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Heroism Science*Volume 1, 2016***Book Review: *Ordinary People Change the World***

Stephanie Fagin-Jones, Ph.D

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews *Ordinary People Change the World* picture biography series, by New York Times Best-Selling author Brad Meltzer and award-winning illustrator Christopher Eliopoulos. The series offers children, parents, and teachers an indispensable resource toward cultivating the character traits and behaviors associated with heroism and heroic leadership. The extensively-researched, historically accurate series is comprised of eight books, each respectively entitled: *I Am...Martin Luther King, Jr.*; *Albert Einstein*; *Amelia Earhart*; *Helen Keller*; *Rosa Parks*; *Jackie Robinson*; *Lucille Ball*; and *Abraham Lincoln*. A major contribution of this book series lies in its ‘parallel process’: parents who share this series on the prosocialization of heroes are themselves engaging in the process of prosocialization with their own children, and in so doing, may be fostering the development of future heroes. Reading this series is likely to stimulate dialogue between parent and child focused on themes of character development associated with heroism and heroic leadership. Such dialogue may serve as scaffolding upon which narratives of moral development and moral identity can be based.

Keywords: heroism, leadership, prosocialization, picture biography, children’s literature, moral identity, moral development

A recent surge in heroism science research reflects a deep “hunger for heroes in a world that so desperately needs them” (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, in press, p. 4). Significant humanistic intervention is needed to counter violent extremism and rampant bystander behavior in an increasingly chaotic and morally indifferent world. Propaganda emphasizing the hero narrative appealing to such hunger among disaffected Muslim youth for example, contributed to ISIS recruits more than doubling over a period of 18 months in 2015 (Winter & Bach-Lombardo, 2016). Simply put, we need more heroes, and in particular, more humanistic ones. Yet, a search for heroes in contemporary Western society oversaturated with reality television stars and media celebrities can be demoralizing, and the notion of what is “heroic” has become so diluted that even ordinary house pets are venerated routinely on the internet for their “heroic” deeds (Pet Hero, 2009). Hence, psychologists are endeavoring to redefine heroism in an effort to unleash its potential in ordinary citizens and, in particular, our youth (Allison et al., in press; Efthimiou, Allison & Franco, in preparation).

Empirical research on heroism suggests that ordinary individuals who were raised by parents who role-modeled humanistic values possess high levels of prosocial traits such as care-based moral courage, empathic concern, and social responsibility, and may be predisposed to undertake heroic action under extraordinary circumstances (Fagin-Jones, in press). Furthermore, by fostering one's *heroic imagination*, "a collection of attitudes about helping others in need, beginning with caring for others in compassionate ways, but also moving toward a willingness to sacrifice or take risks on behalf of others or in defense of a moral cause," the likelihood of crossing from inaction to action on behalf of others in need increases (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006; Franco, Blau & Zimbardo, 2011, p. 111). Thus, our youth and, in particular, young children should be socialized in environments optimized for the development of character strengths and behaviors associated with heroism.

In response to the current day dearth of heroic role models, New York Times Best Selling Author Brad Meltzer has written a compelling series of children's books in which he presents an alternative to fame-based role models. In his *Ordinary People Change the World* picture biography series, author Meltzer and award-winning illustrator Christopher Eliopoulos offer children, parents, and teachers an indispensable resource toward cultivating the character traits and behaviors associated with heroism and heroic leadership. The extensively-researched, historically accurate series is comprised of eight books, each respectively entitled: *I Am...Martin Luther King, Jr.*; *Albert Einstein*; *Amelia Earhart*; *Helen Keller*; *Rosa Parks*; *Jackie Robinson*; *Lucille Ball*; and *Abraham Lincoln*. An exceptional companion curriculum guide created by Rose W. Truong, Ed.M. to support classroom instruction and reader's advisory consistent with Common Core standards organized by grades K-1 and 2-3 offers lessons focusing on language arts, math, science, and social studies for each grade bracket.

The series is highly relatable for even the youngest reader. Each biography begins in the hero's childhood, and uniquely, the hero remains depicted as a child even as he or she matures into adulthood. Social learning theory holds that identification and imitation is a necessary factor in vicarious learning and role modeling (Bandura, 1986). By presenting the hero as a child throughout the book, young readers can immediately identify with and relate to the hero, and as time passes in the respective journeys, the heroes remain children, thus beautifully illustrating how moral identity is established in childhood and integrated across the life span (Walker, Frimer & Dunlop, 2010).

Indeed research on heroic rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe suggests that their actions were likely an ordinary extension under extraordinary circumstances of the natural progression of their identities which tended to be integrated and organized around morality beginning in childhood (Fagin-Jones, in press; Oliner & Oliner, 1988). Meltzer's book consistently illustrates the importance of establishing a moral identity in childhood. For instance, as a child, small and sickly Rosa Parks bravely stands up to a white woman whose son had knocked Rosa down. Young Lucille Ball maintains her sense of humor and uses it to cope with the harsh punishments of an emotionally severe grandmother. Young Abe stands up to a group of bullies being cruel to a turtle, foreshadowing the heroic action of emancipating the slaves later undertaken by President Abraham Lincoln. Such actions are depicted as natural extensions of the moral identity of the heroes and reflect *integrated moral motivation*, or the propensity to act morally because the act is experienced as reflecting one's core self, central values, and identity (Assor, 2012).

Moreover, by beginning the journey in childhood, Meltzer emphasizes the ordinary and humble beginnings of each hero, underscoring the message that heroes begin with everyday acts of moral courage (Halmburger, Baumer & Schmitt, in press) and that ordinary people have the potential to make a difference. The story focuses on ways each icon experienced being “different” in childhood and the tenacity with which they cling to their uniqueness despite social pressures to conform. Amelia Earhart and Lucille Ball, for example, defy gender stereotypes by their efforts to do “unladylike” things, persevering in their respective passions for adventure and comedy. An outsider among his peers, Einstein literally and figuratively insists on following his own compass and curiosity to discover the “Why” in life. In so doing these individuals reflect the “central” traits of conviction, courage and determination and the peripheral traits of exceptionality, talent and intelligence associated with perceptions of heroes (Kinsella, Ritchie & Igou, 2015). Furthermore, these actions reflect high levels of autonomy and social-nonconformity that characterize moral exemplars who demonstrate the courage to defy social norms (Baum, 2008). Indeed, both the use of first-person narrative and the very title of the series “*I Am...*” underscore the centrality of owning and celebrating one’s identity and true uniqueness.

Parenting is arguably the most impactful among factors contributing to socialization (Grusec, 2006), and, in particular the development of prosocial behavior, or, “prosocialization.” Research on moral exemplars suggests that, in some cases, heroes’ parents differed from bystanders’ parents in several ways. Heroes’ parents tended to foster familial cohesion; were more affectionate; modeled inclusiveness, empathy and social responsibility; used victim-centered and inductive discipline, and refrained from using gratuitous forms of aggressive punishment (Fagin-Jones, in press; Oliner & Oliner, 1988).

Another core theme in the series is the focus on prosocial role modeling by the heroes’ parents. Secure attachment patterns among parent-child dyads may facilitate mutually responsive orientations which Kochanska (2002) argues provide the foundation for the development of conscience and moral identity. Meltzer presents portraits of heroes’ parents in which the demonstration of characteristics associated with the establishment of secure attachments among children are emphasized. Moreover, he portrays parents of aggressive and indifferent children with whom our heroes interact as intolerant and hostile, a finding also associated with the development of insecure attachment styles in children (Baum, 2008).

For instance, Jackie Robinson’s mother, the object of her white neighbors’ prejudice, brings food and kindness to these same neighbors when they themselves fall on hard times. Similarly, Martin Luther King Jr.’s mother teaches him to resist the temptation to hate others who are cruel to him and to be kind and loving even toward those who are unkind. Helen Keller’s parents never give up hope and find her a heroic leader in Annie Sullivan. Amelia Earhart’s father accompanies her to her first actual plane ride. Albert Einstein’s father buys him a compass and encourages him to explore his curiosity. Rosa Parks’ mother and grandfather teach her to respect herself and to expect respect from others.

Hence, a major contribution of this book series lies in its ‘parallel process’: parents who share this series on the prosocialization of heroes are themselves engaging in the process of prosocialization with their own children, and in so doing, may be fostering the development of future heroes. Meltzer’s implicit message to parents is to be a role model who establishes a secure, supportive, compassionate and inclusive base from which a child can derive a sense of basic safety and trust in himself/herself, which may be a fundamental underpinning of bravery,

courage, and a willingness to take risks (Fagin-Jones & Midlarsky, 2007). Reading this series is likely to stimulate dialogue between parent and child focused on themes of character development associated with heroism and heroic leadership. Such dialogue may serve as scaffolding upon which narratives of moral development and moral identity can be based (Lapsley, 2010).

Another key theme of the *Ordinary People* series is emotion regulation, which is increasingly associated with morally relevant behavior. The degree to which both parents and children can effectively regulate emotion, and negative emotion in particular, has been positively associated children's prosocial behavior (Eisenberg, 2000). When faced with adversity, both the heroes and their role models demonstrate a high capacity for regulation of negative emotions including fear, anger, frustration, anxiety, and helplessness. Rosa Parks remains confident and calm when refusing to give up her seat on the bus. Helen Keller learns how to self-regulate from her empathic and patient teacher. Heroic leader Branch Rickey counsels Jackie Robinson to remain nonreactive to racist comments by fans and to tormenting by his own teammates. Martin Luther King, Jr. never loses self-control, despite his outrage and unjust imprisonment.

Indeed as in most hero journeys the obstacles the heroes must confront are formidable (Campbell, 1949). Despite being jailed, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. both persevere with their dream of establishing racial justice. Despite being ridiculed by the leading scientists of his generation, Albert Einstein persists with his theory of relativity. Despite being prohibited from playing major league baseball, Jackie Robinson succeeds in being inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Despite being blind and deaf, Helen Keller graduates from Harvard University and goes on to author twelve books. Each story of overcoming adversity accentuates the virtues of conviction, courage, and resilience associated with heroism (Allison & Goethals, 2011).

Notably, Meltzer wonderfully infuses the *Ordinary People* series with humor and creativity, making the experience interactive and fun for children and parents. For example, Helen Keller invites the reader to find the letters of his/her name in the Braille alphabet. Albert Einstein proclaims his hair is "TOTALLY AWESOME!" and reminds readers that he was sent to his room by his father for failing college physics. As a child, Jackie Robinson was scared to sleep in his own bed, so his mother bribed him with quarters, and Abraham Lincoln proudly proclaims to anyone who will listen, "I'm going to be on the penny some day!" to which his contemporaries reliably inquire, "What's a penny?"

Though often humorous, the series does not sugarcoat reality in recounting history, stopping short of including accounts of the assassinations of Martin Luther-King, Jr. and Abraham Lincoln, and the disappearance of Amelia Earhart (for which young children lack the cognitive/emotional developmental capacity to process). The reader bears witness to the real, personal, at times frightening, and painful challenges confronting the heroes. By representing the facts accurately, children are exposed not only to the truth of events as they occurred, but to the reality of adversity and the meaning inherent in developing character strengths such as courage, empathy and perseverance. Indeed, Meltzer ends each book with a unique character-building message/lesson from each hero to the reader:

Stand up for yourself (even if it means sitting down). 'Rosa Parks'

When someone shows you hate, show them love. When someone shows you violence, show them kindness. ‘Martin Luther-King, Jr.’

When you find something you believe in, use your voice. And when you see injustice, speak louder than you’ve ever spoken before. ‘Abraham Lincoln’

No matter how big or small you are, there will always be things that scare you. It’s okay to be afraid. Just don’t let it stop you. ‘Jackie Robinson’

Don’t let anything hold you back. Our lives are what we make of them. There will always be obstacles. But there will always be ways around them. ‘Helen Keller’

Never let anyone stop you. Whatever your dream is, chase it. Work hard for it. You will find it. ‘Amelia Earhart’

In this world, the person you need to love most is you. ‘Lucille Ball’

The more questions you ask, the more answers you’ll find. And the more beauty you’ll uncover in the universe. ‘Albert Einstein’

Our world needs leaders and role models who embody virtues and traits characteristic of the highest forms of humanity for our children to emulate. For, it is not enough to focus on minimizing negative traits in our children; we must also focus on the development of positive, prosocial behaviors (Padilla-Walker, 2014). Brad Meltzer and Christopher Eliopoulos’ *Ordinary People Change the World* children’s biography series and companion curriculum guide offers parents and educators an outstanding resource toward this end. One suggestion for future research is to assess the efficacy of the companion curriculum guide both on its own merits and relative to other interventions aimed at “soft-skill” development in schools. Furthermore, given increasing global ethnocentrism aimed at Muslim individuals and the efficacy of hero narratives used by ISIS to recruit disaffected Muslim youth, an *Ordinary People* book focusing on a Muslim hero, such as Pashtun pacifist Khān Abdul Ghaffār Khān, is recommended.

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