Article

Heroism and the Pursuit of a Meaningful Life

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Abstract

Individuals and groups of individuals are motivated to find meaning in their activities and in life, generally. That is, when events or affective states threaten or reduce a person's sense of meaning, psychological processes are mobilized to serve the goals of meaning maintenance and meaning reestablishment, respectively. We examined two avenues for meaning maintenance: First, we considered psychological resources from the enhancing, moral modelling, and protecting functions of heroes, and second, we considered engagement in heroic behavior as a means to create meaning. We addressed contemporary heroes via conceptual and empirical literatures to discuss a variety of ways that heroes derive meaning from their own actions, and the extent to which others could glean personal meaning from a hero's characteristics and actions. We present a meaning regulation framework that explains how heroes and heroic behavior each boost meaning and the meaning maintenance processes, such as heroism as a buffer against meaning threats. We synthesized relevant literatures on meaning and heroism, and offer a framework that illustrates heroic functions in the context of meaning in life: a central, superordinate psychological variable that is familiar to many individuals and groups. This framework offers many opportunities for future research and practical application of heroism.

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Heroes are often described as the pinnacle of human greatness, displaying the courage to act with moral fortitude and serving the needs of others ahead of their own needs, often with great personal sacrifice. Heroes affect individuals and groups (Klapp, 1969), and inspire and motivate others to develop a sense of purpose in their own lives (Allison & Goethals, 2011, 2013, 2015; Früchtl, 2009; Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2015a, 2015b, 2017). Approximately 66% of people report have at least one personal hero (Kinsella et al., 2015b), reinforcing the notion that we need heroes and benefit from the social and psychological resources they provide (Kinsella et al., 2015a; Sullivan & Venter, 2005). In fact, heroes have been described as "the strength that forces connection to the larger universe and gives meaning to our actions and existence" (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 465). Celebrating and worshipping heroes has been described as a means to reestablish meaning in life, in part because heroic encounters prompt reflection on important questions about one's own purpose and contribution in life (Früchtl, 2009). Indeed, a meaningful life has been defined as one where people use their signature strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than their own self, to transcend one's solitary self (Steger, 2009)—a definition that closely resembles some commonly held notions about what it means to be a modern-day hero (Kinsella et al., 2015b). Yet so far in research, limited attention has been given to understanding the links between personal heroes, heroic behavior, and meaning in life.

From an onlooker's perspective, individuals engaged in heroic behavior appear to have a clear purpose, and live a life that is significant and coherent—elements that are central to the pursuit of a meaningful life (George & Park, 2016; Heintzelman & King, 2014). Indeed, heroes are likely to affirm meaning via their own actions (Green, van Tongeren, Cairo, & Hagiwara, 2017). Heroes appear to personify what it means to live a meaningful life, and for others, they function psychologically as vehicles of meaning. For instance, individuals often feel strongly connected to their heroes, incorporate some of the hero's positive virtues and characteristics into their own self (see Sullivan & Venter, 2005), and engage in behavioral changes in attempts to converge with the hero's positive social values. In this article, we examine two novel, potentially useful avenues that individuals pursue to maintain and reestablish meaning in their own lives: first, they draw psychological resources from the enhancing, moral modelling, and protecting functions provided by heroes, and second, they engage in heroic behavior (see Figure 1).

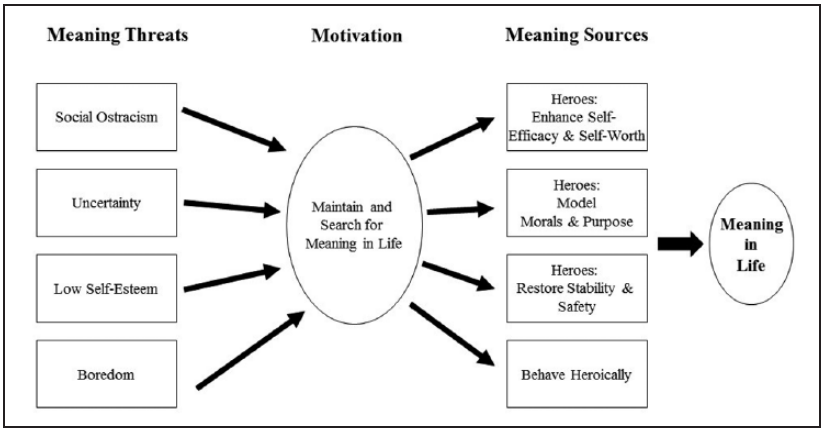

Figure 1. A meaning regulation approach to heroism.

There are many different types of heroes including humanitarian heroes, political heroes, whistle-blowers, religious heroes, and civilian or martial physical risk heroes (see Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011). According to Campbell (1949), there is a recognizable pattern in the sequence of events associated with a hero: the hero's journey or monomyth. The hero is first called to action and becomes aware of a challenge or problem that they need to overcome, the hero then faces great challenges and setbacks as they follow the quest, and finally, the changed hero returns with gifts for society and a new perspective on the world. For example, in The Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen is a girl from humble roots who volunteers herself to enter the strange world of the Capital and the Arena in lieu of her younger sister. She must win over sponsors and allies while impressing the Gamemakers during training, and uses her skills at archery, hunting, and problem solving to compete for her life in the ruthless Hunger Games and in time, initiate societal change. More broadly, Campbell's detailed analysis of the monomyth serves as a reminder that heroes are not infallible or near-perfect individuals, and they, too, cope with numerous threats as each embarks on a personal journey in search of meaning. Each hero's journey reminds us of the dynamic ways in which individuals search for and seek to maintain meaning in their lives (Green et al., 2017). The extent that heroes, such as Katniss Everdeen, derive meaning from their own actions, as well as the extent that onlookers perceive a greater sense of meaning in life as a result of observing heroic action is the focus of the present article.

We have garnered empirical support for lay conceptions of prototypical hero features (Kinsella et al., 2015b). Based on those analyses, the defining *features* of heroes include bravery, moral integrity, courage, protection, conviction, honesty, altruism, self-sacrifice, selflessness, determination, inspiration, and helpfulness. The *functions* of heroes include enhancing and uplifting others, modelling morals, and protecting the safety and welfare of others (hero functions framework; Kinsella et al., 2015a). Each of these functions correspond with basic human needs (Allison & Goethals, 2015; Kinsella et al., 2015a) and the fulfilment of basic human needs (e.g., belonging, certainty, self-esteem, symbolic immortality); such functions are the foundation of the experience of meaningfulness (Fiske, 2004; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Heintzelman & King, 2014). Extending these ideas further, in the present article, we argue that heroes have the potential to fulfil basic human needs because in part they influence the experience of meaning in the lives of others. First, we briefly discuss different conceptualizations and theories of meaning. Second, we address the role of heroes in providing enhancing, moral modelling, and protecting functions in the lives of others. Third, we outline how heroes, as vehicles of meaning, influence others' experience of meaning in life and how the pursuit of a meaningful life can spark heroic actions.

Humans as Meaning Makers

Throughout history philosophers such as Pascal, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus have emphasized striving for and realizing one's own meaning in life as central human goals. Research confirms this existential view: Human beings strive to make meaning in their lives (e.g., Heine et al., 2006; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). At the most basic level, the essence of meaning is connection (Baumeister & Vohs, 2005), and meaning in life builds on connections such as people, places, and things external to the self, as well as the thoughts, emotions, behaviors, motivations, abilities, roles, and memories within the self (Heine et al., 2006). Personal meaning integrates individual's ideas about who they each are, the kind of world they each live in, and how they each relate to the people and environments around them. Generally, people try to incorporate such knowledge into a set of viable aspirations and overarching aims (Steger, 2012). Many individuals strive to make meaning of their own unique existence, including their concerns about the certainty of death in relation to the meaning of life (see Heine et al., 2006; Yalom, 1980).

Previous research on meaning in life has focused on both presence of life meaning and the search for life meaning (see Steger et al., 2006). Presence of meaning in life refers to the extent that people feel their lives have meaning

in a particular moment. Search for meaning in life refers to the extent that people are trying to establish or reestablish a sense of meaning and understanding in lives. Low meaning in life is described as a negative state where individuals feel alienated from the self and others, and relationships are lacking (Fromm, 1973, 1991), a state of anxiety about the absence of meaningful activities and circumstances (Barbalet, 1999; Coughlan, Igou, Van Tilburg, Kinsella, & Ritchie, in press).

According to Frankl (1959), meaning in life helps sustain us through times of adversity and psychological threat. Since Frankl's seminal work on meaning, a diverse range of theoretical (e.g., Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Wong, 2012) and empirical interests (e.g., King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006; Steger et al., 2006) have developed on the topic of meaning. This is not surprising given that the ability to make sense of one's life has a profound influence on psychological well-being (Wong & Fry, 1998).

Despite these advances, researchers have noted that the study of meaning in life has been hindered by definitional ambiguity and oversimplified approaches to understanding the construct (George & Park, 2016; Heintzelman & King, 2014). There is, however, a shift in the literature whereby psychological meaning is characterized in three ways (Heintzelman & King, 2014; Steger, 2012): having a broader purpose in life, one's life being coherent and making sense, and one's life having significance and value (Heintzelman & King, 2014). Similarly, Park and George (2013) suggested that feelings of meaningfulness include "a sense of significance, comprehension, and purpose regarding one's life and existence" (p. 484). The present article focuses on these three characteristics as evidence of a felt sense of meaning in life.

There are two theoretical approaches to understanding meaning which are of particular interest when examining the links between heroes and meaning. First, terror management theory indicates that humans are prone to feeling anxiety and dread about their own mortality. In an effort to alleviate these negative feelings they gravitate toward culture, worldviews, and self-esteem in order to reaffirm connections with others and one's own symbolic immortality. Meaning systems are beliefs that help people make sense of World and that provide orientation (e.g., Fromm, 1947), they help buffer fears about one's own mortality (e.g., Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2004), and reduce existential insecurity (e.g., Van Tongeren, McIntosh, Raad, & Pae, 2013). Throughout this article, we will consider ways that encountering heroes and behaving heroically may reduce the threat of mortality.

Managing the terror associated with one's pending death is just one route in which meaning needs can be fulfilled. An alternative perspective to terror management theory is offered by the meaning maintenance model (Heine et al., 2006), which asserts that meaning is derived from any significant

expected and coherent expectation and connection. At the core of the meaning maintenance model is the notion that when people's sense of meaning is threatened in one of the four avenues for establishing meaning (e.g., self-esteem, certainty, belonging, or symbolic immortality), they attempt to cope with this distressing psychological threat by attempting to restore meaning though other domains—a process known as fluid compensation (Heine et al., 2006). When a person's meaning structure has been threatened by being reminded of their impending death, they often experience an increase sense of nationalism (Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008), feelings of increased closeness to fellow citizens (Proulx, Heine, & Vohs, 2010), and an increased tendency to punish wrongdoers (Proulx et al., 2010). Interestingly, research also indicates that being rejected by others (threat to belongingness) can increase prosocial behavior (Williams, 2001), whereas being ignored by others (threat to personal power) may result in more self-focused behavior (Lee & Shrum, 2012) as a means to reestablish meaning. In general, a characterization of these different responses is that when meaning frameworks are disturbed, people seek to reestablish meaning by finding, affirming, and reinforcing meaning in some other domain (see Heine et al., 2006).

Previous research has demonstrated a link between meaning in life and virtues, such as humility and forgiveness. For instance, the virtue of forgiveness offers individuals a vehicle to increase meaning in life by helping them repair existing relationships (Van Tongeren et al., 2015). Heroes, who model virtues such as forgiveness, may engender those qualities in others, which in turn increase perceptions of meaning in life by promoting positive relations with others. Elsewhere, researchers have found that affirming one's general sense of meaning via self-affirmation (Schmeichel & Martens, 2005) or relationship affirmation (Van Tongeren et al., 2014) prior to a psychological threat lead to greater levels of humility and reduced defensiveness than when affirmations were absent (see also Steele, 1988). Offering individuals an opportunity to think about and affirm their personal heroes, or indeed their own heroic behavior, may also buffer against psychological threats and thus support meaning maintenance, resulting in reduced defensiveness—this hypothesis has yet to be tested empirically.

People typically draw meaning from multiple sources, including family, work, and religion (Emmons, 1997). We suspect that this sense of meaning can be derived from abstract values and identification with heroic persons who represent those values, as well as engaging in heroic behavior. Although a number of these meaning framework-reinforcing strategies have been explored by previous research, our approach is the first to focus on the role that heroes can play a role in people's experience of meaning in life by providing enhancing, moral modelling, and protecting functions to individuals.

The Three Core Functions of Heroes and the Meaning of Life

The Enhancing Function of Heroes

People have a basic need to feel good about themselves (Baumeister, 1991) and are motivated to behave in ways that improve the self (Fiske, 2004). Self-enhancement is concerned with the efforts to create and maintain a positive sense of self (e.g., Sedikides, 1993). Individuals remember self-relevant information and present themselves in a way that enhances the self (Sedikides & Strube, 1997), as well as making significant efforts to avoid, reduce, and repair negative views about the self (Hepper, Gramzow, & Sedikides, 2010). Heroes could infuse positive self-views, for example, via personal or group identity, which in turn leads to perceived meaningfulness in one's life. Heroes that behave in ways that benefit others, sometimes at great personal risk, have been described as increasing positive affect in others and reminding people of the good in the world (Kinsella et al., 2015a).

Heroic myths have been the inspiration for religion, philosophies, arts, and discoveries in science and technology for centuries (Campbell, 1949). People are often moved by influential people, arousing positive emotions such as awe, gratitude, or admiration (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Furthermore, people experience positive affect as a result of observing heroic action, and in particular when they are associated with their hero's exceptional accomplishments (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Cialdini, 2007). The positive emotions instigated by observer heroic behavior may broaden one's awareness and encourage creative and exploratory thoughts and actions (Fredrickson, 2001) as well as resilience and flourishing (Fredrickson, 2003). Positive affect can enhance the experience of meaning in life (King et al., 2006), and it is possible that heroes may increase perceptions of meaning in life by boosting positive affect.

Self-improvement achieves the core need to experience positive feelings about the self (Fiske, 2004), bringing an individual closer to their personal ideal (Sedikides, 1993). Heroes may represent a person's ideal self and help regulate the self toward ongoing self-improvement efforts and strivings. In fact, many individuals remark that heroes inspire them to be a better person, thus, increasing positive feelings about the self. An encounter with a hero may result in people being inspired to take action (Thrash & Elliot, 2003), for example, making efforts toward self-improvement goals, which in turn lead to the perception that one is leading a life of some significance. Personal heroes that boost positive affect could prompt individuals to be more open to, accepting of, receiving negative or psychologically threatening feedback (see

Trope, Hassin, & Gervey, 2001; Trope, Igou, & Burke, 2006), and in turn, benefit from personal development and growth. An alternative explanation is that people bask in the reflected glory of their heroes; boosting their own positive affect but resulting in limited growth or self-improvement (see Kinsella et al., 2017, for more details). These are among many valid questions that await empirical confirmation.

Relevant role models who achieve high but attainable levels of success are perceived as inspiring and self-enhancing, yet relevant role models are perceived as self-deflating if the levels of success achieved are viewed as unattainable (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Presumably, if heroes who achieve unattainable levels of success also reduce self-esteem in others, this would reduce perceptions of meaning in life. Interestingly though, heroes are consistently described as inspiring, motivating, and boosting positive feelings about the self and others, rather than self-deflating (Kinsella et al., 2015a). We suspect this is because heroic acts involve a great deal of self-sacrifice, courage, risk, and exceptionality that observers rarely wish to emulate the behavior (unlike role models). Instead, observers draw inspiration from heroes and make smaller, more manageable changes in their own our own lives. For instance, I may not wish to give up my job and family in order to set up a charitable foundation to help vulnerable children and adults (similar to Mother Teresa), but I may decide to volunteer for an hour each week in my community, thus (potentially) increasingly my sense of meaning.

The Moral Modelling Function of Heroes

The principle of belonging centers on the idea that individuals are motivated to form long-lasting and positive relationships with others (Fiske, 2004). Belonging has been associated with many positive outcomes, including increased well-being (Baumeister, 1991) and reduced risk of suicide (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000). The fundamental need for affiliation is facilitated by people's ability to self-regulate, in other words, the human capacity to override and inhibit automatic tendencies (Bauer & Baumeister, 2011).

Essentially, heroic behavior is—for the most part—highly moral behavior, which serves people's need for meaning. Some cultural heroes boost positive affect and help unite a group around a common goal (Klapp, 1969), promoting a sense of belonging and human connection. Heroic stories and myths are often handed down across generations as a means to communicate important moral lessons that promote harmony in groups and societies (Erikson, 1977), again promoting a sense of belonging and human connection. Heroes may offer self-regulatory resources, such as

reminding individuals of societal morals, ethics, values, and norms, or redirecting individuals away from behaviors that may threaten group membership (e.g., harming others, stealing). Heroes have been described as displaying moral integrity (Kinsella et al., 2015b), acting to do the right thing (Schwartz & Schwartz, 2010), and showing a noble purpose without selfishness (Singer, 1991). Also, heroes model morals and values for others to follow (Cohen, 1993) and prompt others to do what they can for those who need help (Flescher, 2003). It may not be realistic to match the moral fortitude displayed by heroes but thinking about a heroic encounter may cause a period of self-examination which helps individuals avoid moral complacency (Flescher, 2003) and promote personal growth. Furthermore, encounters with heroes may instigate a feeling of greater connection with others and a greater responsibility to behave in ways that benefit others. The concepts of morality and meaning are closely related (Janoff-Bulman, 2013). For instance, abiding by a set of moral codes facilitates harmonious group relations (Bauer & Baumeister, 2011), and simultaneously group relations contribute to an enhanced experience of meaning in life (Fiske, 2004; Heine et al., 2006).

Another potentially interesting area of future exploration is to examine the extent that heroes provoke the feeling of awe, which in turn increases the experience of meaning in life. Recent research has established a link between awe and diminished self-concerns and increased prosocial behavior (Piff, Dietze, Feinberg, Stancato, & Keltner, 2015). We expect that heroes could arouse feelings of awe, which is associated with and potentially leads to prosocial behavior, a known source of meaningfulness—this represents a promising line of future inquiry.

The Protecting Function of Heroes

Making sense of uncertainty in our lives is a core human need (Heine et al., 2006). Given that uncertainty is often viewed as a negative or threatening experience (Fiske & Taylor, 2007), people are motivated to adopt strategies that reduce uncertainty (e.g., Kruglanski, 2004). People adopt affirmative worldviews and norms (Van den Bos, 2009) and draw from powerful myths (Campbell, 1988) and metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) to restore a sense of stability and certainty. As well as physically protecting others, heroes may also protect against psychological threats to a person's sense of meaning in life by offering hope to adults who feel disillusioned (Hobbs, 2010). In particular, heroes who share their personal accounts of dealing with overwhelming life challenges may help others feel stronger when coping with their own difficulties.

Heroes who uphold cultural values and norms may also serve as a resource for dealing with threats to uncertainty, meaning, or other existential dilemmas. A hero may offer a source of continuity and immortality, enabling the individual to transcend one's own mortality (Becker, 1973). Also, individuals strive to create a meaningful life based on society's values (modelled by heroes) with the aim of creating lasting impact and achieving symbolic immortality (Goethals & Allison, 2012; McAdams, 2008).

A Meaning Perspective on Heroism

When does an individual experience meaning in their lives? There are a number of psychological models (e.g., Baumeister, 1991; Fiske, 2004; Heine et al., 2006; Heintzelman & King, 2014) that indicate particular needs that must be met to experience meaning in life. The basic principle of each of these models is that people who cannot satisfy one or more of these needs are likely to experience a limited sense of meaningfulness in their lives. Here, we focus on some specific needs (George & Park, 2016; Heintzelman & King, 2014), which must be met in the pursuit of a meaningful life but we make links to other relevant meaning models throughout. We briefly outline each of the specific needs for meaning (sense of purpose, coherence, and living a life of significance) before considering the extent that heroes might fulfil, at least in part, each need.

Purpose

To experience meaningfulness, a person first needs a broader *sense of purpose*. Purposiveness is achieved through pursuit of objective goals and subjective states of fulfilment (Baumeister, 1991). To have a sense of life, purpose is to believe that one is here for a reason and to orient toward something greater than oneself. In particular, a sense of purpose is felt when actions are serving a highly important goal, and the individual feels the actions are useful in pursuit of meaningful goal (Van Tilburg & Igou, 2013). Research indicates that people tend to find purpose in giving back to their communities, living congruently with their religious beliefs, helping their family members, and serving their countries (Bronk, 2013; Damon, 2008). Heroes are known for their proactivity and purposeful action in the pursuit of their goals: Purpose is the essence of heroic action (Bronk & Riches, 2017). Indeed, the same authors highlight an interesting overlap between heroism and purpose: Some people behave heroically because they are guided by an enduring sense of purpose (*purpose-guided heroism*), while others behave heroically and derive such a degree of meaning from their

actions that they develop a lasting sense of purpose (*heroism-guided purpose*; Bronk & Riches, 2017).

Furthermore, personal heroes may shape how people view their own life purpose. Baumeister and Vohs (2005) argue that evolution shaped humans for living in large and complex groups and that we are attracted to systems that represent collective goals and values. Given that heroes represent positive social values and serve to be proactive in a way that benefits the majority, there may be an evolutionary argument that explains the human preoccupation with heroes. Personal heroes could represent some of people's superordinate and primary goals and desires (Coughlan et al., in press). Heroes push the boundaries of exceptional human behavior and motivate others toward new possibilities, shifting one's perspective to more noble purposes (Singer, 1991). Not only do heroes help people survive physical dangers but they trigger onlookers to reflect on the eudemonic questions of "How should I live? What do I really want?" (Früchtl, 2009). These questions may help direct an individual's attention toward more new goals that lead the individual toward a life of meaning and self-actualization (*self-actualization*; Maslow, 1970).

Bryant and Veroff (2007) described self-focus as focusing on self-improvement goals, and world focus as a broadening of focus from the self to a more global outlook of focusing on goals that benefit larger groups of people. One might expect that heroes can at times trigger a period of self-focus where an individual admires the actions of the hero and decides to create new challenging goals. Yet heroes too have the ability to open and broaden an individual's perspective, and redirect their focus away from self-centered concerns and needs toward humanity-related goals. Heroes sometimes give their lives to something bigger than oneself (Campbell, 1949), inspiring others to shift to a world-focused perspective (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). Ultimately, it may be through the death of a much-loved hero that meaning in life among followers arises: "A real confrontation with death usually causes one to question with real seriousness the goals and conduct of one's life up to then" (Yalom, 1980, p. 26). In other words, heroes can trigger deeper reflection about the type of goals that an individual is pursuing. Heroes sometimes help people set the bar in terms of what is possible for them to achieve in their lives (Flescher, 2003).

Heroes have been defined as representing an ideal self-image (Sullivan & Venter, 2010). Ideal or ought selves (Higgins, 1987) are representations that shape our goals and guide future behavior. Some heroes represent our ideal or ought selves, helping provide us with information about our goals, values, and sense of purpose. Reflections on and social comparisons (Festinger, 1954) with our personal hero provide a point of self-examination which may require individuals to take action to approach or avoid their personal goals.

On a related note, Goethals and Allison (2012) remind us that doing the right thing or modelling the behavior of our heroes requires behavioral inhibition, in other words, restraining or overriding one response in favor of another one.

In addition, heroes influence others through a process of inspiring others to take action toward their goals (*enhancing function of heroes*; Kinsella et al., 2015a). According to Thrash, Elliot, Maruskin, and Cassidy (2010), an inspirational encounter has both an emotional and behavioral response resulting in a sense of self-responsibility and volitional control to take action on their goals. We suspect that a hero first evokes positive feelings of inspiration, awe, and/or wonder. Next, the individual translates the inspirational encounter into a personally meaningful goal, typically linked to self-improvement (see Kinsella et al., 2015a). Heroes may enable people to transcend, or move beyond, their current psychological state (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Klapp, 1969), which is a key component of a meaningful life (Frankl, 1959).

Peak experiences are often associated with religious experiences, but may also be triggered by heroes, which can include transpersonal and ecstatic states, where individuals find themselves in positive experiences, in wonderment, happiness, awe, a sense of connectedness with others, a moment of transcendence, or awareness of a higher truth (Maslow, 1970). Maslow believed that peak experiences influence people in a positive and permanent way: uplift, ego transcendence, provoke creativity, affirm the meaning and value of existence, give a sense of purpose to the individual, and contribute to a feeling of integration to self. According to Baumeister (1991), a fulfilling life is said to lead to the perception of purpose and fulfilment can be gained by focusing on family, relationships, and helping others—this type of other orientation is often modelled and encouraged by heroes.

Coherence

Second, coherence is a source of meaning in life (e.g., Heintzelman, Trent, & King, 2013), and in particular when it relates to one's own existence. People seek to make sense of their own experiences in life (Reker & Wong, 1988) and how those experiences relate to their own sense of identity. According to Antonovsky (1993), a sense of coherence develops when one feels confident that their life environment is structured and predictable. Heroes represent societal norms and values that provide a sense of certainty and security about what is expected of them. Heroic myths (Campbell, 1988) and metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) may help individuals deal with uncertainty. During times of uncertainty, individuals try to make sense of the inconsistencies, question their existence, and wonder about how to make important life decisions; heroes may guide others toward more noble purposes and alleviate the

suffering associated with uncertainty (*protecting function of heroes*; Kinsella et al., 2015a). Powerful heroic encounters may be particularly attached to an individuals' search for meaning in a similar way to the way many people have awe-inspiring religious encounters when people are confused about their life and existence as a result of personal tragedy, such as illness or bereavement (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). Also, we expect that reflecting on personal heroes that were influential at different life stages may help prompt a sense of coherence in one's own life story and personal narrative (for discussion about coherence and personal narratives, see Linde, 1993).

Significance

Third, the experience of meaning requires that an individual feel self-worth and that their own *life is of significance*. Individuals seek confirmation that they are good, worthy, and admirable with desirable traits, and that one's life makes an important contribution to humanity. This can be pursued individually or collectively, belonging to a group or category of people. People speak about feeling a sense of self-worth, which in essence may refer to the relative frequency of positive and negative emotions that result from the self-appraisal of one's personal characteristics (Sommer, Baumeister, & Stillman, 2012). Feelings of self-worth can be achieved through achieving a positive social identity from group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and meaningfulness can be reestablished through group identification (Van Tilburg & Igou, 2011). Heroes often act on behalf of vulnerable individuals and groups, reminding those people that they are worthy of protecting. Heroes promote social cohesiveness (Smith, 1976), instigate an interest in a cause, or prompt collective action (Klapp, 1954). Cultural heroes in particular have a rallying function (Klapp, 1969), which brings groups together around a particular agenda or goals; this can lead to a sense of affiliation with a particular group and social identity, and most likely a sense that one's life is significant.

To experience a sense that one's life is significant, people need to view their past actions as having positive value and morally justified. There are basic societal standards of right and wrong, moral and immoral, and humans are keen to avoid violating these standards (Sommer et al., 2012). Heroes are celebrated as symbols of goodness and morality, representing the more pertinent moral standards and social values (*moral modelling*; Kinsella et al., 2015a); in fact, morality is central to the concept of heroism. Consistently, heroes are described as individuals who do the right thing, model virtuous behavior, and live by a clear set of values (Kinsella et al., 2015a, 2017). Heroes create and promote doctrines, policies, values, or morals that they believe to sustain the greater good and human relations. For example,

religious figures, martyrs, and political activists have proposed new ways of living for groups of individuals throughout history. Heroes have been described as representing the values of society (Carlyle, 1840/2007), acting as behavioral models for the masses (Pretzinger, 1976), and modelling positive human virtues (Cohen, 1993). Heroes may help children understand the norms and roles within society (Erikson, 1977) through fairy tales and stories. Overall, heroes may cause an individual to challenge their own morality and guide those individuals on a path where they can view their own actions as significant, good, and conforming to conventional standards of right and wrong; in other words, helping others live well, successfully, and responsibly (*a life worth living*; e.g., Steger, Shin, Shim, & Fitch-Martin, 2013).

In sum, we argue that heroes provide meaning in people's lives because they represent one or more core human needs. Striving for these needs and fulfilling such needs imbues meaning in people's lives. Heroes are, in this sense, examples that represent these sources of meaning. Beyond the process of beliefs and identity with heroes, heroism can also contribute to meaning in a different way: via action.

Meaning in Life via Heroic Behavior

To many onlookers, heroes are symbols of what it means to live a meaningful life, but to what extent do individuals engage in heroic behavior in order to experience meaning in life? By now, we have discussed the extent to which individuals derive psychosocial resources from thinking about and encountering heroes, which in turn lead to an enhanced sense of meaning in life. We think that this is a fruitful area of inquiry and have many studies that loom on the horizon. Another potentially important line of inquiry would be to examine the extent to which individuals behave heroically, in an attempt to experience an enhanced sense of meaning in life *and* the extent that individuals experience meaning in life as a result of their heroic actions.

The links between living a meaningful life, eudemonia, and a moral life have existed for some time. Aristotle (Aristotle, trans. 1931) believed that true happiness (and presumably meaning) is found by leading a virtuous life and doing what is worth doing. Humanistic psychologists, such as Maslow (1943) and Rogers (1959), were probably the first psychologists interested in eudemonia in the 20th century, making famous the notion that all individuals are motivated toward growth and self-actualization. A number of theories in psychology indicate that living a life driven by hedonic goals is not likely to result in well-being or meaning in life (see Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Seligman, 2002). Indeed, most people derive meaning from projects and relationships that are consistent with commonly held views about morality,

including being good, doing good for our family and the roles that we play, and furthering social and political goals (Wolf, 2010). Each are concepts that are closely related to conceptions of heroism.

The action of behaving heroically offers different sources of personal meaning for the individual. Choosing a heroic course of action could lead to a sense of purpose in the pursuit of goals (e.g., choosing to save a child who has fallen into water, deciding to speak out against immoral behavior in the workplace), as well as a sense of self-efficacy and social efficacy as consequences of taking action on these goals. Heroic individuals may derive a sense of certainty and purpose in a particular course of action, and believing in the self as an agent of change that will outlive the mortal self (see Becker, 1973; Heine et al., 2006, for discussion about symbolic immortality). Heroes who behave in ways that are consistent with particular values and ethics may find it easier to perceive a sense of coherence in their own lives and experiences. For instance, political leader, activist and Novel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi, has spent many years under house arrest, suffered persecution, and exiled from her husband and children; yet she describes her actions as necessary to act against a brutal military dictatorship, and to seek to achieve human rights and democracy in her home country of Burma (Young, 2012). Also, one would not be surprised if heroes, such as Aung San Suu Kyi, feel that their life is of significance, importance, and value to the world. People who engage in heroic behaviors can view their past actions as having positive value and morally justified, and consequently could derive a sense of self-worth, in part by putting the needs of others ahead of their own needs. Over time, heroes are concerned with leaving a positive legacy for future generations, which in turn provides a sense of meaning in life (McAdams, 2008).

Heroic behavior is inherently social (Green et al., 2017). Acting in ways that benefit others is likely to promote positive relations with others as well as a stronger sense of belonging to a particular group. One of the primary ways that people attempt to restore meaning is by reinforcing social connections (Frankl, 1959; Heine et al., 2006; Van Tilburg & Igou, 2011; Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006), including membership in enduring social structures, such as religious practices, national support, and political groups (Arndt, Cook, & Routledge, 2004; Greenberg et al., 1990; Van Tilburg & Igou, 2016). Thus, behaving heroically may provide an avenue to reestablish meaning through processes that are already established in the literature including group identification (Van Tilburg & Igou, 2011), and political or ideological identification (Van Tilburg & Igou, 2016).

It is possible that behaving heroically may serve either an intentional or an unintentional means to reestablish meaning in one's life. In other words, an

individual may feel a sense of meaningless and actively seek to challenge the status quo through their heroic actions. Alternatively, an individual may find themselves in an emergency situation where they behave heroically to protect, save, or help others, and subsequently derive a sense of meaning from their actions (a later result of others celebrating their act of heroism).

One of several hazards is that some individuals view themselves as heroes (or are treated by other members of their group as heroes) despite not acting for the greater good of humanity, but nonetheless derive a strong sense of meaning from their actions. Declaring heroes is a subjective process, and many people consider some actions as heroic that actually do damage to others (including intergroup violence). Indeed, some may consider antisocial behavior as a form of heroism. A classic example is Robin Hood, sometimes described as a heroic outlaw, who is famous for stealing from the rich to give to the poor. Robin's risk, bravery, and self-sacrifice on behalf of the poor may have increased perceptions of meaning for the poor but not for the wealthy. Furthermore, the fact that Robin's goal was to better the lives of the poor may have led him to have greater coherence, purpose, and sense that his life was significant. Understanding the processes surrounding heroic behavior and meaning, will also elucidate the processes that motivate and sustain pseudoheroism where the individual shows some heroic qualities (e.g., courage, conviction, self-sacrifice) but actually seeks to harm (some) individuals or groups that adhere to a different worldview (*pseudoheroism*; Schwartz & Schwartz, 2010).

Heroic behavior may not necessarily predict meaning in life. Indeed, behaving heroically may at times reduce meaning in life, particularly when a hero (e.g., whistle-blower) experiences isolation and ostracism as a result of speaking out against immoral or unethical behavior. Heroic behavior may have negative consequences for the heroic actor, at least in the short term. Yet the heroic actor may increase their perceptions of meaning over time via intrapersonal processes (e.g., dissonance reduction) and via interpersonal and intergroup behavior (e.g., recognition by other individuals or groups).

New experimental research could, for example, threaten meaning in life (e.g., by providing negative feedback and assessing the extent that a threat response is observed when individuals are offered an opportunity to engage [or imagine engaging] in heroic behavior [vs. a control group]). In line with Becker (1973), we predict that engaging in heroic behavior may increase one's perception of leading a meaningful life where the prosocial action will outlive the mortal being. It is important to recognize that heroic acts do not necessarily lead to immediate meaning gratification, for some it may come at later times, for others it may never come, which is a risk—and taking risks is a central characteristic of heroic behavior.

Conclusions

Meaning integrates people's ideas about the self, the type of world they live in, and how they relate to the people and environments around them, and strive to incorporate this information into their life purpose and aspirations (e.g., Heine et al., 2006; Steger, 2009). Heroes provide us with self-related information about our own values, morals, motivations, and weaknesses (individual-level influence), as well as restoring our faith in humanity and protecting us from feeling despair or disillusionment for too long, and reminding us of the value in treating others in ways that are consistent with positive values like respect, humility, and compassion that facilitate harmonious group relations (group-level influence). As well as influencing at a cognitive level, heroes also influence at an emotional level creating positive emotions and feelings of inspiration that create energy to pursue objective goals and subjective feelings of fulfilment. These multiple modes of influence are complex and need further empirical investigation to test the extent that heroes provide useful resources to draw from as we seek to pursue or maintain meaning in our lives.

In this article, we proposed that when events or affective states threaten or reduce the overall sense of meaning, people draw psychological resources from the enhancing (heroes enhance self-efficacy and self-worth), moral modelling (heroes model morals, values, and purpose), and protecting (heroes restore stability and safety) functions provided by heroes that serve the goal of meaning maintenance and meaning reestablishment. Furthermore, we propose that individuals sometimes engage in heroic behavior as a means to reestablish meaning, particularly where heroic behavior provides a sense of purpose, efficacy, values, and self-worth (Baumeister, 1991). Both of these avenues for seeking and maintaining meaning can be tested empirically in a laboratory wherein participants encounter a psychological threat (e.g., boredom, social ostracism) to their sense of meaning and are subsequently offered ways to reestablish meaning through encounters with heroes, or engaging (or intending to engage) in heroic behavior. Such research will contribute to extant literatures on meaning in life, meaning maintenance and psychological threat, self-regulation, and the psychology of heroism. Research that examines heroes as a psychological resource will also have practical relevance where heroes can be used as tools for working with societies most vulnerable children and adults with mental health issues, acquired brain injury (see metaphoric identity mapping; Ylvisaker, McPherson, Kayes, & Pellett, 2008), and developmental disorders, as well as resources for maintaining positive mental health in everyday life (see hero modelling; Malgady, Rogler, & Costantino, 1990). Indeed, the findings from this type of research are likely

to be relevant and important for practitioners in the community, education, mental health care, sports, and the workplace.

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Author Biographies

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Eric R. Igou received his PhD from the University of Heidelberg in 2000 under the supervision of Herbert Bless. Since then, he worked at the University of Mannheim, the New School University and New York University during his postdoctoral fellowship (2002-2004), Tilburg University (tenured; 2004-2008), and the University of Limerick (since 2008). He developed two

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Timothy D. Ritchie is an associate professor of psychology and the department chair of psychology at Saint Xavier University in Chicago, IL, USA. He teaches psychological research methods, data analysis and statistics, physiological psychology, and an honors course on heroism. He is a mentor for independent student research and honor's student thesis projects. He promotes students and colleagues to endeavor research, teaching, and service that span multiple academic, scientific and applied disciplines across cultures, languages, and geographical locations.