

## **The Politics of Heroes through the Prism of Popular Heroism**

**Abstract:** In modern day Britain, the discourse of national heroification is routinely utilised by politicians, educationalists, and cultural industry professionals, whilst also being a popular concept to describe deserving ‘do-gooders’ who contribute to British society in a myriad of ways. We argue that although this heroification discourse is enacted as a discursive device of encouraging politically and morally desirable behaviour, it is dissociated from the largely under-explored facets of contemporary popular heroism. To compensate for this gap, this paper explores public preferences for heroes using survey data representative of British adults. This analysis demonstrates a conceptual stretching in the understanding of heroism, and allows identifying age- and gender-linked dynamics which effect public choices of heroes. In particular, we demonstrate that age above all determines the preference for having a hero, but does not explain preferences for specific hero-types. The focus on gender illustrates that the landscape of popular heroism reproduces a male-dominated bias which exists in the wider political and cultural heroification discourse. Simultaneously, our study shows that if national heroification discourse in Britain remains male-centric, the landscape of popular heroism is characterised by a gendered trend towards privatisation of heroes being particularly prominent among women. In the conclusion, this paper argues for a conceptual revision and re-gendering of the national heroification discourse as a step towards both empirically grounded, and age- and gender sensitive politics of heroes and heroines.

**Keywords:** heroism, age, gender, political engagement, Britain

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## Introduction

Britain has a long-held tradition of utilising a discourse of national heroification through the production of ‘national histories [...], in which heroes and heroines seem to step out of the banal progress of calendrical time’ (Billig 1995, p.70; see also Dawson 1994; Cubitt and Warren 2000; Price 2014; Jones et al. 2014). The key cultural institutions such as the BBC (e.g., *The 100 Greatest Britons*), National Portrait Galleries in London and Edinburgh (e.g., *The Sporting Heroes Exhibition*, *The Heroes and Heroines Exhibition*) venerate heroes for their contribution to ‘the ideas of identity and nationhood’ (SNPG 2018). The biannually published Queen’s Honours lists mark the achievements of distinguished personalities and heroes who ‘serve and help Britain’ (UK Government 2017). Occasionally, members of the political elite appeal to the public to celebrate Britishness as a unique marker of national belonging and a source of inspiration by the great achievements of ‘courageous heroes’ of our age (Brown 2007a), and also by deeds of Britain’s ‘everyday heroes’, ‘the kind of heroes who live next door’ (Brown 2007b, p. 11; see also an expanded discussion of the ‘banality of heroism’ in: Allison et al. 2017).<sup>1</sup> In Britain, this discourse of national heroification is embedded within curriculums of primary and secondary school education, being most prominent in the curriculum on history and citizenship (Yeandle 2014; Power and Smith 2017). Furthermore, since the mid-2000s, there has been a move towards heroification of British Armed Forces, and all those who contributed in British wars (Kelly 2013; Basham 2016). This trend expresses itself through an increasing visibility of military-based charities, most notably Help for Heroes and other military-centric public events, including a range of government-sponsored commemorations designed to pay tribute to ‘fallen heroes’ while marking the centenary of the First World War (e.g. Pennell 2018). Finally, the national media providers are equally passionate about encouraging the public to celebrate heroes for their exceptional contribution to local communities, through such projects as a ‘local hero award’ in addition to a whole range of widely publicised initiatives which routinely utilise the concept of a hero as a means to motivate people to act responsibly in the interest of the common good (e.g. ‘Be a Hero, Don’t Let the Unflushables Win!’ humorously written on stickers attached to Virgin Trains toilet seats across the UK). Such nation-wide celebration of heroes suggests that the discourse of national heroification continues to function as a vehicle for ‘national qualities, traditions and distinctions’ (Lines 2001, p. 288-9).

Despite this rich discourse of national hero-worshipping, British popular heroism remains a largely under-explored and under-problematised subject of an academic enquiry (e.g. Power and Smith 2017). Simultaneously, the available studies of contemporary British heroism suggest that it is characterised by conflicting trends. On one hand, there continues to be a preference for utilising a traditional Victorian idea of a hero as an ultimate do-gooder (e.g. Brown 2007; Jayawickreme and Stefano 2012). This approach fits within a conventional definition of a hero as an individual whose behaviour can ‘enhance and uplift others’ thereby providing a basis for ‘modelling morals, values and ethics’ (Franco et al. 2018, p. 389). On the other hand, research into British media coverage shows a continuous erosion of this normative and morally desirable vision of heroism and its discursive convergence with celebrity culture, resulting in hero-icons, hero-stars, hero-celebrities and hero-villains (Lines 2001; Parry 2009; see discussion of celebrity culture in Turner 2010; Street 2012). Remarkably, as research attests, both elite- and media-driven discourses of national heroification in Britain construct the male-centric conceptualisation of a hero and systematically marginalise heroines (Lines 2001; Parry 2009). For example, our preliminary assessment of the modern political discourse gauged from the UK Government portal ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)) also suggests that heroism continues to function as a masculine discursive device with an internet search for ‘a hero’ generating over 1038 links to uploaded documents with the marginal number of references to women as ‘heroes’ along with only 18 mentions of ‘heroines’ during the same time period, with references to ‘heroines’ mostly incorporated in the documents concerning traditionally feminine occupations such as education and welfare (UK Gov 2018). By focusing on hero-figures nominated by a nationwide representative sample of British population, this paper approaches these contradictions. Through this analysis, it bridges a gap in academic scholarship relating to contemporary popular heroism in Britain, while also aiming to contribute to debates on the socio-political nature of heroism in modern Western democracies.

Our conceptual approach to popular heroism draws upon two sets of literature, including a rich political history scholarship referring to British imperial and colonial heroes, heroes of exploration and everyday heroes of Victorian Britain (e.g. Dawson 1994; Cubitt and Warren 2000; Jones et al. 2014; Price 2014), alongside a large body of political socialisation literature in conjunction with research generated within the expanding field of heroism science placed within the wider field of humanistic and political psychology (e.g. Lookwood and Kunda 1997; Gibson 2004; Ranking and Eagly 2008; Allison and Goethals 2011; Allison et al. 2017; Kinsella

et al. 2015; Kinsella et al. 2017; Franco et al. 2018). Although we build our analysis on this interdisciplinary scholarship, we however refrain from identifying heroism as solely an expression of inner psychological necessity for virtuous and prosocial behaviour as widely accepted within socio-psychological literature and argued within many prominent works representing heroism science cited above. Instead, we adopt Power and Smith's (2017, p.590) and Cubitt's (2000) approach and explore heroism as a culturally specific socio-political construction which simultaneously engenders and co-constitutes identities of social groups whilst also functioning as an important resource of identification with a distinctive political community. As this community exists in a particular time and space (Billig 1995, p. 67), heroism as a socio-political construction takes on particular qualities and dynamics typical for particular, in our case, contemporary British socio-political context.

An analysis of current academic scholarship presents us with the difficult dilemma of aligning choices of heroes with preferences for role models. Scholarship on the facets of modern heroism utilises two methodological approaches. In the first instance, there is a substantial group of scholars who commonly use the terms 'hero', 'role model' or 'admired/inspirational adults' interchangeably, without elaborating on contextual differences between these categories (Lines 2001; Parry 2009; Anderson and Cavallaro 2012; Estrada et al. 2015; Power and Smith 2017). Secondly, there is a growing body of literature within heroism science which focuses on different functions fulfilled by heroes and role models (Allison and Goethals 2011; Franco et al. 2011; Allison et al. 2017; Franco et al. 2018). Importantly, this literature identifies that 'although their [heroes'] exceptional behaviour is normally out of reach of regular people [...], heroes still appear to produce motivational assimilation effects' similar to role models effects' (Kinsella 2015, p.8; see also Lookwood and Kunda 1997). Drawing on this academic debate, in this paper we infer that public preferences for heroes may align with preferences for role models.<sup>2</sup>

Compensating for a scarcity of empirical research on popular heroism in modern day Britain, this paper assesses the public preferences for different types of heroes and identifies age and gender as key determinants which effect choices of hero-figures. The focus on these two causal factors is justified by the importance of generational and gender-based differences for the understanding of heroism as a vehicle for political socialisation and identity building (e.g., Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007; Schutjens et al. 2010; van Deth et al. 2011; Beaman et al. 2012; Latu et al. 2013; Allison et al. 2017; Franco et al. 2018). Specifically, this paper serves as an

invitation to educators, cultural industry professionals and policy makers in Britain to re-assess current approaches to heroism while implementing educational, citizenship-based and political participation initiatives designed to reengage with young people and women, in order to counteract their growing alienation from politics (Hodges and Park 2013; Fox 2014; Henn and Foard 2014). Ultimately, our analysis urges re-conceptualisation, re-gendering within the wider debate about who a modern hero/heroine is, and how public deliberation over heroes, heroines and heroism as a whole can evolve into a productive resource of politics.

The novelty of our research is determined by an original dataset representative of public opinion of British adults (n=1,683; conducted by YouGov 2015), rigorous analysis and contributions to the re-conceptualisation of popular heroism as a resource of politics. It is important to emphasise that the absolute majority of available studies regarding heroes and heroism in modern Western societies has been done on unrepresentative samples (e.g. Allison and Goethals 2011; Franco et al. 2018). For example, the substantial proportion of empirical studies of heroes and heroism focuses on hero-figures chosen by children and adolescents (e.g., Gibbons and Stiles 2004; Estrada et al. 2015; Power and Smith 2017). This research design substantially impedes the determination of possible age-linked effects thereby implying that young people would more prefer ‘unworthy’ or morally questionable hero-celebrities, as opposed to supposedly morally superior hero-figures admired by older generations. Much research on the gendering of heroism is also based on small group purposive and/or convenience samples, which again substantially limits the generalisability and validity of the findings (e.g., Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Rankin and Eagly 2008; Beaman et al. 2012; Kinsella et al. 2017). Finally, to our knowledge, most existing studies of heroes and heroism in modern Western democracies effectively guide participants by pre-selecting types of heroes or their character traits or introducing the restrictions on the ‘appropriate’ types of heroes. For example, it is common to set a restriction on nominating parents and family members as heroes (e.g. Power and Smith 2017) and introducing an additional requirement to separately nominate both heroes and heroines (e.g. Rankin and Eagly 2008). This paper asserts that such probing of participants leads to a biased analysis. Therefore, in this study, we utilise an ‘open-ended’ question format as a means of gauging a range of popular associations with heroes of modern day Britain.

### **Heroes and heroism: towards the interdisciplinary approach**

Most research on heroism in Western democracies begins with a reference to a classical definition of a hero cited from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) (Lines 2001; Jones 2007; Rankin and Eagly 2008; Parry 2009; Allison and Goethals 2011; Jayawickreme and Stefano 2012; Goethals and Allison 2012; Kinsella et al. 2015; Allison 2016; Allison et al. 2017; Franco et al. 2018). Scholars trace the linguistic and historic origin of the term back to antiquity, and typically characterise heroes as possessors of exceptional moral qualities, courage, bravery, and other primarily masculine character traits (OED 2018). Through introducing this dictionary-based definition, these studies attempt to demonstrate that heroism had formed one of the cornerstones of the Western civilisation while also being a powerful concept which has the potential to reveal, ‘what is right with human nature’ (Franco et al. 2018, p. 386). However, some scholars have increasingly criticised this dictionary-based approach for its insensitivity to the multitude of contextually depending meanings attributed to heroes and heroism (Cubitt 2000; Jones 2007; Parry 2009; Jones et al. 2014). This critique emphasises that heroism needs to be studied within a specific socio-political and cultural context and to be explored through the focus on the ways in ‘which heroes have been represented’, and how ‘their lives and personalities have been imaginatively constructed and embellished’ through formal honours, museums, memorials, literature and entertainment (Cubitt 2000, p.1). Importantly, although this constructivist school of British historical analysis of heroism has produced a solid body of scholarship relating to the representations of British ‘imperial’ and ‘colonial’ heroes (Jones et al. 2014), British heroes of polar exploration (Jones 2007) and British military heroes (Dawson 1994), it has been characterised by the focus on ‘the representation of heroic icons, than on their reception’ (Price 2014, p. 13). This outcome resulted from the focus on the historic representations and the construction of historically contingent ‘heroic reputations’ gauged from archive records, studies of memorials and historic media coverage as the main empirical measurements of the public ‘emotional investment’ in British heroes (see discussion in Cubitt 2000). Approaching this gap, we focus on the analysis of public perceptions of heroism as a means to gauge ‘reception’ of heroes while attempting to further expand our understanding of the effects of age and gender on public preferences for heroes.

For example, with regards to age and gender, Dawson’s (1994) analysis of children’s adventure literature discusses its contribution to the construction of patriotic citizenship and warrior-masculinity in Victorian Britain. Jones’s (2007) overview of gendered representations of British historic heroes emphasises the role of ‘heroic narratives’ to demark gender differences through ‘marking certain characteristics as quintessentially male, while relegating women to an

auxiliary position of mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, lovers, foes etc.’ (2007, p.440). Jones explains how this gender-unbalanced framework of heroism was problematised by heroic reputations of women, like suffragette’s leader, Christabel Pankhurst, or nurse Edith Cavell, whose behaviour challenged the conventional relationship between gender, national identity and Britishness and led to their representation as bearers of ‘masculine’ qualities, whilst simultaneously problematising their standing towards traditional femininity (2007, p. 448). Consequently, historians conclude that the male-centric conceptualisation of British heroism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reinforced the patriarchal gender order, introducing the idea of contrasting avenues for male and female heroism (e.g. Jones 2007; Cubitt 2000).

To further explore the effect of age and gender on the public choices of heroes, we engage with the large body of literature from the fields of political socialisation, political and humanistic psychology. The current scholarship, comprising mainly of the US-based studies, points towards the importance of having heroes and positive role models for children and adolescents’ socio-political development and their leadership qualities (Lookwood and Kunda 1997 and 1999; Gibson 2004; Lookwood et al. 2005; Schutjens et al. 2010; Allison and Goethals 2011; Allison et al. 2017). Importantly, most of these conclusions are based on experimental research and small group samples, with children and adolescents often forming the primary sampling category. Considering that the formative years of political socialisation extend well beyond the late-teens to at least the mid-twenties (Van der Eijk and Franklin 2009; Bartels and Jackman 2014; Grasso 2014), there is a clear need to extend the scope of analysis to other age groups.

The focus on children’s and adolescents’ preferences for heroes and role models has resulted in a popular conclusion that young people’ heroes substantially differ from those heroes admired by older age-groups. For example, research suggests that children and young people in Britain are particularly partial towards hero-celebrities (Coudry and Markham 2007; Inthorn and Street 2011). This trend is often interpreted as a negative outcome of identity building as celebrities can provide ‘at best stereotypical – and at worst a self-destructive – basis for young people’s emulation’ (Power and Smith 2017, p. 598), whilst also having a limited capacity to ‘provide any potential routes into political culture’ (Coudry and Markham 2007, p.418). Recognising these concerns, we side with Street (2012, p. 355) who argues that the impact of celebrity culture on political engagement of both British youngsters and adults remains one of the most under-explored issue of academic enquiry and warrants further research.

Finally, the political socialisation literature mostly based on the US case identifies that a substantial proportion of children and young people consider parents as heroes and attractive role models (Anderson and Cavallaro 2002; Martin 2007; Estrada et al. 2015). Importantly, the political science literature also identifies that the political engagement of parents is a critical factor for likewise fostering the political socialisation of children and adolescents (Dinas 2013; see also van Deth et al. 2011; Henn and Foard 2014). However, there is a dearth of empirical information on how these particular preferences for parents as heroes evolve with age, alongside a substantial lack of conceptual work regarding parents as recognisable hero-figures in the context of modern British society (Power and Smith 2017).

As mentioned above, the political psychology literature relating to heroism and mostly based on the experience of the US identifies a specific gendered nature within this phenomenon. For example, scholars identify the dominance of male-centric conceptualisation of heroism in the wider public discourse, discussing its strong association with male-dominated behaviours and environments (Becker and Eagly 2004; Rankin and Eagly 2008; Kinsella et al., 2017). According to this group of scholars, this male-centric hero-discourse leads to a systematic under-representation and misrepresentation of heroines, which are frequently described as ‘invisible’, ‘forgotten’, ‘hidden’ or ‘transparent’ hero-figures (e.g. Allison et al. 2017). To compensate for this gender imbalance in heroes, scholars argue for a two-fold strategy. First, there is substantial support for increasing women’s ‘visibility’ in public life. This argument links the increasing recognition of women as heroines and inspirational role models with positive educational attainments, expanding career aspirations, improving the socio-political inclusion of women (e.g., Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Lookwood 2006; Beaman et al. 2012; Latu et al. 2013; Allison et al. 2017). It also corresponds with the message sent through gender equality and gender mainstreaming policies which, since the early 1990s, are regarded as the main instruments to help overcome barriers faced by women in employment, politics and other forms of key public activities in Britain and other Western democracies (Childs 2008; Lombardo and Meier 2014).

Alternatively, there is a substantial group of scholars whose research identifies the limitations of this ‘visibility’ strategy. These scholars point towards a range of confounding factors which can equally boost or impede the positive role model effect on women’s self-identification and political engagement (Broockman 2014; Kanthak and Woon 2015). As Beauregard (2016, p.5) explains, ‘women’s representation needs to be cued’, and therefore, heroines should not only

be visible in the public domain, but they should appeal to women as such. For example, Rankin and Eagly's (2008) analysis of the gendered nature of popular heroism in the US suggests that women tend to nominate heroes 'who are personally known to participants' with their heroic actions being largely associated with consistent emotional support for family members (Rankin and Eagly 2008, p. 421). A range of factors can drive women's preferences towards personalised heroes. Firstly, women might struggle to find any similarities between themselves and the elite's choices of publically honoured heroines due to differences in class and education between female 'high flyers' and the majority of women (Durose et al. 2011). Secondly, women can either be unaware of state-sponsored heroines, or consider them as unsuccessful in their professional careers or personal life (Beauregard 2016, p. 5). Finally, women can struggle to associate with publically celebrated heroines due to a systematic misrepresentation of their qualities in the mass media. For instance, throughout the 2000s, high-achieving female sport stars in Britain were frequently 'marginalised, trivialised and objectified' making 'feminine sports heroines both invisible and questionable as sporting role models for young girls' (Lines 2001, p. 286; Kian et al. 2013). Our empirical analysis draws on these ideas, while debating the implications of age- and gender-linked heroism for citizenship education and political engagement.

## **‘Heroes of Our Time’: Data, hypotheses and methods of analysis**

### ***Data***

This paper results from a wider the AHRC-funded ‘The Hero Project’ (RG13113-10, 2015-16), which examined the evolving meaning of heroism in Britain, encapsulated in historic, literary and media representations of British heroes. This research project collected a wide range of qualitative data including archive data relating to British colonial heroes, heroes of mountaineering, and also thematic discussions with secondary school children in cooperation with the Educational Department of the National Portrait Gallery of Scotland (n=69).<sup>3</sup> These data inform our hypotheses, and are utilised in enriching the interpretations of the findings. However, in this paper, we focus on the analysis of quantitative, individual-level survey data from an online survey conducted by YouGov on a representative sample of the British population (n=1,683) in 15-16 March 2015 (YouGov 2015).<sup>4</sup> This analysis allows for an empirical testing of the causal effects of age and gender on choices of popular heroes constructing a solid background for future research of heroism in Britain.

Specifically, the dependent variables are constructed on the basis of the following survey questions:

- ‘Would you say that you do or do not have a hero or heroes?’ (binary);
- ‘Name Your Biggest Hero’ – a type-in question for those who reported having a hero.

As the research team did not control the phrasing of the questions, the design of the open-ended questions allowed the respondents freedom in reporting their heroes. This was advantageous because it allowed for a participant-led approach to hero identification. The main limitation of this question design is that participants were able to name only one hero-figure.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, although the survey was conducted by YouGov, the research team completed coding of heroes independently from them to be able to address the research questions. Each reported hero (an answer to the question ‘Name Your Biggest Hero’) has been classified according to

- (1) the primary occupation or relationship to the respondent, thus, feeding into the *herotype* variable. Members of the respondent’s family (mother, father, son, daughter, etc.) were coded as personal (family) heroes, whereas personalities with a more public profile were coded as public heroes. The latter were grouped by their primary occupation (see Table 1 for examples). Note that heroes with multiple career paths (e.g., Nelson Mandela was an activist and a politician, Muhammad Ali was a sportsman and an activist) were coded by the occupation, which launched their public profiles. For instance, Mandela’s role as

a politician was the result of his political activism, hence, he is coded as an activist, and Muhammad Ali's fame and cult status emerged of the back of his sports career.

(2) their biological sex as men and women. The research team use the term 'hero' for references to male and female heroes in general, yet also adopts the term 'heroine' when discussing female heroes in particular.

Using an open-ended type-in question produced a massive variation in personalities regarded as heroes, which necessitated the grouping of heroes in hero types as illustrated in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 demonstrates that just under 1/3 of Britons (29.8 per cent) acknowledged having a hero, unlike, for instance, in the US where nearly half of the population expressed preferences for having a hero (Dahgreen 2015).<sup>6</sup> This suggests that the majority of the population sampled (70.2 per cent) do not consciously associate themselves with the concept of heroism, despite the prominence of the national heroification discourse outlined in the introduction to this paper. This finding suggests that although elites can continue to utilise heroism as a resource of national identity building, this approach would not necessarily find support within the wider population, suggesting that other identity markers may be more appealing to the electorate.

Furthermore, the public perception of popular hero-types is characterised by the conceptual stretching of heroism as in our study, the most popular categories of hero-figures include family members (mostly parents), celebrities and sport personalities, followed by politicians, human rights activists and military heroes. This list of heroes diverges from dictionary-based (OED 2018) and elite-driven approaches to heroism incorporating deserving do-gooders promoted through mass media and educational institutions (Lines 2001; Parry 2009; Power and Smith 2017), as well as personalities whose heroic standing is defined by their personal importance to respondents in addition to those whose 'heroism' does not adhere to the Victorian era standards of prosocial behaviour or moral values (e.g. Jeremy Clarkson may be a primary example of this deviation from the Victorian hero-norm). Our findings also cast doubt on a popular assumption which links contemporary heroism with increasing support for the British Armed Forces (e.g. Kelly 2013), and suggests that popular heroism in Britain has less militaristic and more 'banal' nature, replicating trends in the US (e.g. Allison 2016, p.5).

### ***Hypotheses and methods of analysis***

The empirical analysis is based on three hypotheses. The first one tests the effect of age on choices of heroes and draws on the arguments of political socialisation literature which indicates that between 14 and 25 years of age, young people are most receptive to external influences (Grasso 2014), and therefore, seek out examples to emulate through their behaviour and identity building (Van der Eijk and Franklin 2009). This argument suggests that we should expect to see differences in the probability of having heroes between different age groups, especially between under-25s and older respondents. We hypothesise that:

*H1: Under 25s are more likely to report having a hero compared to other age groups.*

We test the hypothesis using logistic regression on the dichotomous variable *hero* (those who reported having a personal hero coded as 1, those who did not as 0), and the *age group* variable as a categorical, with ‘under-25s’ being the reference group as the main predictor variable. We control for gender, vote intention, income and region. The choice of controls is determined by previous research, but is limited by the range of measures available in the survey. In particular, gender is identified as an important confounding factor which determines perceptions of heroes. We do not introduce an interaction term for age and gender, as political socialisation literature does not suggest that men and women have different formative years (Lockwood 2006; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007; Kinsella et al. 2017).

However, drawing on previous political socialisation research, we control for specific predictors of political behaviours and attitudes, such as social class and party partisanship (Whiteley 2012; Grasso 2014), as well as regional differences, especially in the light of devolving political powers in the UK (Curtice and Seyd 2001; Pattie et al. 2004). Considering no previous analysis exists regarding how these factors might affect the choice of heroes, we do not stipulate separate hypotheses for these variables, and subsequently adopt an exploratory approach to interpreting regression coefficients for these indicators.

Drawing upon respondents’ answers to the open-ended question as the dependent variable, the second hypothesis explores the predictors of choosing public figures vs. personal figures as heroes. This analysis applies a binary variable (DV2) *herotype* - having a public figure hero (0) or having a personal (family) hero (1). While this variable type limits the explanatory potential

of the analysis, our choice is justified by the design of the survey in which the respondents were asked to name only one hero. The analysis tests the following hypothesis:

*H2: Women have a higher probability of having a personal (family) hero, and men have a higher probability of having a public hero-figure.*

This expectation is based on two arguments. The first argument refers to invisibility of heroines in Western democracies (Rankin and Eagly 2008; Estrada et al. 2015; Kinsella et al. 2017). Table 1 provides additional support for this argument with 75.3 per cent of all reported heroes in our sample being represented by male figures, primarily known for their achievements in the public domain. The second argument suggests that the male-centric conceptualisation of heroism can be reinforced through the persistent traditional gender role divide and gender stereotypes (Kinsella et al. 2017), with men pursuing careers in public avenues, and women being primarily responsible for family-centred activities (Barreto et al. 2009; Hodges and Park 2013). We test this hypothesis by performing logistic regression analysis on binary dependent variables (DV2) with gender (women = 1; men = 0) as the key predictor. We control for standard socio-demographic and political characteristics such as age, vote intention (the best proxy for political leanings we have in the dataset), region and income, as in the first set of analyses.

In order to further examine the relationship between gender of the respondent and gender of heroes, we also hypothesise that:

*H3: Men and women tend to choose same-sex heroes.*

This expectation is based on evidence from political psychology research conducted mostly on children and adolescents (Lockwood 2006; Holub et al. 2008; Yancey et al. 2011; Estrada et al. 2015). We test this hypothesis by performing a logistic regression on the *hero-gender* dichotomous variable that records the sex of reported heroes using the gender of respondents as the main independent variable. Female heroes are coded as 1, and male heroes as 0. Additionally, to account for the possibility of an interaction between gender and age, which was suggested by some studies (e.g., Estrada et al. 2015), though never explicitly tested, we introduce an interaction term of gender and age into the model. Finally, we employ the same control variables that are used to test *H1* and *H2*.

The data is weighted to be representative of the adult UK population by weights designed by YouGov, and also by standard socio-demographics (e.g., age, gender, social class, region), alongside vote choice at the previous election and finally, newspaper readership. Targets are derived from the Census, large-scale probability surveys, the results of the previous general election, and official ONS estimates (YouGov 2015a). All the covariates, except for the gender of respondents and the gender of chosen heroes, are inputted as categorical variables to account for the potential of curvilinear effects. Our analytical models also account for the effects of confounding factors (i.e. socio-demographic and environmental factors), thereby increasing the overall robustness of the analysis.

### **Analysis: identifying the effects of age and gender on popular heroism**

Descriptive statistics show major differences in the percentage of under-25s reporting to have a hero, which, by contrast, is much higher than that of other age groups. Not surprisingly, the largest gap is between under-25s and the over-60 age group – at 15 per cent – with more than half of this difference emerging in the middle age groups, i.e. 25 to 39 and 40-59 years of age. This clearly suggests that major differences can be anticipated between the youngest and oldest age groups surveyed, whilst the relationship between having a hero and age for people between 25 and 59 is less pronounced. The fact that there is a bounce up in the probability of having a hero for the 40 to 59 age group also suggests a curvilinear relationship between age and preferences for heroism, rather than a steady decline in the probability of having a hero as one grows older. This finding suggests that further research is needed to explain the identified generational differences.

The regression analysis illustrated in Figure 1 supports these observations. In particular, the logistic regressions show no gendered effect on the probability of having a hero, whereas age consistently indicates a strong and significant effect on the preferences for heroism. Contrasts between the over-60s and under-25s are particularly striking, and increase in magnitude with the inclusion of sufficient controls such as vote intention, region and income, which also improve the model fit. Overall, the analysis partially supports H1 of this study by demonstrating that there is a negative, statistically significant effect of age on the probability of having a hero.

[Figure 1 about here]

Descriptive statistics are also used to look at the relationship between age and preferences for specific hero-types. In the literature, several studies imply that young people are more susceptible to choosing heroes based on both mass media and celebrity culture (Turner 2010; Street 2012), rather than older generations who supposedly selected primarily political, religious and military figures as heroes (Couldry and Markham 2007; Parry 2009; Power and Smith 2017). Our assessment, based on the nation-wide representative sample, does not support this interpretation. On the contrary, our analysis suggests that there are no major differences in preferences for the specific types of heroes between under-25s and over 25s. Both groups have the same top preferential heroes, including family members, celebrities and sport stars. Therefore, both groups appear to be exposed to the personalisation of popular heroism, media-driven celebrity culture and less substantially to sport-centred heroification. This outcome posits that it is important to avoid age-stereotyping whilst setting up a framework for citizenship education and political engagement initiatives.

Although gender has no effect on the probability of having a hero, it is nevertheless a key factor in explaining preferences for a specific hero-type. Drawing on observational evidence from Table 1, dependent variables ‘having a public figure hero’ and ‘having a personal (family) hero’ are used for an analysis of the effects of gender on the choice of a particular hero-type. This analysis produces the most striking result. Indeed, when looking at the differences in percentages of men and women reporting having public or personal figures as heroes, only 5.9 per cent of men have a personal hero, compared to 12.2 per cent of women. Similarly, a quarter of men report having a public figure as a hero, compared to less than 16 per cent of women. These differences are in line with H2, which suggests that women tend to identify personally known individuals (mostly family members) as heroes, whereas men’s preferences are primarily directed towards public figures.

Furthermore, our preliminary analysis shows that although both groups are exposed to celebrity culture, as celebrities occupy the second and third preferential position for women and men retrospectively, the remaining choices diverge substantially between two groups. For example, men choose sport personalities as their second-best type of heroes (also see in Parry 2009; Power and Smith 2017), and elected politicians as their fourth-best type of heroes, whereas women overlook sport personalities, and instead apportion significant support for human rights activists, rather than elected politicians. For example, women tend to identify Cicely Saunders, Nelson Mandela, Malala Yusafzai and Martin Luther King twice as frequently as men. This

observation highlights a deeply gendered nature of popular heroism demonstrating trends towards both personalisation and non-electoral political activism as those most favoured by women in Britain (e.g. Childs 2008).

The logistic regression analysis supports the descriptive statistics and demonstrates that gender has a strong, positive, statistically significant effect on the probability of having a personal (family) hero, whilst having a negative effect towards claiming a public figure as a hero (Figure 2).

[Figure 2 about here]

This finding presents us with a conceptual conundrum. On the one hand, it can be seen as a demonstration that in Britain, as in other Western democracies, support for gender equality policy has had limited impact on the traditional gender divide, which aligns men with the public domain and women with the private sphere (Holub et al. 2008; Estrada et al. 2015; Kinsella et al. 2017). On the other hand, this result can be symptomatic of the convergence between a gender bias in the discourse of national heroification outlined in the introduction to this paper, and popular heroism, which both associate the concept of heroes with masculinity replicating public vs. private divide. Here, it is important to remind readers that in our study the contemporary outlook of popular heroism in Britain is male-centred, with female heroes being reported three times less than male heroes (113 to 333). This result is comparable with other published lists of British heroes (BBC 2002), and findings from a recent study of young people's heroes, which has demonstrated 'an over-representation of men in nearly all professional categories' (Power and Smith 2017, p.597).

Finally, our analysis provides partial support for a pattern of same-sex choices linked to *H3*. In our study, men tend to choose male heroes (87.9 to 12.1 per cent) with women leaning towards gender balanced choices, but still preferring male heroes to female ones (59.4 to 40.6 per cent). This result can also be reflective of the male-centric discourse of national heroification, which is reinforced through the invisibility and misrepresentation of heroines in the British media and politics (Lines 2001; Parry 2009).

When comparing male and female heroes separately, there is a clear pattern of same-sex choices – with 3/4 of heroines favoured by women and 2/3 of male heroes chosen by men. The logistic regression analysis provides further support for *H3* by clearly indicating the probability of

choosing a heroine is substantively higher for women compared to men (coef. = 3.452\*\*) (Figure 3).

[Figure 3 about here]

This finding challenges a popular argument that women have to be prompted to identify same-sex heroes and role models. For example, Estrada's study suggests 'girls tend to choose female role models when presented with a non-biased pool of models' (2015, p. 82) when bias is associated with prompting participants to name public and personal heroes. In Estrada's study, the same-sex pattern emerged when girls were asked to identify personally known admired adults/heroes, whereas in our survey, the pattern of same-sex choices emerged without being prompted by researchers. This finding highlights the gendered nature of popular heroism in Britain, pointing towards the compounding effect of gender on the hero-type choices.

Finally, we observe positive effects from all age groups on the choice of a heroine compared to the under 25s (though none of them are statistically significant). Effects from all regions compared to London are, by contrast, negative – and significant for the South of England. Although far from conclusive, these trends speak to arguments put forth by broader politics literature, which argues that younger people tend to be liberal and equality- or rights-oriented (Pattie et al. 2004, p. 71), alongside residents of London who are claimed to be more socially liberal.

### **Discussion: towards re-conceptualisation and re-gendering of heroism**

Our analysis of popular heroism problematises an urgent need for a substantial reconceptualization of citizenship education and political engagement projects exercised through elite-driven national heroification discourse. Currently, this discourse leans towards utilising a dictionary-based normative and male-centric conceptualisation of heroism as prosocial, deserving and political and morally exemplary behaviour, while demonstrating an increasing disengagement of political and cultural elites from popular perceptions of heroism in modern day Britain. First and foremost, our study shows that the concept of a hero, including the hero as an ultimate do-gooder or hero as celebrity, resonates with only a third of the population. This suggests that there are other meaningful identity markers through which British society expresses itself. Furthermore, a group of those with whom the concept of a hero

continues to resonate is divided between the supporters of a public figure as a hero, and those who personalise heroes and heroism. On one hand, preferences of supporters of heroes as ‘exemplary’ and deserving personalities replicates a list of heroes frequently promoted through national cultural institutions, education and the mass media, demonstrating the contemporary relevance of Cubitt’s approach to British heroes (2000). On the other hand, the fact that our study generated a substantial number of respondents who consider their parents and relatives as heroes, demonstrates both a clear departure from national heroification of ‘exemplary’ individuals and deserving do-gooders, and a move towards the concept of heroism, characterised by the personal importance attached to individuals. This personalised vision of heroism challenges the idea that heroes make sacrifices solely in the name of the national and local community, lead exceptional lives, or perform ‘life-risking activities in extraordinary circumstances’ as suggested by Price (2014) and Brown (2007b) in their discussion of everyday British heroes and reiterated in the heroism science literature referring to the ‘banality of heroism’ which ‘can be carried out by all’ (Franco et al. 2018, p. 386). Expanding on this conclusion, our study shows that British public does not only feel passionate about the idea of ‘anyone becoming a hero’, but it also is ready to individualise heroism as well as to ascribe heroic behaviours and values to family members, including parents, grandparents, siblings and children. Indeed, this idea was eloquently expressed by school children during one of the group discussions.

*...There isn't a particular body image, gender, race or ability. It is what they do. They all look different, some have like superpowers, others may look like ordinary people'.  
...what shouldn't they look like??? A hero can be anyone. A hero can be an old lady with pearls and her collar done all the way up or a male stripper; a hero should be a hero to an individual, they can't be universal...' (SNPG 2015).*

From this perspective, popular heroification discourse not only experiences a conceptual stretching, but suggests that parents and other types of individualised hero-figures cannot be dismissed as unfitting heroes for the purposes of citizenship education and political engagement. Instead, more attention, along with conceptual and empirical work, should be invested into empirically assessing the possible implications of this individualised heroism on political socialisation. This finding gives us the option of fostering critical engagement with heroism through the focus on which hero-traits and hero-deeds could potentially provide a resource for productive engagement with politics, instead of narrowing down the heroification

discourse to a list of ‘exemplary’ state-sponsored hero-figures. This argument leads us to a discussion regarding the effects of age on preferences for heroism.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, our statistical analysis shows that being younger not only makes one more susceptible to the influence of a hero, but substantially increases the probability (and demand) for such heroic figures. This finding is reinforced through the materials from group discussions with school children most of whom associate heroes with demonstration of prosocial altruistic behaviours and values. The examples of the most popular responses include such definitions as: a hero is ‘someone who does good, inspires people and help others’, ‘someone who is selfless’, ‘someone that you look up to – role model’, ‘a hero is someone who is admired and looked up to because they have made a difference’ (SNPG 2015). The fact that under-25s seek heroes to emulate, may resonate with educators, cultural industry professionals and politicians, who are often keen to promote desirable values and behaviours through stories about the lives and deeds of distinguished personalities who made ‘Britain proud’ (Brown 2007b). However, our analysis highlights possible tensions between an elite-driven heroification, and young people’s own choices for hero-figures. As our analysis shows, young people choose parents, celebrities and sports people as their most preferential hero-types. These preferences do not offer a clear pathway for citizenship education and engagement with politics. The motivational effect of a whole range of parental styles on political socialisation remains one of the underexplored areas of research (Dinas 2013), whereas associations with celebrities can discourage young people’s engagement with electoral party-based politics (Couldry and Markham 2007). Whilst recognising the limitations of celebrity culture to engage young people in the political process, we side with Street (2012), who stands against an outright rejection of celebrity politics as a resource of political engagement. We also agree with Power and Smith (2017) that the first step in revisiting national heroification discourse in the British education system lays in steps which can ‘bring young people’s heroes and villains into the curriculum as objects of critical scrutiny’ (2017, p. 599). Based on our findings, it can be argued that modern day popular heroism resists a singular definitional categorisation being an essentially multifaced phenomenon which needs to be critically explored and empirically tested.

Most importantly, our analysis highlights a gendered essence of popular heroism in Britain. Similar to other cross-country comparison studies, we observe the absolute dominance of male personalities in the list of popular hero-figures (e.g. Rankin and Eagly 2008; Estrada et al. 2015; Power and Smith 2017; Kinsella et al. 2017). The current landscape of popular heroism is

characterised by a substantial gender gap, which may be seen as reflective of the larger gender imbalance in political representation and participation of women in Britain (Childs 2008 and 2016). Faced with similar results, Estrada et al. (2015) and Lines (2001) attribute this failure of the gender equality agenda to the engrained mass media bias which sustains gender stereotyping and systematically ignores, trivialises and misrepresents women's qualities and achievements. From Power and Smith's (2017) perspective, the absolute dominance of male heroes is also reflective of the limited progress of educational reform in Britain and signposts the necessity for developing critical literacies towards heroes and heroism (Power and Smith 2017, p. 599). Recently, there have been a range of attempts to elevate the position of women as heroines both in Britain and abroad. In Britain, substantial efforts have been made to amend a gender bias within the honours system (Dinic 2016; UK Government 2017). Globally, one of the more recent examples of addressing a gender imbalance in heroes can be seen in the production of a new series of Barbie dolls entitled 'Inspiring Women', which were released to mark the centenary of the International Women's Day (Associated Press 2018). These dolls honour an aviator, Amelia Earhart, an artist, Frida Kahlo, and the NASA mathematician Katherine Johnson amongst other personalities. This expansion of publically recognised heroines, together with consistent efforts to tackle underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women's efforts in the media and in other public spheres through critical scrutiny or gender mainstreaming, may eventually alter the male-dominated facet of popular heroism in Western democracies.

However, this 'adding deserving women heroes' strategy may also prove unsuccessful, as it ultimately ignores women's own preferences for heroes and heroines. Importantly, women in our study preferred to select personally known heroes, or tended to select heroines from a close circle of family and female friends. These trends suggest that women might not necessarily be inspired by high-achieving women who are variously rewarded by formal honours, or commemorated through the production of 'inspirational' Barbie dolls or other public forms of honouring women-heroes. We can only assume that a range of factors causes this outcome, including differences in class and education between female leaders and the majority of women as pointed out by Durose et al. (2011); a systematic misrepresentation of women's achievements in the mass media (Lines 2001; Kian et al. 2013); and finally, the high personal cost of public careers (Childs 2016). In any case, we argue that gender quotes on heroines do not automatically alter the gendered facets of popular heroism, as this phenomenon is reflective of the broader structure of gender roles, gender relations and gender stereotypes.

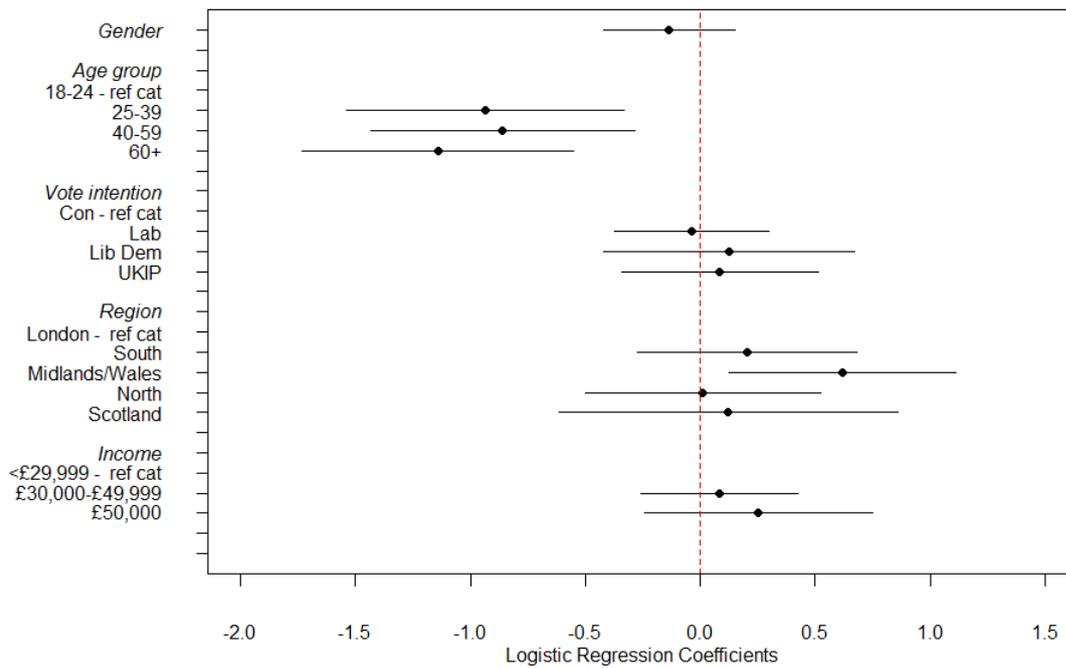
Therefore, we see the most productive pathway towards utilising heroism as a resource of citizenship education and political engagement lies in critical work that is directed at re-gendering and re-conceptualisation of heroism altogether. Elaborating on Rankin and Eagly's point (2008), we agree that the concept of a public hero should be expanded to include a wide variety of inspirational figures and activities, ranging from those who donate their time and effort for a variety of good causes, to mothers, daughters, sisters and aunts whose presence within family life is seen as inspirational by many women around them. Such heroes and heroines might not necessarily be 'high flyers' in professional or political terms, yet as long as they positively motivate women, whilst also being both relatable and approachable, they can be viewed as resources for a more gender-balanced and inclusive politics, whilst also providing effective incentives for expanding participation of women in both electoral party-based politics and a wide variety of political activism within non-electoral politics. However, we would warn against an overly simplistic association of heroines with emotional support and personal sacrifice on behalf of family members, as suggested by Rankin and Eagly (2008; see also Kinsella et al. 2017). This approach to heroism without further research can be potentially detrimental to gender parity agenda in the wider political and cultural context, as it speaks to traditional cross-cultural gender stereotypes, which typically associates women as being helpful to others, empathetic and cooperative (Bakan 1966). To offset the danger of gender stereotyping, heroism as a socio-political framework should be critically re-examined and empirically studied. Ultimately, our study posits that the processes of re-gendering and re-conceptualisation of heroification discourse complement each other, and present an opportunity to redefine facets of heroism as a resource of politics.

Table 1. Hero types and examples<sup>7</sup>

<b>Hero types</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Per cent</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<i>Family members &amp; friends</i>	Mother, father, son, daughter	9.1	154
<i>Celebrities, actors, TV presenters</i>	David Attenborough, Jeremy Clarkson, Audrey Hepburn	4.9	82
<i>Sport personalities and adventurers</i>	Steven Gerrard, Muhammed Ali, Steffi Graf	4.1	69
<i>Politicians</i>	Winston Churchill, Margaret Thatcher, Tony Benn	3.1	53
<i>Human Rights activists</i>	Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Malala Yousafzai	2.2	38
<i>Military heroes</i>	Members of the British Armed Forces, The Duke of Wellington, William Wallace, Admiral Lord Nelson	2.1	35
<i>Scientists and engineers</i>	Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Stephen Hawking, Ada Lovelace	1.4	23
<i>Religious leaders</i>	Jesus Christ, Desmond Tutu, Pope	1.2	20
<i>Writers</i>	JK Rowling, Terry Pratchett	0.9	15
<i>Fictional characters</i>	Superman, Wolverine, Dr Who, etc.	0.6	10
<i>Other<sup>8</sup></i>	Dr Noorali	0.2	3
<b>Total reported heroes</b>		<b>29.8</b>	<b>502</b>
<b>Total, no reported heroes</b>		<b>70.2</b>	<b>1181</b>
<b>Total sample</b>		<b>100</b>	<b>1683</b>

Source: YouGov survey, weighted (15-16 March 2015).

Figure 1. The effect of age, gender and controls on the probability of having a hero



Source: YouGov survey, weighted (15-16 March 2015); n = 929.

Note:

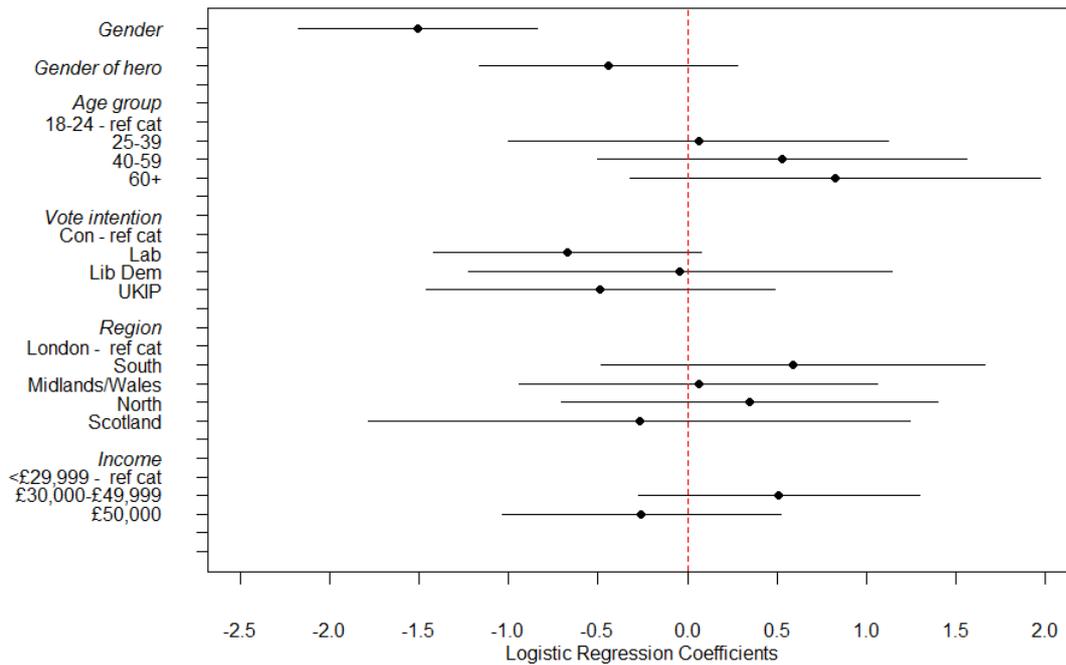
Dependent variable – *hero* (1 – has a hero, 0 – does not have a hero).

Black circles represent logistic regression coefficients. Bars on both sides of the coefficients are standard errors. If they cross the line through zero, the coefficient is not statistically significant at 95% confidence level. The further the coefficient is from the line through zero, the stronger the effect. If the coefficient is on the left-hand side of the line through zero, the effect is negative; if it is on the right-hand side, the effect is positive.

Correctly predicted cases = 68.4%

Cox & Snell R Square = 0.034, Nagelkerke R Square = 0.047

Figure 2. The effect of gender and controls on the probability of having a public figure hero



Source: YouGov survey, weighted (15-16 March 2015); n = 267.

Note:

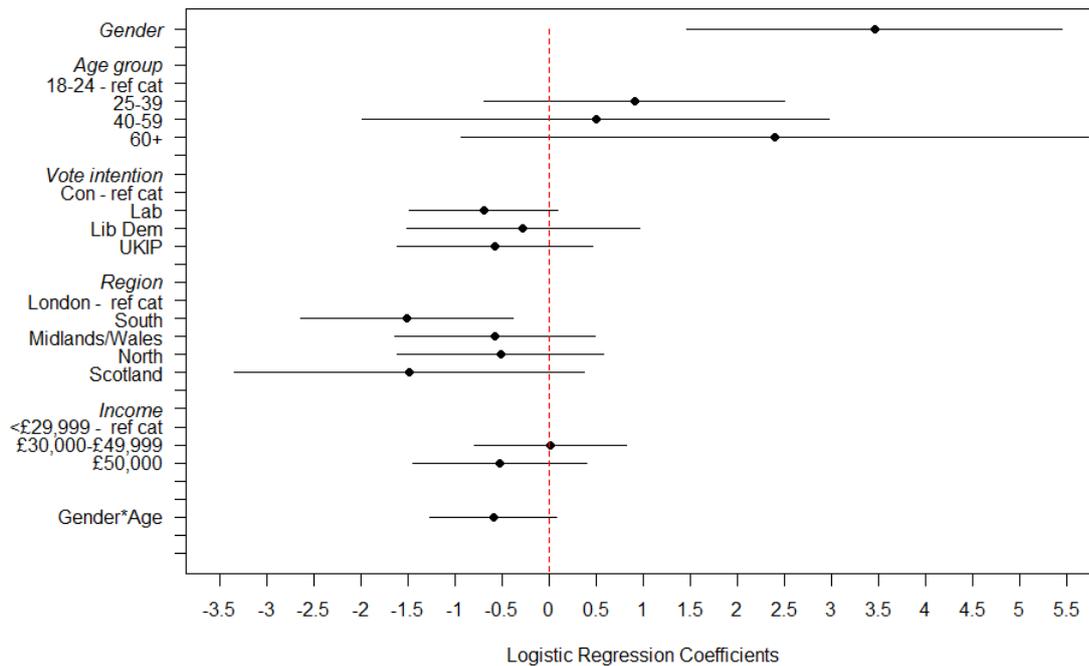
Dependent variable – *herotype* (1 – public figure hero, 0 – family/friend hero).

Black circles represent logistic regression coefficients. Bars on both sides of the coefficients are standard errors. If they cross the line through zero, the coefficient is not statistically significant at 95% confidence level. The further the coefficient is from the line through zero, the stronger the effect. If the coefficient is on the left-hand side of the line through zero, the effect is negative; if it is on the right-hand side, the effect is positive.

Correctly predicted cases = 76.7%

Cox & Snell R Square = 0.151, Nagelkerke R Square = 0.221

Figure 3. Effect of gender and controls on the preference for a female personal hero



Source: YouGov survey, weighted (15-16 March 2015); n = 267.

Note:

Dependent variable – *hero-gender* (1 – female hero, 0 – male hero).

Black circles represent logistic regression coefficients. Bars on both sides of the coefficients are standard errors. If they cross the line through zero, the coefficient is not statistically significant at 95% confidence level. The further the coefficient is from the line through zero, the stronger the effect. If the coefficient is on the left-hand side of the line through zero, the effect is negative; if it is on the right-hand side, the effect is positive.

Correctly predicted cases = 80.1%

Cox & Snell R Square = 0.22, Nagelkerke R Square = 0.328

<sup>1</sup> Soon after becoming a Prime Minister, Gordon Brown published two monographs related to heroes whom he considered vehicles for promoting Britishness (Brown 2007a and 2007b).

<sup>2</sup> The decision of aligning heroes and role models is also dictated by our dataset which uses the concept of a hero as a main conceptual tool.

<sup>3</sup> Group discussions were conducted by Robin Baillie, a Senior Outreach officer in the in the Educational Department at the National Portrait Gallery of Scotland (Edinburgh). Discussions took place between November 2015 and May 2016, and involved 69 school children between the ages of 15 and 17 years old. These data enrich the discussion section of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> The data was purchased as a part of the AHRC-funded 'The Hero Project' (RG13113-10, 2015-16).

<sup>5</sup> Some respondents ('less than') listed groups of heroes (e.g., NHS workers, firefighters, volunteers). To ensure the consistency of analysis, only individually identifiable personalities were included in the analysis, and the respondents listing more than one hero (18 in total) were dropped. The exception was the 'British military' which is treated as an individual collective (e.g. Kelly 2013; Basham 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Many studies suggest that almost everyone has at least one hero and indeed Allison and Goethals's research argues that over 95 per cent of Americans do (2001, pp. 24-25). However, despite having a large sample of 450

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interviewees, this (and most of the previous research on heroes) does not allow to generalise their findings for two reasons. Firstly, Allison and Goethals' sample has not been designed to be representative of the US population. The YouGov sample, on the other hand, has been drawn using stratified random probability sampling and weighted to be representative of the British population (excluding Northern Ireland). Secondly, their finding that most Americans have heroes is based on interviews, i.e. a conversation, which usually yield very different results to unprompted survey responses. This is due to the nature of the interaction and a greater impact of the social desirability bias, which may encourage interviewees to present a favourable image of themselves by overstating the number of their heroes and affect which heroes are mentioned in this conversation.

<sup>7</sup> The examples in Table 1 include three most popular choices of hero-figures.

<sup>8</sup> Includes unknown personalities, or ones that we did not manage to identify.

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