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Hero Worship: The Elevation of the Human Spirit

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we review the psychology of hero development and hero worship. We propose that heroes and hero narratives fulfill important cognitive and emotional needs, including the need for wisdom, meaning, hope, inspiration, and growth. We propose a framework called the *heroic leadership dynamic* (HLD) to explain how need-based heroism shifts over time, from our initial attraction to heroes to later retention or repudiation of heroes. Central to the HLD is idea that hero narratives fulfill both *epistemic* and *energizing* functions. Hero stories provide epistemic benefits by providing scripts for prosocial action, by revealing fundamental truths about human existence, by unpacking life paradoxes, and by cultivating emotional intelligence. To energize us, heroes promote moral elevation, heal psychic wounds, inspire psychological growth, and exude charisma. We discuss the implications of our framework for theory and research on heroism, leadership processes, and positive psychology.

Keywords: heroes, heroism, leadership, narrative, elevation, charisma, altruism

Written 2,700 years ago, Homer's *Odyssey* is universally regarded as one of the first and greatest epics of the Western world. The story centers on the hero Odysseus as he endures an arduous, decade-long journey home from the Trojan War. During his travels, Odysseus must overcome the wrath of Poseidon, a primordial Cyclops and various sea monsters, seductive sirens, lethargic lotus-eaters, and the magic spells of the sorceress Circe. Upon arriving at his home in Ithaca, Odysseus rids his palace of pillaging suitors, becomes reunited with his wife Penelope, and regains his throne as King of the island nation. It seems a fitful, happy ending to a celebrated hero story that has entertained and inspired countless readers.

Unknown to all but the most careful readers, Odysseus's story does not end with his return to Ithaca. Near the end of the tale, Odysseus is called to make yet another journey. We learn of this second journey earlier in the epic, when

Odysseus finds himself in the underworld. There he encounters the blind seer Tiresias, who tells him:

"When you get home you will take your revenge on these suitors; and after you have killed them by force or fraud in your own house, you must take a well-made oar and carry it on and on, till you come to a country where the people have never heard of the sea and do not even mix salt with their food, nor do they know anything about ships, and oars that are as the wings of a ship.... A wayfarer will meet you and will say it must be a winnowing shovel that you have got upon your shoulder; on this you must fix the oar in the ground and sacrifice a ram, a bull, and a boar to Neptune. Then go home and offer hecatombs to the gods in heaven one after the other. As for yourself, death shall come to you from the sea, and your life shall ebb away very gently when you are full of years and peace of mind, and your people shall bless you. All that I have said will come true" (Book XI, p. 89).

This second journey of Odysseus hints at an often overlooked yet psychologically important component of the hero's journey and, more generally, human lifespan development. Odysseus is required to take an oar – a central instrument of his agency as a young man – and carry it inland until he meets a wayfarer who sees it as a winnowing fan – a device for separating the good from the bad. Only after meeting this wayfarer and planting the oar in the ground is Odysseus deemed ready to rule Ithaca. The transformation of the oar from a seafaring tool to a winnowing device serves as a metaphor for the transformation of Odysseus from young warrior to elder statesman. Homer correctly intuited that our greatest heroes are those who do more than just display physical skills in overcoming obstacles. Our most cherished heroes excel in the domains of both competence and morality, and those who undergo a shift from emphasizing the former to the latter are judged to be most deserving of our enduring veneration (Allison & Goethals, 2011, 2013, 2014; Frimer, Walker, Riches, Lee, & Dunlop, 2012; Goethals & Allison, 2012, 2014; Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2015b).

In this article, we trace the psychological underpinnings of hero development and hero worship. We will show how the allure of heroes lies in their fulfillment of important cognitive and emotional needs, such as our need for wisdom, meaning, hope, inspiration, and personal growth. The psychological heft of heroism resides within the hero narrative. Hero narratives, we argue, are highly effective delivery systems for imparting complex truths and for elevating humans toward a higher emotional and behavioral state. Stirring narrative accounts of heroic deeds are the fuel for both human survival and for human thriving. We begin our analysis with an overview of how hero narratives fulfill important psychological needs for both individuals and collectives.

PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS OF HERO NARRATIVES

Evidence that humans have always been drawn to hero stories can be found in the earliest known human narratives that describe stirring accounts of the exploits of

heroes and heroic leaders (Kerenyi, 1978). These ancient hero stories from around the globe included the tales of Hesiod, Vishnu, Gilgamesh, Etana, Sundiata, Beowulf, Samson, Thor, Leonidas, Guan Yu, among others (Durant, 2002; Hamilton, 1999). According to comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell (1949), ancient hero tales from every corner of the earth follow the same clear and predictable pattern. This universality prompted him to refer to the classic hero narrative as a *monomyth*, a single hero story to which all humans resonate. The monomythic hero story begins with an ordinary person, usually a male, who is summoned on a journey away from his safe, familiar world to a new and special world fraught with danger. At the outset of the journey, the hero is missing an important quality, usually self-confidence, humility, or a sense of his true purpose in life. The hero journey is always a voyage toward self-realization and transformation (Smith & Allison, 2014). Receiving assistance from enchanted and unlikely sources, the hero shows remarkable cunning, courage, and resourcefulness to triumph. Once successful, the hero returns to his original familiar world to bestow a boon to the entire community.

To be sure, there is more variability in the hero narrative across time and across culture than Campbell's (1949) model would suggest. Hero stories outside the Judeo-Christian tradition often contain narrative elements that deviate from the Campbellian monomythic structure. Conceptions of good and evil are far from universal and have evolved in significant ways over several millennia, as noted by Nietzsche (1887/1998) in his opus, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Early psychological research by Bartlett (1920) on the mechanisms of oral storytelling suggest that narratives become distorted and transformed by the social, environmental, and cultural biases of communities. More recent work has argued that humans are creators of meaning and that the construction of meaning evolves within a cultural context (Bruner, 1990, 2002; Freeman, 2004). We acknowledge that hero stories from around the globe are far from uniform, but they do share similarities that have an important psychological impact on listeners and readers.

We introduce the term *Heroic Leadership Dynamic* (HLD) to illuminate the ways in which heroes and hero stories nourish the human mind and spirit. Central to the HLD is the idea that hero narratives fulfill important cognitive and emotional needs, such as our need for wisdom, meaning, hope, inspiration, and growth. The HLD includes the term *dynamic*, along with its multiple meanings, intentionally. In its noun form, dynamic refers to an interactive system or process that unfolds over time. Used as an adjective, dynamic describes a system or process that is energizing and always in motion, a system that drives us toward rising heroes or away from fallen ones. The HLD describes how our most basic human needs can account for our thirst for heroes, and how these needs explain why we are drawn to heroes, how we benefit from them, why we stick with flawed ones, and why we repudiate heroes only after they have outlived their psychological usefulness.

The principles underlying the HLD draw from the abundance of research underscoring the significance of narrative storytelling for both individuals and collectives (Bennis, 1996; Boje, 1995; Cajete, Eder, & Holyan, 2010; Gardner, 1995; Jameson, 2001; McAdams, 1997; Sternberg, 2011). Stories crystallize abstract concepts and endow them with contextual meaning (Boje, 1995). Sternberg (2011) and Gardner (1995) provide numerous examples of heroic leaders using stories to win the minds and hearts of followers. Stories are more than tools for influencing others; they also promote self-change. McAdams (1997, 2014) has argued that personal self-narratives shape life trajectories and the maintenance of subjective well-being. Stories are rich, emotionally laden capsule summaries of wisdom for which the human mind was designed (Green & Brock, 2005; Haidt, 2012; Wyer, 1995). According to Price (1978), “a need to tell and hear stories is essential to the species *Homo sapiens* – second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter” (p. 3).

Because stories exert such a strong psychological impact, they have also been used throughout history to support destructive norms and promote oppressive dictatorships. Adolf Hitler’s rise to power was largely based on his use of narratives that justified military aggression against neighboring nations and rationalized the extermination of Jews, Catholics, gays, gypsies, and other groups (Rosenbaum, 2014). The policies and agendas of countless leaders with dubious moral legacies have been inspired by heroic narratives. Hero stories can be twisted to serve the psychological needs and goals of both leaders and followers (cf. Frimer, Schaefer, & Oakes, 2014). Many nations have waged wars against each other, with leadership on each side proclaiming the morally (and heroically) superior upper hand. The double-edged nature of heroism and the use of hero stories as instruments of social control and manipulation are topics deserving of further inquiry. Although hero stories can be used to inspire people to do either great good or great harm, our focus in this article is on the positive use of heroism and the hero narrative.

A core feature of the HLD is that hero stories fulfill two principal human functions: an *epistemic* function and an *energizing* function. The epistemic function refers to the knowledge and wisdom that hero stories impart to us. The energizing function refers to the ways that hero stories inspire us and promote personal growth. We examine these two functions below.

The Epistemic Function of Hero Stories

Stories of heroic action impart wisdom by supplying mental models, or scripts, for how one could, or should, lead one’s life. Ronald Reagan and Winston Churchill are striking examples. Both felt destined for greatness, and were immensely informed by heroic accounts they read as young boys, stimulating them to aspire to ascend to comparable leadership positions (Hayward, 2006). Martin Luther King, Jr., based his strategy of nonviolent resistance on stories of similar tactics used

successfully by Mahatma Gandhi (Bennett, 2003). Heroic narratives also teach us how we should behave in crisis situations (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Goethals & Allison, 2012). The heroic actions of Wesley Autrey offer a compelling example of the wisdom imparted by hero stories. Autrey was a construction worker who received international acclaim when he rescued a complete stranger from an on-coming New York subway train in 2007 (*The Hero in the Subway*, 2007). Autrey provided a script for heroic action to millions of New York citizens hungry for such a script. Heroes such as Autrey are role models who perform behaviors that affirm our most cherished worldviews (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2015a; Solomon et al, 2014).

Hero narratives are more than simple scripts prescribing prosocial action. According to Rohr (2011), hero stories contain instances of *transrational* phenomena, which he defines as experiences that resist or defy rational analysis. Transrational phenomena in hero stories reveal truths and life patterns that our limited minds have difficulty understanding using our best logic or rational thought. Examples of transrational experiences that commonly appear in hero stories include *suffering, sacrifice, meaning, love, paradox, mystery, God, and eternity*. The ultimate transrational phenomenon may be the eternal battle between good and evil, a theme that pervades all of human literature and is a universal characteristic of the human condition (Miller, 2005; Zimbardo, 2008). Transrational phenomena beg to be understood but cannot be fully known using conventional tools of human reason. Hero stories help unlock the secrets of the transrational.

Hero narratives illuminate transrational experience by furnishing meaningful symbols that serve as metaphors for easing our understanding of complex, mysterious phenomena. Over the past few decades, scholars have demonstrated the ways in which metaphors facilitate learning (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; McPherson, 1985; Olson & Haynes, 2008). According to Leary (1994), “all knowledge is ultimately rooted in metaphorical modes of perception and thought” (p. 2). William James himself claimed that the use of metaphor was the basis for all human understanding. Heroic narratives may bring transrational phenomena to life by providing, in James’ words, vivid examples and “similar instances” which operate as “pegs and pigeonholes -- as our categories of understanding” (James, 1878/1983, p. 12). We believe that hero stories promote wisdom in at least three ways: Hero stories (a) reveal deep truths, (b) illuminate paradox, and (c) develop emotional intelligence.

Hero stories reveal deep truths. Joseph Campbell believed that the classic hero monomyth reveals life’s deepest psychological truths (Mishlove, 1998). Truths are considered deep when their insights about human nature and motivation are not only profound and fundamental but also hidden and nonobvious. Campbell (1949) believed that most readers of mythic hero stories remain oblivious to their deep truths, their meaning, and their wisdom. Deep truths contained in hero myths are difficult to discern and appreciate because they are disguised within symbols and metaphors. As a result, readers of mythology underestimate the psychological

value of the narratives, prompting Campbell to proclaim that “mythology is psychology misread as biography, history, and cosmology” (p. 256).

Hero narratives reveal deep truths in several ways. First, tales of heroism send readers into *deep time*, meaning that the truths contained in stories enjoy a timelessness that connects us with the past, the present, and the future. A recent illustration of deep time occurred when legendary South African President Nelson Mandela passed away in 2013. World leaders offered tributes to Mandela’s heroism, including one from U.S. President Barack Obama who observed that Mandela “no longer belongs to us. He belongs to the ages” (Parnes, 2013). Obama surely knew that his words mirrored those made a century and a half earlier by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton upon the death of President Abraham Lincoln. Of Lincoln, Stanton is said to have uttered, “Now he belongs to the ages,” although some claim that Stanton actually said, “Now he belongs to the angels” (Gopnik, 2007). Whether ages or angels, Stanton’s meaning was as clear as that of Obama. When exceptionally heroic individuals perish, we construct rhetoric to ensure that their life legacies transcend the small time period in which they lived. Our language forges great heroes in eternity.

Rohr (2011) notes that deep time is evident when stories contain phrases such as, “Once upon a time”, “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away”, and “they lived happily ever after.” These phrases are not unique to Western tales. African, Middle-eastern, and Japanese folktales routinely contain similar phrasing, with stories often beginning with expressions such as “In very remote times,” “Once during a different time,” and “In the olden days.” Tales from around the world often conclude with a capsule summary of the story’s enduring life lesson. Heroes of religion from Muhammad to Jesus are immortalized through stories that reveal ageless truths in sacred texts. At one time Catholics ended their Latin prayers about Jesus by saying “per omnia saecula saeculorum,” which translates as “through all the ages of ages.” Moreover, the Lord’s Prayer ends, “forever and ever, amen.” A universal characteristic of hero stories is to consign the wisdom of heroism into deep time. By invoking deep time, heroic narratives reinforce enduring values and ageless truths about human existence.

A second way that hero stories emphasize deep truth is by emphasizing *deep roles* in our human social fabric. Moxnes (2012) has argued that the deepest roles are archetypal family roles such as mother, child, maiden, and wise old man or grandparent. Family role archetypes abound in classic hero tales and myths, where there are a wealth of kings and queens, parents, stepparents, princesses, children, and stepchildren. Moxnes’ research shows that even if hero stories do not explicitly feature deep role family characters, we will project these archetypal roles onto the characters. Moreover, in a process much like Freud’s transference, we tend to project these deep family roles onto others in our social environments (Moxnes, 1999a). Moxnes’ conclusion is that the family unit is an ancient device, still useful today, for understanding our social world (Moxnes, 1999b).

A third deep truth centers on the essential role of sacrifice in the hero's journey and in human growth and development. Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo (2011) have claimed that self-sacrifice may be the principal defining feature of heroism, and they argue that sacrifice distinguishes heroism from altruism. Campbell (1949, 1988) emphasized the importance of sacrifice in the hero's journey and observed that self-sacrifice is an integral element of hero myths around the globe. Ancient Greek and Roman religious practices revolved around sacrificial ceremonies during which animals were killed and eaten to show respect to, and earn peace with, the gods. In the *Odyssey*, during Odysseus's second journey, he must plant his oar into the ground and sacrifice a ram, a bull, and a boar to Neptune. Rohr (2011) has argued that this sacrifice reflects Homer's belief that all great heroes cannot complete their heroic task unless they give up tangible symbols of youthful priorities. A battering ram, a breeding bull, and a wild boar are vivid symbols of immature male energy that must be outgrown and sacrificed for Odysseus to develop into a true elder and heroic leader of Ithaca.

Hero stories illuminate paradox. Another epistemic function of hero stories resides in their ability to shed light on meaningful life paradoxes. We believe that most people have trouble unpacking the value of paradoxical truths unless the contradictions contained within the paradoxes are illustrated inside a good story. Hero stories are saturated with paradoxes, and several of them are described in one of Joseph Campbell's (1949) most famous quotes:

"We have only to follow the thread of the hero-path. And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; and where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world" (p. 18).

Campbell (1949) unravels these paradoxes by first observing that all mythic hero stories involve a necessary departure into a new, dangerous world that will require a descent into hell before an ascent into enlightenment. For the hero, according to Rohr (2011), "the way down is the way up" (p. 18). This paradoxical journey is not just reserved for mythic heroes; all human beings face painful challenges that are a necessary path toward personal growth. "Where you stumble," wrote Campbell, "there lies your treasure" (p. 75). Campbell often used dragon-slaying as a metaphor for describing how the confrontation of our fears is necessary for later redemption. When heroes summon the courage to face their challenges, they enter the dragon's lair, and only when they defeat these demons is their personal transformation complete. According to Campbell, when we slay our dragons, we are slaying our false selves or former selves, thereby allowing our true heroic selves to emerge. The journey away from the comforts of home and into unfamiliar darkness is a counterintuitive yet necessary element of heroism and of human life in general (Campbell, 1988). Embarking on this pilgrimage is the surest path to growth and transformation, and hero stories teach us that all

of us, whether we are heroes or not, must leave our safe, familiar worlds to find our true selves (Levinson, 1978).

Campbell's observation that "where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world" is subject to two interpretations. First, this paradox reminds us that although our own individual life path may feel unique to us, the journey in fact represents the path taken by all humans before us and all humans to follow. A second interpretation is that the hero's journey is far from over once the hero has slain the dragon. One of the most important stages of Campbell's monomyth involves the newly transformed hero's return to her original familiar world, where she will enjoy reunion with family and will transform society in significant and positive ways. In this way the hero, once "thought to be alone," becomes united and in communion "with all the world."

Hero stories develop emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to identify, understand, use, and manage emotions (Caruso, Fleming, & Spector, 2014; Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2001; Salovey & Mayer, 1989). Psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim believed that children's fairy tales are useful in helping people, especially children, understand emotional experience (Bettelheim, 1976). The heroes of these fairy tales are usually subjected to dark, foreboding experiences, such as encounters with witches, evil spells, abandonment, neglect, abuse, and death. Listeners to these tales vicariously experience these dark stimuli, allowing them to develop strategies for resolving their fears and distress. Bettelheim believed that even the most distressing fairy tales, such as those by the Brothers Grimm, add clarity to confusing emotions and give people a greater sense of life's meaning and purpose. The darkness of fairy tales allows children to grow emotionally, thus developing their emotional intelligence and preparing them for the challenges of adulthood.

The Energizing Function of Hero Stories

Hero stories energize and inspire us. Recent work suggests that heroes and heroic action may evoke a unique emotional response which Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues have called *elevation* (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Haidt, 2003). Haidt borrowed the term elevation from Thomas Jefferson, who used the phrase *moral elevation* to describe the euphoric feeling one gets when reading great literature. When people experience elevation, they feel a mix of awe, reverence, and admiration for a morally beautiful act (Gray & Wegner, 2011). The emotion is described as similar to calmness, warmth, and love. Haidt (2003) argues that elevation is "elicited by acts of virtue or moral beauty; it causes warm, open feelings in the chest" (p. 276). Most importantly, the feeling of elevation has a concomitant behavioral component: A desire to become a better person. Elevation "motivates people to behave more virtuously themselves" (Haidt, 2003, p. 276). A form of moral self-efficacy, elevation transforms people into believing they are capable of significant prosocial action (Britton, 2008).

Consistent with research on elevation, Kinsella et al. (2015b) propose that heroes serve important life-enhancing functions. Heroes who “behave in ways that benefit others, sometimes at great personal risk, are likely to increase positive feelings towards the hero and others, reminding people of the good in the world” (p. 7). Heroes take risks that inspire us. Franco et al. (2011) argue that in addition to sacrifice, risk-taking differentiates heroism from altruism, with heroes taking risks and making self-sacrificing decisions in ways that altruists do not. Zimbardo (2011) goes so far as to call altruism “heroism-light”. Franco et al. argue that the risk-taking aspect of heroism is what makes heroism especially desirable and emotionally moving. We propose that hero stories energize us in three ways: They heal our psychic wounds, promote our personal growth, inspire us to action, and exude charisma. We examine these ideas next.

Hero stories heal psychic wounds. Hero stories serve a healing function in several ways. First, storytelling is a community-building activity. Before the advent of technological devices, families and groups often gathered for storytelling as a means of establishing social connections. This sense of family, group, or community was, and remains, central to human emotional well-being (Aberson, Healy, & Romero, 2000; Brewer, 1979, 1999; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). The content of hero stories also promotes a strong sense of social identity. If the hero is an effective one, he or she performs actions that exemplify and affirm the community’s most cherished values. The validation of a shared worldview, told vividly in storytelling, serves important healing and self-esteem-building functions (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Solomon et al., 2014).

Group storytelling, we argue, is a quasi-group therapy setting that involves bringing people together to share stories about how to overcome traumatic, anxiety-provoking situations. We believe that hero stories share many of the benefits of group therapy as identified by Yalom and Leszcz (2005). These benefits include the instillation of hope; the relief of knowing that others’ share one’s emotional experiences; the sharing of information; the development of socialization skills; the acquisition of modeling behavior; the fostering of self-awareness; the building of group cohesiveness; the relief of stress; and the development of a sense of existential meaning about life. The anxiety-buffering role of heroic action is consistent with the tenets of terror management theory (Solomon et al., 2014). Moreover, many 12-step recovery groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, also promote healing through the open sharing of members’ stories. Some clinical psychologists even use hero stories in their practice to help their clients develop the heroic traits of strength, resilience, and courage (Garloch, 2013).

Hero stories promote personal growth. Psychiatrist Karl Stern (1966) once observed that “the evolution of human growth is an evolution from an absolute need to be loved towards a full readiness to give love” (as cited in Fernandez, 2007, p. 114). Stern’s observation is consistent with Erich Fromm’s (1956) claim that the ability to love

others first requires self-respect and self-love. We believe that Stern and Fromm have aptly summarized the transformation that the mythic hero undergoes during the hero journey. Joseph Campbell (1949) believed that the hero journey parallels human developmental stages. All young adults, according to Campbell, are driven out of their safe, familiar worlds and into the fearful real world, and “the big question is whether you are going to be able to say a hearty yes to your adventure” (p. 43). Eric Erikson’s (1975) stages of development suggest a hero trajectory during the human lifespan, with young adults driven to establish competencies and carve out an *identity* for themselves. Older adults reach a stage of *generativity*, which Erikson defines as people’s desire to create things that will outlast them and to give back to the society that has given them so much. This shift to generativity is illustrated in Homer’s *Odyssey*, where the transformation of Odysseus’s oar from a seafaring tool to a winnowing device symbolizes his transformation from warrior to heroic leader of Ithaca. Hero stories remind us that we are all developmentally equipped to pursue this type of lifelong hero journey.

Campbell’s (1949) stages of the hero’s journey culminate with the gift, boon, or elixir that the hero bestows upon the society from which he originated. Both Campbell and Erikson believed that personal transformation is the key to reaching the generativity stage of development and, finally, the apex of *integrity*. In all good hero stories, the key to achieving transformation is the discovery of an important missing inner quality that has heretofore hindered personal growth. Good heroes use the power of transformation not only to change themselves for the better, but also to transform the world. Campbell (1988) describes the power of mythic transformation in this way: “If you realize what the real problem is -- losing yourself, giving yourself to some higher end, or to another -- you realize that this itself is the ultimate trial. When we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness. And what all the myths have to deal with is transformations of consciousness of one kind or another” (p. 112).

Transformative gift-giving is apparent in 12-Step recovery groups, which require members to undergo 11 steps of self-discovery followed by a 12th and final step requiring them to “carry the message” to others in need. The co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill Wilson, maintained that the key to the recovered alcoholic’s continued personal growth, and even his sobriety, is to carry the message of AA to other alcoholics (Smith & Wilson, 2013). Moreover, all 12-step programs underscore the importance of sponsorship. Healing and sobriety are not likely to be maintained unless one is willing and able to sponsor newcomers, a process that involves shepherding them through the 12 steps.

The journey of personal growth within the context of the hero narrative is consistent with psychological theories of human growth and development. According to Kohlberg (1969), children possess a preconventional, or Level I, sense of morality. At this level children are concerned with rewards for good behavior and punishments for bad. By the teenage years, children display Level II or conventional

morality. At this stage teens consider what other people will think of them and what society and the law require. Finally, starting in late adolescence or early adulthood, some people begin reasoning at Level III, using postconventional morality. Here people become more concerned about following mutually agreed upon moral principles and their own ethical values. Their thinking revolves around abstract principles such as justice and equality. They might decide that stealing food to save someone is the right thing to do, even though it violates the law.

Other theorists have made a persuasive argument that moral development varies as a function of gender and culture. Carol Gilligan's work suggests that Kohlberg's model is gender-biased, and she presents compelling data demonstrating that young girls tend to make moral judgments based on a utilitarian rather than a de-ontological moral framework (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 1988). In addition, Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller (1987) have shown that Kohlberg's scheme does not generalize to other cultures. These gender and cultural differences in development suggest that hero narratives must vary in their emphases if they are to assist in the developmental growth of a demographically and culturally diverse audience.

Hero stories inspire us. The classic mythic hero is often an underdog or “everyman” who is summoned on a journey fraught with extraordinary challenges. Our research on underdogs shows that we identify with them, root for them, and judge them to be highly inspiring when they triumph (Allison & Burnette, 2009; Allison & Goethals, 2008; Davis, Burnette, Allison, & Stone, 2011; Kim, Allison, Eylon, Goethals, Markus, & McGuire, 2008; see also Vandello, Goldschmeid, & Richards, 2007). Kinsella et al. (2015b) present data suggesting that the inspiring quality of heroes is what sets heroes apart from altruists, helpers, and leaders. Allison and Goethals (2011) asked participants to generate traits describing heroes and, using factor and cluster-analytic statistical procedures, found eight general categories of traits. Called *The Great Eight*, these trait categories consist of *smart, strong, charismatic, reliable, resilient, selfless, caring, and inspiring*. When asked which of the great eight are the most important descriptors of heroes, a different group of participants reported that the trait of *inspiring* is the most important of the eight (Allison & Goethals, 2011).

CHARISMA AND HERO WORSHIP

Our finding that charisma is a central trait of heroes underscores the idea that heroes move us and inspire us. People view charismatic individuals with reverence and awe (Goethals & Allison, 2014). Charismatic leaders are perceived to possess god-like characteristics, an idea conveyed by Weber (1921) who wrote that charismatic individuals are “treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.” Divine intervention on behalf of

the hero is a principal element of Campbell's (1949) hero monomyth. The hero in classic mythology is often summoned by a higher power to a great journey, and the catalytic agent of this journey is some type of deficit or wounding suffered by the hero. This wounding, divine in origin, emerges in countless stories of ugly ducklings, Cinderellas, and other underdogs who through magic or the help of a deity turn their wounds into triumph. Heroes use their wounds to transform themselves and to redeem the world, much like the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus in the New Testament. Unlocking the divine secret of our wounds is the surest path to heroism. The Greek term for charisma is "the divine gift of grace" (Riggio & Riggio, 2008), underscoring the pivotal role of divine involvement in the hero journey. We endow our most charismatic and transformative leaders with god-like immortality, as seen in Obama's description of Mandela as belonging "to the ages."

Strong, charismatic leaders enjoy enduring appeal (Goethals & Allison, 2014; Shamir, 1995). People attribute exceptional qualities to those they find charismatic, and they feel a strong emotional attachment to those individuals. In attributing exceptional qualities to charismatic leaders, followers construct cognitive representations that both develop and maintain heroic images (Goethals & Allison, 2012). Furthermore, many charismatic leaders are often active participants in what we might call leadership theatre, designed to give follower audiences what they wish for in a leader. John Keegan (1987) puts it well: "The theatrical impulse will be strong in the successful politician, teacher, entrepreneur, athlete and divine, and will be both expected and reinforced by the audiences to which they perform.... The leader of men... can show himself to his followers only through a mask, a mask that he must make for himself, but a mask made in such form as will mark him to men of his time and place as the leader they want and need" (p. 46). Followers are co-conspirators in this leadership theatre. Both leaders and followers benefit from the latter's perception that the former are heroic.

Consistent with Weber's emphasis on the divine or supernatural, Sigmund Freud (1921) noted that primal horde leaders are deified in death. Support for death deification is found in our research on the role of death in people's evaluations of leaders (Allison & Eylon, 2005; Allison & Goethals, 2008; Eylon & Allison, 2005). In these studies, participants are given biographical information about a leader. Some participants are told that the leader is deceased whereas others are told that the leader is still living. Our results have consistently shown that the dead leader is judged as more admirable and inspirational than the living leader. We call this phenomenon the *death positivity bias*. Consistent with Freud's analysis, death elevates a leader's status and contributes to hero worship. This phenomenon may explain Simonton's (1994) findings about the factors that determine the perceived greatness of U.S. Presidents. His morbid discovery is that getting assassinated truly helps a president gain stature as a great leader.

We respond to charismatic leaders with reverence and awe. Therefore leaders who could somehow tap into religious feeling and ideation might be seen to be especially charismatic. Another closely related human evolutionary outcome, according

to Carl Jung (1969; Jung & von Franz, 1964), is our readiness to perceive heroes and be drawn to them. To explain this readiness, Jung proposed the concept of *archetype*, the idea that we inherit a *collective unconscious* composed of unconscious or latent images due to our common evolutionary past. These latent images can be made conscious or activated when we encounter stimuli in the world that corresponds to them. For example, an encounter with a nurturing figure may activate the mother archetype, and an encounter with a larger than life figure may trigger the *hero* archetype. The *God* archetype encourages people to invoke supernatural supreme beings and to perceive divine qualities in leaders such as kings, popes and emperors.

Archetypes not only affect what we notice, they also determine our emotional responses. When people encounter a person or event that seems to have supernatural properties, they may respond with reverence, awe, and elevation. Jung suggested that another important archetype is the *hero*. When we encounter people who resemble the unconscious, archetypal image of *hero*, we both think of them as heroes and respond to them with strong positive emotions similar to those elicited by certain god-like figures. Both heroes and gods exude charisma and elevate us.

The determinants and consequences of charisma have been the focus of much attention from leadership scholars over the past twenty years. Shamir (1995) found that followers form different impressions of socially distant charismatic leaders compared to those of socially close leaders. Distant charismatic leaders are viewed as having great courage, persistence, and rhetorical ability, whereas close charismatic leaders are judged to have openness, humor, considerateness, and originality. Popper (2013) extended this work by proposing that the greater the distance between charismatic leaders and followers, the more followers will use abstract trait categories to describe leaders, and the more followers will depend on the leader to strengthen their self worth. This analysis is consistent with Hofstede's (1997) claim that distant charismatic leaders are in fact "culture heroes" (p. 9). The more socially distant a hero is from us, the more we may endow the hero with abstract, prototypically heroic qualities. Miendl and Ehrlich (1987) called this phenomenon the "romance of the leader" but we can just as easily call it the romance of the hero.

TEMPORAL AND DYNAMIC COMPONENTS OF THE HLD

We have argued here that heroes and hero narratives fulfill epistemic and energizing needs, including the need for wisdom, meaning, hope, inspiration, personal growth, and charismatic leadership. We have introduced a framework for understanding the dynamic nature of heroism called the HLD that can account for the myriad ways in which our choice of heroes shifts in response to changing circumstances and naturally occurring developmental stages. When young children are asked to name their heroes, they typically list people who show great competencies,

especially athletic prowess (Goethals & Allison, 2012). For example, Superman is idolized by young children for his ability to leap tall buildings and overpower locomotives, but in later stages of childhood Superman's role as a crime-fighter is listed as the main reason for his heroism. As people develop more sophisticated notions of morality, their heroes evolve accordingly. Goethals and Allison (2012) have used the term *transitional heroes* to describe heroes that correspond to particular stages of development. These transitional heroes are placeholders that fulfill our need for heroes until better ones come along that meet different or higher level needs. Still, not all heroes are outgrown. Many participants admit to having life-long heroes. But Goethals and Allison suggest that most people's heroes do change over the course of their lifespan in a manner consistent with developmental stages.

The Johnny Carson Effect

The evolving nature of need-based heroism was illustrated in 1983 by legendary *Tonight Show* host Johnny Carson. At that time, Carson was embroiled in a contentious divorce from his third wife Joanna. The divorce proved to be a costly one for Carson, both emotionally and financially. One night, during his *Tonight Show* opening monologue, Carson couldn't resist making light of his difficult divorce. "I remember being a kid, age 7 or 8," he said. "Babe Ruth was my hero. Then when I first got into show business, Jack Benny was my hero. Now my hero is Henry VIII" (Carson, 2003). With this joke, Carson illustrated the need-based origin of heroism as well as the dynamic nature of heroic leadership. Our psychological needs dictate our choice of heroes, and as these needs inevitably shift over time, so do our preferences for heroes and heroic leaders. Johnny Carson's quip has inspired us to call our tendency to choose heroes that match our current needs the *Johnny Carson Effect*.

To provide evidence for the Johnny Carson effect, Allison and Goethals (2014) asked 85 people between the ages of 18 and 80 to think of a time in their lives when they faced a significant life challenge. They then asked participants to list the people whom they considered to be their heroes during this period. The results showed a striking relationship between respondents' needs and their choice of heroes. When participants reported a time during which they suffered a severe health setback, they chose heroes at that time who had successfully overcome their specific malady. For example, a participant who overcame testicular cancer reported that his hero was Lance Armstrong, who is famous for triumphing over this form of cancer. Another participant overcame a severe depression and reported that her uncle, who also suffered from and overcame depression, was her hero.

Allison and Goethals (2014) also asked a different group of participants to think back to a time when they had a hero whom they no longer consider to be a hero. These participants revealed that their former heroes helped them cope with difficult circumstances unique to that time in their lives. For example, college-aged participants reported that the Power Rangers were once their heroes because

the Rangers displayed great competencies and self-confidence when our participants lacked those qualities. Another middle-aged participant revealed that the famed soccer player Pelé was once his hero because, as captain of his soccer team, he felt pressure to excel at his sport. Similarly, a recent college graduate who played intercollegiate soccer reported that famed U.S. soccer star Mia Hamm had been her hero for the same reason. Although neither Pelé nor Hamm remained these two participants' heroes, these soccer legends played an important role in inspiring our participants to accomplish their aims and wishes. These results show that our choice of heroes is dynamic, with individual heroes entering and leaving our lives in unison with changes in our needs and life circumstances.

Hero Retention and Repudiation

The tendency of human beings to be drawn to successful, competent others is a robust finding in the attraction literature (Berscheid & Reis, 1998). In a classic study, Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, and Sloan (1976) demonstrated a phenomenon that they called *basking in reflected glory*, or BIRGing. People associate themselves with successful others to such an extent that another's success can become one's own success. We suspect that BIRGing can help explain how one's self-esteem and identity can become psychologically attached to another's heroic accomplishments. Cialdini et al. noted that these associations can shift as the fortunes of the target of our associations shift. These shifts are consistent with the HLD in suggesting that our attachments to heroes come and go, but the HLD extends this idea by suggesting that these shifts reflect the ever-changing nature of our needs. But there may be resistance to changing heroes in whom we have deep psychological investment. When our identities are heavily enmeshed with another's heroism, we may show staunch loyalty to the hero, even when the hero has fallen in the eyes of most others.

The case of Lance Armstrong offers a powerful example. For years, Armstrong denied allegations of doping and even showed a vicious streak toward anyone who dared to make these allegations. Armstrong's supporters were people who, for many years, believed his denials and were inspired by Armstrong's ability to overcome cancer and win seven Tour de France titles. When Armstrong finally admitted using performance-enhancing drugs, he lost most of his admirers but, curiously, he retained a small but fervent fan base that continued to place him on a heroic pedestal. These followers could not or would not be deterred by Armstrong's confession of doping. They downplayed the significance of the doping ("everyone in cycling cheats"); they accused the cycling governing body of corruption ("they were out to get him"); they focused on Armstrong's heroic battle with cancer ("he beat the disease"); or they pointed to his charitable work ("the Livestrong Foundation raises millions"). Armstrong's supporters had shown such a personal investment in Armstrong's heroism and bore identities that were so deeply connected to his legendary status that they could not abandon him

(Levy, 2012). People with deep psychological investments may cling to flawed heroes and may also proselytize about them if they have social support (see Festinger, Riecken, & Shachter, 1956).

People's resistance to abandoning discredited heroes is consistent with research on belief perseverance (Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975). Belief perseverance refers to the tendency of people to cling to a belief even when information is available that contradicts the belief. In one study, people who voted for Richard Nixon in 1972 maintained their positive views of him during the Watergate hearings, whereas people who voted for his opponent George McGovern adopted more negative attitudes toward Nixon (Carretta & Moreland, 1982). Nixon voters selectively remembered information consistent with their views and conveniently forgot inconsistent information, suggesting a motivation to validate their earlier voting behavior and thus avoid cognitive dissonance. This finding supports Anderson's (2007) proposal that belief perseverance stems from *data distortion*. Applied to the phenomenon of hero perseverance, data distortion can include the tendency of Lance Armstrong's fans and Richard Nixon's voters to mentally manipulate information about their heroes in a way that preserved their favorable views. Belief perseverance about heroes may also stem from the selective interpretation of social values. Armstrong's detractors cited "fair play" as their reason for abandoning Armstrong, but his steadfast supporters noted that the pervasiveness of doping among cyclists required Armstrong, in the interest of fairness, to continue his drug use.

Not everyone falls prey to belief perseverance about heroes who behave badly. Many people who once greatly admired Armstrong and Nixon were able to downgrade their evaluations in response to new condemning information. Perhaps their psychological investment in, or public support for, Armstrong and Nixon was lower compared to those who persevered in their beliefs. Further research is clearly needed here. We suspect that the choice to renounce a hero may fulfill the same kinds of needs as the choice to adopt or retain a hero. According to the HLD, the stories we tell about our heroes, even our fallen ones, are designed to impart wisdom and inspiration. We contend that stories about the rise of heroes, and even the fall of heroes, fulfill an important epistemic function by showing us paths to success as well as paths to ruin. In our earlier work on heroes, we discuss two types of heroes who can suffer a reversal of fortune – *tragic heroes* and *transposed heroes* (Goethals & Allison, 2012). Both of these hero types offer a cautionary tale about the fragility of human success. The wisdom we glean from such stories satisfies invaluable needs and inspires us to perform exemplary action in life. The ways in which people benefit from both rising and falling heroes are an integral part of the HLD.

CONCLUSION

We began this article with an examination of the psychological significance of Odysseus's little-known second journey in the *Odyssey*. The hero Odysseus was

far more than a brave Trojan War veteran who overcame innumerable seafaring obstacles during his journey home. Homer intuited that our greatest heroes complete two journeys in life: A first journey that focuses on identity formation and the fulfillment of physical needs, followed by a second journey that involves a transformation to a higher moral state. Homer anticipated Carl Jung's (1969) dictum that the first half of life centers on ego development whereas the second half involves ego deconstruction and more selfless pursuits. The *Odyssey* offers a prescient view of modern theories of human growth and development as outlined by Kohlberg (1969), Brown & Gilligan (1992), Erikson (1975), Graves (1970), Levinson (1978), and Rohr (2011).

Odysseus's second journey is also consistent with formulations of transforming leadership proposed by Burns (1978, 2003) and Bass (1993). Transforming leadership raises both leaders and followers to higher levels of motivation and morality. Built into this idea is the notion that leaders can change the motives of followers by helping to satisfy their lower order needs and focusing them on more elevating motives, such as distinguished achievement, moral behavior, or fundamental values. Mohandas Gandhi is an excellent example of a transforming leader who worked tirelessly to focus more cautious Indian leaders on the goal of independence from Great Britain. Central to his success was his unwavering focus on nonviolence and *satyagraha*, or discovery of and adherence to God's truth through universal brotherhood and the force of love. Gandhi wanted people to satisfy but also simplify their basic material needs so that they could focus on higher motives. His complete embodiment of these principles inspired fellow Indians, and other leaders the world over, most importantly, perhaps, Martin Luther King, Jr. Like Odysseus, Gandhi had to undergo a first journey of suffering and toil before he could become transformed into a great leader. As a young man Gandhi live in racially divided South Africa where, because of his skin color, he was thrown off a train, beaten by a stagecoach driver, attacked by whites, and imprisoned for years. Only through such suffering did Gandhi learn to use love as a weapon and an instrument of social change during his later years as India's pre-eminent leader (Parel, 2002).

We have argued that effective hero narratives, such as those of Odysseus and Gandhi, hold a powerful grip on the human psyche. These narratives do so because of their unsurpassed value in supplying life wisdom and fresh inspiration to an audience thirsty for both. Hero narratives are able to convey complex truths and elevate people toward a higher emotional and behavioral state. We have seen how charisma can play a powerful role in elevating people emotionally, morally, and spiritually. Lincoln, Elvis, MLK, Jr., and Ali were heroes and heroic leaders who used their charismatic appeal to unleash social changes on a massive scale. Perhaps most importantly, heroes shape the behavior of their followers in life-changing ways (Allison & Goethals, 2011). Our most cherished heroes offer narratives of heroism that provide a blueprint for how our own life stories might possibly unfold over time. Hero stories inspire us all because they call us all (Rohr, 2011).

We acknowledge that hero narratives throughout the ages may have initially served epistemic functions but then later may have served less noble motives, such as legitimizing those in power. Hero stories, in short, may evolve over time as a function of the social, psychological, and cultural forces operating on an ever-changing audience whose needs and motivations can distort key details of the story. To illustrate, Bartlett (1932) describes a Swazi story in which the hero is a clever weasel who convinces a powerful lion to eat its own cubs. Bartlett suggested that the story may have evolved this way as a result of English domination of the Swazis. Stories can come to reflect the social and political milieu and may be told, retold, and transformed to meet the current motivations of rulers, audiences, or both. This dynamic nature of classic narratives may explain the existence of the multitude of variations of our most cherished cultural fables and fairy tales.

The phrase *hero worship* in the title of this article is derived from Thomas Carlyle's classic 1841 book in which he proposed that all of human history has been made by great individuals who were gifted with supreme vision and action. These gifts, Carlyle argued, made it one's duty to worship heroes. Today we know the limitations of the "great man" theory of leadership, as a multitude of contextual factors and followership characteristics play a crucial role in the success of any leader or group (Lapierre & Carsten, 2014). We have argued here that heroic leaders may "earn" the worship they receive by their ability to meet many essential needs of followers, but scholars have recently shown that followers also meet many of the critical needs of leaders. Messick (2005), for example, has convincingly shown that leaders cannot fulfill their vision unless followers provide leaders with focus, gratitude, loyalty, commitment, effort, cooperation, sacrifice, respect, and obedience. Future scholars may wish to direct their attention to examining how the followership of leaders compares and contrasts to the followership of heroes.

In addition to exploring the relationship between heroism and leadership, social scientists may fruitfully investigate the connection between these two phenomena within the broader context of authority relationships. Morselli & Passini (2011) make the persuasive case that social psychology has failed to link the level of the individual (how people perceive authority) with the societal level (how authority is expressed). One exception is research that has explored people's willingness to submit themselves to the demands of an authority figure when they perceive that the authority has acted on principles of justice and equity (Tyler, 2006). After the American civil war, Abraham Lincoln was admired by many defeated southerners because of gestures directed toward the South that reflected the principles of harmony, reconciliation, and justice (Goethals, 2015). Moreover, heroes who violate basic rules of justice are vilified and thus risk losing their heroic status (Allison & Goethals, 2011). Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, adopted a more punitive approach to southern military leaders, sowing the seeds for divisiveness and bitterness that lasted for decades.

Our human craving for heroes, our need for the psychological benefits that heroes offer, and our desires over time either to retain our heroes or to repudiate

them, all comprise the constellation of phenomena that we call the *Heroic Leadership Dynamic*. In this chapter we've identified a number of key psychological processes that are implicated by the HLD. These processes include the mental construction of scripts and schemas about heroic behavior; the processing of transrational phenomena in hero stories that defy rational analysis; the analysis of deep truths and paradoxes inherent in hero stories; the development of emotional intelligence; the healing power of group storytelling; the inspiring nature of charismatic leaders and triumphant underdogs; various mechanisms underlying personal growth and developmental health; and the psychology of associating with, and disassociating from, heroes and heroic leaders over time. A central driving mechanism underlying the HLD is the every-changing state of human needs. The Johnny Carson effect describes what we call need-based heroism -- the human tendency to choose heroes based on one's current set of needs, motives, and drives.

We conclude this article by pointing out heroism's startling absence in the literature in positive psychology. Zimbardo (2013) has lamented the fact that there is not a single mention of heroes or heroism in the two most recent editions of the *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (viz., Lopez & Snyder, 2011; Snyder & Lopez, 2005). One of the principal aims of this article is to call attention to the rich psychology of heroism and its connections to theory and research in several of psychology's subdisciplines, including social, developmental, cognitive, positive, and clinical psychology. The human tendencies to develop heroes, to be elevated by them, and to worship them are the culmination of a pervasive narrative about human greatness that people have been driven to construct since the advent of language. Because heroic leadership is so valuable to society, and also because it is so rare, human beings take steps -- usually in the form of storytelling -- to ensure that these heroic leaders never leave our collective memories. Our hope is that our work offers some initial insights and observations about the psychology of immortalizing humanity's greatest individuals.

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