

Shaping Lives: The Everyday Hero as Transformative Agent

Cynthia Gadsden

Abstract

The hero concept is tightly woven into the fabric of American and Western cultural identity. This hero is more icon than human, more mythic than mortal. Ordinary individuals often have little connection to these larger than life characters. Their heroes generally bear little resemblance to the outsized projections splashed across social media, television, movies, and theater. Instead, ordinary individuals choose everyday people as heroes—family members, neighbors, coaches, teachers—with whom they have a personal connection. Social constructionists believe individuals' perspective of the world is based on their relationships and the experiences that result from those relationships. Using phenomenology and arts-based research, a study was conducted with 18–25-year-old students attending Tennessee State University, an HBCU in Nashville, to explore the archetype of the everyday hero, and how this relationship can shape and transform an individual's life. Unlike with well-documented and researched iconic heroes, knowledge concerning people's experiences and interactions with everyday heroes is limited. This study provides insight into that relationship, while expanding existing knowledge of the hero archetype. The visual art component acts as a catalyst for deep inquiry exploring experiences with, connections to, and interactions with everyday heroes. Significant knowledge is accessed concerning this relationship that illustrates the transfer of cultural and generational knowledge that influences, shapes, and also transforms.

Introduction

In popular fiction, the fantasy genre, and fairy tales, the image of the elusive hero is prevalent. Such stories describe a hero who is superhuman like Hercules or Superman. Or he might be a god that is larger than life. Or he is a commanding white knight on an impetuous and high-spirited steed. Regardless of his physical appearance, this hero is male, reticent, mysterious, sensual, and has a mythic quality.

History is littered with monuments and other architectural paraphernalia that recount astounding feats of bravery and victory by leaders and their armies against a despised enemy. The historical lens clothes these conquerors in a cloak of celebration, rarity, and legend. Religion, (i.e., the Bible, etc.), also includes stories that are built around winsome, reluctant, engaging, and even surprising heroes and heroines, (e.g., David and Goliath, Judith and Holofernes).

So, who then is a hero? Although the Western concept of the hero is rooted in the Greek mythology of demigods and superhuman feats, comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell's *The Hero of a Thousand Faces* (1949) found that in almost every culture and civilization there has been a hero figure—an individual, usually male, who either voluntarily leaves, or is forced to leave, his community to pursue a quest or goal. During

the journey the hero encounters several trials, (e.g., obstacles, challenges) that he must overcome while simultaneously developing a set of skills he must master. As a result, the hero transforms from an idealistic youth into an experienced, mature adult who returns home with the honed skills and knowledge that are vital to the survival of his community. Campbell's concepts have been widely read, adapted, and broadly disseminated in various media, most notably in George Lucas' Star Wars saga (Gordon, 1978, p. 320).

Yet, research concerning the "everyday hero," an ordinary individual who performs mundane acts of heroism, has received limited study. While everyday heroism may be defined differently by each individual, (e.g., a parent sacrificing a move to a better job to aid a spouse's career, a child shouldering the responsibility for younger siblings after a parent's death), this adaptability is what makes the everyday hero such a strong, valuable resource. As a means of exploring the everyday hero relationship, a phenomenological and arts-based research study was designed and conducted with students enrolled in art appreciation and art history courses taught by the author during fall 2016 and spring 2017. The question guiding the research study was: How does the archetype of the everyday hero transfer knowledge to others in a way that shapes and transforms their lives?

In addition, several sub-questions supported the inquiry: What type of interactions and experiences are common, and significant for individuals within this relationship? What cultural and generational knowledge, or other information is transferred through this relationship? What impact has relating to an everyday hero had in the participant's life? Participants completed an essay that discussed their everyday hero, designed and created a shoe for their everyday hero, and presented their everyday hero and shoe to their classmates. The combination of written, artistic, and oral components within the study allowed participants to access conscious and tacit knowledge concerning their personal values, as well as offer insights regarding the people and things, (e.g., experiences, memories, actions) they find meaningful.

What then does a hero look like in contemporary culture? Prior to the 1960s, the hero mantle was placed on an individual's shoulder who had shown valor, courage, and strength in the face of difficult circumstances and triumphed. Heroes were victors. They were also white, male, and over 50 (Graebner, 2013). The cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, along with television, film, and public relations, dramatically changed this definition. Suddenly, the names associated with hero shifted away from world leaders to actors such as Lee Majors, who played "The Six Million Dollar Man" on the popular television drama. By 2016, the concept of a hero had again shifted from media and entertainment stars to celebrities of media.

America, as a nation, is interwoven with the concept of the hero. However, this definition differs from the one Campbell described. For instance, Hollywood mythologized the hero through the American Western lone male iconography (Kaulingfreks, 2009). By this definition, the hero is cloaked in mystery and danger, refuses to adhere to anyone else's rules, revels in his rugged individualism, and cares little about society or the larger culture. This image remains prevalent in contemporary media and popular culture. Conversely, in mainstream America, the hero title has traditionally been bestowed on national or political figures—for example, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John Glenn, Ronald Reagan (Graebner, 2013). By the 1970s and 1980s, the image of the hero had broadened to include women and people of color, for example, Cheryl Ladd from "Charlie's Angels" and the National Football League's Walter Payton (Graebner, 2013).

In contrast to the previously described heroes, ordinary people typically do not relate to the larger

than life society and media appointed heroes. Instead their heroes are everyday people, who are within their personal sphere, and often bear little resemblance to the supersized personalities elevated by the press, magazines, movies, television, or the Internet. So, who then are the individuals that bear the hero mantle for ordinary people? What makes their heroes heroic?

Social Construction

From a social construction perspective, an individual's ideas about the world are created or constructed. Moreover, these ideas derive from our various relationships that help us know and understand not only the world in which we live, but also our place in it. "What we take to be the world importantly depends on how we approach it, and how we approach it depends on the social relationships of which we are a part" (Gergen, 2009, p. 2). Our lives are constructed through relationships, and those relationships shape the way individuals see and operate within the world (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Gergen, 2009; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Our earliest connections to other human beings is through our relationships with our parents. What happens, or conversely does not happen, in those relationships—as well as in other significant relationships—affect, influence, and shape us in minute and grand ways. Moreover, these experiences, relationships, and connections offer each person a unique lens through which to view, perceive, and engage with others and the world. Just as these relationships are pivotal to an individual, so are the stories that derive from and are associated with them. Stories teach us how to live, but even more than that they offer characters that we can connect to and with. Moreover, these characters can become models that show us who we want to be, or how we want to live in the world we create. This then is where heroes come in.

The Everyday Hero

Although the iconic hero has been well researched and documented, the everyday hero has received limited study. Moreover, iconic heroes typically generate an array of interest from various media outlets such as network news, the Internet, entertainment channels, television pundits, and political authorities. In contrast, knowledge concerning people's experiences with everyday heroes is limited. In a 2016 and 2017 study of college students using phenomenology and arts-based research, participants were asked to examine their relationship, experiences, and interactions

with an everyday hero. The intent of the study was to discover and understand the deeper meaning underlying such experiences (Englander, 2012), and provide insight concerning the everyday hero aspect of the hero archetype. In addition, the study provided an opportunity to interject fresh, diverse voices into the existing social science academic conversation in general, and the everyday hero discussion in particular (Leavy, 2015).

Methods

The study focused on an exploration of the relationship with an everyday hero. The research was guided by the following research questions: How does the archetype of the everyday hero transfer knowledge to others in a way that shapes and transforms their lives? What type of interactions and experiences are common, and significant for individuals within this relationship? What cultural and generational knowledge, or other information is transferred through this relationship? What impact has relating to an everyday hero had in the participant's life?

The questions were explored through qualitative phenomenology and arts-based research methods. The intent was to discover and understand the deeper meaning of experiences with an everyday hero. As a result, participants were probed for "the knowledge of the content of the experience, often in depth, to seek the meaning of the phenomenon" (Englander, 2012, p. 21). By examining the phenomenological experience, participants were also asked how the knowledge that was received within this relationship has shaped, changed, and/or transformed their lives.

Arts-based Research

The study included an art project designed to help participants access their creativity, memory, and feelings as a means of meaning making. The appeal of arts-based research lies in its flexibility, as well as its openness to diverse participants, and to new ways of information gathering and evaluation (Leavy, 2015). It also allows for the artistic-scholar to combine elements of traditional qualitative research with artistic practice. For many years academic research has confined itself to traditional methods of gathering and analyzing data from study participants. Unfortunately, methods such as written questionnaires, surveys, etc. are limited in the types of information that can be gathered. Typically, such research instruments are unable to delve deeply into participants' experiences and knowledge. Since the aim of this study was to elicit information concerning meaning making, a form

of research gathering that extends beyond the barriers of conventional research was warranted (Huss & Cwikel, 2005).

Arts-based research can integrate a variety of art media, (for example, writing, storytelling, dance, poetry, visual art, music, clowning). As a result, the adaptable and versatile nature of the method allows researchers to ask new questions, to ask them in unusual ways, and to reach untapped audiences as study participants, or as recipients for their research findings (Leavy, 2015). Moreover, its experimental and experienced-based nature provides greater avenues for study and ultimately, more in-depth understanding of a community or culture. Arts-based research then has broad application, and offers researchers a means of building a multi-layered, complex web of knowledge.

In addition, the method allows a diverse chorus of voices to be acknowledged. Too often historically, certain voices, (i.e., women, non-whites, people with special needs, etc.) and their unique perspectives have been unheard. This wider array of voices is typically not sought out since they do not fit neatly within the Western dialogue that favors the white male perspective (Huss and Cwikel, 2005). In contrast, arts-based methods expand the research landscape by providing spaces where every participants' unique voice and experience are valued. This leads to previously untapped knowledge that is rich with insight, diversity, and depth (Leavy, 2015). Finally, the adaptability of arts-based research unearths greater avenues for study and ultimately, a more in-depth, complex understanding and knowledge of our existing culture (Leavy, 2015; Huss and Cwikel, 2005).

The project included in the research study asked each participant to design a shoe for their everyday hero. Why a shoe? From shoe advertising campaigns featuring well-known sports figures like LeBron James and Serena Williams, to rock star status shoe designers like Jimmy Choo and Manolo Blahnik, to shoe companies with a social conscience (e.g., TOMS), shoes carry lots of weight in the global culture. They are multi-faceted symbols of travelers and journeys. For example, a businessman's hard sole lace-up differs from a fireman's heavy heat-resistant boot, or a ballroom dancer's flexible soft-soled shoe. Each shoe is distinctive, yet implies a specific path that is appropriate for each individual's journey. Regardless of the profession or style of footwear, the everyday hero's shoe offers a glimpse into his or her identity, life, and style.

Participants

A total of 17 undergraduate students aged 18–25 years old agreed to participate in the everyday hero study. Participants were students who were enrolled in one of the courses I had taught during the 2016–2017 school year at Tennessee State University. TSU is one of 107 public and private HBCUs in the nation. Founded in 1912, the university traditionally served the African American community. The current student body, though, is a diverse mix of students, including African American, Native American, Asian American, Caucasian and Hispanic, along with an array of international students from around the globe.

The data for the study originated from a required assignment in my Art Appreciation and Art History courses. The course project consisted of: 1) writing a 1–2 page essay that described the student's everyday hero, what made the individual a hero, and their relationship with their everyday hero; 2) an art project that asked each student to design and create a model of a shoe for their everyday hero; and 3) a 5–8 minute presentation to the class that discussed their everyday hero and the shoe they created. The study lasted approximately two weeks. A total of 17 students—seven from fall 2016 and 10 from spring 2017—submitted their school assignments to the study. The participants were derived from a pool of 112 students who completed one of the four Art Appreciation courses, or one of the two Art History courses offered during those semesters. The study participants were African American women, except for two women—one of whom was Vietnamese and the other white—and four African American men. Prior to participating in the study, each participant was required to read and sign an Informed Consent Form. All who completed one of the six courses received five bonus course points regardless of whether they submitted their assignment to the study. This was done to prevent any student from feeling pressured to participate or penalized for not submitting their assignment to the study.

Procedures

To participate in the research study, each student was asked to:

- 1) Watch a 7-minute segment of the *Power of Myth* where Joseph Campbell defines the characteristics of the hero. Then using Campbell's definition of a hero or heroine (ex-departure, fulfillment, and return), select a contemporary (21st century), little known or unrecognized person

that they believed fulfilled the role of a hero. Next, they wrote a 1–2 page essay that described their everyday hero, the situation or circumstances that made him or her their hero, and their relationship and experience with their everyday hero.

- 2) Design and create a three-dimensional model of a shoe that would help their hero in their daily work and life. In designing the shoe, participants considered: a) the type of work their hero/heroine does, b) whether that work requires lots of frequent standing, walking, or moving, c) if the look of/surface design of their everyday hero's shoe is important.

- 3) Present their everyday hero and shoe model to the class in a 5–8 minute presentation.

- 4) Submit a copy of their essay and four photographs of their shoe model showing the front, back, left side, right side to the research study.

Since the original data source was a course assignment, data analysis did not occur until after the close of each semester and students' grades had been submitted. All personal identifying information was removed from each participant's submission, and each data source was given a unique identifier (e.g., EF2016001). This identifier code indicated the data type (E = essay, P = photograph), semester, and participant number.

Content analysis was used to discover patterns and themes. Such an analysis can identify specific meanings and messages that are embedded in the data. Moreover, content analysis is typically applied to various forms of human communication, such as written material (e.g., letters, papers, emails), photographs, film, and video (Berg, 2007). The process of close reading and interpretation can lead to a broad understanding of specific material and the discovery of new perspectives on collective meaning and knowledge.

Although content analysis can be a time-consuming process, qualitative data analysis software offers the advantage of examining and analyzing large amounts of data quickly. Additionally, these specialized software programs—for example, Atlas.ti and NVivo—allow researchers to view and analyze data from various perspectives. In addition, different types of data can be coded and then examined to identify specific themes, concepts, and ideas. Atlas.ti was the software program used to analyze the data for this research study.

Findings

Seventeen students submitted their work to the everyday hero research study. Thirteen of the participants were women, while four participants

were men. The participants were young adults, aged 18–25 years old, whose classification ranged from freshman to graduating senior. Six of the participants were art majors, while the remaining 11 were not.

Through their essays the participants shared stories and memories about their everyday hero that illustrated patterns of behavior. Although each life and story was unique, behavioral similarities revealed patterns related to a generosity of spirit and heart, along with a willingness to forge long-term, nurturing relationships along generational and cultural lines. Many of the relationships had familial connections. Yet, other relationships were formed with individuals within the participants' personal circle, (i.e., best friend, teacher, etc.). From these behavior patterns five themes emerged from the data. The themes in order of their frequency are: motivated/inspired/admire, shouldering responsibility/sacrifice, nurturing and encouragement, adversity, and death and loss.

The emergent themes illustrate that for study participants, the actions of the everyday hero are profoundly influential. For example, the themes that were discussed most frequently were: motivated/inspired/admire, (i.e., 43 instances), shouldering responsibility/sacrifice, (i.e., 30 instances), and nurturing and encouragement, (i.e., 27 instances). This indicates that what an everyday hero does carries more influence than verbal proclamations. Moreover, the motivated/inspired/admire theme illustrates that participants view the everyday hero as a realistic role model whose life circumstances may be similar to their own. As an individual who is admired, the everyday hero inspires the participant's thoughts and actions, and offers a motivating demonstration of how to live in the world. Sarah reiterates this idea by pointing to her reason for studying music education. She wants "to follow [in] the steps of [her everyday hero], and give back to students like [he] gave to me."

Another recurring theme is shouldering responsibility/sacrifice, which means sacrificing one's own needs for the benefit of others and accepting significant responsibility to ensure the well-being of others. Dana's hero "took on the responsibility of taking care of her brothers while trying to finish her senior year of high school." Similarly, Caitlyn's grandfather has a practice of providing "people in the family money, rides, food, and even a place to stay when they need it." These examples indicate that participants are learning by witnessing the everyday hero in action. Through the everyday hero relationship, they receive lessons in

responsibility, problem-solving, and personal values.

The nurturing and encouragement theme relates to the everyday hero's nurturing presence in the study participant's life. Encouragement is demonstrated through continuous words of wisdom, counsel, and advice. For example, Annette describes her everyday hero as a person who "encourages me to fight and stay strong as well. She has always been someone I could talk to." In addition, the everyday hero's actions illustrate caring and concern through loving interactions and nurturing support, (i.e., emotional, physical, financial, etc.). Erica's everyday hero:

does outstanding things like going above and beyond to protect, provide, and mostly unconditionally love me. Whenever I may feel alone, all I have to do is make one phone call and it feels as if she's here with me even being miles away. Whenever I fear [something], all I have to do is express it to her and I no longer have tears. I could be having the worse day and before the night is [over] she's giving me a call or sending me an encouraging text letting me know that everything is going to be okay. It's like she just always knows exactly what to say or do to take the pain away.

Continuous nurturing from the everyday hero is an important source of emotional support for participants.

Although the study's emergent themes have nuanced differences, they are also interrelated. While shouldering responsibility and sacrificing oneself for others demonstrates a generous spirit and strength of character, it also offers participants' a model of living that is admirable and inspiring. Additionally, the remaining two themes—adversity, and death and loss—share some commonalities.

Adversity was discussed 22 times by participants, and describes an everyday hero who has experienced and/or overcome a major life challenge, (i.e., loss of a job, spouse or child, illness, etc.). Despite the odds or circumstances, they have persevered and achieved a measure of triumph or at least peace. Hannah says:

My mom has dealt [with] a lot of suffering and hardships in her life. When she and dad left Vietnam, she left behind her entire family and moved to America without even knowing a drop [of] the language. This is the bravest decision

anyone could make. My mom was 32 and had to face obstacles that sometimes were too big to face on her own.

Death and loss (i.e., 10 mentions) also relates to personal struggles and difficulties. This theme refers to the everyday hero who has experienced significant emotional or financial loss, (i.e., divorce, abandonment, job loss, etc.) or physical death, (i.e., family member, friend, significant individual, etc.). Although both themes deal with disappointment, grief, and tragedy, the everyday hero models ways that participants can deal with challenging situations. In addition, witnessing the way the everyday hero deals with these situations provides motivation for participants when dealing with their own challenges. For instance, Bettye describes how her young nephew, who struggles with a life-threatening illness, motivates her:

He has taught me patience, how to remain faithful, to always stay humble, to be strong when you're feeling weak and to hold your head up high because there are people in this world that are doing worse than you.

As Nikki shared about her mother's cancer:

It's hard for me to see her this way, but I tell myself that now it's my turn to stay by her side when she gets depressed. Even though my mother is going through this she hasn't become weak mentally. At college I sometimes get tired from so much work and figuring out my future that I sometimes want to just give up. I start to think about the challenges that she is going through, how hard she is working to beat cancer. It gives me the drive to work harder.

Discussion

The hero archetype is woven into the fabric of American society, as well as the global culture in many forms. Although such iconic heroes have been well documented and researched, in contrast everyday heroes have garnered limited attention. Everyday heroes live ordinary lives and receive little attention outside their own social and family circles. Yet, they are impactful and influential. Through the relationships they form, everyday heroes quietly and with little fanfare shape others through their continuous encouragement, personal

sacrifice, and modeling behavior. As a result, the personal relationships with the everyday hero is a prime conductor of cultural and generational values and knowledge.

In our phenomenological and arts-based research study based on a course assignment, undergraduate students were asked to identify an everyday hero and then explore that relationship. The majority of the everyday heroes were drawn from familial (parent, grandparent, godparent) or personal circles, (coach, friend). Participants clearly saw successful living strategies in their everyday hero's personal triumphs and struggles. Moreover, participants valued opportunities to talk with, learn from, and receive guidance from the everyday hero. Study participants illustrated that they are keen observers of human nature and interaction, (i.e., admirable qualities, devastating losses, nurturing behavior, etc.). Moreover, they are not simply chronicling others interact, instead they are learning important lessons about humanity, cultural values, and responsible thought and action. Many participants saw the everyday heroes' handling of difficult experiences as a means of inspiration and admiration. As a result, they are modeling agents that led participants to change their own perspective and behavior. The everyday hero then is more than a role model, but instead an inspirational impetus leading to value and character development.

The process of shoe creation encouraged participants to critically examine their relationship with the everyday hero, and provided a concrete way to illustrate the participant's feelings and memories. The participant's shoe offers a visual manifestation of the everyday hero's journey, and reiterates the written narrative. Often the aesthetic value of the shoe is outweighed by the conceptual ideas that the shoes represent (i.e., perseverance, foresight, responsibility, etc.). In describing her everyday hero's shoe, Caitlyn says,

He is older and has health problems so it helps support him even when he feels weak [sic]. I chose a work boot over any other kind of boot because it shows the amount of work he does not only for the family but in the home as well.

As a result of creating the shoe and writing the essay, participants recognized, acknowledged, and celebrated the transformative aspects of the relationship with their everyday hero. Finally, the class presentations of the everyday heroes and their shoes was also transformative. Through

listening, hearing, and witnessing through tears, laughter, and pain participants discovered common experiences that connected them to one another through the stories that were told. The classroom space became a charged environment of remembrance and vision. An ordinary classroom of a diverse group of students simply wanting to pass a course shifted into a transformative, connective space. In sharing, the students became a linked body where culture, race, or major no longer mattered. Instead bridges of understanding, bonding, and knowing were formed.

Implications

The everyday hero assignment worked well in my courses and with my students. Several students, particularly the young women, found the idea of selecting a hero, creating the shoe, and then talking about their hero an enjoyable experience. They viewed the assignment as an opportunity to honor someone who was important to them, which was personally rewarding. Moreover, the project acknowledged their cultural values and heritage. Within communal cultures honoring elders and acknowledging their wisdom is culturally significant. While the practice celebrates specific individuals, it also provides a means of strengthening the bonds of personal support and maintaining a connection to the larger community.

In addition, projects similar to the everyday hero allow students to incorporate their personal experiences and lives into the academic environment, which may at times seem an unforgiving place. The classroom can seem a strange, foreign place for students from families, neighborhoods, and communities that do not value, support, or advocate higher education. Students from households where the focus is on the family's basic needs and/or survival may be the first in the family to attend college, or sometimes even graduate from high school. Moreover, these students quickly learn that to succeed in academia, they must put aside their personal experiences, feelings, and voice in favor of the objective perspective valued in Western higher learning. Such practices unnecessarily teach students to separate their home lives from their academic lives rather than offer ways to integrate the two.

Instead of being distant and unfamiliar, the classroom can be a welcoming place for students' whole selves, where the combining of home with academia is celebrated and valued. Assignments that allow students to access personal experiences, memories, stories, and deeply rooted knowledge

can help them engage with curriculum topics in more significant ways. Moreover, asking questions and creating assignments that encourage accessing tacit knowledge and wisdom help to enhance student learning inside the classroom, as well as beyond the university walls. Finally, incorporating meaningful artistic creations when designing assignments and projects offers students avenues for a deeper understanding of and engagement with the community of which they are a part.

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About the Author

Cynthia Gadsden is an assistant professor of art history at Tennessee State University. She holds the master of arts degree from Ohio University and is a candidate for the PhD from the California Institute of Integral Studies.