

# What Makes a Hero? Exploring Characteristic Profiles of Heroes Using Q-Method

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## **Abstract**

Building on research about the characteristics and varieties of actual heroes, the purpose of this project was to investigate the extent to which different types of real heroes have similar and distinct characteristics using Q-method, a person focused method. Awarded heroes sorted 49 psychological characteristics and Q-factor analysis revealed two profiles, or groups, of heroes; “open, loving, and risk-taking heroes,” and “spiritual, socially responsible, and prudent heroes.” These findings are interpreted in light of humanistic psychology, and the implications of these findings on the field of heroism science are discussed. The profiles bring the field of heroism science a deeper and more comprehensive view of the whole heroic person, and suggest directions for using heroic examples to fostering heroism.

## **Keywords**

hero, heroism, courage, prudence, Q-method, hero profiles

A hero is 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,

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and it can come in the form of physical or social risk (Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011). Anyone can be a hero. For example, a civilian who rescues another person from a fire at great physical risk is a hero. Holocaust rescuers who risked life or social standing to help others were heroes. An employee who is aware of unethical or illegal activities in their organization and reveals them at the risk of their job, income, and social standing is also a hero (Franco et al., 2011; Franco & Zimbardo, 2006; Zimbardo, 2007). Although anyone can be a hero, individuals who take heroic action are rare (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006). During the Holocaust, the highest estimate of heroic rescue was “less than one half of 1% of the total population under Nazi occupation” (Midlarsky, Jones, & Nemeroff, 2006, p. 30). Although heroes are rare, they exemplify human excellence and deserve empirical attention to better understand heroism, altruism, and people who perform dramatic prosocial action.

Heroes are valued across cultures and throughout history (Becker & Eagly, 2004). Yet surprisingly little research focuses on understanding the psychological characteristics (e.g., personality traits, character strengths, and emotions) that may be defining features of heroes and heroic action. Although the literature is sparse, there are studies that compare the traits and characteristics of real heroes with more typical individuals, and investigate laypersons' views of heroes (Franco et al., 2011; Midlarsky, Jones, & Corley, 2005). There is also a growing understanding that not all heroes are the same (Walker, Frimer, & Dunlop, 2010), thus there is a need for more research on the whole heroic person.

Gordon Allport (1962) argued that psychological research should be more idiographic and focused on the individual. Humanistic psychology continues to emphasize whole person analysis, investigating the breadth and depth of human experience (DeRobertis, 2015; Schneider, Pierson, & Bugental, 2014). Using this person-centered approach, the current project is an exploratory study aimed at identifying the profiles of psychological characteristics associated with different types of real, awarded, heroes. Heroes are rare, so studying a sample made up exclusively of heroes is one of the most effective ways to learn about their characteristics.

### *Types of Heroes*

At least two studies have attempted to distinguish different types of heroes. Specifically, Walker et al. (2010) examined moral exemplars who received the Canadian Medal of Bravery and recipients of the Caring Canadian Award, and found support for the varieties perspective of heroism. The varieties perspective is the philosophy that a hero can possess many virtues that differ from other heroes. In other words, there could be different profiles or

constellations of virtues that characterize different heroes (Walker et al., 2010). This is a much more comprehensive way to look at heroes than competing perspectives which reduce heroes to single virtues driving their action, or situational factors alone (Walker et al., 2010).

Another study found that laypeople divided heroes into three categories, civil, social, and martial heroes, depending on the risk associated with the heroic action (Franco et al., 2011). A *civil hero* refers to citizens who put themselves at significant physical peril in helpful actions toward one or more individuals, without thought of reward (Franco et al., 2011). Civilian fire rescue is prototypic of this heroic action (Franco et al., 2011). A *social hero* does not usually confront physical risk, but instead, acts for the good of others in the face of social risk or other great personal sacrifice such as loss of social status, finances, job, or freedom (Franco et al., 2011; Greitemeyer, Osswald, Fischer, & Frey, 2007; Zimbardo, 2007). A whistleblower provides an example of a social hero, risking freedom, positive social standing, and in some cases their lives fighting for social justice. *Martial heroes* are duty bound to a code of conduct to help others, even at the risk of their own lives; examples include military personnel, firefighters, and police officers who went above and beyond the call of duty (Franco et al., 2011; Zimbardo, 2007). As suggested by the findings of these studies, heroes are not homogeneous. There are different types of heroes and they likely possess different profiles of psychological characteristics. The current research builds on these studies by investigating profiles of heroes which will enable a much more comprehensive analysis of the whole heroic person.

### *Characteristics of Heroes*

Recently, there have been numerous studies of layperson's analysis of heroes and their characteristics. Goethals and Allison (2012) asked college students to name the traits of heroes and uncovered the "Great Eight" traits of heroism. While Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou (2015) investigated the characteristics laypeople considered prototypic of heroes. Studies of actual heroes are rare. Studies of nonfictional heroes often include individuals who fit the definition of a hero and have investigated the personality traits of these heroes, including comparing them with matched nonhero comparison groups (Franco et al., 2011; Midlarsky et al., 2005; Oliner & Oliner, 1988; Walker et al., 2010), or investigating gender differences in heroes (Becker & Eagly, 2004). These studies provide a good starting point, but there has been no empirical attention directed at distinguishing the characteristics possessed by different types of heroes. Some characteristics may be possessed by one type of hero and not another, whereas some characteristics may be possessed by all types of

heroes. In addition, there may be many characteristics relevant to heroes and heroic acts that have yet to be studied. In short, the field of heroism needs a broader and deeper understanding of heroes.

The purpose of this project was to explore constellations of psychological characteristics of different types of actual heroes to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the whole heroic person. A wide net of 49 characteristics included the primary correlates of heroism in the literature (e.g., altruism, empathy, extensivity, risk taking, and social responsibility), and other characteristics that have been empirically tested in heroes; characteristics that have been theoretically linked to heroism, or have clear connections to prosocial behavior, civic engagement, or moral behavior (e.g., sense of world community, self-regulation, and mindful); and exploratory characteristics such as character strengths or virtues, which have not yet been linked to heroism in the literature. Heroes, like all humans, cannot be reduced to their components or simple characteristics (Bugental, 1964). In investigating a large number of characteristics, this research aims to understand the characteristics common to heroes through a person-centered approach in the hopes of better understanding the whole heroic person, integrating multiple fields of study, extending our knowledge of heroes, and point toward areas of further research that we may help develop more heroes.

### *Current Study and Hypotheses*

Q-method was used in this exploratory study of actual, awarded heroes. Q-method is a person-centered, quantitative, and qualitative method in which participants rank order characteristics, statements, or traits from "most characteristic" of themselves to "least characteristic," allowing an examination of participant characteristics by their own self-report (Waters & Deane, 1985). The primary reason for using Q-method is to explore the psychological characteristic profiles, or Q-sort profiles of awarded heroes. This method allows for an examination of characteristic differences between heroes, and should reveal characteristics that may be shared by heroes. Additionally, this study adds to the very few studies of real heroes currently available in the literature.

It was predicted that more than one group of heroes with distinct profiles of psychological characteristics (Hypothesis 1) would emerge in this exploratory research. Specifically, there would be characteristics that are unique, or ranked differentially, in each group of heroes (Hypothesis 2). Furthermore, it was predicted that there would be characteristics that are shared, or are not ranked differentially, across all groups, such as empathy and risk taking (Hypothesis 3).

## Method

### *Participants and Procedures*

Associations that recognize or award heroes provided contact information and histories of participants. These organizations criteria for rewarding heroes align with the definition of heroism used for this study. However, descriptions of each participant's heroic actions were reviewed to ensure the action fit the definition used in this study. The Carnegie Hero Fund Commission makes awards to civil and martial heroes and the majority of the sample was contacted using information they provided. Social heroes were identified through HazingPrevention.org's Hank Nuwer Anti-Hazing Hero Award, the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights' Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award, and the Giraffe Heroes Project. After receiving contact information and hero's stories, 96 heroes were invited, via phone or e-mail, to participate voluntarily in a study of characteristics of heroic exemplars. A total of 53 heroes agreed to participate and were sent a recruitment e-mail containing a study description and consent form, as well as a link to the Q-study online through Flash Q, a web-based Q-method program. Participants consented to participate and followed step by step instructions through the study. Due to data recording problems with the server hosting the Flash Q-program, after the study participants e-mailed their data to the lead researcher. This unusual final step may have dissuaded a few heroes from completing the study, or sending in their data.

Indeed, 26% of the 53 contacted heroes completed the study. The final sample, or *p*-set, included 14 heroes (79% male; 93% White, 7% Hispanic or Latino;  $M_{\text{age}} = 50.71$ ,  $SD = 13.16$ ). Which is not an uncommon sample size for a Q-study (e.g., see Brown, 2009; Lai et al., 2007). This group included 8 civil heroes (75% male, 100% White;  $M_{\text{age}} = 54.00$ ,  $SD = 13.14$ ), 3 social heroes (67% male; 67% White, 33% Hispanic or Latino;  $M_{\text{age}} = 38.00$ ,  $SD = 14.53$ ), and 3 martial heroes (100% male, 100% White;  $M_{\text{age}} = 54.67$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ).

*Psychological Characteristics to Sort.* In the Q-study, participants ranked 49 psychological characteristics relevant to heroism. As discussed above, these characteristics include the primary correlates of heroism in the literature, characteristics that have been theoretically linked to heroism or prosocial behavior, and many exploratory characteristics such as character strengths. This set of characteristics, or Q-sample, shown in Table 1, was broad enough to be a reasonable representation of the topic of heroism while also allowing for diversity in participants' Q-sorts (Brown, 1980; Dziopa & Ahern, 2011).

**Table 1.** Characteristics Used for Q-Sort and Their Factor Arrays.

Statement	Factor array	
	Factor 1	Factor 2
Courage	5	3
Perseverance: Persistence and industriousness	5	5
Honesty: Authenticity and integrity	3	5
Humor: Playfulness	3	3
Bravery: Valor	2	4
Kindness	2	2
Contempt	-2	-2
Wisdom: Perspective	-2	-2
Hedonism	-4	-5
Shame	-4	-2
Public Self-Awareness	-5	-4
Curiosity: Interest, openness to experience	4	-2
Zest: Vitality, enthusiasm	3	-3
Creativity: Originality, ingenuity	3	-5
Risk taking	2	-2
Joyful	2	-3
Anger: Indignation, moral outrage	-3	2
Spirituality: Faith	-3	4
Prudence	-5	2
Love	4	1
Love of learning	4	0
Empathy	2	0
Forgiveness	-2	1
Disgust	-3	1
Elevation	-3	0
Embarrassment	-4	1
Social Responsibility	1	4
Mindful	0	3
Judgment: Critical thinking	0	3
Purpose	-1	2
Appreciation of beauty and excellence: Awe	1	-3
Future minded	0	-3
Sense of world community	1	-4
Internal locus of control	-1	-4
Leadership	2	0
Self-efficacy	1	1
Generous	1	-1

*(continued)*

**Table 1. (continued)**

Statement	Factor array	
	Factor 1	Factor 2
Social intelligence: Emotional intelligence	1	1
Gratitude	0	-2
Humility	0	2
Extensivity	0	-1
Teamwork	0	2
Compassion	-1	0
Guilt	-1	1
Fairness	-1	0
Autonomy	-1	-1
Self-Regulation: Self-control	-2	-1
Hope	-2	-1
Altruism	-2	0

Note. Characteristics with scores at or above +2 and at or below -2 represent characteristics that are most and least like the heroes in that factor, respectively. Characteristics at the top of the table represent those defining characteristics that were shared between the two hero groups but not significantly different in their ranking. Highlighted scores indicate unique or distinguishing characteristics to that factor, these ranking differences between Factors 1 and 2 are statistically significant at  $p < .01$ . Characteristics at the bottom of the table represent those that were shared but not defining of either factor (i.e., ranked around average for both factors).

In one of the first steps of the study, participants read each characteristic and a self-referential statement to define the characteristic. For example, perseverance was defined as “I finish what I start; I persist in a course of action in spite of obstacles; I take pleasure in completing tasks” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 29). To ensure participants understood the definitions, 40 U.S. adults participated in a separate pilot study using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, where they demonstrated they could accurately match the characteristic to the appropriate definition with no prior training. In a simple matching task online, no characteristic was matched with its definition at a rate lower than 60% accuracy, and most were matched above 80% accuracy. This pilot demonstrated that these characteristics are generally understood by laypersons in the way they were defined by the researchers.

*Process of Q-Sorting.* Q-sort is the process by which participants sort the characteristics, called a Q-sample, into categories ranging from “not at all like me” to “exactly like me.” After reading the list of psychological characteristics and definitions (participants could review the definitions at any time during the

study), participants completed a presort where they sorted characteristics into three groups: least like me, average, and most like me. This initial presort helped speed the process of the final sort (Dziopa & Ahern, 2011). After the presort, participants sorted the 49 characteristics by individually placing each into the Q-sort distribution matrix (see Figure 1).

Sorting into this Q-sort distribution matrix began with the psychological characteristics ranked in the presort as, “most like me,” “average,” and then “least like me.” Participants then had the opportunity to explain the rankings of the two characteristics they sorted as “exactly like me” and the two characteristics ranked as “not at all like me” in open-ended responses. At the conclusion of the Q-sort, participants completed a short demographic questionnaire including age, ethnicity, gender, and highest level of education completed.

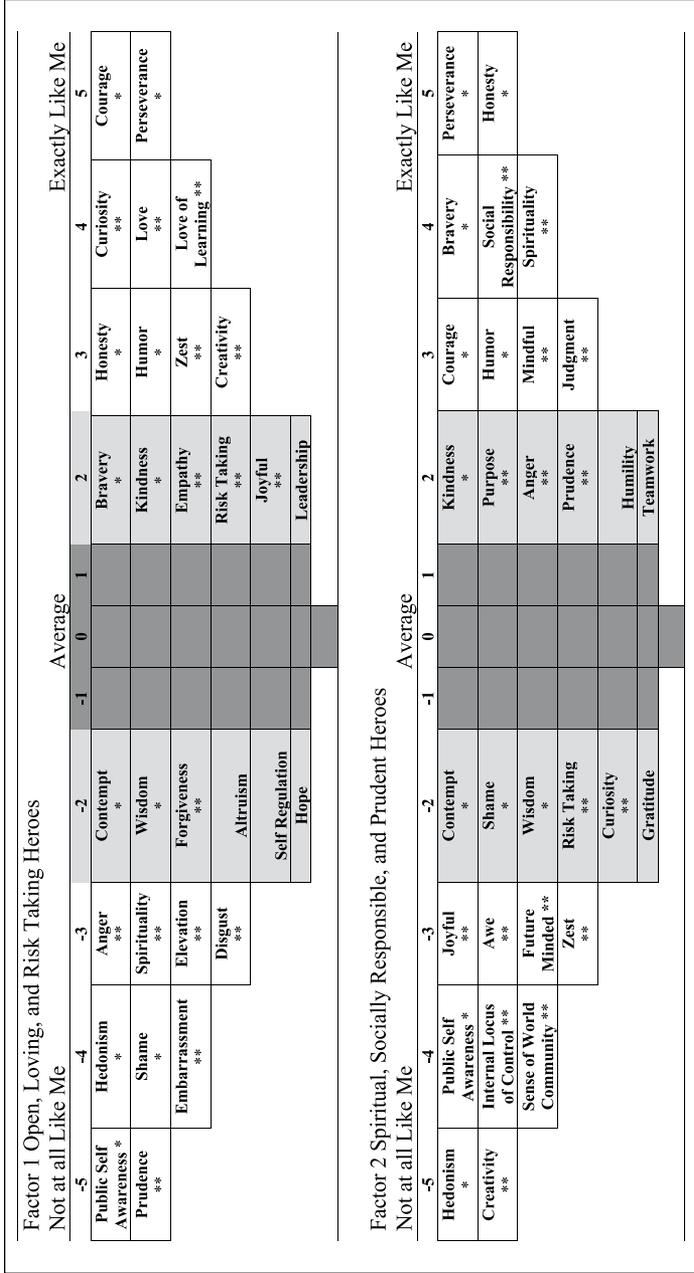
## **Results**

### *Preliminary Analysis*

The most common method to analyze Q-sort data is through a by-person factor analysis (Brown, 1980, 1993; Dziopa & Ahern, 2011). The purpose of the factor analysis is to take the psychological characteristics participants place in the Q-sort distribution and cluster people with similar sorts, or personal profiles, together. This essentially leads to the identification of groups of heroes with similar characteristic profiles. In the first step of the Q-analysis, correlations were examined between each participant’s characteristic rankings and every other participant’s characteristics rankings.

Next, principal components factor analysis was performed on the correlation matrix. Factors with at least four participants were retained because such factors tend to be more reliable (Brown, 1993; Dziopa & Ahern, 2011). In the next step, Varimax factor rotation was performed. Following these analyses, data were also analyzed using principal axis factoring and Oblimin rotation. Oblimin rotation allows correlation of factors and the expectation was that these groups of heroes would be similar, or correlated. Principal axis factoring with Oblimin rotation did not produce a different factor solution. Thus, only the results of the principal components factor analysis with Varimax rotation are reported below.

The final analytic step involved calculating the normalized weighted average Q-item score (*z* score) of each psychological characteristic in each profile and developing a representative Q-sort, indicative of the shared characteristic profile of participants in that factor. This distribution revealed which characteristics were highest ranked and lowest ranked, for that specific group, or



**Figure 1.** Factor solutions displayed on the Q-sort response matrix.

Note. Factors 1 and 2 are correlated at  $r = .21$ .

\*Indicates characteristics that are common between factors. \*\*Indicates distinguishing characteristics of that factor which are unique, not common between factors.

factor, of heroes. Following the factor analysis, a simple qualitative analysis of the participant's open-ended responses was performed by reading why participants ranked certain characteristics as exactly like them or not at all like them. Common themes and explanations of the differences between characteristic rankings were uncovered. Allowing interpretation and naming of the factors based on participant's open-ended responses.

### **Factor Analysis Results**

Principal components analysis revealed five factors with Eigen values above one. However, an analysis of the scree plot suggested there were only two or three meaningful factors. After Varimax rotation, all 14 participants loaded on one of the two factors in the two-factor solution. Three participants cross-loaded on both factors; they were retained on the factor they loaded highest on. The three-factor solution had more, and higher, cross loadings of participants on factors. It also had one factor with only three participants loading on it. Thus, the two-factor solution was selected as the most illuminating grouping of these heroes. It accounted for 37% of the total variance and the factors were correlated at  $r = .21$ . This result supported Hypothesis 1, in which the analysis revealed two unique groups of heroes with distinct profiles of psychological characteristics.

*Open, Loving, and Risk-Taking Heroes.* Careful examination of the factor loadings reveals that seven heroes fell on Factor 1 which accounted for 21% of the total variance. This factor represents a unique group of heroes with homogeneous psychological characteristics, who are otherwise heterogeneous people. In fact, this factor included all three women in the sample, as well as four men (57% male, 86% White, 14% Hispanic or Latino;  $M_{\text{age}} = 49.57$ ,  $SD = 17.29$ ), and four civil heroes, two social heroes, and one martial hero. Factor 1 was distinguished and interpreted using the characteristics ranking positively at or above +2 in the Q-sort response matrix, and those characteristics ranking negatively at or below -2. Characteristics ranked positively included courage, perseverance, love, curiosity, love of learning, humor, creativity, zest, honesty, bravery, kindness, risk taking, empathy, joyful, and leadership (see Table 1 and Figure 1). These positively ranked characteristics represent what this group of heroes agreed was closest to "exactly like me" in their self-descriptions. Characteristics ranked negatively included public self-awareness, prudence, hedonism, shame, embarrassment, anger, spirituality, elevation, disgust, contempt, wisdom, forgiveness, altruism, self-regulation, and hope. These characteristics represent what this group of heroes agreed was closest to "not at all like me."

Factor 1 was named based off distinguishing characteristics which included love, curiosity, love of learning, creativity, zest, risk taking, empathy, and joyful on the “exactly like me” side of the distribution and prudence, embarrassment, anger, spirituality, elevation, disgust, and forgiveness on the “not at all like me” side of the distribution. Distinguishing characteristics are significantly different ( $p < .01$ ) from the same characteristics ranking in the other group, which amounts to about three columns in the current Q-sort distribution, and are one way to identify key differences between groups or factors. In light of these distinguishing characteristics, this factor or group of heroes was named “open, loving, and risk-taking heroes.”

*Spiritual, Socially Responsible, and Prudent Heroes.* Seven heroes loaded on Factor 2, which accounted for 16% of the total variance. This factor represents a second group of heroes with homogeneous psychological characteristics (100% male, 100% White;  $M_{\text{age}} = 51.86$ ,  $SD = 8.552$ ). In addition, this group included four civil heroes, two martial heroes, and one social hero. The positive rankings on this factor included perseverance, honesty, bravery, social responsibility, spirituality, courage, humor, judgment, mindful, kindness, anger, purpose, prudence, humility, and teamwork. Characteristics that were ranked negatively included hedonism, creativity, public self-awareness, internal locus of control, sense of world community, joyful, awe, future minded, zest, contempt, shame, wisdom, risk taking, curiosity, and gratitude. Distinguishing characteristics included the following: social responsibility, spirituality, judgment, mindful, anger, purpose, and prudence as closer to “exactly like me” and creativity, internal locus of control, sense of world community, joyful, awe, future minded, zest, risk taking, and curiosity as “not at all like me.” Using these distinguishing characteristics as a guide, this factor or group of heroes was named “spiritual, socially responsible, and prudent heroes.” These two distinct profiles of heroes support Hypotheses 1 and 2; two distinct groups of heroes were discovered, and there were characteristics that were unique or distinctive (i.e., ranked differentially) to each group of heroes.

Finally, in support of Hypotheses 3, the hero groups (factors) shared a few defining characteristics. That is, characteristics that had high rankings (+2 and greater) in both groups of heroes included courage, perseverance, honesty, humor, bravery, and kindness, whereas the characteristics that had low rankings in both groups of heroes (−2 and more negative) included public self-awareness, hedonism, shame, contempt, and wisdom.

## Discussion

This study builds on previous research on real heroes (e.g., Franco et al., 2011; Walker et al., 2010) in using Q-method to explore the psychological

characteristics of different types of actual heroes. Results supported all three hypotheses. Specifically, the factor analysis revealed two groups of heroes with distinct profiles of psychological characteristics (Hypothesis 1). Across the two groups, differentially ranked characteristics distinguished the groups (Hypothesis 2), and some characteristics shared by both groups of heroes emerged (Hypothesis 3).

### *Common Characteristics of Heroes*

As noted in the results, both groups of heroes shared some characteristics. It is interesting that most of the positively ranked characteristics are character strengths falling under the character virtue of courage or valor, which is defined as “emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 29). This was not hypothesized but makes intuitive sense. Heroic acts are risky by definition, and require courage and a great deal of perseverance in the face of opposition.

In speaking about courage, one participant said, “I have been through numerous battles and hopeless situations. I have always been victorious in the end. There is always hope no matter how dire the situation. Never give up. Failure is your choice.” Another participant discussed perseverance, “Plain and simple, I will not give up. I will always keep going regardless of how miserable I am” Thus, it seems the heroes in this sample were defined by the virtue of courage.

The two groups of heroes also shared characteristics they felt were unlike them, including public self-awareness, hedonism, shame, contempt, and wisdom. These participants did not seem to be concerned with what others thought of them, and in fact, took heroic action, even if other people around them did not. Additionally, hedonistic motivations did not appear to drive these heroes. These participants claim to consistently live their values and beliefs, beyond the moment of heroism. Previous research has investigated many of the characteristics that both groups of heroes ranked highly and share (e.g., Becker & Eagly, 2004; Fagin-Jones & Midlarsky, 2007; Franco et al., 2011; Walker et al., 2010). The results of this study further support the idea that there may be common characteristics all heroes possess. Future research could examine if this constellation of characteristics is unique to heroes, and seek to determine if the profile represents an essential core constellation of heroic characteristics.

### *Open, Loving, and Risk-Taking Heroes*

In support of Hypotheses 1 and 2, this study identified two groups of heroes, each with unique characteristics. One group of heroes, *open, loving, and*

*risk-taking heroes*, differed most dramatically from the second group of heroes in their rankings of the characteristics curiosity, love of learning, love, and risk taking as “exactly like me.” These participants were open and curious to explore in the world, their free responses included comments such as “I get curious about my surroundings, the events in my life, the events in others’ lives sensing that we are all part of one. I ask why a lot” and “I love learning new things, trying out new ideas. I love to learn from other people about life and other things.” These comments paired with the characteristic rankings paint a picture of these heroes as interested in the world around them, seeking new knowledge, and sharing love for others, which is in contrast to the second group of participants who were less open, loving, and curious. Characteristics of love and openness have been of interest to humanists since the days of Socrates and Plato. The fact these characteristics feature so prominently in these hero’s profiles suggest these heroes might be good examples of human potential as other people try to reach for these virtues.

Participants in the group of *open, loving, and risk-taking heroes* were also different from other participants in their rankings of risk taking. One participant in this group said, “I have always thrown caution to the wind.” Meanwhile, one participant from the other group of heroes said, “I have a constant internal dialogue . . . I do not do things without carefully thinking about the consequences and costs.” All the participants in this study took significant risk to help others. However, one group seemed to claim to generally take risks in their daily life, but in contrast, the second group reported being generally prudent, which is a novel finding in heroism research.

### ***Spiritual, Socially Responsible, and Prudent Heroes***

The *spiritual, socially responsible, and prudent heroes* distinguished themselves with high rankings on spirituality, social responsibility, and prudence. On the other hand, the *open, loving, and risk-taking heroes* did not claim a sense of spirituality or faith. One *spiritual, socially responsible, and prudent hero* said, “I believe Jesus Christ is the son of God and the savior of the world. Therefore I commit my life to his will, purpose and plan.” In contrast, an *open, loving, and risk-taking hero* said, “There is no higher power. We are all equal and we are all worthy. Our ‘purpose,’ if we need one, is to survive. It is that simple.” These comments further demonstrate the differences between the groups of heroes revealed in the Q-factor analysis. Both groups of heroes have a deep concern for the welfare of others but the *spiritual, socially responsible, and prudent heroes* tended to claim a spiritual faith provides purpose and guides their goals and interactions with others. Meanwhile,

the *open, loving, and risk-taking heroes* have concern for others, but this concern is not rooted in spiritual purpose or belief in a higher power.

While spirituality has appeared in interviews of heroes and its various manifestations are often discussed in humanistic psychology, prudence is a novel finding in research on real heroes. The prominence of prudence in the profiles of *spiritual, socially responsible, and prudent heroes* shows these heroes carefully considered their choices in life and in heroic action. These heroes were not simply driven to acting heroically by the social pressure of an immediate life and death scenario, but chose to act after careful consideration even when they encountered a life and death scenario. This is in direct contrast to most laypersons' conceptions of heroes as risk taking (Goethals & Allison, 2012). While this is a new empirical finding, it is not without theoretical support. In many cases, Holocaust rescuers took thoughtful and careful action (Becker & Eagly, 2004), and at least as far back as Kant, theorists have suggested that prudent thought in a bystander situation could increase intervention behavior, which is often heroic (van den Bos, Müller, & van Bussel, 2009). Prudence is also related to human agency. It seems some heroes retain, and use their agency by carefully choosing to act heroically. This prudence helps set heroes apart from the bystanders who relinquish their agency and allow social pressures to determine their actions. A deeper understanding and investigation of the prudence, and agency, of heroes could be useful for understanding how to foster heroism in others.

### *Theoretical Implications*

Investigating a wide number of characteristics using Q-method allowed for a more comprehensive, person centered, and integrative view of heroes than studies using a few personality measures. While it would be impossible to achieve a comprehensive view of any person with a single study, this study seems a step in the direction of understanding the breadth and depth of heroes. Similar to layperson views, there does not seem to be one defining characteristic that distinguishes heroes (Kinsella et al., 2015). Furthermore, while some of the characteristics of awarded heroes line up with the conceptions of laypersons such as bravery, kindness, and perseverance (Goethals & Allison, 2012; Kinsella et al., 2015); some of the characteristics of actual heroes do not line up with the characteristics laypersons commonly expect heroes to possess, such as prudence and openness to new experience and learning. These differences between layperson conceptions of heroes, and heroes' characteristics should be researched further as they may have implications regarding the functions heroes serve for people.

This study revealed two groups of heroes with unique and defining characteristics. Like Walker et al. (2010), who found three groups of heroes, the two groups revealed here provide additional support for the varieties perspective of heroism. There appear to be different profiles or constellations of virtues possessed by heroes. Furthermore, the results indicate that categorizing heroic action or heroes based on the types of acts, or risks engaged, in may not be the most useful method of defining or distinguishing heroes. Examination of the means and standard deviations of participant rankings by hero type (e.g., civil, social, and martial), suggested wide variability in characteristic rankings among heroes and within the three categories. Furthermore, the two groups of heroes in this research had almost an equal number of civil, social, and martial heroes in each group. While it may be easy to conceptualize heroic acts based on their risks, whether social or physical, it may be more useful to conceptualize, categorize, and assess heroic persons based on their more comprehensive characteristic profiles (e.g., personality traits, character strengths, emotional traits, and other individual differences).

Humanistic psychology has long “sought pathways and technologies that assist humans in reaching full humanness” (Moss, 2015, p. 3). While this is usually done through therapeutic practice, this more comprehensive understanding of the characteristics and character profiles of heroes could help programs foster heroism and positive development to encourage prosocial and altruistic choices and behavior. Programs could use heroes’ profiles of characteristics as a guide to encourage positive development among people to achieve these higher values as they stretch toward full humanness. Future research should investigate the development of heroes by asking questions such as, “How do groups of heroes develop specific and similar characteristics?” and “Do examples of heroes inspire others to reach for these virtues?” Current research and theory in humanistic psychology, positive youth development, moral development, and character education may be instructive in answering these questions and fostering heroic behavior.

### *Limitations*

A primary limitation of this study is that 96 heroes were invited to participate, 53 heroes agreed to participate, but only 14 participants completed the study. The heroes who did participate may be systematically different from those who did not participate. It is equally possible that unfamiliarity with technology or technology failure could explain the low-response rate. If participant data were automatically recorded, rather than requiring participants to e-mail data to the lead researcher, the response rate may have been higher. The low-response rate presents a problem because there may be more than two

generalizable factors or groups that could encompass all heroes. While the two-factor solution was the best fit for the data in this study, it should be possible to get a clearer picture of how many generalizable factors there are in a study with more participants.

Another related limitation is the lack of demographic diversity in the sample. In particular, there were only three female participants. Women do behave heroically as discussed by Becker and Eagly (2004). However, these actions may not be as public, or possibly not as valued, as many heroic actions performed by men and may partially account for the lack of women recognized as heroes (Becker & Eagly, 2004).

A final limitation is the fact that this study did not use personality assessments, or similar measures, to assess characteristics of heroes. Like the studies of layperson's views of hero characteristics, the characteristics described in this study may simply be the hero's views of their own characteristics. Despite these limitations, the findings from this study are a useful exploratory step to more fully understand the characteristics of all heroes. Future studies should validate these characteristics, and profiles, using valid measures of these characteristics in samples of awarded heroes.

### *Significance and Conclusion*

The purpose of this project was to take a deeper look into the profiles of characteristics that real heroes possess in an attempt to discover if there are different types of heroes, and if there are particular and shared characteristics across the groups of awarded heroes. These hypotheses were supported. Specifically, using Q-method, the results supported the varieties perspective of heroes. Two groups of heroes emerged from the factor analysis. Heroes in both groups possessed the shared virtue of courage, while embarrassment and hedonism did not motivate them. One group of heroes possessed open, loving, and risk-taking characteristics, whereas the other group possessed spiritual, socially responsible, and prudent characteristics. These two groups and specific characteristics are novel findings in heroism research and may be useful in creating a comprehensive understanding of the whole heroic person. Furthermore, it may be possible to utilize these characteristics and heroic examples to help people reach for their full prosocial potential.

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