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The Influence of Heroic Leadership on Career Identity and Graduate Employability: A Transdisciplinary Perspective

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Introduction

In terms of scholarly inquiry, the exploration of heroism within the context of career development is relatively new. Graduate employability is an important area of research, especially in an increasingly unstable and precarious job market (Du Toit & Coetzee, 2012). Financial stability, job security and career progression are primary concerns for most aspiring and practicing workers. It is becoming evident that employability is a developmental process, requiring leadership and resilience to craft a career. Whilst much career development and employability research has focused on graduate destinations and the development of requisite skills and knowledge, the factors that energize a graduate to *persist* remain an important and under-studied area of employability research.

We have drawn on data from the Creative Workforce Initiative (CWI), an Australian Research Council (ARC) employability project exploring career attitudes and expectations of creative industries students and practitioners, to develop a framework informed by emerging research on heroism, including:

- Perth and the Netherlands creative industries studies.
- New ARC (Making music work).
- Industry research.
- Educational research: preparing students to negotiate complex careers.

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Our thesis is that heroic leadership will provide a valuable new framework for developing an understanding about what causes people to persevere (Efthimiou, Bennett & Allison, 2016).

Core themes of our framework include:

- career and graduate employability as a hero's journey or journey metaphor
- heroic leadership as an epistemic, energizing and ecological skillset for career growth
- the heroic imagination
- self-authorship, and
- cognitive career development

as important ingredients to sustaining lifelong career resilience (Efthimiou, Bennett & Allison, 2016).

Outline of Emerging Research

The Hero's Journey and Career Identity. Researchers are beginning to assess modern career experiences as heroic experiences. Dik, Shimizu & O'Connor (in press) conclude that "perhaps anyone can come to express heroic traits and engage in heroic acts within their chosen profession, even if quietly, in largely unsung ways." The value of the hero's journey (Campbell, 1949) and its application to career identity development lies in the recognition of the career journey as a lifelong fluid process of growth and transformation.

Heroic Leadership Dynamic (HLD). Allison and Goethals (2014, p. 169) argue that "although not all leaders are heroes, all heroes are leaders." Heroic leadership is a dynamic and temporal process that incorporates "various mechanisms underlying personal growth and developmental health", "in which the psychology of heroism unfolds over time" (Allison & Goethals, 2014, pp. 177, 180).

Heroism leadership is said to have 3 functions:

Epistemic: the knowledge and wisdom imparted by hero stories. Hero stories reveal deep truths, paradox and develop emotional intelligence, resulting in wisdom gaining (Allison & Goethals, 2014).

Energizing: the ways that hero stories inspire us and promote personal growth. Hero stories heal our psychic wounds and inspire us to action (Allison & Goethals, 2014).

Ecological: this function recognizes the individual as embedded within larger environmental structures in which the agent and environment are mutually informed. It recognizes that the complex familial, social, intrapersonal, interpersonal and other relationships dynamically regulate the opportunities for trauma and growth, crisis and order to achieve whole-of-life balance. Students need to know the context in which they will work in as graduates; they need to understand community and culture, and become social citizens. They need to understand the competition and the environment, not just in the workplace, but in the locale in which they will be working. This aspect of heroic leadership is crucial for every graduate, particularly in more precarious positions where people are working in isolation and are not part of structured workplaces. (Efthimiou, in press).

The Heroic Imagination

The “heroic imagination” is an emerging term proposed by Franco and Zimbardo (2006) denoting “the development of a personal heroic ideal. This heroic ideal can help guide a person’s behavior in times of trouble or moral uncertainty” (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006, p. 31). This shows the importance of employing a future-oriented creative imagination of what might yet be in respect of personal career growth, while at the same time retaining a self-reflective mindset of one’s past and present.

Critical Connections Between Heroic Leadership and Employability

We have developed an integrative heroic leadership framework of career identity across ten key areas that are central to the hero’s journey, heroic leadership and the heroic imagination (Efthimiou, Bennett & Allison, 2016) (Figure 1):

1. adventure and travel,
2. inspiration,
3. paradox,
4. the transrational,
5. purpose and meaning,
6. metaphor,
7. intelligence,
8. creativity and imagination,
9. story, and
10. lifelong learning.



Figure 1: 10 Key Areas of Heroic Leadership Activity in Career Identity

Theme 1: Adventure and Travel

Adventure is a key aspect of hero stories and heroic leadership. Franco and Zimbardo (2006) argue that one of the fundamental characteristics of everyday heroism is the involvement of “some type of *quest*”. A recent study (Bennett, 2010) affirmed the prevalence of migration patterns and overseas pilgrimages in the creative career journey, and the dramatic impact they can have on both the artist and local and national creative capital.

Theme 2: Inspiration

Being inspired, and the ability to in turn inspire others, is a crucial property of heroic leadership. Allison and Goethals (2011) found that the characteristic of being *inspirational* was one of their Great Eight traits of heroes. ‘Career’ choice (versus degree choice) appears to be more intrinsically motivated; this type of choice appears later in life in graduates following age and experience, and learning from past failures. Inspiring people, environments and transformative experiences is key to this more mature attitude.

Theme 3: Paradox

The most notable paradox in student data especially, is *identify confusion and foreclosed identity*. This means that there is a significant disparity between objective – ‘what I seem to be doing’ and how other people see us – and subjective – ‘how I feel’ and what I do – identity. Paradox is a central function of heroic leadership. Allison and Goethals (2014, p. 172) state that: “Hero stories teach us that only by confronting our dragons can we sow the seeds of our redemption.” Developing heroic leadership in making career choices is set to be a beneficial skill for managing the inherent paradoxes of a lifelong career journey.

Theme 4: The Transrational

Allison and Goethals (2014, p. 170) argue that hero stories “reveal truths and life patterns that our limited minds have trouble understanding using our best logic or rational thought.” Developing heroic leadership as part of a healthy career identity involves the appreciation of the importance of complex life themes that defy logic and have a deeply spiritual and phenomenological significance.

Recent research affirms that transrational themes appear prominently in creative practice. Some examples from student and educator musician drawings include: “Time,

suffering and joy”, “[A musician] listens with the heart”, “Expressing different dimensions and forms of being”, and “A musician is someone that besides having theoretic knowledge is also worried about the way in which he can touch people [with his music]”. The symbol of a heart or multiple hearts and the word “love” is present in visual representations and descriptions of the role of a musician also feature prominently (Bennett, 2015, pp. 8, 10, 13).

Theme 5: Purpose and Meaning

Purpose is crucial to both the development of a healthy career and a heroic profile. Dik et al. (in press, pp. 9, 37) state: “A sense of calling overlaps conceptually with heroism, and its three dimensions—transcendent summons, an alignment of one’s work activity with a broader sense of purpose in life, and prosocial or other-oriented motives and goals.”

Igou, Coughlan, van Tilburg, Kinsella and Ritchie (2016, p. 2) propose that “boredom, a state associated with a sense of meaninglessness, leads to search for meaning in life, which in turn elevates the evaluation of heroes, given that heroes function, in part, as source of meaning in life”. This supports that heroic leadership offsets the negative effects of boredom and laziness, which comes up in student data from the employability projects.

Theme 6: Metaphor

Metaphor reveals the significance of the epistemic function of metaphor in heroic leadership: “heroic narratives and their meaningful symbols serve as metaphors for easing our understanding of complex, mysterious phenomena” (Allison & Goethals, 2014, p. 171). Metaphor is increasingly recognized as a powerful tool, with scholars and practitioners across disciplines borrowing the metaphor to promote wellbeing, and a stronger career identity.

The use of metaphor is strongly present in the CWI and other Australian employability project data. Some of the most common and persistent motifs include: ladders (as a metaphor for climbing or falling down), trees (often aligned with a career progression, at times drawn with a ladder), heads (indicating the complex thought required to imagine and realize career goals), juggling (as a metaphor for managing multiple responsibilities), building (as a metaphor for creating a career), and boxes or squares (as a metaphor for thinking outside the box). These metaphors underscore the transformative nature of the hero’s journey during the process of developing a career identity.

Theme 7: Intelligence

An important consequence of the epistemic function of heroic leadership and the accumulation of wisdom is the development of emotional intelligence (Allison & Goethals, 2014). Researchers are increasingly recognizing the presence of multiple types of intelligences (Gardner, 1983). The third ecological function of heroic leadership, for example, implicates the development of physical and social intelligence as a concomitant benefit (Efthimiou, in press).

Data gathered from the CWI studies show the importance of developing various types of intelligences, including: the accumulation of technical and non-technical skills, emotional and social intelligence, physical intelligence (e.g. in promoting greater bodily and movement awareness, including self-care), gendered intelligence (which is of particular importance for students entering highly gendered professions such as engineering), and workplace culture intelligence. The importance of developing emotional and social intelligence in workplace culture is heightened in gendered professions and for students from equity groups: for example, people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and those with a mental or physical disadvantage.

Theme 8: Creativity and Imagination

This work reveals the *career heroic imagination* to be a core aspect of career development as a lifelong journey metaphor, as the focus shifts to whole person identity wellbeing. Creativity is certainly not essential per se for heroic leadership. However, *creative thinking* and *problem solving* are essential for a lifelong heroic mindset, or the notion of the ‘entrepreneurial spirit’ (Schein, 1990). The increasingly precarious, unstable and complex 21st century job market makes this type of creative mindset essential – graduates must be able to self-lead and self-manage their careers, as well as actively and strategically create diverse and meaningful opportunities for themselves.

Theme 9: Story

Story is as essential to career identity as it is to leadership, and wellbeing. Story is an integral part of data collected from creative practitioners. A central aim of the creative workforce survey was to gather stories about the impact and value of the arts within the community, and about the wide-ranging skills, knowledge and activities of artists. One of the

core outcomes of the practitioner survey results was the strong need of respondents to vocalise their stories of adversity, pain and heroic resilience in their professional creative practice journeys, and their depth of diversity. These stories reveal the psychological, spiritual, social and physical resilience that is essential to employability success. They show a degree of risk present in creative practitioners' employability hero journeys and its transformative function, and the potential for growth that sharing these stories can have and the sense of community they build.

Theme 10: Lifelong Learning

Ongoing professional and personal development is essential to a healthy workforce and career development (Watson, 2009). Knowledge and wisdom across the lifespan is central to the epistemic function of heroic leadership, as it is to the energizing by inspiring us to persevere. Return to study throughout one's career, not simply for career advancement and monetary benefits, but out of intrinsic motivation and a genuine desire to learn is representative of the epistemic value of heroic leadership.

Visual of Theoretical Model: Rationale

A visual model of a heroically led career identity was developed across these ten core themes (Figure 2). This model is:

- cyclical (as is representative of the hero's journey). This denotes the presence of one or more successive, and often overlapping hero journeys;
- dynamic and temporal (in accordance with heroic leadership); and
- *spiral* as a fundamentally *transformative* model (see Wade, 1999).

In our model career identity is always unfolding, in flux, and dynamically engaged with our past, present and future possible career selves.

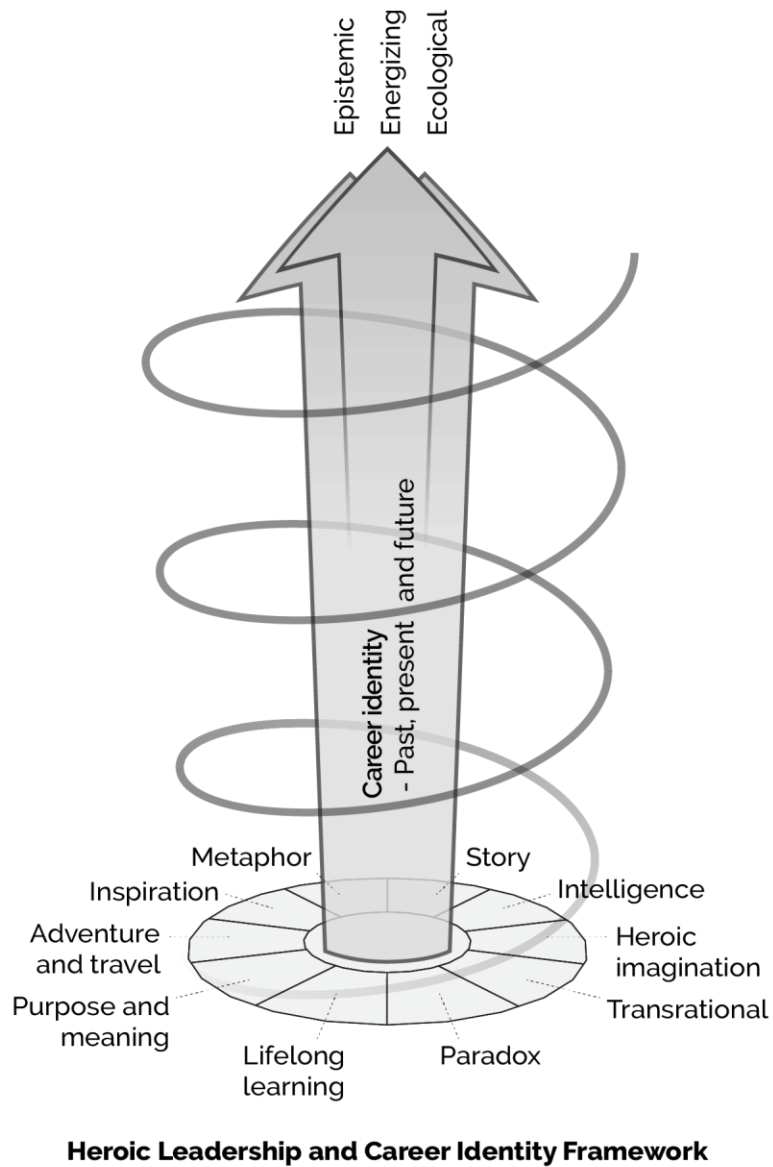


Figure 2: A Visual Representation of the Dynamic and Evolving Nature of Career Identity Development across the Lifespan in Relation to Heroic Leadership

Future Directions

Moving forward we need a transdisciplinary approach to understanding career identity formation.

A Biopsychosocial Model for Career Identity and Heroic Leadership

One of the most influential models of illness and wellbeing is the “biopsychosocial model” developed by psychiatrist George Engel (1977). Engel (1977) maintained that “clinicians must attend simultaneously to the biological, psychological, and social dimensions of illness.” This powerful model can and should be applied to wellbeing, and career identity given the impact it has on all facets of our lives.

The Benefits of Heroism and Heroic Leadership for Life and Career Identity

Heroism is emerging as an important precursor to wellbeing. For Kinsella, Ritchie and Igou (2015, p. 1), the results of a series of studies clearly demonstrate the social, psychological and physical benefits of heroic leadership: “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).

Key research questions moving forward:

- Can heroic leadership training raise students and practitioners career resilience, student engagement and satisfaction, and graduate employability?
- Can a heroically informed and led career path hold a protective function against the uncertainty of the 21st century job market, making the student, trainee and graduate mentally, physically, socially and morally career ready?

Developing workshops, training programs, and integrating heroic leadership training as part of higher education, and the undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum to qualitatively and quantitatively assess the impact of the framework, the relationship between resilience and heroism, stress management, and subjective wellbeing, and progressively testing its effectiveness across various cohorts and through a range of mixed and innovative methods will be important moving forward.

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