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The Romance of Heroism and Heroic Leadership

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE ROMANCE OF HEROISM

In the last decade, an exciting new field of study has emerged. Its subject is heroes and heroism. It is fast growing, multidisciplinary, and international. There is now enough of a corpus of scholarship to warrant referring to these various studies as constituting a scholarly discipline of heroism science. One manifestation of this new domain of study is the new journal, *Heroism Science*. Two other signs are new special issues on heroes and heroism in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* and in *Frontiers in Psychology*. Another is the 2017 publication of the *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*. There is also a new biennial conference series in Heroism Science, the first held in Perth, Australia, in 2016, and the second in Richmond, Virginia, USA, in 2018. We have been privileged to be part of this new research endeavor.

Heroism Science includes a sprawling set of theoretical and empirical explorations of who heroes are, how they develop, what they do, and what they're like. In short, these studies explore what makes heroes tick. Two illustrative studies from this vast domain of research are Walker's (2017)

exploration of the moral character of individuals who step up as heroes and Franco's (2017) work on heroic leadership in times of crisis. Another, smaller body of work examines how people think about heroes. Who comes to mind when people are asked to name heroes? What traits do heroes have? What do people believe heroes do? For example, scholars have explored how perceived heroes inspire or motivate the people who admire them (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2017), how groups identify moral heroes (Decter-Frain, Vanstone, & Frimer, 2017), and the way people construct heroic images of underdogs (Vandello, Goldschmied, & Michniewicz, 2017).

Our own work has considered both sets of questions. Who are heroes, what defines heroism, and how do people think about heroes? However, most of our writings have focused on the latter set of questions, questions about how people construct perceptions of heroes. In taking this approach, we have perhaps stubbornly resisted defining what heroism is. We do note that many of the heroes people name are fictional. Some of them are so-called superheroes, while others are characters such as Arthur Conan Doyle's "consulting detective" Sherlock Holmes, or the protagonist Rick Blaine in the classic 1942 film *Casablanca*, played by Humphrey Bogart. While the array of fictional and real people, from the past or still living, who are named as heroes is immense, there are two central attributes of these perceived heroes. They are almost always highly moral, and they are generally very competent and effective. These qualities are central to the "great eight traits" of heroism that emerge from our studies. Heroes are seen as Smart, Strong, Selfless, Caring, Charismatic, Resilient, Reliable, and Inspiring. These findings have prompted us to assert that heroism is in the eye of the beholder. Again, we resist specifying the defining qualities of heroes ourselves, or naming people as heroes.

Consistent with this approach, we think, we do mention our own heroes in the dedications of our books. In our first book, we acknowledged our grandmothers, but clearly do not believe that anyone else is likely to regard them as heroic. We dedicate our second book to the memory of much better-known heroes, the baseball player Roberto Clemente, and US President Abraham Lincoln. In calling Clemente and Lincoln heroes in the preceding sentence, we must note that they are heroes in our eyes. That doesn't make them heroes in any objective sense. We can make a case for their heroism in terms of morality and effectiveness, but others might disagree. We are well aware that in our home city of Richmond, Virginia, capital of the Confederate States during the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln is perhaps a villain to many. So while we do not designate on the basis of scholarly expertise particular individuals as heroes, we cherish our own heroes.