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The Initiation of Heroism Science¹

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ABSTRACT

In this article I describe the nascent field of heroism science, as part of a broader movement for the promotion of heroism in 21st century societies. I identify several markers of its emergence and offer reasons why the science is now coalescing into an established and autonomous field of inquiry. Moreover, I discuss the importance of maintaining a dynamic symbiotic relationship between the research and activist wings of the heroism movement. The aims and scope of heroism science are discussed, and reasons are offered for producing a science that is inclusive, transdisciplinary, and risk-taking. I examine all these issues within the metaphorical framework of *initiation*.

Keywords: heroes, heroism, initiation, heroism science, heroism movement, transdisciplinarity

Introduction

Heroism is as old as humanity itself. For that reason, my use of the word *initiation* in the title of this article may seem surprising. Yet there is no denying that until the 21st century, scholars largely neglected the study of heroic behavior. The past decade has witnessed a burgeoning number of researchers focusing their attention, either directly or indirectly, on the study of heroism in its many different varieties (Allison, Goethals & Kramer, 2016). We have now reached a tipping point or ‘critical mass’ of scholarly activity and production, giving us occasion to acknowledge and celebrate the coalescence of a new field of study. The initiation of *heroism science* is good news for science, and especially good news for a troubled world thirsty for heroes.

Precursors to the Initiation

Why has this initiation taken so long to unfold? There are no doubt many reasons, but one fact stands out in particular. Over the centuries, philosophers and social scientists

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have shown far more interest in the dark side of human nature. Psychologists especially have long demonstrated a consuming preoccupation with people's worst behavior rather than with the best humanity has to offer. The consequence of this imbalance is that we have well-developed theories of human dysfunction, clinical deviance, and the genesis of evil. But this rigorous understanding of humanity's dark side has come at the expense of our understanding of our heroic side. We are now witnessing a welcome change in the emphasis among researchers. The shift in intellectual thought brought about by the advent of the humanistic movement in psychology from the mid 20th century, coupled with the increased momentum of positive psychology in this century, has been a welcome game-changer. A seismic shift in the prevailing Zeitgeist in the social sciences and other allied disciplines has contributed to the emergence of a worldwide movement that recognizes and promotes heroism – and a science of heroism.

Matt Langdon deserves kudos for initiating the heroism activist movement through his international [Hero Round Table](#) conference series. These conferences have enjoyed immense popularity and success, and they have galvanized a social, cultural, and psychological movement dedicated to promoting heroism in all corners of human society. The rise of heroism activism has paralleled a similar rise in heroism scholarship conducted at colleges and universities worldwide. Special credit goes to Zeno Franco and Phil Zimbardo, two scientists who have played a catalytic role in the initiation of heroism science. Franco and Zimbardo (2006) first gave us a highly influential article on the “banality of heroism”, and later they offered a pioneering delineation of many of the conceptual principles of heroism (Franco, Blau & Zimbardo, 2011). At the same time, Larry Walker and Jeremy Frimer were conducting outstanding work on moral exemplars (Frimer, Schaefer & Oakes, 2014; Frimer, Walker, Lee, Riches & Dunlop, 2012; Walker & Frimer, 2007). Inspired by these pioneering scholars, my colleague George Goethals and I began synthesizing work on heroism and leadership (Allison & Goethals, 2011, 2013, 2014; Goethals & Allison, 2012). In Europe, Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou (2015a, 2015b, 2016) embarked on a sophisticated social cognitive approach to understanding lay-perceptions of heroes.

There should, of course, be no separation between heroism science and the heroism activism movement. It would behoove heroism scientists to participate in the Hero Round Table meetings to glean insights from those who perform and promote heroic feats. At the 2014 Round Table in Flint, Michigan, I was privileged to meet Auschwitz survivor Dr. Edith Eger, who described her ordeal as a young girl incarcerated at the camp and in the grips of Nazi physician Josef Mengele. Eger's story of resilience, courage, and recovery has inspired millions worldwide, and I am using her remarkable spirit as a guide for my current work on the hero's transformation. Surely, scientists can learn more about heroism from personal encounters with heroes than they can from reading about these heroes from secondhand sources. Moreover, heroism activists can absorb useful insights from conversations with heroism scientists. The Hero Round Table offers an ideal platform for such a union between scientists and practitioners. The famous social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1951, p. 27) once said, “There is nothing so practical as a good

theory” and he championed the unity of basic and applied research. Let’s not lose sight of the potential fruits of this exciting reciprocity.

Heroism science may have been slow to develop but the field is apparently trying to make up for lost time. At the present time, several hundred scholars across the globe are investigating hero-relevant phenomena such as empathy, courage, altruism, leadership, meaning, morality, sacrifice, resilience, wisdom, and service to others. Mentioning the names of all these gifted researchers is beyond the scope of this short article. Many, but not all of them, have contributed work to the inaugural *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*, edited by George Goethals, Rod Kramer, and me. In addition to the impressive research of Elaine Kinsella and her colleagues (2016), Larry Walker (2016), and Jeremy Frimer (2016), the *Handbook* features a review of whistleblowing research by A. J. Brown (2016), neurobiological research by Stephanie Preston (2016), holocaust heroism research by Stephanie Jones (2016), character development research by Richard Lerner (2016), research on the development of purpose by Kendall Cotton Bronk (2016), and civil disobedience research by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2016), to name but a few of the chapters. The number of talented scholars contributing to the *Handbook* and also producing excellent and exciting research around the globe is long and impressive. Suffice to say, the accelerating trajectory in the growth of this research is bearing witness to the ascent of heroism science and is long overdue.

Initiation as the Path to Maturity

Let’s return to my use of the term *initiation*. Why use that word to describe the beginnings of heroism science rather than *introduction*, *emergence*, *rise*, or *birth*? I apply the term *initiation* because of its double meaning. Yes, it can refer to the ascent of the field, but it also describes one of the central processes by which a human being evolves into the hero role. Most human cultures throughout history have deemed initiation rituals as crucial to producing mature, generative, and enlightened members of society (Moore & Havlick, 2001). Rites of passage play a central role in preparing people to become emotionally, spiritually, and behaviorally ready for a heroic life. The hero’s journey, as described by Joseph Campbell (1949), is an example of an initiation or rite of passage that includes an individual’s separation from the larger world, the experience of trials and discomfort, and then a return to the original world with the individual forever transformed. Sadly, initiation rituals, so crucial for healthy human development, are largely absent in most modern societies (Eliade, 1975).

As we initiate heroism science, we should be careful to craft the most inclusive definition of the science as we possibly can. In this way we can attract and encourage the widest range of scholarly approaches needed to illuminate the complexity of phenomena implicated in heroic action. Olivia Efthimiou deserves great credit for creating the first [Heroism Science website](#) in which she urges heroism scientists to utilize “a mix of traditional and cutting-edge epistemological and methodological frameworks, and their

application in a wide variety of settings”³. Heroism science is home to virtually every discipline, including “social psychology, philosophy, digital humanities, creative arts, nursing, law and public policy, semiotics, neuroscience, leadership, organizational management, religion and spirituality, positive psychology, ethics and morality, political science, sociology, counseling, education, developmental psychology, evolutionary biology, and more”⁴. Moreover, heroism science is “part of a broader movement which aims to foster holistic well-being, promote heroic awareness and action, civic responsibility and engagement, and build resilient individuals and communities in the face of increasingly complex social landscapes” (Efthimiou & Allison, 2015, p. 27). Efthimiou’s recognition of the international scope of heroism science has led to the creation of this online journal, *Heroism Science*, and also to the convening of the first international cross-disciplinary conference in 2016, *The Rise and Future of Heroism Science*, held in Perth, Australia and devoted solely to the sharing and dissemination of heroism science research.

The vast and diverse epistemological and methodological expanse of heroism science is underscored by Efthimiou and Allison’s (2015) call for the science to incorporate research approaches that are *interdisciplinary*, *multidisciplinary*, and *transdisciplinary*. These terms are not interchangeable. Interdisciplinary heroism science “analyzes, synthesizes and harmonizes links between disciplines”⁵. Multidisciplinary heroism science “draws on knowledge from different disciplines but stays within their boundaries”⁶. Transdisciplinary heroism science “integrates the natural, social and health sciences in a humanities context, and transcends their traditional boundaries”⁷. Efthimiou and Allison (2015) make the further claim that heroism science may, in fact, be a “*deviant*” interdisciplinary science in that it transcends the sort of knowledge that the disciplines themselves can provide (Fuller, 2013). A striking illustration of heroism’s multiple disciplinarity lies in its roots in both comparative mythology (Campbell, 1988) and embodied experience or the “lived heroic body” (Efthimiou, 2016). A hero in classic storytelling and in real life is firmly embedded in the *deep time* and *deep roles* of mythology (Allison & Goethals, 2014, 2016; Moxnes, 1999). These psychological effects have been shown to have neurophysiological consequences for the brain and body. For example, the mere entertainment of heroic thoughts affects one’s physical strength and agency, a demonstration of *embodied heroism* (Efthimiou, 2016; Gray, 2010). Heroism science is that rare field that resides comfortably within the purview of the humanities and the sciences; it pervades all intellectual domains and invokes phenomena that involve mental, emotional, physical, moral, philosophical, cultural, cosmological, and spiritual processes (Allison & Goethals, 2014, 2016).

In 1841 Thomas Carlyle wrote an intriguing book entitled *On heroes, hero-worship, and the heroic in history*, in which he proposed that “the history of the world is but the

³ See <https://heroismscience.wordpress.com/what-is-heroism-science/>

⁴ See Efthimiou (2015): <https://heroismscience.wordpress.com/about/>

⁵ Based on Choi and Pak’s (2006, p. 351) definition of ‘interdisciplinarity’.

⁶ Based on Choi and Pak’s (2006, p. 351) definition of ‘multidisciplinarity’.

⁷ Based on Choi and Pak’s (2006, p. 351) definition of ‘transdisciplinarity’.

biography of great men” who were gifted with supreme vision and action (Carlyle, 1841, p. 112). These gifts, Carlyle (1841) argued, made it one’s duty to worship heroes. Today we are well aware of the limitations of this “Great Man” theory of leadership. There are, of course, great women, great circumstances, great genes, great followers, and a multitude of additional factors both great and small that play a pivotal role in producing heroic phenomena. But let’s not lose sight of Carlyle’s (1841) core premise that a single individual can exert a profoundly positive effect on one’s immediate family, set of friends, small community, or entire world. What Carlyle (1841) got wrong was his claim that only the gifts of great individuals can save our world, which I earlier called ‘troubled’ -- and it surely is. The troubles of our world are not for great individuals to solve but for every one of us to solve. Gifts are not the monopoly of great people. Every human being possesses one or more gifts to make the world a better place. Every human being is called to discover his or her gift. The banality of heroism, so deftly described by Franco and Zimbardo (2006), is a concept that can never be emphasized enough in our schools, in our homes, in our places of worship, and in the cacophony of cyberspace.

Conclusion

Let me close this essay by once again revisiting the concept of *initiation*. Ancient peoples were well aware of the value, and necessity, of initiating the young members of their tribe into the larger society. Initiation rites often involved sending young people into the unknown and often hostile natural world. There were risks to be incurred, sacrifices to be made, and suffering to be endured (Allison & Setterberg, 2016). Our forebears somehow knew that risk and sacrifice were essential for growth, maturity, and enlightenment. I suspect that to become a meaningful and impactful scientific endeavor, heroism science will also require risk and sacrifice from its constituents. If our scientific work is to make a difference in the world, we can neither accept the status quo nor play it safe with regard to our paradigms, theories, and methodologies. The field of heroism science will unfold in ways that we can only imagine – and in ways that we cannot. There will be delightful surprises, and there will be painful setbacks. These are the inevitable gifts and perils associated with any initiation.

It is an exciting and fortuitous time for today’s heroism scientists who are at the forefront of an emergent discipline that is so urgently needed by a world in turmoil. This essay acknowledges the initiation of heroism science and suggests some directions based on the wisdom of hero initiation rites. Zeno Franco and Olivia Efthimiou have each told me, independently, that we are in the midst of a vital social movement. The heroism movement that I have described – with its heroism activism and heroism science bifurcation – is still in the process of ascending and transforming, much as a hero does during her journey. Joseph Campbell (1988, p. 138) taught us that the classic, mythic initiation ritual ends with the hero discovering that “our true reality is in our identity and unity with all life”. I am certain the heroism movement is guided by this principle, and both its branches would be wise to recruit and to welcome diverse peoples and perspectives into their fold. We are all destined to walk the same hero’s journey in our own individually unique way, as global citizens and as global scientists. Let us celebrate

the advent of heroism science and move forward, in both unity and in multiplicity, to illuminate the mechanisms underlying the best of human potentialities.

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