Social Representations of Heroes: Triggers from the Past, Values in the Present, Patterns for the Future

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Abstract

The representations of heroes and the heroic acts point to social values, norms, and morality of the present, creating a bridge between the past and a potential future. In this paper, a cross-cultural explorative study of heroes is presented aiming to explore general tendencies and possible patterns related to the different social contexts. Participants were reached from seven countries via social media ($N=974$) for corpus construction. We asked by their choice of hero, national hero, and desired heroic action in their respective countries. A thematic analysis was conducted. Results show that there is a high rate of no choice, while among the chosen the prototypical hero is a lone moral man acting in the private (family) or public sphere (political actors). Both spheres offer the naturalization of the hero. There is a dialogical frame between the exceptional and the ordinary. Chosen heroes are dominantly contemporary males' family members or political figures. While the purpose attributed to the personal hero is to maintain stability, the purpose attributed to the heroic actions of the public sphere is to obtain change. Similarities and differences between the seven subcorpora are also described.

Keywords Hero · Social representations · Values · Heroic action · Collective actions

From a social-psychological perspective, the increasing freedom followed by the economic crisis caused uncertainty of the last decades created space for collective anxieties. The spread of right-wing populism—creating differences both horizontally and vertically, ignores knowledge and elite, degrades institutions, creates common enemies for the nation to justify itself (Staerklé & Green, 2018) as a morally superior group of “ordinary people” (Mols & Jetten, 2016; Mudde, 2004; Vossen, 2010)—can be seen as the political sphere's answer to the “social demand” for feelings of safety and order while giving easily accessible form to fears stemming from otherwise elusive and complex social-economic problems. While refugees, ethnic minorities, other vulnerable social groups (LGBTQ, women) are targeted as scape-goats of societal problems, a renewal of

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human-rights movements and civil action is also on the rise. There is a strong ideological struggle (Jovchelovitch, 1997) to cope with the social and economic uncertainty of nowadays. While people have similar normative reference frames of knowledge (about social reality, values, identity, ideologies) which permits communication, their positioning on it is pluralistic, to create consent or dissent (Staerklé, 2011, 2013). There is a crescent antagonism of reference frames about social reality as responding to “threat, people may refer to such knowledge in order to interpret the threatening situation and to take action on the basis of culturally available strategies and discursive resources” (Staerklé, 2011:89) between the demand of highly structured social order with authoritarian leaders, secure structure, definite norms, traditional values, stable borders which competes with more dynamic demands of social order. In the last decades, a new split arises and become more and more visible between these more dynamic social orders: *la réalité de liberté* (Charrue, 2005)—based on the norms of self-interest, free will, autonomy, individual responsibility, and self-regulating economy and the *la réalité de fraternité*—based on the norms of horizontal democratic processes, interdependence, solidarity, cooperation, the experiencing and managing diversity for an equitable, and inclusive society (Brown, 2011; Graham, 1992; Hepburn, 2003). People anchored to these different norms are seeking for ideals, moral compasses, heroes to look up to and follow their lead in congruence to their own reference frame. In this paper, we look at how different cultural contexts emphasize different aspects of heroic representations and what can we infer from these regarding the social norms, values, and participatory intentions in different collective action.

Choosing Heroes

The word hero comes from the Greek ἥρως (hērōs) meaning protector. In the field of social psychology, heroes are a relatively understudied area, which has attracted growing interest over the past decades. The relevant literature offers diverse conceptualizations of a hero, each focusing on a different aspect, such as someone with a moral will, doing good for others (Schwartz, 2012); one who makes sacrifices for others in their community (Becker & Eagly, 2004); one protecting and helping the well-being of future generations (Gash & Conway, 1997; Kinsella et al., 2017); one who refuses to conform to unjust norms and does not obey to unfair authorities (Zimbardo, 2008); and one who persists even when facing obstacles or failures (Halmburger et al., 2017). Heroes can be divided into small and big heroism (Farley, 2012) or multiple categories of heroism (Franco et al., 2011; Goethals & Allison, 2012). While the hero in general represents the extraordinary through abstract values such as brave, self-sacrificing, strong, helpful, and everyday hero is contextualized, anchored to concrete situations of everyday life “present in Heroic Roles, Ordinary Heroism and Everyday Context” (Keczer et al., 2016:14). These theoretical definitions naturalize the hero, as being or becoming heroic is a moral choice, personality, behavior of the individual. Boulanger describe this twofolded process in his concept of CHARACTERisation (Boulanger & Christenson, 2018; Boulanger, 2019); there is the process of translation from “the immanent and immediate life to the transcendent” and than “people *invent* new ways of relating with the object in the practical life constructing new needs” (Boulanger, 2019:17).

Adapting the approach of social representations, a hero is not a hero by his/her inner characteristics, but by the normative reference frame adopted by those judging him/her as a hero. The choice of a hero is embedded in the historical and social context of the one who

judges, such as the cultural and communicative aspects of the collective memory (Assman, 2011), the dominant and alternative cultural narratives providing a context for heroic characters and actions (László, 2013), the accepted and contested norms, and the system of competing values (Jayawickreme & Di Stefano, 2012; Kinsella et al., 2015) as the existence or emergence of counter-normative sources of active minorities in dialogical relation with the majorities (Markova, 2011).

Value Permeated Dialogical Knowledge

As Allison and Goethals (2014) point out in their conceptualization of the *Heroic Leadership Dynamic*, narratives about heroes offer psychological benefits. These characters can fulfill cognitive and emotional needs by providing wisdom, meaning, hope, inspiration, and growth. As these needs are unstable and change over time, the choices of heroes also change depending on the individual's developmental stage and current life situation (Allison & Goethals, 2014).

The dynamic evolution of the heroic image does not only depend on individual change and circumstances. Since the concept of hero is value-based (Jayawickreme & Di Stefano, 2012) and radically ambivalent (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2017; Franco et al., 2011), it implicitly defines what is considered good and bad in the present society. However, the meaning of good/bad, unjust/just, at a social level changes over time, and it is continuously negotiated between parties or imposed by those with power upon communication fields. As Foucault points out in his debate with Chomsky on human nature (1971) that justice is “an idea invented and applied in different types of society as an instrument of a certain political and economic power, or as a weapon against this power” (Chomsky & Foucault, 2015:69). The inherent ambivalence of the hero belongs to the continuously changing intersection between the concrete (heroic) “action” and the contextual features of what is considered good or bad. In this intersection, the potential interpretations of the “action” can forge the heroic interpretations. These potential interpretations of the hero are grounded into the value system of the position of those individuals and groups which participate in these direct (about the hero) and indirect (about values) negotiation processes. For this reason, the “creation” of a hero, as a moral character embedded in a narrative, is a prospective and retrospective process at the same time, orients the future, stabilizes the present, and reinterprets the past.

Moscovici abandons the durkheimian collective representation as too much static and normatively coercive and adopts a more dynamic approach not just because of the different belongings of the individual in modern societies, but also to take into account “the representational diversity, tension and even conflict in modern life” (Rose et al., 1995:3). Moscovici (1988) distinguished among the coercive and widely consensual *hegemonic*, the differentiated but not incompatible *emancipated* and the conflict or tension based *polemical* representations. In this way, social representational fields does not construct a fully consensual reifying universe, the degree of consensuality, which permits to understand each other, reflects the power of social reality upon the individuals, while there is the agency of the individuals, or (active) minorities to question that reality or act for change. Representational diversity, ambivalent thoughts, inconsistent ideas, and tension are embedded in the very structure of social representations. This *cognitive polyphasia* reflects both how knowledge is intrinsically bound to communities and social contexts, thus changing social conditions knowledge changes as well (Moscovici, 1961/2008;

Jovchelovitch, 2002, 2007), and the agency of the individuals to act in a context with competing representations, which means also the ability to adapt or to resist to social change (Batel, 2012).

Societies and communities offer identifications to the individuals (Elcheroth et al., 2011; Tajfel, 1981); these belongings as anchoring points become the interpretative lens of the world around (Breakwell, 2001; Jovchelovitch, 1997; Lloyd & Duveen, 1991; Wagner, 1998). A few of these socially constructed categories, like nation (Anderson, 1991; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001) and gender (Duveen & Lloyd, 1986), class (Elcheroth, 2006), can become relevant in specific times even through identity politics offering a wide range of representations to their members (Dogra, 2012; Howart et al., 2014). For example, a glorifying national identity not only offer a glorious re-interpretation of the past and the role of collective victimhood (Bar-Tal et al, 2009; Rimé et al., 2015; László, 2013) or the perception of the different outgroups and minorities as threatening the unity of the nation (Cohen, 1979; Elcheroth & Spini, 2011), but also how this position thinks about gender, religion, or not thinks about class differences. Thus, identities and representational fields are strictly interwoven, more possibilities have the individuals to belong and act, more an internal dialogical work among the different roles, and their respective representational fields will arise to diminish incongruencies.

Behind the construction of heroic narratives, we find embedded morality, norms, and values of the present. Values are concepts of the desirable ways of action, which serve as cross-situational guiding principles (Ingelhart, 2000; Schwartz, 2012). Furthermore, values provide standards and criteria for the evaluation of actions and their consequences, for the justification of opinions, and they are guidelines for possible behaviors, interactions, decisions, and interpretations of the self and others (Bigazzi & Nencini, 2008). Yet, according to social representation theory, values and morality are not separated entities, but each knowledge that groups and societies accumulated in and through culture over generations are value-loaded (Markova, 2017:363), as Moscovici states arguing on specific about Human Sciences, in general about societies, by “ascribing a value to each of the possibilities perceived” people create a reference framework, “by which all else is judged” (Moscivici, 1993:362). Thus, the theory looks at the human as an “ethical being” (Markova, 2013) and question the idea of a superior and inferior knowledge permeated in human and social sciences, according to which there is a superior knowledge based on facts, science, and logics, and an inferior one based on imagination, values, and believes. These distinctions between facts and values construct an idea of neutrality and neglect the ethical choices of scientific questions as well.

The Potential of Heroes on Action

According to the theory of social representations, two processes—*anchoring* and *objectification*—underlie the emergence of new social objects that represent something previously unknown or unfamiliar. Anchoring relates the unknown to existing knowledge—inserting it “into a hierarchy of values and into its operation” (Moscovici, 1961/2008:104). Objectification is the process as a result of which the “invisible” becomes “perceptible” (Farr, 1984: 386), or something that is abstract becomes material and concrete, “integrated into social reality” (Moscovici, 1961/2008:106, 1984; Farr, 1984; Abric, 1996; Billig, 1988).

We assume that individuals' choices of their heroes objectify their value systems and its potentialities for the future, thus they use the past, reconstructing it according to move forward the ethically chosen potential future. In this way, heroes as role models offer to the individual's potential behaviors to imitate. Imitation process from an ontogenetic perspective—that of persistent imitation (Baldwin, 1894), by copying constructively experimenting and reproducing into a novel form—creates the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1933/1984 in Valsiner & van der Veer, 1993), where the child participating to joint activities of still comfortable but challenging tasks, and with the socially constructed constraints and supports reflected by the socially available others explores the potentially near future (Rogoff, 2003). Valsiner concept of zones (1987) proposes the intersection between the constraining and supporting context and the individual as free as possible activity in it. The “bounded indeterminacy” of transition from the present to the next future includes potentials that will or will not become (Valsiner, 1997; Valsiner & van der Veer, 1993). The implicit ambivalence of heroic choices inherently holds these potentials of becoming from the present to the future through creative imitation of past figures, moral exemplars. The concept of time is relevant here and concerns two of the four layers defined by Tateo and Valsiner (2015). At a psychological level, time is understood as irreversible, shared, and communicated at intersubjective level, leading to a coordination that becomes socially constraining. This irreversible time justify the heroic choice coming from the past. However, time is also a cultural construct here, containing shared historical heritage and historical characters that constitutes the context of future experiences (Tateo & Valsiner, 2015:360). The stories about heroes serve the social representations of moral codes; thus, they justify potential actions while inhibiting others. Their specific story is re-interpreted in the holder's mind, however, bounding the quality of potential future actions.

Meanwhile, for some individuals, the hero is activating, serves as a moral example to imitate in a creative way, we assume that for others heroes can be passivating as well. In these cases, individuals can outsource the moral commitment and responsibility to the hero, he or she still sacrificed her/himself to the cause, with or without obtaining results, but the price, the sacrifice was enough. In these cases, probably the (social) cause or the action interpreted as more futile, there is nothing worse than that. Another case of passivating heroic representation, when the heroic act is assumed to be accomplished because of the supreme and unachievable inner and innate qualities of the hero, with an implicit comparison and too much psychological distance, or superiority of the heroic figure leading to block the imitation process. The same psychological distancing is assumed when people choose heroes from distant contexts, for example, from a remote past, not from the ambivalence and moral choices of the more recent communicative memories, but from the dominant and institutionalized representations of cultural memories (Assman, 2011). As Assman states, the remote past is “highly formalized and institutionalized” by specialists and power (Assman, 2011:18), similar to the Durkheimian concept of collective or to Moscovici's hegemonic representations. As these memories are less debated and diffused, they allow less possibilities of interpretation and inner tension. To choose a hero from the remote past, without that tension and ambivalence, can be seen as a moral disengagement, or a choice of neutrality and leaving out present moral dilemmas (Touraine, 1985; Turner & Hamilton, 1994).

The Heroic Imagination Project, led by Zimbardo, encourages ordinary people of all nationalities and ages to commit acts of heroism. Zimbardo points out the potentially heroic quality of passivity as well: “we often think of heroics as a valiant activity, something that is clearly observable. But some forms of heroism involve passive resistance or an unwillingness to be moved” (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006:32). Thus, between potential

actions based on heroes, we can identify passivity as well, as the action itself of opposing, not acting as expected. As potential actions, potential passivities can also be offered by the choice of the figure of a hero.

Heroic Actions as Narratives

Narratives (Bruner, 2004) are social constructions relating historical events to current ones, at the same time report the collective experiences of a community, embody values and belief-systems, and represent the shared identity of the collective. Heroic actions are represented in schematic narratives which include a goal and a plan (the moral will), a performed action, the cost to pay for pursuing the specific goal (sacrifice), and the outcome of that action (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Čehajić-Clancy & Bilewicz, 2017; Labov, 2010). The specific part on which the narrator focuses gives account of the narrator's present state and potential performance (Bruner, 2004; László et al., 2013; Liu & László, 2007). According to the narrative social psychology (László, 2013; Murray, 2017), the collective experiences behind the moral order of societies and groups are organized in narrative structures; thus, the social identities of the individuals and the culturally available heroic narratives create differences in the potential directions of action in the social arena. While thinking about moral actions, focusing on the *plans* or the *actions* and *outcomes* rather than on the potential barriers and *costs* creates cognitive perspective for potentialities and stimulates action out of the ordinary. As Collins states, "there are classes of behavior that escapes from cost/benefit analysis. These include emotional behavior, altruism, and morally or value-motivated behavior generally" (Collins, 1993:203), instead of being rational decision-makers, individuals tend to focus on those information that underline their own position and motivation (Collins, 1993). When individuals describe an action as heroic, taking the perspective, the values, the motivation of the hero, or his/her actions or the achieved results they are more willing to activate similar actions, while when they create the heroic of the action through the sacrifices. Focusing on the cost/benefits of an action belongs to the decision-making of the rational man model, while individuals are more able to engage in actions of bravery when they do not focus on possible obstacles and barriers.

Neither social movements nor heroic actions, due to their dialogical nature, are always aimed at changing the political system or struggling against the prevailing social norms; they can also serve the prevailing social order with its values, norms, and ideologies. These latter actions serve restorative and protective purposes rather than innovation (Yadav, 2015). Questioning the existent normative system, due to the rise of cognitive alternatives based on the perception of the social system as unjust and/or unstable, enables the development of movements aimed at changing the current political and social order (Tajfel, 1981). However, participation in such movements not only includes the expression of alternative views on social order but also the engagement in the symbolic struggle for power, in which these particular views must overcome others (Bigazzi et al., 2019; Howarth et al., 2014; Jovchelovitch, 1997).

The last decades, we see the spread of collective actions and changes in its regulation (Nagy, 2019), the strengthening of participation to the social arena and to the communities, while there is also a strong polarization (Campbell, 2006, Down & Wilson 2008; Baldassarri & Park, 2020) all around the world fueled by identity politics (Mintchev & Moore, 2019; Tsatsanis et al., 2020; McNeil-Willson et al., 2019). Manifest is the

dialogical nature of value based knowledge related to dynamic identifications and available representations in the context, information becomes fake news between social network bubbles, and values tried to be re- and renegotiated on the surface, values concerning nature-human relation, ways of co-living, boundaries, leadership, etc. As heroes are figures from the past reinterpreted according to moral positions of the present with the aim to create potential actions in the future, their explorative analysis can highlight the persistent ethical dilemmas and potential future actions in their context.

Method

Sample

Data were collected from 974 participants recruited with convenience sampling online in 2019. We chose European countries divergent in relation to the eight units based on *traditional/secular* and *survival/self-expression* values described by the cultural map of the world value survey of Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map (2020): from *Orthodox Europe unit* Greece ($N=106$); from the *Catholic Europe unit* Italy ($N=103$), Hungary ($N=215$), France ($N=178$); from the *Protestant Europe unit* Germany ($N=172$); from the *English speaking unit* UK ($N=115$); and from the *African-Islamic unit* Turkey ($N=85$); In the other 3 units (Latin American, Confusian, and West and South Asian), no European countries were found. 429 males and 540 females aged between 18 to 82 years ($M=34.6$,

Table 1 Subsamples

Nationality	<i>N</i>	Age <i>M (SD)</i>	Gender female share of the sample, %	Education
Hungarian	215	29.76 (10.94)	61.68	29.30% high school 66.05% university (BA, MA) 2.33% elementary school 2.33% no answer
British	115	44.53 (16.03)	54.87	55.65% high school 42.61% university (BA, MA) 1.74% no answer
Greek	106	32.89 (12.29)	45.71	71.70% high school 26.42% university (BA, MA) 1.89% elementary school
German	172	34.23 (16.28)	52.91	63.37% high school 34.3% university (BA, MA) 2.33% elementary school
Italian	103	38.28 (11.77)	60.19	18.45% high school 63.11% university (BA, MA) 18.45% no answer
French	178	27.76 (8.25)	54.8	48.88% high school 49.43% university (BA, MA) 1.12% no answer
Turkish	85	37.55 (14.46)	56.47	85.88% high school 14.12% university (BA, MA)

$SD = 14.2$) constituted our sample. Descriptive data of the national subsamples are summarized in Table 1.

The national subsamples differed both in size and in mean age. The French and the Hungarian subsamples were the youngest on average, while the oldest were the British, the Italians, and the Turkish. Apart from the Greek subsample, female participants were in majority in all cases.

Instruments

The online questionnaire included the following open-ended questions: (1) *who is your personal hero?* (personal hero) and (2) *why?* (personal action); (3) *who is your national hero?* (national hero) and (4) *why?* (national action); and finally (5) *what do you think that a heroic act could be in your country nowadays?* (desired action). The open-ended questions were followed by general demographic questions (gender, age, education).

For the open-ended questions, an inductive coding scheme was developed in team-work with the 8 researchers involved (Krippendorf, 1980; Bauer, 2000; Marks & Yardley, 2004; Smith & Joffe 2013, Liu et al., 2005). The coding system applied according to the purposes of a thematic analysis based on the theoretical considerations discussed. The coding process proceeded manually in team work, while each researcher involved coded into an excel sheet with the answers of one subsample (except for the Hungarian data, splitted between two researchers), ambiguity or hesitations concerning categorisations of the answers were discussed in the team. For the heroic figures (personal and national), the same codes were applied. For their explanations, as well as the desired heroic action same codes were applied (Table 2.)

Thematic Analysis

Concerning the (1) **type of character** (Table 2), the following codes were used both for the personal and national heroes: chosen from *religion, family, fiction, sport, science, art, media*, the participant *himself/herself, military, healthcare, ordinary people, politics, history*. The distinction between the latter two categories was chronological. The *political actor* code was used for contemporary actors active during the twentieth or twenty-first century, whereas heroes from an earlier period were coded as *historical figures*. This differentiation was based on Jan Assman's distinction between communicative and cultural memory (Assman, 2011). The heroes' (2) **gender** (*woman or man*) and (3) **number** (lone individual or collective actors, such as "firemen" and "nurses") were also coded.

The thematic analysis of heroic actions (Table 2) revealed in participants' explanations for their choices of personal and national heroes and in their choices of desired collective actions was aimed at identifying the types of action considered heroic from different (personal, national, desired) perspectives in the involved nationalities. Responses to the three questions were consistently sorted into the same set of thematic categories:

1. **Type of action:** (a) *fight for something* (e.g., "fought for his country"), (b) *support for something* (e.g., "She was who in all conditions stood up for me and for the whole family. She is who gives me directions in difficult situations still today"), (c) *political act* (e.g., "She has undertaken to carry out the British Referendum choice to leave the European Union against the wishes of her political party"), (d) *creation of something* (e.g.,

Table 2 Coding scheme of the thematic analysis

Hero	Heroic action		
	Personal	National	Desired
Type of character: historical, religious, family, political, fictional, ordinary, media, self, anyone	Type of action: fight for, support, political act, creation, effort, self-sacrifice, selflessness, inner qualities Focus of narrative: plan, action, cost, outcome Purpose: stability, gradual change, radical change		
Gender: male, female, collective			
Number: individual, collective			

Table 3 Age related to the heroic choices at a personal and a national level

		Type of character						
		Political	Family	Religious	Historical	Ordinary	Fictional	No one
Measure	Question							
Age	Personal	38.83	32.16	43.95	34.3	33.11	32.87	34.11
<i>M (SD)</i>		(14.55)	(13.35)	(17.27)	(14.6)	(11.53)	(12.11)	(14.63)
	National	37.00	35.10	40.30	34.60	35.00	30.00	32.70
		(16.70)	(1.97)	(16.00)	(13.30)	(13.00)	(9.69)	(12.30)

“he made simplicity brilliant and he was able to create”), (e) *effort* (e.g., “Because he built a very successful advertising agency for over 50 years with no college education and in troubled economic times”), (f) *self-sacrifice* (e.g., “He gave his all to make me and our family happy and successful, he worked hard and gave his life to his family”) (g) *selflessness* (e.g., “She has not had an easy life and faces challenges every day, but remains positive, caring, and selfless”), (h) *inner qualities* (e.g., “For his self control and determination”).

2. **Focus of narrative:** In this case, we coded the respondents to focus on the episodic structure of the heroic action. The narrative focus can be (a) *on the plan of the hero* (e.g., “for the purity of his motivation”), (b) *focus on the action* (e.g., “Cross the ocean to explore the unknown.”), (c) *focus on the cost of the action* (e.g., “because she sacrificed her appearance and her lifestyle without being sure about the success”), (d) *focus on the outcome* (e.g., “Because risking his life he proved the Hungarian virtue in the space”).
3. **Purpose of the hero:** we also distinguished according to the purpose attributed to the heroic action, if the hero’s action is interpreted as to provide (a) *stability* (e.g., “Because he stood by the traditions, the old, customary practices, which are important to me as well.”), (b) *gradual change* (e.g., “She devoted her time to helping people and preaching tolerance”), or (c) *a radical change* (e.g., “Real revolution, to concretely change the status quo.”).

Results

The Choice of Heroic Figures

The majority of both personal and national heroes were *men* (52.88% and 54.03%, respectively). The proportion of female personal heroes (22.30%) was significantly larger than that of female national heroes (7.54%). The remaining percentage are related to collective characters (e.g., healthcare workers).

For a **personal hero**, 27.43% of the overall sample chose a *family member*, while 18.64% chose a *political actor*. The third most frequent category was *anyone* (10.26%). The most frequently chosen **national heroes** were *political actors* (22.72%), *anyone* (22.30%), *historical Figs.* (12.88%), and *ordinary people* (11.52%).

Table 4 Percentage frequencies of the chosen figures among the different subsamples

		Political	Family	Religious	Historical	Ordinary	Fictional	No one
Subsample	Question							
British	Personal	20.87	37.39	a	a	a	a	a
	National	37.39	a	a	a	a	a	a
French	Personal	17.5	16.88	a	a	10.63	21.25	12.5
	National	11.25	a	a	a	11.88	a	20
German	Personal	a	36.05	a	a	13.95	a	10.47
	National	22.67	a	a	a	14.53	a	30.23
Greek	Personal	28.3	16.98	a	24.53	a	a	11.32
	National	22.64	a	a	38.86	a	a	18.87
Hungarian	Personal	a	35.05	12.15	a	a	a	10.28
	National	15.42	a	a	21.96	14.49	a	23.36
Italian	Personal	24.27	13.59	a	a	10.68	a	16.5
	National	19.42	a	a	a	11.65	a	34.95
Turkish	Personal	51.76	27.06	a	a	a	a	a
	National	47.06	a	a	a	10.59	a	14.12

^aRelative frequency lower than 10%

Significant differences were found with one-way ANOVA in mean *age* (Table 3) across different types of personal heroes ($F(14,794)=3.218$; $p=0.000$). Those who chose *religious figures* for a **personal hero** were significantly older ($M=43.95$) than those who chose *family members* ($M=32.16$; post hoc Tukey HSD $p=0.000$), *fictional characters* ($M=32.87$; post hoc Tukey HSD $p=0.009$), *ordinary people* ($M=33.11$; post hoc Tukey HSD $p=0.015$), or *no one* ($M=34.11$; post hoc Tukey HSD $p=0.033$). Those who chose *political actors* ($M=38.83$) were older than those who chose *family members* ($M=32.16$) (post hoc Tukey HSD $p=0.000$). No age differences were found related to the choice of **national hero**.

The frequency distributions of various types of character revealed that all subsamples showed one of the highest preferences (between the 3 most chosen categories) for *political actors* both as personal and as national heroes (only Hungarians and Germans did not choose political actors as personal hero) (see Table 4). This preference was the most pronounced among Turkish participants, about half of them named a political actor both at the national (47%) and personal level (52%). As members of their respective national groups, participants tended to name popular public figures, anchoring themselves to political representatives and their ideologies (e.g., *Margaret Thatcher*, *Barack Obama*, *Angela Merkel*, *Viktor Orbán*, *Marie Curie*, *Roger Federer*).

At the personal level, *family members* (e.g., father, mother, aunt) were chosen by a relatively high proportion of participants in each subsample; among British, German, and Hungarian participants, this category was the most relevant. *Historical figures* were named in the Greek and Hungarian subsamples, and only Greek participants chose such figures the more as a personal hero too. German participants showed the highest (within group) preference for *family members* at the personal level and at both the personal and national levels this subsample chose the more *ordinary people*. *Ordinary people* were also frequently chosen as national heroes by Hungarian participants, who showed the highest preference among the subsamples for *religious figures* as personal heroes. *Fictional figures* were

chosen as personal heroes by a considerable proportion of French participants. Among Italian participants, *no choice* was the highest both for personal and national hero. At the level of within-group choices, German, Hungarian, and French participants mostly preferred to not choose a national hero.

According to the gender of the chosen personal heroes, Greek and Turkish participants show the highest percentage of male figure choices (92.58% and 76.47%), other subgroups are all around 50%, Hungarian choose the less male heroes (43.2%). The most female personal heroes are chosen among British and Hungarian participants (41.96% and 31.07%), while only the 7.41% of Greeks and 8.24% of Turkish participants choose women. Collective characters are chosen by 21.19% of the whole sample, with Italians who choose the most (30.39%) and Greeks who do not choose collective heroes (0%) (Fig. 1).

According to the gender of the chosen national heroes, both the preference of “lone” male heroes (63.18%) and collective characters (27.97%) increased for the whole population. The pattern of the different subpopulations is similar to the personal hero choice. Greeks (98.67%) and Turkish (70.59%) choose the most male figures, while in this case Italians the least (51.96%). British (18.45%), German (13.14%), French (12.59%) respondents choose above average (8.87%) female heroes. Italians choose the most collective characters (45.10%) and Greeks did not choose collective characters (0%) (Fig. 2).

The choice of collective characters (e.g., *firemen, doctors, nurses*) increases from personal heroes (21.19%) to their choice as national heroes (27.95%). Italians are those who choose them more at both levels, but nearly 1/3 of the German, Hungarian, French subsamples also prefer collectivities as heroes, while Greeks did not consider them as heroes at all (0%).

Heroic Actions: Types of Action

Of the overall sample, 22.58% explained their **choices of personal heroes** by an *inner quality* attributed to them (e.g., courage, intelligence, values, selflessness, honesty, strength), 13.09% by *the support they provided for someone*, 12.15% by *their willingness to fight for*

Fig. 1 Gender of personal heroes in the different subsamples (%)

Fig. 2 Gender of national heroes in the different subsamples (%)

a cause, and 11.62% by the *efforts they made*. A relatively high proportion of participants (18.53%) did not explain their choices (Fig. 3).

At the **national level**, a high proportion (31.62%) of the overall sample chose not to explain their choices. Those who gave an explanation primarily referred to their national heroes' *inner qualities* (16.07%), *political acts* (12.61%), or *willingness to fight for a cause* (12.18%) (Fig. 3).

Regarding the **desired actions** chosen in a national context, the highest proportions of participants in the overall sample chose *political actions* (28.99%), *support* (17.02%), and *fight* (15.44%). These results suggest that many people in the involved nationalities have a need for political change and mutual support, and they or someone else should fight for the desired change (Fig. 3).

Table 5 shows the differences in the explanations between the different subsamples. Apart from the German subsample, *fight* appears at least as a desired action in all subsamples. Participants in most subsamples chose *political acts* at the desired level, some of them at the national and personal level too, Italians, French, and Hungarians are those

Fig. 3 Heroic action explanation for the whole sample (%)

Table 5 Explanations behind choices by the different subsamples

Subsample	Quest	Fight	Support	Political act	Effort	Self-sacrifice	Selflessness	Inner quality	No description
British	Personal	15.65	26.09	a	10.43	a	a	19.13	a
	National	20.00	a	13.91	a	a	a	21.74	15.65
	Desired	27.83	32.17	13.91	a	a	a	a	a
French	Personal	14.38	a	a	13.13	a	a	18.75	28.75
	National	14.38	a	a	a	a	a	12.42	37.91
	Desired	15.59	14.65	14.65	a	a	15.92	12.10	13.38
German	Personal	a	14.88	a	13.13	a	a	22.62	18.45
	National	a	a	18.60	13.95	a	a	a	36.05
	Desired	a	16.96	30.99	15.20	a	11.11	a	a
Greek	Personal	24.53	a	12.26	a	a	a	19.81	17.92
	National	19.81	a	14.15	a	a	a	21.70	28.30
	Desired	15.09	12.26	51.89*	a	a	a	11.32	a
Hungarian	Personal	a	14.42	a	15.35	10.23	a	32.09	11.63
	National	12.15	10.28	a	a	a	a	21.50	26.17
	Desired	13.49	20.00	28.84	a	a	a	16.28	a
Italian	Personal	14.56	11.65	a	a	a	a	23.30	17.48
	National	12.62	a	a	a	a	a	12.62	41.75
	Desired	19.42	16.50	10.68	17.48	a	a	a	12.62
Turkish	Personal	a	11.76	23.53	a	a	a	12.94	34.12
	National	a	a	22.35	11.76	a	a	14.12	40.00
	Desired	12.94	a	65.88*	10.59	a	a	a	a

*Relative frequency lower than 10%; * relative frequency higher than 50%

Table 6 The purpose of heroic actions (% within subsamples)

		Stability	Gradual change	Radical change
Subsample	Question			
British	Personal	27.59	55.17	17.24
	National	16.39	75.41	8.20
	Desired	13.73	68.63	17.65
French	Personal	30.86	37.04	32.10
	National	19.12	55.88	25
	Desired	14.6	40.88	44.53
German	Personal	72.13	24.59	3.28
	National	55.56	37.37	7.07
	Desired	48.89	46.67	4.44
Greek	Personal	22.06	33.82	44.12
	National	14.29	28.57	57.14
	Desired	5.68	23.86	70.45
Hungarian	Personal	52.29	33.33	14.38
	National	28.68	38.97	32.35
	Desired	20.21	42.02	37.77
Italian	Personal	33.56	33.33	31.11
	National	13.95	65.12	20.93
	Desired	33.72	38.37	27.91
Turkish	Personal	17.65	23.53	58.52
	National	23.26	30.23	46.51
	Desired	0	39.24	60.76

who choose the least and only at the desired action level. *Support* also appeared in all subsamples, among Greeks and French only at a desired level, and among Turkish participants only at the personal level. Finally, only Hungarians referred to *self-sacrifice* (when explaining their choices of personal heroes) Table 6.

Heroic Actions: Narrative Focus

The explanations for the choices of personal and national heroes and the descriptions of the desired actions were more frequently focused *on the heroic action* itself and on the *outcome* rather than on the *plan* or on the *cost* to pay. However, this focus showed differences across the three levels. The descriptions of the **desired heroic actions** were the most *action-oriented*, while the importance of the *sacrifice* and the *outcome* was most pronounced in the **personal heroic stories**, and these stories were the least frequently focused on the *plan* (Fig. 4).

Participants focusing on different components of the personal heroic story significantly differed in age ($F(3,599)=3.802$, $p=0.010$). Those who focused on the *plan* were significantly older ($M=38.213$) than those who focused on the *sacrifice* ($M=30.943$) (post hoc Tukey HSD $p=0.008$).

A comparison of the subsamples for the narrative focus of the personal heroic story revealed that the British sample was mainly *plan*- and *action*-oriented. French, German,

Fig. 4 Narrative focus of the heroic actions in the overall sample

Italian, Turkish samples were *action*- and *outcome*-oriented, while Hungarians, and less the Greeks *sacrifice* and *outcome* oriented (Fig. 5).

Regarding the national heroic story (Fig. 6), British, French, Italian, and Turkish samples appear all as *plan*- and *action*-oriented. Germans as before and Hungarians focus mainly on *action* and *outcome*, while Greeks focus mainly only on *action*. Still, Hungarians are those who focus the most on the *cost* as well.

There were no significant differences in the narrative focus of the national heroic story concerning age.

Regarding the desired heroic story, the Turkish and the Italian subsamples placed focus on *plan* and *action*; Germans as before on *action* and *outcome*; British, Hungarians, and Greeks mainly only on the *action*, while French surprisingly on the *sacrifice* and the *action* (Fig. 7).

Participants focusing on different components of the desired heroic story show tendential differences in age ($F(3,725)=2.634$, $p=0.049$). Those who focus on the action of the desired heroic story are older ($M=35.855$) than those who are focusing on the sacrifice ($M=30.65$) (post hoc Tukey HSD $p=0.031$).

Fig. 5 Narrative focus by subsamples concerning the personal heroic choice

Fig. 6 Narrative focus by subsamples concerning the national heroic choice

Heroic Action: Purpose of the Hero

The purpose of the heroic actions showed differences across the personal, national, and desired levels. The purpose most frequently assigned to **personal heroes** was *maintaining stability* (30.47%), while **national heroes** were primarily associated with *achieving gradual change* (27.43%), and the most important **desired actions** included both *gradual* (37.83%) and *radical change* (31.08%).

Participants assigning different purposes to personal heroic actions (i.e., stability, gradual change, or radical change) showed significant differences in age ($F(3,766)=3.911$, $p=0.009$). Those who expressed a need for *stability* were significantly younger ($M=32.159$) than those who believed that heroic actions should serve either gradual change ($M=35.331$) or radical change ($M=35.750$).

Fig. 7 Narrative focus by subsamples concerning the desired action

Fig. 8 Relative frequencies of the purposes of personal, national, and desired heroic actions

The subsamples showed different tendencies in their preferences for different purposes of heroic actions. German participants primarily endorsed heroic actions aimed at maintaining *stability*, while British participants preferred actions for *gradual change*. The French subsamples showed a heterogeneous picture in terms of purposes: no particular preference was found at the personal level, while the most preferred purpose was *gradual change* at the national level, and *gradual and radical change* at the desired level. A similar pattern was shown by the Italian subsample, apart from the desired actions, which they primarily associated with *gradual* rather than *radical change*. Hungarian participants most frequently chose *stability* at the personal level, while their responses pointed out *gradual and radical change* both at the national and desired level. Greek and Turkish participants consistently preferred *radical change* at each level (Fig. 8).

Discussion

As a hero, a value-based, radically ambivalent concept that at the same time objectifies and personifies power managed good and bad in present polarized societies and contextualize into potential (in)action (Boulanger, 2019), their choice and the explanation of that choice are not an easy task (high rate of *no choice*). However, according to the choices and explanations made by our sample, we can find prototypically the contemporary lone moral man acting on the private (*family members*) and public sphere (*political actors*) of the individuals. While individuals have experiences of morally judged women only in the private sphere, the public sphere beside political actors, offers as valorous the institutionalized (Assman, 2011) remote past (historical figures) and the everyday no name heroes (ordinary people), valuing the exceptional and the ordinary in a dialogical frame. Another similar dialogical frame is captured at the private sphere of the imagined morality; the generational gap between the sacred (religious figures) and the fictive. There is also a

changing intensity and broadness of moral commitment with age, a result that could be hypothetically explained as a developmental shift or a result of generational gap. While in comparison, elders choose with the purpose of representing change from a more wider public sphere (religion and the political arena) and focus on plan and action, youngsters seeking for stability do not choose, choose ordinary people or the narrow family for moral compass and focus on the sacrifice of the heroic.

More the personal than the public, but both spheres (Jovchelovitch, 1995) offer the naturalization of the hero similarly to the mainstream theoretical definitions, which means at least two implicit psychological assumptions: the exceptionality of certain individuals (*inner qualities*) and a supreme and constant value-system according to which the exceptionality can be defined (Moscovici, 1993).

The personal sphere offers *support*, advocacy (*fighting for*), motivation (*efforts*) creating that constraining (*costs*), and supporting context of that “bounded indeterminacy” of transition (Valsiner, 1987) from the present (*action*) to the next future (*results*); however, the aim seems to be mainly *to maintain stability*. In contrast, in the public sphere, change is a request (both at the national existent and national desired level), embedded in *political acts, fight*, and solidarity (*support*). Heroes in the public sphere are people in action. While the present public sphere offers actions aimed at gradual change, the request regarding the next future is more radical.

As the inherent ambivalence of the hero belongs to the changing intersection between the concrete action and the competing values of a given socio-cultural context, we can infer from the patterns of data differences and similarities (Fig. 9). The choices of the British subsample clearly separate private (heroes: *family members*, heroic actions: *support*) and public sphere (heroes: *political actors*, heroic actions: *inner qualities and fight*) of morality. Both are activated for a gradual change, not only the action (at each level), but also the motivation of the chosen hero (personal and national) is viewed as part of the heroic act. The choices of the French subsample are much more heterogeneous and reflect the

Dimension	British	French	German	Greek	Hungarian	Italian	Turkish	
Hero	Pers.	family	fict/pol/fam	fam/ord	pol/his/fam	fam/religious	pol/æ/ord/fam	pol/fam
	Nat.	political	æ/ord/pol	æ/ord/pol	his/pol	his/pol/ord	æ/pol/ord	pol/none/ord
	Gender Coll.	M/W	M>W	M>W	MAN	M>W	M>W	MAN
		collective	collective	collective		collective	COLLECTIVE	
Heroic action	ActP	Support	*	Inner	Fight	Inner/sacrifice	Inner	*
	ActN	Inner	*	*	*	*	*	*
	Act.D	Fight	Fight/Selfless	Political act	Political act	Political act	Political act	Political act
	NFpers	P+A	A+O	A+O	C+O	C+O	A+O	A+O
	NFNat	P+A	P+A	A+O	A	A+C+O	P+A	P+A
	NFDes	A	C+A	A+O	A	A	P+A	P+A
	PPers	Grad Ch.	Gradual Ch.	Stability	Radical ch.	Stability	*	Radical ch.
	PNat	Grad Ch.	Gradual Ch.	Stability	Radical ch.	Radical+Gradual	Gradual ch.	Radical ch.
PDes	Grad Ch.	Radical/Gradual	Stability	Radical ch.	Radical+Gradual	Gradual ch.	Radical ch.	

Fig. 9 Patterns of the subsamples

above mentioned dialogical contrasts, the extraordinary (*Political actors, fictive characters*) versus the ordinary (*ordinary people, family members*), or between the imagined (fictive) and the real (*political*). While the purpose is change at each level, the cognitive polyphasia characterizes more the present (heterogeneity of the narrative focus, actions, personal, and national heroic choices) than the potential next future based on activating solidarity (because potential actions of *selflessness* and *fight* justified by a narrative of *sacrifice* and *action*). The choices of the Italian subsample reflect quite similar patterns to the French, but with a less visible next future. The German subsample seems very pragmatic to maintain *stability*, supported by the schematic narrative focus on *action* and *outcome*. They separate the private (*family members* for their *inner qualities* as personal heroes) and the public sphere (*acting political actors*) and value the efforts of the *ordinary men* (*collective characters*). Greek and Turkish subsamples' hero is a lone *man* (from the *family* or the *political arena*) seeking for *radical change* and the desired action is *political*. However, the dialogical nature of the public sphere differs between the two subsamples: for the Turkish anchored to present moral dilemmas *political actors* and *ordinary men* are in competition, and their motivation (*plan*) becomes important, Greeks anchoring is more stable between *political actors* and remote *historical characters*. While their personal choice *fight*s, *self-sacrifices* (*cost*), and obtains *results*, their national choice just *acts*. At least, the specificity of the Hungarian subsample is the representation of the hero based on his/her *sacrifice* and paid *costs* and an anchor to *remote past* or *religion*. For their private choices, *family members* and *religious figures* are chosen the most; heroism is based on their *inner quality* and the presented *sacrifice* with the aim to *maintain stability*. For the public sphere (national and desired action), the purpose become *change* (*gradual* or *radical*), however in a chaotic field of competing extraordinary individuals from cultural (*historical figures*) to communicative memories (*political figures*) as well as *ordinary people* too, with their *actions*, exhibited sacrifices (*cost*) and obtained results (outcome). And then the next future: visualized as a change, imagined at a level of the political arena (*political acts*), somehow seems a resolution from the outside.

Limitations

Qualitative analysis of data asks for decisions to take by the researcher. The first decision we made was to make an explorative study about heroes. Contributing to the wide research paradigm on the effects of moral exemplars on intergroup relations, we used the story of a Hungarian hero saving Jewish lives to diminish today's prejudice and to take collective responsibility about past events, without success. Then, we understood that the hero is a hero for us, but not for our subjects. This is why we decided to explore what the hero could mean.

We asked a few simple open-ended questions to people of different contexts, to which they answered in a very heterogeneous way using their own concepts and words, their own representations about heroes and heroic actions. We used corpus construction of "signifiers of social life" (Bauer & Aarts, 2000:23), focusing more on content analysis and less on the selection. In this way, the results are content-explorative and do not try to be representative of populations.

In our interpretation of data, we used the percentage of appearances of different thematic categories, to find out shared and differentiated patterns that could indicate potentialities in competing and sharing of content dimensions concerning heroes. The coded the-

matic categories are just a few of the possible infinite, we coded other categories as well (from the more simple of holder's gender-hero's gender, to the applicable Schwartz values, if the action involve an object, the direction of the action, etc.), but we made a choice based on presentability with the analyzed dimensions more relevant to explore the potential of (heroic) actions in their context.

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Declarations

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of Interest The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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