Zeroing in on Heroes: Adolescents' Perceptions of Hero Features and Functions

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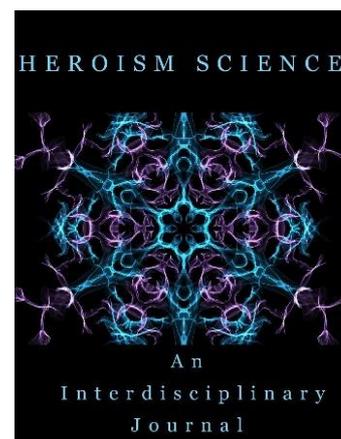
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ABSTRACT: Recent research has revealed that having a personal hero can offer psychological resources to adults, particularly during challenging times. Yet we know little about the role that heroes play in the lives of adolescents – a period of human development when challenges are plentiful, and adolescents are increasingly open to the influence of others outside the family unit. In the present study, adolescent perspectives were sought on types and characteristics of heroes, and the psychological and social functions provided by heroes for young people. Four focus groups were conducted with adolescents ($N = 22$) aged 15 to 17 years at two urban, co-educational public secondary (high) schools in Ireland. Four themes of hero functions were identified: 1) Heroes uplift others (inspire, offer hope, remind about the good in the world) but they can also disappoint; 2) Heroes model good (or moral) behaviour but they can also model bad behaviour; 3) Heroes protect others and help others to cope (provide emotional and social support, boost self-efficacy, provide social control) but young people may over-rely on their heroes on occasion; 4) Heroes provide an important role in support of identity exploration and formation – often representing the 'ideal self' but at times may offer an unrealistic standard of comparison. These findings provide a nuanced view of the role of heroes in the lives of adolescents, and a novel perspective of both the positive and negative consequences of having heroes during adolescence.

KEYWORDS: heroes, social influence, mental health, role models, resilience, identity

1   ZEROING IN ON HEROES: ADOLESCENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF HERO FEATURES AND FUNCTIONS

The concept of *hero* has existed in mythology and folklore since the 14th century. Conceptions of heroes have evolved and expanded over time — the meaning of the term hero has changed over time. Over the past ten years, researchers have successfully unpacked implicit conceptions of hero features and functions held by adult samples in Europe and the USA (Franco, Blau & Zimbardo, 2011; Allison & Goethals, 2011; Allison & Goethals, 2013; Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2015a; Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2015b). Empirical studies have demonstrated that heroes are viewed as social categories that are distinct from role models and leaders (Kinsella et al., 2015a; Kinsella et al., 2015b). Recent research in psychology has noted approximately two-thirds of adults have a personal hero (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2017), and most importantly, that heroes provide a number of positive psychological and social functions (Kinsella et al, 2015a). Given that adolescence is a critical time in human development where new challenges are negotiated and the foundations for positive mental health and wellbeing in adulthood are formed (Sawyer et al., 2012), examining the extent that thinking about and identifying with heroes may influence the developmental pathways of adolescence is likely to be important. At present, however, little is known about adolescents' views about heroes and heroic behaviour. Given that adolescents often differ to adults in terms of their cognitive, moral and emotional development (Yurgulum-Todd, 2007), as well as in their interests and motivations, we are keen to explore whether there are some perceptible differences in terms of how adolescents describe the characteristics and functions of heroes.

Adolescence is characterised by physical, cognitive and social changes. Indeed, adolescence is a critical stage in which cognitive abilities advance and begin to resemble those of adults (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Theories of adolescent development abound. A

considerable focus of adolescent development research is on the development of the self and morality during this period. Erikson (1968) proposed stages of human development, with adolescence entailing the identity-versus-role-confusion stage from 12-18-years of age. In essence, identity formation is the process by which adolescents develop a permanent sense of self through social relationships with others in addition to exploring various roles. During adolescence young people are eager to consider how they are unique to others in addition to the role they can play in shaping their futures in order to answer 'who am I?', a key question of this stage (Sampson & Chason, 2008). With identity formation as a key area of focus, adolescents are particularly likely to be influenced by the adults in their physical environment (Erikson, 1968) or more recently, in their virtual worlds (Perry & Singh, 2016). During adolescence the influence of external others (particularly peers) becomes stronger (Davies & Kandel, 1981) — reaffirming that adolescents are open to influences outside the family unit. Although heroes can be sourced within the family unit (e.g., parents, grandparents), heroes often take other forms that are less similar to traditional role models (e.g., humanitarians, whistleblowers, Good Samaritans) (Zimbardo, 2007).   At present, we know little about the type of heroes that young people gravitate towards.

Theorists also propose that young people undergo a developmental transformation that enhances their moral thinking and reasoning (Kohlberg, 1978, Piaget, 1965) and prosocial behaviour (Solomon et al., 2001). It is this period of transformation that makes the role of heroes during adolescence particularly interesting to study. For instance, we know from previous work that young people are highly impressionable through social learning (Bandura, 1977, Gwon & Jeong, 2018), yet we know little about the influence of heroes during this formative period. Adolescents sometimes choose 'bad role models' and may be negatively influenced by those models (Brownhill, 2015). For example, Perry & Singh (2018) note that the rise in blogging and vlogging has created a new 'A-list' of celebrities that

boast millions of online followers which may sometimes adversely affect young people if the influencer's lifestyle or advice promotes harmful lifestyles. Thus, we wonder about the types of heroes that appeal to adolescents, and also, whether there are potentially negative effects of having (or becoming overly invested) in heroes at this early stage of life. To this end, we are curious about the potential downsides (as well as the upsides) of having heroes during adolescence.

Young people differ from adults on cognitive, moral, behavioural and emotional dimensions (Yurgulum-Todd, 2007) yet much of our current understandings of heroes and their functions derive from adult studies. In the present research, we embark on a detailed exploration of adolescents' views about heroes as a point of comparison with *adult* conceptions of heroes and the relationship to existing developmental theories relevant to adolescence. The present study may strengthen existing work regarding the characteristics (Kinsella et al., 2015a) and functions of heroes (Kinsella et al., 2015b), as well as bolster mainstream developmental theories, where the new data supports and further validates existing frameworks. Alternatively, this new data may highlight limitations of previous studies relating to heroes in terms of its generalisability to young people highlighting areas where adolescents differ to adults in terms of how they think about and use heroes in their everyday lives. Armed with greater insights into adolescent conceptions of heroes, we will be more informed about the ways that heroes currently influence young people in their daily lives, as well as better equipped to develop structured opportunities that support adolescents to effectively draw from their heroes as an additional psychological resource in times of need.

2   THE 'WHAT' AND 'WHY' OF HEROES

The concept of hero is fuzzy and complicated, and like many other everyday concepts is difficult to articulate with a simple, definitional approach. Some authors have defined

heroes as persons who: persist in the face of failure (Ko, 2007); risk and to make sacrifices

for others (Becker & Eagly, 2004); resist external pressures (Zimbardo, 2007); protect and

promote the well-being of future generations (McAdams, 2008); and demonstrate the desire

and the capacity to do the right thing in a particular situation (Schwartz, 2009). However,

these definitions are probably too simplistic and narrow to encompass the multi-faceted

meaning of the term 'hero' as it used in everyday talk. Although the selection of a personal

hero is a subjective process (i.e., *your* personal hero, may not be *my* personal hero), in adult

and Western samples it has been possible to identify a number of prototypical characteristics

that are shared across most heroic figures (Kinsella et al., 2015a). Across seven studies with

adult samples, prototype methods (see Cantor & Mischel, 1977) were employed to identify

26 of the most representative features of a hero, ranging from central characteristics (e.g.,

altruistic, brave, displaying conviction, being courageous, determined, helpful, honest,

inspirational, having moral integrity, protects and saves others, is selfless and willing to self-

sacrifice) to peripheral characteristics (e.g., humble, proactive, compassionate, powerful).

The central features make heroes more easily identifiable, activate a person's schema of a

hero, and are used in person perception to attribute heroic status to others (see Kinsella et al.,

2015a). The peripheral features of heroes capture a more complete spectrum of lay

conceptualisations of heroes but are perhaps not the first characteristics that a person

considers when thinking about a hero. At this stage, it is not known whether these

characteristics capture and represent adolescents' cognitive representations of heroes.

Most research on the topic of heroes has been conducted with (but not exclusively)

adult samples. One study (White and O'Brien, 1999) conducted with children aged between

five to 16 years of age in the USA revealed that older students acknowledged the wider role

that heroes can play in society, whereas the talents of heroes were appreciated across the age

range. The most frequently mentioned characteristics in that study were courageous, good,

nice and trustworthy. Elsewhere, data from fifteen-year-olds collected in Ireland, Slovakia, France and Spain (see Gash & Bajd, 2005; Gash & Dominguez, 2009) indicated that admired hero qualities include beautiful, brainy, brilliant, caring, confident, good, hardworking, helpful, honest, important, inventive, loving, skilful, strong and as a warrior-like. These findings suggest that adolescents rate physical appearance (e.g., beautiful) and individual competence (e.g., brainy, brilliant, inventive) as important hero characteristics to a greater extent than similar studies with adults (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Goethals & Allison, 2012; Kinsella et al., 2015a). It is worth noting that adults (but not adolescents) in previous studies described other-oriented characteristics such as altruistic, selfless, and self-sacrificing as central to the concept of a hero (Kinsella et al., 2015a). These apparent differences in thinking between adults and adolescents, along with the passage of a decade where many societal changes have occurred (e.g., economic turmoil, the birth of social media), reinforce the importance of conducting further research to explore young person's views about heroes.

With two thirds of people claiming a personal hero it begs the question: why? The existing literature indicates that heroes provide important functions to meet human needs such as being as a moral model (Schwartz & Schwartz, 2010), helping to protect physically (Becker & Eagly, 2004), act as a buffer against psychological threat (Becker, 1975; Kinsella, Ritchie & Igou, 2015b), act as an agent of social control (Klapp, 1954) or give meaning to one's life in the face of uncertainty (Kinsella et al., 2017). Existing studies have surveyed young person's attitudes and found that heroes *entertain, display a good example, and represent a model of how to do things well* (White & O'Brien, 1999; Gash & Bajd, 2005; Gash & Dominguez, 2009). These findings represent a departure from more recent findings that have been highlighted in multiple studies with adult samples exploring the reasons why adults have heroes. Indeed, lay conceptions among adults about the benefits of having a hero have been systematically grouped into three broad categories (hero functions framework;

Kinsella et al., 2015b). Firstly, heroes can *enhance* people's lives by inspiring others, being a role model, motivating others, instilling hope, boosting morale and camaraderie, and by providing guidance to others. Secondly, heroes can *model morals* by behaving in ways that are consistent with societal values and norms, challenging immoral actions, reminding others that there are 'good' people in the world, and proactively making the world a better place. Thirdly, heroes can *protect* by confronting evil or danger, by acting in situations when others are afraid, unable or unwilling, saving, helping, and protecting others from physical or psychological threat.

While previous research notes that having heroes is beneficial (e.g., Kinsella et al., 2015ab), Franco et al. (2011) have called into question whether heroism is always positive. Heroes may not consistently act as moral models of society. Heroic acts may be conducted by those who engage in non-moral behaviour who by chance do something of benefit (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006-07). Heroic acts performed by individuals for non-altruistic reasons may include the desire for acclaim or due to social/role expectations such as in a war zone environment (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). The extent that heroic gestures performed for the 'wrong' reasons negatively impacts on others is unknown. We do know, however, that comparing oneself to "superstars" has the potential to produce self-deflating results (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Yet, the potentially negative impact of having a hero has received very limited attention in research, and little is known about harmful consequences of reciprocal or parasocial relationships with heroes during adolescence.

A primary aim of the present research is to systematically analyse adolescents' perspectives about the social and psychological functions that heroes provide to others and assess those perspectives with adult conceptions of hero functions outlined in the hero functions framework (Kinsella et al., 2015b). Drawing from relevant psychological theory, we will evaluate the extent that young people believe that heroes play a role in fulfilling basic

human needs (see Fiske, 2008) as well as more specific, developmentally-appropriate needs

during adolescence (Erikson, 1968). We will respond to the gap in the literature by asking

adolescents about both the benefits and disadvantages of having heroes in an effort to obtain

a balanced view of the topic. As such the present study builds on previous research and

employs qualitative methods as a means to develop rich insights into young person's views

on heroism including subtleties as to the positive and negatives aspects of having a hero.

3   THE PRESENT RESEARCH

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand adolescents' views about the

characteristics and functions of heroes. The overarching research questions were as follows:

How do adolescents describe the characteristics of heroes? Who are the heroes that

adolescents refer to? What psychological and social functions do heroes provide to young

people? The findings generated from this study may help to answer important questions

about the processes around heroic influence during adolescence and provide information

relevant to developing new interventions using heroes.

Focus groups aim to be natural and conversational in nature and facilitate interaction

between members of the focus group. A focus group method was chosen for this study as a

developmentally appropriate method to elicit rich and detailed data relating to how young

people express, construct, defend and modify their views (Gibson, 2007) about heroes.

4   METHOD

4.1   DESIGN AND PARTICIPANTS

This study followed a qualitative design guided by a phenomenological perspective.

Qualitative focus groups ($N = 4$) were conducted with 22 students at two urban, co-

educational secondary schools in Limerick, Ireland (6 males, 16 females, aged 15 to 17). A purposive sampling technique was employed and both schools have a diverse student body. Each focus group consisted of groups of either five or six students. Small focus group size was chosen to encourage all participants to voice their opinions (Green & Hart, 1999). All students aged between 12 and 18 years in the school were eligible to participate – no additional exclusion criteria was applied.

4.2   PROCEDURE AND MATERIALS

The University of Limerick ethics committee (ULREG) provided ethical approval for this research study (2017_02_37_EHS). Adolescents were approached via gatekeepers at targeted schools. Letters of information were sent to six schools identified through links with the primary and third author – two schools responded and agreed to participate. Once schools agreed to participate approaches to students were made in line with recommendations from the school principal (i.e. which academic year of study might be appropriate). Information sheets and parental/guardian consent forms were sent to the parents of children attending their fourth year of study, typically known as Transition Year (a year between the junior and senior school cycles where students can try alternative academic subjects, travel, and engage in more extra-curricular activities) in Ireland. Further to this informed consent was obtained from young people who had returned their parental consent forms and who were interested in taking part in the study. Telephone and email contact details of the primary researchers were provided to each participant and their parent/guardian. Between the two schools, 69 letters and consent forms were distributed and participation uptake was 32% (*N*=22).

In advance of the focus groups, participants, teachers and parents were sent information about the broad aims of the study. The focus groups took place in the classrooms of the secondary schools from where the participants were recruited at a time suitable to

participants and school personnel. The groups were led by one moderator (the second author), a trainee psychologist (Year 4 of study), and a non-participating observer, also a trainee psychologist (Year 3 of study).

4.2.1   Data collection method

The moderator followed a semi-structured guide developed by the researchers in consultation with previous research concerning lay conceptions of heroes (Gash & Conway, 1997; Goethals & Allison, 2012; Kinsella et al., 2015a & 2015b) which is provided in the supplementary material. At the start of each focus group, a statement to remind students that their participation was voluntary, that there were no right or wrong answers, and to remind them of confidentiality was read aloud (Gibson, 2007). Prior to the official discussion, an 'ice-breaker' discussion was initiated to help the students feel at ease (Gibson, Aslett, Levitt, & Richardson, 2005a). At the close of the focus group, students were offered a sweet treat as a token of appreciation and reminded that a written report of the group-level findings could be obtained on request from the researcher in the future. Each focus group discussion was audio recorded using dictaphones then later transcribed verbatim by one of the researchers.

4.2.2   Data analysis

Analysis of the qualitative data were conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012) due to its theoretical flexibility and because the goal of the current study was to identify patterns of understanding and perceived functions of heroes amongst participating adolescents. Using an inductive approach, the first and second author familiarised themselves with the data by conducting a line by line reading of the transcripts. Following this the coders met to reflect on the general patterns emerging from the data. The data was reread, initial nodes (15 nodes) were identified and fragments of text were coded accordingly using NVivo 12 (Nvivo, 2019). Through a process of analytic induction coders

searched for themes, examining the data for patterns and overlap. Themes were retained when both coders agreed they were relevant to the study. In an iterative process the coders reviewed the emerging themes and agreed the final themes to be written up. In line with previous work (e.g., Gash & Bajd, 2005; Gash & Dominguez, 2009), we focused on identifying themes that shed light on the primary research question. Four themes were agreed upon as being important in the representation of the adolescent's views on the provided by heroes.

5   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we first present a descriptive analysis of the characteristics of heroes and the types of heroes outlined by the adolescents. Second, we present a thematic analysis of the functions of heroes as articulated by the adolescents.

5.1   DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF HERO CHARACTERISTICS

The hero characteristics most frequently described by adolescents were inspirational, helpful, protects others, selfless, altruistic, humble, saves others, personable and moral integrity. This finding is notable as it portrays that adolescents share similar representations of hero characteristics with adults sampled in previous studies (e.g., Kinsella et al., 2015a). Of the 26 characteristics from Kinsella et al.'s (2015a) hero characteristic framework, 25 of those characteristics were also mentioned by the young people. Interestingly, powerful was not cited as a characteristic of heroes by young people unlike adults. The adolescents noted that heroes are different from leaders as "*not all leaders are good*", however heroes were portrayed as capable of leading despite not having the same amount of power as a leader (consistent with the view that not all leaders are heroes but all heroes *are* indirect or direct leaders; Allison & Goethals, 2013).

Unlike the findings from White and O'Brien (1999), Gash and Bajd (2005) and Gash and Dominguez (2009), the adolescents sampled in the present research focused less on competence (e.g., brainy, brilliant, inventive) but more on prototypical hero attributes (protecting others, showing moral integrity, humility) and other-oriented characteristics (altruistic, selfless) in line with adult conceptions of heroes (cf. Kinsella et al., 2015a). These differences could be explained, in part, by Piaget's theory of cognitive development, where younger or less mature children have yet to develop their abilities to engage in more abstract reasoning (Piaget, 1952) and therefore, may be more likely to conceive of heroes in more concrete terms (such as firefighter or medical expert) rather than more abstract terms (inspirational model) resulting in different associated hero characteristics. Whereas late adolescence is characterised by greater mental capacity to engage in abstract thought (Marini & Case, 1994). Definitions of a hero are also likely to be influenced by societal changes that have occurred since previous research was conducted (White & O'Brien, 1999) as well as informed by broader cultural differences, which may account for these varying conceptions of heroes by adolescents. Thus, there may be both global and local components to how young people view and use heroes.

5.2   DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF TYPES OF HEROES

In the next section, adolescents' choice of heroes is discussed in light of two taxonomies that categorise different types of heroes (Zimbardo, 2007; Goethals & Allison, 2012).

All three categories of Zimbardo's (2007) taxonomy of heroes, were mentioned by the adolescents. Martial heroes are those who put themselves at physical risk and are trained and paid to do so. Civil heroes put themselves at physical risk but are ordinary citizens rather than members of the armed forces or protective services. Social heroes are defined as those who

contribute to society with minimal physical risk (Zimbardo, 2007). Good Samaritan heroes, an aspect of Zimbardo's social category of heroism, are those who are altruistic without putting themselves at physical risk. Zimbardo's social category of heroism was more recently extended with the additional of four categories by Allison and Goethals' (2013). In their taxonomy, transparent heroes are the 'unsung' heroes with who we interact with daily and are often taken for granted. Transforming heroes are defined as people who create something and make a difference. Trending heroes are heroes whose influence or popularity can trend upward or downward. Transitional heroes refer to those who are our hero during a particular developmental stage before we outgrow them (Allison & Goethals, 2013).

5.2.1 Transparent heroes

Transparent heroes such as parents, family members and friends were most commonly mentioned by the participants in our study. The emphasis on proximal and media-based heroes in the sample displays the role of the micro and macro levels of the environment on adolescent's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This finding is consistent with previous research on 15-year-olds which found they prefer a combination of proximal and distal heroes (White & O'Brien 1999; Gash & Bajd, 2005; Gash & Dominguez, 2009).

5.2.2 Trending heroes.

Trending heroes were also popular among this age group. For example, one participant explained that a hero is:

> "Anyone who is big in the media. Anyone, like if the charts say Arianna Grande is
> massive this week, she is the new hero and idol for everybody. Like it could change
> the next week, but that's what it is nowadays. Like everyone who is in the media and
> massive that week is everyone's hero".

Here the participant illustrates that trending heroes correspond well with media culture in which celebrities' influence or popularity can increase or decline. The frequency of media-type heroes reflects the extent of the role of the media in young people's construction of heroes and how heroism and celebrity-culture can overlap in modern discourse (North, Bland & Ellis, 2005). Furthermore, this sensitivity to mass media is likely to interact with peer-influences, where young people experience pressure to behave in ways that are consistent with their peer group. Particular heroes that are celebrated in the media and by local peer groups become "everyone's hero" by default. This 'peer pressure' is less likely to exert influence on adult samples, who experience a greater sense of autonomy independent of their peer group (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986).

Another participant reveals how a local singer was mentioned as a hero for some of the young people due to his online presence on YouTube and accessibility to his fans (reiterating the social influence of both peer groups and mass media on adolescent hero selection). This hero is both proximal and distal, readily accessible in daily life but also made famous through the internet. Previous research (e.g., White & O'Brien, 1999; Gash & Bajd, 2005; Gash & Dominguez, 2009) notes that this age group particularly value both proximal and distal aspects of heroes. One participant notes:

"And even like he [local singer] does all these things on like his Snapchat and Instagram and he like answers people's questions" and "You would always see him in town, he would always take pictures".

5.2.3 Martial heroes

Martial heroes were mentioned by one participant which indicates some recognition for the 'traditional' type of hero in this age group:

> "*Real* heroes like you know let's say, nurses or firemen or things like that, they don't
>
> really get the fame for that and they're doing like good like every day"

The use of the word "real" is notable, indicating that some of the others types of heroes are less real or even fake.

5.2.4   Transitional heroes

Transitional heroes are heroes that we outgrow as we age. The extract below is particularly interesting as the participant explains how young people may change their hero to match the ideals and values they acquire as they get older:

> "Well like younger people may not be as mature, kind of just follow after someone
>
> who's like popular and trendy or whatever and they think everything they do is great,
>
> but I think maybe as you grow up like you discover who your hero would be someone
>
> more like inspirational and a better person".

Again, there is a sense that this participant believes that some heroes that are chosen by adolescents may be chosen because other people admire that person (i.e., popular or trendy), rather than because of the heroic characteristics or values associated with that person. Importantly, this participant refers to the maturity gained through the lifespan which can help to identify heroes who are both "inspirational" and "better". The use of the word better is interesting, suggesting that the heroes chosen in adolescence may be lesser than those chosen later in life. This complements Seiffge-Krenke (1997) who suggested that increased cognitive development in adolescents facilitates a greater level of independence from the influence of the media. Interestingly, there is evidence here of a meta-cognitive awareness that choices and decisions (including hero selection) are somewhat transient during their current life phase in line with dynamic identity formation processes. Extending this point, the participant seems to imply that adulthood will facilitate a more stable engagement with a suitable hero.

5.2.5   Good Samaritan heroes

Finally, one participant spoke of Good Samaritan heroes, those who "*do something out of the kindness of their heart*". This response indicates that young people value the pro-social, communal motivated functions that heroes can serve.

> "My auntie she works in a drug addiction place, and she does it voluntarily. She helps them, she talks to them. She goes to meetings and has meetings with them, she just does it voluntarily. Yeah she just tries to help them".

It is worth drawing attention to the types of heroes that were not mentioned from Zimbardo's (2007) social hero category by this age group; adventurer/explorer, bureaucracy heroes, martyrs, religious figure and whistle blowers. This indicates a difference in how adults and adolescents select and celebrate heroes. We speculate that the reasons for these differences could involve the changing role of religious institutions in society and also, changes to the post-primary (high) school curriculum (for instance, where history no longer is a compulsory academic subject in Ireland). Unexpectedly, the adolescents did not mention books, movies or comics as places to find heroic figures, although the mass media was mentioned several times.

6   THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF FUNCTIONS OF HEROES

Four themes were identified subsequent to the analysis of all focus group data relating to psychological and social functions provided by heroes. These themes outlined below were 1) Heroes uplift others; 2) Heroes model good (or moral) behaviour; 3) Heroes protect others and help them to cope; and 4) Heroes aid identity exploration and formation. Both upsides and downsides of heroes were explored by the adolescents relating to each of the four thematic categories.

6.1 HEROES UPLIFT OTHERS

In their accounts of heroes, adolescents noted that heroes uplift others by inspiring others, reminding others about the good in the world and offering hope. Participants also noted that heroes can disappoint others by not living up to expectations. Each of these sub-themes are discussed below.

6.1.1 Inspire Others

Participants reported that heroes inspire others in a number of different ways. For instance, one participant noted that a hero "might inspire you to be able to do something that you've always wanted to do and just help you get along with that". Another participant described how a hero can "inspire [someone] to come out of the bad habit".

One participant noted the importance of having a hero to look up to during this stage of their life:

> "Because I think part of growing up and everything like that you need a hero to look up to and they can help you through growing up and if you don't have one it could be very difficult on you because you won't be able to strive to reach what that person has reached."

Interestingly this participant also highlights how the absence of a hero may adversely affect the young person, implying that they might not reach their full potential without the guiding influence of the hero. Many other participants echoed the sentiment that heroes inspire young people to "strive to reach what that person has reached" and are models "to look up to". This notion of looking *up* to someone implies that the hero is operating at a higher standard of behaviour (perhaps in terms of their competence or moral integrity) and therefore, are admired by others.

6.1.2   Remind about the good in the world

One participant noted that heroes provide "peace of mind". Another noted that:

"Sometimes the world can obviously be a very negative place and I think if you have someone to look up to, you see good in the world it kind of gives you some sort of, like, reason, do you know, like, to believe the world still has good in it like the way some people have their religion as a reason to believe there's a reason to, like, be here. I think if nobody had like a hero nobody would believe there's good in the world and there would not be a reason to be here".

In this quote, the participant draws parallels between having a hero and having a religion to draw from particularly during challenging (or negative) times. This indicates that heroes, like religion (Emmons, 2005), can offer a sense of meaning in life (see also, Kinsella, Igou, & Ritchie, 2017; Kinsella et al., 2017; Coughlan et al., 2017; Igou, van Tilburg, Kinsella & Buckley, 2018) – "a reason to be here" and that without heroes "there would not be a reason to be here". The notion that heroes remind others about the good in the world, particularly when things seem challenging, echoes adult views about the functions of heroes (see Kinsella et al., 2015b). Related to the theme of reminding about the good in the world is that heroes *offer hope*.

6.1.3   Offer hope

Several participants described heroes as doing "something good" and *offering others hope* through their actions and particularly by doing good. One participant noted that "if they're in a bad situation in their life [heroes] might give them hope to get out of it". This indicates that heroes serve a particularly useful function of offering hope when a young person is experiencing life challenges, and perhaps enabling the individual to take action "to get out of" the negative situation rather than remain a passive observer.

6.1.4   Provoke disappointment

On the converse, participants noted that heroes can also disappoint those who follow them. One participant noted that:

"If we depend on a person to make us happy then that's a bad thing because they also have the ability to make you sad."

This participant has noted that heroes can influence our emotional state either positively or negatively. The use of the word "depend" is important, suggesting that the emotional state of the young person may, at times, hinge on their relationship with their hero. In this quote, as with a number of other quotes, we notice the adolescents using 'we', 'us' and 'they' as personal pronouns rather than "I" or "my" statements. There are a number of reasons for this. Perhaps this is a deliberate effort to distinguish between personal beliefs and more abstract beliefs about the functions served by heroes. Alternatively, this choice of pronouns may serve to deflect some of the more personal, private sentiments away from the self in front of peers and avoid appearing vulnerable or too dependent on a hero.

Another participant noted how the behaviour of the hero may result in negative affect:

"If they did something bad or you feel like you were let down".

And at times, the young person may be so invested in their hero that they "refuse to accept when [the hero does] something bad". This suggests that young people can become attached (or perhaps overly-attached) to their heroes and find it difficult to accept when their hero does not live up to the standard expected. Where individuals can bask in the reflected glory of their heroes (e.g., Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, & Sloan, 1976), they may also experience strong emotions when their heroes let them down. Indeed, because aspects of our heroes become included into the self (see Sullivan & Venter, 2005), it may be harder to distance the self from the hero's negative or shameful behaviour.

6.2 HEROES MODEL GOOD (OR MORAL) BEHAVIOUR

In their accounts of heroes, participants emphasised that heroes show them how to do good or be a better person. One participant explained how heroes model prosocial behaviour and how that in turn may prompt the individual to also help others in the future:

> "I think if someone did something for you in your life and then you're kind of looking up to them saying 'oh well they helped me like this, I'm going to grow up and help someone the way they helped me."

A number of participants emphasised that heroes "influence young people to do good things" and "teach [them] how to be a good person", and provide much-needed "guidance". Other participants noted that heroes "inspire them to become a good person as well" and "live their lives in a better way". These quotes reveal that heroes are cherished for their good behaviour, but also for their ability to inspire and teach others to follow suit. One participant noted that:

> "Young children, their brains are like sponges and if they pick up bad habits from like other people they will do the same thing. But if they have a hero, that can influence them the right way, they will do good".

The use of the word "good" is interesting. It is possible to interpret the word in terms of competence (i.e., a good rugby player) or in terms of morality (i.e., a person who is morally virtuous). For the most part, we think the participants here were referring to the latter where heroes were described as being "helpful", "generous", showing "act[s] of kindness" and fighting for what is "right". The use of the word "good" is probably not surprising within this cohort of adolescents – throughout childhood they have been exposed to simplistic dichotomies good vs bad in children's stories, movies and games (e.g. "Beautiful people are good") rather than more nuanced interpretations of moral behaviour (Eco, 2004; Klein & Shiffman, 2006). This is also in line with Kohlberg's theory of moral development which emphasises that at about the age of 16 (similar to the age of this sample) there is a shift

towards right behaviour consisting of doing one's duty, showing respect for authority, and

maintaining the given social order for its own sake (Kohlberg, 1971). In our previous analysis

of adults' conceptions of heroes (Kinsella et al., 2015a), there was a more distinct emphasis

of morally virtuous behaviour (where they explicitly described heroes as moral and as

beacons of morality). This noticeable difference provides support for the proposal of morality

as a developing in stages, with young people not yet advancing through the upper levels of

Kohlberg's stages of moral development (1971) to reveal a more nuanced view of morality.

6.2.1   Bad behavior

Participants also noted that young people do not always select heroes that are

appropriate ("like somebody who has a bad, like, light in the media") and in turn those heroes

model 'bad' behaviour or sometimes provide a license to young people to behave in a certain

way ("oh if my hero can do that so can I"). Participants reiterated the potential for heroes to

influence adolescents:

> "Like if, you might want to do something bad if they are doing something bad,
>
> because like, they might influence you to do something bad."

Indeed, one participant noted that poor selection of heroes could result in more people

adopting those same negative attitudes or beliefs:

> "And like the Donald Trump thing as well, if he's, like, promoting racism as the
>
> president of America then his followers are going to listen to that and then they are
>
> going to start to become racist, which is setting everyone back. So, like….he is like an
>
> example of a bad role model and how children can aspire to be like someone like that.
>
> So there are some people like that give out negative, like, vibes."

From this quote, it is interesting to note that the participant is using the words hero and role

model interchangeably. Whereas, adults are able to articulate clear differences between

heroes and role models (see Kinsella et al., 2015a; 2015b), it seems these social categories

may not as distinct for adolescents which serves to justify the inclusion of adolescents as a subgroup worth studying. A look at the types of heroes that many of the young people shows that many of the people they see as heroes are frequently located in their immediate environment, their microsystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; White & O'Brien, 1999) rather than heroes chosen by adults that may be located from a range of physical and spatiotemporal places (Kinsella et al, 2015a). In particular, a number of participants note the potential dangers of choosing fame or celebrity status as a criterion for heroism. For instance, one participant explained that some famous people are struggling in their own lives and would not make a good heroic model for young people:

> "I also feel like famous people, people that have loads of money you see all these scandals of how their lives, kind of, they're all depressed and they don't really have like, proper relationships with people all they do is try and be famous and keep up with everyone."

One participant described how adolescents may be actually limited by the heroes they choose:

> "They might feel like they mightn't amount to go do anything better than what they've done they might just aspire to do just what they've done and reach for bigger goals like."

This quote suggests that if an individual focuses on a particular hero they may be actually limiting themselves to achieve a similar level of accomplishment to their hero rather than setting themselves original and "bigger" goals.

In a similar vein, another participants describes how young people may follow in the footsteps of the hero which may not always result in a positive outcome:

> "They might lead you down the wrong path, you know, like go down the same path as everyone else."

Due to a person's focus on their hero, one participant noted that an individual may not find their own path in life:

"Maybe just because they're better at something maybe they don't enjoy that as much but they probably would be better at that as well but they don't realise it."

Indeed, one participant noted that a young person is better off with no hero than a *bad* hero. This dichotomy (bad hero vs good hero) proposed by the young people in this sample can also be linked with Stage 3 of Kohlberg's theory, the good boy vs good girl orientation (Kohlberg, 1971) suggesting that some young people in this study viewed heroes as a means to help them identify good behaviour which may be a risk if the young person is not discerning.

6.3 HEROES PROTECT OTHERS AND HELP THEM TO COPE

Our third theme related to the role of heroes in protecting young people from physical or psychological challenges and particularly, helping young people to cope with personal challenges or challenging circumstances – "helping people carry on and to keep going" and acting as "good coping mechanisms for some people". One participant noted that adolescents may "be lost without them" (i.e., their hero). To provide greater clarity to this theme, we outline six sub-themes relating to heroes and coping below.

6.3.1 Emotional support

Heroes are cited as providing emotional support – often helping young people to regulate their own emotional state – a hero is "always there for you" and in particular "during times of need". Heroes were frequently described as helping people into a more positive state of mind – "It gives you like positive thoughts as well to know that you are close to someone

that's so good." and "to make you feel good". One participant explains how heroes can be used as a tool to regulate emotions during tough times:

"When they [a young person] are in trouble or a time of need they can think back and go to that person [a hero] and be like, am, think of all the stuff that they have done good in their life."

And other participant agrees with this sentiment:

"If you're having like a bad day with negative thoughts you can kinda like think of the positive because you look up to them."

6.3.2   Social support

Heroes are described as providing social support. For instance, "[heroes] will be there" "someone to have close to you as well, like you can kinda talk to them about whatever" and "you can get advice off them".

6.3.3   Instrumental support

Heroes are noted as offering instrumental support. For instance, "doing little things for you" and doing "little things every day that makes [others'] lives easier". Three participants made reference to heroes that are involved with charitable work that serves to make the lives of others better (e.g., through education or health projects).

6.3.4   Coping self-efficacy

Interestingly, heroes are described as helping others to experience a greater sense of self-efficacy particularly during times of doubt (Prelow, Weaver & Swenson, 2006). One participant noted that having a hero "can boost your confidence as well like, to like to have someone there". Similarly, another participant noted that a hero can "inspire you to like work hard, to do it because someone who believes in you".

6.3.5   Social control

One person noted that heroes effect a sense of social control – stopping people going out of control:

"I think in this day and age definitely need heroes because everyone is just like going out of control."

Although the participant does not explain in detail, it is implied that heroes are needed to bring order and guidance where young people are "going out of control".

6.3.6   Physical protection

One participant noted that heroes offer physical protection in a more traditional sense of the word "hero" (from the Greek word *heros* meaning protector):

"They catch bad people…so that's good and they um, they keep our city safe and things like that so that's pretty good."

6.3.7   Overreliance

On the other hand, one participant noted that young people may rely on their heroes too much and in a sense, become over reliant on the hero rather than feeling confident in their own ability to cope:

"Relying on them [the hero] you will always like ask them for help and you might not get anything done by yourself."

Self-regulation, the act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal directed actions, undergoes considerable development in adolescence (Kagan, Reznick Snidman, Gibbons, & Johnson, 1998). With the confluence of behavioural, cognitive, emotional and situational changes the young person is compelled to develop new approaches to intentional self-regulation (Gestdottir & Lerner, 2007). Our research suggests that young people are

harnessing heroes to help them navigate this new terrain which may open up avenues to promote the development of this important skill for more positive youth development.

6.4 HEROES AID IDENTITY EXPLORATION AND FORMATION

Many participants in their accounts of heroes claim that heroes are particularly important during adolescence as they help young people to experiment with their own sense of self and develop a greater sense of clarity about their authentic sense of self. One participant described this in detail:

> "It's important to have a hero but like at this age, going into secondary school and everything, you kind of need to find yourself."

In an apparent paradox, identifying with and/or emulating a hero appears to serve as a useful tool for gaining a clearer sense of self. This is in keeping with the social identity approach where it is argued that it is through our interactions and social comparisons with others that we develop our own sense of self and identity (see Abrams and Hogg, 1990).

Another participant described how heroes bring clarity to our life goals:

> "They kind of give you a sense of what you're looking forward to in life. Like if you have a hero you might see where they're going in life and want to be like that."

One participant noticed the challenges of the adolescent period and the role of a hero in navigating those challenges:

> "It's just a very confusing time, really know where you're going or what you want to do for the rest of your life but if you have a hero you might."

Heroes may also fill a void for a young person:

> "Because sometimes someone might not have someone they can look up to in their personal life so a hero might just be a way of helping that person find who they are,

because like _____ said, a lot of teenagers change and they try to find themselves or

whatever".

In this quote, the participant acknowledges the particular challenges of identity exploration

and formation during the adolescent phase and the role of heroes in helping the individual to

"find themselves".

Interestingly, one participant noted that one's choice of hero "could change in a

week" and our heroes are "constantly evolving" – we are reminded that adolescence is a state

of flux and change, and adolescent's' patterns of hero selection reflect this. Another

participant noted that adolescents may choose heroes that are consistent with other members

of their social groups (in keeping with earlier discussion of peer influence and peer pressure):

"Especially teenagers and stuff like everyone kind of has their groups and in your

group you kind of share interests with those people. So like one group, there is a chance that

you can all have the same hero".

6.4.1   Ideal Self

A major sub-theme in this area, noted by participants, was that heroes embody a

person's ideal self, which in turn help to regulate behaviour towards goals and provide

direction. This notion of having an ideal self that helps regulate behaviour is strongly linked

to self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987). According to Higgins, one's ideal self acts as a

self-guide to motivate towards self-improvement and behavioural change. Here, heroes were

described as representing a "certain image of themselves they want to be", "the best version

of themselves", "somebody to look up to" and "a high standard to become" – in other words,

heroes personify or symbolise ideal self-representations. More specifically, having a hero was

described as giving people "a goal in life" and "something to aspire to".

One participant noted how heroes may influence career paths and life choices in

adulthood:

"Like their hero could be in the profession they're interested in and they want to do it.
Like some child might want to be like a famous footballer like Ronaldo or Messi and
he might want to follow in their footsteps so you might look up to them and think 'oh
I can do that one day".

This fourth theme relating to the role of heroes in influencing identity during
adolescence was somewhat unexpected as it had not been cited by adults as a psychosocial
function of heroes in previous studies (e.g., Kinsella et a., 2015b). Yet, identity exploration
has long been emphasised as an important theme within the study of adolescence and the
findings of this study lend support to work by developmental theorists such as Erikson (1968)
and Marcia (1993). In his theory of lifespan development, Erikson spoke of the young
person's need to come to terms with, the person and social worlds they inhabit, recognising
choices, making decisions and finding unity within one's self while claiming a place in the
world (Erikson, 1968 in Ferrer-Wreder, Palchuk, Poyrazli, Small & Domitrovich, 2008).
Marcia noted that this consolidation of identity is synonymous with late adolescence and
marks the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood (Marcia, 1993). Therefore, it is
particularly of note that adolescents draw from heroes as a means to explore and form their
own sense of identity during this critical life stage in a way that adults from previous samples
did not articulate.

Research by McAdams (1985) proposes that young people produce a coherent
narrative identity which emerges in late adolescence and cites societal expectations as well as
maturation processes as important in the development of 'stories' about themselves
(McAdams et al., 2013). The findings of this study suggest that this process may be more
dynamic than researchers have previously suggested and that young people may be actively
seeking opportunities to stimulate the story making process with heroes acting as potential
catalysts for youth identity exploration. This observation provides an important justification

for this study and to further examine the function of heroes for young people, given that

heroes may provide a means to positively direct the trajectory of adolescent development.

While heroes sometimes serve to support youth identity exploration, as in the case of

the other themes, participants also noted that heroes have the potential to negatively impact

young people. According to Higgins (1987), failure to achieve the standards of the ideal self

is often associated with the experience of dejection-related emotions (e.g., disappointment,

dissatisfaction, sadness). Given that heroes sometimes represent the ideal self for young

people, it is likely that a perceived discrepancy between one's actual self and ideal self

(represented by hero) may lead to the same predicted negative emotions. While negative

emotions are not specified, one participant did note the risk of modelling oneself on a hero

but never actually living up to those expectations:

> "Or maybe they [adolescents] might feel like they want to be like them [hero] but then
>
> sometimes they might feel like they're never get there and be like them.".

Furthermore, while striving to be like their hero, adolescents may actually lose a clear sense

of themselves (develop an inauthentic sense of identity) – "you can't be too caught up in your

hero and trying to be them because you kinda have to find out who you are".

7 CONCLUSION

To summarise, heroes are characterised in ways that are generally consistent with

adults in previous studies (see Allison & Goethals, 2011; Kinsella et al., 2015a; 2015b).

Adolescents noted that heroes could be described as inspirational, helpful, protects others,

selfless, altruistic, humble, saves others, personable and moral integrity. Indeed, 25 of the 26

prototypical features of heroes identified in previous research (Kinsella et al., 2015a) were

mentioned by the young people in this sample. However, the adolescents sampled showed

remarkable differences to adults with the *types* of people they considered heroic – with the

young people showing a much greater focus on celebrity and media-based figures than adults
(consistent with Gash & Bajd, 2005, Gash & Dominguez 2009).

The most significant contribution of the present work is offered in terms of the novel
insights about the psychological and social functions that heroes provide during adolescence.
While previous research has indicated three overarching functions (see Kinsella et al.,
2015b), the present study, which employed qualitative methods, has revealed more detail than
previous adult studies. The thematic analysis is consistent with the three categories outlined
in the hero functions framework (Kinsella et al., 2015b, 2017) but has provided more detail in
relation to *how* exactly heroes might provide psychological and social functions, and has
revealed that heroes may provide an additional and important *identity exploration and
formation* function during adolescence.

According to research with adults, heroes provide an enhancing function (Kinsella et
al., 2015b) which is very similar to what the adolescents in the present sample describe.
Heroes serve to inspire, offer hope, remind about the good in the world. However, unlike
adults, the young people in the present study noted that heroes can disappoint others - perhaps
because heroes often represent the ideal self which is a high standard to compare one's actual
self – evoking negative dejection-related emotions as well as positive emotions. This is
perhaps an unexpected finding, as one might expect that adults would have experienced more
opportunities than adolescents for disappointment through their interactions with heroes over
time. However, as one adolescent noted adults may become more astute at choosing
appropriate heroes as they gain maturity and therefore, experience less disappointment.

Research with adults has indicated that heroes provide a moral modelling function –
behaving in ways that are consistent with societal values and norms, challenging immoral
actions, reminding others that there are 'good' people in the world, and proactively making
the world a better place (Kinsella et al., 2015a). In the present research, heroes were

described as people who show "good" behaviour and model how to be a good or better person. Young people in this study noted that selecting 'bad heroes' may result in negative consequences for adolescents (note: the topics of 'bad heroes' or negative consequences of having heroes were not mentioned by adults in previous studies). While the essence of the descriptions are similar (this is clear as the examples of behaviour that the young people cited as heroic were very much self-sacrificing, altruistic and prosocial), it is likely that the focus on good vs bad behaviour rather than various shades of moral behaviour is primarily linked to more simplistic views of morality (Kohlberg, 1971). As suggested by White and O'Brien in their study with children and adolescents (1999), the maturing of cognitive processing, social development and moral reasoning all influence conceptions of heroes and heroism.

In previous research with adults (Kinsella et al., 2015b) and children (White & O'Brien, 1999), heroes have been described as providing a protecting function – where heroes are cherished for confronting evil or danger, by acting in situations when others are afraid, unable or unwilling, saving, helping, and protecting others from physical or psychological threat. Young people in this study noted that heroes help others both physically and psychologically, with the greatest emphasis on heroes helping others to cope. It is notable that heroes are described as a tool in coping with life challenges, particularly at this stage of life when young people are experiencing a high degree of stress and challenge. Within this category there was a much clearer emphasis by young people (as opposed to previous adult samples) on the use of heroes to support emotion regulation. Emotion regulation has been related to a wide variety of domains of functioning, including social functioning, psychological and physical well-being, and academic performance (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Interestingly, adolescents warned that having heroes may result in over-reliance on their heroes rather than relying on themselves to cope with negative life situations. This potential drawback was not mentioned by adults in previous research. As such future research

may seek to unpack when and how heroes can be used to facilitate more effective coping and emotional regulation.

Another important finding and contribution of this study is that heroes likely provide an identity exploration and formation catalyst for some young people. In other words, heroes can help young people to consider their own goals, values and desired life paths at this important life stage. This function was not previously noted by adults but supports a large body of research on the importance of identity exploration and formation for adolescents linked to key developmental milestones.

Our analysis of perspectives of adolescents on hero features and functions offers a more rounded understanding of the positive and negative influences of heroes than existing research on the topic. Overall, adolescents describe heroes in ways that suggest that heroes play a role in fulfilling basic human needs (see Fiske, 2008) such as self-esteem (feeling good about the self and others) through uplifting others, belonging (enabling people to live effectively in group and collective societies by behaviour in good and moral ways) and maintaining certainty and predictability (protecting vulnerable others and making people feel safe, as well as coping with uncertainty and chaos). Furthermore, heroes are cited as providing more specific, developmentally-appropriate needs during adolescence with a particular emphasis on identity exploration and formation (see Erikson, 1968) and emotional self-regulation (see Reidiger & Klipker, 2013).

This study is not without limitations. The participants sampled for this study were homogenous in ethnicity, race, and age. In the future this research can be expanded by including adolescents from rural areas, diverse nationalities, ethnicities and socioeconomic groups, as well as sampling adolescents of varying ages between 12-18 years old. While the findings from the current study are unlikely to be representative of the views of all adolescents; they do provide a sound basis for future research. We posit that two critical and

novel areas of future research will be to explore the role of heroes in shaping identity during adolescence and to examine the role of heroes in promoting adaptive forms of coping (in particular, emotion regulation).

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that heroes play a significant role in the unique stage of adolescent development. Adolescents use heroes to meet the challenges in their everyday lives. For this age group, the lines between heroes, role models and celebrities are often blurred. For adolescents to continue to benefit from heroism they must be exposed to the full range of heroism potential which the media does not guarantee to provide. A number of drawbacks of having heroes during adolescence were identified by adolescents – most of which were the result of choosing inappropriate heroes. It follows that there is an opportunity for people who interact with young people to challenge them to question and reflect upon the heroes they are cherishing, and to spotlight a range of diverse heroes in order to expand their repertoire of *what* and *who* could be considered heroic.

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Table 1

Central and peripheral characteristics of heroes

Central	Examples	Frequencies
Altruistic	"Someone who does good things for people"	12
Brave	"They would have to be like brave"	4
Conviction	"Doing something just because you think it's right"	2
Courageous	"Helped someone that fell into the sea"	3
Determined	"Sports people, people who have come up from nothing"	4
Helpful	"They can help you through growing up"	38
Honest	"Someone who's honest"	2
Inspiration	"Someone who's inspirational"	54
Moral integrity	"Heroes teach us how to be a good person"	13
Protect	"They try to protect you from the world	26
Saves	"Someone who saves lives"	10
Selfless	"Selfless"	22
Self-sacrifice	"Puts other people's needs in front of their own"	1

Peripheral	Examples	Frequencies
Caring	"They would be caring"	5
Compassionate	"Helping an old woman across the street"	4
Exceptional	"Malala stood up for education in her country"	1
Fearless	"Arianna Grande and what she did for the Manchester shooting"	1
Humble	"Not expect something in return"	13
Intelligent	"A person who is like, smart"	3
Leader	"A hero leads"	2
Personable	"Very friendly"	10
Powerful	--------	0
Proactive	"They act to keep our city safe"	7
Risk-taker	"What he did during the 80's with the hunger strike"	1
Strong	"They're strong"	2
Talented	"A famous footballer like Ronaldo"	3

Table 2

Types of heroes

Type	Examples	Frequencies
Civil Heroes	Citizen saves another from train, fire, sea	10
Martial Heroes	Doctors, nurses, firemen, police.	16
Social heroes		138
Adventurer/explorer	-	0
Bureaucracy heroes	-	0
Good Samaritan	Volunteers	13
Martyrs	-	0
Odds beater, underdog	Conor McGregor, Malala Yousafz	6
Political military leader	Barack Obama, Bobby Sands	8
Politico-religious leader	Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela	2
Pseudo-heroes	Those with 'bad intentions'	16
Religious figure	-	0
Scientific discovery	Scientists	1
Transforming hero	Alicia Keys, Steve Jobs	2
Transitional heroes	Justin Bieber, Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé	14
Transparent	Parents, friends, teachers	52
Trending heroes	Soccer players, YouTubers, Snapchatters	32
Whistle blowers	-	0

Supplementary Material 1: Focus group questions

Defining heroes

1. What does the word 'hero' mean?

2. What are the characteristics/traits/features of a hero??

3. In what ways are heroes similar or different from role models?

4. In what ways are heroes similar or different from leaders?

5. In what ways are heroes similar or different from celebrities?

What is heroism?

6. Can you give an example of a heroic act?

7. Can you give an example of a hero and what they do?

Functions of Heroes

8. Why do people have heroes?

9. How can having a hero help a person? Anything else?

10. How do heroes help people in every-day life?

11. What are the drawbacks of having heroes?

Relevance

12. Do you think heroes are needed?

13. Do you think young people (your age) need heroes?

Who are the heroes?

15. Who are the heroes that young people have today in Ireland?

16. How do popular heroes for young people fit with your idea of hero?

17. Are there enough heroes for young people today in Ireland?

18. Can women and men both be heroes?

10 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.