

The Making of a Hero: Cultivating Empathy, Altruism, and Heroic Imagination

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Abstract

Heroes are not born; they're made. This article examines the commonalities in the backgrounds of people who take heroic action on behalf of others to theorize the ways in which our society can encourage citizens to prepare themselves to act heroically. In looking closely at a variety of people who have acted heroically, in a single moment or over time, we argue they have at least four crucial commonalities: They imagined situations where help was needed and considered how they would act; they had an expansive sense of empathy, not simply with those who might be considered “like them” but also those who might be thought of as “other” in some decisive respect; they regularly took action to help people, often in small ways; and they had some experience or skill that made them confident about undertaking the heroic action in question.

Keywords

hero, heroism, empathy, altruism, heroic imagination, development

Every year in New York City, dozens of people die after falling from subway platforms and being struck by oncoming trains. Indeed, in 2013, 151 commuters were hit by trains (Donohue, 2013). On nearly every occasion,

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dozens of people stood by, each of whom likely would have said beforehand that they would definitely step up to help someone in desperate need of assistance. Most people like to think of themselves as helpers. Ask anyone about a commuter falling on the tracks, a drowning child, or a woman whose purse has been snatched, and the certainty of heroic action is virtually assured.¹ As such, if asked, these subway commuters might have said they could see themselves doing something heroic in this situation: calling 911, organizing a rescue effort that involves the group of onlookers, providing some sort of medical assistance after the fallen man has been hauled back onto the platform, or even jumping down to lift the man up onto the platform before the train arrives. But, importantly, they were not asked and, at least in part, we contend that is one reason they mostly do not take action. While we undoubtedly want to think of ourselves as the sort of people who would rush to assist someone in need, it is far more likely that most of us would be among the throng that is standing by, watching the events unfold. Indeed, studies of the failure to act in situations of precisely this sort have grown in number, with the result that the Bystander Effect, or diffusion of responsibility is a fairly well established principle in the field of psychology (see, e.g., Darley & Latane, 1968; Fischer et al., 2011).

And yet, every year, there are also reports of subway heroes. They step out of the crowd and attempt to assist the person who has stumbled and fallen into harm's way; they do what we all take to be the right thing, despite the obvious risk. Society tends to briefly lionize these heroes without learning much about them. Most of them simply walk away after their heroics, uninterested in any media coverage or reward, and most of them are never heard from again after taking heroic action.

It turns out to be very difficult for most people to do the right thing when the stakes are high. This is not to say that people are uncertain about what it would mean to do the right thing in any given situation. The real reason that most people are bystanders rather than heroes is that most people are out of practice.

Clear, commonly used, and relatively well-studied examples of heroism are the so-called Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust, rescuers who risked life and social standing to help Jews evade or escape from the Nazi machinery of death. The risk undertaken by these individuals was extreme and often required them to consciously choose to put themselves and their families in danger over and over again, often for a period of several years. But heroic action can also be a one-time decision, undertaken seemingly without a great deal of planning or decision-making time, as the case of the subway rescuer or the civilian who rescues another person from a fire aptly demonstrated. And while heroism is often associated in the popular imagination with

physical risk, we also posit that the whistle-blowing employee who reveals unethical or illegal activities in their workplace—risking their job, income, and social standing—is a hero (Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011; Franco & Zimbardo, 2006; Zimbardo, 2007). Although anyone can be a hero, individuals who take heroic action are rare (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006). Although heroes are rare, they exemplify human excellence and deserve empirical attention to understand their development.

Humanistic psychology focuses on the breadth and depth of all human experience to understand humans themselves (Schneider, Pierson, & Bugental, 2014); and we are particularly interested in the experience of humanities heroes. This article begins to examine the ways in which people who act heroically are primed to take that action as a result of their personal history. In looking closely at a variety of people who have acted heroically, in a single moment or over time, we argue they have at least four crucial commonalities: They imagined situations where help was needed and considered how they would act; they had an expansive sense of empathy, not simply with those who might be considered “like them” but also those who might be thought of as “other” in some decisive respect; they regularly took action to help people, often in small ways; and they had some experience or skill that made them confident about undertaking the heroic action in question.

Heroes are valued across cultures and throughout history (Becker & Eagly, 2004; Kohen, 2014). Suppositions about heroes and other exemplars’ motivation, responsibility, love, and choice have been primary concerns of humanists and psychologists since the days of Socrates and Plato (Schneider et al., 2014). Yet surprisingly, little research focuses on understanding the development of heroes. Although the literature is sparse, there are studies comparing the traits of heroes to more typical individuals, and investigating laypersons’ views of heroes (Franco et al., 2011; Midlarsky, Fagin Jones, & Corley, 2005). There is also a growing understanding that not all heroes are the same (Kohen, 2014; Walker, Frimer, & Dunlop, 2010). We 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 (Zimbardo, 2007). Risk to the hero makes heroism a distinct form of altruism (Franco et al., 2011).

Expansive Empathy

For Richard Rorty (1989, p. 191), solidarity and sympathy are directly resultant from personal identifications. When those who are suffering “are thought of as ‘one of us,’ where ‘us’ means something smaller and more local than the human race,” the sense of solidarity with them is strongest. Indeed, he

suggests that human rights promotion is best served by “[concentrating] our energies on manipulating sentiments, on sentimental education. That sort of education gets people of different kinds sufficiently well acquainted with one another that they are less tempted to think of those different from themselves as only quasi-human” (Rorty, 1998, p. 176). Pushing the example of the Holocaust further, Rorty (1989, p. 190-191) notes:

Did they [non-Jewish Danes and Italians] say, about their Jewish neighbors, that they deserved to be saved because they were fellow human beings? Perhaps sometimes they did, but surely they would usually, if queried, have used more parochial terms to explain why they were taking risks to protect a given Jew—for example, that this particular Jew was a fellow Milanese, or a fellow Jutlander, or a fellow member of the same union or profession, or a fellow *bocece* player, or a fellow parent of small children.

Rorty insists that victims of persecution, rather than making an appeal to our common humanity, have traditionally been better served by appealing to a more powerful, more immediate, commonality.

In agreement with Rorty on this point is William F. Schulz, former Executive Director of Amnesty International USA, whose argument lines up very closely with Rorty’s. After detailing human rights abuses in Nigeria, Afghanistan, and El Salvador, he notes,

I am stricken at heart because I have the imagination to know at least in proximate form what the experience, the pain, must have felt like. I am stricken at heart because on some level I identify with the victims; I know what it is to bleed. Although I have never been bitten by a horde of red ants or had a thumb amputated or been crushed by a wall, I have enough acquaintance with human suffering, either my own or that of those I love, that my memory of that acquaintance stokes my recognition (Schulz, 2002, p. 23).

Not everyone, however, finds Rorty’s hypothesis compelling. Norman Geras (1995, p. 11) is surprised by

how abstract . . . how obviously speculative, Rorty’s thesis about the rescuers is. “Perhaps,” he suggests, they occasionally said something like this; but “surely” they more often said something like that. These rescuers were real people and there is a body of writing about them.

In a sense, though, Geras misses Rorty’s ultimate point. Rorty’s goal is not necessarily to create more rescuers but to instead expand everyone’s sense of solidarity in order to prevent the human rights violations that require heroic

behavior. This is what Rorty (1998, p. 181), following Annette Baier, refers to as a “progress of sentiments.”

How has this progress of sentiments occurred and what might we do to extend its reach? On this point, Rorty (1989, p. 196) offers us a great deal, both in terms of his own theory and also in terms of our research on heroism:

The right way to take the slogan “We have obligations to human beings simply as such” is as a means of reminding ourselves to keep trying to expand our sense of ‘us’ as far as we can. That slogan urges us to extrapolate further in the direction set by certain events in the past—the inclusion among “us” of the family in the next cave, then of the tribe across the river, then of the tribal confederation beyond the mountains, then of the unbelievers beyond the seas (and, perhaps last of all, of the menials who, all this time, have been doing our dirty work). This is a process which we should try to keep going. We should stay on the lookout for marginalized people—people who we still instinctively think of as “they” rather than “us.” We should try to notice our similarities with them. The right way to construe the slogan is as urging us to *create* a more expansive sense of solidarity than we presently have.

Most important to note is Rorty’s (1998) notion that our sense of who “we” are can be continually expanded to include more and more people based on similarities that are not found so much as they are created by telling

the sort of long, sad, sentimental story that begins, “Because this is what it is like to be in her situation—to be far from home, among strangers,” or “Because she might become your daughter-in-law,” or “Because her mother would grieve for her.” (p. 185)

Telling these sorts of stories, he argues, is the most practical method for increasing our sense of solidarity with those we once considered “others.”

By way of example, consider the case of Carl Wilkens, an Adventist missionary and the only American to remain in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide. When the genocide began, the U.S. government closed its embassy in Kigali and evacuated citizens who were residing all across the country. Wilkens, however, made the decision to send his family home and to remain in Rwanda (see Barker, 2004). In doing so, he put himself directly in harm’s way, not only because of the ongoing warfare between the Hutu Power government and Tutsi-led rebels but because he sheltered Tutsi refugees from the *interahamwe* militia and worked to assist others who were in hiding. When asked why he chose to act as he did, Wilkens’s response is telling:

For a while, when people would ask me why [I] chose to stay, I would try to go into some detail [about] that Tutsi young lady and that Tutsi young man [who worked for me]. [They] were [the] faces [of the victims of the genocide], representing the country and I felt if I left, they were going to be killed. . . . The first three weeks, I never left my house, and I was wondering, why did I stay? What am I doing? [Then I realized] the two people in my house [were] still alive, and I [was] very grateful for that. (Barker, 2004)

That his heroic rescue of Tutsi began with those who were closest to him is no surprise, but what is noteworthy is that he need not have identified with them in the way that he did, given that so many others (Hutus, Americans, other foreign nationals in Rwanda and abroad) did not. Doing so, recognizing that these potential victims were like him in some important respect, allowed him to expand the circle of care that is so important to heroic behavior (Kohen, 2010).

Empathy has always been highly correlated with heroic and altruistic actors (Fagin-Jones & Midlarsky, 2007; Harvey, Erdos, & Turnbull, 2009; Jayawickreme & Di Stefano, 2012; Midlarsky et al., 2005; Osswald, Greitemeyer, Fischer, & Frey, 2004, 2010). And while some researchers such as Oliner and Oliner (1989) conclude that heroes act because of an expanded sense of empathy, other psychological research on empathy and prosocial behavior seems to support Rorty's point. Empathy is an affective response that comes from taking the perspective of another while sharing the same or similar emotions. The emotional component develops incredibly early in children, essentially from birth (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006), then as children's cognitive abilities advance they gain perspective taking skills and are able to empathize to stories, by mid childhood they can empathize with another person's specific struggles, and adolescents are able to both feel and take the perspectives of entire groups, such as the poor (Eisenberg et al., 2006). Interestingly, recent research on the neural circuitry of empathy suggests that empathy for similar others "is neutrally distinct from empathy for humankind, more generally (Mathur, Harada, Lipke, & Chiao, 2010, p. 1474)." The affective response is experienced broadly in response to any suffering other, but the cognitive component of empathy, perspective taking, may be activated only when observing the suffering of similar others (Mathur et al., 2010). Additionally, Mathur et al. (2010) determined the cognitive process, not affective, must be in place for altruistic motivation.

Clearly, the ability to take the perspective of others is directly tied to Rorty's argument. Furthermore, many programs seeking to foster empathy seem to operate on the assumption that it is easier to take the perspective of someone similar to you, than more dissimilar (Belman & Flanagan, 2010).

One of the most common ways to foster empathy is to encourage a participant to take the perspective of a similar, rather than dissimilar, other. This is used often to foster empathy in medical professionals, for conflict resolution, and in school antibullying programs (Belman & Flanagan, 2010). These programs have varying levels of success but one clear example is an empathy focused method of rape prevention given to male student athletes and fraternity members where they watched a video describing the rape of a man, by two other men (Foubert & Perry, 2007). Participants made clear connections between the feelings they had while watching it, and the feelings a woman would have in similar situations (Foubert & Perry, 2007). While the act of refraining from rape is clearly not heroic, this example demonstrates that it was easier to take the perspective of similar others, than more dissimilar others. In short, empathy was easier when the participants saw immediate commonalities with the victims; this pattern has been seen in heroes as well. When comparing rescuers during the Holocaust to bystanders, Fagin-Jones and Midlarsky (2007) found evidence that heroes who had experienced persecution themselves were more likely to help because they were more likely to empathize with the victims. However, they also found that bystanders had more previous experience with Jews than the heroic rescuers (Fagin-Jones & Midlarsky, 2007).

Another rationale for how this expanded empathy arises comes from the self-expansion model of motivation. Aron, Norman, and Aron (1998) describe that as people develop relationships, their self expands and begins to include the other. A clear example of this is a partner in a relationship who takes on the perspectives of their companion. In essence their self has expanded and the other is now included as an overlapping part of the self. However, this process does not need to involve a close relationship, it can involve strangers. Specifically, the cognitive component of empathy involves a person putting themselves in the shoes of the other, this acts as a means of including the other in the self (Aron et al., 1998). Aron argues that when a person sees someone in need, empathy is activated and the process of taking that person's perspective makes them more self-like, expanding the self to include that other (Aron et al., 1998). Furthermore, this inclusion of another person in the self enhances empathy and altruism (Aron et al., 2004).

The conclusion is that while it's likely not all heroes acted out of empathy born of direct commonality, many likely did, and in any case it is clear that working to see "others" as similar to "us" is one effective way to develop empathy. We hypothesize that most heroes expanded their empathy to include the people they helped; additionally, we predict that working to expand empathy could be an effective way to increase prosocial and even heroic behavior.

Heroic Imagination

In addition, and very much related to this expansive sense of empathy, is the development of what we call the heroic imagination, by which we mean that, prior to their heroic actions, heroes imagined situations where help was needed and considered how they would act. This has been a primary focus of Zeno Franco and Phil Zimbardo since the writing of their first article in *Greater Good* (2006) and in *The Lucifer Effect* (2007). They proposed an intervention where they would foster the “heroic imagination, or the development of a personal heroic ideal. This heroic ideal can help guide a person’s behavior in times of trouble or moral uncertainty” (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006, p. 31). While there is currently a dearth of empirical evidence in support of these interventions, there are dramatic anecdotal examples of participants who attended the Hero Round Table, or participated in the Heroic Imagination Project interventions, who did find themselves in situations requiring heroism and acted heroically (Hero Round Table, 2016).

Christopher Norman provides a noteworthy example. He was a passenger on a high speed train from Amsterdam to Paris at the end of August in 2015. A heavily armed man came into his cabin with the clear intent to cause harm. Norman’s first reaction was to hide. He ducked to the floor and hoped he would survive. His reaction turned into considered action as he decided he needed to do something rather than remaining passive and almost certainly dying. As a regular traveler, Norman had thought about this kind of situation before. He had played out scenarios in his head, considering his possible actions. He had also talked about these possibilities before. A couple of weeks before the incident on the train, he had spoken to a friend in law enforcement about his options. His conclusion was that action was the only option. It is no surprise that he took action on the day of the attack.

Two years after, Wesley Autrey famously saved a man’s life by laying on top of him between the subway tracks, Chad Lindsey found himself unexpectedly recalling the story. Lindsey was on the platform waiting for his train, when a man fell onto the tracks. He leapt onto the tracks and tried to lift the unconscious, bleeding man onto the platform. He had difficulty doing so and saw the tunnel starting to get lighter. Recalling Autrey’s feat, Lindsey decided not to repeat it. He told *The New York Times* (Wilson, 2009), “I was like, ‘I am not doing that. We’ve got to get out of here.’” He called for help and bystanders turned into active helpers, pulling the man onto the tracks.

In an e-mail to the authors Lindsey said, “I don’t think I had consciously absorbed Autrey’s lessons for ACTUAL USE . . . but when I was confronted with the situation, it seems I had instant access to those memories—what to do, where to lie in the track-bed had it come to that, how horrendous it would

be for the rolling stock to pass over you.” He also pointed out that as a Michigander living in New York he had “curiosity about the transit system in general led me to have a fuller knowledge of the moving parts even before I ever imagined I’d need them” (C. Lindsey, personal communication, March 21, 2016).

There are also examples of heroes in the literature like Oscar Romero and Andree de Jongh. Romero was an Archbishop who was assassinated for sermons and activism in support, defense, and liberation of the poor in San Salvador (Brockman, 1989; Bronk & Riches, 2016). He clearly considered how he would act in times of trouble or moral uncertainty because he became more active after his mentor Rutilio Grande was assassinated for the same thing (Brockman, 1989; Bronk & Riches, 2016). While growing up in Belgium, Andree de Jongh, wanted to be like her hero, Edith Cavell. Cavell had been executed for helping captured British soldiers escape captivity during World War I. De Jongh followed in Cavell’s footsteps, becoming a nurse before World War II. When the war started, she signed up to volunteer for the Red Cross. Within a year, De Jongh had set up the Comet Line; a series of safe houses and escape routes from Brussels to Bilbao, Spain. Both Romero and De Jongh are also great examples of the habitual helper, as discussed below. There are a great many of these stories, but it is also clear that there is not as much research on the heroic imagination as there is on empathy in heroes. Even so, there are empirical connections we can make.

Mental practice, or imagining, has been successfully used in sports psychology to improve specific skills, and in counseling situations to practice interpersonal interactions (Cooper, Tindall-Ford, Chandler, & Sweller, 2001; Kendall, Hrycaiko, Martin, & Kendall, 1990). Even when a specific skill is not practiced explicitly imagery rehearsal, or imagining, is effective at improving specific sports skills (Kendall et al., 1990), which is relevant to the heroic imagination because it may be impossible or unwise to explicitly practice many heroism scenarios. Cooper et al. (2001) also found that imagining is an effective way to improve performance for someone who has experience with a subject or context, but imagining is not effective for a novice who has little or no experience with that subject or context. The effect is even more pronounced when self-talk or self-explanation is included along with imagining (Cooper et al., 2001). This is directly related to the special training and experience of many heroes we discuss in more detail below. Imagining acting heroically in contexts and with skills familiar to a person will be more effective than imagining a heroic act in contexts the subject has no knowledge of.

The heroic imagination may also be related to prospection. Prospection is the process of mentally running through hypothetical future situations, evaluating prospective behaviors, and selecting an action based on needs and goals

(Seligman, Railton, Baumeister, & Sripada, 2013). One example of prospection that most people are familiar with is imagining a difficult conversation with a friend, a person might predict the responses their friend could give, and prepare rebuttals for potential responses (Seligman et al., 2013). While much of prospection happens automatically and implicitly, it can be performed deliberately, and the deliberate practice of imagining oneself in heroic situations may serve as a form of prospection. Prospection helps drive goals and motivate behavior (Seligman et al., 2013), and may also help a person clarify their self-concept, in this way engaging the heroic imagination may help a person see themselves as a potential hero. We also predict that this heroic imagination will be more effective when the imagined contexts are familiar, in a similar area as the special training the prospective hero has special training in. We encourage more work on the heroic imaginations affect the development of heroes.

Special Training

Very much related to the idea of imagining oneself taking heroic action is the notion of developing a skill that is ultimately translatable to heroic action. In other words, it is all well and good to consider how I *might* respond to an emergency, but it is also obviously beneficial to actually possess some experience or skill that makes me confident about undertaking the heroic action in question. The problem of the rescuing the hypothetical drowning child is a familiar one to most people and Peter Singer (1972) sums up the ethical requirements of a passerby succinctly: “if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it” (p. 231).² But a requirement for acting on behalf of the drowning child, most people believe, is some baseline ability to swim. It would be heroic for anyone to attempt to rescue a drowning child, but the chances of success are obviously much greater for someone with lifeguard training. We want to go a step farther and argue that it is more likely for someone who regards herself as a strong swimmer to attempt a rescue than it would be for someone who does not know how to swim; the former, even without lifeguard training, is more likely to jump into the water while the latter would be more likely to remain a bystander (and advisedly so).³

Three Americans were also involved in effort with Christopher Norman to prevent a massacre on the train in Europe. Anthony Sadler, Spencer Stone, and Alek Skarlatos ran at the man with very little hesitation and took much of the credit in stopping the attack. Each of them had military training. While this training is unlikely to have specifically prepared them to take down an

armed man on a train, they undoubtedly had practiced combat during training and perhaps had engaged in combat during their service.

In 2015, a member of Parkour Generations UK walked into the Green Park Underground station and saw a commotion at the end of the platform. A man had fallen onto the tracks and was unable to help himself back up. Numerous people were debating what to do. The Parkour practitioner dropped his backpack, jumped onto the tracks, and lifted the man back up. His reaction was without thought about the practicalities of the procedure. As someone who tested his body's capabilities and limits on a daily basis through Parkour, he knew he would be able to lift the man up, and how he would do it. In an e-mail to the authors, the rescuer said there "wasn't any thought process" nor any doubt (Anonymous Hero, personal communication, March 22, 2016).

With regard to specific evidence from the field of psychology. A few studies have found that the bystander effect is weaker, or does not occur, for people with domain specific training, or training to recognize the bystander effect itself (Fischer et al., 2011). Of our four proposed commonalities, this may be the area in need of the most scientific research.

Habitual Helpers

We argue that the final predictor of heroic behavior is repetitive action on behalf of others. These actions, often small-scale, serve as a building block of heroism insofar as they prime the prospective hero to take action when the need arises. It has been said the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. While the pattern of helping in the development of heroes has not been examined in depth, there are quite a few studies that find many heroes are people who are habitual helpers. In fact, many studies of heroes find participants through organizations that award long-term commitment in providing prosocial service to others (see Becker & Eagly, 2004; Walker et al., 2010; Walker & Frimer, 2007). We see more direct evidence of habitual helping leading to more helping behavior in the research on prosocial development. Participation in prosocial activities seems to foster prosocial behavior later in life (Eisenberg et al., 2006). Like the foot in the door, small commitments early in life lead to larger future commitments. One example is organized youth activities and nonvoluntary service in school programs is linked to future volunteering (Eisenberg et al., 2006). These prosocial habits also increase empathy, social responsibility, adoption of prosocial norms, opportunities to learn about new systems of meaning (e.g., about social injustice or society), and may also lead to changes in self-concept so habitual helpers begin to see themselves as helpful people (Eisenberg et al., 2006). Here again,

Oscar Romero is an example of a hero who lived his life in help to others. He made smaller commitments early in life such as attending seminary, which deepened his purpose, and opened routes to future prosocial behavior and heroism (Bronk & Riches, 2016). Interestingly, just as it did with Oscar Romero, this habitual helping may serve as domain specific training.

Furthermore, along with values, social comparison, commitments, and many other processes, these small habitual behaviors can help build a person's identity. As a comparison, people with a moral identity developed it, in part, by engaging in small acts of habitual helping through their life (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Walker & Frimer, 2007). People who have developed a moral identity see themselves as centrally a moral being; being moral and having moral values, principles and perspectives are central to their sense of self (Berkowitz, 1997). This moral identity is partially created because of habitual helping, and leads to further habitual helping as people with a moral identity act in accordance with that identity across contexts (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). While we do not expect all heroes to have a moral identity, we hypothesize that many will, and many more will have gone through similar processes of incorporating their habitual helping in the development of their identity as a potential hero.

Next Steps/Future Research

While heroism research is growing (see Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2016), we lack understanding of how heroes develop. Leading developmental theories, such as relational developmental systems theory, suggest human development happens as a bidirectional interaction between individuals and multiple contexts (Ford & Lerner, 1992; Lerner, 1991, 2006). Studies using the developmental systems model are often person-centered and focus on the processes that create change in the person and their contexts (Lerner, 1991, 2006). The four commonalities of hero development we have begun to outline in this article easily fit this developmental framework.

Hero development may be similar to many moral exemplars: parent, mentor, and peer examples helping foster empathy, prosocial behavior, altruism, and moral identity. Heroes may have developed skills or traits specific to their heroic actions. Heroes may have a habit of small-scale helping that makes heroic action easier. Heroes may have developed a heroic imagination, imagining and considering how they would act in situations calling for heroism. Heroes may also have acted out of empathy due to direct commonality or identification with victims. Heroes may develop this way, but as yet we do not have much empirical data regarding the development of heroes beyond

the anecdotal. We propose the field of heroism science examine the development of heroes from the lens of the developmental systems model.

It is not an easy task to study heroes and it will not be an easy task to examine these four commonalities; however, we propose a few next steps for this research. In-depth interviews with recognized heroes could help jump start the process of understanding hero development, as would using any available archival data of awarded heroes to examine evidence of these commonalities or suggest new ones. The field might also find use of a scale of heroism or intended heroic behavior. At present, survey measures of civil courage or various personality assessments are all that are available.

Conclusion

When confronted with a situation in which decisive, heroic behavior is required, most people do not act. What sort of person chooses to endanger herself on behalf of another person, perhaps a stranger? What motivates the hero to act when we know that so many others remain passive, bystanders? Getting to the root of heroic motivation, understanding why the hero acts, why he is different from the crowd that stands back from the edge of the subway platform, has the potential for great benefit for our society. In considering four distinctions that characterize the hero, that separate him or her from everyone else, we also point to ways in which everyone might prepare themselves for a situation that calls for heroic action. This is in line with a goal of humanistic psychology which has always “sought pathways and technologies that assist human in reaching full humanness” (Moss, 2014, p. 3). While we argue that heroism is, in some very real sense, predetermined by a series of choices made long before the heroic action takes place, we must point out that each of these characteristics can be inculcated in any prospective hero. Heroism, in this way, relies on or requires a great deal of priming or training. But it nonetheless remains something that is accessible to anyone who is willing and able to prepare for it.

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Notes

1. Consider how much of the ongoing debate in the United States over gun violence, gun control, and so-called gun-free zones centers on the notion, proposed by gun owners and advocates, that, so long as he is not prohibited by local ordinances or federal regulation, a “good guy with a gun” will always step up heroically to protect the endangered masses against an active shooter.
2. Singer (1972), of course, proceeds from this example to argue for a more expansive understanding of need and assistance: “It makes no difference whether the person I can help is a neighbor’s child ten yards from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away” (pp. 231-232).
3. A powerful example from the world of professional athletics is Joe Delaney, a Pro Bowl running back with the Kansas City Chiefs, who attempted to rescue three drowning boys in a Monroe, Louisiana park on June 29, 1983. Though he had never learned to swim, Delaney succeeded in saving one of the boys before drowning in an attempt to save the two others. He was posthumously awarded the Presidential Citizens Medal by Ronald Reagan (cf. Reilly, 2003).

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