

Hero today, gone tomorrow?

'Show me the man you honour, and I will know what kind of man you are.'

(Thomas Carlyle, 1795–1881)

Recently I was asked to give a short presentation, on a topic of my choice, to a group of young people from the Young Offending Service in Gloucester. I decided that I'd only agree to it if I could think of a topic that would engage them, or at least keep them awake! Around the same time, the director of a local charity I work with (the National Association for Children of Alcoholics) was given an Unsung Heroes award, and that set my mind thinking about heroism and what it means to me. However, I found that the more I thought about heroism, the harder it became to define — although I am certain that it is more than just bravery, compassion or wisdom alone.

In the medical and psychological literature, a number of definitions of heroism have been used. For example, a hero has been described as 'a person who already has or will produce objects, ideas or followers (which are of national or international importance), and whose achievements persist through time'.¹ The authors used this definition to distinguish heroes from celebrities, with the term celebrity being defined as 'a famous person whose achievements are well known nationally or internationally, but who does not create any objects or ideas of permanence or lasting importance.' It's important to make this distinction between heroes and celebrities — within the celebrity culture in which we live, people can be famous purely for being famous, but that doesn't necessarily equal heroism. How many heroes are there in the Big Brother house?

Becker and Eagly² argue that heroism falls into the larger category of prosocial behaviours, so that heroism would consist of 'actions undertaken to help others, despite the possibility that they may result in the helper's death or injury'. In their study of gender differences and heroic behaviour, they analysed a range of

extremely dangerous acts (for example, those experienced by Carnegie medalists and non-Jews risking their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust) and risky but less dangerous actions (such as, living kidney donations or volunteering for the Peace Corps or Doctors of the World). I think that their definition, as well as physical death or injury, could also include financial, emotional and reputation death or injury. Their work was prompted by the observation that the characteristic of heroism appears to be more associated with masculinity than femininity. They found that although the majority of Carnegie medallists were male, in the other categories the ratio of males to females was equal or even lower.

In addition to gender, other factors may play a role in the perceived 'greatness' of a person. North *et al* found that perceptions of the emotional significance of a pop song could be mediated by whether the composer was dead or alive, and this interacted with whether they had demonstrated 'good' or 'bad' conduct during their life. Interestingly, when conduct was 'good', death led to the music being rated as more meaningful.¹

My own personal hero is both alive and female. Her name is Camila Batmanghelidj and she works as a psychotherapist in London. She was born in Iran to a very wealthy family and grew up believing that everyone had bodyguards just as she did! During the revolution her father was imprisoned, although her boarding school arranged political asylum for her. She trained as a psychotherapist in England and set up The Place to Be, a charity that provides emotional and therapeutic support for children in primary school. Later, she founded Kid's Company, a day centre for young people in South London, and now works with adolescents who are often extremely challenging and have been excluded from a string of other services. She works tirelessly to raise funds and decided against having her own family in order to stay committed to her vocation. Not many people that I speak to

have heard of her, so she is a very personal hero, and I became interested in finding out who other people's personal heroes were.

I conducted an informal survey of staff members from the Department of Community Based Medicine at the University of Bristol, asking who their hero(es) were, and leaving the definition of heroism completely open. Forty-eight people responded and, since some put forward more than one individual, they generated a list of 82 heroes in total. This list included non-famous people (around a quarter of the responders nominated family members or friends) and Table 1 shows the list of famous heroes ($n = 71$, including those nominated more than once) — although some of them are less famous than others (I spent many hours on internet search engines trying to find out about some!). Also not included in Table 1 are the nameless unsung heroes that were mentioned by several people; for example, firemen, doctors, sailors, mountaineers, naval commanders and people who have overcome disability or other adverse situations. Four responders stated that they did not have a hero, and a couple were also cynical about the overall concept of heroism, questioning whether it really exists — at least in today's world.

Looking through the list, it is fascinating how varied people's suggestions were. In order to make the results more 'readable', I categorised the heroes into groups according to the particular domain in which they were believed to be heroic: adversity (individuals who lived through extremely difficult circumstances yet strove to create something positive), society (those who changed the status quo with regard to their community or culture), science (individuals who greatly contributed to our understanding of, or ability to navigate the world), spirituality (those who have stood by their religious beliefs and acted as spiritual guardians), sport (individuals who have advanced their sport) and entertainment (those who have inspired others through art). A final category consists of people who were nominated more than once and I felt

that they deserved a category of their own, since they were examples of shared admiration. These categories are in no way mutually exclusive, and many individuals could easily fit into more than one group. For example, Chris Martin, the lead singer with musical group Coldplay, may also be described as a humanitarian (belonging perhaps in the society group), through his dedication to publicising the Fair Trade campaign.

However, although some individuals could be seen as being heroic across categories, heroism does seem to be fairly domain-specific, in that having superior skills in one area does not guarantee excellence in another. And in fact several responders noted that although their hero had contributed greatly to, for example society, they were not superhuman and had flaws just like the rest of us. I began to wonder whether there is a difference between performing a heroic act, and having a heroic character. Some of the nominated individuals seemed to have become heroes almost by accident, for example Rosa Parks (who managed to change the course of American civil rights history by not giving up her seat on the bus to a white person) once said: 'I did not get on the bus to get arrested ... I got on the bus to go home'.³

With regard to the male/female ratio, only 13 females were nominated as heroes, which was slightly surprising considering that 67% of the survey responders were female. I wonder what the results would look like if I had asked responders who the kindest person they knew was. The gender and heroism issue is too big for this article however! The heroes nominated came from all over the world and their lives spanned from before the Common Era to today (just under half of the individuals — 49% — are still alive). In terms of celebrity, I decided not to categorise the individuals into celebrities versus heroes, since the responders had chosen them all as heroes. It is worth noting though that the largest group of people is from the entertainment industry (four of whom are fictional characters), and most of them are alive and very famous.

Regardless of whether we can draw any concrete conclusions from this mini-survey, the subject of heroes did get people talking, and most responders were eager to share their views about the nature of heroism and what it means in modern society. Some people believe heroes play a positive role in our society whereas others find the term hero unhelpful or even dangerous. I would definitely agree that hero worship or unnecessary heroism would, in the long term, lead to greater costs than benefits to an individual and their community. But the debate is interesting! While browsing through various hero-related journal articles, I stumbled across one entitled 'Jack Kevorkian: a medical hero' and found that it had prompted many people to write to the journal and express their, at times very angry, views about this unlikely hero (Dr Kevorkian admitted to assisting in the suicides of 28 people).⁴ With medicine in mind, DeAngelis argues that everyone who is 'involved, directly or indirectly, in the care of patients is a potential hero' and that all it would take would be to remember the noble and courageous reasons for becoming a physician.⁵

It's probably best not to take the subject of heroes too seriously, but instead enjoy heroes and allow them to inspire and illuminate our own personal strengths. Heroes are like lighthouses. They help us to find our way when we are in darkness. Or at least they can do if we look out for them.

P.S. The kids really enjoyed my presentation!

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REFERENCES

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2. Becker SW, Eagly AH. The heroism of women and men. *Am Psychol* 2004; **59**(3): 163–178.
3. Dove R. The Torchbearer. *Time Magazine* 14 Jun 1999. <http://www.time.com/time/time100/heroes/profile/parks01.html> (accessed 14 Jul 2005).
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Table 1. Categorised list of nominated heroes.

Adversity (n = 10)
Anne Frank (d. 1945)
Douglas Bader (d. 1982)
Helen Keller (d. 1968)
Hugo Gryn (d. 1996)
Jane Tomlinson
Johnson Beharry
Lance Armstrong
Marla Ruzicka (d. 2005)
Primo Levi (d. 1987)
Simon Weston
Society (n = 13)
Albert Schweitzer (d. 1965)
Alexander the Great (d. 323 BCE)
Bruce Kent
Camila Batmanghelidjh
Ho Chi Minh (d. 1969)
Margaret Thatcher
Martin Luther King (d. 1968)
Princess Diana (d. 1997)
Rosa Parks
Steve Biko (d. 1977)
Tony Benn
William Gladstone (d.1898)
Science (n = 5)
Ernest Shackleton (d. 1922)
Isambard Kingdom Brunel (d. 1859)
Ray Mears
Thomas Brassey (d. 1870)
Vilayanur Ramachandran
Spirituality (n = 7)
Basil Hume (d. 1999)
Dalai Lama
David Sheppard (d. 2005)
Derek Worlock (d. 1996)
Desmond Tutu
Jesus Christ (d. 27/36 CE)
St Cuthbert (d. 687 CE)
Sport (n = 9)
Andy Irvine
Bill Shankly (d. 1981)
Eddie the Eagle
Jean Gallia (d. ?)
John Aldridge
Laird Hamilton
Martin Johnson
Puig Aubert (d. 1994)
Steven Gerrard
Entertainment (n = 14)
Bono
Chris Martin
Clark Kent
Daniel Day-Lewis
Han Solo
John Lennon (d. 1980)
Laura Morante
Luke Skywalker
Maggie Tulliver
Marge Piercy
Michael Palin
Nanni Moretti
Sean Connery
The Beatles
Shared heroes (n = 13)
Nelson Mandela x 6
Winston Churchill x 3 (d. 1965)
Ghandi x 2 (d. 1948)
Mother Teresa x 2 (d. 1997)