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Making Heroes: The Construction of Courage, Competence, and Virtue

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MAKING HEROES: THE CONSTRUCTION OF COURAGE, COMPETENCE, AND VIRTUE

George R. Goethals* and Scott T. Allison†

Contents

1. Introduction	184
1.1. The concept of hero	186
1.2. Central themes in heroism	187
2. Part I. The Naïve Psychology of Heroism: Profiles in Courage and Competence	191
2.1. Types of heroes	191
2.2. Extreme perceptions of fictional heroes	192
2.3. Hero schemas	193
2.4. Hero scripts and narratives	195
2.5. Archetypes and the innate mind	197
2.6. Identifying with heroes	199
3. Part II. Behaving Heroically: Making Moral Choices and Accomplishing Difficult Tasks	200
3.1. Overcoming obstacles to achievement	201
3.2. Moral thought and moral behavior	205
3.3. Self-regulation and heroic behavior	207
3.4. The foundations of heroic behavior	209
4. Part III: Needing and Shaping Heroes	209
4.1. Why we need heroes	209
4.2. Identification with struggle	210
4.3. The fragility of underdog heroism	215
4.4. How we shape heroes	215
4.5. Death makes the hero	216
5. Part IV: A Social Influence-Based Taxonomy of Heroes	221
5.1. Heroes as agents of social influence	222
5.2. Influence as the basis for our t(r)axonomy	224
6. Conclusion	230
References	231

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Abstract

People use the term *hero* frequently in our culture, and most people can easily name several heroes. Our research explores how people think about heroes as well as the determinants of heroic behavior. People's heroes may be real-world figures or fictional characters. They are thought to be competent enough to achieve at a high level, moral enough to do the right thing in difficult situations, or both. People's conceptions of heroes reflect both schemas about what heroes are like and narrative structures about how they act. We consider the possibility that images of heroes and common hero narratives reflect evolutionarily based archetypes. Given that typical conceptions of heroes include high levels of competence and morality, we consider aspects of self, including self-efficacy, self-affirmation, self-theories of intelligence, self-guides, and self-control that enable people to achieve at high levels and to act morally, even when doing so is difficult. We discuss research showing that people's needs for heroes prepare them to perceive struggle and to root for underdogs. Work on a death positivity bias and admiration for martyrs illustrates the centrality of self-sacrifice in hero schemas and the perceptions of heroes. Finally, we propose a taxonomy of heroes based on various dimensions of influence such as strength, duration, direction, exposure, and origins. The subtypes of heroes in our taxonomy are Transforming, Transfigured, Traditional, Transparent, Transposed, Tragic, Transitional, Transitory, and Trending. In addition, we consider a Transcendent Hero category, referring to heroes who affect their admirers in ways that combine the influences of other types.



1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1960s, National Basketball Association games were for the first time beginning to appear regularly on weekend television. During half-time of one contest, Boston Celtics fans were thrilled to hear coach Arnold "Red" Auerbach praise his superb shooting guard, Sam Jones. Auerbach emphatically proclaimed that Jones was not simply a "star," but rather, a "superstar." That now overworked term was new then, but it did not need to be defined. Viewers were invited to think of Jones as a hero. If you were a Celtics fan, that was easy to do. Jones was a truly outstanding player. Anointing individuals as heroes by matching the idea of hero to particular persons seems very easy in our culture. Thinking of Sam Jones in that way is just one example.

Many other examples help make the point. For instance, once young children learn what a hero is, they effortlessly match the concept to their own lists of extraordinary characters, now labeled "heroes," and, yes, superheroes. Comic book characters Superman and Wonder Woman fit that bill. A more scientific, research-based example comes from ratings of U.S. presidents. For years, scholars and journalists have asked historians to rank

and/or categorize U.S. presidents. The categories offered in most such polls, including the first one done by Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. in 1948, are typically Great, Near Great, Above Average, Average, Below Average, and Failure. Beyond the positivity bias revealed in offering three categories above Average and only two below, the terms invite raters and rankers to think of presidents in heroic terms. Perhaps not many qualify as heroes, but the consensus "Greats," Washington, Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, are widely seen that way. There has not been any perceptible tendency to avoid such labels, and it is likely that most polled scholars would agree that Abraham Lincoln, for example, is indeed a hero. The concept of hero is remarkably available.

In our work, we have emphasized that the hero idea is not static. It is a schema like any other. It is shaped by exemplars while it correspondingly does a good deal of shaping itself. We have been struck by the numerous ways that the idea of hero and people's conceptions of particular individuals are matched on the basis of cognitive construction processes. When someone is put forth as a hero, there is generally an accompanying narrative that explains how that person possesses important personal qualities and behaviors that qualify him or her as a hero. Bruner (1989a, 1989b) has argued that human beings have a "universal narrative structure" at an early age. Hero stories follow that familiar structure.

An example of such a narrative from over a century ago suggests that the hero schema had as much common currency in North America back then as it has today. In 1902, the Boston publisher DeWolfe, Fiske and Co. produced a skillfully illustrated book for juveniles entitled "The Heroic Life of Ulysses S. Grant." (No author is credited.) Throughout, Grant is described as manifesting heroic traits. One of them is his ability to remain calm in battle under enemy fire and thereby rally his troops. The book comments on Grant's election to the U.S. presidency in 1868 as follows: "In the campaign Grant took no part. He returned to Galena, and awaited with the quiet calmness which ever marked the man the nation's verdict." The book acknowledges difficulties in Grant's two terms as president and then is quite explicit about the way human beings construct heroic images. Its last page claims, "With the illness and death of the General all the love and admiration of the days after the war came back. Mistakes forgotten, only his transcendent merits were remembered." In this way, the reader is reminded, following Johnny Mercer's lyric, to "accentuate the positive, and eliminate the negative." This is part of the construction of heroes.

In the sections to follow, we discuss (1) how people think about heroes and construct what we call "profiles in courage and competence"; (2) how people manage to perform heroic deeds, of both achievement and morality; (3) why people need heroes, and how our needs lead us to construct heroic images; and (4) how 10 different types of heroes can be organized in a hero taxonomy. In this section, we introduce some central issues in our

exploration of the psychology of heroes and heroism, and the range of research that illuminates it. Our work has two overall foci. One is how people think about heroes. How can we understand general conceptions of heroism, and the ways they interact with impressions of individuals? The second is what leads people to behave in heroic ways. Given our general understanding of the defining attributes of heroes, what enables individual persons to behave heroically? On the other hand, what leads them to fail the test of heroism, and even to become villains?

1.1. The concept of hero

The English word *hero* is derived from the Greek word for hero or warrior. It literally means protector or defender. Interestingly, though many dictionary definitions of the word “hero” refer to men, such as the male lead in a play, the original Hero in Greek mythology was a woman, a priestess of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Hero’s lover was Leander. Though they could not marry because of Hero’s vow of chastity, Leander persuaded Hero to make love to him. For a glorious summer, each night Leander swam to Hero across the Hellespont from Asia to Europe, guided by a lamp she hung from a tower. That happy arrangement ended when Leander was lost at sea in a storm. In her grief, Hero drowned herself. Perhaps that myth gave rise to the notion of a hero sacrificing one’s life for an ideal.

The dictionary definitions of hero resonate to the Greek myth. They refer to persons of great courage and strength, celebrated for their bold exploits, and to individuals known for “feats of courage or nobility of purpose,” or prominent people known for their achievements. We have taken a somewhat craven approach to the definition of heroes. We do not specify the characteristics of heroes, or outline what makes a hero. As mentioned, our conception is not static. We think it is important to remember that heroism is in the eye of the beholder. Different people have different heroes. Some individuals, for example, Sarah Palin, are heroes for some and villains for others. However, when we consider the people individuals name as heroes and the way heroes are portrayed in literature, plays, and movies, it becomes pretty clear what the principal dimensions are. First and foremost, heroes are people who do something that is moral. Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King are widely regarded as heroes because they committed themselves to important moral pursuits. They capture the “nobility of purpose” element of the dictionary definition. The 1950s television series *Superman* provides a fictional example of heroes as fundamentally moral. The introduction to each episode reminded us that the man who was faster than a speeding bullet and more powerful than a locomotive fought for “truth, justice, and the American way.” There was no doubt then that the American way was as moral as truth and justice.

A second characteristic of people's heroes is that they are highly competent. They achieve at exceptional levels. Thus, the dictionary definition references to "bold exploits" and people of "special achievements." Hockey hero Wayne Gretzky was called The Great One for his record setting and aesthetically stunning achievements in the rink. Another example is U.S. Airways pilot Chesley Sullenberger. In January 2009, "Sully" became a hero when with extreme skill he ditched stricken Flight 1549 into the Hudson River so that all aboard could escape safely. The film *Casablanca* portrays the protagonist Rick Blaine, played by Humphrey Bogart, as a hero. The film's dramatic tension centers around whether Rick will rise above his cynicism and love wounds to do the right thing, but there is never any doubt about his competence. In one scene, Ilsa, the lover who jilted him, played luminously by Ingrid Bergman, walks into Rick's nightclub with her husband, Victor Lazlo. Ilsa asks to be seated as close as possible to the piano player Sam, while Victor asks to be seated as far away as possible from the Nazi villain, Major Strasser. Bogart says "The geography may be a little difficult to arrange" but then immediately turns to the Maitre'd and directs, "Paul, table 30." His control and command are seamless and set up the possibility of later heroic action. Competence counts in the way people think about heroes.

1.2. Central themes in heroism

A number of themes in heroic exploits amplify their aspects of competence and morality. One such element in the perception of heroes is that they often act morally or achieve their goals at crucial, decisive moments. Coming through in the clutch is part of the hero narrative. Los Angeles Lakers basketball star Jerry West was known as "Mr. Clutch" for his penchant for making shots in crucial moments in must-win games. When U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt found ways to help keep Great Britain afloat during the darkest hours of World War II, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill quipped that Americans always do the right thing, once they have tried everything else. In the clutch, FDR and the USA rose to the occasion. In *Casablanca*, it first seems that Rick Blaine will not lift a finger to help the Allied cause in that war. He has declared on different occasions, "I stick my neck out for nobody," and "I'm the only cause I'm interested in." But in the climactic scene, he sticks his neck out very far indeed, shooting Major Strasser and helping Victor, the resistance fighter, leave Casablanca for America—with Ilsa. Victor welcomes Rick back to the fight, "This time I know our side will win."

Attributions of heroism are further enhanced when moral or competent behavior in a decisive moment is unexpected. George W. Bush's response to the 9/11 attacks in 2001 provides an example. The U.S. Supreme Court and the Electoral College made Bush president in 2000 despite his losing the

popular vote by over half a million. He was doubted by many. Columnist Gail Collins (2000) said during the election that he "resembled a small mammal in distress," hardly a heroic characterization. But after the terrorist attacks 8 months into his presidency, he seemed to many to rise masterfully to the occasion. His poll ratings rose to historic highs. In another shocking reversal, during the well-known 1968 Ivy League football game portrayed recently in the film "Harvard Beats Yale, 29-29," reserve quarterback Frank Champi unexpectedly emerged from total obscurity to become a Harvard hero, for one glorious hour. Oskar Schindler provides a vivid example of unexpected heroic moral behavior. An opportunistic and enthusiastic Nazi at the start of World War II, by 1943 he had started going to extraordinary lengths to protect the Jewish forced-laborers working in his factories. The explanation seems to be an elementary sense of decency and humanity that emerged after his acquaintance with individual Jews changed his views about the treatment of Jews as a group.

A fictional example that touches the bases of competence, morality, and unanticipated heroic behavior in the clutch is the 1961 pop song by country singer Jimmy Dean (of the sausages), called Big Bad John. John was a large, mysterious, and probably dangerous mine worker who sacrificed himself by using his prodigious strength to allow fellow miners to escape from a sudden tunnel collapse. He could not get out himself and died a hero. The Big John story also underlines the point that heroes are often packaged within narratives of struggle and redemption. In the past, one of John's bar fights in New Orleans had "sent a Louisiana fellow to the promised land." But in the end, he saves others.

In many of these narratives, the struggling hero is an underdog. The overmatched *Karate Kid* develops his skills to prevail at the end. He is prototypical underdog who struggles to victory. The race horse Seabiscuit was a nonhuman hero to many during the Great Depression in large part because of his underdog casting and his surprising match-race victory over Triple Crown winner War Admiral in 1938. He was a natural subject for Laura Hillenbrand's (2001) book *Seabiscuit* and the 2003 movie. In his classic *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell argues that humans embrace essentially archetypical hero narratives involving struggle and redemption. The title of a recent book about the late Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy capitalizes on that narrative. It is called *Last Lion: The Fall and Rise of Ted Kennedy*.

The element of struggle enters the hero narrative because many heroes must overcome obstacles. Our research shows that people root for, identify with, and like people who are underdogs and must struggle to achieve their objectives. This liking and rooting for perceived underdogs even holds for inanimate objects whose movements on a computer screen activate scripts of struggle and effort against more powerful rivals. These struggles can be against external obstacles, such as a collapsing mine or a Triple Crown

winning race horse, or against internal obstacles, usually *akrasia*, one's own weakness of will. Such internal obstacles include lack of effort during struggle or failed moral conviction when faced with temptation. Welterweight boxer Roberto Duran, though ranked as one of the greatest fighters of all time, suffered significant loss of hero status when he cried "No mas" in the eighth round of his 1980 fight with Sugar Ray Leonard. He simply quit. His loss seemed more an inability to overcome his own exhaustion rather than his opponent. At the end of Tolkien's (1955) *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Frodo must overcome his temptation to keep the power-yielding ring for himself.

The idea of struggles with temptation points to another aspect of heroism and hero narratives. Oftentimes, people become heroic by sacrificing their own selfish or personal interests for the greater good. In *Casablanca*, Rick Blaine finally wins back Ilsa, the love of his life. The two of them plan to send her husband Victor off by himself to continue his resistance work in America. But in the climactic scene, Rick tells Ilsa that Victor needs her and that she must go with him. In one of the movies' most famous lines, Rick explains, "Ilsa, I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world." She must leave him to join the cause, as he will, in his own way. (Thus, Rick proves that he is quite good at being noble.) His words "We'll always have Paris," referring to the time when they first fell in love, sound rather empty. The sacrifice is real, contributing to the construction of Rick as a hero.

The ultimate sacrifice that heroes make is giving their lives for the greater good. The miner called Big Bad John died to save others. American heroes Martin Luther King and Abraham Lincoln, among others, were assassinated in their struggles for a better world. We will explore Lincoln's example in discussing Dean Keith Simonton's research showing that assassination is one of only six terms in an equation that predicts historians' ratings of presidential greatness. Dying for a cause is vividly illustrated in Clint Eastwood's 2008 film *Gran Torino*. The bigoted, self-centered Walt Kowalski, played by Eastwood, perfectly illustrates heroic redemption through surprising self-sacrifice. In the critical moment, he walks into a death trap in order to help an Asian immigrant family he has gradually come to admire. As he turns toward the pivotal encounter, a young priest pleads with him to go in peace. Walt walks forward saying, "Oh, I am at peace." Paying the ultimate price plays a large role in the construction of many heroes' stories, both real and fictional.

Although life and death choices for heroes are often lonely, many heroes depend on other people. Joseph Campbell pointed out that there are several key junctures in the typical hero narrative where someone else gives the hero essential support. Guides or helpers often assist emerging heroes both as they begin their struggles and as they return from their ordeals. A classic literary example is Don Quixote's faithful friend Sancho Panza. Such helpers

or sidekicks offer emotional support and provide a degree of balance to the heroes' weaknesses and eccentricities. Sancho provides some realistic advice to his idealistic but muddled knight errant, generally to no avail. American hero George Washington depended greatly on his young aide-de-camp Alexander Hamilton during the Revolutionary War. And for the rest of his career, Washington depended on Hamilton's help in various roles, including contributing to the Federalist papers and as first Secretary of the Treasury.

For many heroes, obstacles appear in the form of villains who oppose them. Nazis and racists are often the villains opposing both real-life (Oskar Schindler) and fictional (Rick Blaine) heroes. We will explore how people become heroes rather than villains, including the factors that enable them first to chose and then persist on the road to heroism. Research traditions from achievement motivation and moral development to ego depletion are helpful here.

Very often, the people who come to mind as heroes also come to mind as leaders. Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela are common examples. Later, we will develop a taxonomy of heroes that places *transforming heroes* near the pinnacle. They are heroes who through their leadership significantly change their followers and thus influence much larger groups, including entire societies and even significant segments of the world as a whole. William Wilberforce, a British politician who was a key leader in the fight against the African slave trade in the early 1800s, is one such figure. Still, not all leaders are heroes. And many individuals, though they are exemplary figures to those who hold them as heroes, do not have followers and therefore might not be considered leaders. People who gain heroic status through achievement, Albert Einstein, for example, fall into this category.

Nevertheless, we will see that heroes are often looked to for leadership. In *Casablanca*, Ilsa asks Rick "to think for both of us, for all of us." The characters are in a situation of danger, conflict, and confusion. Someone has to lead the way out. James Meindl's (Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987) research on the *romance of leadership* helps explain this yearning for direction, or what Freud (1921) called a "thirst for obedience." Part of our "implicit theory of leadership" is that leaders and leadership cause group outcomes. Success and failure are attributed to good and bad leadership. Managers of losing baseball teams are routinely sacked. The romantic fantasy is that a new, better leader will make everything better.

One of the most interesting analyses of heroism is Keegan's (1987) *The Mask of Command*, an exploration of military leadership. Keegan contrasts the heroic leadership of Alexander the Great with other equally effective forms of leadership in combat that fall short of the heroic ideal. He suggests that in the nuclear age, leaders must resist the compelling script of heroic leadership in order to avoid catastrophic escalation. His examination of the

restraint against that heroic ideal enacted by both John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 is particularly interesting. Both had to resist hardliners in their governments who recited heroic narratives and pressed for a much more aggressive approach.

In the remainder of the chapter, we will explore many facets of heroic behavior and the perception of heroes. Although heroes and heroism are not traditional topics in social psychology, there is a great deal of social psychological research that helps us understand both. Our objective is to reveal the important connections.



2. PART I. THE NAÏVE PSYCHOLOGY OF HEROISM: PROFILES IN COURAGE AND COMPETENCE

Who are our heroes anyway? We have made the argument that the idea of heroes is highly available in our culture. But what evidence supports that claim? Some of our own research is relevant. Allison and Goethals (2011) reported the results of a national telephone survey of 450 adults ranging in age from 18 to 72, averaging 32 years old. Respondents were asked whether they had any heroes, and to list as many as came to mind. In general, people had no difficulty listing heroes. Ninety-five percent listed at least two heroes, and two-thirds listed six or more in just a few minutes. On average, respondents listed five heroes. Our respondents were neither too cynical nor too jaded to come up with names of people who qualified as heroes. No one felt that being asked to name heroes was silly or childish. Although they acknowledged that their heroes had flaws, they credited them with either high levels of accomplishment or exceptional virtue, or both. Whatever others may think, for the respondents, the individuals they named were heroes.

2.1. Types of heroes

We were surprised to discover that just about a third of the heroes mentioned (32%) were family members. This finding became clearer when we considered participants' responses to another question, asking why they considered each listed person to be a hero. Representative answers were "My parents went through rough times to raise six kids successfully" and "My father did without to give to us." The themes are generosity, self-sacrifice, struggle, persistence, and faith: for example, "My mother for teaching me to never give up." Usually, the struggle and self-sacrifice of such heroes come in the form of older family members helping younger ones emotionally, financially, or temporally. That is, those heroes not only respond to the emotional and financial needs of their families but also give

them time to develop their own lives. Although these heroes' behavior in the eye of their beholders is altruistic, evolutionary psychologists would point out the role of kin selection (Smith, 1964). Older family members helping the young increase the chances of the former to pass on their genes and maximize their reproductive success (Buss, 1994).

The second group of named heroes, also one-third of the listings (33%), was real human beings coming from many walks of life and from many historical periods. They were statesmen (George Washington, Margaret Thatcher), sports figures (Michael Jordan, Babe Ruth, Babe Zaharias), agents of social change (Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela), and entertainers (Oprah Winfrey, Mel Gibson). About 10% of all our listed heroes, so approximately a third of the real-life ones, were clearly underdogs, individuals or groups who overcame great odds to succeed, for example, the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team.

At the time we conducted our survey, even more surprising than the frequency of family member heroes was finding that another third (34%) of the named heroes were fictional. We should have known. It is vastly easier to talk about heroes and explain how people think about heroes using fictional examples. Fictional characters can be drawn with much sharper outlines, and with fewer flaws and frailties than real people. Their creators can make them especially prototypical. Most of our fictional heroes come from comic books, television, or movies. They include typical superheroes such as Batgirl and Superman, sports heroes such as the Karate Kid and Rocky Balboa, and science fiction heroes such as the Captain James Kirk and Han Solo. But, we also find literary figures such as Roy Hobbs, Huckleberry Finn, and Ivanhoe. Films and television can be more vivid and less complicated than literature, so it makes sense that so many fictional heroes come from these sources.

2.2. Extreme perceptions of fictional heroes

Is it really true that fictional heroes are less complicated and manifest the defining characteristics of heroes more sharply than real-world heroes? We addressed this question by asking whether the overall "goodness" of fictional heroes was greater than that of real-world heroes, and correspondently whether the overall "badness" or evil of fictional villains was greater than that of real-world villains. Our original survey of 450 adults had asked them to list not only heroes but also villains. As with heroes, some of the villains were real people and some were fictional. We took, then, the overall lists of heroes and of villains and randomly selected 10 real-world heroes, 10 fictional heroes, 10 real-world villains, and 10 fictional villains. We then asked 75 college students to rate each of the individuals, randomly arrayed, on an 11-point scale, anchored at 10 signifying "extremely good" and 0 signifying "extremely bad," and 5 meaning "equally good and bad."

We found that fictional heroes and villains were indeed rated as more definitely good or bad than their real-world counterparts. Fictional heroes were rated 8.7 on the good–bad scale while their real-world counterparts were rated 7.8. Fictional villains were also rated more extremely than real-world villains, 2.2 versus 3.9. Both comparisons were statistically significant. It does appear that both fictional heroes and fictional villains represent more extreme forms of heroism and villainy than their real-world counterparts. Can we take this finding to mean that fictional heroes are more prototypical than those from the real world?

2.3. Hero schemas

Answering the question of the prototypicality of different kinds of heroes requires some definition of hero schemas or prototypes. To our knowledge, there has not been any previous research on such schemas. A useful place to begin exploring the issue is work by leadership scholars on “implicit leadership theories.” As noted, there appears to be considerable overlap between what heroes and leaders do. Both, for example, can transform large groups of followers or admirers. Emrich (1999) has usefully distinguished three elements of implicit leadership theories. People have implicit theories, or schemas, about what leaders are like, that is, what traits define them; what leaders do, that is, how they actually behave; and what leaders cause, or the causality of leadership. The latter refers to James Meindl’s concept of the “romance of leadership.” Many people implicitly believe that group success or failure is caused by leadership. As noted, the annual firing of professional football coaches and major league baseball managers reflects the belief that leadership, good or bad, is a significant cause of teams winning and losing. There may be a parallel implicit theory that heroes generally cause success and salvation, but that evil, ruin, chaos, destruction, and despair reflect the work of villains.

We can begin exploring the traits of heroes by considering the traits of leaders. The trait tradition is long in leadership studies (e.g., Hogan & Hogan, 2004; Van Vugt, Johnson, Kaiser, & O’Gorman, 2008; Zaccaro, Gulick, & Khare, 2008). It has identified many traits associated with leadership, including charisma, surgency (or extraversion), analytical and social intelligence, kindness, emotional stability, and health. Notably, dominance is not associated with leadership (Van Vugt, 2006). What about heroes? Since traits have long been recognized to exist in the eye of the beholder (Bales, 1958), we asked 75 college students to list the traits that they believed characterized heroes. We then asked 50 other students to sort the traits on the basis of similarity and differences between the different traits. A sorting analysis revealed eight different trait clusters. Following is the alphabetical list of these traits, named for the defining term in each cluster and several of the related traits in that cluster:

Caring: compassionate, empathetic, kind;
Charismatic: dedicated, eloquent, passionate;
Inspiring: admirable, amazing, great, inspirational;
Reliable: loyal, true;
Resilient: accomplished, determined, persevering;
Selfless: altruistic, honest, humble, moral;
Smart: intelligent, wise;
Strong: courageous, dominating, gallant, leader.

We have called these the Great Eight traits of heroism. The list is of interest in its own right, but it is also notable that the list bears many similarities to lists of traits defining leaders. Perhaps the clearest overlap is the trait *charisma*, central to many conceptions of leadership. *Strong*, *smart*, and *inspiring* are also commonly associated with leaders. The trait *reliable* resonates to "integrity," crucially important in many studies of effective leadership, while *reliable* and *selfless* are important elements of "servant leadership" (Greenleaf, 1977), the idea that leaders act as servants to their followers and address followers' needs rather than their own. *Caring* is not frequently thought to be associated with leadership. However, "kindness" is noted in the evolutionary approach to leadership, and in studies of mate selection (Buss, 1994).

Charisma is the Great Eight traits that best illustrates the schematic nature of perceiving heroes. The term *schema* derives from the Greek word for "shape." Our work on heroes emphasizes shaping, both the way heroes, especially in the case of hero/leaders, shape us and the way constructive social perception processes shape the image of particular heroes and understandings of the idea of hero itself. We argue that once elements of heroism are detected in an individual, and the schema of that person and the schema of hero are sufficiently matched, a hero is identified. Then, following principles of schematic perception more generally, the cognitive construction of heroes involves a Gestalt perception-like process of filling in missing pieces. This process is described brilliantly in Gladwell's (2005) chapter in *Blink* called "The Warren Harding Error." Gladwell describes how Ohio Republican political operator Harry Daugherty fastened on small-town newspaper editor Harding as a potential U.S. Senator, and perhaps even more. Daugherty thought that Harding just "looked like a Senator." He was tall, magnificently built, with a bronzed complexion. (He was rumored to have had African-American ancestors.) He moved with power and grace and possessed a strong, sonorous voice. He was impressive and charismatic. People's implicit theories of leadership were engaged. Harding matched the template. He fit the leader schema. Cognitive construction filled in the blanks, and Harding was assumed to have other important leadership qualities, including intelligence and integrity. Interestingly, Harding himself was not much fooled by the image but did not have the strength to resist Daugherty's marketing efforts.

The results were not good for the country. Harding was elected Senator in 1914, and when the Republican Party deadlocked at the 1920 convention, Harding received the presidential nomination, along with running mate Massachusetts Governor Calvin Coolidge. They were elected easily, over Democrat James Cox (and his young running mate, Franklin D. Roosevelt). Harding died after only 2 plus years in office. He is routinely at the bottom of polls of historians rating presidents. He was way over his head, but for better or worse, he activated the leader schema.

On the other end of "greatness" ratings of presidents from Harding is Abraham Lincoln. People's perceptions of Lincoln illustrate schematic construction even more vividly. To the extent that good looks are important in the identification of leaders and at least some heroes, and are part of charisma, Lincoln would seem to start at a distinct disadvantage. He was ugly and he knew it. His looks and demeanor led dashing Union Civil War General George B. McClellan to call him "the original gorilla." When political opponents called Lincoln two-faced, he joked, asking whether anyone could really believe that he would wear the face they saw if he had another. But Lincoln became a hero to many during the war, and in many ways benefited from heroic interpretations of his appearance. Historian Shelby Foote (1958) wrote that "thousands touched him, heard him, saw him at close range and hardly one in all those thousands ever forgot the sight of that tall figure, made taller still by the stovepipe hat and the homely shape of the shawl across the shoulders." The "impression remained . . . imperishable in its singularity – and finally, dear" (p. 803). People worked on the image until it became iconic and heroic.

Lincoln's face, in particular, required cognitive work to fit a hero schema. One Paris editor thought his widely distributed photographs were so ugly that they would set back the Union cause. But a private soldier wrote of Lincoln's appearance in his diary: "None of us to our dying day can forget that countenance. . . . Concentrated in that one great, strong, yet tender face, the agony of the life and death struggle of the hour was revealed as we had never seen it before. With a new understanding, we knew why we were soldiers." According to this writer, Lincoln's appearance accommodated not only attributions of charisma but also the Great Eight heroic traits of Strong, Caring, Resilient, and Inspiring.

2.4. Hero scripts and narratives

If personal traits make up the first part of implicit leadership and implicit hero theories, the second component would then be schemas or scripts about what heroes do. These schemas or scripts often take the form of stories or narratives. Bruner (1989a, 1989b, 1991) argues that narrative structures are children's fundamental way of understanding the world and constructing reality. He claims that children "turn things [they don't

understand] into stories, and when they try to make sense of their life they use the storied version of their experience as the basis for further reflection" (p. 118). Narrative forms or narrative structures are how they understand their worlds. Bruner's and others' writings in Nelson's (1989) book *Narratives From the Crib* show that very young children's narrative language is surprisingly inventive and sophisticated. Children understand their experience through stories. Bruner notes that among other attributes, narratives are marked by events taking place over time; by characters who have goals, beliefs, and values; by unusual events; and by moral implication.

Gardner (1995) argues in *Leading Minds* that narratives are central to leadership. Leaders influence their audiences through stories marked by dynamic tension that unfold over time, and in which leaders and followers together play a central role in achieving an objective. In Gardner's theory, the most important leader narratives are about the identities of the leader and the followers, and the ways they must collaborate. It is the particular burden of leaders, Gardner writes, to help people understand who they are. The leaders' stories explain to followers where they have been, where they are going, and what obstacles lie in the path of getting there. Abraham Lincoln again furnishes an apt example. Lincoln concluded his second inaugural address, often regarded as his greatest speech, by pointing the nation's way forward at the end of the Civil War: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gave us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations." This was typical of Lincoln's rhetoric. In vivid language, he sketched a narrative of a united the country working toward a common cause. In the Gettysburg Address, for example, he spoke of the nation's "unfinished work" and "the great task remaining before us." His language told stories about needing followers to stay engaged in important and noble work to achieve their future goals.

Given the importance of narrative in the way human beings understand their experience and their worlds, it is not surprising that there are compelling narratives about the way heroes behave. Campbell's (1949) classic *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* argues that these rich narratives, and myths more generally, have similar structure across time and place and that they shape universal understandings of heroes. One central element in such stories has the hero venturing forth into strange and supernatural worlds where she or he encounters mysterious forces. There is almost always repeated struggle against these forces. Obstacles appear in numerous and unpredictable forms to test the prospective hero. These obstacles are not only villains and monsters, fires and floods but also internal demons. Typical is lust. In the *Odyssey*, the hero Odysseus has himself tied to the ship's mast so he cannot be drawn to destruction by the Sirens who arouse his sexual passions.

One of the most interesting aspects of hero narratives is that they often involve other characters who guide or assist in a range of different ways. For instance, often an elder provides direction and council as the hero initiates his or her journey into the unknown. The movie *Star Wars* capitalizes on this universal mythological feature in Alec Guinness' character Obi-Wan Kenobi, the kindly white-robed elder who counsels the young hero Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) to "let the force be with you." In sports, manager Leo Durocher served as a veteran guide to baseball heroes Jackie Robinson of the Brooklyn Dodgers and later Willie Mays of the New York Giants. Also, along the mythological journey, other characters, often young helpers or sidekicks, help the struggling hero. In *Star Wars*, Luke Skywalker teams up with Han Solo (Harrison Ford) and Princess Leah (Carrie Fisher). Similarly, Batman has Robin, Don Quixote relies on Sancho Panza, and Ronald Reagan leaned heavily on his wife Nancy to surmount many difficulties during his presidency. She famously commented that women are like teabags, you never know how strong they are until you put them in hot water.

The penultimate phase of the hero narrative is final victory over the dark forces, internal and external, which have repeatedly arrayed themselves against the hero. Again, some other figure may assist. And finally, in most hero myths, the protagonist returns, often with a "boon" to help those originally left behind. For example, Moses returns from Mount Sinai with the word of God. The "thousand faces" Campbell discusses all fit a *monomyth*, a universal narrative structure. It is one that is familiar and easy to understand. It is this universal narrative structure that makes it so easy for children, old and young alike, to understand the concept of hero and to identify heroes of their own.

Campbell's idea of monomyth and the idea of archetype to which we turn next both suggest cross-cultural universal understandings of heroes. Different cultures undoubtedly have different heroes. Our research participants' lists of heroes described earlier clearly reflect narratives of Western culture. However, while people in different societies may have different heroes, our sense is that similar dimensions of competence and morality are common across cultures. This might be a fruitful area for further research.

2.5. Archetypes and the innate mind

Joseph Campbell's work was rooted, among other things, in Freudian psychoanalytic theory and Jung's theory of archetypes. For example, Campbell noted that many hero struggles involve confrontation with father figures, reflecting Oedipal dynamics. In *Star Wars*, Luke Skywalker's chief antagonist, the black-clad mysterious Darth Vader, turns out to be his father. But Jungian influences are also prominent in *Star Wars*. The Obi-Wan Kenobi figure is Jung's archetypical "wise old man." Such figures populate

many hero myths. In writing *Heroes*, we have found ourselves unable to ignore the possibility that narrative structures around heroes, or hero scripts, reflect evolved, inherited Jungian archetypes.

Jung's theory of archetypes implies that schemas, scripts, and narrative structures are not based entirely on experience. Jung argued that a part of our psyche called "the collective unconscious" was a storehouse of latent or potential images based on human evolutionary history. These latent images are the *archetypes*. By referring to these images as latent or potential, Jung meant that they were not initially conscious but could be activated when experience sufficiently matched one of them.

Jung claimed that archetypes have form but not content. This idea is probably best understood as meaning that archetypes, much like schemas, are general outlines or shapes. Hogg (2006) describes prototypes as "context specific, multidimensional fuzzy sets of attributes" (p. 187). That description nicely captures the idea of archetype. While archetypes are very similar to schemas, or prototypes, there are two important differences. Social psychologists typically think of schemas as based on individual experience, not inherited collective experience. Jung (1969) addressed the idea of collective experience as follows: "There are as many archetypes as there are typical situations in life. Endless repetition has engraved these experiences into our psychic constitution, not in the form of images filled with content, but ... only as forms without content, representing merely the possibility of a certain type of perception and action" (p. 48). A second difference between schemas and archetypes is that the latter, when activated, have an affective or emotional valence. We are drawn to or repelled by the activated archetypal images.

These ideas are illustrated well in the Jung's *mother* archetype. Human infants are prepared to see mothering figures, and generally to respond positively, with a clear approach tendency. More generally, human beings pay attention to and are drawn toward or repelled from, objects, persons, and experiences that fit a latent archetypal image. For us, it is important that Jung wrote about a number of archetypes relevant to understanding heroism, including the archetypes of *hero*, *demon*, *magic*, *power*, and *wise old man*. Jung also discussed the ways that archetypal images may be combined. For example, the hero and demon archetypes can both be activated by a leader such as Jim Jones or Adolph Hitler, or fictional characters such as Dracula. Their pull or appeal can stem from the activation of both those archetypes.

The idea that *hero* is an archetype that includes latent images of the looks, traits, and behavior of heroes, as well as the narrative structure of heroism outlined by Campbell, is a compelling psychological possibility. Is there any evidence for such an idea? Although it may be a stretch, research on the mysteries of inherited cognition and natural language (Chomsky, 1986) is extremely suggestive. Infants carefully appraise features of human faces and

show a remarkable ability to discriminate emotional expression in those faces (Klinnert, Campos, Sorce, Emde, & Svedja, 1983). Shortly after birth, infants show a distinct preference for face-like shapes, and after as little as 42 min the ability to imitate facial gestures (Carruthers, Laurence, & Stich, 2005; Johnson & Morton, 1991; Meltzoff & Moore, 1995).

In their book *The Innate Mind* (2005), Carruthers et al. argue for a nativist understanding of the human mind, based in part on discoveries showing that a great deal of cognition is uniform and predictable, and similar across cultures, and that the human mind shares a great deal with other species. In that volume, Marcus (2005) argues that “dozens of experiments have shown that babies come to the world able to think and reason” (p. 23). He cites work by Pinker (1991) and Dehaene (1997) suggesting a “language instinct” and a “number sense.” In short, there is considerable evidence supporting the idea of inherited cognitive capacities that interact with experience to produce the ways mature humans think and construct their worlds. Again, marshaling this evidence to support Jungian archetypes may be too much of a stretch. To us, however, the idea of inherited, universal hero narrative structures that provide a ready basis for adopting heroes seems quite plausible.

2.6. Identifying with heroes

What is the psychological significance or function of our readiness to label a wide range of individuals as heroes? We believe that it reflects the common tendency to identify with certain people as role models or guides for action, particularly moral action. Heroes after all are believed to be inspiring. They potentially energize or at least guide our behavior. Freud made identification an important concept in psychology. He spoke of it in several different ways. At its core, it involved “the assimilation of one ego to another” or one ego coming to resemble another (Freud, 1933; Gamson & Modigliani, 1974, p. 124). The first identifications are typically with parents and form the basis of the superego’s conscience and ego ideal. Later, other identification figures such as educators are chosen as ideal models, who affect the ego more than the superego. All of these persons can become heroes, as our research participants’ listing of heroes reveals.

Following Freud, identification has been considered in several different ways in social psychology. An influential early use of the term is found in Herbert Kelman’s distinctions between three processes of opinion change—compliance, identification, and internalization (Kelman, 1958; Olson & Haynes, 2008). Identification is belief or attitude change based on a self-defining identification with another person such that that person’s opinions are adopted as one’s own in an effort to be more like that individual. The new opinion is based on admiration and lasts as long as the admiration lasts. Steele (1997) discusses identification with task domains as self-defining. This

kind of identification sometimes makes some people vulnerable to stereotype threat. Identifying with tasks or domains of effort, such as achievement in college, can often stem from identifying with another individual who exemplifies success in that domain. They have often been named as heroes.

In sum, human beings have many heroes and vivid narratives detailing the exploits of those heroes. These narratives may be based on archetypical conceptions of what heroes are like and what they do. And the heroes in these narratives of struggle and triumph seem to provide powerful identification figures, which, in turn, can motivate and channel activity toward both achievement and right action. We consider these two aspects of heroism in the next section.



3. PART II. BEHAVING HEROICALLY: MAKING MORAL CHOICES AND ACCOMPLISHING DIFFICULT TASKS

Very few people know the name Irene Sendler. She died at the age of 98 in 2008, the year after she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. (She lost to Al Gore.) Before the year 2000, even fewer had heard of her. But that year, her story was discovered by students at Uniontown High School in Kansas, and became the basis for their play, *Life in a Jar*. In dramatizing Sendler's heroism, these teenagers revealed a woman who illustrates "making moral choices and accomplishing difficult tasks" as powerfully as anyone. Sendler lived in Poland. During World War II, she worked to smuggle Jewish children out of the Warsaw ghetto. Her task was heart wrenching. Parents asked whether she could guarantee their children's safety and return if they turned them over to Sendler. No, she replied, but she could guarantee that they would be killed by Germans if they remained in the ghetto. Sendler developed a complex scheme to place children with adoptive parents, who were also risking their lives, and to maintain records of their placements. Those records were hidden in jars under an apple tree across the street from Nazi headquarters. Sendler was discovered and captured in 1943, and soon condemned to death. Fortunately, her collaborators bribed Nazi guards and she escaped, with two broken legs. Sendler survived the war, recovered the jars, and worked tirelessly to reunite 2500 children with their families. As predicted, most of those families had been killed in the Holocaust.

Stories of heroism like Sendler's, some true, some fictional, play an important role in inspiring others to behave, if not heroically, at least morally and persistently. In this section, we discuss research that helps explain the heroic behavior people admire and sometimes emulate. We start with the fact that people face obstacles. In both real-life and fictional hero narratives, we can distinguish external and internal obstacles. Whatever

kind they are, heroes must overcome them. Ernest Shackleton's famous voyage on *Endurance* provides numerous examples of both kinds. In 1914, Shackleton and a crew of 27 men set out to cross the Antarctic continent. Their ship, *Endurance*, became trapped in the ice. Shackleton's nearly unbelievable heroism cannot be detailed here. But the external obstacles of cold, dark, lack of food and isolation that he and his crew had to overcome were extraordinary. Equally important, Shackleton had to use his leadership abilities to prevent the collapse of morale, overcome conflict among crew members, and counter the hopelessness which would surely have led men to quit and die.

On a lesser scale, many classic experiments in social psychology show how easily external obstacles overwhelm people's capacity to do what they know is right. In Asch's early conformity experiments, only one quarter of the participants possessed fully "a capacity to recover from doubt and reestablish their equilibrium" (Asch, 1955, p. 21). Those few never conformed to the strongly felt majority pressure. It is really not clear how they did it. Milgram (1965) wrote that some obedient subjects in his studies were "unable to invent a response that would free" them from the experimenter's authority. "Many subjects cannot find the specific verbal formula that would enable them to reject" the experimenter's commands (p. 85). In both experiments, people were faced with situations that prevented them from taking the right action they wanted to. It was surprising to both Asch and Milgram that the situations they created were powerful enough to overcome so many people's capacity to resist social influence. Acting decently, never mind heroically, is more difficult than we thought. Similarly, many studies of bystander intervention (Darley & Batson, 1973; Darley & Latane, 1968) show how easily subtle situational circumstances can disrupt people's ability to make good decisions and assume responsibility for helping others. What do psychologists know, in contrast, about the factors that help people overcome obstacles, and to achieve at high levels and act morally?

3.1. Overcoming obstacles to achievement

Early work by McClelland, Atkinson, Clark and Lowell (1953) helps us understand the origins of the motive to achieve. The way parents treat their children is of great importance. McClelland et al. argued that emphasizing initiative and independence, and warmly rewarding efforts toward autonomy, instill higher levels of achievement motivation. Research by Lareau (2003) on "concerted cultivation" makes a similar point. She argues that middle class parents, compared to working class parents, participate in their children's activities, organize much of what they do outside school, model critical thinking, and give children a sense of entitlement, that is, a sense that they can question and press other people, including authority figures, about

what those figures request and suggest. This concerted cultivation prepares their children for success in school settings and in the professions and organizations in which they are apt to find themselves after college.

These approaches help children develop what Erikson (1968) called "a sense of industry," an interest in doing new things and in "being able to make things and make them well and even perfectly" (p. 123). Still, there is a danger in providing too much encouragement for achievement: the undermining of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973). If achievement is "overjustified" by concerted cultivation, there is a possible downside. For the most part, however, these childhood experiences can provide a foundation for "self-efficacy" (Bandura, 1977), one's sense that one has ability in a specific domain. Children develop self-efficacy both from their own successes and from watching how others succeed. The needs for achievement, sense of industry, intrinsic motivation, and self-efficacy can all become important parts of the self-concept and important sources of self-esteem. We want to make the case that the self is importantly involved in levels of achievement, and eventually, perhaps, even heroic behavior.

A very good place to start exploring the role of the self in achievement is James' (1892) theory of people's different selves and how they contribute to a person's overall self-esteem. One of the James' most important ideas was that of multiple selves: "*A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind.*" Furthermore, although people have "many possible selves or characters," they cannot actually *be* all of them, in part because the characters might conflict. ("The millionaire's work would run counter to the saints; . . . the philosopher and the lady-killer could not well keep house in the same tenement of clay.") Consequently, as Steele (1997) quotes in his well-known paper "A Threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance," James argues that "the seeker of his truest, strongest, deepest self must review the list carefully, and pick out the one on which to seek his salvation." The experiences of this self matter: "its failures are real failures, its triumphs real triumphs. . . ." The choices one makes about her or his important selves have complex consequences for self-esteem. In one of his most famous quotes, James goes on "So we have the paradox of a man shamed to death because he is only the second pugilist or the second oarsman in the world." He has pitted himself to be number one and anything less makes him feel "as if he were not, indeed he *is* not" (pp. 186–187).

A solution to feeling this kind of loss of self-esteem, indeed loss of self, is to alter one's chosen selves and their corresponding aspirations. The oarsman, for example, may decide not to "carry that line," as the merchants say, of self at all." In other words, people can disidentify with the activity corresponding to that line of self. Since self-esteem results, James argues,

from the ratio of success to pretensions, and "may be increased as well by diminishing the denominator as by increasing the numerator," self-esteem can be raised by giving up certain selves and the activities and endeavors they prescribe. If being an academically competent college student, for example, is one such self, and one falls short of relevant aspirations, then giving up, or disidentifying, may straightforwardly follow. Such disidentification may happen following conscious deliberation, or it may reflect automatic self-maintenance routines that occur without much, if any, self-awareness.

For Steele, this kind of disidentification can follow from stereotype threat. For African-American college students, for example, such threat applies to "the vanguard" for whom academic achievement is important, and a significant piece of their identity. For those students, fear that they will confirm the stereotype that African Americans are not intellectually able is an added source of stress which can diminish performance and lead to underperforming their own aspirations. To defend their self-esteem, they may then lower their aspirations, even to the extent of deciding not to "carry that line" of self any longer. The good news might be that a concern about confirming the stereotype is no longer a source of stress. The bad news would be that they stop trying. They may even internalize the stereotype, but not let it bother them. A potential hero to other young African Americans is lost.

Stereotype threat is clearly a significant problem. Fortunately, recent work on another concept developed by Steele (1988), *self-affirmation*, suggests that a different self-related process can significantly counter it. Sherman and Cohen (2006) and their colleagues (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006) have shown that rather small self-affirmation interventions for African-American school children can have large effects on their academic achievement. Self-affirmation, accomplished by having children list their values and explain why their most important ones are highly significant for them, seems to reduce stereotype threats and the possible recursive cycle of failure and disidentification that follows. Another promising line of work is Dweck's (2002) research on people's self-theories of intelligence. Individuals differ in whether they tend to think that intelligence is fixed, that it is primarily genetic and stable versus believing that it is malleable, such that intellectual achievement is largely determined by effort. Parents who praise their children's success in some domain by saying that they must be very good at it encourage a belief that ability levels in that domain are fixed. Parents who praise the same successes by telling their children that they must have tried hard encourage the belief that the relevant ability is malleable and that it can be developed through hard work. In short, an affirmed self, which includes the belief that one's intelligence is malleable and can be improved by effort, can help maintain the hard work that can lead to high levels of accomplishment and heroic achievement.

Self-related processes can influence achievement motivation in another way. For several decades, Higgins and his colleagues (Higgins, 1987, 1998; Higgins, Kruglanski, & Pierro, 2003) have explored self-guides that influence achievement-related behavior. Their work distinguishes *ought* versus *ideal* self-guides. Ought self-guides dispose people to act according to their beliefs about what they should do, or what their obligations and responsibilities are. Ideal self-guides dispose them to think about what they would ideally like to be, and their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. When ought self-guides direct behavior, people become more concerned with preventing disaster, and with responsibility, protection, and safety. Their mode of self-governance is "assessment," where they study situations carefully in order to avoid mistakes. They endorse statements such as "let the buyer beware" and "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." When ideal self-guides are operative, people focus on advancement, growth, and accomplishment. Their mode of self-governance is "locomotion," getting things done. They want to move, achieve, and get into "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), a state of channeled and almost joyous immersion in a task. They are more likely to say "if at first you don't succeed, try, try again," and "never put off till tomorrow what you can do today."

These two self-governance modes are nicely illustrated by Cervantes's fictional pair Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Quixote wants to move, to strike out for virtue, literally and figuratively "tilting at windmills." Sancho is realistic and cautious, trying to tell his boss to assess the situation before venturing forth. Sometimes, his wisdom comes to good effect. Higgins et al. argue that Quixote's locomotion self-guide is more likely to foster achievement. People governed by locomotion are active, decisive, open to ideas, and highly involved in their work. They worry less about what other people think of them, and they are more likely to bend the rules. Conventional moral standards count for very little. They want to get things done, whatever it takes.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt is consistently rated as one of the "greatest" American presidents. To many, he is a hero. He clearly illustrates the locomotion mode of self-governance. Political scientist Barber (1992) described Roosevelt's character as "active-positive," as a personality grounded in secure self-esteem and oriented toward action, innovation, and improvisation. FDR said he couldnot be expected to get a hit every time at bat, but that one must keep plugging. In tackling the Great Depression of the 1930s, he kept experimenting and kept pushing forward. A similar heroic example is John Stevens, one of the chief engineers of the Panama Canal. Stevens was an inspiring doer. Like Roosevelt, he was extremely action oriented. He told canal workers "you won't get fired if you do something, you will get fired if you don't do anything." Known as "Big Smoke," he stressed that you can correct something that is wrong, "but there is no way to correct nothing" (McCullough, 1977, p. 469).

The active-positive, locomotive stance fits the hero schema much better than that of the cautious assessor. However, research reported by Higgins et al. (2003) also shows that although locomotion provides the drive for achievement, achievement itself depends on behavior reflecting both ideal and ought self-guides, combining locomotion with assessment. The finding that the locomotion orientation can involve ignoring social norms and prevailing morals is cautionary. Sometimes, heroism is simply exceptional accomplishment. But more often, people are heroes because they do the right thing. Why do people act morally, often at great cost to themselves?

3.2. Moral thought and moral behavior

Roger Brown's classic *Social Psychology* (1965) highlighted crucial distinctions between moral feelings, moral thought, and moral behavior. Our ultimate concern here is the moral behavior that typically defines heroic action. However, we need to consider how moral feeling and moral thought foster that behavior. Freud (1933) argued that moral feelings come from the *superego*, which makes people feel guilty when their behavior, or even their thoughts, violate the dictates of the *conscience*, and feel pride and self-satisfaction when their behavior approaches the standards of the *ego ideal*. As noted, the key process in forming the superego, according to Freud, is identification, usually with the superego of the same-sex parent. But Freud also noted that identification continues throughout life. Likely identification figures include heroes and leaders whose behavior inspires both high levels of achievement-oriented engagement and moral choice.

Kohlberg (1969; Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977) contributed a great deal to our understanding of moral thought. As with identification parents and other significant community figures help shape such thinking. But Kohlberg was much more focused on cognitive development than on the psychosocial development that leads to identification. Particularly important for Kohlberg is Piaget's research (Piaget, 1932; Piaget & Inhelder, 1948) showing that as children pass through stages of cognitive development, they become less egocentric and more capable of looking at things from other people's perspectives. Egocentrism declines precipitously during the stage Piaget called "preoperational," roughly ages 2–7. By the next stage, called "concrete operations," roughly age 7 to adolescence, egocentrism has disappeared, and children begin to consider events and their surroundings from other people's perspectives. They realize, for example, that a landscape will look different to a person standing in a different place than they are. By the time adolescents reach the final stage of cognitive development, "formal operations," they can understand multiple perspectives.

Kohlberg believed that increases in the cognitive ability to take other people's perspectives enabled their progression through stages of moral development. He distinguished three levels. The first level of moral development is

the “preconventional level.” Here, children are focused on punishment and reward. Their behavior is shaped by its consequences, rewards and punishments, and they think that what they are punished for is morally bad and what they are rewarded for is morally good. Consistent with Piaget’s idea of egocentrism, children at the preconventional level of morality focus on themselves, “What’s in it for me?” Later, children move to the “conventional level,” where they focus on what others in salient groups believe and what society’s norms are. They want to be thought of as a good boy or girl by their peers, and they come to respect authority figures and value law and order. In the conventional level, the focus moves from individual needs to what significant others, especially authorities, define as moral.

Kohlberg believed that few people ever develop beyond conventional morality, and move forward to his “postconventional” level. However, depending on their experience, they might be pushed or pulled to think seriously about other people’s needs and perspectives. If that happens, they develop a greater capacity for empathy. Leadership scholars focusing on “authentic leadership” (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005) describe “trigger events,” or “road to Damascus” moments, that cause people to think deeply about their values, especially in relation to the perspectives and experiences of others. Such moments often provoke a process of value clarification and lead ultimately to postconventional morality and heroic action. In many cases, traumatic experience serves as a trigger event. In discussing his book *Surviving Hell: A POW’s Journey*, Medal of Honor recipient, Leo Thorsness (2008) talked about parachuting after being ejected from his crippled jet fighter over Vietnam in 1967. As he floated to the ground, not knowing whether he would live or die, he thought about what was really important to him and focused on the values he would fight for should he ever return to the United States. (Thorsness also told of an acquaintance of who was planning to take a year off from work to figure out what his life was all about. Thorsness suggested that there was a much quicker way to find out.)

Trigger events can also come from acknowledging the meaning of an experience that took place long in the past rather than something in the moment. An interesting fictional example occurs in the film *Gran Torino*. The character Walt Kowalski squarely faces the fact that during the Korean War he killed innocent civilians, not because he was ordered to but because he lost his self-control and vented his frustration, anger, and aggression on defenseless people who happened to be in the way. That acknowledgment fortified his determination to make up for the past by protecting his Asian neighbors, even at risk of being killed in gang warfare.

Regardless of what generates such meaningful thinking, people who engage in it sometimes reach Kohlberg’s “postconventional level” of morality. They both think about a social contract with other people and strive to clarify their own moral ideals based on universal values and ethical principles

such as justice, equality of human rights, and the dignity of individuals. These principles take people far beyond selfish concerns or even group and societal norms to an abiding concern for the welfare of all other human beings. This is the level at which the moral behavior of heroes becomes most likely.

Although Kohlberg outlines one route by which people awaken to the needs of others, altruistic behavior may have simpler, more direct origins. Like archetypes, could morality have an evolutionary basis? Pinker (2008) suggests a "moral instinct" that can lead very young children to try to help and comfort others. In "Morality: An Evolutionary Account," Krebs (2008) also suggests an essentially moral instinct. He argues that "cooperative and altruistic behaviors and moral virtues have evolved in humans" because they help groups to flourish. Such "moral virtues are attractive to potential mates" (the virtues suggest that offspring will be well looked after), so altruism can increase reproductive success. This perspective helps explain some remarkable instances of spontaneous altruistic behavior. For example, on January 13, 1982, Air Florida Flight 90 ditched in the Potomac River after taking off from Washington, DC's National Airport. A bystander, Lenny Skutnik, dove into the frozen river to help a woman grab a lifeline. Arland Williams, a passenger who survived the crash, aided the escape of one person after another. He lost his own life in the effort. Sophisticated moral thought often underlies heroic behavior, but sometimes people just do the right thing without a great deal of deliberation.

3.3. Self-regulation and heroic behavior

Research on an evolutionary basis for altruism and moral behavior more generally underlines Brown's (1965) important distinction between moral thought and moral behavior. Sometimes moral behavior occurs without a great deal of thought, and at the same time, moral thinking does not guarantee what Kohlberg called "right action." Among other things, doing the right thing may often require significant measures of psychologically effortful self-control.

Recent research on self-control or willpower (Baumeister & Tierney, 2011; Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007) details some of the internal obstacles to both moral behavior and exceptional achievement. Often doing the right or effortful thing requires inhibition, that is, restraining or overriding one response (e.g., starting an illicit affair, giving up on a frustrating task) to perform another one. As Freud wrote many years ago, inhibiting one tempting response to perform a more moral or more effective one requires what Baumeister et al. call "executive control." Using an energy model similar to ones outlined in psychoanalytic theory, they suggest that self-control, like a muscle, can weary and wear out. As predicted by the model, people who have recently been required to exercise self-control in one

situation exhibit less self-control in a later one. For example, Richeson and Shelton (2003) showed that white students who had talked about racial politics with a person of a different race, compared to white students who discussed the same topic with another white person, then performed less well on the effortful Stroop task. The students in the mixed-race condition had to exercise self-control to avoid giving offense and showed classic signs of ego depletion. In a similar study, subjects who had to resist the temptation to eat chocolates, and ate radishes instead, gave up more quickly on a frustrating task than did control subjects.

Baumeister et al. have extended their "strength model of self-control," which emphasizes that the self-control "muscle" can become fatigued, to suggest ways that ego depletion can be countered. One is practice. Working out one's self-control capacity, like exercising any other ability (without overwhelming it), can improve one's overall ego strength and lead to better long-term self-control. This, in turn, can lead to an enhanced capacity for high levels of achievement and right action. The authors suggest, for example, that striving to alter verbal behavior, such as not saying "like" so much, or performing simple tasks with one's nondominant hand, can improve overall self-control. If self-control is a muscle, we need to think about ways to strengthen it.

Research on inhibition and self-control has given rise to a number of theories about the nature of self-regulation and ways to improve it. A recent review of the literature by Fujita (2011) argues that the effortful inhibition of impulses is not all that is involved in adaptive, moral, competent, and possibly heroic, behavior. Fujita argues that self-control is "the process of advancing distal rather than proximal motivations when the two compete" (p. 352) and that effortful impulse inhibition is only one way to accomplish that goal. For example, he discusses ways people can organize their lives to avoid temptations and ways they can automatize or routinize self-control procedures so that putting aside temptations is not so effortful, and they can then "multitask." Another means of self-control is cognitive reconstrual, whereby temptations are thought of more abstractly, for example, a pretzel is construed as an object in a picture frame. This work does not undermine the impulse inhibition approach but suggests that there are a variety of ways that people can learn to exercise more effective and adaptive self-control.

A further element in self-regulation, perhaps more relevant to achievement than morality, is "situated optimism" (Armor & Taylor, 1998). Armor and Taylor offer an extensive discussion of the ways optimistic expectations for specific endeavors can be "expressed strategically, being somewhat more extreme in situations where they are less likely to be disconfirmed, but more modest in situations in which the potential for disconfirmation is great" (p. 310). That is, carefully controlled optimism not only can energize effective behavior in a highly adaptive way but also be calibrated to avoid devastating disappointment, personal endangerment, and wasted effort.

3.4. The foundations of heroic behavior

Through their lists of heroes and the reasons they offer to explain their heroism, people tell us that heroic action consists of highly competent or highly moral behavior, or a strong combination of both. We have seen that self-related processes such as achievement motivation, self-efficacy, self-theories of intelligence, self-guides, and self-affirmation can energize and direct resilient commitment and effort toward competent achievement. At the same time, self-protective tendencies such as disidentification alert us to factors such as stereotype threat that can undermine effort and achievement. Then, whether people's efforts are expended in moral pursuits depends both on moral thinking and on the capacity to continue working toward difficult moral goals in the face of temptations to just quit, or worse. As noted earlier, Abraham Lincoln, a moral and persevering hero himself, offered us all some good advice: "... with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in"



4. PART III: NEEDING AND SHAPING HEROES

In this section, we review the psychological processes underlying people's need for heroes. We argue that heroes fulfill important physical, emotional, and existential needs and that the mental construction and shaping of heroes occurs in the service of satisfying these needs.

4.1. Why we need heroes

Very few scholars have addressed the question of why people need heroes. We have argued previously that there is considerable overlap between great leadership and heroism (Allison & Goethals, 2011). Theories of leadership emphasize the role of leadership in providing followers with security, direction, inclusion, identity, and group pride (e.g., Burns, 2003; Conger & Riggio, 2006; Messick, 2005). In short, an effective leader helps groups survive, achieve their goals, and feel good about themselves. The greatest and most heroic leaders, whom Burns (1978) calls transformational, are true visionaries who transform both their groups and themselves in such a way that their followers are inspired to become heroic as well. In short, groups and organizations need heroes to survive and to thrive at the level of both the individual and the collective.

Existentialists have argued that people need heroes for reasons that go beyond pride and performance. To understand this perspective, we turn to the seminal work of Becker (1971, 1973), whose contributions have inspired a voluminous amount of research on terror management theory

(Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszcynski, 1997; Pyszcynski, Solomon, Greenberg, & Maxfield, 2006; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszcynski, 2012). It was Becker's thesis that among all animals, human beings are unique in their awareness of the inevitability of their own death, and that this awareness is terrifying. To mitigate the terror, people create a life of meaning—a heroic life—that honors their society's most cherished values. In this way, people achieve a type of symbolic immortality, creating something great that will last forever.

Becker also emphasized the role of social support in the creation of heroism. He theorized that people realize that true heroes are a rare breed whose feats require social validation. As such, most human beings are all too aware of their limited ability to receive heroic recognition from others. Becker noted that "man simply cannot justify his own heroism; he cannot fit himself into his own cosmic plan and make it believable" (Becker, 1973, p. 196). The awareness of the importance of believability directs people to seek out true heroism in the extraordinary behavior of others. A meaningful life, therefore, can be achieved by revering the lives of individuals who are viewed as exemplifying the noblest forms of behavior.

Becker also invoked the psychoanalytic principle of *transference* to explain people's tendencies toward hero worship. Transference is the unconscious redirection of feelings from one person to another. The phenomenon was first identified by Freud to explain his patients' deification or demonization of him, patterns that Freud termed "positive" and "negative" transference, respectively (Freud, 1914). Freud believed that these strong feelings directed toward him were unconsciously expressed feelings of love or hate for a parent figure. Becker suggested that these same processes operate in perceptions of heroism and villainy, with positive transference explaining hero worship and negative transference explaining villain hatred (Becker, 1973; Scimecca, 1979).

4.2. Identification with struggle

Struggle is a central, inescapable part of the human experience. It is a pervasive theme in virtually all human storytelling, including the earliest epic tales in human history. The *Aeneid* tells the story of Aeneas brave journey from Troy to Italy and the founding of the Roman Empire. The African epic of *Sundiata* tells the similar story of Sundiata's great triumph over adversity in establishing the Mali Empire. In Mesopotamian mythology, *Gilgamesh* chronicles the story of a king who overcomes many supernatural challenges to build the great city of Uruk. These and many similar stories demonstrate that humans across time and from all corners of the globe have been enamored with the hero who suffers deeply to accomplish something noble and great.

The inspirational life of Terry Fox illustrates the power of struggle in shaping our thoughts, feelings, and behavior. In 1979, Fox was just an

average Canadian college student working toward a degree at Simon Fraser University. He was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, a rare form of bone cancer, in his leg. As Fox underwent painful treatments, including a leg amputation, he was disheartened to learn how little money was dedicated to cancer research. After Fox was fitted for a prosthetic leg, he decided to do something extraordinary to raise awareness and money for research. He would run across Canada, a distance of 5000 miles. "I was determined to take myself to the limit for this cause," he said (Scrivener, 2000).

During the first few weeks of his run, he received scant attention from the media. On more than one occasion, annoyed drivers almost ran him off the road. But Fox, a fine natural athlete, ran with remarkable determination. Stunningly, he averaged 26 miles per day, the equivalent of a daily marathon. The physical demands took its toll on Fox's body. He suffered shin splints, an inflamed knee, cysts on his stump, and dizzy spells. But, as the weeks went by, his incredible run began to capture Canada's attention. People were awed by Fox's courage, audacity, and gritty tolerance of pain to achieve his dream of finding a cure for cancer. As Fox passed the halfway point across Canada, it appeared that nothing would stop him from making it to British Columbia.

Unfortunately, the spread of cancer in Fox's body did stop him. Fox had run for 143 days and traveled 3339 miles. But he was simply in too much pain to complete his journey. After conferring with doctors, he held a tearful press conference at which he announced that his cancer had spread to his lungs. He died a few short months later at the age of 22. By the time of Fox's passing, his extraordinary story had galvanized Canada to raise money to fight cancer. Shortly after Fox's death, Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau addressed the nation: "It occurs very rarely in the life of a nation that the courageous spirit of one person unites all people in the celebration of his life and in the mourning of his death . . . We do not think of him as one who was defeated by misfortune but as one who inspired us with the example of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity" (Scrivener, 2000). Today, Fox's heroic status in Canada is unquestioned. A 1999 national survey named him as the nation's greatest hero. The annual *Terry Fox Run*, involving millions of participants, raises millions of additional dollars for cancer research.

Fictional superheroes also inspire us with their extraordinary struggles and ability to triumph over them (Irwin, 2011). Superheroes experience at least three different types of struggle. First, the prototypical origin story of the superhero features great pain and hardship, usually in the form of childhood trauma. We bestow heroic status to those who overcome severe childhood setbacks and use them to serve the greater good. Second, all superheroes have a unique weakness or Achilles heel that renders them vulnerable. The vulnerability can be in the form of a destructive substance or emotion, and the superhero must overcome this chronic shortcoming to

perform noble acts. Third, all superheroes encounter exceptionally evil, cunning villains whom they must defeat. We become captivated and inspired by the superhero whose struggles in these three areas reveal great resilience, character, and accomplishment (Allison & Goethals, 2011).

As noted, the obstacles that heroes struggle with come in many different forms. Experimental psychologists have tended to show greater interest in *social* obstacles than in *physical* ones. The seminal works of Asch (1955), Milgram (1965), Zimbardo (1974), and Darley and Latane (1968) have identified a multitude of social forces that inhibit heroic activity. Asch focused on conformity pressures, Milgram on blind obedience to authority, Zimbardo on the power of social roles, and Darley and Latane on the tendencies of group members to diffuse responsibility. The results of these studies reveal that overcoming social pressures can seemingly be just as formidable a task as overcoming the most daunting physical obstacles.

Heroes somehow overcome hidden forces that discourage heroic acts. Social pressures do not deter them. Consider the participants in Asch's study who failed to conform, the subjects in Milgram's study who refused to apply painful electric shocks, the prison guards in Zimbardo's study who treated the prisoners well, and the participants in Latane and Darley's experiments who helped victims in emergencies. We argue that all of these individuals displayed *moral courage*—an important component of heroism—in their willingness to defy social forces operating to deter them from doing the right thing. Morally, courageous individuals are challenged to perform the morally correct action in the face of popular opposition and possible risk to personal reputation or financial standing. The most prominent social category associated with morally courageous persons is the *whistleblowers* who expose their organizations' unethical practices at great risk to their own well-being (Johnson, 2002).

The results of several experiments suggest that we sympathize and identify with such people who struggle to achieve a difficult goal (Allison & Burnette, 2009; Allison & Goethals, 2008; Kim et al., 2008). This research focuses on perceptions of disadvantaged social entities and underdogs (Kim et al., 2008; Vandello, Goldschmied, & Richards, 2007). It is of interest to note that most social psychological theory and research has focused on the human tendency to associate with winners and successful others (Cialdini et al., 1976). Downtrodden underdogs, ironically, have a similar appeal (Kim et al., 2008). Stories about underdogs seem to touch something deep in the human psyche (Spencer, 1873). People, animals, and even inanimate objects that face difficult challenges, against a strong opponent or a demanding situation, stir us emotionally (Allison & Goethals, 2008).

Why might people identify with underdogs? The results of numerous studies suggest that it is the *struggle* of the underdog with which we identify (Allison & Goethals, 2008; Kim et al., 2008). Underdogs struggle because

they are, by definition, disadvantaged. Our research has shown that underdogs struggle with being young, small, or historically unsuccessful. We argue that people's sensitivity to struggle stems from the Jungian concept of the *hero* archetype, which underscores the appeal of people who triumph over their struggles (Jung & von Franz, 1964). As with all archetypes, the hero archetype reflects millions of years of evolution during which humans and their ancestors struggled on many levels, including the areas of survival, subsistence, and reproduction. We identify with struggle precisely because we *know* struggle, both firsthand at the level of personal experience, and also at the deeper archetypal level.

Research has shown that underdogs who conquer their struggles are likely to be viewed as heroes. In one study, Allison and Heilborn (2011, Study 1) gave participants descriptions of business and political leaders and experimentally manipulated the biographical backgrounds of the leaders, with half the participants learning that the leaders endured an impoverished upbringing (underdog condition) and the other half learning that the leaders enjoyed an affluent upbringing (top dog condition). Although participants did not differ in their ratings of the basic competence of underdog and top dog leaders, they did differ significantly on measures of sympathy and inspiration. Specifically, participants reported that they sympathized more with underdog leaders than with top dog leaders, and that they viewed the underdog leaders as more heroic than top dog leaders. In addition, participants were significantly more inspired by the underdog leaders, more motivated to work for underdog leaders, more inspired by the underdog leader's vision, and more convinced that the underdog leaders would achieve long-term success.

Allison and Heilborn (2011, Study 2) also asked a different group of 50 participants to generate lists of real-world underdog and top dog leaders. The underdog leader most frequently mentioned was Muhammad Ali, and the top dog leader most frequently listed was Bill Gates. The 10 underdog and top dog leaders mentioned most often were then rated by other participants on dimensions of sympathy, liking, respect, competence, inspiration, and heroism. The results showed that, compared to the group of top dog leaders, the group of underdog leaders was significantly more sympathized with, liked, respected, inspiring, and heroic.

The results of several studies suggest that all underdogs—leaders as well as nonleaders—are perceived to have inspiring and heroic qualities. Kim et al. (2008, Study 1) found that people are significantly more likely to show affection for, root for, and sympathize with many types of underdog entities (e.g., athletes, artists, and businesses) as compared to top dog entities. Yet, it is important to note that increased liking for the underdog does not translate into increased perceived competence in the underdog. Although people were more likely to root for an underdog artist than for a top dog artist in an upcoming competition, they judged the top dog artist's painting to be

superior in quality to that of the underdog (Kim et al., Study 2). Importantly, we have found in a follow-up study that this negative view of the quality of underdogs' work is limited to perceptions of quality *before* the outcome of a competition is known. When people are asked to judge the quality of underdog and top dog work *after* the successful outcome of a competition, we discovered that people judge underdogs' work as superior to that of top dogs. These findings suggest that although underdogs are better liked and more inspiring than top dogs, they must prove themselves worthy of our admiration by triumphing over their obstacles. In short, heroism is borne out of a successful outcome coupled with underdog status.

One of our most revealing studies underscored the psychologically powerful effect of underdogs on judgments of hero-like qualities (Kim et al., 2008, Study 3). Employing a methodology reminiscent of that used by Heider and Simmel (1944), the study involved showing participants video clips of animated shapes that appeared to chase or bump other shapes. Heider and Simmel's participants inferred causality from the movement of these shapes and also assigned dispositional attributes to the shapes as a result of their behavior toward each other. The beauty of Heider and Simmel's work is that it illustrated just how pervasive and natural the attribution process is, emerging in judgments of simple lifeless objects. Kim et al. presented their participants with moving shapes to determine whether people naturally bestow underdog status and underdog qualities upon geometric shapes that appear to struggle more than others. The study included four conditions: (1) a single nonstruggling circle rolling at a steady speed along a flat line and then over a bump; (2) a single struggling circle, as shown in Fig. 4.1, rolling at a steady pace until the bump, and then slowing and nearly stopping before going over the top of the bump; (3) a struggling circle together with a benign nonstruggling circle that simply passes the struggling circle; and (4) a struggling circle together with a "malicious" nonstruggling circle that appeared to intentionally bump the struggling circle backwards. The results of this study showed that people showed more liking and emotional support for a single struggling circle than for a single nonstruggling circle. This finding suggests that simply an entity's struggle is enough to endear it to people, even when the entity is alone. Kim et al. also found that introducing a social context heightened participants' emotional feelings for the struggling entity, such that participants were especially likely to harbor strong positive feelings for a struggling



Figure 4.1 A circle appearing to struggle as it traverses a bump on a computer screen.

entity when paired with a nonstruggling one. Finally, the strongest underdog effect emerged when participants viewed a struggling shape whose progress toward achieving its apparent goal was overtly thwarted by a nonstruggling shape. The results of this study make a compelling case that our need to see heroic traits in any entity, even a simple circular shape, is deeply ingrained in us. If an entity, living or otherwise, seems to struggle to succeed, we are moved and inspired by it.

In summary, the results of several studies suggest that successful underdogs are viewed as highly respected and inspirational leaders and heroes. Successful underdogs derive their appeal from their resilience in attempting to overcome difficult situations. Underdogs who prevail over their circumstances and later achieve great success have earned our affection and admiration, and they are judged to be inspiring leaders and heroes. The underdog phenomenon is such a powerful part of our thinking that we anthropomorphically ascribe human traits of courage and strength to lifeless objects that resemble heroic underdogs.

4.3. The fragility of underdog heroism

While reporting the results of several studies demonstrating people's love for underdogs, Kim et al. (2008) offer an important caveat: The underdog phenomenon is "a mile wide and an inch deep" (p. 2566). People's love for underdogs is limited and qualified by several factors. First, we tend to give underdogs our support only when their fate has minimal impact on us or others (Kim et al., Study 4). For example, we are more likely to pull for underdogs in the sports world than in other contexts that have more far-reaching consequences, such as in the business or political worlds. Second, we only show love for underdogs when they expend maximum effort to perform at their highest level. When the underdogs are perceived to be coasting, we switch our allegiance to the top dog (Allison & Burnette, 2009). Third, we love underdogs the most when they have an unlikely—but not impossible—chance to prevail. A small but reasonable possibility of success is apparently necessary to assure us of a sufficiently high emotional payoff if the underdog triumphs (Allison & Goethals, 2011). Finally, as mentioned earlier, people's love for underdogs does not translate into respect. For example, Kim et al. (Study 2) not only found that people root for underdogs but also believe that underdogs produce work that is inferior to that of top dogs. Only after underdogs prevail do we judge their work to be meritorious and heroic.

4.4. How we shape heroes

As noted earlier, Messick (2005) offered a theory of effective leadership that included the familiar idea that leaders give followers security, vision, inclusion, and pride. Messick went beyond this basic framework by emphasizing

the reciprocal nature of the relationship between leaders and followers. Leaders provide direction; in return, followers give leaders their focus. Leaders offer security and protection; in exchange, followers give leaders their gratitude and loyalty. Leaders give followers group achievements; in return, followers offer their commitment and effort. Leaders give followers a feeling of belongingness; in return, followers cooperate and sacrifice. Leaders instill a sense of group pride; in exchange, followers give the leader respect and obedience. Messick's model makes the point that heroes do not perform their heroic work in a social vacuum. Some types of heroes, particularly leaders of social movements, need their followers as much as their followers need them.

Messick (2005) does not suggest that these exchanges are formally discussed and agreed upon, as might occur in a business relationship. Instead, these exchanges are usually uncalculated, spontaneous, and unpremeditated. They emerge naturally and implicitly. Messick also argues that the exchange is the *result*, not the *goal*, of leadership. Moreover, for the exchange relationship to work, leaders must show *benevolence* and *objectivity* in their dealings with their followers. Do all leaders who follow this exchange relationship successfully become heroes? Not necessarily. For the vision to be heroic, it must be noble, courageous, creative, groundbreaking, and risky (Allison & Goethals, 2011). Martin Luther King's vision for a color-blind America is a more heroic vision than the psychology department chairperson's vision of a well-run psychology department. Still, given the right vision, Messick's model does provide a nice model of the dynamic social relationship between heroes of social movements and their followers.

One of the important takeaways of Messick's (2005) theory is its emphasis on the idea of followers influencing leaders as much as leaders influencing followers. Of all the ways that followers influence and shape leaders, we believe that the most important form of shaping takes place in followers' heads. As we have argued earlier, powerful schemas and scripts about the heroic narrative influence perceivers' judgments about the heroic qualities of target individuals. These heroic narratives, derived possibly from the Jungian hero archetype, provide information about the kinds of actions that perceivers associate with heroes and heroism. Thus, when a target individual performs such an action, perceivers may be predisposed to conclude that the target is heroic.

4.5. Death makes the hero

A striking example of a powerful element of the heroic script is the idea that a great hero sacrifices his or her life for a great cause. The inclusion of death in a narrative may therefore lead to biased judgments of heroism. To test this idea, Allison, Eylon, Beggan, and Bachelder (2009) asked participants to

form judgments about the heroic qualities of a rather ordinary North American who worked at a bank. Half the participants were told that this person was currently alive, whereas the other half were informed that he had recently died. The cause of death was not revealed. Allison et al. found that participants who believed that the banker had died formed significantly more favorable evaluations of him than did participants who believed that the banker was alive. The dead banker was judged as more likable, inspiring, respected, and successful than the living banker. The description of the banker in both the living and the dead conditions was identical, yet the dead banker was viewed as possessing more heroic qualities. Allison et al. called this phenomenon the *death positivity bias*.

We propose that people associate death with greatness. This association explains why eulogies delivered at funerals tend to exaggerate the positive qualities of the deceased, and why we observe moments of silence at public gatherings even for people we have neither met nor heard of (Allison et al., 2009). When valuable members of society die, they are honored in many tangible ways. Monuments and shrines are built; stamps and coins bear their likeness; roads and buildings are named after them; and statues are constructed. The most powerful heroic script contains the idea that the hero dies in the service of a great cause. This script is reinforced by our awareness that some of our society's greatest heroes have been assassinated. The list of assassinated luminaries is depressingly long: Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Anwar Sadat, John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lennon, and many others.

Simonton (1994) has conducted many thorough studies of the factors that determine the perceived greatness of U.S. Presidents. His morbid finding is that getting assassinated truly helps a president gain stature as a great leader. Simonton concludes that getting assassinated adds about as much to a former president's greatness rating as serving 5 years in office or leading the nation through 4 years of war. His data also show that for an assassination attempt to improve a president's reputation, it has to be successful. Failed assassination attempts do nothing to elevate our impressions of presidents.

The cause of death does not have to be assassination for the reputation benefit to occur. An especially intriguing illustration is the story Missouri governor Melvin Carnahan, who was elected to the U.S. Senate on November 7, 2000. Ordinarily, there is nothing noteworthy about such an election, except in this instance it was well known on election day that Carnahan had died in a plane crash 3 weeks earlier. Even more extraordinary was the fact that Carnahan was trailing his opponent by several percentage points in opinion polls prior to the plane crash. Polls clearly showed that his popularity soared as a result of his death, enabling him to be elected posthumously. As Carnahan was obviously unable to serve, his wife was appointed to fill the position.

Death by natural causes also can help a person's reputation. In June of 2004, the death of former U.S. President Ronald Reagan triggered an outpouring of praise and admiration from former political allies and adversaries alike. These tributes caught many of Reagan's detractors by surprise. Media coverage of Reagan became significantly more positive after his death than during his tenure as president. Shortly after Reagan's death, a Gallup poll ranked him as the second best U.S. President, trailing only Abraham Lincoln. We suspect that Reagan's reputation was boosted not only from his death but also from the way he died. For many years prior to his death, Reagan's battle against Alzheimer's disease, perceived as brave and heroic by many, attracted much sympathy and admiration.

In a series of studies, Allison et al. (2009) tested the limits of the death positivity bias. Does death elevate our impressions of people whom we believe were incompetent or immoral? Participants in one study learned of a man who managed a company very well. This competent person hired good employees, made wise investment decisions, and earned the company a good profit. Other participants were told that the man managed the company very poorly; he hired bad employees, made foolish investment decisions, and ran the company into a deficit. The results showed that participants displayed the death positivity bias for both the competent and incompetent manager. It apparently does not matter if a person is inept. He or she will still be liked more dead than alive.

In another study (Allison et al., 2009; Experiment 3), participants were informed of a manager who consistently made ethical choices his entire career. He was careful in disposing of toxic waste; he gave his employees generous salaries and benefits; and he gave generously to charities. Other participants learned about an unethical manager who dumped toxic waste illegally, underpaid his employees, and actually stole from charitable organizations. The results showed that the death positivity bias was replicated for the moral manager: A dead moral manager was viewed as more likeable and inspiring than a living moral manager. But for immorality, the *reverse* pattern emerged. A dead immoral manager was viewed as *less* likeable than a living immoral manager. Death appears to intensify whichever evaluative tendency we have of others based on what we know about their moral character. Upon death, a good person is seen as better and a bad person is seen as worse.

Allison and Goethals (2011) speculate that people intuitively recognize that when we form evaluations of the dead, a person's basic goodness is more important than what particular skills he or she had. We are aware that one's ability level is only partly under one's control. Thus even an inept person is deserving of at least a pat on the back upon his or her death. A person's morality, however, is viewed quite differently. Morality is a choice, completely under one's control, and it appears to define a person's final legacy. Hence death cannot salvage the reputation of a moral

scoundrel. Death only reinforces our belief that morality, or lack of it, is the true measure of a man.

Eylon and Allison (2005) conducted studies showing that the most sure-fire way for a hero's image to be protected and preserved is for the hero to die. Shortly after movie critic Gene Siskel died in 1999, Eylon and Allison gave half the participants new information about Siskel "that had just recently surfaced." The other half were given new information about Roger Ebert, whom participants knew was still alive. For some participants, the new information was evidence that Siskel had been the creative genius behind the *Siskel and Ebert* television show and that Ebert had merely ridden Siskel's coattails. For other participants, the new information was the reverse, namely, that Ebert was the creative genius behind the *Siskel and Ebert* show and that Siskel had ridden Ebert's coattails.

The results showed that in response to the new information, participants were significantly more likely to change their opinions of Ebert, whom they knew to be alive, than they were to change their views of Siskel, whom they knew to be dead. When new information had surfaced about Ebert that was flattering to him (i.e., he was the brains behind *Siskel and Ebert*), participants evaluated Ebert more favorably. Moreover, when evidence surfaced about Ebert that was unflattering about him (i.e., he had been riding Siskel's coattails), participants evaluated him less favorably. But when this same information was provided about the late Gene Siskel, our participants did not change their initial evaluations of him. It appears that once someone dies, our impressions of that person become fiercely resistant to change. In death, people become *frozen in time*.

People who die young are especially loved and revered (Allison & Goethals, 2011). The list of mega-heroes who perished long before their time includes John F. Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, Princess Diana, James Dean, Heath Ledger, Janis Joplin, John Belushi, Anne Frank, Bruce Lee, Jesus of Nazareth, Lou Gehrig, Martin Luther King, Jr., and many others. When President Kennedy died in 1963, the Kennedy mystique was born. No other president, before or since, has had as many buildings, monuments, and schools named after him. Martin Luther King, Jr., another hero who died young, has almost 800 streets in America that bear his name. To demonstrate that the death positivity bias becomes heightened when a young person dies, we conducted a study in which participants learned of a man who drove a cab for a living. Some participants learned that he was 25 years old, while others learned that he was 65 years old. Then, participants were informed that he had died. Our results showed that participants liked and admired the dead 25-year-old cabbie significantly more than they liked the dead 65-year-old cabbie.

We propose the possibility that people associate dying young with martyrdom. The association may be based on the notion that especially great heroes who champion a worthy yet controversial cause are placing

themselves in harm's way for the greater good. Martin Luther King, Jr., is a classic example of a martyr, but there are others. Nathan Hale was hanged by the British during the American revolutionary war and is known for uttering the famous line, "I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country." Once we label someone a "martyr," that person can become an especially powerful symbol for a cause. Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once observed that "the tyrant dies and his rule is over; the martyr dies and his rule begins."

Surprisingly, little research has been conducted on martyrdom. The concept has its roots in ancient Greek and Roman cultural values, with the death of Socrates serving as a prototype for western martyrdom. Despelder and Strickland (1996) have argued that the suicide of Socrates has stood for 2400 years as a symbol of dying for one's principles. Greeks and Romans valued the idea of meeting death with both courage and acceptance. Romans revered both the bloody deaths in the gladiator arenas as well as intellectual suicides in the tradition of Socrates. Professor of Religion Margaret Cormack has argued that the Roman belief system contained the idea that life "was a treasure that gained value or power only when expended" and that martyrdom "transformed weakness into power."

In modern times, martyrdom is probably most often considered in the context of religious extremism, and this religious context also has ancient origins. Two thousand years ago, Christianity was transformed from a peripheral offshoot of Judaism to a beleaguered underdog religious sect. Early Christians were put to death in great numbers for preaching their illegal faith to their fellow Roman citizens. This era of persecution spurred the growth of Christianity, as each publicly executed martyr attracted a new cult of converts. According to Kastenbaum (2004), the suffering and death of Jesus held a "fatal attraction" for early Christians and was a strong advertisement for a threatened faith. Like Socrates before him, Jesus willingly chose his suffering and death, according to the Gospel of John (10:18): "No one takes my life, but I lay it down of my own accord." The redemptive value of suffering became part of the Christian heroic ideal. Martyrs did not just expect to be resurrected in the next life but also for their memories to be resurrected for all of time. The unshakeable determination of these early Christian martyrs shamed the Roman Empire's tactics of brutality, attracted sympathy for the Christian cause, and fueled the growth of Christianity.

Martyrdom also plays a central role in the Islamic faith. The Qur'an specifies that the Muslim martyr, or *shahid*, is spared the pain of death and receives immediate entry into paradise. Islam accepts a much broader view of what constitutes a martyr, including anyone who succumbs in territorial conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims. Today, there remains significant disagreement within the Muslim community about whether suicide bombers should be considered martyrs.

A dead martyr appears to derive sympathy and support from two different sources. First, we know from research on the death positivity bias that a person's death leads to great liking and admiration for that person (Allison et al., 2009). Second, most martyrs embrace underdog causes and we know that people tend to root for underdogs (Kim et al., 2008). Thus, it is easy to understand how and why we construct martyrs into powerfully heroic figures. To demonstrate the power of a martyr, we conducted a study in which participants learned of a person who died while engaged in a fierce political fight against poverty. Some participants learned that this individual was a financially disadvantaged person (the underdog condition), while others learned that this individual was a financially advantaged person (the top dog condition). In addition, some participants learned that this person took his own life for the cause he championed (the suicide condition), while others learned that this person was killed by opponents of his cause (the assassination condition).

Our findings showed that the martyr who attracted the highest degree of sympathy and support was the underdog martyr who was assassinated by the opponents of his cause. Martyrs who took their own lives—whether underdog or top dog in status—were viewed the least sympathetically and received the weakest emotional support. It is interesting to note that the wealthy martyr did not elicit the most sympathy; his actions were arguably the most altruistic as he already had lots of money himself. The poor martyr, in contrast, may have been fighting poverty because he would benefit from antipoverty actions. The underdog effect appears to be so strong that it can overwhelm factors like possible motives for undertaking the action (unselfish vs. possibly selfish). These findings also underscore the stigma associated with suicide regardless of underdog or top dog status. For a martyr to have maximum positive impact, his or her death must not be self-inflicted. This finding, of course, may be culture specific. Palestinian suicide bombers have been treated like celebrities, their legacies cemented by community-wide celebrations, and their personal items coveted as objects of worship-like devotion.



5. PART IV: A SOCIAL INFLUENCE-BASED TAXONOMY OF HEROES

Heroism assumes many different forms and defies simple categorization. Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo (2011) recently proposed a taxonomy of heroism based on the types of risks that heroes take when they perform their good deeds. Of the 12 subtypes of heroes in their taxonomy, two describe heroes who take physical risks. These heroes include *military personnel* and *courageous civilians* who put themselves in harm's way to help others. The remaining 10 hero subtypes feature heroes who take social risks. These heroes include *whistleblowers*, *scientific heroes*, *martyrs*, *good Samaritans*, *underdogs*, *political figures*,

religious figures, adventurers, politico-religious figures, and bureaucratic heroes. As these subtypes suggest, Franco et al.'s taxonomy is driven by the context in which heroism takes place (military, religious, political, etc.).

5.1. Heroes as agents of social influence

We propose a conceptually different taxonomical framework. We believe that the most important aspect of heroism is the nature of the impact that heroes have on their followers and on society. Social psychologists have long defined their field as the study of social influence (Allport, 1985; Kasson, Fein, & Markus, 2010; Myers, 2010; Taylor, Peplau, & Sears, 2006). As social psychologists, we are thus inclined to view heroism from the perspective of how heroes influence the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of others. Below, we briefly describe how heroes can affect the way people *feel, think, and act*.

5.1.1. Influence on emotions

When we earlier described the Great Eight traits associated with heroism, we noted that an important defining characteristic of many heroes is charisma and magnetism. Heroes move us. Some of our most inspiring heroes, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., use soaring rhetoric to dare us all to join them on their heroic journeys. Other heroes, such as the New York subway hero Wesley Autrey, move us with their actions. Still others move us with their selflessness and love, as shown in our survey of people's heroes (Allison & Goethals, 2011). Roughly one-third of our respondents listed family members as their heroes, and when asked why, respondents emphasized the love and emotional support that their parents or siblings gave them. Heroes can lift our spirits, dreams, and aspirations. We identify with them, we want to be with them, we want to be like them, and we want to bask in their successes (Cialdini et al., 1976).

5.1.2. Influence on thoughts

Heroes also influence our thinking to a significant degree. They challenge conventional thinking or traditional ways of viewing the world. Famous spiritual and religious leaders have often defied their society's prevailing mindset. Confucius' moral philosophy 2500 years ago challenged traditional views of Taoism and Legalism. According to Islamic theology, Muhammad received revelations from God, and these messages formed the basis of a new holy wisdom described in the Qur'an. According to Christian theology, Jesus of Nazareth was a revolutionary whose new moral doctrines challenged the existing moral landscape. The Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and other spiritual leaders have all challenged conventional thinking by advocating peaceful solutions to difficult (and often violent) intergroup conflicts.

Heroes offer new ways of looking at old situations, suggesting new schemas or scripts for people to follow. In the sciences, heroes suggest new paradigms that precipitate revolutionary shifts in thinking (Kuhn, 1962). Copernicus offered a heliocentric view of the universe; Darwin forever changed our view of the origin of species; Einstein turned our views of space and time upside down; and Freud shocked the world with his visionary theory of unconscious processes. In the business world, Henry Ford revolutionized transportation and industrial output, and Steve Jobs made computing smooth, sleek, and stylish. In each of these examples, a bold and heroic scientist or entrepreneur dared to challenge entrenched ways of thinking by completely reframing the nature of the world.

5.1.3. Influence on behavior

Heroes show us how to behave well. Perhaps there is no better example than Oprah Winfrey, who was named “arguably the world’s most powerful woman” by CNN and Time.com. For more than two decades, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* promoted books and literature, various forms of self-improvement, family values, and a stronger spiritual lifestyle. Winfrey’s show has helped propel nontraditional lifestyles (gay, lesbian, transgender) into the cultural mainstream. Her book club encouraged legions of Americans to read more; a book plugged by Winfrey sold a million more copies than it would have ordinarily. Winfrey’s influence has been sweeping and legendary, and it has not gone unnoticed. She was named “one of the 100 people who most influenced the twentieth century” and “one of the most influential people” of 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009 by *Time*. At the end of the twentieth century, *Life* magazine listed Winfrey as the most influential person of her generation. Barack Obama has said he “may be the most influential woman in the country.” In 1998, she made the top of Entertainment Weekly’s list of the 101 most powerful people in the entertainment industry. In 2003, Winfrey edged out both Superman and Elvis Presley to be named the greatest pop culture icon of all time by VH1.

Heroes not only shape the behavior of lay-people, but also they mold the actions of other heroes as well. Tiger Woods has often attributed his success to Charlie Sifford and Lee Elder, two black golfers who broke the color barrier on the professional golf tour. Major league baseball players often express their appreciation for Jackie Robinson, who in 1947 was the first Black player to be allowed to participate in major league baseball. Heroes begetting heroes can also be seen in the world of art and music. Elvis Presley affected the songwriting of Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, The Everly Brothers, Little Richard, and Buddy Holly. In the 1960s, the *Beatles* built on this foundation and took rock music to a level of creativity not seen before or since. Beatles’ lead guitarist John Lennon admitted that “if there hadn’t been Elvis, there wouldn’t have been the Beatles” (Davies, 2004, p. 256). The Beatles’ ground-breaking 1967 album, *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts*

Club Band, was inspired by the 1966 Beach Boys' innovative album *Pet Sounds*. "Without *Pet Sounds*," said producer George Martin, "*Sgt. Pepper* wouldn't have happened. *Pepper* was an attempt to equal *Pet Sounds*" (Davies, 2004, p. 277). Musical heroes are thus much like their scientific counterparts, building on the pioneering work of their predecessors and contemporaries.

5.2. Influence as the basis for our t(r)axonomy

Our analysis begins with the observation that a hero's influence can differ on many significant dimensions. Influence can vary along the continua of *weak* versus *strong*, *short-term* versus *long-term*, *widespread* versus *limited*, *waxing* versus *waning*, *hidden* versus *exposed*, and *constructed* versus *authentic*. These dimensions of influence are reflected in the various categories of heroism contained in our taxonomy. Our taxonomic structure features the following subtypes of heroes: trending, transitory, transitional, tragic, transposed, transparent, traditional, transfigured, transforming, and transcendent. Because each of these subtypes shares the same first two letters—"tr"—we are tempted to call our framework a *traxonomy* rather than a taxonomy. Below, we briefly describe each of the hero categories in our framework.

5.2.1. Trending heroes

Heroic influence can be in a state of flux, with some heroes steadily gaining influence and others losing it. A hero whose impact is either rising or falling is said to be a *trending hero*. The perceived impact of former U.S. presidents is often in a state of flux as new information surfaces or as historians offer new interpretations of old information. Ulysses S. Grant is an example of one president who is trending upward. In a 2000 C-SPAN poll of U.S. presidents, Grant was ranked as the 33rd best president. When this poll was repeated in 2009, Grant rose to 23rd. In the world of entertainment, Lady Gaga appears to be trending toward heroism. She burst onto the music scene in 2008 with song lyrics promoting positive social change, especially in the area of gay rights. With her unique look and style of dress, Gaga is also achieving iconic status in the fashion world.

Heroes can also trend downward. In the first ever poll of historians' rankings of U.S. presidents, conducted by Schlesinger (1948), Woodrow Wilson finished fourth. In the 2000 C-SPAN poll, he was ranked sixth, and later in the 2009 C-SPAN poll, he had fallen to ninth. In the National Hockey League, hockey stars Jarome Iginla and Martin Brodeur are considered by some to be fading heroes due to injuries and fallen production (McNally, 2011). Hollywood actors who have been judged to be on the decline include Val Kilmer, Renee Zellweger, Helen Hunt, and John Travolta (Bloch, 2009). These and other stars are experiencing the law of heroic gravity: What goes up must come down.

5.2.2. Transitory heroes

American artist Andy Warhol once quipped that “In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes” (Murphy, 2006). The phrase *15 minutes of fame* has become part of our cultural lexicon, signifying the tendency for many people, even the least likely among us, to achieve fleeting glimpses of fame. We believe that Warhol was describing the *transitory hero*, the type of hero who enjoys a very short shelf life. We also suggest that there are two subtypes of the transitory hero: the transitory-true hero and the transitory-false hero. A striking example of a transitory-true hero is Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger, the U.S. Airways pilot who saved the lives of 155 passengers when he successfully landed his crippled aircraft onto the Hudson River in January of 2009. Sullenberger’s act was widely celebrated for a few short weeks, but soon quickly forgotten. In our view, Sully’s heroism may have been ephemeral, but he was, nevertheless, a true hero for showing remarkable skill and courage in saving the lives of scores of people.

A notable example of a transitory-false hero was Steven Slater, the JetBlue flight attendant who quit his job in frustration by screaming obscenities over the loudspeaker, grabbing a couple of beers, and sliding down the emergency chute. Slater became a folk hero to hundreds of thousands of people on Facebook and on Twitter. People resonated to the idea of quitting a thankless job in a blaze of glory. Such an act was glorified in the famous Johnny Paycheck song, *Take This Job and Shove it*, released in 1978. But we call Slater a transitory-false hero because his fame was deservedly fleeting. Slater displayed neither skill nor morality in resigning his position. He merely acted out a fantasy that attracted attention.

5.2.3. Transitional heroes

Psychologists have long known that human beings experience many important phases of development throughout the lifespan. Our values, emotional states, cognitive abilities, and priorities shift and evolve as we mature. With these changes come adjustments in our preferences for heroes. Our college-age students tell us that their *transitional heroes* from a decade ago were the Power Rangers, Michael Jordan, and the Backstreet Boys. Our students openly admit that they have outgrown these heroes. As authors of this book and products of the mid-twentieth century, we gravitated in our youth to personal heroes who were professional athletes and artists such as Willie Mays, Jerry West, Elvis Presley, and the Beach Boys. As older adults, we now choose our heroes more carefully based on different criteria. In keeping with theories of adult development (Erikson, 1959), our choice of heroes is now based less on one’s ability to throw a ball or hit a note. Today, our heroes are Gandhi, Lincoln, King, and others who have made meaningful moral contributions to society.

5.2.4. Tragic heroes

Ancient playwrights such as Sophocles made the *tragic hero* a staple of western literature. Oedipus still stands as the prototypical example. Prophe-sized to marry his mother and kill his father, Oedipus is banished from his land so as to avoid such a fate. But his quick temper and naivete elicit behaviors from him that confirm the prophecy. The tragic hero is usually a great individual whose character failings bring about his or her downfall. Shakespearean tragic heroes abound—King Lear, Hamlet, Macbeth, and Brutus are vivid examples. The story of U.S. President Bill Clinton contains some of the central elements of the tragic hero narrative. Clinton was a brilliant, charismatic president with superb political instincts. Even his detractors held a grudging admiration for him. Clinton's tragic flaw was his repeated philandering, and during his second term in office, his sexual misconduct led to impeachment charges of perjury. Tiger Woods is another modern day tragic hero with a similar tragic flaw. Woods dominated the golf world and appeared happily married until new stories revealed numerous extramarital affairs and a possible sex addiction. His personal life and golf game were shattered and have never fully recovered.

5.2.5. Transposed heroes

Sometimes, an individual who is a hero, or who appears to be one, converts to villain status. In the Batman comic book and movie franchise, the character of Two-Face illustrates the concept of a *transposed hero*. Two-Face was once Harvey Dent, the virtuous district attorney of Gotham City and an ally of Batman. After a criminal throws acid on his face, hideously scarring him, Dent loses his sanity and becomes a crime boss. LeBron James may serve as a real-world example of this kind of transposition. A basketball great, James was the toast of Cleveland until he left the team in an arrogant, disrespectful manner. Outraged fans decried his decision to move from the role of hero to villain (Bradley, 2010). An example of an individual who experiences the reverse conversion from sinner to saint is the great Christian philosopher St. Augustine (Augustine of Hippo, 1998). It is important to note that there is an important difference between tragic heroes and transposed heroes. While both these hero subtypes involve a fall from grace, the tragic hero is a sympathetic figure whose life or career ends in shambles. In contrast, transposed heroes make calculated choices to achieve a complete status reversal, and they may actually thrive in this new role.

5.2.6. Transparent heroes

We next turn to an important category of people who quietly perform heroic deeds behind the scenes, outside the public spotlight. We call them *transparent heroes*. They are our parents who made great sacrifices for us. They are the teachers who molded our minds, the coaches who taught us

discipline and hard work, the healthcare workers who healed us, emergency first responders who saved us, and military personnel who protect us. These heroes are quite possibly the most under-appreciated members of our society. They may also be the most abundant, and to test this idea, we asked participants to estimate the prevalence of the hero subtypes in our taxonomy. The results showed that participants estimated that 65% of all heroes are transparent—the invisible individuals among us whose heroic work often goes unnoticed. No other category of heroes came close to matching this percentage; the next highest percentage was 13% for traditional heroes, whom we describe next. Transparent heroes may be our most unsung heroes, but they are judged to be the most prevalent in our society.

5.2.7. Traditional heroes

The *traditional hero* is the prototypical hero. He or she is the person who follows the classic hero journey described by Campbell (1949) as the hero monomyth. This journey features a hero who comes from humble origins, experiences early childhood setbacks, receives assistance from unlikely sources, overcomes adversity, and returns with a boon to society. Because Campbell's model of the hero's journey is derived from mythological legends from all corners of the globe, we are more likely to find the purest instances of this traditional hero in fictional stories. The heroic tales of Luke Skywalker, Batman, and Harry Potter are all narratives of the traditional hero. But many real-world heroes, such as Abraham Lincoln and Oprah Winfrey, have important elements of this hero type. It is not unusual for people to emphasize elements of the traditional heroic script in their own lives to engender support from the public and to further their own political causes. Individuals who have done so with some success are Arnold Schwarzenegger and Barack Obama.

5.2.8. Transfigured heroes

People are hungry for heroes, and at times, this hunger motivates people to construct heroes, to see heroic elements where none exist, or to turn a mildly heroic tale into an extremely heroic one. Heroes who benefit from these constructions or exaggerations are called *transfigured heroes*. One example of this transfiguration occurred in the weeks following the August 5, 2010 Chilean mining accident that trapped 33 miners one half-mile underground for 70 days. The miners were eventually rescued and their stories were told to the media. At different times throughout the rescue process, all the miners, or their leader, Luis Urzua, or the rescuers, or the Chilean president, or the whole country seemed to be heroes. An undoubtedly great event had taken place, and observers craved to identify the heroes of the historic rescue.

The individual who seemed to be the most obvious hero was Urzua. As the foreman of the crew locked underground, he seemed to have performed

magnificently as the group's leader. He got the miners through the first 17 days before a probe finally reached them. During that time, the miners had no way to knowing whether they would ever be rescued. Urzua persuaded the men to stringently ration their food and water. They had enough for 48 hours, but Urzua anticipated that the rescue might take much longer than that. At first, the men limited themselves to a few bites of tuna fish, some fruit, and a half glass of milk each day. But as the days stretched on, the men were issued rations only every 48 hours. Then, the brave rescue took place before worldwide audience of tens of millions. The behavior of the miners as a whole and of Urzua as leader seemed flawless.

But then, other information trickled in that suggested that the miners' story was not so simple or so neat. As the men faced starvation, and possible cannibalism, discord and despair descended on the group. While Urzua tried to maintain cohesiveness, subgroups began to form, each with its own agenda. Some planned their own escape. Petty squabbles and even fist fights broke out. Some men refused to get out of bed, seemingly overcome by hopelessness and depression. As food became more limited, and the men had to drink filthy, polluted water, their bodies began to consume themselves. And their minds just waited for death.

Once the miners were contacted, and hopes rose for a rescue, a very pretty picture was painted of Urzua's leadership and the miners' response to it. The narrative included the fact that Urzua was the last person to be rescued. It all seemed very tidy. None of the disturbing information above was included in most accounts. Once the rescue was achieved, it seemed that what happened below ground would stay there. The men involved had no reason to air their fears, failures, and conflicts in the world spotlight. Even more perhaps than the miners, the public had little use for dissonant elements that might diminish the heroic story. Transfiguration quenches our thirst for heroes.

5.2.9. Transforming heroes

Heroes whose contributions transform them as individuals, and also transform the society to which they belong, are called *transforming heroes*. Heroes who are transforming can be more influential than any other subtype of hero. Our conceptualization of the transforming hero borrows heavily from the seminal work of James MacGregor Burns, who first coined the phrase *transformational leadership* (Burns, 1978). According to Burns, transformational leadership occurs when both leaders and followers engage in a mutual effort to raise levels of motivation and morality. The transformational leader is able to articulate a clear vision, offers a plan to attain the vision, exudes confidence, leads by example, and empowers followers to make the vision a reality. We believe that virtually all transformational leaders are also transforming heroes. Martin Luther King, Jr., is an ideal example of a

transforming hero as seen in his charisma, expression of lofty ideals, and ability to stir followers to action.

We distinguish between heroes who transform entire societies (transforming-global heroes) and heroes who transform smaller subcultures with societies (transforming-specific heroes). As chief architect of the civil rights movement in North America and elsewhere around the world, King is clearly a transforming-global hero. Other globally transforming heroes include Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi. Examples of transforming-specific heroes are Albert Einstein, who transformed the field of physics; Elvis Presley, who transformed popular music; and Steve Jobs, who transformed personal computing.

5.2.10. Transcendent heroes

Not all heroes fit neatly into one of the subtypes of our taxonomy. Some heroes defy simple categorization. These heroes are *transcendent*; their contributions feature a complexity or depth that transcends our taxonomic structure. Examples of transcendent heroism abound. Jesus of Nazareth is most certainly a transcendent figure. He is a transforming hero for his profound influence on western culture, and he is also a traditional hero whose life story contains many of the most essential the elements of Campbell's hero's journey: a born calling, a humble birth in a manger, a tumultuous clashing with the status quo, the crucifixion, and the rising from the dead to save the world. Jesus may also be considered a transfigured hero, depending on one's beliefs about the veracity of biblical accounts of his life.

Harry Potter is arguably the most transcendent heroic figure in fictional literature. Potter transformed Hogwarts School and the entire landscape of witchcraft and wizardry. His hero's journey was traditional, containing many of the classic elements as described by Campbell, including a born calling, his orphan status, Professor Dumbledore as the wise old man who helps him, and the evil villain in Lord Voldemort. Potter can also be considered a transitional hero in that some people, especially children, may outgrow the character as they mature into more sophisticated readers. Legendary basketball coach John Wooden can also be described as a transcendent hero. A college basketball coach, Wooden, believed that his job was to teach his students how to succeed, not just in basketball, but in life. His contributions in this area occurred outside the public eye and thus made him a transparent hero. With his unprecedented string of wins and championships, Wooden forever changed the world of college basketball, making him a transforming hero. There are also some elements of a traditional hero in Wooden's story: He came from a small town in Indiana; he experienced many failures and setbacks along his life journey; and he received wise counsel from many sources throughout his career.

Because they are able to satisfy the criteria for multiple categories of heroism, transcendent heroes would appear to be the most influential of all

the heroes in our taxonomy. But this is not necessary the case. A hero could conceivably be both trending and transitory, as when a rock singer enjoys one hit song (trending upward) but then disappears from the music radar screen (transitory). One-hit wonders of this type are transcendent because they meet the criteria for more than hero type, but they are hardly more influential than a transforming hero such as Martin Luther King, Jr. We thus argue that for transcendent heroes to be more influential than transforming heroes, one of their hero categories must be the transforming hero.



6. CONCLUSION

Our study of heroes grew out of our research on death positivity and underdogs. We were struck by finding how readily people perceived struggle. The struggling entity might be an underdog basketball team, a young artist, a biblical hero, a race horse, a fictional locomotive, or a circle rolling along a flat line toward a bump. People rooted for, identified with, and admired those struggling figures. They seemed particularly to admire people who have given their all. Also, in our studies of presidential leadership, we were struck by the near apotheosis of assassinated presidents, and Simonton's (1987) research showing the impact of assassination on historians' ratings of presidential greatness. And it is not only Lincoln and Kennedy. A recent book about President James A. Garfield, shot only 4 months after his inauguration in 1881, continues the heroic casting of presidents killed in office (Millard, 2011).

Then, we focused on our own heroes, from Tiger Woods to George Washington, Muhammad Ali to Martin Luther King, and Seabiscuit to Irene Sendler. How do we choose them? Do our heroes have anything in common? And more fundamentally, why do we like them so much? What do they do for us? What are the emotional as well as cognitive dynamics of heroism? At some point, we turned a corner and asked whether our knowledge of social psychology could help us understand people's thoughts and feelings about heroes. We began focusing on what heroes do and how people psychologically shape them. From these considerations, the basic outline of our argument emerged. First, heroism exists in the eye of the beholder. It is a perfect example of cognitive construction. Different people have different heroes. As a result, we have never offered a definition of a hero, or tried to specify what constitutes heroism, or tell anyone else whether a particular individual is a hero. But we did look at what other people said about their heroes, and what common attributes emerged when we studied what they told us. From those surveys, a number of initial hypotheses emerged. First, people really like their heroes. They perceive them accomplishing great things and being exceptionally virtuous. We were

struck by the parallels in the ways people think about leaders and the way they think about heroes. For example, attributions of charisma seem central to the perceptions of leaders and heroes. We were also struck by the possibility that Jung may have been on to something in proposing a *hero* archetype.

We then began considering how social perception processes can help us understand how people identify heroes and define their virtues. We find that people especially admire heroes who struggle, achieve, and do the right thing—even when doing so is very difficult, and even when it might cost them their lives. Given that, can psychology help us understand what drives people to aspire, to achieve, to persevere, and to both define and take the path of moral action? The result is the work reported in this chapter. We realize that heroes are an unconventional topic in social psychology. But we are heartened that others, for example, Phil Zimbardo and his collaborators, are also studying and promoting heroism in everyday life with their Heroic Imagination Project (Zimbardo, 2011). Perhaps other social psychologists will begin to follow Zimbardo's lead. But if not, we simply hope that thinking about how all of us think about heroes, and about the fabulous things they do, can inspire and motivate at least a few of us.

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