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Definitions and Descriptions of Heroism

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Synonyms

Concept of heroism; Depictions of heroism; Hero definition; Meaning of heroism; Portrayals of heroism; Understanding of heroism

Definition

Definitions and descriptions of heroism reflect human efforts to understand the nature, meaning, and scope of the phenomenon of heroism. Heroism is a rich and nuanced concept, easily misconstrued, available to everyone, and shaped by societal and cultural values.

Heroism is a complex and beguiling phenomenon of human behavior. It has captured the imaginations of poets, playwrights, artists, and intellectuals throughout the ages. Heroism involves processes that range from the "micro," such as bodily and psychological processes, to the "macro," such as large cultural, historical, and political forces. Paradoxically, heroism has been described as occupying both the fringe and the center of humanity. Viewed as the pinnacle of human behavior, heroism implicates the nadir as

a point of comparison and all behaviors in between. The goal of this chapter is to offer a review of people's attempts to define and describe heroism, beginning with conceptions of heroism in antiquity and including contemporary efforts to depict the nuanced, enigmatic nature of heroic phenomena.

Brief History of Efforts to Define Heroism

The concept of a hero has evolved significantly over human recorded history. As societies progressed and changed, so did perceptions of heroism. Prior to the twenty-first century, most conceptualizations of heroism were put forward by men who held sexist, elitist, and Eurocentric views. Contemporary discussions of heroism seek to address and remedy this issue. A complete review of the history of defining and describing heroism is beyond the scope of this chapter, but we can offer this brief overview.

Heroism in Antiquity

In ancient civilizations such as Greek, Roman, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian, heroes were mythical figures with god-like powers or lineage. They were celebrated for their physical strength, courage, and exceptional skills in battle. Heroes were often involved in quests and adventures which found their way into classic, mythic storytelling (Kohen 2013). Examples of these heroes include Gilgamesh, Hercules, Achilles, and Odysseus.

The ancient Chinese view of heroism was closely tied to the idea of self-sacrifice and putting the interests of the nation or community ahead of one's own (Ivanhoe 2017). The works of Confucius and Mencius focused on cultivating the virtues of honor, inner goodness, humility, and compassion. Confucianism also had an impact on Japan, particularly during the Edo period. Confucian values, including loyalty, filial piety, and proper conduct, were emphasized by scholars and samurai as essential virtues for governing and living honorably. In India, the ancient Sanskrit *Arthashastra* was a treatise on statecraft, politics, and economics. While not solely focused on virtue, it addressed the importance of ethical leadership, governance, and moral conduct in achieving social order and prosperity.

Heroism in Medieval Period and Renaissance

During the Middle Ages, heroic tales continued to be popular, but the focus in Europe shifted to chivalric knights and legendary warriors, such as King Arthur and Roland. These figures embodied ideals of honor, loyalty, and courage in their quests for justice and valor. Heroes of the Renaissance were often associated with religious figures and saints who demonstrated exceptional piety, sacrifice, and miracles. The concept of heroism merged with religious virtues and divine guidance.

Renaissance and Enlightenment Eras

The Renaissance and Enlightenment periods emphasized individuality, reason, and human potential. The scientific revolution influenced the identity of heroes who contributed to knowledge, science, arts, and social progress. Leonardo da Vinci and Galileo Galilei are prominent examples.

Romanticism in the Nineteenth Century

Romanticism celebrated emotional expression, nature, and individuality. Heroes in this era were often rebellious, passionate, and anti-establishment figures, expressed as the heroic ideal in Lord Byron's *Childe Harold* or in Beethoven's Third Symphony. In China, the late nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries featured a shift in heroism from selfless service toward the greater good toward more individualistic and nationalistic ideas. In China, great military leaders, powerful politicians, or successful revolutionaries became heroes partly because of the need for strong leaders to help the country through difficult times. In Japan, Fukuzawa Yukichi emphasized modernization, education, and the importance of individual self-improvement. His ideas about self-reliance, progress, and adapting to change contributed to the shaping of a new Japanese identity and notions of personal heroism. In India, Swami Vivekananda was a philosopher and spiritual leader who emphasized self-realization, service to humanity, and the importance of inner strength. His teachings on selflessness, self-mastery, and the pursuit of noble ideals had a significant impact on the understanding of heroism and moral courage. In Africa, the Akan people of Ghana cultivated a rich tradition of proverbs conveying moral and ethical teachings that touched upon virtues such as wisdom, integrity, and community responsibility. The Fante people of Ghana used the oral tradition to impart moral lessons about virtues such as honesty, kindness, and respect for elders.

Modernity and Mass Media in the Twentieth Century

With the rise of mass media, heroes became more closely associated with popular culture and entertainment. By the mid-twentieth century, fictional characters like Superman, Batman, and other comic book heroes became iconic representations of bravery and justice in the Western world. Many star-struck people regarded celebrities and popular media influencers as heroes. In China, leaders rejected the more traditional, Confucian-centered view of heroism and instead promoted a more revolutionary conception of a hero. This new hero was someone who was willing to take risks and sacrifice for the greater good, defined as promoting the Communist cause. There was less emphasis on moral or Confucian values. In India, Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence (ahimsa) and his leadership in India's struggle for independence had a profound impact on thinking about heroism. His emphasis on moral courage, self-sacrifice, and the pursuit of truth

influenced perceptions of heroism in the Indian context.

Postmodern Era

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the hero concept in Western culture has become more complex and deconstructed. Anti-heroes, flawed characters, and morally ambiguous figures gained popularity, challenging traditional notions of heroism. This era is characterized by a surge in scholarly interest in heroism and the development of hero training programs. In China today, heroism is less about a single individual and more about collective efforts to achieve national goals aimed toward advancing the country's economic and technological progress. Nations of the Global South are navigating the complexities of a postmodern world while preserving and reimagining their cultural legacies. Heroism is evolving to incorporate diverse narratives and respond to the changing social, cultural, and ethical landscapes of the twenty-first century.

Everyday Heroes and Social Change

In contemporary Western societies today, the definition of a hero has expanded to include ordinary people who perform heroic acts, such as first responders, activists, and humanitarians. This *banality of heroism* makes heroism accessible to everyone through acts of kindness, courage, and risky forms of altruism (Franco and Zimbardo 2006). While the term "banality of heroism" may not be explicitly used in China, Japan, or India, similar ideas and trends can be observed in these countries, reflecting a broader shift in how heroism is perceived. Chinese culture places significance on collective responsibility and community harmony, which can align with the idea that heroism can be manifested in ordinary interactions and everyday choices. In Japan, the concept of "giri" (duty) and the notion of "shibui" (understated elegance) are examples of how Japanese culture recognizes the importance of fulfilling responsibilities and displaying virtues in modest and unassuming ways. In India, the concepts of "seva" (selfless service) and "karma yoga" (the path of selfless action) in Hindu philosophy align with the notion that heroism can be

expressed through small acts of kindness, compassion, and ethical behavior. As societies continue to evolve, these ideas are likely to shape perceptions of heroism in ways that extend beyond extraordinary feats and acknowledge the heroic potential within ordinary individuals.

Overall, the definition of a hero has evolved from mythical figures and legendary warriors to encompass a broader and more nuanced range of qualities, emphasizing human potential and the capacity for everyone to make a positive impact on the world. The hero archetype continues to adapt and reflect the values and aspirations of each era and culture.

Definitions of Heroism from Non-Scholarly Sources

Dictionary Definitions

Dictionaries describe heroism as "impressive and courageous conduct or behavior" (American Heritage Dictionary 2023), "conduct especially as exhibited in fulfilling a high purpose or attaining a noble end" (Merriam-Webster 2023), "great bravery, especially in battle; courage, valor" (Oxford English Dictionary 2023), "the display of qualities such as courage, bravery, fortitude, unselfishness" (Wictionary 2023), "behavior directed toward achieving something very brave or having achieved something great" (Cambridge Dictionary 2023), and "great courage, nobility, or magnanimity" (Collins English Dictionary 2023). These definitions underscore courage and exceptional qualities exhibited by people striving to achieve the greater good. Dictionaries tend to omit or downplay mention of several aspects of heroism emphasized by today's heroism scholars, namely, the idea that heroes are made, not born (Kohen et al. 2018), and that heroism is a voluntary action (Franco et al. 2011) involving significant risk (Franco et al. 2018) and self-sacrifice (Kinsella et al. 2017).

Lay Definitions of Heroism

Researchers have studied the ways that lay people describe their heroes. Sullivan and Venter (2010) asked participants to identify and describe their

personal heroes. Participants' heroes were portrayed as intelligent, loving, caring, talented, hardworking, creative, motivated, religious, and a role model. In addition, participants described their heroes as providing standards of conduct, being role models, and representing ideal self-concepts.

In a second study, Sullivan and Venter's participants described heroes as loving, caring, talented, intelligent, hardworking, creative, motivated, and religious.

Allison and Goethals (2011) also asked participants to list the traits of their heroes, and these traits were then subjected to exploratory multivariate factor and cluster analyses. The resultant hero trait categories revealed *the Great Eight* traits of heroes: intelligent, strong, reliable, resilient, caring, charismatic, selfless, and inspiring. Based on their participants' descriptions of their heroes, Allison and Goethals (2011, 9) concluded that people define heroism as "doing the right thing at a critical moment." Moreover, participants indicated that doing the right thing involves demonstrating acts of great morality and great competence. This two-fold description of heroism is consistent with decades of research revealing social cognition's "Big Two" dimensions of person perception: (1) warmth-communion and (2) competence-agency (Fiske 2018, 67). Heroes are viewed a warm, compassionate, and community-building, and they are seen as competent, agentic, and efficacious.

To shed more light on lay conceptions of heroism, Kinsella, Ritchie and Igou (2015a) examined the prototypical structure of the hero concept. Prototypes are mental blueprints that people use to understand and makes sense of the world. For example, when we are asked to think about a chair, a mental prototype of a chair comes to mind, even though chairs can come in many different shapes and sizes. Kinsella et al. explored whether a prototype exists for the hero concept. In keeping with prototype theory, these researchers distinguished between *central features* essential to activating the hero prototype from *peripheral features* that are slower and weaker in activating the hero concept. Using methodologies involving open-ended descriptions, ratings of these

descriptions, reaction time tasks, and surprise recall tasks, these researchers concluded that the hero concept can indeed be viewed as a prototype with a combination of central and peripheral features. A total of 26 heroic characteristics were identified.

The central features of heroes, as identified in Kinsella et al.'s (2015a) data, include *bravery, moral integrity, courage, conviction, honesty, altruistic, self-sacrificing, selfless, determined, willingness to protect and save others*, *inspiring*, and *helpful*. Peripheral features of heroes include *proactivity, strength, leadership, compassion, risk-taking, exceptionality, humility, fearlessness, caring, powerful, intelligent, talented,* and *personable*. Overall, this prototype analysis of heroism revealed that there is a shared understanding about what "hero" means. Most importantly, Kinsella et al.'s studies illuminated many important features of heroism, as perceived by lay people.

Kinsella et al.'s (2015a) research also uncovered key differences between how heroes are viewed differently from leaders and role models. Compared to leaders, heroes were described as more brave, moral, willing to save others and sacrifice, altruistic, compassionate, selfless, courageous, and willing to protect others. Role models were rated as more talented, honest, personable, exceptional, and humble than heroes or leaders. Moreover, the research highlighted how the hero prototype includes both stereotypically female characteristics (e.g., compassionate, caring) and stereotypically masculine characteristics (e.g., risk-taking, powerful). Heroes can show agentic traits such as individual grit, determination, and proactivity, to achieve communal goals such as social justice. Lay people view both heroes and leaders as having agentic traits, but for heroes there is a stronger association with communal traits. In fact, heroes are judged to be as communal as they are agentic (Hoyt et al. 2020).

Kraft-Todd and Rand (2019) approached lay understandings of heroism by focusing on four common indices of human behavior: (1) cost to the actor, (2) benefit to the recipient, (3) perceived frequency of the act, and (4) perceived

expectation to perform it. Kraft-Todd and Rand's participants generated examples of heroic acts, rated how heroic they were, and then judged these heroic acts on the above four dimensions. The results yielded both obvious and nonobvious findings. First, not surprisingly, the most heroic acts were seen as the rarest and the costliest to the heroes performing them. Unexpectedly, the most heroic acts were not judged as most beneficial to recipients, nor were they viewed as less obligatory. It appears that when we judge whether a person's behavior is heroic or not, we are more attuned to the consequences for the heroic actor than we are for those of the recipient. The actor is the main protagonist of the drama and seems to draw most of our causal attention, with the recipient playing a more passive role in our intuitive deciphering of the event.

The tendency of heroes to capture more of our attention than recipients has significant psychological implications. Social and cognitive psychologists have long known that the *salience* of a stimulus – that is, its attention-grabbing power – affects a variety of human judgments. Salient people, such as heroes and villains, not only seize our attention; they tend to initiate more elaborate mental processing. According to Fiske and Taylor (2017, 73), "salience makes a stimulus *larger than life* in various judgments" (italics added). Salience affects perceivers in several important ways. First, salient people are judged as causing things to happen, good or bad. They are seen as movers and shakers. Second, perceivers tend to attribute the behavior of salient people to their personal qualities. Third, perceivers tend to form more complex and more organized impressions of salient people. Fourth, perceivers are more likely to make more extreme evaluations, good or bad, about salient people. Fifth, perceivers are generally unaware that salience affects their judgments. Larger-than-life figures such as heroes are lightning rods for presumed causality, evaluation extremity, narrative building, and elevated dispositional inference.

One important aspect of lay perceptions of heroism, detected by Kinsella et al. (2015a), is the description of heroes as humble. Klein (2020, 2023) conducted research showing that observers of heroic action tend to evaluate heroes more favorably than do heroes themselves. Heroes tend to downplay their heroism. Observers are captivated by heroes' salience, while heroes desire to avoid the spotlight. Klein has collected quotes from heroes who are asked to comment on their heroic actions. Heroes say such things as, "it was nothing," "everyone would do the same as I did under the same circumstances," "I'm just an ordinary person trying to help." Klein's conclusion is that heroes are not motivated at all by external incentives. Heroic humility "may come not from a choice to downplay one's good deeds but rather from an interpretation of performing heroic actions as an obligation that comes with being in situations that offer the opportunity to help others in extreme ways" (Klein 2023, 2). Klein has collected data suggesting that engaging in heroism may actually *create* humility by reminding heroes that they are inseparable from others and "one" with humanity. This selfless, sociocentric mindset of the hero is integral to many definitions of heroism (e.g., Franco et al. 2011; Kohen et al. 2018; Worthington and Allison 2018; Zimbardo 2011).

Definitions of Heroism from Artists, Poets, and Intellectuals

Many of the world's greatest artists, lyricists, and thinkers throughout history have used their creative works to depict and define heroes and heroism. Below we offer a few select highlights of these portrayals of heroism.

Artists and Poets

The ancient Greek poet Homer defined heroism through the legendary military exploits of Achilles and Odysseus in his epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Virgil's epic *Aeneid* celebrated the founding of Rome, depicting Aeneas as a heroic figure destined to establish a great civilization. In ancient China, Li Bai, a celebrated Tang Dynasty poet, often wrote about heroes, warriors, and martial themes in his poetry. His works convey a sense of admiration for brave individuals and the heroic spirit. At the same time, Li Bai expressed

antipathy toward needless wars and sympathy for the suffering of ordinary citizens. In ancient Japan, Ono no Komachi, a renowned poet of the Heian period, is known for her emotionally charged and introspective poetry. While her work is often associated with themes of love and beauty, some of her poems also touch on the concept of heroism, particularly in relation to personal resilience and inner strength.

In *The Divine Comedy*, the protagonist, Dante Alighieri (1472/2023), encounters various heroic and mythical figures that reflect different aspects of heroism and virtue. Geoffrey Chaucer's (1476/2016) *The Canterbury Tales* is a collection of stories told by pilgrims on a journey to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket. These tales depict a wide range of characters, including heroic knights, pilgrims, and adventurers. Leonardo da Vinci celebrated the heroic ideal through his portrayal of historical figures and mythological scenes, showcasing bravery and nobility in his works. William Shakespeare's plays, such as *Henry V* and *Macbeth*, feature heroic characters and explore the complexities of heroism, ambition, and leadership. Artemisia Gentileschi portrayed strong and heroic women in her artworks. Her painting *Judith Slaying Holofernes* is a powerful depiction of Judith, a biblical heroine, displaying courage and determination as she beheads the enemy general. The Romantic poet Lord Byron celebrated heroic figures in works like *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*, portraying characters with passionate and rebellious spirits. Though known for her introspective and contemplative poetry, Emily Dickinson touched on heroism in poems such as *Success is Counted Sweetest* and *Victory Comes Late*, where she reflects on the nature of triumph and what it means to be a hero.

The great American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson (1841/2007, 12) defined a hero as someone who "is no braver than an ordinary man, but he is brave five minutes longer." Emerson believed that heroes go beyond the call of duty, do more than what is expected, and trust themselves to do whatever it takes to accomplish their heroic mission. Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* is a gripping representation of heroism in the face of war, capturing the horrors and resilience of the Spanish Civil War.

Frida Kahlo often depicted herself as a powerful and defiant figure in her self-portraits. Her paintings, such as *The Two Fridas*, symbolize her resilience in the face of physical and emotional challenges. Elizabeth Catlett, an African-American sculptor and printmaker, created artworks that celebrated the heroism of ordinary people, especially African-American women, and their contributions to social change and civil rights.

Maya Angelou's poetry often celebrated heroism in the face of adversity and celebrates the indomitable spirit of individuals who rise above challenges. In her famous poem *Still I Rise*, she embodied the essence of heroism by demonstrating resilience in the face of oppression. According to a quote often attributed to Nobel Prize winning poet Bob Dylan, "A hero is someone who understands the responsibility that comes with his freedom." A similar idea was expressed by the famed comic book writer Stan Lee (1962), who coined the iconic phrase,

"With great power there must also come great responsibility" to describe a key aspect of heroism. The aphorism is frequently used in popular culture as a key lesson imparted to Spider-Man about the ethical responsibilities that come with his superhuman abilities. Heroes understand their obligation to serve others if they've been endowed with the ability to do so.

Intellectuals and Philosophers

Aristotle (350 BCE/2016) viewed heroism as a form of virtuous action. In his work *Nicomachean Ethics*, he emphasized that heroes display courage and bravery in the face of danger, but their actions are guided by moral virtues and a sense of honor. Niccolò Machiavelli (1532/2021), an Italian philosopher and political theorist, wrote extensively on political leadership and the qualities of successful rulers. In his famous work *The Prince*, Machiavelli discussed the characteristics of an effective prince, which often included traits associated with heroism, such as courage, decisiveness, and the ability to inspire loyalty among their followers. The Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung (1934) explored heroism through his concept of the *hero archetype*. According to Jung, the hero

represents the individual's journey of self-discovery and transformation, integrating their unconscious and conscious aspects to achieve wholeness. The existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1946) explored heroism in the context of freedom and responsibility. In his work *Existentialism is a Humanism*, he argued that individuals create their own values and must take responsibility for their actions, which can lead to heroic acts of authenticity and defiance.

Simone de Beauvoir (1947), a French philosopher and feminist, also discussed the idea of authentic heroism in her book, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. She defined authentic heroism as a person's ability to take full responsibility for their own choices and actions and to live in a way that is true to their own values. Albert Camus (1942), another existentialist, depicted heroism in his novel *The Stranger*. He explored the idea of an *absurd hero* who confronts the inherent meaninglessness of life with courage and acceptance, even in the face of death. The psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl (1946) described heroism in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*. He emphasized the heroic capacity of individuals to find meaning and purpose amid suffering and adversity. The existential psychologist Rollo May saw heroism as an expression of authentic and creative living. In his work *The Courage to Create*, he explored how individuals can channel their inner heroism by taking risks and embracing their creative potential. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1986) discussed heroism as an aspect of moral courage and empathy in her work on ethical theory. She emphasizes the importance of compassion and the ability to empathize with the suffering of others as an essential part of being a hero.

Lu Xun (1925/2016), a leading figure of modern Chinese literature and thought, explored themes of social responsibility, individual courage, and the need for reform in his writings. His works often depicted characters who exhibited heroic qualities in the face of social injustices and political challenges. Deng Xiaoping's (2006) pragmatic approach to governance and economic reform in post-Mao China reflected his focus on modernizing the country. While not explicitly discussing heroism, his ideas of collective progress and the "Chinese Dream" can be seen as a form of societal heroism aiming for national rejuvenation. In India, Rabindranath Tagore's (1912) philosophy and literary works explored themes of heroism, spiritual values, and the interconnectedness of humanity. His emphasis on selfless service, compassion, and the pursuit of truth had a significant impact on Indian thought.

In the nineteenth century, Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky (1864, 51) anticipated several modern-day elements of the definition of heroism. Dostoevsky wrote, "What makes a hero? Courage, strength, morality, withstanding adversity? Are these the traits that truly show and create a hero? Is the light truly the source of darkness or vice versa? Is the soul a source of hope or despair? Who are these so called heroes and where do they come from? Are their origins in obscurity or in plain sight?" With these insights, Dostoevsky anticipated the importance of identifying the traits that define heroism, elucidating the functions of heroism, exploring whether humans are innately good or bad, and illuminating the banality of heroism. Dostoevsky was one of many intellectuals and philosophers who contributed valuable insights into the nature of heroism, exploring themes of virtue, transformation, authenticity, responsibility, and moral courage.

Thomas Carlyle's "Great Man" Theory

In his book, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History,* Thomas Carlyle (1841) explored the concept of heroic leadership and its role in shaping history and society. Carlyle's nineteenth-century thinking about heroism was sexist and anachronistic by modern-day sensibilities. However, it shaped scholarly thinking about leaders and heroes for a century or more. His five main points were as follows:

1. **Great men drive progress**: Guided by will-power and genius, exceptional men exert

disproportionately substantial influence over posterity. To accomplish feats surpassing common mortals, Carlyle believed towering personages possessed attributes such as physical strength, moral virtues, and natural talents honed by education, practice, and self-discipline.

2. **Heroes deserve deification via worship**. Carlyle described heroism as an expression of the divine and the ideal, and therefore heroes deserve to be revered by society for their exceptional deeds.

3. **Cultural and historical forces affect heroism**: Carlyle suggested that the nature of heroism and hero-worship varies across different cultures and historical periods.

4. **Heroes have impact**: Carlyle believed that the deeds and teachings of heroic individuals have a lasting impact on society, shaping its beliefs, values, and institutions. Heroes inspire people to follow their example and lead them toward progress and greatness.

5. **Heroes overcome adversity**: Carlyle acknowledged that heroism is not without its challenges and sacrifices. Heroes often face adversity, opposition, and personal struggles in their pursuit of their ideals.

Thomas Carlyle's view of heroism was influential but has been criticized for its idealized and elitist view of heroic action. He focused on white male exceptionality, a place where only a few extraordinary individuals are deemed worthy of recognition, while the heroic potential of ordinary people is overlooked. Carlyle's view of heroism was Eurocentric and lacked diversity in its examples. His concept of heroism tended to focus on male figures, reinforcing traditional gender roles and downplaying the heroic contributions of women throughout history. His outlook for heroism was deterministic, suggesting that heroic individuals are predestined or "chosen" by fate. Contemporary discussions of heroism seek to address these issues and offer a more inclusive, diverse, and nuanced exploration of heroic actions and individuals.

Definitions of Heroism from Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Scholars

Joseph Campbell's Eight Elements of Heroism

In his iconic book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell (1949) laid the foundation of modern heroism science. Campbell audaciously proposed that the general public's understanding of heroism derives from a shared mythological consciousness cultivated by ancestral heroic tales that have permeated society throughout the ages. Campbell transformed our understanding of heroism by proposing that it involves a life-altering journey, described in storytelling around the world. To become a hero, people must leave their familiar environs, undergo trials, and ultimately return with newfound wisdom and a desire to share it. Campbell's primary definition of heroism reflected his belief that the hero cannot be separated from the journey or from the purpose of the journey. Campbell (1949, 31) stated that *"the hero is symbolical of that divine creative and redemptive image which is hidden within us all, only waiting to be rendered into life."*

Campbell's description above contains eight elements of heroism that he believed were important in understanding the true meaning of a hero. The eight elements are:

1. the symbolic nature of the hero's journey
2. the divine or spiritual aspects of the journey
3. the creative side of heroism
4. the redemptive component of heroism
5. the central role of imagery in guiding the hero
6. the hidden features of the hero's inner journey
7. the waiting that is required for the journey to unfold naturally
8. the life-giving qualities of the journey

First, Campbell (1949) viewed the hero as "symbolical," meaning that the archetypal hero in mythological stories was a representation of something deeply important, such as the human capacity for courage, strength, and self-sacrifice. The hero is therefore a metaphor for ideals that are greater and beyond the individual person. Later, in

his Bill Moyers' interviews, Campbell (1988, 167) expanded on this idea and gave a succinct definition of a hero: "A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself." The hero is a personification of an ideal, a transcendent principle of human life. When heroes first embark on their journey, they may not be aware of its greater, symbolic significance. The journey always brings much insight and revelation into conscious awareness.

Second, Campbell (1949) viewed the hero's journey as a quest to connect with the transcendent or divine. Throughout the journey, the hero often encounters supernatural beings, mentors, or experiences that represent higher spiritual forces, guiding them toward self-realization and a deeper understanding of the cosmos. As the hero progresses through trials and challenges, they may experience moments of revelation or profound insights that bring them closer to the sacred and the mysteries of existence. Campbell observed that many hero myths involve a quest for immortality or a desire to transcend the limitations of mortality. This pursuit reflects the human longing for a higher, eternal state, which is a central theme in spiritual and religious traditions. Overall, Joseph Campbell saw the hero's journey as a profound spiritual odyssey, where the hero embarks on an inner quest, grapples with universal themes, and ultimately achieves a deeper understanding of themselves and their place within the cosmos. The hero's journey resonates with the spiritual journey that individuals undertake in seeking higher meaning, purpose, and connection to the divine or the sacred.

Third, Campbell (1949) viewed heroism as a creative process involving a profound act of self-discovery, transformation, and an integration of various elements into a new and more complete whole. Throughout the journey, the hero encounters various trials and challenges that demand innovative thinking and creative problem-solving. Zimbardo (2007, 2011) and others (Kohen et al. 2018) would call it *heroic imagination*. With each obstacle, the hero must adapt and respond creatively. Overcoming a symbolic abyss or moment of crisis requires a profound transformation or turning point requiring the hero to creatively

confront their innermost fears and limitations to achieve growth and self-discovery (Allison and Goethals 2017; Ross 2019). Heroes experience moments of revelation and insight, gaining a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world. These insights are often sparked by creative thinking and self-reflection. This process is akin to a creative act of reinventing oneself.

Fourth, Campbell believed that redemption was an integral part of heroism because he saw the journey as a metaphor for the human experience. According to Campbell, people are often faced with a sense of "fallenness" or incompletion, and the hero's journey is a way of rediscovering wholeness and transcendence. This redemption can take many forms. For example, the hero might need to atone for past wrongs, heal a past trauma, or overcome a significant personal shortcoming (Allison et al. 2019; Ross 2019). Campbell viewed redemption as a necessary step in the journey toward self-actualization and self-realization.

Fifth, Campbell believed that images and symbols were important in guiding the hero's psychological and spiritual development during the hero's journey. Images serve as powerful tools for conveying deeper meanings, archetypal patterns, and universal truths that resonate with the human psyche. The hero encounters symbols that represent different stages of the journey, such as crossing the threshold, encountering a dragon, or acquiring a magic object. Imagery is often employed to represent mentors and guides who provide wisdom and assistance to the hero. These figures may appear in dreams or visions, offering guidance and insights that facilitate the hero's growth. Visual imagery is often used to convey the hero's symbolic death and subsequent rebirth or transformation. This might be represented through images of burial, descent into darkness, or emerging from a chrysalis, symbolizing the hero's spiritual renewal. Visual representation resonates with human emotions and allows the audience to connect more profoundly with the hero's transformative journey, making the process of heroic growth and self-discovery more tangible and relatable.

Sixth, Campbell emphasized that the hero's outer, physical journey was less important than the interior, psychological journey. Campbell believed that the hero's physical challenges and struggles with the external world are manifestations of the inner struggles and conflicts that the hero must confront. For example, if the outer journey requires the hero to slay a dragon, this might represent the hero's inner struggle to overcome their own fears or destructive impulses. If the hero must cross a body of water, it may represent the hero's need to overcome their own fears or unconscious desires.

Seventh, Campbell suggested that timing within the hero's journey is important. The journey involves a particular ordering of stages that cannot be rushed or ignored. Waiting is part of the hero-forming process. Each stage represents a particular psychological process that the hero must undergo for inner transformation to occur. If heroes rush through these stages, they may not fully integrate the insights and learnings that each stage provides. In other words, the timing of the journey is important because it allows the hero to fully process and benefit from each stage. Campbell cautioned that ignoring or skipping certain stages can be dangerous because it can leave the hero incomplete or unfulfilled.

Finally, Campbell noted that the hero is "rendered into life" as a result of completing the journey. As mentioned earlier, the hero's outer journey reflects an inner, psychological journey that involves "leaving one condition and finding the source of life to bring you forth into a richer or mature condition" (Campbell 1988, 152). In every hero tale, the hero must "die spiritually" and then be "reborn to a larger way of living" (141), a process that is the enactment of a universal spiritual theme of death being the necessary experience for producing new life (Campbell 1991). When the hero leaves their comfortable, ordinary life and steps into the unknown, they begin to experience life more deeply, by confronting challenges, facing fears, and going beyond their comfort zone. By journey's end, the hero has grown and developed in profound ways, allowing them to experience the richness and "the rapture that is associated with being alive" (Campbell 1988, 5). Campbell is famous for referring to this rapture as *bliss* (Campbell 2004).

Orrin Klapp's Perspectives on Heroism

Sociologist Orrin Klapp (1954, 57) explored the concept of heroes and heroism in the context of American culture during the mid-twentieth century. Klapp argued that heroes serve an important social function by embodying and representing values that are important to a society or group. He believed that heroes are symbolic leaders who help unify and motivate people by giving them aspirational ideals. He defined heroes as "personages, real or imaginary, who are admired because they stand out from others by supposed unusual merits or attainments." Heroes "are recognized as such" and "occupy an honored status, to which behavior such as homage, commemoration, celebration and veneration is appropriate." Klapp's main points about heroes and heroism can be summarized as follows:

Heroes Are Cultural Symbols Klapp argued that heroes are not merely individuals but cultural symbols that reflect the values and aspirations of a society. They embody the ideals and virtues that a culture admires and that a society encourages its citizens to emulate.

Human Societies Need Heroes Klapp suggested that societies have an inherent need for heroes because they provide a sense of identity, purpose, and inspiration. Heroes serve as role models, representing the traits and behaviors that a culture considers commendable.

Heroes Are Both *Real* and *Constructed* Klapp (1954, 57) recognized the reality of "supernormal" individuals whose exceptional behavior warrants the status of hero. But he also emphasized that a hero is "created and assigned by collective processes. A man can act in any way that he will, but only a group can make him a hero." Media representations, fan culture, and myth-making mechanisms contribute significantly to the hero-making process.

Heroes Are Psychologically Important Klapp discussed the psychological functions of heroes, which include offering a template for living a good life, instilling a sense of meaning, giving us something to strive for, providing comfort during times of crisis, inspiring hope, and unifying people around shared values.

Overall, Klapp's (1954) views on heroism highlight the multifaceted role that heroes play in shaping societal values, aspirations, and collective identity. His work shed light on the complex relationship between individuals and the heroic ideals they admire and strive to emulate. Klapp anticipated twenty-first-century approaches to heroism by acknowledging both the reality of heroism and the socially constructed nature of heroism (Decter-Frain et al. 2017).

Ernest Becker's Psychoanalytic Approach to Heroism

Ernest Becker's 1973 book, *The Denial of Death*, explored human psychology and behavior in the face of mortality. Becker presented a complex analysis of various psychological mechanisms that individuals use to cope with the terror of being aware of their finite existence. His definition of heroism revolved around the idea that people strive to achieve a sense of significance and transcendence to help them cope with their fear of death. He suggested that people seek to become heroic by engaging in actions or behaviors that contribute to a lasting legacy or a sense of meaning beyond their own limited physical reality. Becker argued that heroism is a psychological defense mechanism against the terror of death. By striving for accomplishments, recognition, and contributions that will outlast their mortal lives, individuals attempt to deny the ultimate reality of their own mortality. Heroic acts, in this context, serve as a way for individuals to symbolically conquer death and leave a lasting impact on the world.

It's important to note that Becker's exploration of heroism was deeply intertwined with his broader thesis about the ways in which human beings construct cultural and societal structures to manage their existential anxiety. He suggested that heroism is one of the ways individuals engage in their own personal *immortality project*, which involves creating or aligning with belief systems, values, and actions that help them feel connected to something greater and enduring. Heroic actions and aspirations are seen as symbolic ways to transcend the limitations of human existence and leave a mark on the world that outlasts death. Research on terror management theory (Solomon et al. 2016) has supported Becker's idea that mortality awareness may increase heroic motivation. Studies have shown that when people are reminded of their own mortality, they are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior (Dong et al. 2019).

Becker and Eagly: Gender Bias and Heroism

Selwyn Becker and Alice Eagly (2004, 164) brought attention to gender bias in expressions and definitions of heroism. Defining heroes as "individuals who voluntarily risk or sacrifice their life for others' benefit," Becker and Eagly argued that gender bias is responsible for women being denied opportunities for certain kinds of heroism and for women's heroism to go unrecognized. Gender bias affects people's expectations about who is seen as eligible for heroic status. The bias engenders stereotypes about heroic actions, determines how society defines heroes, and affects how society evaluates heroic behavior based on the gender of the person involved. Some ways in which gender bias can affect our perception of heroism include:

Stereotypical Roles Traditional gender roles and stereotypes influence the types of heroism available to men and women. Men are often associated with qualities like physical strength, bravery, and assertiveness, which align with conventional notions of heroism. Women, on the other hand, are often associated with nurturing, compassion, and caretaking roles, which may not be as readily perceived as heroic.

Excessive Emphasis on Physicality Heroism is sometimes linked to physical acts of strength or daring, which can lead to an emphasis on male heroic figures, especially in contexts that involve

physical risk or combat. This emphasis can marginalize heroic actions that are not solely reliant on physical prowess.

Contextual Bias The context in which heroic acts occur can also influence gender bias. For example, heroic actions in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as military or law enforcement, may be more heavily associated with men. These associations with men, in turn, lead to inflated views of the heroism of men.

Media Representation The way heroism is portrayed in media, including movies, TV shows, and books, can perpetuate gender biases. Men are often cast as the protagonists and heroic figures, while women may be relegated to secondary or supporting roles. Men also have more speaking roles in movies, diminishing the perceived heroic contributions of women (Lauzen 2023).

Recognition and Praise Women's heroic actions are often behind the scenes and invisible, thus making them easy to overlook and undervalue them. This hidden nature of woman's heroism can lead to less recognition and praise compared to similar actions performed by men.

Double Standards There may be double standards in how heroic behavior is evaluated based on gender. Actions considered heroic in one gender may be criticized or dismissed when performed by individuals of another gender. Courageous assertiveness, for example, may be seen as an asset in men but a liability in women (Endendijk et al. 2020).

Intersectionality Gender bias in heroism perception can intersect with other forms of bias, such as race or ethnicity. People can experience multiple forms of discrimination at the same time, and these different forms can interact with each other. For example, a woman of color might experience both gender bias and racial bias. Very few scholars have studied racial bias in perceptions of heroism and how it may intersect with and magnify gender bias.

Becker and Eagly's (2004) work inspired other scholars to explore aspects of gender bias in models of heroism. Research by Susan Ross (2019, 511) identified several hero models as sexist, and she used Campbell's (1949) hero's journey as an example. Ross argued that Campbell's journey involves "masculine initiation [and] a predominantly masculine voyage fostering masculine-related strengths." Addressing gender bias in heroism perception requires raising awareness through educational campaigns, social media outlets, and public discussions. It is important for all people to recognize their own biases and learn about the impact of stereotypes on perceptions of heroism. The entertainment industry can promote diverse and realistic portrayals of both men and women in heroic roles in movies, TV shows, literature, and other forms of media. This can help challenge traditional gender norms and expand the definition of heroism. Moreover, society can emphasize a wider range of traits that constitute heroism, such as compassion, empathy, resilience, and intelligence, rather than focusing solely on physical strength or aggression. This can help counteract gender stereotypes that favor certain traits over others.

The use of language, including the word "hero," may perpetuate gender bias (Rankin and Eagly 2008). People should avoid using gendered language that reinforces stereotypes and instead use inclusive terms that acknowledge the contributions of people of all genders. The idea of using the term "shero" in lieu of "hero" is often associated with discussions about gender-neutral or gender-inclusive language. Feminist activists, writers, and advocates for gender equality may use and promote terms like "shero" as a way to challenge traditional language patterns that often default to male-centric terminology. The goal is to raise awareness about the importance of acknowledging and celebrating the achievements of women and other marginalized genders, including those in the LGBTQ+ community. Leonard (2023) opined that dominant definitions of heroism continue to valorize male bodies and hypermasculine behaviors and forms of association. The association of heroism with hypermasculinity may depend on the devaluation and exclusion of

LGBTQ+ people and identities and non-heteronormative ways of being.

Franco and Zimbardo: Banality, Hero Conceptualization, and Heroic Imagination

Zeno Franco and Phil Zimbardo (2006) ignited the field of heroism studies by highlighting the banality of heroism – the idea that everyone has the capacity to be heroic if they choose to take action to help others in the face of adversity or challenge. In summarizing the banality of heroism, Franco et al. (2018) emphasized two points. First, building on Farley's idea of "small-h heroism" (Farley 2011), the banality of heroism refutes the idea that heroism is reserved only for elite, iconic figures. Small acts of everyday heroism can be carried out by anyone. Second, Franco and Zimbardo encouraged the cultivation of a mindset to help people in need, to care for others compassionately, and to develop a sense of *heroic efficacy* (Condren 2023), defined as confidence in one's ability to take heroic action when necessary.

This idea of a heroic mindset evolved into the concept of *heroic imagination* – the capacity for people to become everyday heroes by recognizing and responding to situations that require moral courage, altruism, and positive action (Franco 2023). People can be inspired to act heroically when they develop at least six specific cognitive and emotional skills: (1) the ability to recognize situations where one's intervention is needed to prevent harm or help others, (2) a belief in one's capacity to make a positive difference and influence the outcome of a situation, (3) the willingness to take risks and face adversity in order to stand up for what is right, (4) the capacity to understand and share the feelings of others, motivated by a desire to alleviate their suffering, (5) the ability to overcome obstacles, and (6) a commitment to personal development and positive change through heroic actions.

Franco and Zimbardo (2006) argued that heroism is composed of at least four independent dimensions. First, heroism involves some type of pursuit, ranging from the preservation of life (e.g., taking steps to save a life) to the preservation of an ideal (e.g., taking steps to expand civil rights). Second, heroism must encompass actual or anticipated sacrifice or risk. Emergency workers, for example, place themselves in physical peril and often make tremendous sacrifices. Third, the heroic act can either be passive or active. Heroism is often seen as a clearly observable activity, but some forms of heroism involve passive resistance or an unwillingness to be moved. Finally, heroism can include a sudden, one-time act or a series of actions that make a long-term positive difference. Zimbardo's (2007, 2011) research on the psychology of heroism has highlighted the role of situational factors and social influence in shaping heroic behavior. He has explored how social contexts, norms, and roles can shape individuals' willingness to act heroically or to conform to less admirable behaviors, a phenomenon that Zimbardo called the *Lucifer Effect*.

In addition to proposing the idea of heroism's banality, Franco and Zimbardo carefully articulated their definition and description of heroism. Zimbardo (2007, 461) presented a definition of heroism that describes a hero as in "contempt of danger, not from ignorance or inconsiderate levity but from a noble devotion to some great cause and a just confidence of being able to meet danger in the spirit of such a cause." Zimbardo preferred definitions of heroism that mention the word "fortitude." Fortitude, often referred to as courage or bravery, is a crucial and foundational trait in understanding heroism because heroes often find themselves in situations of great danger, adversity, or crisis. Fortitude is the quality that enables individuals to confront these challenges head-on, despite their fear or risk involved. It empowers individuals to take decisive action in the face of difficult circumstances, to overcome their self-preservation instincts, to prioritize the welfare of others or a noble goal, and to overcome bystander apathy or the diffusion of responsibility. In essence, fortitude is the bedrock of heroism because it represents the inner strength and courage that propel individuals to act selflessly, stand up for their beliefs, and make a positive impact on the lives of others and the world around them.

According to Franco et al. (2011), heroism and altruism differ conceptually in at least three ways. First, altruism generally involves a comparatively low degree of risk compared to the high risk

associated with heroic actions. As Friedman (2017, 3) noted, heroism is "putting life and limb – or at least livelihood, on the line through an extraordinary act of altruism." Second, while altruistic actions often strengthen social bonds, heroic acts such as whistleblowing can result in social rejection or exclusion. Third, altruism and bystander intervention usually entail a period of thoughtful hesitation, ranging from a few seconds in clear-cut scenarios to several minutes in situations of uncertainty. In contrast, accounts of heroism involving physical risk suggest that individuals are driven to make instantaneous decisions that propel them into action, even in complex circumstances.

In summary, Franco and Zimbardo argued that heroism involves individuals taking deliberate and voluntary actions to help others or make a positive difference in their communities, often at great personal risk or sacrifice (Franco and Zimbardo 2006; Franco et al. 2011). Heroism often requires a sense of moral courage that empowers people to act on their principles with the goal of benefiting others or promoting a just cause. According to Franco et al. (2011), heroism involves going beyond what is expected or required in a situation, with the goal of helping others or society at large. They emphasized that heroism is not limited to physical actions or acts of selfless sacrifice but can include standing up for principles or speaking out against wrongdoing despite potential consequences.

Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou: Hero Prototypes, Functions, and Meaning

Elaine Kinsella, Tim Ritchie, Eric Igou, and several of their colleagues have undertaken a rigorous social psychological examination of heroism's meaning, functions, and social implications. Earlier we noted Kinsella et al.'s (2015a) prototype research identifying the central and peripheral traits of heroism. These same investigators also proposed the *hero functions framework* (Kinsella et al. 2015b, 2017). This model is derived from empirical data and a top-down analysis of the heroism literature that reveals three broad functions served by heroes. First, heroes serve to enhance the lives of others by inspiring others,

being a good role model, instilling hope, and improving morale. Second, heroes are moral models. They remind people about good in the world, and they make the world a better place by demonstrating morals and values. Third, heroes protect people from physical or psychological threats. They help, save, and defend others, acting against evil or danger to preserve others' lives. Kinsella et al.'s groundbreaking work has inspired research that has since identified several additional functions of heroism. Heroes help heal us, guide us through developmental stages, impart wisdom, engender positive emotions, offer meaning and purpose, reduce loneliness, help individuals achieve personal, and push humanity toward achieving larger societal goals (Allison 2022).

Kinsella, Igou, and Ritchie (2019) and their colleagues (Coughlan et al. 2019) have also explored the role of heroism in the human need to lead a meaningful life. Psychological meaning can consist of having a broad purpose in life, sensing that one's life is coherent, perceiving that one's life has significance, and seeking self-improvement on a desired dimension. Coughlan et al. found that the feeling of boredom activates an existential drive to search for meaning. Their results showed that perceptions of heroism endow people with a sense of meaningfulness that counteracts boredom. Kinsella, Igou, and Ritchie further explored how heroism acts as a buffer against threats to the meaning maintenance process. When life events or emotional states undermine people's search for meaning in life, people may draw from the functions of heroism (the enhancing, moral modeling, and protective functions) to reestablish meaning. In addition, people may engage in heroic behavior themselves to create meaning. Whether observed in others or personally undertaken, heroism bestows many psychological benefits.

Kinsella and Rachel Sumner have also conducted recent work on the idea of an implicit exchange relationship between heroes and those who benefit from heroic action (Kinsella and Sumner 2022; Sumner and Kinsella 2021). This exchange agreement is called a *hero contract*. From this perspective, heroes have some awareness that a fair exchange of services and benefits

should exist between heroes and recipients, and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic offered vivid evidence of such an implied agreement. During the crisis, frontline heroes working in the public health sector witnessed beneficiaries of their heroism violating the terms of the hero contract. While doctors and nurses were risking their lives to save gravely ill public citizens, other citizens were noncompliant in wearing masks, avoiding large gatherings, and providing frontline heroes with adequate support and protections from the COVID-19 virus. In response to this perceived violation of the hero contract, healthcare workers protested or resigned in great numbers. Further research has illuminated how the terms of the hero contract evolve over time in response to crises (Allison and Beggan 2022).

Kohen, Langdon, and Riches: Empathy, Risk, Motives, and Training

In his 2013 book, *Untangling Heroism*, Ari Kohen explored how early Western literature has informed current attempts to define heroism. Socrates, as depicted in Plato's dialogues, expressed a deep concern for ethical matters and sought to understand and promote the well-being of others through knowledge and self-examination. Two Homerian heroes, Achilles and Odysseus, fall short of demonstrating "other-regarding" traits such as empathy and compassion. Achilles's heroic qualities, for example, centered on personal honor, vengeance, and prowess in battle. The heroism of Odysseus, moreover, is manifest in his cunning, resourcefulness, and pursuit of personal goals. According to Kohen, heroism is an expression of empathy and moral courage grounded in everyday life choices rather than grand gestures or extraordinary circumstances. Kohen identified several key characteristics of heroic action: taking risks to help others; assuming responsibility for one's own life and decisions; acting autonomously without external coercion; and embodying a commitment to the common good.

By emphasizing the importance of personal choice and individual empowerment, Kohen (2013) presented a nuanced perspective on the nature of heroism and encourages people to recognize their own capacity for heroic behavior.

Kohen proposed that society tends to celebrate external traits like physical prowess or charisma in lieu of focusing on internal virtues, leading to misunderstandings regarding what constitutes genuine heroism. He stressed the importance of considering quiet heroes who exhibit humility alongside strength of character and a willingness to serve humanity. In short, Kohen's perspective encourages people to consider how they might embody heroism in their own lives through simple acts of compassion, honesty, and integrity.

According to Kohen, the concept of mortality plays a crucial role in defining heroism (Kohen 2013; Riches et al. 2020). Kohen believes that when people face the reality of their own mortality, they are able to think more clearly about the kind of life they want to live and about the principles and people they are willing to fight for. He suggests that this understanding of mortality can be a catalyst for heroic action, as people may be more willing to take risks and make sacrifices when they have a clear sense of what matters most to them. In other words, mortality can help people clarify their values and find the courage to act on them.

Kohen has teamed with Matt Langdon and Brian Riches to examine in depth the definition and making of a hero. Kohen et al. (2018, 619) define a hero as "a person who knowingly, and voluntarily, acts for the good of one or more people at significant risk to the self, without being motivated by reward." The motive underlying the heroic act is very important to Kohen et al.'s formulation of heroism. If a prosocial action is motivated by a desire for recognition, then it is by definition not heroism. Kohen et al. also use the term *expansive empathy* to describe the sense of one-ness that a hero feels for all other people, even those who are dissimilar to the hero. In their analysis of the heroes' responses in emergency situations, Kohen et al. (2018) concluded that real-world heroes plan for the moment when others might need their help. In short, heroes are mentally and physically prepared for heroic behavior because "heroism is, in some very real sense, predetermined by a series of choices made long before the heroic action takes place" (629). The average person can and should receive

training in heroism that focuses on acquiring specific life-saving techniques and heroic qualities such as situational awareness and empathy. Such training should heed several cautions about the risks of teaching people to be heroic (Beggan 2019; Riches et al. 2020).

Allison and Goethals: Hero Romance, Unification, and Transformation

Scott Allison and George Goethals brought attention to several important factors bearing on the definition of heroism. First, these scholars emphasized the importance of differentiating objective approaches to defining heroes from subjective or constructivist approaches. Allison and Goethals argued that understanding how people perceive heroism is just as important as understanding what heroism actually is (Allison and Goethals 2011; Allison et al. 2017; Goethals and Allison 2012). The topic of heroism's subjective, constructive nature was brought up in Joseph Campbell's interviews with Bill Moyers. Campbell (1988, 156) said, "You could be a local god, but for the people whom that local god conquered, you could be the enemy. Whether you call someone a hero or a monster is all relative." The World War II German soldier who died, said Campbell, "is as much a hero as the American soldier who was sent over there to kill him." In the same vein, Franco et al. (2011, 99) acknowledged that heroism is a "social construction" and that "heroes of one era may prove to be villains in another time." As noted earlier, Becker and Eagly (2004) emphasized that people's attempts to define heroism reflect a process of social construction that favors male heroes over female heroes. Allison (2023a) has argued that heroism is more than a social construction; it is a concept shaped by myriad constructions, including perceptual, psychological, cultural, economic, political, media, spiritual, ecological, and historical constructive forces.

Allison and Goethals have highlighted several important dangers associated with heroism's inherent subjectivity. First, subjectivity creates a blind spot when it comes to identifying actual heroism. This blind spot contributes to people's inability to discern heroes from villains, a phenomenon called *hero illiteracy* (Allison and Beggan 2023). Hero illiteracy is more than a distortion in perceptions of heroism; it is also a barrier to people's ability to become their most heroic selves, and it can contribute to people behaving as villains when they think they're being heroic. Second, heroism's subjectivity contributes to the prevalence of many psychological biases associated with perceiving heroes. These biases refer to the various ways that people distort reality and arrive at erroneous social judgments when perceiving heroism. Allison (2023b) described how these psychological biases fall under three categories: perceptual biases, cognitive biases, and motivational biases. An example of a psychological bias is the *heroism attribution error*, referring to the tendency of people to assign heroic status to celebrities and famous public figures who are unworthy of such status (Goethals and Allison 2023).

The third implication of heroism's subjectivity is what Goethals and Allison (2019) called *the romance of heroes*. Romance has two meanings: (1) an emotional attraction, or special quality or feeling that comes from a person, place, or thing, and (2) the tendency to exaggerate or invent detail. Goethals and Allison argued that people's craving for heroes is so strong that it can be called a romantic longing and deep emotional attraction capable of causing mental exaggeration or invention of heroism. People see what they want to see, especially when they are stirred by strong emotions and motivations (Fiske and Taylor 2017). As noted earlier, the salience of a hero may intensify evaluations and causal inferences about the hero (Goethals and Allison 2023). Overall, the romance of heroism resembles Kinsella, Igou, and Ritchie's (2019) model of meaning-making that predicts our need for heroes to increase when mental or emotional states threaten or reduce our sense of meaning. Goethals and Allison (2019) proposed that situational danger and ambiguity are examples of such threats, triggering a heightened need to overattribute heroic or villainous qualities to people. The romance of heroism is consistent with social psychological research pointing to our human tendency to resolve ambiguity at all costs by mentally distorting the world

to meet our psychological needs (Fiske and Taylor 2017).

Allison and Goethals have also championed the *unification principle of heroism*, defined as the tendency of all heroism, either directly or indirectly, to involve unifying people. That is, heroes take actions that bring people together, making them united and *whole* (Allison and Goethals 2020; Efthimiou et al. 2018). Every iconic social activist hero, from Mahātmā Gandhi to Malala Yousafzai, has made it their goal to eliminate divisions between people and build social mechanisms for unification. Campbell (1949) observed that the goal of the mythic hero's journey is always to return home and become united with family and community. "Where we had thought to be alone," wrote Campbell, "we shall be with all the world" (25). Campbell noted that heroes do not distinguish their own fate from that of others. Heroes, said Campbell (1988), are guided by the true reality that we are all connected and in unity with all life, an idea similar to Kohen et al.'s (2018) notion of expansive empathy and Zimbardo's (2008) concept of sociocentricity. Heroic consciousness is characterized by seeing the one-ness of humanity (Allison 2019). Friedman (2017, 15) called it self-expansiveness, where "the boundaries between self and other, and even self and the world, including the cosmos as a whole, are seen as permeable." Wrote Campbell (1949, 31): "The great deed of the supreme hero is to come to the knowledge of unity in multiplicity and then to make it known."

Allison and Smith (2015) suggested that a simple rule of thumb for distinguishing heroes from villains is that heroes tend to be social unifiers whereas villains tend to be dividers. Villains throughout history have made it their goal to divide human beings, glorifying one subgroup of humanity while harming another. From Hitler to Pol Pot, villains' divisive agendas inflict terrible human suffering and death. Donald Trump's destructive ideology in the US earned him the nickname, *The Divider* (Baker and Glasser 2022). In his insightful book on leadership, Howard Gardner (1995) observed that there are two types of collective identity stories that leaders can tell: inclusionary and exclusionary. Inclusionary stories bring people together by emphasizing shared values and experiences, whereas exclusionary stories focus on differences and create divisions between groups of people. Gardner argues that the most effective leaders are those who are able to tell both stories at different times, depending on the needs of the situation.

Overall, the unification principle of heroism takes much of the subjectivity out of heroism and presents a measurable way of objectively measuring heroism, although no empirical data have yet been collected to support the heroism unification principle.

Allison and Goethals (2017) have also defined heroism in terms of the psychological transformation that heroes undergo when they traverse the hero's journey (see also Ross 2019; Williams 2018). As Kohen et al. (2018) pointed out, heroes are made, not born, and yet the finished product of the hero-making process is often the only "face" of heroism that we see. For example, the famous New York subway hero, Wesley Autrey, is known for his remarkable act of saving a disabled person from certain death on the tracks. But what remains unknown is the transformative developmental process that Autrey underwent that made his extraordinary act possible. Allison and Goethals identified six types of heroic transformation: mental, moral, emotional, spiritual, physical, and motivational (Allison et al. 2019). Campbell (1988, 155) argued that heroes "undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness," requiring them "to think a different way." According to Allison (2019), this transformed heroic consciousness is exemplified by nondualistic ways of thinking, a desire for unification, and a wise sense of empowerment. Heroic consciousness, moreover, is achieved via three routes: (1) traversing the hero's journey, (2) effective use of specific spiritual practices, or (3) participation in hero training programs.

There is one important caveat about heroic transformation. Bronk and Riches (2017) make the point that the heroic act is not always the culmination of the hero's transformative journey. At times, the heroic act inspires such a journey. Bronk and Riches proposed two terms,

purpose-guided heroism and *heroism-guided purpose*, to describe these two arcs of heroic transformation. The first arc, purpose-guided heroism, refers to the hero whose journey endows them with the resolve to live a heroic life. This is the classic pattern laid out by Joseph Campbell (1949). Bronk and Riches offer the story of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who cultivated a meaningful, heroic purpose for his life which allowed him to take risks to help the poor and promote social justice in El Salvador. Bronk and Riches' second arc, heroism-guided purpose, describes the hero whose courageous actions trigger a transformative journey. An example of this arc is Miep Gies, the holocaust rescuer who helped hide Anne Frank and her family from the Nazis. Gies was neither socially nor politically active before her heroic behavior, but her act of helping the Franks inspired her to undertake a life journey of pursuing justice for persecuted groups of people.

Additional Issues Relevant to Defining Heroism

Evolutionary Perspectives

In their evolutionary analysis of heroism, Kafashan et al. (2017, 37) define heroes as "those who incur costs (e.g., risk of injury or death; or significant sacrifices such as time, money, or other forms of personal loss) to deliver greater-than-expected benefits to others." These costs "are incurred by the hero without certainty and/or negotiated expectation of direct future rewards," Kafashan et al. acknowledge that while heroes may not *consciously* perform their heroic acts with rewards in mind, there may be *unconscious* motivations driving heroic action. A hero may be unconsciously guided by a sense that their heroic acts may attract admiration and status – rewards that could improve the hero's reproductive fitness. Rusch, Leunissen, and van Vugt (2015) invoke *costly signaling theory* to suggest that heroes perform extraordinary acts, in part, to advertise their best qualities to potential mates. This idea of heroes having motives for external rewards conflicts with Kohen et al.'s (2018) definition of heroism as behavior that is

always freely given without expectation of reward.

The notion of *adaptivity* is central to evolutionary explanations of behavior. Adaptive behaviors are those that confer a reproductive advantage, increasing an organism's chances of passing on its genes to the next generation. Callina et al. (2017, 90) incorporated adaptivity in their *Relational Developmental Systems Metamodel* (RDS model) of heroism. These scholars proposed a bold life-span approach to the study of the development of character, offering a model that explains the emergence of heroism across diverse settings. Callina et al. argued that there is a "contextually sensitive nature of heroism" that enables heroes to adapt to the demands of time, place, and other people. Heroes act in ways that put their future adaptivity to contexts at risk to improve others' future adaptivity to contexts. From this perspective, heroes seek to improve the environment for others while putting their own future at risk. Callina et al. stated that "heroes are viewed as agents of change representing the human attempt to expand present abilities towards new, greater levels of skills or application" (92). Thus, the RDS model of heroism emphasizes an agentic, internal motivation to adapt to contexts as a central means of achieving heroism.

To resolve the issue of whether heroism is ever externally motivated, scholars may wish to consult the work of Daniel Batson and his colleagues on the motives underlying altruistic behavior (e.g., Batson and Leonard 1987; Batson et al. 1991). As Franco et al.'s (2011) analysis demonstrated, altruism and heroism are not the same phenomenon, but extreme altruism comes close to approximating heroism. Batson's studies of altruism suggest that both empathic concern and selfish, egoistic motives can play roles in motivating radical prosocial behavior. Batson acknowledged that genuine empathy, alone, can lead individuals to engage in altruistic action. But he also acknowledged the existence of ego-enhancing motives for helping. For example, people may help others to alleviate their own distress, guilt, or to gain social approval or reputation. Batson acknowledged that motives for helping

others may, of course, involve a combination of self-interest and concern for others.

Rusch (2023) and his colleagues (Rusch et al. 2015) explored the evolutionary origins of motivation for extreme altruism, particularly on wartime battlefields. Rusch et al. conducted an archival study of US soldiers who fought in World War II. They compared the reproductive success of 449 non-decorated veterans to that of 123 surviving Medal of Honor recipients of WWII. Rusch et al. found that the decorated heroes sired significantly more offspring than the non-decorated veterans. In addition, these researchers uncovered evidence that female participants specifically regarded decorated war heroes as more sexually attractive compared to non-decorated veterans. Importantly, this effect was absent for male participants judging female war heroes. Rusch et al. concluded that "war heroism likely benefits men because it increases their sexual attractiveness and as a result, their reproductive success" (372). Such a finding could contribute to explaining why men more than women tend to prefer settling intergroup conflicts using violent methods like war (Rusch 2014).

Regarding conscious motivation to be heroic, Rusch (2023, 5) concluded that "real heroes themselves may actually not have any deliberately strategic motives." Many physical-risk heroes cannot recall what motivated them specifically in the moment of their heroism. As Franco et al. (2011) noted, some heroic acts occur instantaneously, with no possibility of conscious consideration of potential rewards. These one-time heroic actions fulfill Kohen et al.'s (2018) criterion of no expectation of reward, whereas more deliberate, relational, and long-term acts of heroism may reflect more complex motives. It would seem that any comprehensive definition of heroism must be nuanced enough to offer a layered approach to motivations for heroism.

Humanities Approach

Humanities scholars approach the study of heroism using various methodological techniques such as historical analysis, textual interpretation, comparative analysis, qualitative data collection, interdisciplinary collaboration, and close reading. Critical theories are invoked, such as Marxism, feminism, postcolonial theory, queer theory, disability studies, and race theory to analyze texts, images, artifacts, performances, rituals, belief systems, mythologies, and other cultural expressions relevant to the study of heroism (Gill 1996). Scholars in the humanities examine topics such as moral philosophy, political ideology, metaphysics, epistemology, ontology, hermeneutics, semiotics, discourse analysis, or narratology to understand different aspects of heroism. Many humanities scholars take interdisciplinary approaches to study heroism. For instance, they combine philosophy, literature, and history to explore the intersections of heroism and culture (Efthimiou and Allison 2017). Scholars also engage in comparative analysis to examine heroism across different cultures and traditions, exploring how heroism is defined, valued, and represented in diverse cultural contexts (Sun et al. 2023). Some scholars critically examine the concept of heroism itself (e.g., Kohen 2013). They may challenge traditional heroic ideals, exploring issues related to gender, power dynamics, and the potential for heroism to perpetuate certain norms or values. In all these approaches, the study of heroism within the humanities seeks to deepen our understanding of the human experience, ethics, culture, and the motivations that drive individuals to engage in acts of courage, selflessness, and sacrifice.

As a scholar of the humanities, Curry (2017) observed that the social sciences tend to dominate the field of heroism studies, and she noted some problems associated with this dominance. To initiate new avenues of investigation and potentially resolve certain dilemmas, Curry recommended more focus on the historical and humanities-based origins of current notions of heroes and heroism. According to Curry, two distinct conceptual categories have been conflated: "heroes," which refers to labeling individuals as heroic, and "heroism," which pertains to recognizing behaviors as heroic. Curry argued that the term "hero," rooted deeply in classical antiquity, carries a more diverse range of meanings compared to the modern construct of "heroism."

Unlike many religious and philosophical traditions, the heroic tradition does not aim to depict an ideally virtuous individual. Greek heroes, often considered the epitome of human experience, achieve this status not through perfection, but by embracing life with intense vitality. Greek heroes share a sense of magnitude, encompassing both suffering and strength, rather than adhering to strict moral excellence.

According to Curry (2017), it is essential to acknowledge that transgression, destruction, and brutality are intrinsic to the heroic tradition. Such qualities are an anathema to present-day social-studies-based heroism scholars. But in antiquity, heroes were both revered and feared. Individuals such as cancer survivors are associated with heroism not only due to their admirable qualities like courage and resilience, but also due to their encounter with the profound ordeal of death, which places them beyond ordinary human experience. Heroes, Curry argued, are not only products of social construction but also contribute to social development. These insights should encourage researchers of heroism to shift their focus from classifying and simplifying heroic individuals to exploring heroic relationships between communities and the individuals they elevate. Heroes are both role models and engines of collective identity. Additionally, researchers could examine how heroes function symbolically and discursively in the public realm. Shifting the research focus from the traits and circumstances that lead to heroism to the motivations and perceptions that are associated with heroism could provide valuable perspectives for the field of heroism studies.

Inclusivity and Heroism

As noted earlier in our review of Becker and Eagly's (2004) work, both the general public and the community of scholars studying heroism have been accused of gender bias in their views and treatment of heroism (Leonard 2023). With some notable exceptions (e.g., Efthimiou 2017; Fagin-Jones 2019; Kinsella 2013; Preston 2017; Ross 2019), most twenty-first-century definitions of heroism have been crafted by Western or European males for whom physically risky heroism is integral to their definition and description of heroism. Yet when people are asked to name their heroes, the most frequently mentioned hero is their mother (Allison and Goethals 2011). Mothers do not rescue people from burning buildings; they love, nurture, and mentor. If Baumeister (2010) and others (Rusch et al. 2015) are correct that evolutionary forces have encouraged men to take more risks in life than women, then it should not be surprising that male definitions of heroism tend to downplay the kinds of heroism demonstrated by women. Nor should it be surprising, given evolutionary forces discouraged female risk-taking, for women to be penalized for succeeding in male-dominated roles (Heilman and Okimoto 2007; Rusch et al. 2015).

Defining heroism by emphasizing masculine terminology can exclude women from heroism. Communality, collaboration, and participation must be included in efforts to define heroic phenomena. Demonstrating the importance of inclusivity in defining heroism, Sun et al.'s (2023) research on cross-cultural differences in hero perception reveals that collectivistic societies have different emphases that should be incorporated into our understanding of heroic phenomena. Chinese participants in these studies viewed *patriotism* as the most central feature of heroism. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognizes that there are thousands of distinct cultures around the world. Moreover, there are myriad cultures and subcultures within each region, nation, and community. The WEIRD research perspective (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) currently dominates the discipline of heroism studies. Because non-WEIRD cultures offer unique and valuable perspectives on heroism, incorporating these diverse cultural perspectives into our understanding of heroism should be a high priority.

Non-WEIRD approaches to heroism can include employing cross-cultural studies that incorporate data from a wide range of non-WEIRD societies. These studies can explore cultural variations in behavior, cognition, and social norms related to heroism. Social scientists, moreover, may wish to pay more attention to

indigenous knowledge systems and traditional practices. This includes studying indigenous societies' unique social structures, environmental stewardship, spiritual perspectives, and cultural values. Heroism studies can also benefit from more representation from the Global South, which includes countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East. Researchers may also delve into historical and archaeological records to understand past societies and how their approach to heroism differed from contemporary WEIRD societies. Ethnographic research would also help grow heroism studies. Ethnographers aim to understand and describe the intricacies of these societies from an insider's perspective. Intersectionality can also be useful framework for heroism studies, examining how multiple dimensions of identity, such as race, gender, class, and culture, intersect and influence individuals' experiences. This approach recognizes the importance of diverse perspectives within and across societies.

Ideal Self in the Person-Situation Nexus

Heroism has been described as one of the central routes to becoming one's best self (Efthimiou et al. 2018; Kinsella et al. 2017). Sullivan and Venter (2005, 102) proposed that heroes are those "whom others imagine themselves to be like." We admire the personal attributes of heroes and become inspired to acquire those qualities ourselves. Personal heroes provide a blueprint for one's ideal future self, also called a *positive possible-self* (Sullivan and Venter 2010; Kinsella et al. 2017). As Markus and Nurius (1986, 954) noted, "Possible selves are the ideal selves that we would very much like to become. They are also the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming." Hero training programs demonstrate an effective way of overcoming the hurdles getting in the way of becoming one's ideal self. The Heroic Imagination Project (HIP) focuses on fostering the heroic mindset of imagining oneself in a heroic role and taking action to help others. The methods used by HIP to cultivate the ideal self include education and awareness, storytelling and role modeling, scenario-based training, bystander intervention training, self-efficacy development,

and community engagement. HIP's training programs have proven to be effective because they equip people with the desire, the mindset, and the skills to become their most heroic selves (Heiner 2019).

Hero training programs draw liberally from the psychology literature on bystander intervention, self-improvement, self-actualization, and social decision making. Comparing the heroic ideal championed by Zimbardo (2011) with Maslow's notion of self-actualization, Bland (2019) found considerable overlap, with one key difference. Heroism is not a way of being, as implied in self-actualization, but rather a set of skills that are used in certain situations. These skills are expressions of core values and principles embedded in people's personal narratives. Bland noted that these skills of heroism can include intrinsic goal-setting, autonomous behavior, mindfulness, self-awareness, self-efficacy, prosociality, and practical wisdom.

Heroism scholars and practitioners could benefit from a model of prosocial behavior put forward by Weber, Kopelman, and Messick (2004). Building on March's (1994) theory of decision making, Weber et al. suggested that prosocial decisions are shaped by three factors: (1) one's ability to recognize and classify a situation that calls for helping behavior, (2) one's personal self-concept or identity, and (3) one's ability to apply a particular rule or heuristic that reflects one's identity and satisfies the needs of the situation. Social cognition researchers use the term *person-situation interaction* to describe the idea that every situation we encounter has its own norms or rules for best behavior (Mendoza-Denton et al. 2001). Studies show, moreover, that we bring different self-concepts into different situations. A firefighter, for example, may be fearful of conflict with their spouse but fearless in rescuing people from physically dangerous situations. Thus, in a situation calling for a heroic response, a person must recognize that situation, access a relevant portion of their self-concept that corresponds to that situation, and then select a behavioral rule that is compatible with the person-situation nexus. Hero training programs are designed to capitalize on this psychological

process in training ordinary people to recognize situations that call for heroic action and to become their best selves in those situations.

Deviance and Heroism

Several scholars have focused on heroes as positive deviants (Beggan 2023; Csikszentmihalyi et al. 2017; Efthimiou et al. 2018; Seal 2018). Efthimiou et al. (2018) defined heroism by its innate, deviant, transgressive nature that disrupts and upends traditional boundaries involving gender, sexuality, status, and culture. Efthimiou et al. (2018) argued that are disruptors. Heroes must cultivate situational awareness to read and understand the status quo and determine whether disruptive change is needed to pursue a noble cause or to save, protect, or unify people. The hero has clarity in reading the situation, understanding the nature of the problem that needs addressing, and understanding what is required to solve the problem. Activist heroes are able to discern when the social order is fundamentally diseased and requires dismantling to achieve social justice.

Most lay definitions of heroism view it as positive and commendable actions that go beyond the norm to help or protect others. But because heroic behavior often requires divergence from societal norms, expectations, or rules, heroes can be mistakenly vilified. As Rosa Parks' (1999) defiant behavior demonstrated, heroic action may involve resisting authority figures or laws to do what is morally right. In situations where following rules or obeying authority is expected, defying these norms can be seen as deviant behavior. Within certain groups or contexts, heroic behavior might be seen as deviant if it goes against the consensus of a group which can lead to ostracism or negative reactions. Heroic acts can disrupt the existing social order or status quo. For example, challenging oppressive systems or institutions can be seen as deviant if these systems are considered legitimate by the majority. Heroic behavior might challenge cultural values or traditions. In some cultures, defying long-held beliefs or practices could be viewed as deviant, even if the intention is to promote positive change. Engaging in heroic behavior such as whistleblowing come with personal costs, such as social isolation, criticism, or even legal consequences (Brown 2017). While some might view heroic behavior as a threatening challenge to established norms, others might see it as an exemplary demonstration of moral courage. The interpretation of deviance can change depending on the values and context of the individuals or groups involved.

Psychopathy and Heroism

Scott Lilienfeld and his colleagues made the provocative claim, back by scientific evidence, that some definitions of a hero overlap considerably with the definition of a psychopath (Costello et al. 2018; Murphy et al. 2017). These investigators first defined heroism as a form of prosocial behavior marked by risk to self. The common denominator in heroism and psychopathy is the trait of fearlessness, which can produce daring and heroic life-saving actions but can also underlie psychopathic violence. High-functioning psychopaths use their fearlessness to climb to the top of the corporate or political world. Impulsivity and grandiose narcissism, paired with fearlessness, can help psychopaths fight off a mugger, confront an enemy in war, or rescue innocents in a hostage crisis. Thus, certain aspects of psychopathy, such as boldness, fearlessness, charm, persuasiveness, and risk-taking propensity, can lead to prosocial outcomes, including acts of heroism. These characteristics, combined with social and cultural influences, may encourage people with psychopathic tendencies to take calculated risks and act decisively in dangerous situations. Their bravado and willingness to face danger head-on could potentially save lives or prevent harm.

Nevertheless, Lilienfeld cautioned against romanticizing psychopathy or considering it a desirable trait in everyday life. The vast majority of research indicates that psychopathy generally manifests as a destructive force, causing significant damage to both victims and society as a whole (Marquis et al. 2021). Lilienfeld argued that while heroic qualities can arise accidentally from some psychopathic traits, they remain separate and distinct constructs with fundamentally different consequences. Nevertheless, while psychopaths are different from heroes in important

ways, they may be two "twigs in the same genetic branch" (Lykken 1995, 118).

An Integrative Definition of Heroism

Table 1 below offers a listing of many of the hallmark characteristics relevant to understanding heroic phenomena. The table is based on this chapter's review of the myriad definitions of heroism offered over time and across academic disciplines. For pragmatic reasons, the items in this table are streamlined, and they no doubt reflect the biases of the author, his academic discipline, and his culture. Still, the table is suggested as a starting point for further conversations and explorations of heroes and heroism.

From Table 1, it seems clear that a brief one- or two-sentence definition of heroism, seen in most heroism articles and books, would fall short of capturing the richness of the phenomenon. Thus, the following several paragraphs offer a tentative, integrative definition and description of heroism:

Heroism is a complex, nuanced, and multi-layered phenomenon that has resonated with human beings throughout recorded history. Heroism remains shrouded in misunderstanding by the general citizenry, and even by scholars, due to its intricate nature, the diverse ways that it manifests, and biases and limitations in human cognition. One of heroism's remarkable attributes is its universal accessibility, transcending boundaries to be available to all individuals, regardless of

Definitions and Descriptions of Heroism, Table 1 A selected listing of the main defining features of heroism

Overarching themes of heroism	• Heroism is complex, nuanced, and multi-layered • Heroism is easily misunderstood • Heroism is available to everyone • Heroes are made, not born • Heroism of historically underrepresented groups has been overlooked • Definitions of heroism are shaped by ever-shifting societal and cultural values
Goals of heroism	• To save and protect human lives • To pursue a noble cause, serve others, and unify disparate human groups • To help others or benefit society without expectation of reward • To leave a lasting personal legacy, perhaps unconsciously • To become our best selves
Types of heroism	• One-time risky acts performed instantaneously to save lives • Small, daily acts that accumulate into a heroic life • Long-term, lifetime deliberative commitment to a noble cause
Description of heroic action	• The heroic act is voluntary • The heroic act involves risk and self-sacrifice • The heroic act can deviate from social norms • The heroic act is associated with the completion of an interior, psychological journey
Description of the hero	• *Compassion*: heroes have expansive empathy; they are caring, communal, participatory, and selfless • *Fortitude*: heroes show emotional and physical courage, resilience, competence, and determination • *Imagination*: heroes are creative and efficacious problem-solvers • *Humility*: heroes deny they are special or heroic
Benefits of the hero's journey	• Heroes undergo significant personal transformation • Heroes precipitate significant societal transformation • Heroes are role models for others • Heroes forge connection with the world • Heroes give people hope • Heroes energize, develop, and heal people • Heroes impart wisdom to people • Heroes engender positive emotional experiences and well-being • Heroes give people meaning and purpose

their background or circumstances. With appropriate education and preparation, any human being is capable of leading a heroic life of some type. The heroism displayed by historically underrepresented groups, whose courageous acts have frequently been denied or ignored, serves as a poignant reminder of the diverse forms this noble quality can take and the significance of adopting a broader perspective of the phenomenon.

At its core, heroism encapsulates a range of profound goals that reflect humanity's highest ideals. This includes the imperative to safeguard human lives, endowing heroes as guardians of hope in dire circumstances. But heroism's scope extends further, encompassing the pursuit of noble causes that bridge divides among humanity. Additionally, heroism reflects a journey of self-discovery and growth, during which individuals learn how to become their best selves and use their gifts to make a positive impact on humanity.

Heroism finds expression through diverse avenues, including instantaneous acts of courage, small daily acts of kindness that in aggregate can morph into a heroic life, and a lifelong dedication to a great and virtuous cause. Whether heroism emerges in the form of immediate life-saving actions or as the enduring commitment to a noble purpose, it shares common threads. Heroic actions are inherently voluntary, undertaken with a deep sense of empathy and responsibility. These actions necessitate embracing risk and self-sacrifice, often deviating from established norms to achieve greater good. The completion of a transformative interior, psychological journey further characterizes heroism, representing the challenges, growth, and metamorphosis that heroes experience.

Heroes are characterized by a constellation of virtues that shape their character. Compassion forms their foundation, reflecting an expansive empathy, selflessness, and an unwavering concern for forging human connections and fostering the well-being of others. Fortitude in heroes isn't limited to the physical realm; it extends to mental and emotional resilience, courage, competence, and resolve to overcome adversity. Imagination drives their ingenuity, enabling them to navigate
intricate challenges with creative problem-solving. Perhaps their most understated trait is humility, as heroes often reject the label of 'special' or 'heroic,' focusing instead on their mission and the welfare of others.

The hero's journey yields far-reaching benefits that resonate both within the individual and throughout society. Heroes undergo profound personal transformation, emerging as their best, most fully realized selves. They are wiser, more compassionate, and deeply attuned to the world around them. In parallel, their actions serve as catalysts for profound societal shifts, driving transformative changes in cultural norms, values, and practices. Serving as beacons of inspiration, heroes become role models, igniting the potential for positive change in others. This influence fosters hope, engendering a sense of communion and purpose. Heroes not only energize, develop, and heal communities but also bestow wisdom and stimulate positive well-being for members of all groups. Ultimately, heroism confers upon individuals and societies a profound sense of meaning and purpose, enriching the collective human journey.

Heroism Is Love in Action

The above definition of heroism is admittedly verbose. A more succinct definition of heroism is that it is simply love in action. Defining heroism as love in action underscores the core mission of heroism. Either directly or indirectly, all heroic actions are driven by love and compassion. The notion that heroism represents loving action can be supported in many ways. First, many acts of heroism stem from altruistic motives – putting oneself in harm's way for the sake of helping others, protecting innocent lives, or upholding values that we collectively cherish. This selfless behavior reflects love not just toward humanity as a whole, but also toward specific individuals facing adversity. By stepping forward to provide aid when needed, heroes express love through actions rather than mere words or feelings. Acts of heroism frequently arise from empathetic connections to those suffering, signaling that love plays a vital

role in shaping our responses to crises. When we witness distress or unfair treatment affecting someone else, our natural inclination may be to intervene because we care about them and want to alleviate their pain. This compassionate impulse exemplifies love translated into concrete actions aimed at promoting fairness, justice, and well-being.

Even physical risk, duty-bound heroism can be said to stem from an underlying love for humanity. Heroism often involves making courageous sacrifices, such as endangering one's safety, reputation, or future prospects. When done out of love for others or noble ideals, these courageous acts demonstrate how love manifests tangibly in difficult situations. The willingness to take risks and face hardships shows that love can engender exceptional bravery, even under daunting circumstances. Rescue operations operate from a framework of love. Firefighters often refer to their profession as a "brotherhood" that is driven by a love for their communities. Love is the driving force behind philanthropic organizations and volunteers around the globe. These selfless individuals are motivated by a love for humanity and compassion for those who are suffering.

Mothers are listed as people's hero more often than any other person (Allison and Goethals 2011) and for good reason. Our mothers defend and protect us; they impart wisdom and offer invaluable guidance; they model morality and integrity; they comfort us when we're in pain; they show a willingness to sacrifice everything for us; and they enhance and inspire us. We were all once "one" with our mothers in the womb, and if we follow our heroic calling, we seek such one-ness with all of humanity. Everyday acts of kindness are regular demonstrations of love in action. Historical figures who have championed love include Gandhi, Maathai, Mandela, King, Jr., Barton, Yousafzai, and Tubman. Love in action refers to the tangible and compassionate acts of kindness, service, and support that individuals and groups demonstrate within their communities. These actions include volunteer work, donation drives, neighborhood watch programs, mentoring programs, disaster relief, support for vulnerable populations, environmental initiatives, educational initiatives, support for the elderly and disabled, advocacy groups, and activism. Love fuels heroism of all types.

Conclusion

This chapter began its description of heroism by portraying it as complex and beguiling. Heroism's complexity is evident in the abundance and variety of perspectives reviewed here. The beguiling nature of heroism refers to its allure, mystery, and deception. Heroes fascinate us and captivate us, yet even with all the attention we give them – and perhaps *because* of such attention – they are often misunderstood. Heroism, it can be argued, is far more than it seems. It is far more because the nuanced layering of heroism, on display in Table 1, can overwhelm people's capacity for quick understanding. If there is one thing that social cognition research has taught us, it is that people prefer to take quick mental snapshots of their social world, and when a perceived individual is complicated, a "quick" understanding doesn't do that individual justice (Fiske and Taylor 2017). Our fast and efficient social perceptions can lead to oversimplified views of heroism, views that fit our preconceptions or fulfill our romanticized motivation to see our heroes the way we want to see them (Goethals and Allison 2019).

Paradoxically, if heroism is far more than it seems, it is also far less. While people tend to embrace oversimplified views of their heroes, they also tend to overinflate their heroes, deifying them and worshiping them beyond what reality warrants. Klein's (2020) research tells us that heroes have a very simple, humble mindset about themselves, namely, that their lives are indistinguishable from others' lives. As such, heroes feel others' pain and value others' well-being as they would their own. This expansive empathy (Kohen et al. 2018) or self-expansiveness (Friedman 2017) makes the heroic choice the only option for heroes. Viewing heroes as larger-than-life, then, is a terrible mistake. It denies heroes their humanity, overlooks their journey, and risks reducing the hero to an unattainable,

oversimplified caricature. No human can possible measure up to the superhuman hype and expectations we inflict upon our heroes. Placing heroes on too high a pedestal twists heroism into malformed, destructive idolatry. Forming a bloated view of heroes also makes our own potential for heroism seem out of reach.

Several scholars have quoted Christopher Gill's (1996, 98) apt description of heroism as "radically ambiguous" (e.g., Franco et al. 2018; Kinsella et al. 2017). Radical ambiguity suggests that heroism is characterized by inherent contradictions and dualities that make it difficult to define or categorize heroes in simple terms. Heroism originates from both dispositional qualities (Frimer et al. 2012; Walker 2017) and situational influences (Zimbardo 2007). There is single-act heroism and lifetime heroism (Franco et al. 2011). Heroes enjoy special status (Kafashan et al. 2017) and yet are ordinary people (Franco and Zimbardo 2006). Heroes are made (Kohen et al. 2018) yet some heroic traits may be genetic (Efthimiou 2016, 2023). Heroism exists along the fringes of humanity (Franco et al. 2011) yet lies at the center of humanity (Allison et al. 2017). Heroes must leave home to find home, and they must suffer to get well (Campbell 1949). Heroism is peppered with paradoxical dualisms, each revealing a complex, counterintuitive truth about heroic acts (Allison 2023c; Franco et al. 2011).

Dualistic categories can foster an initial understanding, but they can impede deeper understanding. Table 1 contains dualities about heroism that are helpful but can be misleading. For example, as noted by Curry (2017), the dictum that "heroism is voluntary, not involuntary" may unfairly exclude the heroism of Anne Frank. The field of psychology has identified many *false dichotomies* such as nature versus nurture and mind versus body. There is some irony in describing these dichotomies as false when there is obvious initial heuristic value in doing so. The pronouncement that heroes are made, not born (Kohen et al. 2018), is extremely helpful to know even if some traits associated with heroism have genetic origins (Preston 2017). The key is to glean the benefits of a dualistic approach without remaining stuck

there. For instance, future definitions of heroism are likely to include some blending of the two main dimensions on which human behavior is evaluated: the warmth/communion dimension and the strength/agency dimension (Fiske 2018). This duality captures aspects of heroism that for millennia were associated with women and men, emotion and reason, families and tribes, thriving and surviving, risk-aversion and risk-taking, stability and change, and collectivism and individualism. But as Hoyt et al. (2020) noted, heroism is far more androgenous than it is masculine or feminine. Dichotomies are useful starting points but researchers must dig deeper.

If it is true that heroism is at least in part a social and cultural construction, does that preclude the goal of developing a universal definition about which most of humanity can agree? Not necessarily. Those who argue in favor of universal moral truths believe that certain human values are inherent and apply to all people, cultures, and contexts (Gabriel 2023). Research shows there are commonalities in human nature and shared moral intuitions across cultures (Schwartz 1992). Certain moral principles, such as prohibitions against murder and theft, are fundamental to human societies and have emerged independently across different cultures and times. The act of saving a life, for example, is likely to be deemed heroic in all cultures. Moreover, there can be no doubt that moral progress and moral evolution can be observed throughout history. Societies have moved toward recognizing and respecting the rights and dignity of all individuals, suggesting a trajectory toward universal principles like justice and human rights. Research in positive psychology also reveals that certain human strengths and actions contribute to human flourishing and well-being across all cultures (Peterson and Seligman 2004). A good chunk of heroism can and should be universally agreed upon, despite variability in social and cultural moral worldviews.

The integrated definition provided in this chapter and based on Table 1 no doubt falls short of capturing the many facets and nuances of heroism. All definitions of heroism are limited and will necessarily evolve in response to several factors.

Changing social, cultural, and political conditions will always shift attention to different aspects and interpretations of heroism. New research and new approaches to heroism from the next generation of more globally diverse scholars will reveal more about heroism. As noted earlier, heroism studies is currently dominated by WEIRD research perspectives. This approach has been criticized for limiting the generalizability and applicability of research findings to broader human populations. Failing to consider cultural diversity hinders our ability to understand the full range of heroic behavior. Findings from studies conducted on WEIRD populations may not be fully generalizable to other populations with different cultural, social, and economic contexts. This limits the applicability of research findings to a global scale. Researchers from WEIRD backgrounds can introduce biases in study design, interpretation of results, and the formulation of research questions. A more global approach to heroism will promote welcome progress in how the world conceptualizes heroism.

Ultimately, the journey toward heroism may be a metaphor for self-discovery. Campbell (2004, p. xvi) stated that the hero's journey provides "a field in which you can locate yourself." The self that we discover is our fullest, ripest self, the self that we unknowingly had within us all along. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, we discover that we've possessed the treasure of the heroic self all along. Our lives are spent stumbling our way toward claiming this heroic self but not before blood, sweat, and tears change us in unimaginable ways. This secret heroic self, described in the opening moments of the movie *Finding Joe*, is hidden from us yet awaits us – if we are open to the discomfort that always accompanies the metamorphosis. The "Joe" in the movie is, of course, Joseph Campbell, who noted that in our modern world lacks quality hero myths to guide us toward our bliss and toward the heroic lives we are meant to live. For this reason, it is imperative that the meaning of heroism, and the mechanisms for achieving heroism, become common knowledge rather than a well-kept secret.

Cross References

- ► Altruism
- ► Banality of Heroism
- ► Hero Imagination
- ► Hero Monomyth
- ► Hero Mythology
- ► Hero's Journey
- ► Heroic
- ► Heroine's Journey
- ► Heroine's Journey Mythology
- ► Heroism Studies
- ► Metaphors of Heroism

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