The (late?) modern family: The family's significance for adolescents in Germany and Israel

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A B S T R A C T

This study presents German and Israeli youth's heroes and role models. Two hundred twenty-six students from 22 high schools took part in small group interviews. Despite differences in the normative place of the family in the two cultures, the comparison reveals significant similarities between their views and what attributes the subjects assign to their families. Three main models of family members as hero arise from the data: The Self-made Person; sacrifice and pro-social action; and contending with everyday reality. The results point to a) the fading of traditional heroes from the imagination of youth in post-industrial societies; b) the substantive place the family holds in young people's lives. I suggest that the rise of uncertainty and risk in the current socio-historical constellation, contributes to adolescents' choice of figures from their immediate environments that embody safety and a moral framework.

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Introduction

The decline of great myths and venerable role models are some of the most salient features of the second half of the 20th century. Changes in national identities and new technologies combined with changes in the employment structure make life in late modernity challenging and complex (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). These changes radically affect young people's lives, as they face more insecurity and lack of certainty than ever before (Jeffery & McDowell 2004). To strengthen the rich quantitative data (Furstenberg, 2000), considerable qualitative knowledge of how adolescents understand the world and form their identity is essential (Furlong, 2009).

Involved with the changing nature of heroism in our times, Philip Zimbardo wonders on "what the term "hero" will mean for this generation is yet to be answered" (Zimbardo, Franco, & Blau, 2011: 112). Jean Twenge, writing on young people's tendencies, has recently posited that the "most likely candidate for change [is] … family orientation, which may become more salient with the economic downturn." (2013: 15). This study follows these queries and offers initial empirical answers. Using Germany and Israel as case studies, I seek to assess who might be a role model or source of inspiration for youth today, one in whom they find a beacon of moral guidance (Freedman-Doan & Eccles, 1996).

I will survey the literature describing the fading of the mythical hero and its replacement by the everyday hero. I will highlight the place of the family in both societies, and offer the rationale for the comparative nature of this study. I will then present the results, which highlight the significance of family members, especially parents, in the lives of adolescents. Finally,

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I remark on some cultural differences, but mainly on the striking similarities found, thereby adding to present knowledge and developing perspectives on the values that adolescents in late modernity hold dear.

The ascent of the everyday hero

Following Weber's thesis (Gerth, Miles & Wright 1946) on the disenchanted world, Campbell (1956), Boorstin (1978), and Porpora (2003) pointed out that mythical figures are disappearing from the public sphere in our times. These works deal with the fate of heroes in a world lacking a transcendental foundation. According to Holt and Thompson (2004), we are witnessing a redefinition of the heroic life, particularly since the second half of the 20th century. Our heroes are no longer the conquerors and victors; rather, they are defined mainly by their sacrifices. They are ordinary individuals who are no longer measured by a single act, but rather continuously work for the benefit of society in an uncelebrated, unremarkable existence.

Featherstone (1992) offered a significant sociological reference to the transition from traditional heroism to the new virtues and the conception of the ideal individual. Democratization and the rise in the influence of previously marginalized groups (e.g., women, racial minorities) have accompanied a huge cultural shift. They challenged the dominant models of the heroism and the traditional shaping of collective heroes. In a society wherein heretofore-great myths are challenged and undermined, individuals turn to fighting their battles in the everyday realm, thus "yielding the floor to" new kinds of heroes and heroines.

The examination of heroes and role models in the lives of individuals plays an important role as a tool in understanding how they face and interpret the world. This task is of even greater importance regarding adolescents, who make use of various figures in forming their identities. It appears that youth no longer idolize traditional hero figures (Pleiss & Feldhausen, 1995); heads of state, community leaders, and athletes are disappearing from young people's imagination (Freedman-Doan & Eccles, 1996). When adolescents are asked to name a specific figure as an ideal individual, they choose those with whom they have personal acquaintance (White & O'Brien, 1999), naming their parents as their heroes (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002; Staats et al., 2009). Family members were cited due to their courage, honesty, and hard work. I will now address briefly the changing nature of the family as it is addressed in the literature and some of its lacunas.

The family in late modernity

In the 1950s and 60s, the status of the family was at its peak in Western societies as a fundamental institution of modern society. The family was the accepted model of everyday life, and dominant sociological theory described it in functionalist terms, as essential in guarding and recreating society. Since the 1970s major changes in the family structure created fertile ground for continuing theoretical and empirical investigation (Bengtson, Biblarz, & Roberts, 2002; Smart, 2004) with a central focus on how it effects children and youths (Brown, 2006; Deleire & Kalil, 2002).

In this study, I neither address the various, and often contradictory definitions of the family (Levin, 1993), nor its changing demography. While definitions are vital on the macro level, they do not tell the 'stories of families' (Smart, 2004), of the individuals who form them, and of its meaning in their lives (Levin, 1993; Wyn, Lantz, & Harris, 2011). Following Dumon (1995), I argue that families are mainly "human support systems". The dimension of support (economic, social, and emotional) is central to the research into understanding the family, based on the individuals who form it. Yet, these issues are relatively unexplored. In this study I seek to partially fill the lack of cross-cultural research on relations within the family (Kwak, 2003).

According to Giddens (1991) and Beck and Beck-Gershenheim (2002), late modernity is characterized by the "detraditionalization of the family", caused by increasing individualization. Kinship and marriage are weakening, replaced by a reflective project of self-realization, unaffected by "old" categories such as gender, family ties, or religion. Despite the many changes, families still matter, as Bengtson et al. (2002) suggested, influencing young people's values, choices, and life course. In fact, as Davis (1999) claimed, never has the nuclear family been so important to adolescents' lives, at the same time that it has never been weaker as an institution. This paper will examine how adolescents see their family. Specifically, I seek to examine how the family is perceived by adolescents in Germany and Israel, and what meaning it holds in their lives.

Israel and Germany: a comparison

Israel and Germany have a fair share of commonalities on which to base a comparative study, as well as several differing fundamental aspects to make the comparison worthwhile. While both countries are post-industrial, capitalistic democracies (Lewin-Epstein, Stier, & Braun, 2006; Lewin-Epstein, Stier, Braun, & Langfeldt, 2000), they represent mirror images of two central fundamentals that lie at the heart of this study: cultural attitudes toward heroes, and the normative place of the family. After World War II, the two countries developed in opposite directions as far as social acceptance and legitimization of heroes, and their uses in cultural and educational spheres. The denial of heroes in post-1945 West German society is explained as a reaction to the Nazi regime's cult of personality (Micheal, 2005; Rodden, 2009). With the end of the Communist regime in East Germany, the word "hero" (Held) became a cultural taboo in the German lexicon. This stands in direct opposition to the Israeli nation-building that made vigorous use of heroes: Heroes were advanced as an important part of the construction of national identity, especially those related to wars and the defense of the Jewish nation (Sheffi, 2002; Shimony-Tadmor, 2003).