Empathy and Leadership

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Abstract
Empathy helps explain why heroes take risks on behalf of others and make personal sacrifices for people and causes that they believe in. The chapter relates the literature on heroes and empathy to the research on charismatic leadership, and maintains that empathy and heroic behavior are key components of charismatic leadership. Although heroic empathy can be seen as a characteristic of heroic individuals, this chapter also examines heroic empathy from a distributed cognition perspective that positions heroic leaders in the larger context of the organization and in the system in which the organization resides. By using a distributed cognition approach, we can better understand the dynamic socio-cognitive properties of complex organizations, and explain the nature and function of heroes in organizations.

Key words: heroic, leaders, empathy, altruism, distributed cognition, socio-cognitive, mental models

Heroic Empathy: The Heart of Leadership

What compels people to risk their lives for complete strangers, not just once but many times over? Perhaps it is heroic empathy, a compassionate identification with others combined with a bias towards action. U.S. Coast Guard rescuers provide an ideal example of this. Every year they save 3000 lives, often putting their own lives in danger while doing so (Phillips & Loy, 2003). For example, Patrick was fresh out of his aviation survival technician training program when he demonstrated heroic empathy (case example based on Humphrey, 2013; and Phillips & Loy, 2003). A fishing boat had sent an emergency call to his base in Kodiak, Alaska. One of the boat’s crew members had been badly injured, his arm almost cut off. Without a quick rescue, the crewman would die. To complicate matters, it was night time, and the raging snow storm meant visibility would be especially poor. The 25 foot waves would make landing on the boat difficult and dangerous. Undeterred, Patrick let himself be lowered from the helicopter towards the boat. A huge wave hit the fishing boat, causing a steel girder to smack into Patrick. Back on the helicopter, the flight attendant thought that the girder might
have killed or seriously injured Patrick, so he quickly hoisted him back up. Patrick was aching but avowed himself fit for duty.

The pilot wondered if the bad conditions meant the rescue should be called off. The decision was Patrick’s, and he knew that calling off the rescue would mean the injured fisherman would die. Patrick decided to try again, this time with a new plan. Instead of dropping straight into the boat, Patrick had the helicopter swing him along the waterline towards the side of the boat. This meant that Patrick would be swamped with freezing cold seawater during the big waves, but the plan worked and Patrick was able to board the boat and rescue the fisherman. The fisherman lived as a result of Patrick’s bravery and competence.

The above case illustrates three of the defining characteristics of heroes. According to Goethals and Allison (2012), heroes are courageous, competent, and virtuous. This matches well with the seven characteristics that the U.S. Coast Guard looks for in recruits: (1) intelligence, (2) high energy, (3) self-confidence, (4) continual learning, (5) compassion, (6) courage with a bias toward action, and (7) character (Phillips & Loy, 2003). Obviously characteristic 6, courage with a bias toward action, matches with being courageous. Characteristics 1-4 match with competence, and compassion and character match with virtue.

It is this special combination of courage, competence, and virtue that separates heroes from others. Courage, like that shown by Patrick in the U.S. Coast Guard case, is characteristic of many types of heroes, and certainly many people would not be brave enough to jump out of a helicopter into a winter storm at sea. However, courage by itself is not enough. A person may perform a risky behavior, and thus act courageously, but unless this risk is taken on behalf of a moral purpose it is not a heroic act. As Goethals and Allison (2012:186) state, “First and foremost, heroes are people who do something that is moral.” Extreme sports enthusiasts, race car drivers, and other dare devils risk their lives for thrills, but they are not heroes according to this moral standard. However, it must be admitted that they may be seen as heroes by their fellow enthusiasts, as heroic status is in many ways in the eyes of the beholders (Goethals & Allison, 2012). Perhaps their followers find some way to attach a moral purpose to these pursuits, for instance, by believing that these activities develop courage, self-confidence, and discipline, or are a worthy life goal (i.e., living ones’ dreams for adventure). However, when risky behaviors endanger others the actors may even be seen as villains instead of heroes. For example, when people drive recklessly on public roads. Thus overall a moral purpose is still one of the key defining characteristics of courageous heroes.

Support for the dual roles of bravery and moral purpose is provided by the study by Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou (2015). Among the 8 features they found that were central to prototypical perceptions of heroes, the three features seen as most prototypical of heroes are Brave, Moral Integrity, and Courageous.

Competence is also crucial to heroes. Heroes need to be competent enough to achieve their moral purpose and to aid those they are trying to help. This is clearly shown in the U.S. Coast Guard case discussed earlier. Patrick had to have the skills to carry out a dangerous and difficult mission in order to achieve his moral purpose, rescuing the injured fisherman. Carrying out tasks that are easily performed by most people, no matter how important, is not enough to garner one attributions of heroism. As Goethals and Allison (2012) observed, heroic status is more likely to be given to those who overcome obstacles and task difficulties
that would defeat the average person. Heroes are often depicted as struggling against almost overwhelming odds, and their heroic status is conferred when they finally succeed through their competence and ingenuity. People tend to have sympathy for underdogs (Allison & Burnette, 2009; Allison & Goethals, 2008). Indeed, underdogs are particularly likely to be accorded heroic status, provided they go on to win (Kim et al., 2008). An important exception to this is in the case of martyrs, who may not personally succeed in achieving their goals, but who inspire others to take up the cause and the struggle.

Although history books and popular culture are full of heroes who have performed truly outstanding achievements, it must be recognized that many people are heroes in the eyes of their friends and family members. Indeed, Allison and Goethals (2011) conducted a national survey of adults, and they asked respondents to list heroes. They found that 32% of the heroes listed were family members. In their open-ended explanations of their choices, participants were grateful for the generosity their heroic family members showed, and they appreciated the sacrifices that their family members made and the struggles that they went through in order to help them out.

Although courage and competence are two of the three key characteristics of heroes, the moral purpose, often accompanied by self-sacrifice and struggle, is at the heart of heroism. It is this moral purpose that motivates the heroic behavior and that makes heroes willing to endure struggles and persevere in the face of obstacles. In this chapter we will develop the argument that empathy is one of the core motivating forces behind moral purpose and heroic action. This emphasis on empathy is consistent with Goethals and Allison’s (2012) view of the origins of moral thinking as it relates to heroes. They draw upon the work on moral development in children by Kohlberg (1969; Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). According to Kohlberg’s model, moral development depends on being able to take the perspective of other people. At the first level in Kohlberg’s model, the pre-conventional stage, children are concerned with rewards and punishments and their own self-interests. As the children gain in the ability to perceive others’ perspectives, they move to the conventional level, where they consider social norms, authority figures, and other social groups standards for behaviour. Kohlberg believed that most people remained at the conventional level of morality and only a few progressed to the highest level, postconventional morality, which requires a deeper level of empathy. As Goethals and Allison (2012) put it, life experiences may push or pull people into thinking more deeply about others’ needs and perspectives, and thus into the postconventional stage. The ability to perceive others’ thoughts, feelings and needs is the essence of cognitive forms of empathy and thus empathy is crucial to moral development and virtue.

Hoffman (2001) has also related empathy to moral development, and reasons that empathy is a major motivator promoting caring and justice. He maintains that our empathic instincts had great survival value and thus lead to the development of an empathy instinct or trait. Groups of humans that had empathic concern for each other survived and propagated more than those that did not, thus leading to ever greater levels of empathy among humans.

Further support for the role of empathy in heroism is provided by Goethals and Allison’s (2012) study of heroic traits. They used a trait listing and sorting methodology to discover how students perceive heroes. They found that the list of traits sorted into 8 clusters: Caring, Charismatic, Inspiring, Reliable, Resilient, Selfless, Smart, and Strong. Relevant to this
chapter, the first cluster, Caring, includes the traits compassionate, empathic, and kind. As we shall see from the later review of the literature on empathy, empathy’s role in heroic behaviour may be even greater than this suggests.

What is Empathy?

Empathy is commonly defined “as the ability to comprehend another’s feelings and to re-experience them oneself” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990: 194-195). This definition recognizes that there is a cognitive component to empathy, which is the ability to perceive and recognize another’s feelings. And it also recognizes that there is an affective component, which is where one feels to at least some degree what others are feeling. Over the years various philosophers and social scientists have emphasized one aspect of this or another. The origins of the empathy concept go back to 1873, when the term Einfühlung (translated to “empathy”) was invented by Robert Vischer to explain how someone “feels into” another’s emotion (Titchener, 1999). Since then, a variety of conceptualizations have emerged, with Batson (2009) listing 8 different forms of empathy.

In a classic description of the empathic process, Katz (1963, p.5) illustrates how an empathetic response is “triggered by cues in the conversation or by impressions we receive of the state of mind or feeling of the other person. We assimilate this information without being aware of doing so. We pick up the signals through a kind of inner radar and certain changes in our own emotional states make themselves felt. We mimic the other person and in the excitement of our spontaneous response our attention is almost completely absorbed.” Katz further maintained that this process results in the empathizer expressing recognition and acceptance of the other person’s needs and emotions, and that this acceptance has a reassuring effect on the other person. Perhaps this is one reason why empathic listening is a keystone of many types of therapy (Rogers, 1975). Some scholars have even gone so far as to assert that empathy is “the fundamental competence of social awareness” and “the sine qua non of all social effectiveness in working life” (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002: 50).

The distinction between cognitive and affective empathy is important because it is possible for someone to recognize what others are feeling without sympathizing with them or sharing their emotions. Modern neurological research has verified that the cognitive and affective empathic processes are separate and distinct (Cox et al., 2012; Decety, 2011). This has important implications, both good and bad, in terms of willingness to perform heroic behaviors on behalf of others. As will be shown in a later section, people are more willing to help another person when they identify with them and are feeling affective empathy. Thus affective empathy may be a powerful catalyst to heroic behavior. However, heroes often operate in emotionally tense settings, where many people are prone to panic, personal distress, or emotional hijacking (Goleman, 1995). Heroes need enough empathic detachment to regulate their emotions to perform at their best.

Affective empathy has been depicted as an “other-oriented emotional response elicited by the congruent welfare of someone else” (Batson, 2009, p. 418). Affective empathy occurs from a “bottom up” process whereby people first imitate the emotions they are witnessing by activating “mirror neurons” that mimic the emotions being observed (Kilner & Lemon, 2013). This is an automatic process that occurs before conscious awareness, and thus is largely uncontrolled by higher thought processes. This automatic form of empathy may have
physiological effects, including on heart rates and breathing patterns, and may influence emotional states as well (Critchley et al., 2006; Vignemont & Singer, 2006).

In contrast, cognitive empathy is a “top down” process more susceptible to conscious control. Conceptualizations of cognitive empathy differ somewhat, in that some count awareness of others’ emotions, thoughts and perspectives without any sharing of emotions as a type of cognitive empathy (sometimes this is simply known as perspective taking). However, others consider cognitive empathy to be a sharing of another’s emotions coupled with an awareness that one is feeling the emotions for different reasons than is the person being observed (for a review of different conceptualizations of empathy from a neuroscience perspective, see Decety & Meyer, 2008). In this case, cognitive empathy involves an awareness that the emotions they are witnessing in others are not their own emotions. Thus cognitive empathy involves less of an identification with the other party and a lower sharing of emotions.

Cognitive empathy can be influenced by focus of attention and by a variety of workplace or environmental factors that direct one’s attention towards others (thus increasing empathy) or towards oneself or other non-social features of the environment (Batson, Eklund, Chermok, Hoyt, & Ortiz, 2007). This suggests that training programs can promote empathy by getting people to focus their attentions on the needs of others. Studies have shown that people can learn to be higher on cognitive empathy (although not affective empathy) (Dziobek et al., 2008). For example, empathy training programs have helped clinicians become better at diagnosing patient problems and helped them establish better overall doctor-patient relationships (Dow, Leong, Anderson, & Wenzel, 2007). Following on from this, it also suggests that the impulse to help others, perhaps in a heroic way, could also be influenced.

**Empathy, Prosocial Behavior, and Heroic Behavior**

Empathy is often regarded as an internal mental and affective process best assessed by either physiological measures or self-reports of internal states. Nonetheless, empathy can also be considered from a behavioral standpoint—does someone act in an empathic way towards others? In other words, does the individual exhibit prosocial behavior or good organizational citizenship? Empathy is often used as an explanation for these prosocial behaviors, and this approach is known as the empathy-altruism hypothesis (e.g., Batson et al., 2007). Prosocial behavior can consist of simple acts, such as donating small sums of money to charity, helping others out with their work, or similar acts of generosity and good will. At the high end of this spectrum, we can consider heroic behaviors as among the ultimate forms of prosocial behaviors, since it may involve risking one’s life to help others.

Meta-analyses have confirmed the empathy-altruism hypothesis (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). People who scored higher on empathy were more likely to perform prosocial behaviors and were also more cooperative and more socially competent. The results were similar regardless of whether empathy and prosocial behavior was measured using questionnaire measures of both, or whether measured in simulations that actually gave participants a chance to act prosocially. Interestingly, even measures of empathy based on observations of the facial features of the participants showed support for the empathy-altruism hypothesis.

Why is it that empathy predicts prosocial behavior? Scholars who take an evolutionary perspective argue that empathy emerged because it helped people survive during difficult
times (Preston, 2013). By acting empathically towards a member of their species in distress, they help the species as a whole survive (Hoffman, 2001).

**Empathy and Heroic Self-Sacrifice**

Going back to the question asked at the beginning of this chapter, why is it that some people are willing to behave heroically and risk their careers, their freedom, their health, and even their lives to help others? The empathy literature may help answer this question, because the research shows that empathic people are more likely to make personal sacrifices to help others. Studies on empathy have shown that people high on empathy are willing to perform altruistic behaviors even when they come at a cost in terms of time or money (Joireman, Daniels, George-Falvy, & Kamdar, 2006). Heroic behaviour, risking one’s life, can be seen as the ultimate end of this altruistic, self-sacrificing continuum.

As Goethals and Allison (2012) so vividly depict in their summary of the literature on heroes, self-sacrificing behaviour and risk-taking are part of the hero mythology and prototypes. As they observe, a dramatic illustration of the importance of self-sacrifice concerns the effects of being assassinated on perceptions of presidential greatness. Simonton (1994) found that being assassinated was equivalent to spending four years leading the nation through wartime. Presidents who risked their lives in well publicized events prior to being president also seem to have a boost in perceptions of greatness. George Washington risked his life while general several times, and was well-known for being among the last to retreat. His aides had to retrieve him during one retreat. At other times, he rode his famous white horse in front of the troops and in clear sight of the enemy, defying enemy fire. Teddy Roosevelt, another president rated high on greatness, risked his life in various well-known episodes throughout his career. He endangered his life while fighting corruption in city hall, and in his most famous event personally led the troops up San Juan Hill during the Spanish-American War. Later, he risked his life, and seriously damaged his health, exploring a previously unexplored river in Brazil. These true-life exploits all contributed to his almost mythological heroic status.

It is perhaps not surprising given the importance of self-sacrifice that this theme is well-reflected in the lives of the four presidents given special recognition in the form of the Mount Rushmore National Memorial. One, Abraham Lincoln, led the nation through civil war and was assassinated as well. George Washington and Teddy Roosevelt both personally risked their lives in combat and were well-known for their bravery and boldness. Thomas Jefferson was not known for his exploits on the battlefield, but as a revolutionary his life was on the line, and if the revolutionaries had lost the war it was well-known that he would have been hung as a traitor.

Equally important, the four presidents on Mount Rushmore were also known for their compassion and empathy for others. George Washington demonstrated his compassion for his troops during the tough times and harsh winter at Valley Forge (Humphrey, 2013). While his troops were at Valley Forge, roughly 3,000 (out of 11,000) soldiers perished from frigid temperatures, lack of food, and sickness. Washington demonstrated his empathy for his troops by sharing their harsh conditions. He supervised the construction of shelters to protect his troops from the cold, and he was one of the last ones to move into a shelter. Abraham Lincoln was known for his humble, self-effacing manner, and gentle humor. More importantly, he devoted his life and career towards helping out those less fortunate than
himself. Although not known for being humble, Teddy Roosevelt devoted his career just as much towards helping those less fortunate. Although from a wealthy family, he campaigned for reforms that helped the poor and middle class, and in his personal interactions with others he showed a keen interest in the lives of others no matter what their background. Thomas Jefferson was also from a privileged background, but he too campaigned to give everyone the right to pursue liberty and happiness. Jefferson was such a soft touch to his friends that he frequently ended up in financial difficulties because of the money he loaned out with little reassurance of being repaid.

The altruistic behaviors shown by the Mount Rushmore presidents is typical of those high on empathy. Empathy is a powerful motivator of altruistic behaviour even when it comes at great personal cost and sacrifice. The presidents also illustrate how individual personal sacrifice facilitates the survival of the group, as maintained by the sociobiologists discussed earlier. Each of the presidents acted on behalf of the larger society, and their societies grew and prospered as a result.

The particular type of empathy shown by heroic leaders may be especially important. Many empathy measures and conceptualizations of empathy have been developed by clinical psychologist and other counselors. This origin means that many conceptualizations of empathy focus on negative emotions—the sort displayed by those seeking professional help. In addition, empathy is often described as a one-way process, whereby the counsellor listens and the client emotes his or her feelings. However, Kellett, Humphrey and Sleeth (2006) argued that this conceptualization of empathy is not particularly appropriate for leaders. First, if the negative emotions are transferred to the counsellor (a common problem in therapeutic settings) then the counsellors become depressed or in other ways feel badly. In contrast, leaders need to display confidence and optimism during difficult times (Humphrey, 2008; Humphrey, Pollack, and Hawver, 2008). Thus empathy measures designed for leaders need to take into account the need for positive emotions. Second, empathy is often described as a passive, one-way process in which the listened receives the emotions from the speaker. Leaders, in contrast, have to take an active role and stimulate the sharing of emotions. Carl Rogers (1975) most famously described therapeutic empathy and listening as a highly active process because of the effort it takes to understand someone else. Leaders need to take this active role if they are to understand the needs of their followers. However, they must also engage in shaping and influencing their followers’, particularly when their followers are feeling pessimistic about their chances to succeed (Humphrey, 2008; Humphrey et al., 2008). This is why Kellett and her colleagues described their interactive empathy scale as a two-way influence, in which leaders are both influenced by their followers’ emotions, but also influence their followers’ emotions as well through their common empathic bond (Kellett et al., 2006). As they maintained, leaders need to take the initiative in creating the empathic bond with and among their followers.

The above conceptualization of empathy is also consistent with the shared leadership view that leadership is a multiway process (Pearce & Conger, 2003). According to the shared leadership perspective, leadership in modern organizations occurs at every level, and top leaders need to be influenced by their followers, and grant their followers opportunities to take initiative and demonstrate leadership. This is because knowledge is widely distributed in organizations, and decision-making authority and leadership needs to shift to whoever has the most knowledge and expertise about the problem at hand. From an empathic viewpoint, an
empathic bond among followers and leaders would make them more willing to accept each other’s viewpoints and goals. When people share an affective empathic bond, they feel to at least some degree what the other person is feeling, and this can help them understand the needs and desires of the other party. Even cognitive forms of empathy mean that the empathizer has at least an awareness of the needs, feelings, and viewpoints of the other party.

It is far easier to empathize with others when they are similar to us in terms of age, social class, background, dress and looks, and overall lifestyle. When people are similar to us, it is easier to imagine ourselves in their situation. With high levels of similarity, we may even have been in their situation before, or may even currently experiencing it ourselves. When people share and experience common situations, the levels of empathy may be strong enough to promote lifelong bonds and high levels of mutual admiration and liking. This one reason why wartime buddies, despite enduring high levels of stress and horrific conditions, often feel empathy and warm feelings for each other, and many stay in touch throughout their lifetimes.

The common sense observation that it is easier to empathize with others who are like us has been confirmed by research (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Preston & Hofelich, 2012). In part, this is because it is similarity primes cognitive mechanisms that make it easier to imagine ourselves in others’ circumstances (Chambers & Davis, 2012). Without “walking a mile” in others shoes, as the adage goes, it is hard to fully imagine ourselves in someone else’s situation. This is what makes the empathy and care for the less privileged so remarkable among leaders like Washington and Teddy Roosevelt, whose privileged upbringings placed them far above those they dedicated their lives to helping. Like his relative Theodore, FDR also grew up in luxury. However, as a young adult he contracted a crippling case of polio, and it is possible that FDR’s deep compassion for the poor and helpless was forged in the fire of his own crisis and personal tragedy.

**Charismatic Leadership, Empathy, and Heroism**

The above conceptualization of empathic heroes has some strong overlaps with depictions of charismatic leaders, suggesting that empathy and heroism are two major components of charismatic leadership. The original concept of charisma was in line with the view of heroes as truly exceptional and special (Goethals & Allison, 2012). Weber (1947) used the term charisma to refer to leaders with special gifts and powers; the word charisma is derived from the ancient Greek word meaning “divine gift” and literally referred to religious leaders who had gifts of miracles from god. Weber applied it to political leaders who had extraordinary impact on society, often by leading major social movements. According to Weber, these charismatic leaders awed their followers through their special gifts of oratory and leadership, and made their followers feel that their charismatic leader was far above them in talents and abilities.

However, later scholars began to develop a little more scepticism as to the divine origins of charisma and of the view that only truly exceptional individuals can have charisma (Shamir, 1995). These scholars begin to argue that other leaders can also have charisma even if they are not transforming the world in the way that charismatic leaders like Moses or Churchill did. They began to develop models of charisma that emphasized rhetorical techniques, such as the use of “we” statements to create perceptions of a common identity (Shamir, Arthur, & House, 1994; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). This emphasis on we
statements suggests that charismatic leaders need to create a sense of an empathic bond between them and their followers.

Because it is possible to learn rhetorical techniques, scholars in this tradition take more of a behavioral approach, rather than a trait approach, to leadership (Conger, 2011; Conger & Kanungo, 1987). Thus this approach emphasized the various behaviors that lead others to attribute charisma to a leader. As Conger, Kanungo, and Menon (2000, p. 749) state, “charismatic leadership is distinguished from other forms by the followers' perceptions of the manager's formulation of a shared and idealized future vision as well as his or her effective articulation of this vision in an inspirational manner.” Note that this approach keeps some of the emphasis on social movements or change, and also emphasizes a shared bond in the form of a common future. The focus on rhetorical techniques that create perceptions of special abilities or at least of leadership qualities is still there. This accords well with the view that heroes have competence and high ability (Goethals & Allison, 2012).

Models of charisma also emphasized the role of crisis situations in garnering attributions of charisma (Conger, Kanungo, & Menon, 2000; Halverson, Murphy, & Riggio, 2004; Pillai, 1996). After all, it is hard to believe that someone is truly exceptional if he or she is solving merely routine problems. It is only when leaders solve crisis situations or other problems that baffle us are we willing to grant them the superior status of charisma. Crisis situations call for the soaring inspirational language typical of charismatic leadership (Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl, 2004). Empathy also plays a role in crisis situations, and of course crisis is when heroes are most needed. In crisis situations heroes need to be sensitive to the needs and wants of their followers. Without empathy, successful and wealthy people may be uncaring when others lose their jobs due to economic crisis situations. With empathy, they may be motivated to use their wealth, knowledge, and skills to help others. Whereas empathy helps them understand why help is needed, courage and heroic behaviour may be needed to take action.

Although early theories of charisma emphasize crisis as a necessary precursor for awe-inspiring attributions of charisma, it must be acknowledged that later models argue that charismatic attributions may also be granted during times of great opportunities, or when people achieve extraordinary feats that astound others (Conger, 2011). This accords with the view of sports leaders or other outstanding achievers as heroes (Goethals & Allison, 2012). A high tech computer program who makes a vast fortune almost overnight, or a top athlete who sets a world record, may be seen as charismatic heroes in the eyes of their followers. When these heroes display empathy by contributing to society as well, their heroic status is often enhanced, which is why so many professional sports teams take time out from their televised broadcasts to highlight charitable actions by their players. Lance Armstrong, before his fall from grace, achieved world-wide hero status in part because the charity he founded, Livestrong, raised roughly a billion dollars for charity.

So far, the view espoused in this chapter has largely covered heroic empathy from the individual perspective, i.e., from the view that empathic leaders have special abilities, such as high levels of empathy, courage, and competence, that makes them standout. However, as we will see in the next section, empathic heroes are also socially constructed and owe much to organizational and society factors that predispose others to see them as heroes, and that facilitate their empathic and heroic actions.
How Empathy Makes Heroic Leadership Possible

As Goethals and Allison (2012) so vividly depict in their summary of the literature on heroes, self-sacrificing behaviour and risk-taking are part of the hero mythology and prototypes. Other research has identified the benefits and rewards that are exchanged between leaders and their followers, but heroic leaders are characterized by selflessness and self-sacrifice. In order to avoid rendering the relationship between heroic leaders and followers as merely transactional, we employ a theoretical framework, namely, distributed cognition (DC) that positions heroic leaders in the larger context of the organization and in the system in which the organization resides. This enables us to underscore the role that empathy, particularly cognitive empathy, has in giving rise to heroic leaders and their acts. In the remainder of this chapter, we explain how other researchers have used a distributed cognition approach to understand the dynamic socio-cognitive properties of complex organizations and explain what we believe this approach reveals about the nature and function of heroes in organizations.

Woodrow Wilson once said, “I not only use all the brains I have, but all I can borrow” (1914). He understood the important role that followers play in leaders’ success, and in this case, he was particularly aware of relying on their cognitive competencies. Heroic leaders play important roles in organizations, but they do not accomplish their great feats alone. As Barack Obama noted during the 2012 presidential elections,

[I]f you’ve been successful, you didn’t get there on your own... If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you’ve got a business—you didn’t build that. Somebody else made that happen (C-SPAN, 2012).

His comments, directed at small business owners, spurred a flurry of debate over the self-sufficiency of the stalwart entrepreneur, over the locus of a leader’s success, and seemed to garner Obama both criticism and praise. Just how dependent are great leaders on their followers? Further, what role does empathy play in this relationship?

Elsewhere in this handbook, Klisanian draws our attention to the collaboratively constructed nature of the hero in the networked age. Further, Zimbardo, Breckenridge, & Moghaddam (2013) underscore the fact that the definition of the hero construct varies, with some conceptions anchoring the hero as an exceptional individual and others emphasizing that heroic feats can come from ordinary individuals in everyday circumstances. The idea of the “banality of heroism” (namely, that the heroic impulse exists in each of us) has been advanced to oppose the terrifying idea of the “banality of evil” proposed by Hannah Arendt (namely, that evil has been rendered supremely ordinary, and Adolf Eichmann’s deeds and subsequent trial served as evidence) (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006). This scholarship, along with Barak Obama’s commentary to small business owners emphasizing our interdependence, suggests a growing tension around the idea of locating heroism within the exceptional individual. Yet, even these arguments and hypotheses have not gone far enough to reveal the well-spring of heroism that can be made available to all of us. Alternatively, the DC approach paves the way for recognizing where heroism comes from and how one might


foster the “heroic imagination” for which Franco and Zimbardo call (2012). A DC approach to heroism can help us recognize the co-constructed nature of heroism in order to begin to understand how to deliberately structure organizations that encourage what Franco and Zimbardo call “the high watermark of human behaviour.”

Further, a DC approach reveals how circulating representations of “heroes” and heroic acts is dependent on organizational members’ capacity for empathy. Both leaders’ and followers’ empathy enables the potential for leaders to emerge in these social structures. This empathy also enables ideas of heroic action to perpetuate, which then structure organizational members’ responses to the challenges they face in their organizational contexts. As we discuss below, this theoretical framework helps address the fact that while interactions between leaders and their followers provide each with benefits, researchers are uneasy about qualifying this mutuality as quid pro quo exchanges that are transactional in nature (Messick, 2005). As the literature on heroism reveals, heroes do not engage in heroic acts for self-serving ends. In fact, heroism is consistently defined in terms of selflessness and self-sacrifice (Kinsella et al., 2015). DC provides an alternative theoretical framework through which to examine the apparent contradiction between the leader-member exchange literature and the research on heroic leadership. It also enables us to capture the coherence and evolution of heroism as a practice embedded in organizations. Specifically, we explore the how multidirectional interrelating between leaders and followers, which is founded on members’ capacity for empathy, both enables and constrains the opportunities for heroes to emerge in organizations. A DC framework reveals that cognitive empathy plays a role in constructing systems of practice (Halverson, 2003) that enable the emergence of heroic leaders who possess the traits, such as intelligence, compassion, and competence, ascribed to such leaders. Followers and leaders alike have roles in perpetuating these traits. This perpetuation occurs through complex systems of representation, such as, for example, stories of heroic deeds that become part of organizational lore. From a DC perspective, even deeds themselves serve as signifiers of preferred organizational behaviour, functioning to reify the types of behaviours and goals endorsed by the organization (or endorsed by the larger social system in which these organizations reside). These various forms of representation, both internal and external, function to reify the ever-evolving conception of the hero and structure both followers’ and leaders’ activities. Below, we describe the foundations of distributed cognition, emphasizing a broad definition of artefacts, those inscriptive tools that enable the offloading of cognition from individuals to the systems in which they participate.

**Distributed Cognition**

Distributed cognition has evolved from the mid 1980’s out of the cultural historical psychology of Vygotsky, whose book *Mind and Society* influenced social science researchers to consider that individual cognition is offloaded into the environment through both social and technological means (Hutchins, 2000). Hutchins, a cultural anthropologist who studied how navigational symbols and tools enabled large navy ships to be navigated in tight, shallow waterways and expansive seas, believed that contemporary cognitive theories tended to be disembodied, subordinating the fact that cognition is distributed in systems and occurs in both agents and the material world (Hutchins,1995). According to Hutchins, the coordination of individuals, artifacts and the environment produces a system of practice in which participants work towards shared goals by distributing their cognitive efforts, not just across a system’s members, but through its technologies as well. Practices are forms of technologies (what the
Greeks referred to as *technê*, or craft). For example, speaking to large audiences, comporting oneself with confidence, and framing one’s message as inspirational are practices we often associate with heroic figures. But chief among these technologies are forms of representation that precede actors, whether leaders or followers. For example, Hutchins explains how the cognitive work of navigation was at one point in history offloaded to the sextant and the celestial array of stars; both were representations of one’s bearing at sea and both were interpreted by sea-goers, extending their cognition via these mediational means.

The emphasis on the propagation of representational states across media suggests that thinking and ideas can be located in many mediums and communicated through a variety of semiotic tools. For example, the recognition and awareness of the presence of another can be understood as offloaded to the simple gesture of the wave. This approach broadens the phenomena one studies in order to understand organizations. As Hutchins explains, “The emphasis on finding and describing ‘knowledge structures’ that are somewhere ‘inside’ the individual encourages us to overlook the fact that human cognition is always situated in a complex sociocultural world and cannot be unaffected by it” (1995 xiii). Given that distributed cognition looks for a “broader class of cognitive events and does not expect all such events to be encompassed by the skin or skull of an individual” (Hutchins, 2000, 2), where might cognitive empathy fall in such a framework and how might it function in relation to propagating representations of the hero and heroic acts?

We tend to think of the ways in which heroes and heroic leaders are represented in external media, such as films, books, video games, organizational lore, and striking images. Yet, representations are also found internally in the mind, and the DC approach encourages a holistic analysis of how these internal representations are coordinated with external ones to construct systems of practice. Representations that exist in the mind are often referred to as knowledge structures, and the most commonly researched knowledge structures are schemas, scripts, and frames. An example of a commonly circulated schema is that of construct of the doctor. The script that accompanies a visit to the doctor would include expectations about the how the interaction and the activities during the appointment will unfold. Formerly, a common frame for doctor-patient interactions held that the doctor possessed the authority on the nature of the body and bodily experiences, but with the access to information via the internet, this frame has shifted and patients now claim relatively more expertise over their own subjective bodily experiences and commonly recognize doctors’ limitations (Adams, 2014, unpublished diss.). It is easy to see that external representations, meaning the more modern depictions of doctors that circulate, have helped to reify these expectations and even to structure both patients’ and doctors’ actions. One might compare, for example, renditions of the doctor by painter Norman Rockwell during the early-to-mid 19th century as the fatherly and compassionate authority figure with the depiction of Dr. House on the TV series House, MD: the detached and idiosyncratic expert who works his teams of specialists to puzzle out the difficult mysteries of the body. However, there is no research on heroism or heroic leadership that links internal forms of representation to the circulation of the hero construct (Geothal & Allison, 2011). Yet, Emrich (1995) in his work on leadership has distinguished the variables about which people might construct such schemas: people tend to have theories about what traits leaders possess, how they behave and the nature of their agency. These factors might be usefully employed to flesh out existing schemas for heroic leaders.
However, there is yet another form of internal representation that has a profound effect on the circulation of the hero and the heroic leader, both through society and the organizational systems that operate within it. Mental models can be understood as cognitive representations (Bezemer and Kress, 2008; Thibault, 2004). Mental models are “small-scale models” (Craik, 1943) or symbolic representations that we construct in our heads to help us reason through the complex nature of the world. A type of mental model familiar to most people is the mental map, which contains spatial representations of geographies through which users can navigate in their heads. Another familiar everyday context for mental modelling that most people will recognize involves reasoning through how to get a large piece of furniture through a door, a problem “usually solved by mentally simulating turning over a geometrical structure approximating the configuration of the piece of furniture through various rotations” (Nersessian, 2004, 150). People construct mental models of others in order to anticipate their responses to certain situations (Adams, 2014, unpublished diss.). Adams found that mental models are dynamic, enabling a “thinker” to imagine how another person might respond to a particular context. The mental model itself is comprised of objects, both abstract and conceptual, relationality between these objects, and forms of dynamism applied to “run” the model. Mental models are multimodal constructions in that they that employ representational modalities afforded by “mind,” such as force, image, and affect; their design reveals the thinker’s tacit values and assumptions. Mental models are used to work through “problem spaces” and when those spaces involve predicting other people’s behaviour, we tend to model others responding to the situational variables we think are significant to them. In this way, these situational factors become significant to us, and our mental models provides us with a range of potential responses we think influential others would consider legitimate. Research suggests that reflecting on our mental models of others (or on our models of specific challenges and problems) can enable us to extend our reasoning, critically evaluate our assumptions and expand the range of responses available to us (Adams, 2104, unpublished diss.).

Previous methods to research the modelling of other people and their imagined responses has relied on discourse analysis, talk-aloud protocol, and semi-structured interviews; the results revealed that people constructed models of others who would evaluate their performance (Adams, 2104, unpublished diss.). Specifically, people frequently construct mental models of others in order to imagine how they might respond to their work (in this case, passages of writing) in order to self-correct (Adams, 2014, unpublished diss.). More importantly, these dynamic, opinionated imagined others could be either a person in real life with which the participant regarded as a critic, a mentor who “spoke to them” to provide advice and recommendations that the participant then followed, or even someone they admired but had never met. Participants tended to imagine these figures providing them with constructive (sometimes even harsh, but well-intended) criticism. Many people regard their role models as heroes, and ideally, one’s mentor doubles as one’s role model. However, the DC approach has not yet been used to investigate the mental models we create of our heroes and mentors. Research investigating traits of heroic leaders suggests that people will model those whom they believe to be competent to evaluate their performance (Geothals & Allison, 2011) and those who are designated to evaluate them (e.g. supervisors or teachers who evaluate subordinates or students).
How do we model these heroes for whom we have such great regard? The “eight great traits” that Goethals and Allison have identified are likely components of respondents’ dynamic mental models, which are far more holistic and responsive than the list of traits or typologies of heroes suggests. However, how dynamic and manipulable are these models? Under what conditions are we motivated to invoke mental models of heroes that function to reassure us or even perhaps to provide us with constructive criticism or vocal advice? Do people model heroes’ responses to unique situations in order to anticipate how their hero will behave under certain circumstances so that they can mimic their heroes’ behaviors in, and do people wonder how their heroes (particularly those who serve as role models) will evaluate their actions?

These questions warrant additional investigations. However, it is likely that we mentally model heroic leaders to both anticipate how they will act in the contexts that, as Joseph Campbell explains, gives rise to heroic acts (Campbell, 1988). These internal representations are coordinated and work in tandem with the representations of heroes that circulate in the systems in which we participate. They work to reify and perpetuate the cultural repository of images we have of heroes. According to a DC framework, the distinct representations of heroic leaders in medicine provided earlier each arose in part by our shared expectations but also participated in continuing to shape those expectations. Further, in addition to providing us instructions on how to “act the part” in certain contexts, mental models carry ideological cargo (Adams, 2014, unpublished diss.). Mental models of critics, mentors or heroes function to shape our values. Joseph Campbell (1988) suggests this when he so playfully points out that as a boy, he had an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other, each whispering in his ear. He explains that all those who participated in his religious education “concretized” the forces of good and evil in these two forms, and it had a profound influence on his behaviors. While he would not explain it in the same terms, these concretized mental figures had circulated externally as shared representations, and once they had been shared with Campbell in his boyhood, they enabled him to model and assess acts based on values associated with the Catholicism.

Importantly, these representations are enabled by cognitive empathy. As discussed earlier in this chapter, cognitive empathy is the top down process of imagining others’ emotions. Emotional responses are context specific and people are able to predict how their leaders or followers might feel in certain contexts. For example, we might predict a heroic leader that responds to news of an alliance with others as ecstatic or as deeply disappointed, depending on the context. These predictions, based contextual variables, suggest people are constructing mental models of heroes that include affective components. These affective components of our mental models arise from our capacity for cognitive empathy, for modelling affect in relation to situational variables. These emotional states play important roles in how one responds to a situation, so being able to construct mental models that factor affective states (Adams, 2014, unpublished diss.) allows leaders to anticipate their followers and followers to predict their leaders.

According to a DC framework, these internal representations produced by both heroic leaders and followers work in tandem with representations in other forms of external media. For example, while an organization might be considered a relatively closed system (Coleman, 1988), organizations exist within the larger framework of national and global collectives. Mental models of heroes circulate throughout these systems via external artifacts and
signifiers to help shape the actions of leaders and to help followers set expectations for their behaviors. This circulation of representations is similar to an instruction manual for the heroic leader, yet it appears in pieces and the instructions are widely distributed across the system. For example, the Star Wars movies through the character of Han Solo have instructed massive numbers of viewers that the “mercenary figure” might require nothing more than the right context to instigate a profound sense of heroic purpose (Campbell, 1988). Such a lesson instructs us all that while we may foster economic relationships with our organizations, it is possible to experience a deep connection to them and their aims, even at a great cost to ourselves. This figure of the mercenary-turned-hero has the power to turn organizational leaders into heroic leaders by enabling them to mentally model the possibility of responding to situations not for personal gain, but out of deep obligation to “do the right thing.” It is only by way of our capacity to mentally model Han Solo’s situation that we understand that in the beginning, he is not emotionally committed to the cause for which he is recruited, but later we understand the deeply satisfying rewards of the emotional ties to which he has committed himself. It is through such instruction contained in the heroic form of Han Solo that we can begin to understand our reluctance, both as researchers and as human beings, to relegate the relationship between leaders and followers as mere exchanges. A DC framework allows us to understand that our participation in organizations is richer and more complex.

Conceptions of the hero vary across culture and context. Yet, the conceptions of the hero form a constellation of sorts. As such, they serve as a repository of the range of possible heroic acts. Culture itself has been theorized from a DC perspective as the distribution of beliefs across members of society (Schwartz, 1978) with later researchers devising quantitative models of cultural patterns (Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986). Organizational cultures arise in part from individual’s acts, and those serve to represent and reify the conceptions of heroic action, but so too will artefactual renditions, such those that occur in organizational lore. Additionally, policies and procedures, which may not speak directly to heroism, will nonetheless frame what is considered exceptional behaviour in a particular context. One only has to consider performance evaluation guidelines to see how these kinds of artifacts go ahead of us to circulate and propagate conceptions of exceptional leaders in organizational contexts.

Lastly, the DC framework begs the question, what conclusions are we to draw from the propagation of scholarship on the “everyday hero”? Is it that scholars who research this topic are capturing (i.e. representing) a phenomenon that circulates among us or is it that these scholars themselves are participating in coalescing cultural forces through representation, forces that with enough momentum participate in propagating the cultural material through which to make possible the hero in us all? More likely, there is a recursive relationship between scholarship and practice that results in a tipping point (Gladwell, 2006), a historical moment that brings forth cultural change. Franco and Zimbardo’s (2006) work on the hero provides an example of the scholar’s agency in the larger cultural system: they assert, “We believe it has become necessary to revisit the historical meanings of the word, and to make it come alive in modern terms…. [I]t is possible to foster … the development of a personal heroic ideal. This heroic ideal can help guide a person’s behavior in times of trouble or moral uncertainty.” These scholars capture the yearning we have for the meaningful journeys that Joseph Campbell (1988) dedicated his life to exploring through the power of myth. Campbell himself has propagated much of the cultural material that today
inspires many individuals, both leaders and followers, to embrace our ordinary lives as heroic quests.

**Conclusions**

From this review we can see that empathy is a prime motivator for heroic behaviour. Empathy has the following positive effects on heroic leaders:

1. Empathy can help potential heroes realize when others are in distress. In cases of emergency, distress may be evident, but when social problems become widespread and endemic, such as poverty or slavery, un-empathetic people may not recognize the suffering of others.

2. Even more crucially, empathy is what motivates leaders to take risks on behalf of others, even to the extent of sacrificing their own lives. The empathy-altruism relationship is a key motivator for heroic action.

3. Empathy may also help heroes become more effective leaders by helping them establish empathic bonds that unite them with their followers. This helps heroes emerge as leaders, which then allows them to mobilize resources to take action.

4. Empathy may help people who perform heroic acts get recognized as heroes and achieve heroic status. Heroic status is in some ways in the eyes of the beholder. People who display empathic concern are more likely to be recognized as heroes.

5. Empathic heroes may serve important roles for organizations and societies, thus people and institutions create heroes when necessary. Heroic myths and stories motivate followers to achieve their organizations mission.

6. Thus although heroes are often described as individuals with exceptional courage and abilities, heroic behaviors are distributed throughout organizations. The glorification of particular people as heroes serves as a useful way of transmitting an organization’s values and mission to its followers.
References


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