Article

Sociology

What Makes a Hero? Theorising the Social Structuring of Heroism

Sociology
2019, Vol. 53(1) 87–103

DOI: 10.1177/0038038518764568
journals.sagepub.com/home/soc
SAGE

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Abstract

The article discusses four dominant perspectives in the sociology of heroism: the study of great men; hero stories; heroic actions; and hero institutions. The discussion ties together heroism and fundamental sociological debates about the relationship between the individual and the social order; it elucidates the socio-psychological, cultural/ideational and socio-political structuring of heroism, which challenges the tendency to understand people, actions and events as naturally, or intrinsically, heroic; and it points to a theoretical trajectory within the literature, which has moved from very exclusive to more inclusive conceptualisations of a hero. After this discussion, the article examines three problematic areas in the sociology of heroism: the underlying masculine character of heroism; the presumed disappearance of the hero with modernisation; and the principal idea of heroism as a pro-social phenomenon. The article calls for a more self-conscious engagement with this legacy, which could stimulate dialogue across different areas of sociological research.

Keywords

Altruism, bravery, charisma, classical social theory, courage, gender, great man theory, heroism, modernity

Introduction

While the study of heroism has been closely tied to the origin and development of sociology, surprisingly little labour has been done to summarise the different attempts to understand the hero as a social phenomenon.[1] There is no self-conscious tradition of research on heroism, meaning that sociologists interested in the heroic are confronted with a fragmented body of literature that covers different subject areas, distinct societies and various disciplines. Going through this literature, it also becomes

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clear that there is little consensus about the precise definition of the heroic, from Carlyle's (2001 [1841]: 5) 'Great Men […] [who] have shaped themselves in the world's history', Campbell's (2004 [1949]: 28, emphasis in original) culture hero who '*comes back from* […] *a mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man*', Oliner's (2002: 123) perception of 'heroic altruism, involving greater risk to the helper […] [than] conventional altruism' to Featherstone's (1992: 165) discourse on 'the heroic life' as a counter-concept describing 'the sphere of danger, violence and the courting of risk whereas everyday life is the sphere of women, reproduction and care'. On that basis, the purpose here is to create a more organised discussion of the sociology of heroism.

I begin by exploring four dominant perspectives within the literature: the study of great men; hero stories; heroic actions; and hero institutions. My discussion focuses on the main lines of demarcation between the four perspectives, the multidimensional features of heroism and the theoretical trajectory of the overall field of research. During this discussion, I link heroism to the mainstream of social theory, since discussions as to what makes a hero relate to fundamental sociological questions about the relationship between the individual and the social order, the cause of history, the locus of human behaviour and the formation of cultural meaning. I argue that sociologists have advanced our understanding of heroism by elucidating the social structuring of heroic figures, heroic actions and hero-worship, thereby disproving the tendency to understand people, actions and events as naturally, or intrinsically, heroic. Finally, I call for a more self-conscious engagement with the heroic legacy in sociology. To this end, I address three problematic areas within the literature: the underlying masculine character of heroism; the presumed disappearance of heroes with modernisation; and the dominant idea of heroism as a prosocial phenomenon. I argue that such areas could not only reinvigorate the sociology of heroism, but also stimulate sociological discussion across the study of media, nationalism, policy, religion, sport, warfare and more.

Methodology

The article presents a thematic discussion of a body of texts found by combining a systematic and more intuitive process. First, I have located relevant items through the *Social Science Citation Index*, where I have searched for 'hero', 'heroes', 'heroine', 'heroines', 'heroic' and 'heroism' in the title or resume of papers within the category of sociology (accessed 1 November 2017). The resultant 288 items were reduced to 194 after a reading triage. I then extended the collection by extracting relevant items from the bibliographies, until I reached a point of saturation where I found no more text of immediate importance to my discussion. During the process, I decided to include texts from disciplines other than sociology, where they play a paradigmatic role in the study of heroism or deal with themes of sociological relevance. To get a manageable volume, I focused on articles and books in English (both original and translated) and excluded non-English literature, conference papers, reports and theses. While this entire body of scholarship has informed my discussion, it has not been possible to acknowledge every item found. Consequently, the article focuses on items of major importance to the history of the sociology of heroism and items that address the concept of heroism most directly.

Table 1. The ideal typological field of the study of heroes, divided by analytical focus and conceptual approach.

Analytical focus/ conceptual approach	Exclusive	Inclusive
Individuals	1. Great men	3. Acts of heroism
	Object of study The life and characteristics of significant persons in history	*Object of study* Factors determining why some people act heroically
	Theory The submissive dimension of hero-worship (Carlyle); the revolutionising but transient power of the hero's charisma (Weber); the social precondition for the development of great men (Spencer, Elias, Bourdieu); the symbolic and cohesive dimensions of hero-worship (Cooley)	*Theory* Common personological traits of heroes (Midlarsky, Jones and Corley); motivational explanations (Oliner); the banality of heroism (Zimbardo); the importance of socialisation and emotional culture (Lois), roles (Blake and Butler), group cohesion (King), and social capital (Glazer and Glazer)
Structures	2. Hero stories	4. Hero institutions
	Object of study Narrative structures in mythology and fiction	*Object of study* Function of hero-systems, and the social construction of heroism
	Theory Common cross-cultural features of hero stories (Rank, Raglan, Campbell); developments in heroic figures as expressions of historically specific conflicts (Friedsam, Giraud, Ziolkowski)	*Theory* The moral grammar of hero types (Klapp); the existential function of cultural hero-systems (Becker); the exchange economy of heroic status (Goode); the reciprocal formation of heroism, collective identity and power (Featherstone, Giesen, Hobsbawm, Schwartz)

Exploring Heroism: Four Perspectives

This section is organised as in the grid of Table 1. As the table shows, differences in *analytical focus* and *conceptual approach* divide the literature on heroes into four ideal types: the study of *great men*; *hero stories*; *heroic actions*; and *hero institutions*. The study of great men and heroic actions has focused on heroic *individuals*, whereas the study of hero stories and hero institutions has focused on the internal and/or external *structures* of discourses. While differences in *analytical focus* elucidate the multidimensional features of heroism, (i.e. its socio-psychological, cultural/ideational and socio-political components), differences in *conceptual approach* point to a theoretical trajectory within the study of heroism. Initially the study of

great men and hero stories was characterised by an *exclusive approach* to heroism, where the title of hero was restricted to grand figures in history and myth. Yet around the 1950s the study of heroic actions and hero institutions began to promote a more *inclusive approach*, embracing such relatively mundane figures as celebrities, foot soldiers, mountain rescuers, Righteous Gentiles and sportspersons within the hero-category. In the following four subsections, I aim to give substance to these two main points. A fifth and final subsection summarises sociology's contribution to the cross-disciplinary study of heroism.

Great Men: Carlyle, Weber, Spencer and Cooley

Many scholars have equated the term 'hero' with 'great man' to describe a host of significant historical persons, from Alexander the Great to William Shakespeare. Although the idea that great men act as prime movers in history has surfaced in a broad range of literature since the 19th century, one treatise has been particularly important in popularising it. In *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, Carlyle (2001 [1841]) argued that the progress of civilisation could be boiled down to the thoughts and deeds of a few distinguished personalities. 'Universal history,' he wrote, 'the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here' (2001 [1841]: 3). Appearing 'as lightning out of heaven' (2001 [1841]: 91), these great men have been the object of worship by the many, whether in the form of gods, prophets, priests, men of letters, or kings, and so 'Society everywhere is some representation […] of a graduated Worship of Heroes', or '*Hero*archy' (2001 [1841]: 17, emphasis in original). Conceptualising hero-worship as the 'submissive admiration for the truly great' (2001 [1841]: 17), Carlyle paradigmatically stressed the dictatorial dimension of hero-worship, which was celebrated across Europe from the Romantic era to the end of the Second World War (Boorstin, 1992: 50; Schwartz, 1985: 104).

Another great man, Weber (1978 [1921]), rethought the hagiography in sociological terms, developing the ideal type of 'charismatic authority' that tied together heroism and the legitimisation of power. In brief, Weber (1978 [1921]: 1116) argued that contrary to the rational and traditional types of legitimate domination, 'the power of charisma rests upon the belief in revelation and heroes, […] upon heroism of an ascetic, military, judicial, magical or whichever kind'. Although these charismatic leaders are 'bearers of specific gifts of body and mind that were considered "supernatural" (in the sense that not everybody could have access to them)' (1978 [1921]: 1112), their continued recognition is based on the success of their mission. Contrary to the inertia of 'rational authority' and 'traditional authority', charismatic belief, for him, is characterised by a transformative energy. This energy 'revolutionizes men "from within" and shapes material and social conditions according to its revolutionary will' (1978 [1921]: 1116): but it is also fragile, transient and prone to coagulating, 'as permanent structures and traditions replace the belief in the revelation and heroism of charismatic personalities' (1978 [1921]: 1139).

Both Carlyle and Weber focused on the hero as a progressive force in history. Although Carlyle (2001 [1841]: 134) assumed that the outward shape of the hero 'will depend on

the time and the environment he finds himself in', and Weber (1978 [1921]: 1112) briefly noted that charismatic leaders tend to rise to power 'in moments of distress – whether psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, or political', both were fairly unconcerned as to the origin of the hero. Roughly put, both of them perceived the hero, or the heroic force, as coming from somewhere outside the social order. Confronting this theoretical deficiency, Spencer (2008 [1873]: 24) argued that 'the genesis of societies by the actions of great men, may be comfortably believed so long as, resting in general notions, you do not ask for particulars'. Uncomfortable particulars, Spencer claimed, come to the fore if one asks where such great men come from. Calling attention to the sociological preconditions of individual greatness, he argued that before the great man 'can re-make his society, his society must make him' (2008 [1873]: 25). Along with society's 'institutions, language, knowledge, manners, and its multitudinous arts and appliances, he [the great man] is a resultant of an enormous aggregate of forces that have been co-operating for ages' (2008 [1873]: 34).

Taking a somewhat similar perspective, Cooley (1897: 121) connected the great-man debate with perhaps the fundamental question of sociology: 'that is, of the mutual relations between the individual and the social order'. Cooley (1902: 355) argued that the authority of great men is 'so potent as to reorganize a large part of the general life in its image, and give it a form and direction which it could not have had otherwise', but that this greatness 'stands on top of a culminating institution' (1897: 156). Also in contrast to Carlyle and Weber, he postulated that the hero 'leads by appealing to our tendency, not by imposing something external upon us […] [and heroes] are, therefore the symbols or expressions, in a sense, of the social conditions under which they work' (1902: 354). Bringing to mind Durkheim's totemic principle, Cooley (1902: 346) proposed that most people are not interested *in* the hero, but in what the hero can make them feel, and so '[t]he hero is always a product of constructive imagination'. On this basis, he stressed the cohesive dimension of hero-worship, claiming that heroic figures 'produce in large groups a sense of comradeship and solidarity […] [which] is possibly the chief feeling that people have in common […] and the main bond of social groups' (1902: 326).

Summing up, Carlyle and Weber perceived the hero as a cause of social transformations, while Spencer and Cooley stressed heroic greatness as both cause and effect of the surrounding society, by which they called into question their colleagues' romanticist notion of the genius and the existence of a supreme force of will (Schwartz, 1985: 104). By emphasising the cohesive and symbolic feature of the cult around great men (Schwartz, 1985: 108–114), Cooley in particular contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the hero and society, which has also characterised more recent studies on the psychological profile of great men (Erikson, 1962); the ability of a single person to shape history (Hook, 1955); the genesis and structure of the field, or figuration, in which great men are formed (Bourdieu, 1993; Elias, 1993); and, most extensively, the power of charismatic leaders in totalitarian states, developing countries and religious communities (see Schwartz, 1985: 104). In the latter research tradition, there is a fine line between the study of great men and the study of hero institutions, which, together with the gendered understanding of heroism, will be discussed later in this article.

Hero Stories: Explorations in Mythology and Fiction

The study of hero stories is a dominant field within the study of heroes, and this, according to Edelstein (1996: 31), 'explains why tales of giants, ogres, and the demigods of a mysterious past so often come to mind when one thinks of heroes'. Contrary to Carlyle's assumption that a few heroic men brought about what mankind had accomplished, the study of hero stories proposes that the heroic figure is a creation *of* man. Exploring the hero not as a historical figure but as a narrative phenomenon, the early study of hero stories, such as the paradigmatic work of Rank, Campbell and Raglan, has opened our understanding of the cultural/ideational dimension of heroism by drawing attention to the typical structures of folklore, myths and religious texts about heroes through cross-cultural comparisons.

Integrating the study of mythology with psychoanalysis, Rank (1914: 68) thought that 'the hero should always be interpreted merely as a collective ego', expressing society's suppression of man's innate urges of incestuous desire, growing self-awareness and aggression, while carrying 'the knowledge of a very ancient and universally understood symbolism, with a dim foresight of the relations and connections which are appreciated and presented in Freud's teachings' (1914: 71). Relatedly, Campbell (2004 [1949]: 16–18) proposed that hero stories are organised in the three stages of separation, initiation and return and explained the origin and function of the so-called 'monomyth' of heroism with reference to 'the collective unconscious' of Jung. Also Raglan (1949: 281) delineated a tripartite structure in hero stories, but connected their focus on the hero's birth, accession to the throne and death with the principal rites of passage of ancient kings: hero stories, he wrote, 'grew up with the [ritual] drama, of which they formed an essential part', and here there was no distinction between heroes, kings and gods (1949: 284).

While Raglan's hypothesis is highly speculative, it points to an important dimension that Rank and Campbell largely neglect: the relationship between hero stories and the organisation of wider society. The study of heroes in fiction and popular culture has strengthened our understanding of this linkage. Yet before sociologists began to explore the telling of hero stories by Hollywood or within the world of sport (e.g. Butryn and Masucci, 2003; Llinares, 2009), Friedsam (1954) pointed to the social structuring of hero stories. He observed that the occurrence of bureaucrats as heroes in American literature during the 1940s departed from previous norms, since this new type of hero expressed an intrinsic paradox of modernity where 'ideal conceptions and integrity (for the artist, the scientist, the executive – any man) [clashed] with the practical requirements of behaviour in a bureaucracy' (1954: 272). Somewhat similarly, Giraud (1957: 185) connected the 'unheroic hero' of the late romantic novel to the development of bourgeois society: 'Too bourgeois to be heroic, too lonely and sensitive to be bourgeois, the contradictory unheroic hero is a tragic misfit in modern society', he wrote. Travelling even further back, Ziolkowski (2004: 5) argued that an inhibition expressed by heroes as far back as Virgil's *Aeneid* bears witness to growing cultural crises: where classical heroes incarnated the convictions of their culture, the 'hesitant hero' appears as 'an epigone, a man born so late that he is torn between opposing systems of belief and value and becomes incapable of the same unthinking action that characterised his heroic predecessors'.

Apart from showing how heroic figures have been linked to historically specific encounters between the individual and social structures, the study of heroes in fiction and popular culture elucidates the point that conceptions of the hero as a kind of mythological being (Campbell, Raglan and Rank), or a person of unique talent, charisma and willpower (Carlyle, Cooley, Spencer, and Weber), have given way to a less exclusive approach to heroism. While these differences in conceptual approach clearly express some 'disagreement about what sorts of *qualities* ought to be considered heroic', as Best (2011: 93, emphasis in original) has proposed elsewhere, they also (and perhaps more interestingly) point to a theoretical trajectory in the general field of the study of heroism. However, the gradual widening of the concept of heroism did not involve a move away from one perspective to another. As illustrated here, it rather entailed a growing interest in less heroic heroes *within* the study of hero stories and, perhaps more visibly, the gradual emergence of the study of heroic actions and hero institutions that began in the post-war period. Hence, Table 1 does not illustrate four schools of clear-cut paradigms, but reduces the complexity of the study of heroism in line with Weber's conception of ideal types.

Acts of Heroism: Motives, Situations and Organisations

The study of heroic actions clearly illustrates the inclusive, or democratic, turn in the study of heroism. As Oliner (2002: 136, emphasis in original) has paradigmatically put it, heroic acts 'are not the exclusive province of larger-than-life figures. Rather, they are usually the *deeds of ordinary people*'. Hence, the basic question here is why some individuals act heroically, whereas others do not. The study of heroic actions makes up an interesting point of intersection between theories on the locus of human behaviour of which the bulk regards heroism as an extreme form of altruism, designating the willingness to help others despite a high risk of personal injury or death (e.g. Oliner, 2002: 123; Shepela et al., 1999). The Gentile rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust have been a major theme, as psychologists have investigated their personality traits, characterised by a high degree of locus of control, risk-taking behaviour, social responsibility, tolerance, empathy and altruistic moral reasoning (see Midlarsky et al., 2005: 908–911). Others have looked into the question of heroic motivation. As a famous example, Oliner (2002) has delineated three motivational factors on the basis of 700 in-depth interviews with rescuers: 52 per cent of them expressed 'normocentric' motivations (a feeling of obligation to community-based norms); 38 per cent 'empathetic' motivations (a feeling of pity for Jewish refugees); 11 per cent 'principled' motivation (a feeling that their own principles were being violated).

Recent years bear witness to a productive debate about the relative significance of *personological* versus *situational* factors in determining heroic action (Franco et al., 2011; Jayawickreme and De Stefano, 2012; Walker and Frimer, 2007), and this debate relates to more sociological concerns. Attacking the idea of 'the heroic elect', Zimbardo (2007: 275) proposed the hypothesis that '[t]he banality of evil is matched by the banality of heroism. […] Both emerge in particular situations at particular times, when situational forces play a compelling role in moving individuals across the line from inaction to action'. Instead of trying to dig out people's inner core of heroism, Franco et al. (2011:

101–102) have pinpointed a host of situations that typically incite heroic action. A conceptual consequence of their situational perspective is that heroism cannot be perceived as a subtype of altruism, since the triggers of bravery and self-sacrifice are here found *outside* (not *inside*) the individual (Franco et al., 2011: 102–103). Yet heroic action is not only dependent on the *right* mind, motivation and situational circumstances, but is also preconditioned by the characteristics of human organisation, as demonstrated by sociologists from various subject areas.

Military heroism is here a case in point. In examining the receivers of the Congressional Medal of Honor, Blake and Butler (1976) found that military honouring has underpinned the latent role structure of the US military by inculcating a war-winning orientation among officers (victorious heroes) and a comradely mentality in the rank and file (fallen heroes). Riemer (1998) explained military self-sacrifice by citing the forging of *esprit de corps* and expectations that leadership will be demonstrated. Historicising this discussion, King (2014: 234) has pointed out how the poorly trained army of conscripts depended on heroic deeds performed by either skilled or lucky individuals, but that the processes of military professionalisation have 'involved a democratisation of heroism; as they [today's professional soldiers] conduct their drills, everyone – and no one – has become heroes'.

The importance of organisational structures, social roles and human bonds is clearly not exclusive to military heroism. In a study of courageous political activists, Glazer and Glazer (1999: 279) have found that heroic actions are seldom a spontaneous decision taken by a single actor: rather network and cultural resources make up a core component of such heroism, since heroes (just as other people) 'call on a reservoir of social capital, of bonds that they have developed over many years'. Relatedly, Lois (2003) has shown how bravery is linked to the gradual socialisation of individuals into specific roles and 'emotional cultures'. From fieldwork among mountain rescue volunteers, she found that the prospective corps members were required to learn 'other-directed feelings' through engagement in 'self-denying' routine work if they were to gain acceptance within the team (2003: 64–83), during which they slowly internalised a culture of extreme self-control that involved 'not only the ability to manage one's own emotions during crisis but also the superior ability to pass along that emotional control to others in distress' (2003: 195). While this line of research has emphasised that social forms are embedded in the motivations of heroic acts, the last perspective brings into focus the broader social dynamics and historical processes of heroism.

Hero Institutions: Functional Systems and Social Constructions

Although the study of hero institutions is highly indebted to the classical sociological understanding of the submissive, institutional, cohesive and symbolic features of hero-worship (Weber and Cooley in particular), it departs from the study of great men by focusing on how ideational and socio-political structures impinge on heroes as collective representations. Instead of looking into the biography of great men, narrative patterns and developments, or the driving forces of courageous behaviour, the study of hero institutions investigates the link between the public recognition of the hero and the wider webs of cultural meaning, identity and power structures.

Following larger developments in social theory, the study of hero institutions has moved from the view of functionalism (static thinking) to social constructivism (processes thinking). As a key representative of the 'old' school, Klapp (1954, 2014 [1962]) argued that the hero (alongside the villain and the fool) is a social type embedded in language, 'used by all societies to maintain the social system, especially to control persons and put on significant dramas and rituals' (2014 [1962]: 17). Since the hero type functions to reduce social complexity, guide perceptions and behaviour and maintain a basic level of moral consensus in society (2014 [1962]: 16–24), the hero 'states for us as a people what we seem to the world, and, in some measure, what we are' (2014 [1962]: 49). Becker later used the term 'cultural hero-system' to direct attention to the way in which a society 'cuts out roles for performances of various degrees of heroism: from the "high" heroism of a Churchill, a Mao, or a Buddha, to the "low" heroism of the coal miner, the peasant, the simple priest' (Becker, 1973: 4–5). While Becker (1973: 4–5) insisted that the principal function of the hero system is to inculcate in people the hope and belief 'that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay', Goode (1978) proposed that heroic status is part of a wider economy of respect, esteem and honour. From the perspective of exchange theory, Goode (1978: vii) thus argued that the public celebration of heroes is bound up with the distribution of prestige in society, which generates 'a system of social control that shapes much of social life'.

Whereas the early literature was preoccupied with the role of heroic figures within systems of symbolic action (Klapp and Becker) and economic exchange (Goode), the literature that has gradually emerged since the 1980s explores the formation of heroism within the wide-ranging paradigm of social constructivism. Avoiding the universalist claims of previous scholars who were determined to find the trans-historical essence or functioning of heroism (Becker, 1973; Campbell, 2004 [1949]; Carlyle, 2001 [1841]; Goode, 1978) – or, alternatively, fix the phenomenon by classifying it according to universal social (Klapp, 2014 [1962]), situational (Franco et al., 2011: 102) or moral types (Kohen, 2014) – these recent studies have examined how and under which conditions discourses of heroism are created. For instance, Featherstone (1992: 162) has argued that 'the heroic life' derives its meaning from the opposite life style, that is, 'the everyday life', conceived of 'in terms of the changing struggles of interdependencies between figurations of people bound together in particular historical situations in which they seek to mobilize various power resources'. Somewhat similarly, Scheipers (2014: 5, emphasis in original) has proposed that what makes a hero should be understood 'as a *continuous process of social construction* rather than the performance of an individual courageous act or as a social condition that emphasizes narratives of heroism and sacrifice'. According to Scheipers (2014: 14) this process is formed by many actors and, consequently, the concept of heroism 'never arrives at an ultimate interpretation, but is necessarily subject to reconstruction and reinterpretation'.

A growing literature has pointed to various cultural/ideational and socio-political forces that can influence the heroic as a category of social recognition. Among other things it involves notions of authenticity, body, career, death, gender, history, national identity and political leadership (Benwell, 2003; Brad, 2008; Connell, 2005; Giesen, 2004; Hutchins, 2011; Lorber, 2002; Rodden, 2009; Schwartz, 1983, 2008; Seale,

1995), besides developments in the relationship between media and society (Drucker and Cathcart, 1994; Van Krieken, 2012), struggles between dominant and dominated groups (Curott and Fink, 2012; Hargreaves, 2013; Hobsbawm, 1959), the influence of the elite (Fine, 1999), changes in *raison d'État* (Frisk, 2017a) and, relatedly, developments in warfare (Kelly, 2012; Mosse, 1991; Scheipers, 2014). Exploring this dynamic play of forces has brought into focus the elusive, impersonal and temporal characteristic of heroism as a social phenomenon, which is perhaps most instructively shown by the study of how people may go from being hero to villain (Ducharme and Fine, 1995; Jackson, 1998), or villain to hero (Bromberg, 2002). Hence, recent developments in the study of hero institutions have challenged the very idea that a precise definition of heroism can be given.

Sociology's Contribution

While folklore, historical research, literary criticism and social psychology have provided important insights into the biographies, narratives, symbolic meaning and mindset of heroes, they seldom provide us with the necessary theoretical tools to analyse and explain the processes by which social institutions, networks and hierarchies impinge on the life, character, role, worship, fall and revival of heroes. Sociological concepts such as 'charisma' and 'routinisation' (Weber, 1978 [1921]), 'collective memory' (Giesen, 2004; Schwartz, 2008), 'emotional culture' (Lois, 2003) and 'social type' (Klapp, 2014 [1962]) manage to do so. Sociologists have simultaneously brought into view the *use value* of the concept of heroism, which has been largely overlooked otherwise. From the viewpoint of sociology it has become clear how the label 'hero' functions as a category of social recognition, and how it forms part of the negotiation of juridical and symbolic status, group membership and collective values. Confirming Alexander's (2012: 7–15) argument about the importance of social theory, sociologists have drawn attention to the social structuring of heroism thus: if heroes are to emerge at the level of the collective, they must be recognised as heroic, which is a process that involves a dynamic play of social forces. On this basis, the sociology of heroism has challenged the tendency to perceive heroes as heroic in and of themselves, thus releasing the study of heroism from the hero's self-presentation, which is precisely 'to deny that there is any strategy, that *their* heroism is entirely "natural" and requires no synthetic support from the organization of their public perception', as Van Krieken (2012: 7, emphasis in original) has recently put it.

Problematising Heroism: Three Areas for Future Research

As is illustrated in the previous section, there is a valuable legacy within the study of heroism with which sociologists can engage. I conclude this thumbnail introduction by embarking on a critical engagement with this legacy. To this end, I explore three common problematic areas, all of which lie at the root of the sociology of heroism: the underlying masculine character of heroism, the presumed disappearance of heroes with modernisation and the general neglect of the hero's dark side. By addressing such common problem areas, I suggest that sociologists could advance our understanding of what makes a hero,

and how and why this is so, and simultaneously enrich sociological discussion across the study of gender, nationalism, policy, religion, sport, warfare and more. What is needed is not another branch of academic specialisation, but a broadly orientated, more self-conscious and perhaps better organised sociology of heroism that could integrate empirical knowledge and theoretical perspectives from different areas of sociological research, while counteracting the segregation of sociology into enclosed sub-disciplines. A starting point could be found in the following areas.

A (Fe)Male Heroism

The absence of women in the early literature on heroes, as in the writings of Carlyle, Weber, Spencer, Rank and Ragland, points to a close association between heroism and masculinity. While Campbell (2004 [1949]: 18) indeed declared that a hero could be a man *or* woman, Pearson and Pope (1981: 4) have persuasively argued that he too 'proceeds to discuss the heroic pattern as male and to define the female characters as goddesses, temptresses, and earth mothers'. In the now classical literature, the hero is almost exclusively a *man* who *takes action*, either as a bearer of social transformations (Carlyle and Weber), or as a champion of personal limitations (Campbell, Ragland and Rank). Heroism has here been tied to physical strength, especially in warfare and long journeys, or great accomplishments on the public stage of politics, theology, science and art. In both cases, the hero has typically shown traditionally masculine virtues, involving competitiveness, power of will and risk-taking. From a long historical perspective, the idea that heroic action belongs to the world of men, as evident in this literature, mirrors the celebration of male heroism in warfare and the processes of nation-building (Connell, 2005: xvi; Mosse, 1991: 53), besides a longer dualistic tradition of defining masculinity in contrast to the domestic sphere of allegedly *in*active women (Featherstone, 1992: 161), which has handed the heroine a passive role in western cultures, where it is 'she who waits (Penelope), she who is to be rescued (Andromeda), she who receives (Mary), she who is abducted (Persephone)' to quote Nicholson (2011: 190–191).

With the advent of feminism in theoretical discourse, scholars have felt that the traditional focus on *men's* heroism presents itself as a challenge to be overcome, because the study of heroism otherwise runs the risk of neglecting the female side (Nicholson, 2011: 192; Pearson and Pope, 1981: 13). Answering this call, recent studies have found that women in post-traditional societies have indeed begun to be recognised as heroes, but, paradoxically, often with reference to traditionally female virtues, such as giving care and concern for others (Kinsella et al., 2015: 125; Seale, 1995, 2002). Yet women are still less likely than men to be recognised as heroes in public discourse, even if they demonstrate courage and self-sacrifice to the same degree as men (Becker and Eagly, 2004; Lorber, 2002). Sociologists have likewise found that women who enter traditionally male roles that require a high level of risk-taking, or physical performance, have been constrained by conventional gender stereotypes with few opportunities to excel. At least, this has been the case in the fields of sport (Hargreaves, 2013; Lines, 2001), search and rescue (Lois, 2003: 180–186) and the military (Frühstück, 2007: 184). Changes in the role of women within traditionally male-dominated institutions, and the simultaneous

emergence of anti-heroic discourses of masculinity (Benwell, 2003), may thus be fertile soil for cultivating our knowledge of the gendered patterns of heroic opportunities.

No More Heroes

While Carlyle (2001 [1841]: 19) held that 'hero-worship endures forever while man endures', he nevertheless lamented a presumed decline of heroism, on the grounds that the cultivation of a rationalistic world view produced a 'general blindness to the spiritual lightning' of great men (2001 [1841]: 18–19). Less vigorously, Weber (1978: 1133) claimed that it is the fate of heroic leaders 'to recede with the development of permanent institutional structures', while Boorstin (1992: 52) found that the spread of democratic beliefs has encouraged distrust in heroes, since '[h]ero-worship, from Plato to Carlyle, was often a dogma of anti-democracy' (1992: 50). Relatedly, Giesen (2004: 151–152, 162) has observed that the victim (not the hero) became the main figure of reverence in post-war Europe, where claims of heroism have been met with irony and scepticism. With this Schwartz (2008: 8) seems to agree, highlighting that a democratic society 'inclusive of all people and solicitous of their rights, is precisely the kind of society in which great men and women and their achievements count for less, while the victimised, wounded, handicapped, and oppressed count for more than ever'. Scholars have also emphasised such factors as growing alienation and anomie (Becker, 1973: 6; Klapp, 2014 [1962]: 141), mediatisation (Boorstin, 1992: 57; Drucker and Cathcart, 1994) and risk-aversion (Furedi, 2007: 178), besides the displacement of religion by 'business ethics' and 'monkey-holiness' (Campbell, 2004 [1949]: 360).

Instead of speaking of the disappearance of heroes, Ziolkowski (2004: 131) has urged that it is more correct 'to say that an increasingly fragmented society has produced a variety of heroes to suit its needs'. Confronting the above hypothesis more directly, Best (2011) argued that Americans today live in a 'congratulatory culture' in which everyone celebrates everyone as heroes, and so the problem is not that we live without heroes, but that we live in an age with too many of them, which devalues the meaning of heroism. Ironically, the argument that we live in an anti-, post- or hyper-heroic age has led to the selfsame conclusion: that heroism has lost meaning with modernisation. Against this, empirical studies point to hero-worship in today's societies, suggesting that claims of a corrosion of heroism are (at best) exaggerated (e.g. Brad, 2008; Fine, 1999; Frisk, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Kelly, 2012; Lorber, 2002; Scheipers, 2014; Seale, 1995, 2002). Whether or not one can talk about a post-heroic age seems to depend on the narrowness of one's conceptual approach to heroism and, as Schwartz (2008) has demonstrated, the historical time frame of one's study. Rather than speaking of more or less heroism, it would be more productive to explore *what counts as heroism*, how it may change and how the very idea that there are no more heroes may be part of such transformations.

Dark Heroism

When Schwartz (2008: 17) wrote that the diminution of heroes seems to go 'hand in hand with the nation's increasing civility and enlarged awareness of its present faults and their historical sources', he touched upon the dark side of heroism. So did Weber (1978: 1117),

emphasising how 'charisma, in its most potent forms, disrupts rational rule as well as tradition altogether and overturns all notions of sanctity'. Usually scholars have conceptualised heroism as a positive, or pro-social, phenomenon, meaning that the disruptive side of the hero and of hero-worship, or what Giesen (2004: 18) has termed the 'madness of the hero', has been largely ignored. As a paradigmatic illustration of the positive view on heroism, Carlyle (2001: 21) claimed that a lack of heroes threatened the moral development of man, since 'every true man feels that he is himself made higher by doing reverence to what is really above him'. Associations between heroism and religion in the writings of Carlyle, Cooley, Campbell, Becker and Oliner have likewise stressed the significance of heroism to the maintenance of cultural meaning, public morality and social cohesion, without which society would surely fall apart.

As with every other social phenomenon, the social labour done by heroic figures is not always desirable from all perspectives. Again military heroism can be a case in point. Exploring the relationship between hero-worship and authoritarianism (initially pinpointed by Carlyle and Weber), Mosse (1991: 7) posited that Nazi Germany's militarism was not just made meaningful through the cult of personality, but that broader discourses of heroism – especially the cult around fallen soldiers – played a crucial role in this process by providing 'the nation with a new depth of religious feeling, putting at its disposal ever-present saints and martyrs, places of worship, and a heritage to emulate'. While soldiers of today's democratic states are typically represented as peacekeepers and freedom fighters, the figure of the soldier hero has also played a role in the legitimisation of the resort to military violence by for instance the USA, UK and Denmark in Afghanistan (Frisk, 2017a, 2017b; Kelly, 2012; Lorber, 2002). As demonstrated by a few other studies (e.g. Curott and Fink, 2012; Fine, 1999; Hargreaves, 2013; Hobsbawn, 1959; Jackson, 1998), the celebration of heroes indeed appears to be an integral part of group antagonism and the struggle for recognition, rights and resources, the study of which could provide a better understanding of the double-edged character of the heroic.

Conclusion

In sum, I have argued that discussions of heroism relate to fundamental sociological questions about the relationship between the individual and the social order, the cause of history, the locus of human behaviour and the formation of cultural meaning; that a fragmented body of literature has elucidated the formation of heroism at various levels of society, thereby bringing into focus the multidimensional features of heroism, that is, its socio-psychological components (especially the study of great men and heroic action), cultural/ideational components (especially the study of hero stories and hero institutions) and socio-political components (especially the study of great men and hero institutions); that the general field of research has moved away from an elite concept of heroism to a wide-ranging interest in mundane figures and discourses; and, finally, that sociologists have contributed to the general study by drawing attention to the function of the label 'hero' as a category of social recognition and contestation, while providing the necessary theoretical tools to describe how top–down (instrumental/disciplinary) and bottom–up (expressive/cohesive) processes influence heroic figures, heroic action and hero-worship, and vice versa. Embarking on a more self-conscious engagement with this legacy,

future studies could strengthen our knowledge of heroism, while the exploration of such wide-ranging themes as the gendered patterns of heroism, the possible corrosion of heroism in modernity and the hero's dark side could stimulate dialogue across different areas of sociological research.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Gunnar Lind Haase Svendsen, Niels Reeh and the peer reviewers of *Sociology* for commenting on this article.

Funding

PhD grant from the University of Southern Denmark.

Note

1. Brief discussions are found elsewhere; see Best (2011); Edelstein (1996); Jayawickreme and De Stefano (2012); Schwartz (1983, 1985); Segal (2004).

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Date submitted April 2017
Date accepted January 2018