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The Hero Organism and Heroism Science: A New Frontier of Human Consciousness¹

Editorial

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ABSTRACT: In the context of a new science of heroism this article presents a brief history of the presence and study of heroism, and an outline of the key characteristics of the modern-day movement of heroism. The potentially wide-reaching impacts of the science of heroism are briefly discussed. The hypothesis of human beings as “hero organisms” is presented, before embarking on a discussion on what it means for each of us to be on our own hero’s journey.

KEYWORDS: heroism science, heroism studies, hero organism, embodiment, hero’s journey, transformation, DNA, hero gene, heroism movement, transdisciplinary

There is a revolution happening at this moment in the field of heroism and research more broadly, or an *evolution* to be more precise. It has, in fact, been happening for almost half a century. We are increasingly discovering that human nature and the world around us is more complex and dynamic than we ever imagined. This means that real world problems need more than just one perspective or field of knowledge to be addressed. At the same time, a growing number of researchers are realising that studying the strengths of human nature is the best road to solving these problems.

A Brief History of Heroism

Heroism is an inherently transdisciplinary phenomenon. It cannot be understood from the vantage point of any single perspective. Heroism cannot be the monopoly of any one field of knowledge. This means that to truly understand heroism we must travel beyond it, far beyond it. The inherent transdisciplinarity of heroism suggests something deeply important – heroism could be the key and a tool for resolving the world’s most pressing problems (Efthimiou & Allison,

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hn1uXuPnscI&t=1s>

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2017). The field of “heroism science” (Allison, Goethals & Kramer, 2017; Efthimiou & Allison, 2017; Seal, 2018) is still very young – but the study of heroism is as old as humans. This can be roughly clustered into five major periods:

- *Pre-historic and ancient period (BC – c. mid 1st century AD)*. The roots of heroism can be located in the mythologies and folklore traditions that human cultures have created and passed down through the generations (Seal, 2009). In the Homeric period the term “hero” was reserved for the Gods and mortals from noble lineage, and eventually demi-Gods – those who were part-mortal and part-Gods – in the Classical era. The morality of these figures was not a determining factor (Isen, 2010).
- *Early Christian and medieval period (c. 1st century AD – early 15th century)*. With the birth of the Christian era the ideas of courage, martyrdom and self-sacrifice for the greater good became synonymous with heroism, as for example, in the accounts of brave and chivalrous medieval knights in Arthurian times (Isen, 2010).
- *Modern period (c. late 15th century – 1949)*. There is a shift from the Christian notion of sacrifice and the transcendental, to the everyday individual (Smyth, 2010). These are the roots of heroism science and the “New Heroism” (Zimbardo & Ellsberg, 2013), characteristic of the increased meaning of heroism as a form of core human action and civic engagement.
- *Postmodern period (1949 – 2006)*. Joseph Campbell’s use of comparative mythology marks the first critical interdisciplinary moment in the study of heroism, and its popularisation. The hero’s journey was introduced to the world with the *Star Wars* franchise. Joseph Campbell’s (1949) seminal book *The hero with a thousand faces* showed that there was a common pattern in hero stories, regardless of location and period. This led to the development of the hero’s journey model with distinct stages. Its essence is the “monomyth,” or the commonality in hero myths across cultures and time of the necessity of rites of passage and trials as a road to transformation and enlightenment.

This period also marks the first major uptake of the study of heroism outside the humanities in the field of psychology. This is the beginning of the use of the hero’s journey as a tool for promoting wellbeing in everyday settings, counselling and education.

- *Scientific period (2006 – present)*. In 2006 psychologists Zeno Franco and Philip Zimbardo published their seminal paper “The banality of heroism” in *Greater Good* – this catapulted the study of heroism into the realm of scientific inquiry for the first time in academic history, and its observation in everyday contexts. The present period signifies the entrance of the study of heroism in mainstream and scientific psychology, the social sciences and, finally, the sciences. It marks the end of the centuries old stronghold that mythology, religion and philosophy have had on its observation. This is the second critical interdisciplinary moment in the study of heroism, and the beginnings of a broader global 21st century heroism movement (Allison, 2015; Efthimiou, 2017a; Franco et al., 2016). But much more work needs to be done, especially between hard science and the humanities.

This is a unique moment in time for the study of heroism – its pursuit is not just limited to research and intellectualising it. It is an active movement of individuals who have discovered the value of heroism for personal and social empowerment. What are the broad characteristics of this emerging movement?

- (a) International
 - (b) Multidisciplinary (education, business, healthcare etc.)
 - (c) Prosocial.
- (Efthimiou, Magladry, Allison & Klisanin, 2017)

Engaging with “the problem of heroism” (Efthimiou, 2015) goes beyond the theoretical – it must be lived, felt, experienced, sensed and enacted in the everyday. Mind and body must come together in this process and experience to form “embodied heroism” (Efthimiou, 2017b). This is why developing and promoting a science of heroism and its empirical observation is so important. By “science” I mean *episteme*, knowledge in its fullest sense, knowledge that is experienced; and “empirical” from *empeiria*, experience (both from Ancient Greek derivations).

Heroic Beginnings?

Researchers are now discovering and talking about nature as being highly intelligent – that plants, insects, all living things are a massive network of minds that can communicate to each other in ways we are only beginning to understand (Narby, 2005). That everything has a consciousness, whether we are aware of it or not. If a single human being is re-classified as an intelligent *hero organism* (Efthimiou, 2017b; Efthimiou & Franco, 2018) by virtue of the millions of heroic cells residing within and constituting it, the totality of the planet can be viewed as a vast, complex, yet elegantly simple planetary hero organism.

The claim of a hero organism has enormous implications for research. It would require us to fundamentally rethink how we perceive our world and how we test it. It implies that in our thousands of years of “civilised” humanity we have only just scratched the surface of our potential. And we must not forget that humbling fact despite our wonderful achievements – how young we still are in the history of this vast universe and the grand scheme of heroic things. We are only recent inhabitants of deep time and vast space.

Heroism, in this sense, predates us. It is our birth mother, it is our guide map, and it is our guardian. We must rediscover this fact of nature to truly evolve into the species that we were designed to be. DNA and heroism share three vital things:

- (a) They are pervasive narratives of greatness.
- (b) They are constants in deep time.
- (c) They possess a deeply transformative function by manifesting in a diversity of life forms, but retain a core immutable structure.

This leads to the ultimate hypothesis – the hero gene is present in *all* life on earth, extending to animals, and the most basic cellular organisms, as DNA is the building block of all life on this planet. The hero’s journey is not only a metaphor and a story pattern, but a very real cycle of transformation (Campbell, 1949; Allison & Goethals, 2017). A cycle of regeneration, on every single level of existence – from the psychological, to the social, to the biological, to the spiritual (Efthimiou, 2017b). From the personal, to the relational, to the collective, and finally, the

cosmological. If we can find the science behind these important concepts we may well have the answer to the human condition.

The impacts of this hypothesis on an applied level could be groundbreaking. The processes of repair and damage are vital to the role DNA plays – and they are equally vital to the hero's journey and the heroic process in the psychological and spiritual sense. DNA is like an instruction book for organisms to make up their own proteins. Just as the process of passing through pain and trials, and achieving healing at the end of the cycle is instrumental to the hero's journey, so does the need for regeneration and self-repair of an organism permeate all facets of life. If we can identify the connection between the hero's journey at the psychosocial level and its relationship to the role inflammation and stress play on the immune system, and how the organism reacts at the biological level, this could change the face of medicine and psychology as we know it.

A Brave New World

We are like the early explorers setting out to discover the New World – we have no map, we are drawing it up as we go along, bravely charting new territory. Research as a whole is on its own hero's journey. There is a very real sense amongst us in the field that we are at the cusp of a new frontier. The benefits of heroism science research could be felt by many groups:

- Humanitarian and sustainability organisations looking to make real grassroots change in the world and cope with our pressing social and political problems.
- Media critics and cultural theorists, in understanding the impact holistic and responsible reporting of hero stories may have on the public as educational tools.
- Clinicians working in counselling practice, in particular those with patients dealing with mental and physical trauma in their care (such as PTSD).
- Medical practitioners, in assisting them to provide more holistic care for their patients through a deeper appreciation of their personal journeys and the inter-relationship between their physical ailment and mental state.
- Researchers in the medical and genomics fields seeking to work with cultural knowledges, to promote a deeper understanding of disease and wellbeing in whole-of-lifespan terms.
- The broader public, by contributing to an awareness of the importance of story to wellbeing and developing creative problem solving, stress management and life strategies.

Inherent transdisciplinary concepts like heroism need multiple perspectives and teams of researchers working together. And this must be done with an open mind and an open heart, and we must learn to talk to each other even though we may not speak the same language. We must find common ground.

So, we need *you* – we need bright minds to research, educators to discover the value of this knowledge in the classroom. Healthcare professionals in counselling. Businesses and entrepreneurs to infuse a conscience and heroic resilience into their dealings and trade communities. Politicians who desire to make deep institutional changes. A local, national and

international network of self-leading, self-motivated and self-energized heroic actors – or “heroic ecologies” (Efthimiou, 2017a).

The Road Less Travelled

The planet is in real crisis. The problems we face are vast, complex and seemingly insurmountable. Children and families starving, natural disasters, enduring wars, refugee crises, collapsing economies, mental illness, suicide, drugs, alcoholism, incurable diseases – and perhaps most important of all – hopelessness and boredom, a sense that our lives are not fulfilled, that there is something missing but we do not quite know what that is. Make no mistake – despite our great progress, we are still very much a mess. We need heroism now more than ever before. We need to step up on a very personal level. As we step into this new future we are, in effect, reversing the potentially ill fate on which we find ourselves. This task is our curse and our gift as a species. We must begin to ask the questions to find the answers. We hope that this journal is an important step to the journey of personal and collective heroic discovery.

So where do we start? We are *already* on a hero’s journey – as individuals, as mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, friends, as *human beings*. Every one of us at this moment has something that they are battling with, that they are uncertain about, that they want to find out more of, that they fear, that they long to be. Question what you take for granted. Follow your gut feeling – because that is where your bliss lies. Joseph Campbell would instruct his students to “follow their bliss.” Do not be afraid to have a conversation out of the ordinary. If you have an idea that you think is crazy, follow it. And start to think of yourself as part of the human species. Because what you do with your life, may well change the course of humanity. Einstein was only one man, Darwin, Gandhi, Amelia Earheart. One small step for a man, a woman, a transgendered, non-binary person, and so forth, could be one giant leap for humankind.

We need to begin to think about the human condition, what that is. What our role is in it. I believe that the biggest human disease is ignorance – of our minds, our hearts, our bodies and our true nature. Knowledge really is power. We only have a short time on this earth and we are all destined for the same end. So our heroic “being-toward-death,” as philosopher Martin Heidegger (1962) put it, is important. We must begin to accept responsibility for our learning, our paths, our lives. And we should choose wisely and be mindful of the long-term consequences of our actions, but most importantly our *inaction*. We should use every day as an opportunity to learn something new about ourselves, about the people around us, the world. I think that is one small but vital step to the heroic.

The hero’s journey is the road less travelled. It is stepping outside ourselves to eventually return with a new set of eyes. We must be willing to let pain into our lives, to be tested, to make room for uncertainty. Because if we do not, the costs of not living up to our own expectations can be far greater. The death that we experience may be a silent one that eats away at us. We all know that it is the things we have felt we should have done in our lives but never did, or could have done better or more of, that we most regret in life. But no one can force us to take this journey. We have to truly, deeply want it, and ache for it. And that is different for all of us. In the end, if you can find where your pain is, that thing that makes you vulnerable, that seems so unbearably big and beyond your abilities that you do not want to face, *that* is where your bliss truly lies. That is *your* hero’s journey.

And we have a sheer duty to do this, not only to ourselves, but the ones we love and count on us, to be the best that we can be as human beings. Adversity is the stuff of heroism. We need to actively seek out pain, learn to make room for it, and use it as fuel. And that is easier said than done. Breaking old habits that no longer serve a purpose is hard. Making a whole culture shift is hard. But that is the hero's path.

We already *are* hero organisms. And we can be on our way to becoming a H.E.R.O – a Highly Evolved Radical Organism. Never underestimate the power of *one*. And if we are all mirrors and reflections of each other, that is the same as the power of *we*.

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