer benefits to both the heroes and onlookers. Instead, we argue for a more nuanced view of the heroes in their full humanity.

The majority of heroes reject the label of hero – they are humble and feel they do what anyone would do in a similar situation (10). Similarly, many frontline workers often deflect their hero label onto other sectors of frontliners (7), recognising the heroism in others but denying it for themselves and their own profession. There are many other, more sinister reasons why heroes might reject the label of heroes and unfortunately, in the context of COVID-19, it appears that the term hero has been used strategically by some leaders and members of the general public in a way that lets them ‘off the hook’ from their responsibilities – the heroes are named and as such are solely responsible for protecting society.

In ancient myths, heroes were often depicted as demi-Gods or individuals with extraordinary (super-human) capabilities. Over time, our implicit understanding of what it means to be a hero has remained relatively constant, but the individuals for whom we apply the label have changed (3). Through the advent of social media and 24- hour media coverage, we can obsess over every detail of our heroes – their appearance, their behaviour, their triumphs, their woes, and their falls. Our standards for the heroic bar have not have adjusted over time – we apply these high, unrealistic and unyielding standards to individuals who act in the spirit of the good, but who are imperfect, human beings. Through the pandemic, we have expected our frontline workers to remain resolute over many months, with minimal support, and we have viewed their efforts through our own lens of what it means to be a hero

– resilient, strong, unbreakable. While these individuals are true heroes, we argue that it is the expectation of what it means to be a hero that needs recalibration. We advocate for greater discussion around the hero label in this context, as individuals can be heroes but still struggle, still fail, and still feel vulnerable.

The labelling of individuals as heroes can lead to the development of an implicit social contract, or hero contract (9). This has been particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic – where frontliners often agreed to work to protect the safety of the nation under the premise that others do ‘their bit’ – by observing the public health guidance to minimise their work burden and to help them stay safe. We argue that if someone is to confer the label of hero onto another, this comes with it an implicit acceptance that as *they* are heroes, we are not, and therefore we are reliant upon them for their help. By acknowledging their extraordinary effort, and simultaneously our inability to do the same, we enter into a social contract to honour their sacrifices. This has represented a painful discrepancy for frontline workers; knowing that they are being called heroes, but that the behaviour of those that give them that name not only hinders their efforts, but also hurts them. Frontliners are not asking to be revered, quite the opposite, but they are pleading others to follow public health advice. We regard this as an important insight into the future of humankind and its need for heroes – a move towards making the implicit explicit to allow for meaningful dialogue.

A Way Forward

As human beings we need heroes – both in a physical and a psychological sense. There are true heroes in all walks of life, and they deserve recognition. This recognition means we not only clap for them, but we conduct our lives in a way that is mindful of their struggle and sacrifice. Recently, the hero label may have been used to shift responsibility from self to other, and in that case, it is not only harmful to the overall rhetoric of heroism, but to

frontline workers. The general public and frontliners are interdependent – we depend on frontliners to keep us safe, save our lives, and ensure we have the things we need, and they depend on us not to make their complex work more difficult. The impact of the public’s (in)action is crucial not only to them being able to do their jobs, but also, in coping with distress. The labelling of frontliners as heroes has been harmful, but it need not be. Heroes can inspire and provide comfort and security in times of distress (2), and in the pandemic context, their incredible work can give us hope and assurance of a barrier between us and unlimited tragedy. Frontline workers do what we cannot, and have kept our societies afloat during months of crisis: they truly *are* heroes. However, by recognising (and hailing) them as such, we also enter into a hero contract where we must do what we can to help and not hinder their progress. We argue that whilst the label has been difficult for many to accept or live with, it is not the label that is at fault, but the failure of those who give it to fulfil the true and appropriate recognition of their heroism.

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