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Heroic ecologies: embodied heroic leadership and sustainable futures

Introduction

Since the dawn of the 21st century there has been a notable shift from the study of disease and maladaptive behaviours to an increased momentum across the social and psychological sciences in the study of optimal human functioning, such as motivation, resilience, altruism, courage and human growth. Notably, an area of study in which a flurry of research is being witnessed is heroism and heroic leadership. The timeless phenomenon and discourse of heroism may be significant in shaping our concept of wellbeing in contemporary culture. A recent study conducted by Kinsella *et al.* (2012) has highlighted “the importance of heroism in everyday life”. This study acknowledges the wide-reaching effects of heroism across the spectrum of human experience: “The term hero is universal and understood to provide important physical, psychological, and social benefits to people” (Kinsella *et al.*, 2012). A comprehensive and astute knowledge-building of the construct of heroism will therefore be integral to the broader agenda of improving mental, physical and spiritual public wellbeing in the 21st century.

There has been some debate on the appropriation of heroism for leadership, with calls for a “post-heroic knowledge era” (Davis, 2010, p. 43) of leadership due to critiques of the limitations arising from a hero-focus in leadership studies and practice (Bendell and Little, 2015). This paper seeks to demonstrate how heroic leadership stands to benefit individuals and communities at large. The perceived discord between heroism and leadership is arguably largely based on historical narratives of heroism, rather than what heroism can mean today. On the one hand, a methodological focus on senior role holders as especially salient agents of change may restrict our analysis of social and organisational change (Bendell and Little, 2015). On the other hand, research into heroism is just beginning to understand the systemic complexity of the antecedents, processes and consequences of contemporary heroism, and thus offers new opportunities for understanding and enabling sustainability leadership. Therefore, it is hoped that the synergies and case study presented here serve as an indication that, rather than move away from an ‘age of heroism’, leadership and sustainability researchers should join forces with heroism researchers and educators, to develop innovative, critical, sustainable and dynamic wellbeing frameworks. Both contemporary heroism and leadership research stand united in their mutual goal of identifying “where the underlying values and assumptions that drive our leadership, learning and lives emanate from” (Davis, 2010, p. 43).

Wassell (2015, p. 1) stresses that “To confront the myriad of challenges facing humanity in the next century, leaders must focus on wellbeing capital. Wellbeing is a balance point between challenges and resources; it is multidisciplinary and holistic, and it requires fit and co-responsibility”. It is the aim of this paper to highlight the value of heroic leadership by demonstrating its critical interrelationship with wellbeing and sustainability. The increasing recognition of the importance of both heroism and leadership in 21st century societies signals a timely investigation of emerging understandings of heroic leadership for wellbeing. The ubiquity of the enduring phenomenon of heroism and its connection with leadership, suggests that drawing on these synergies could pave the way for the development of an applied model for use in a wide range of settings (healthcare, counselling, pedagogy etc.). A preliminary attempt at developing such a model is presented herewith.

This paper is organised into five sections. First, it will set out the important role of heroic leadership and embodiment as critical connectors to wellbeing in light of emerging literature, as well as evidence amassed over decades of research on the “hero’s journey” as a powerful tool for healing and optimal psychosocial development. The “hero’s journey” describes the theory that across cultures there is a similar concept of a remarkable individual who faces a difficult challenge, experiences a revelation, attains new capabilities, overcomes the challenge and then brings the knowledge or benefit to the community (Campbell, 1949). The second section examines the potential relationship between sustainable leadership and heroic leadership. The concept of an embodied heroic leadership framework is introduced and the importance of an ecosystem approach to wellbeing for increasingly complex and dynamic 21st century communities is emphasised. The third section outlines the emergence of a new heroism social movement and science working to propagate resilient, self-leading and heroic pedagogies and communities at large. The call for a sustainable model of wellbeing is applied to heroism in the fourth section, proposing a five-stage approach to fostering heroic leadership and building heroic communities. Gorman *et al.*’s (2012) sustainability framework forms the basis for the construction of a sustainable model of embodied heroic leadership. In the fifth section, this model is applied to a case study of two partner non-profit organisations working to nurture heroic behaviour in communities predominantly in the US, Europe and Australia: the Hero Construction Company and the Heroic Imagination Project. These settings offer a preliminary indication of the real-world value of embodied heroic leadership for sustainable development. The paper concludes with some final thoughts on the urgency of developing and sustaining global heroic leadership, and the rewards and challenges associated with this task.

Embodied heroic leadership: an imperative for holistic wellbeing

Much of our contemporary understanding of heroism has its roots in Joseph Campbell’s work. Campbell’s (1949) seminal cross-cultural comparative analysis of myths from around the world evidenced a common pattern in hero narratives, regardless of local and period manifestations. This led to the development of the widely recognised “hero’s journey” model comprising distinct stages. Its essence is that the commonality in hero myths across cultures and time is the necessity of rites of passage and trials as a road to transformation and social change. Although historically definitions and theoretical applications of heroism in humanities’ fields such as literature, mythology, philosophy and so forth abound, definitions in emerging psychological research are limited, indicating the need for a systematic and in-depth exploration of this phenomenon. Highlighting the elusiveness of the concept in his investigation of the psychology of heroism, Weinstein (2013, p. 2) states that “The lack of an accepted standard definition is a major hurdle”. Leading studies agree that what ‘heroism’ describes can vary significantly in context, type and degree, pointing to the wide range of contemporary manifestations and the need for further multi-variant systematic studies (Franco *et al.*, 2011, Goethals and Allison, 2012; Kinsella *et al.*, 2017). However, they seem to converge on the notion that heroism describes behaviours manifested in the presence of a challenging event, morally, mentally and/or physically, calling the individual to rise to it, and culminating in some form of psychological, spiritual, physical and/or social transformation.

Emerging scholarly research on heroism is beginning to uncover critical connections between heroism and leadership, resulting in the integrative concept of ‘heroic leadership’. Allison (in conversation, July 31, 2015) describes heroic leadership as “leadership that takes into account all the processes implicated by the hero’s journey, and heroism science”. Allison and Goethals (2014) have introduced the “Heroic Leadership Dynamic” to gain a deeper understanding of the universal profundity of heroism through time. The authors’ (Allison and

Goethals, 2014, p. 169) Dynamic is strategically framed around the notion of “*heroic leadership* rather than as simply heroism” based on their focal premise expounded in previous works (Allison and Goethals, 2011; Allison and Goethals, 2013; Goethals and Allison, 2012) that “although not all leaders are heroes, all heroes are leaders”. Heroic leadership is defined as a “dynamic” and “temporal” process that incorporates “various mechanisms underlying personal growth and developmental health”, where “the psychology of heroism unfolds over time” (Allison and Goethals, 2014, pp. 177, 180). This definition provides a solid basis for the integration of heroic leadership in wellbeing discussions. If “we are all developmentally equipped to pursue a lifelong hero-like journey”, as Allison and Goethals (2014, p. 175) suggest, then heeding – or denying – our very nature stands to have far-reaching consequences for our mental, emotional, physical and spiritual state of wellbeing.

The value of heroic leadership in advancing holistic wellbeing is becoming increasingly evident. Allison and Goethals (2014, p. 169) point out that “Lifespans are longer and general health is better today than millennia ago, but there seems little doubt that people today still seek out powerful hero narratives as a tonic for their anxieties and fears”. A study conducted by Allison and Goethals (2014, p. 178) “showed a striking relationship between ... respondents’ needs and their choice of heroes. When they reported having a severe health problem, they chose heroes at that time who had overcome their specific malady”; this indicates a relationship between heroic self-leadership and state of health. Kinsella *et al.* (2015, p. 5) hypothesised that “Given the etymology of the word *hero* (meaning ‘protector’) ... heroes would be the best protectors of psychological and physical well-being”. The results of a series of consecutive studies clearly demonstrated the social, psychological and physical benefits of heroic action and perceptions of heroes as enhancers of wellbeing: “participants thought that heroes enhanced the lives of others, promoted morals, and protected individuals from threats”, and “rated heroes as more likely to fulfill a protecting function than either leaders or role models” (Kinsella *et al.*, 2015, p. 1). Significantly, “thinking about a hero (relative to a leader or an acquaintance) during psychological threat fulfilled personal enhancement, moral modeling, and protection needs” (Kinsella *et al.*, 2015, p. 1). These results provide important preliminary evidence for the positive correlation between *heroic leadership* – rather than simply leadership – and momentary wellbeing, at least in situations of anxiety.

The beneficial impact of heroic leadership on wellbeing is becoming evident in contemporary clinical practice. Emerging literature cites the co-incidence of trauma and personal growth, and how challenges may feature as an essential pathway for developing resilience, self-leadership and a heroic mode of being. Nelson (2011, p. 26) describes how PTSD sufferers can connect with the heroic domain by “creating their own unique meaning that can be brought out of the experience, writing their own ending to the trauma narrative”. Indeed, “lived story” is crucial to both embodied leadership (Burbank, 2013, p. 3) and heroic leadership (Allison and Goethals, 2014). The experience of trauma and the demonstration of resilience, which “is generally defined as one’s ability to bounce back after a traumatic experience” (Nelson, 2011, p. 7) is instrumental to this process:

What makes our characters heroic is their perseverance through the trickery and shadows, finding or creating light to guide them through the darkness instead of getting lost in it. Heroes are formed through transformative suffering and immortalized in legends throughout time. (Nelson, 2011, pp. 26-27).

Researchers are already beginning to discuss and use initial findings on the physical, psychological and social benefits of heroism to wellbeing in applied clinical and abnormal psychological settings (Kinsella *et al.*, 2017; Ylvisaker *et al.*, 2008). The development of “metaphoric identity mapping”, for example, is a reconstruction technique used in patients diagnosed with “severe traumatic brain injury (TBI)” (Ylvisaker *et al.*, 2008, p. 713). This method promotes the use of the hero metaphor as a valuable tool for enhanced “self-regulation” and “identity exploration and reconstruction”; it serves “as an aid to enabling participants to identify a meaningful, higher representation of what is important to them as a basis for deriving and pursuing rehabilitation goals” (Ylvisaker *et al.*, 2008, pp. 715, 726, 738). The “huge transformational potential” of trauma (Fosha, 2002, p. 4) is the foundation of heroic leadership.

A growing body of research is illustrating the power of the hero’s journey model in its use as a counselling and pedagogical tool for self-transformation. Brown and Moffett (1999, p. 104), for example, support the central role everyday heroic leadership could have on wellbeing in the classroom, education reform and reinvigorating learning in the face of failing models: “Ultimately, the ‘story’ we create *in partnership with others* is the narrative tapestry at the heart of the hero’s journey in education”. Feinstein *et al.*’s (1988, p. 24) “five-stage model” developed for use in “clinical, educational, and community settings” demonstrates “the evolution of the individual’s mythology” in therapy. This methodology is echoed by contemporary clinical psychologists such as Williams (2016) and Grace (2015). Williams (2016) uses a 12-stage “Hero Model of Change (HMOC)” in his clinical practice working with a wide range of clients, based on his extensive research on Campbell’s (1949) work. Williams (2016) proposes that the HMOC provides a comprehensive stage-based template for understanding and contextualising personal change in the therapeutic setting for the Client/Hero. This research indicates how rethinking the individual as heroic leader is important to personal and social transformation.

Aside from their role as conduits for wellbeing, heroism and leadership share another crucial point. The centrality of the body and embodied experience is increasingly recognised in emerging interdisciplinary fields such as neuroplasticity, epigenetics and the cognitive sciences – leadership and heroism are no exception. A number of contemporary theorists are exploring the embodied dimensions of leadership, offering innovative conceptions of the somatic and situated aspects of “Being Well and Leading Well” (for examples see: Bathurst and Cain, 2013; Burbank, 2013; Illes, 2015, p. 1; Jankelson, 2010; Karssiens *et al.*, 2014; Laszlo, 2012; Ropo *et al.*, 2013). These have to date been sidelined in place of psychosocial evaluations of leadership and wellbeing. The emerging field of Leadership Embodiment (Illes, 2015; Yoon, 2014), though in its early stages, is already offering important insights into the complexity of this important phenomenon. Similarly, social psychologists such as Gray (2010) are in the early stages of revealing the remarkable link between heroism and its impacts on our bodies – Gray (2010) argues that individuals who have performed selfless heroic acts have reported a notable, and even ‘super-human’ increase in physical strength during the act. Embodied heroism denotes that “*all types of heroism encompass a physiological and embodied basis or aspect of experience*” (Efthimiou, 2017, p. 141). Embodied heroic leadership can be defined as “*a simultaneously universal, yet deeply personal, distinct state of embodied consciousness and intentionality. The lived heroic body is grounded in corporeal knowledge ... and conscious dynamic inquiry within lived space*” (Efthimiou, 2017, p. 144). Uncovering the embodied aspects of heroic leadership stands to offer a notable contribution to the development of distributed dynamic wellbeing frameworks.

In this shifting epistemological momentum researchers such as Coyle (2011) advocate the centrality of holistic therapies in improving brain health and the physical body as “portal and path to wholeness”. This approach reinstates the vital role of the body in Western healing illustrating “how body-centered practices support the work of psychotherapy, shortening the time in treatment and improving the potential for psychic growth” (Coyle, 2011, p. iii). How can embodied heroic leadership contribute to this path to wholeness? Rossi (1997, p. 70) emphasises the central role Campbell’s (1949) hero’s journey model stands to play in the development of integrative therapies:

Joseph Campbell’s myth of the hero together with the creative cycle of discovery in the arts and sciences provide a starting point for this exploration, which can then be amplified by recent neuroscience research pointing to a new view of mind-body communication and healing. Along the way we will gather new insights about the nature-nurture controversy and the so-called “Cartesian gap” between mind and body.

At its heart, the hero’s journey is a metaphor for the regeneration cycle, or the innate, and largely untapped, capacity of every organism to heal itself. The biological process of regeneration (whether it be cellular, genetic or other) captures the scientific equivalent of the concept of heroism in its transformative function, and the idea of a journey that alters the individual profoundly at the very cellular level. Embodied heroic leadership heals the Cartesian split and reinstates the centrality of the mind-body continuum, linking transformative heroic action to mental, emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing; as Burbank (2013, p. 7) states, “anyone can develop transformative leadership qualities. It is a practical result of radical embodiment”. The self-healing properties of transformative heroic self-leadership, as indicated by emerging research, are a testament to this radical embodiment. This preliminary research from a diverse range of fields is indicative of the benefits heroic leadership stands to offer global health assessment, intervention and prevention. As such, this paper is driven by the question: How can an embodied framework of heroic leadership wellbeing contribute to sustainable futures? The importance of answering this question is explored in the next section.

Heroic futures, sustainable futures: the call for new models of sustainable wellbeing

While the relationships between the hero’s journey and wellbeing, and leadership and wellbeing have been extensively recorded, the synergies with sustainability are only just beginning to be revealed. The emerging area of sustainable leadership is at the forefront of championing a bold and inclusive notion of global participatory leadership, with all of us “co-creating a sustainable future” (Ferdig, 2007). Significantly, Lin (2011, p. 63) suggests that what is likely “most important to the sustainability of human beings is virtues” including “altruism, honesty” and “*heroism* [emphasis added]”. Likewise, Caselles (2012, p. 16) proposes Salzman’s (2008, p. 326) “constructive heroism” as a potential solution for the promotion of improved human ethics and a sustainable “just globalization”. This nascent research is indicative of the links between leadership, heroism, wellbeing and sustainability, and the fruitful collaborative space that exists in their mutual reference.

Heroic leadership may offer an emergent, dynamic and distributed form of sustainable development that stands to benefit individuals and communities at large. An integrative *Heroic Leadership Embodiment* (HLE) framework is proposed as a viable alternative to the two competing models of wellbeing – the dominant biomedical and the biopsychosocial (the latter advanced by George Engel in 1977) – and the potential for their reconciliation. This framework is premised on the three functions of heroic leadership: the “epistemic”,

“energizing” (Allison and Goethals, 2014, p. 170) and “ecological” (Efthimiou, 2017, p. 146). HLE is founded on an embodied reading of Allison and Goethals’ (2014) Dynamic and their initial proposition of the first two functions. HLE’s epistemic function refers to the acquisition of transformative embodied knowledge and wisdom, and the development of emotional and physical intelligence instilled by heroic behaviour. The energizing function denotes the promotion of biopsychosocial growth, and the self-healing capacity of heroic leadership to mend psychic and physical traumas and promote self-regeneration. Finally, the ecological function refers to the dynamic formation of our identity within all the systems of which we are a part of, live, move, feel in, and assert our agency: social, family, cultural, political, religious and so forth. Embodied heroic leadership involves dynamic, intelligent and embodied human agency.

The ecological function of heroic leadership manages the regulation of suffering and healing, or crisis and order within the broader ecology of the human-hero actor. This is heroic leadership as “emergent leadership” that “recognises environmental, social and financial facets as integrated and inseparable parts of a whole system. That system supports the health of the organisation” (McLean and Wells, 2010, pp. 53, 54) and the individual – heroism is indeed being conceptualised as an “emergent property” (Hutchins, 2013), aligning with such theorisations of leadership. Furey (2015) observes: “the individuals’ heroic knowledge, habits, skills, and reasons for acting heroically are intricately tied to the successful performance of tasks associated with managing the health and functioning of the social ecosystems in which people live, work, learn, and play”. The third function of heroic leadership results in the creation of ecologically and globally minded heroic actors, able to effectively navigate complexity and maintain sustained growth throughout their lifespan in dynamic systems, offering “convincing grounds on which humankind can justify the project of sustainability” (Orr, 2002, p. 1459).

HLE’s foundation is the recognition of heroic leadership, sustainability and radical embodiment as imperatives for holistic wellbeing, and social behaviour as a complex dynamic system of interactions. The energizing function of heroic leadership is deeply related to Orr’s (2002) first challenge of sustainability, which is revising and stabilising the economy to “protect the Earth’s production of real wealth, and develop equity among nations”, as summarised by Odum and Odum (2001, p. 133). The capacity of heroic leadership to contribute to this new eco-friendly economy is reflected in Salzman’s (2008) constructive heroism as a tool for promoting a reformed globalised society. This stabilising capacity of the energizing property of heroic self-leadership is further indicated by Korten (2013); Korten (2013, p. 1) calls for an extension of the personal notion of the “hero’s journey of self-discovery” to “collective self-discovery” in the face of the pressing economic, social and environmental crises plaguing our planet and species. This is an embodied scientific story of a global scale; “a story of many trillions of individual choice-making living organisms cooperating as an intelligent whole to optimize the capture, organization, and sharing of Earth’s” resources (Korten, 2013, p. 4). It is an embodied reading of the planet, with humans and other species as its core agents and mutually interacting organisms within the context of a broader hero’s journey, revealing a co-narrative of human evolution (Landau, 1984) between us and our enveloping world. This energized, ecologically minded and responsible heroic global citizenry is primed to co-author a sustainable narrative of human evolution.

Fergid (2007, p. 25) provides a powerful and bold philosophy for sustainable leadership and growth: “anyone *who takes responsibility for understanding and acting on sustainability challenges* qualifies as a ‘sustainability leader,’ ... They lead ‘with’ ... others in ways that account for the long-term viability of complex, interconnected living systems”. This

paradigm challenges conventional conceptions of leadership, and brings personal empowerment into the picture (Bendell and Little, 2015). It aligns with the ecological framework of embodied heroic self-leadership that is founded on the notion of the hero's journey and leadership as complex dynamic ecosystems. Ferdig (2007, p. 25) adds, "Paradox, contradiction, and differing viewpoints" are vital to "healthy systems". Importantly, "Sustainability leaders recognize that the experience of change itself, and the dissonance it creates, fuels new thinking, discoveries, and innovations that can revitalize the health of organizations, communities, and the earth" (Ferdig, 2007, p. 25). The inherent property of "paradox" embedded in the epistemic function of heroism and the hero's journey (Allison and Goethals, 2014, p. 171), its intrinsic interdisciplinarity, and its ecological function grounded in the dynamic interrelationship between crisis, change and growth, render the process of heroic leadership as fuel for novel discoveries, innovations and complex creative worlds. *Heroic* leaders can therefore be *sustainable* leaders.

Developing individuals and communities that are well trained in heroic leadership is essential to realising the vision of sustainability. In his conclusion of the requirements for a sustainable world Orr (2002, pp. 1459-1460) surmises:

In words written shortly before his own death, Becker concluded that "The urge to *cosmic heroism*, then, is sacred and mysterious and not to be neatly ordered and rationalized by science and secularism" (p. 284). No culture has gone farther than our own to deny individual mortality, and in its denial it is killing the planet. A spirituality that allows us to face our own mortality honestly without denial or terror contains the seeds of the *daily heroism necessary to preserve life on Earth*. Instead of terror, a deeper spirituality would lead us to a place of gratitude and celebration. It would also *energize* us to act [emphasis added].

From this perspective we are all active participants in our wellbeing and creators of our sustainable futures as energized heroic actors. This sustainable notion of heroic self-leadership development is highlighted in Allison's (2015, p. 5) revisiting of the "great man" theory of leadership:

The troubles of our world are not for great individuals to solve but for every one of us to solve. Gifts are not the monopoly of great people. Every human being possesses one or more gifts to make the world a better place. Every human being is called to discover his or her gift. The banality of heroism, so deftly described by Franco and Zimbardo (2006), is a concept that can never be emphasized enough in our schools, in our homes, in our places of worship, and in the cacophony of cyberspace.

This is a participatory, open and inclusive concept of sustainable heroic leadership: "We are all destined to walk the same hero's journey in our own individually unique way, as global citizens and as global scientists" (Allison, 2015, p. 5).

The importance of the participatory and open framing of a model of heroic self-leadership and sustainable development cannot be overstated. Laszlo (2012, p. 95) emphasises that the task of evolutionary leadership "is not a task for a few privileged, 'enlightened' ones, but a responsibility for every human being". In order for "the insights from systems thinking and practice" of heroic leadership to assist "in the transition to a viable future for all" (Laszlo, 2012, p. 95), this model cannot be garnered from a hyper-idealised notion of heroism. It must be grounded in lived experience, embodied reflexivity, and sustainable practices in which we all take responsibility in our roles as heroic leaders to co-create our future. The deeply inspirational property of heroism's energizing function (Allison and Goethals, 2014) is

central to sustainable embodied leadership; as Jankelson (2010, p. 12) points out, leadership “is not about what one knows or how much one knows; it is what one embodies ... To be inspired is to allow the breath, the idea, the meaning to penetrate into one’s body and then act”. Thus, to borrow Ferdig’s (2007, p. 25) words, a model of *Heroic Leadership Embodiment and Sustainable Development* (HLESD)¹ “is a compelling leadership opportunity ultimately grounded in a personal ethic that reaches beyond self-interest”.

The wellbeing of individuals and social ecosystems lies at the heart of heroic leadership and HLESD – healthy social behaviour is fundamental to holistic wellbeing. Prilleltensky and Nelson (2002, p. 8) propose an interlinked multilayered model of wellbeing: “Well-being is achieved by the simultaneous and balanced satisfaction of personal, relational, and collective needs”. Koppe (2002, p. 375) also proposes a “framework for integrated wellbeing” across the “physical”, “mental” and “spiritual” dimensions, that accounts for “personal relationships”, the “environment” and “activities” within the broader life context. This is health understood as “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (Koppe, 2002, p. 375). Consequently given the intrinsic universal (Allison and Goethals, 2014; Campbell, 1949; Kinsella, 2013) and deeply timeless (Allison and Goethals, 2014) properties of heroic leadership, it is proposed that a sustainable heroic leadership wellbeing framework be read across the personal (e.g. physical, biological, mental, spiritual, phenomenological, activities), relational (personal relationships), collective (e.g. social, cultural, environmental, ecological), global and cosmological dimensions of experience². The inherent interdisciplinarity and complexity of heroism make this type of multilevel reading an imperative; the capacity for heroic resilience and fostering of heroic behaviour across these broad dimensions reflects a capability driven approach to sustainable development (Lessmann and Rauschmayer, 2013). This embraces, but transcends biopsychosocial readings of heroism – theorists such as McLaren (1998) and Ghaemi (2009) are placing an urgent call for a new model to be developed for evaluations of human wellbeing. Sustainable futures will require sustainable behaviours – the realisation of personal and collective heroic leadership will be instrumental to this enterprise.

In the next section, evidence for early stages of this vision is considered against the backdrop of a broader emergent social movement that calls for the fostering of heroic behaviour in classrooms and communities, and sustainable co-created futures.

Heroic leadership in the 21st century: an emerging social movement

The previous section outlined some preliminary theoretical connections between embodied heroic leadership and sustainable development, and their potential impacts for global wellbeing. But this extends beyond theory. There is a broader social movement emerging – heroism is not simply felt at the individual level, but at the collective. In the dawn of the 21st century heroism is morphing into a social phenomenon, with its use to inspire social action and cultivate prosocial, resilient and compassionate behaviour. This resurgence extends beyond academia, with actors specifically galvanising to advance heroic leadership and the hero’s journey as vehicles for enhanced wellbeing across the board. The emerging field of Heroism Science is part of this broader movement which aims to foster holistic wellbeing, promote heroic awareness and action, civic responsibility and engagement, and build resilient individuals and communities in the face of increasingly complex social landscapes (Allison, 2015). Real world social concerns such as school bullying, gang violence, workplace discrimination, bystanderism and debilitating diseases, have seen the cry for their resolution morph into the promise of heroism as a powerful tool for promoting individual and community resilience. The coalescence of the two concepts of heroism and leadership in

heroic leadership, and advancing research to gauge the consequences of this underexplored area for individual, relational and community wellbeing, is emerging as a powerful force.

This potentially seminal historical period is evidenced in the momentum building by heroic mobilisers across wide facets of society – from academics, to business leaders, educators, artists and so forth – in what can be dubbed an emerging grassroots 21st century multidisciplinary heroism movement. These various parts of the movement are joined in their common goal of instilling and bringing to the forefront of social consciousness the notion of the “banality” (Franco and Zimbardo, 2006) of everyday heroism. The movement comprises two distinct, yet interrelated and often overlapping communities: the heroism research, and heroism promotion and education communities. In this “new heroism”, Zimbardo and Ellsberg (2013) are uncovering the powerful effects group dynamics and social forces can have on fostering heroism. Franco *et al.* (2011, p. 101) have developed a multilevel operational definition of heroism “as a social activity”. The function of narrating hero stories as a primary social activity that affects us profoundly through our interactions with others, helps us grow as heroic actors and imparts knowledge, dates back to our earliest ancestors (Allison and Goethals, 2014). This process is facilitated now more than ever in history with the rise of social media, a space in which we can reflect on, debate and be inspired into action by heroic accounts across all spheres of human activity.

This movement also marks the onset of what can be dubbed a wave of ‘digital heroism’ or the infiltration of hero narratives in the Internet and blogosphere – these are forming the beginning stages of online perspectives of heroism and, more significantly, the historiography of the heroism movement, and heroism in time more broadly. The blogging and social mediascape of contemporary heroism, though still in its infant stages, is a key trend which is providing not only an interactive and creative space for both the lay and intellectual engagement with the concept of heroism, but a space for heroic mobilisers to communicate research and community developments in real-time, share ideas, collaborate, and generate momentum for this 21st century movement (Klisanin, 2015). The advent of this splinter in the study of heroism into the universe of mobile media and the Internet enhances our embodied engagement with the experience of heroism, as active participants in its consumption and reading and contributors to its knowledge-making process through blogs, social media and other locative, social and mobile platforms (Efthimiou, 2016).

A growing number of people from all walks of life are working towards actively raising heroic leadership in the everyday with the start-up of heroic projects and NFPs – this is a distinction between the widespread manifestations of the phenomenon of heroism in the community, media and so forth, and *heroism as an organised self-conscious social movement*. With the launch of the San Francisco based Heroic Imagination Project (HIP) in 2010, renowned psychologist Philip Zimbardo has spearheaded the dissemination of heroism research and a social intervention-based approach that “encourages everyone to imagine a new world where every school child and every adult is a hero in training” (Franco and Zimbardo, 2016, p. 516). The vast majority of the focus of this momentum is concentrating on arming educators and students with the tools to foster heroism in school settings, in order to combat bullying and bystanderism. Other foci centre on promoting courage in the workplace, and developing a deep understanding of the barriers and facilitators of everyday heroism for the development of effective teaching strategies at the local, and eventually, national and international level. Projects such as the Australian based Hero Construction Company (HCC) work closely with HIP, joined in their mission to ‘build’ heroes in schools and local communities. A number of other like-minded projects such as School Heroes Unite, Cyberhero League, and the MY HERO Project, reflect the deeply prosocial character of the

heroism movement in its mission to build sustainable and resilient communities, and caring and aware human beings and societies. This activist side is what makes the heroism movement a truly grassroots phenomenon – heroism activists are on the ground actively spreading the campaign of heroic wellbeing, often voluntarily and in their own time, out of a deep sense of compassion for their fellow human beings and, at times, frustration with global injustices and unsustainable practices.

What makes this movement particularly powerful is the participation of intellectuals to the cause of heroism education and dissemination, as well as the creative sharing of ideas, both online and offline. The movement is strengthened and informed by the innovative and wide-ranging rapidly emerging research on heroism, with some actors carrying dual research and activist roles. In 2013, the first multidisciplinary international conference on heroism, the Hero Round Table, was held in Flint, Michigan, which has been dubbed “Hero Town USA” since the conference’s inception (Langdon, 2014). On 21 January 2015 “representatives from Hero Town USA” gathered at “Lapeer High School to train about 40 LINKs Mentors on handling social situations” (Lapeercs, 2015). The Hero Round Table is a unique annual gathering of research experts, inspirational speakers, heroism movement and community leaders, and passionate everyday people desiring to make a positive change in themselves and their surroundings. The conference is aimed at inspiring and mobilising action through heroism education to help participants transform their communities. In November 2015, Hero Town Geelong (HTG) was launched in Victoria, Australia, coinciding with the first Australian held Hero Round Table conference. This has marked the onset of the sustained and organised delivery of heroism education and training to local primary and secondary schools, workplaces and community centres, with Geelong as the epicentre of this important initiative.

Despite its infancy, the heroism movement is already proving a potent force of collective action, in an age that increasingly demands creative solutions for both new and persistent social issues that are standing in the way of lasting progress and sustainable human and planetary futures. The next section outlines the proposed stages of a heroic model of human societies and ecosystems based on contemporary sustainability and embodied leadership literature, setting the stage for evaluating its applied impact in short-term and long-term settings and its implications for practice.

Toward a sustainable model for promoting embodied heroic leadership

Gorman *et al.* (2012, p. 88) outline a five-part framework for sustainability, in the context of “understanding and managing complex systems that couple human beings, nature and technology”; this involves “Superordinate goals”, “Moral imagination” and “Trading zones”, as precursors to “Adaptive management” and “Anticipatory governance”. Let us consider how this may be applied to the practice of *Heroic Leadership Embodiment and Sustainable Development* (HLESD).

1. *Heroic consciousness.* The first stage of a heroic leadership model of sustainable development involves raising awareness of the importance of heroism at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, community, national and international levels, and fostering a sense of unity as “global citizens and as global scientists” (Allison, 2015, p. 5). Developing superordinate goals in the enterprise of heroic leadership demands the raising of *heroic consciousness* – this results in human agents becoming conscious of “the urgent necessity of working together to solve problems” (Gorman *et al.*, 2012, p. 88) of a wide range, as they begin to conceive of each other as kin

heroic actors united in a common human journey. This growing sense of heroic solidarity is crucial to building a common purpose, a trait recognised as critical to the identity of the heroic leader and psychological wellbeing (Allison, 2014). Modine (2015, p. 2) emphasises its importance:

The development of purpose is central to wellbeing, leadership and sustainability. Individuals and organizations with a clear purpose are more likely to act in ways that are consistent and authentic. Those that lack a sense of purpose are likely to be unnecessarily influenced by external factors and ‘blown off course’. The development of individual and organizational purposes that contribute to a sustainable world are, therefore, crucial.

The development of heroic purpose is central to the development of a heroic consciousness and superordinate goals; initiatives such as the Joseph Campbell Foundation, the Hero’s Journey Foundation, and the Hero Training School have been set up to empower individuals and bring heroism into the modern day and, most importantly, the *everyday*³. Brown and Riedy (2006, p. 1) apply integral theory to sustainability communication as a “comprehensive overview of the systemic, cultural, psychological, behavioral and developmental dynamics that influence any sustainability initiative”. Further research that examines Brown and Riedy’s (2006) eight stages of consciousness development would be useful to enhance our understanding of the evolution of heroic consciousness, and HLESD overall, with a view to developing an improved appreciation of its ramifications for sustainability communication.

2. *Heroic imagination.* Igniting the heroic imagination is a key tenet of contemporary efforts to promote heroic leadership as an integral tool for improving the human condition. Gorman *et al.* (2012, p. 88) note that “Differences in values can prevent adoption of a superordinate goal. Moral imagination is the equivalent of interactional expertise concerning values; it involves being able to ‘step into the shoes’ of another”. There are immediate connections between the philosophy underpinning the moral imagination and the heroic imagination; extensive research has been conducted on moral heroism (for examples see: Eveleth, 2006; Kohen, 2010; Walker and Frimer, 2008). Franco and Zimbardo (2006, p. 31) originally introduced us to the importance, and depth, of the heroic imagination:

Heroism is an idea as old as humanity itself, and some of its subtleties are becoming lost or transmuted by popular culture. Being a hero is not simply being a good role model or a popular sports figure. We believe it has become necessary to revisit the historical meanings of [heroism], and to make it come alive in modern terms. By concentrating more on this high watermark of human behavior, it is possible to foster what we term “heroic imagination,” or the development of a personal heroic ideal. This heroic ideal can help guide a person’s behavior in times of trouble or moral uncertainty.

This is a vision of wide global citizenship engagement with the heroic imagination. The development of this skill in our 21st century societies as dynamic complex systems is well suited to an ecological model of sustainable leadership: “Strengthening the heroic imagination may help to make people more aware of the ethical tests embedded in complex situations, while allowing the individual to have

already considered, and to some degree transcended, the cost of their heroic action” (Franco and Zimbardo, 2006, p. 34). Franco and Zimbardo (2006, p. 34) caution that “As our society dumbs down heroism, we fail to foster heroic imagination” and consequently to recognise its vast potential as a mechanism for developing holistic wellbeing – a failure arguably of the ‘post-heroism’ leadership school of thought to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon and its enduring relevance to the modern age.

Many of the proposed strategies advocated by the authors (Franco and Zimbardo, 2006, p. 34) to foster the heroic imagination are grounded in embodied leadership and sustainable decision-making, including: exercising mindfulness in all situations in order to take appropriate action; maintaining awareness of “an extended time-horizon, not just the present moment”; and being conscious of the moral nature of our actions thus fostering the moral imagination proposed by Gorman *et al.* (2012). Ultimately, this is the definition of the human-hero actor and leader as a “positive deviant”, who “does the right thing for sustainability, *despite* being surrounded by the wrong institutional structures, the wrong processes and stubbornly uncooperative people” (Parkin, 2010, p. 1).

3. *Heroic zones.* This is the (re)formation and sustainment of physical, online and other spaces in which heroism can be enacted and experienced in a meaningful embodied way, or *ecosystems and ecologies of heroic leadership and heroic wellbeing*. These collaborative spaces and places – for example, Hero Round Table conferences, workplaces, schools and community halls in which heroism training and education is delivered – will be material evidence of the embodied experience of heroism that link heroic agents for the “exchanging [of] ideas, resources, and solutions across different communities and interests” (Gorman *et al.*, 2012, p. 88). It should be noted that these zones refer to creating both material (Ropo *et al.*, 2013) and mental (Karssiens *et al.*, 2014) spaces in which embodied heroic leadership and experience is felt and enacted. Ropo *et al.* (2013, pp. 378, 391) consider how “spaces and places construct and perform leadership”, concluding that “the material places and subjectively experienced spaces construct ways of conceiving leadership and, in fact, perform leadership. From the spatial perspective, leadership is truly an embodied phenomenon”. In these embodied heroic zones, actors *perform* heroic leadership as “bodies move and gesture to one another by inviting and responding to each other in open co-creative spaces” (Bathurst and Cain, 2013, p. 358). This is heroic leadership as “socially constructed, emerging and as meaning making” (Ropo *et al.*, 2013, p. 378).

Developing the preceding heroic leadership capabilities will permit progression into the next phases of sustainable heroic development:

4. *Adaptive management.* Gorman *et al.* (2012, p. 88) note: “This strategy involves treating management interventions like hypotheses, subjecting them to empirical tests, and revising the strategy based on the results ... hypotheses should be constructed not only about environmental impacts, but also about effects on stakeholders”. Adaptive management of the heroism promotion and education movement will require research and community strategies that promote heroic leadership to be flexible, and always dynamically engaged with the needs of contemporary societies whilst maintaining a futures oriented approach. This will include adapting to the formation of new systems, agendas, groupings and

technologies. Embracing change and fluidity within complex systems and being willing to accept personal, intellectual and, possibly physical, risk as part of this endeavour will be important.

The initial phases of testing HIP methods underway in Australia, for example, is an indication of this style of adaptive management – HTG is working closely with researchers at Deakin University, Geelong for the empirical evaluation of HIP training and interventions in schools. This includes a series of pre-tests (including the Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory amongst others) and post-intervention tests. This is an important step to ensuring quality control in program delivery. HTG is investigating relationships between HIP intervention and socialisation (primary, secondary and tertiary), educational outcomes, resilience in crisis supporters, youth recidivism, and long-term unemployed youth re-engagement with their community. Finally, cultural influences are being considered through extensive testing with HTG and HIP’s partner organisations in Budapest, Bali and the United States (S. Gray, President, HTG Inc., email communication, November 29, 2015).

5. *Anticipatory governance.* This phase is especially important if heroic leadership is to be sustainable; for Gorman *et al.* (2012, p. 88):

Global problems and opportunities will require adding more anticipatory, adaptive capability to governance mechanisms, linking decision makers with other stakeholders. These exchanges will have to be motivated by a superordinate goal so urgent that governance structures can be transformed, if necessary.

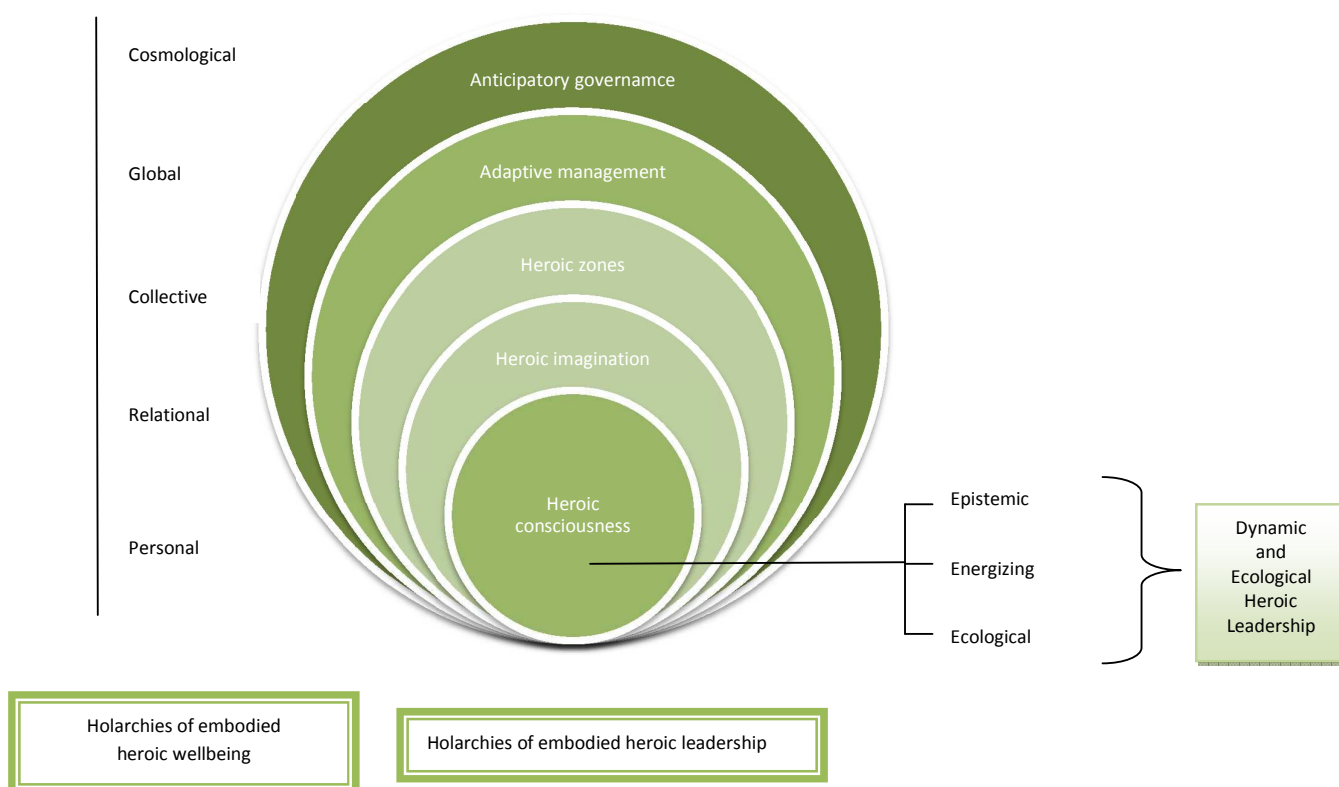
This is heroism research and advocacy effecting policy and social change at the political, structural and governmental level, as part of a broader interlinked network of heroic leaderful-minded organisations and non-profits whose chief goal is heroism promotion and education. The adoption of consulting roles by both heroism science researchers, and heroism promoters and educators in schools, NFPs, businesses, governments and so forth, to facilitate the widespread and organised infiltration of heroism training at the management and governance stages, will be crucial.

Lessmann and Rauschmayer (2013, p. 95) argue that alleviating “the cognitive and moral burden on individuals” implicated in the demand “to consciously choose sustainable actions” – which they paradoxically deem to be unrealistically “heroic” – is essential for sustainable development. Although an embodied heroic self-leadership model of wellbeing is proposed to ameliorate this burden with its inherent energizing, epistemic and ecological functions and emergent property, “concentrating on the natural environment and ... introducing collective institutions” (Lessmann and Rauschmayer, 2013, p. 95) will be essential to effective anticipatory governance in sustainable heroic leadership. This capabilities based approach complements an ecologically informed model of heroic behaviour. It integrates and accommodates an improved understanding of various essential factors, such as the evolution of complex systems and their interactions, “the development of natural systems with human interferences”, “the role of collective-level heuristics in complex decision making and in relation to ethical

individualism”, “dynamics” and “multidimensionality” (Lessmann and Rauschmayer, 2013, p. 110).

This model of sustainable heroic leadership is holarchical – each stage of development and fostering of heroic capabilities is a self-sustaining complex system and hero’s journey unto itself. It is a simultaneous representation of a single stage and the broader five-stage structure in which it is embedded. Each stage is necessary to progress onto the next, but sustains and reflects the overarching path of heroic leadership as a whole. This model can be adopted at the personal, relational, collective, global or cosmological levels of heroic leadership and heroic wellbeing⁴. As Waltner-Toews (2001, pp. 20-21) asserts, we “define health at our boundaries – as individuals, communities, nations and globally – and we achieve health by communicating and negotiating across our boundaries. Think ecosystemically, act holarchically, should be the rallying cry of health workers around the world”. The advancing scale to which heroic leadership is represented in this model, from the personal to the cosmological, mirrors Campbell’s (1949) hero’s journey model – from the individual, localised and very personal beginnings of a journey, to the sharing of the hero’s gift with the world, helping to shape and change its policies, governments and institutions at the social, collective and global levels, and ultimately its evolutionary history and origins at the cosmological.

Figure 1: Heroic Leadership Embodiment and Sustainable Development (HLESD): An Ecosystem Model of Wellbeing



Adapted from Gorman *et al.* (2012); and Allison and Goethals (2014)

A case study of HLESD is carried out below on two non-profit organisations dedicated to fostering everyday heroism: the Hero Construction Company (HCC) and the Heroic Imagination Project (HIP).

A case study of sustainable action and heroic leadership embodiment: the Hero Construction Company and the Heroic Imagination Project

Founded by Australian youth educator Matt Langdon in 2006, HCC⁵ is a non-profit, as of April 2015, dedicated to heroism promotion and education in schools. It is an innovative program that helps combat bullying and anti-social behaviour, and fosters moral responsibility, greater academic and social engagement, and overall wellbeing in school communities. HCC's first aim is to raise awareness of the potency of the hero's journey as a tool for individual and community empowerment, thereby instilling heroic consciousness in its participants and the wider community. HCC is currently developing the world's first comprehensive heroism training curriculum which will be available free online (Langdon, 2015). The program "uses inspiring narratives about heroes to promote heroic (rather than condemning bullying) behavior ... [and] accounts of heroes such as Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, Daniel Ellsberg, and Irena Sendler to educate and inspire others toward ... positive change" (Kinsella *et al.*, 2015, p. 2). This is a direct application of the extensive literature documenting the use of the hero's journey as an effective pedagogical and therapeutic tool for fostering personal and social wellbeing. This is achieved through a range of mediums, namely media dissemination (YouTube, TedX talks), social media (Twitter, Facebook), websites, and face-to-face presentations. The Hero Round Table⁶, the world's first conference for heroism promoters and educators established in 2013, is a further avenue for dissemination of this work. The mission of HCC is to create heroes in schools from the ground up. It is distinct from anti-bullying approaches, in its positive pro-hero driving premise; this is the idea of building heroes and heroic communities that care for others, our society and the ecosphere, in action.

In this initial stage, heroic consciousness is fostered via the development of tools based on the hero's journey model; primary school and high school children are taught about exemplary historical and contemporary real and fictional heroes. The material which involves a range of visual mediums as well as oral and written activities, aims for inclusive, engaging and effective discussion with students and teachers. The larger assembly gathering is a story-based presentation which provides students with the inspiration to be heroes and leaves teachers with the follow-up tools to facilitate the change (Langdon, 2015). Resources such as the "Hero Deck", a card game with heroes that engages students in a playful and educational manner, is a practice of effective mindful embodied play. The HCC format is sustainable and ecological in its scope by embracing multiple perspectives (Waltner-Toews, 2001); catering to multiple learning styles is a vital aspect of the HCC program (Langdon, 2015). The aim of HCC workshops is to empower students to make better choices for themselves and others. The hero stories used in the educational material provide knowledge and developmental stages rooted in the wisdom traditions and great mythologies; Allison (2015, p. 3) notes that "Rites of passage play a central role in preparing people to become emotionally, spiritually, and behaviorally ready for a heroic life ... Sadly, initiation rituals, so crucial for healthy human development, are largely absent in most modern societies". In simple terms, students become aware of the timeless hero's journey, its continued relevance to their world, and more conscious of their commonalities rather than their differences of race, class, appearance, peer circles and so forth, as they begin to develop superordinate goals or a shared human heritage and heroic sensibility.

Illes (2015, p. 7) describes how Leadership Embodiment “focuses on changing habitual, less conscious behaviour and developing more skilful responses in challenging and stressful situations”. HCC’s story-based material is strategically developed with the specific aim to change automatic reactive behaviours of students and the broader school community, and to develop more effective and mindful responses to confronting issues such as bullying. The foundation of the workshops and the heroic mindset fostered by this hero’s journey based training seeks to develop three competencies displayed by significant leaders:

1 Inclusiveness: they are able to expand their presence and ‘embrace’ even large audiences by creating a “we are all in this together” feeling. 2 Centred Listening: they listen with their whole being, hear all what is being said without taking the message personally. 3 Speaking Up: they are able to speak their truth (even when it is not a popular view) with clarity and precision without becoming aggressive or collapsing. (Palmer, 2013; as cited in Illes, 2015, p. 7)

The heroic training material can support the school community “to create space in their fixed patterns of thinking and acting. Creating such space generates the possibility of experiencing meaningfulness and satisfaction at work [and school] and producing innovative results” (Karssiens *et al.*, 2014, p. 231).

The second stage of sustainable development, as presented earlier, involves fostering the heroic and moral imagination. HCC works closely with non-profit organization HIP. HIP “is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that teaches people how to take effective action in challenging situations”. According to the website, HIP “is a research-based organization, which provides knowledge, tools, strategies, and exercises to individuals and groups to help them to overcome the social and psychological forces that can keep people from taking effective action at crucial moments in their lives”. This novel enterprise is based on embodied mindful practices and lived experience; it encourages considered and effective heroic action and combating social apathy in a range of settings by providing “meaningful insights and tools that individuals can use in their everyday lives to transform negative situations and create positive change”⁷. This approach is centred on “learning how to wisely and effectively stand up, speak out, and take heroic action against injustice of all kinds – bullying, prejudice, unjust authority, and apathy of passive bystanders in emergencies” (Franco and Zimbardo, 2016, p. 516).

In the third stage, HCC and HIP seek to create ‘heroic zones’, or communities and ecosystems of heroism, with the aim that students and other individuals have the confidence to exercise heroic leadership to speak out against injustice, and to dream about and actively work towards creating a better world. The aim is for the classroom, the assembly hall, the playground, the home, and other material places to be transformed into heroic zones. The annual Hero Round Table conference is a further such space; it is an invaluable networking opportunity for heroism promoters and educators and researchers to connect with each other, and interested members of the public to become educated and receive the skill set to bring back to their local communities and effect positive change. It is in these spaces that heroic action and leadership is demonstrated as embodied skill acquisition. The thesis is that if we are developmentally equipped to pursue a hero’s journey, as Allison and Goethals (2014) propose, then the HCC and HIP sustainable model of heroic behaviour is giving us the tools to reconnect with this innate wiring and our in-built capacity for heroic leadership, fostering personal and community heroic wellbeing in the process.

Some psychological research documents the effectiveness of the HCC programme as a sustainable model for wellbeing (Allison, 2014; Heiner, 2014; Kinsella *et al.*, 2015; Spurlin, 2015). A qualitative evaluation of a HCC presentation by Spurlin (2015, p. 3) reported enduring effects and preliminary indications of success of the programme. Part of this success is attributed to the coalescence of HCC's philosophy with increased momentum in positive psychology focussing on concepts such as "subjective well-being" (Spurlin, 2015, p. 6). In a doctoral study using a "Courage Measure for Children (CM-C)" instrument, Heiner (2014, p. i) measured the effectiveness of HCC's program on "62 fourth- and fifth-grade students from Morrish Elementary School in Swartz Creek, Michigan". The results of the study demonstrated "a significant increase in the students' levels of courage for the first two time periods" providing early "empirical evidence that exposure to a program about heroism can lead to an increase in the internal feelings of courage in children" (Heiner, 2014, pp. i-ii). Heiner (2014, p. 37) suggests that the continued implementation of such programs in schools is "essential to a child's well-being":

These findings provide clinicians with a unique method to approach working with children suffering from issues such as depression or anxiety, teachers and school psychologists an avenue to help students who are struggling socially, and caregivers a way to help strengthen their children's feelings of moral courage. (Heiner, 2014, p. ii).

The approach taken in this case study is not an egocentric or 'great man' approach to leadership. The heroic zones aim to give students the tools to self-motivate, self-inspire, and self-propel toward effective prosocial action – this is the essence of emergent, distributed self-leadership and "collective learning" (Lämsä, 2010, p. 140). It is a ground-up approach to fostering heroic leadership that is deeply "embodied and embedded" (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008, p. 74) in the world around us, our actions and the ecosphere. This is the effecting of positive social change by leading others to enable them to lead themselves, and eventually others. As these zones and "chemistries of strengths" (Cooperrider, 2011) multiply, they could become a growing network and web of ecosystems of everyday self-energizing and self-leading heroes or heroic leaderships.

By effectively carrying out the first three stages of a sustainable model of heroic wellbeing, HCC and HIP are now in the fourth stage of their evolution. Demonstrating adaptive management, the HCC curriculum actively works with schools to adapt its programs (or create new ones) to meet a school's goals. Those goals may be curricular, behavioral, character-based, or something else; examples of this adaptive management include applying the content to a number of areas, such as aligning with the International Baccalaureate Learner Profile, and a multiple-visit program aimed at creating a student-led cultural change (Langdon, 2015). Effective management at this level could allow HCC and HIP to advance into the fifth part of Gorman's (2012) sustainable development model, by establishing a clear structure and governance, and effect change at the policy level.

HCC and HIP may become an example of emergent HLE in action, as a sustainable paradigm for fostering distributed and participatory heroic leadership in individuals and communities alike. For heroic approaches to be more widely applied for children's development will require more evaluation, including attention to those conditions where it might not work as intended. As children are the intended beneficiaries, it is also important that any potential side effects on some types of children are considered, so that the approach can be scaled as responsibly as possible. The effects of the heroic development approach within other organisational settings also invites more research. In particular, it will be useful to explore

how a philosophy of heroism could enable senior managers to practice sustainability leadership.

Sustainable futures: leading heroic wellbeing into the 21st century and beyond

As heroism science research advances alongside leadership and embodiment theory, and presents evidence for the significance of heroism for wellbeing and sustainability, the potency of heroic leadership as an integrative concept can be considered. There is perhaps no more urgent time for this welcome union than the present, in “a troubled world thirsty for heroes” (Allison, 2015, p. 1). HLESD is not a “privileged” and “ego-centric” (Davis, 2010, pp. 45, 56) concept of heroic leadership – it is one centred in a deep sense of concern and urgency for the human condition, interconnectedness, and the desire for the emergence of a “planetary consciousness” (Klisanin, 2003).

Though it is offered here in a bold manner, HLESD, and any model, will not be able to fully describe the intricacy of complex systems. Waltner-Toews (2001, pp. 10, 30) notes that “Some authors ... argue that the interactions between people and ecosystems reflect an ‘emergent complexity’, which cannot be captured by even our most sophisticated complex systems models”. Nonetheless, developing such frameworks is a necessary endeavour that may serve as a useful guide as we take the challenging road to sustainable development. An embodied systems approach to wellbeing provides further impetus against the notion of the ‘fixed mind’, pushing the idea of self-leadership as perpetual lifespan growth across all facets. The hero’s journey describes a primordial process of personal, social and cosmological evolution, and gaining of wisdom. Denying its relevance, may stunt our biopsychosocial growth and resilience, and blind us to the forces that bind us. As heroic agents, we can become active participants in knowledge production, so vital to sustainable heroic futures in their epistemic basis, and embodied leadership – the heroic “leader will be the embodiment of ideas, a most powerful force” (Jankelson, 2010, p. 14). Innovative futures will require innovative language and vocabularies to engender sustainable communication; aside from social capital, economic capital, intellectual capital and spiritual capital, we may begin to speak of “wellbeing capital” (Wassell, 2015, p. 1), “leadership capital” (Bickel, 2007; Lynn, 2001) and, perhaps, *heroic capital*. Their accumulation will be integral to sustainable development, where heroic leadership has become a paradigm of sustainable social behaviour.

Ultimately, any discussions on developing an innovative model of heroic behaviour based on the mutual strengths of leadership, embodiment, heroism and sustainability *must* be applied. The value of heroism to contemporary societies, and efforts to promote and galvanise heroic leadership in everyday communities, will be largely unrealised and ineffective unless their relevance to pressing personal and social issues is clearly explored, tested and demonstrated. Examples of such issues in which a model of heroic leadership may be introduced and offer significant benefits if implemented appropriately – and indeed already is in some cases as we have seen – include, but are not limited to: mental illness; addiction and substance abuse; treatments for debilitating diseases; strengthening developing nations; addressing failing economies crippled by debt and developing a long-term sustainable economic model; unemployment; homelessness; social violence; LGBT issues; Indigenous reconciliation; and cyber-bullying. The use of heroic leadership as a wellbeing tool can be applied across a wide range of settings, and its development be made in consultation with the broadest group of professionals, and those most affected.

Developing these synergies and sophisticated frameworks is an important challenge for researchers and practitioners. Aside from hard work, it will require coming to full collective consciousness of a heroic sense that we have a duty to ourselves to perceive our lives as living a calling. This is a critical junction in the history of humanity on its hero's journey to sustainable development; as Ferdig (2007, p. 34) stresses, "We can no longer claim ignorance, or innocence. None of us stands outside of the circle of responsibility". *Leading a heroic life*, is leading a *healthy* life, in every sense of the word. Its impacts have nothing to do with the grandiose mythical connotations of the ancient past – they are deeply grounded in everyday lived experience, our bodies, our intimate relationships, our fears, addictions, hopes and dreams, our planet, environment and the universe. Failure to lead a heroic mindful embodied existence may mean we bear the consequences of our inaction and suffer an unsustainable self-fulfilling prophecy; as Albert Einstein famously stated, "The world is a dangerous place to live. Not because of the people who are evil; but because of the people who don't do anything about it". Might we all be called upon to be heroic sustainable leaders and active co-creators of our shared sustainable futures?

¹ See Figure 1.

² See Figure 1.

³ For a list of contemporary heroism projects and non-profits see:

<https://heroismscience.wordpress.com/resources/projects-and-non-profits/>

⁴ See Figure 1.

⁵ See <http://www.heroconstruction.org/>

⁶ See <http://www.heroroundtable.com/>

⁷ See <http://heroicimagination.org/>

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Article Title Page

Heroic ecologies: embodied heroic leadership and sustainable futures

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Structured Abstract:

Purpose: This paper seeks to demonstrate heroism as an embodied system of leadership and wellbeing. Heroic leadership is presented as a baseline for sustainable futures and global health.

Design/methodology/approach: This paper presents an embodied reading of heroic leadership and its sustainable development across five stages. It outlines its core functions, its grounding in self-leadership through physical and mental trauma, and its holistic benefits, resulting in the development of the *Heroic Leadership Embodiment and Sustainable Development* (HLESD) model. The efficacy of HLESD is discussed with a case study of heroism promotion and education: the Hero Construction Company and the Heroic Imagination Project.

Findings: Heroic leadership is reported as an emergent, dynamic and distributed form of sustainable development.

Research implications: This paper demonstrates the critical connections between heroism, sustainability, embodied leadership and wellbeing, and how they stand to benefit each other, individuals and communities at large.

Social implications: The implementation of HLESD in educational, counselling, activism and broader contexts in consultation with a wide range of professionals stands to offer significant benefits to pedagogies, clinical practice, holistic therapies and 21st century societies, at both the community and policy level.

Originality/value: The emerging field of heroism science and the utilisation of heroic leadership as an interdisciplinary tool is a novel approach to wellbeing, which holds immense potential for the imagining and fostering of sustainable personal and collective futures.

Keywords:

Wellbeing, Heroic leadership, Hero's journey, Sustainability, Ecosystems, Heroic Leadership Dynamic, Embodied leadership, Heroism science

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