

# Young people's heroes in Ireland and Slovenia

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## ABSTRACT

Digital culture is becoming increasingly global and accessible. It is important to see how participation in the European Union (EU) global economic culture is changing young people's self-images. Representations of heroic figures in questionnaires given to Irish ( $n = 239$ ) and Slovenian ( $n = 389$ ) samples of 15-year-olds were examined to assess the extent to which heroes originated in film and television, and whether the heroic figures were local or global personalities. The degree to which age and gender influence choice of hero was examined within the Irish sample, which also included 10-year-olds ( $n = 316$ ). There is strong evidence that heroes in this sample were largely learned about on film and television, since family or community heroes were a minority (Ireland 23%, Slovenia 17%). Children chose male heroes more often than female heroes, though a child's sex was associated with sex of hero chosen. Family, sport and musical heroes were more important in Ireland than Slovenia, and audio-visual heroes were more important in Slovenia. In the digital age the sequence for acquisition of hero type reported in the pre-television era – proximal (family and community) to distal (beyond the neighbourhood) – seems to have disappeared.

## INTRODUCTION

Ireland and Europe are undergoing unprecedented change and there has been much discussion of the impact of this change on values and psychological patterns (Moane, 2002). From an educational and psychological point of view, it makes sense to try to explore how deep the change is for children. In this article we examine the heroes that young people choose in contemporary Ireland and Slovenia.

Heroes have been studied within a number of psychological domains including play (Fein, 1981), gender development (Ruble & Martin, 1998) and antisocial behaviour (Coie & Dodge, 1998). In addition, heroes are implicit in a number of theoretical approaches to self-development including role modelling (Ruble & Martin, 1998) and the construction of possible selves (Oyserman & Marcus, 1990a, 1990b). There were beneficial effects in an intervention to foster ethnic identity for high-risk Puerto

Rican adolescents that used discussion of heroes from their culture (Malgady, Rogler & Costantino, 1990). Duggan (2005) described evocatively this capacity of heroes to elicit emotional involvement and signal identity (in this case negatively as Duggan is an Irish rugby supporter): 'Carling [an English rugby captain] invoked in most Irishmen of my acquaintance an inexplicable and borderline psychotic hatred' (p. 10). We focus in this paper on the origins of heroes, their characteristics, their functions and their domains of action.

Gash and Conway (1997) demonstrated the influence of classroom discussion on 10-year-old children's heroes and described some differences between US and Irish children. Those discussions were successful in promoting more pro-social heroes, an issue that will be taken up here. The Irish children preferred their heroes to be famous and rich, whereas children from the US emphasised personal/social

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qualities. Family choices were more important in the US, while film and television choices were chosen more frequently by the Irish sample. At a time when Ireland is reinventing itself (Kirby, Gibbons & Cronin, 2002) it is of interest to examine whom our young citizens admire and where they come from. To what extent do young people look to the US or to Europe to find their heroes?

Of particular interest at this time of rapid change in Europe – and Ireland especially – is the balance between the individual and social world. One focus in research on cross-cultural self-development is the distinction between ‘individualism’ and ‘collectivism’ (Oyserman, Coon & Kimmelmeier, 2002). This focus is closely associated with Putnam’s (1993) concept of ‘social capital’. Community heroes, for example, often have collectivist goals and contribute to the social capital in the community. Mother Theresa would be an example of this type of hero. Since heroes allow insight into who is admired, their characteristics and functions, they provide implicit information into the relative importance of individual versus collective social values.

At a political level there has been some effort to influence the television programmes available to Europeans. The Treaty on European Union (1992) known as the ‘Treaty of Maastricht’ specifies that the Community shall take action ‘encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, supporting and supplementing their action in the following areas: ... artistic and literary creation, including in the audio-visual sector’ (Article 128.2). In addition, the Television without Frontiers directive (European Commission, 1989) makes provision to protect minors from harmful material partly because access to such material is increasingly transnational. The American film industry is enormously successful and there are many American programmes on European screens, indeed on screens globally (Le Breton, 2000). It is a truism that today global market values thrive. One tendency is for the global to submerge the local. How do societies strike a balance between the local and the global? In the creation of the EU, legislators sought to promote a European identity while safeguarding

local values. The cultural and economic forces of the US are, we suspect, less interested in local European issues. The EU has sought to curb the influence of the American film industry on a number of occasions, partly to safeguard European film industries and also for cultural reasons. The French Government, among others, has sought to safeguard cultural diversity in an enlarged Europe (Statement of Prague, 2002).

The media influence choice of hero. For example, Yeatts (1985) has shown that in the US choice of heroic figure is related to the television programmes elementary school children watch. In the sense that culture enriches the mind, heroes are profoundly cultural persons. Heroic figures not only enrich children’s experiences, but also provide them with ways of learning about their culture and their place in society (Erikson, 1980). In Asia, Goonasekera (1999) has studied the impact of multinational digital satellite technologies on children’s lives, in particular on how television programmes impinge on the child’s conception of gender differences and identity. Within the context of the EU audio-visual policy, we would do well to examine the same issue.

The amount of television watched by Europeans has been monitored. The European Commission (2001) reported in the introduction to its audio-visual policy that ‘television is the most important source of information and entertainment in European Societies, with 98% of homes having a television, and the average European watching more than 200 minutes television per day’ (p. 1). Researchers who work on television’s influence on gender development have noted that in programmes for children and adolescents, males are more frequently represented than females and that both sexes are presented as highly stereotyped (Ruble & Martin, 1998). These gender differences may play a role in the career choices of boys and girls (Curry, Trew, Turner & Hunter, 1994).

Early studies with primary and secondary school pupils prior to the television era (Hill, 1930; Stoughton & Ray, 1946) reported that girls and younger children chose proximal heroes (family and community) and boys and older

youngsters chose distal heroes (historic or public figures). Specifically, heroes developed in the context of the local micro-system (family) in younger children before the macro-system (global broader society) exerted its influence (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). However, developmental differences showing later emergence of distal heroes were not found in a study by Gash and Conway (1997). The children in that study were 9 to 10 years old and so very close in age. It is possible that the distinction between proximal-local and distal-global is blurred, as digital media are so readily available in the home. We take local or proximal to refer to family and community. A recent Irish poll (MRBI, 2003) of young people aged between 15 and 24 years indicated that 35% of them admired their parents, 15% admired other family members and 25% admired friends and neighbours. Sports and music stars were also admired at slightly lower levels. Therefore, one aim of the present study is to re-examine this issue with new data in Ireland representing a broader age group. Perhaps youngsters born at the end of the Twentieth Century, with increased access to television, will not show the developmental transition from proximal to distal heroic figures that was characteristic of young people growing up in the pre-television era.

The juxtaposition of Irish young people with those in Slovenia offers a comparison between two European cultures with on the one hand Celtic roots, and on the other differences both in terms of length of time in the EU and as independent countries. Privatisation, free trade and deregulation are part of the EU economic policy with consequences for individualisation in a broad cultural sense (Cronin, 2004). Ireland joined the European Economic Community in 1972 and has been independent since 1922. Slovenia, at the time of data collection, was about to enter the EU as a full member and has been independent since 1991. Ireland has strong historical links to the US. In the last decade over 75% of direct foreign investment in Ireland has come from the US and it may be argued that this has contributed to the individualising tendency in Irish society (Cronin, 2004). The Irish have had traditional emigration patterns to the US and are well integrated in North American

society: studies of Slovene communities show similar patterns of integration there (Halpern & Kideckel, 1983). Ireland and Slovenia each have unique linguistic traditions where cultural identity is enshrined in Irish and Slovene, languages not often spoken outside these countries. We aim to examine whether these differences and commonalities entail differences in the appeal of the heroes presented to young people in the media in each country. It may be, however, that the influence of global culture is so strong that there is really little difference between the young in Ireland and Slovenia in their choice of heroes.

The main aims of this study are: (a) to assess the importance of the influence of film and television as a source of heroic representations and (b) to identify characteristics of contemporary heroes in Ireland and Slovenia. In the Irish sample, variations due to age and sex on young people's choices of heroic figure are presented to monitor developmental changes in the heroes that are attractive to young people.

## METHOD

### Participants

The participants attended public primary or secondary schools in Ireland and Slovenia. The total sample size was 944. The Irish sample consisted of 555 children, with 316 ten-year-olds and 239 fifteen-year-olds (see Table 1). The Slovene sample consisted of 389 fifteen-year-olds. Students were mixed in socio-economic level but could be described as middle class. In comparison with Ireland, Slovenia is about a quarter the size and has a population of nearly 2 million people. Slovenia became independent in 1991 and joined the EU in 2004. The national language is Slovene.

Table 1  
*Country of participants by age by sex*

	Ireland age 10		Ireland age 15		Slovenia age 15	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Male	171	18.1	97	10.3	191	20.2
Female	145	15.4	142	15.0	198	21.0
Total	316	33.5	239	25.3	389	41.2

### Hero questionnaire

A questionnaire about heroes was constructed and used in Ireland and the US with children aged about 10 (Gash & Conway, 1997). The original questionnaire provided characteristics, domains and functions of heroes. Pilot tests in Ireland and Slovenia with children at age 10 and 15 indicated that the categories provided on the questionnaire included nearly all categories used by older participants. However, three additional heroic characteristics were added to this questionnaire: hard-working, inventive and classy. The questionnaire was translated into Slovene by the second author (who is a native speaker of the language). The first step for children in answering the questionnaire was to name their hero. Next they were asked to identify the gender, characteristics and function of the heroic character, the domain in which he or she lived, and whether they identified with this person. The 27 characteristics provided on the questionnaire are listed in Table 2. Space was provided for the respondent to include other words.

The domains provided on the questionnaire in which their hero lived were as follows: family, film or video or TV or computer games (hereafter called audio-visual), politics, the community, religion, music, sport, fashion, literature and arts/sciences, or another open-ended category. Clearly information about heroes in many domains is available in digital media. Here, the audio-visual category was restricted to actors in film, TV and video such as Bruce Willis, and in computer games like Lara Croft. The possible functions of heroes were: to entertain, to excel, to give a good example, to do good, to protect against bad things, to risk their lives for others, to demonstrate how well things can be done, and there was also an open-ended category. These open-ended categories were used so infrequently that they were excluded from the analyses. Teachers administered the questionnaires in classrooms, beginning by reading the list of domains in which heroic figures might live to the pupils. Administration of the questionnaire took about 20 minutes.

TABLE 2

Percentage choices of heroic characteristics by gender, age (Ireland only) and country

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	Ireland				Slovenia		Country		Total
		Gender		Age		Gender		Ireland	Slovenia	
		Male	Female	10	15	Male	Female	239	389	
Active	239	49	41	42	47	49**	34	47	41	273
Beautiful	119	11***	32	19	26	31**	47	26***	39	214
Brainy	165	24***	37	26*	36	45	51	36**	48	273
Brave	274	49	53	55	46	51**	35	46	43	277
Brilliant	273	54	48	51	51	33	28	51***	30	239
Caring	216	24***	55	42	38	17**	28	38***	22	177
Classy	99	34*	24	22	31	24	29	31	26	175
Confident	244	39**	51	41*	51	38	46	51*	42	285
Dresses well	166	25**	36	32	30	28**	43	30	36	211
Famous	289	63***	45	55	52	50	41	52	46	303
Friendly	251	39***	54	51*	41	35**	51	41	43	267
Funny	187	28***	41	36	33	34	34	33	34	212
Gentle	150	18***	37	35***	19	17**	29	19	23	136
Good	170	33	30	39***	23	42*	31	23***	37	197
Good-looking	156	21***	36	29	29	76	68	29	28	177
Hard working	239	60*	73	66	68	31	35	68***	32	290
Helpful	204	31***	44	44***	30	40	36	30*	38	221
Honest	199	26***	47	38	36	38	42	36	40	242
Important	188	34	36	34	36	26	21	36***	23	178
Inventive	59	16	17	8*	21	40**	25	21**	32	176
Kind	212	29***	49	45**	33	26	34	33	30	195
Loving	178	17***	47	36	30	15	19	30***	17	137
Loyal	125	22	24	22	24	17	19	24	18	128
Rich	200	45***	30	38	36	37	33	36	34	216
Skilful	269	46***	35	50	50	40**	27	50***	33	249
Strong	273	58***	44	50	51	46***	30	51***	38	269
Warrior	99	24**	14	13***	25	48***	28	25***	38	206

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## RESULTS

### Data analyses

Data were analysed using 2 x 2 cross-tabulations and chi-square analyses on items in the questionnaire as described below. Only significant results ( $p < .05$ ) with adjusted standardised residuals greater than +/- 2.0 are presented unless otherwise stated. Percentages are given in Tables 2, 3 and 4, and the corresponding adjusted standardised residuals for significant findings only are presented in Tables 5 and 6. The adjusted standardised residuals are standardised residuals that are adjusted for row and column totals.

We first present gender analyses of the choice of hero in the Irish data. Next we present analyses comparing hero choice in the Irish and Slovene samples of 15-year-olds, followed by gender analyses of choice of hero in the Slovene data. Finally, we describe the data on origins of heroes and the prevalence of North American heroes.

The first row of numbers in Table 2 gives the numbers in the Irish sample, so there are 268 Irish males and 287 Irish females, 316 Irish 10-year-olds and 239 Irish 15-year-olds and so on. The next row in Table 2 shows that 239 of the Irish sample selected active as a characteristic of their heroic figure, and that 49% of the males and 41% of the females chose this characteristic. Moving to the end of this row: 47% of the Irish and 41% of the Slovene sample chose active and this choice was made by 273 Irish and Slovene

participants. Tables 3 and 4 also follow this format.

Adjusted standardised residuals for significant chi-square statistics are presented in Tables 5 and 6. In these tables the heroic characteristics, domains and functions have been categorised as reflecting either individual or social collective values. In some cases, such as music, this may appear arbitrary. However, we believe that this is a useful way to categorise the heroic qualities in the context of understanding both the results and the psychological meaning of heroes for our participants. There are four columns in each row in Tables 5 and 6: the first row, for example, shows for the Irish sample overall differences in choice pattern of males and females for individual and social qualities. A category appearing in the male column signifies that it occurred significantly more than expected for male participants. These sex differences were also examined within age separately and these results are also summarised here. The second row in Table 5 shows the overall choice patterns for age for individual and social qualities for the Irish sample.

### Analyses in the Irish sample

#### *Participant gender and hero choice in the Irish sample*

Many of the heroic characteristics are like stereotypes and predictably there were significant differences in the choice pattern on many of these variables. Cross tabulations were

TABLE 3

Choice of heroic domain as a function of nationality, gender and age (Ireland only)

Domain	n	Ireland		Slovenia		Country		n		
		Gender		Age		Gender				
		M	F	10	15	M	F		Ireland	Slovenia
Family	115	13***	29	23	21	4*	10	21***	7	76
Audio-visual	111	24	18	32***	7	41	39	7***	40	172
Politics	24	4	5	2*	8	2*	0	8***	1	22
Community	11	2	3	3	1	6	10	1***	8	34
Religion	12	2	3	3	1	0	1	1	1	4
Music	92	14*	21	14*	22	7*	15	22***	11	96
Sport	122	36***	11	18***	30	29***	8	30***	18	141
Fashion	1	0	0.4	0	0.5	0***	6	0*	3	13
Arts/sciences	7	0*	2.5	1	2	5	3	2	4	18

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

TABLE 4



Choice of heroic domain as a function of nationality, gender and age (Ireland only)

Function	<i>n</i>	Ireland		Age		Slovenia		Country		<i>n</i>
		Gender								
		M	F	10	15	M	F	Ireland	Slovenia	
Family	n	268	287	316	239	191	190	239	389	
To do good	455	80**	89	83	87	93	96	87***	95	554
To entertain	341	65	63	57***	73	89	87	73***	88	494
To excel	429	80	80	74***	89	92	86	89	89	531
To give good example	421	75	81	70***	90	88	87	90	87	530
To protect	352	65	66	68	63	71	71	63	71	408
To risk their lives	289	53	55	59***	47	65	56	47***	60	330
To show how well things can be done	423	75	82	73***	87	89	91	87	90	529

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

prepared separately for each item of the description of the hero (characteristics, domain and function) by sex. First, we describe the significant differences in choice pattern for heroic characteristics and sex of hero. Male heroes were chosen by 91% of males and female heroes were chosen by 51% of the females, which is greater than would be expected by chance,  $\chi^2(1, N = 533) = 102.62, p < .001$  (adjusted standard residual = 10.1). The girls chose the individual characteristics of beautiful, brainy, brilliant, confident, dresses well, funny, good-looking and hard-working at higher rates than expected by chance. They also chose the social characteristics of caring, friendly, gentle, helpful, honest, kind and loving at higher rates than would be expected by chance. Boys chose the individual characteristics of classy, famous, rich, skilful, strong and warrior at higher rates than chance. Girls chose heroes in the domains of family, music and arts/sciences at higher rates than chance and boys chose sporting heroes at higher rates than chance (see Tables 3 and 5). In terms of heroes' functions, the only significant finding was that girls selected 'to do good' at higher rates than expected by chance (see Tables 4 and 5).

#### *Participant age and hero choice in the Irish sample*

Cross-tabulations were prepared for each item of the description of the hero by age (10 or 15

years of age). There were significant differences in the pattern of choice in the Irish sample between 10- and 15-year-olds. The younger participants chose the social characteristics of friendly, gentle, good, helpful and kind at higher rates than expected. The older ones chose the individual characteristics of brainy, confident, warrior and inventive at higher rates than expected (see Tables 2 and 5). There were significant age differences in participants' choices of hero domains (see Tables 3 and 5). Younger children chose audio-visual media at higher rates than expected. Audiovisual here is restricted to actors in film, TV and video games. Older participants chose sporting and musical heroes at higher rates than expected and this was also the case for political heroes, though the numbers choosing political heroes were very small (see Tables 3 and 5). Older participants valued four of the heroes' functions at higher rates than expected: to entertain, to excel, to show a good example, and to show how well things can be done. The younger participants chose 'to risk their lives for others' at higher rates than expected (see Tables 4 and 5).

The influence of age was also examined in the order of development of proximal and distal heroes. In today's world young people often meet distal heroes (politics, audio-visual, religion, music, sport, fashion, arts/sciences) on television. The historical developmental relation with age (as age increases distal heroes are

TABLE 5

Adjusted standardised residuals categorised by social and individual values

Ireland							
Male		Female		Male		Female	
Social				Individual			
Variable	Std Res	Variable	Std Res	Variable	Std Res	Variable	Std Res
<i>Characteristic</i>				<i>Characteristic</i>		<i>Characteristic</i>	
Caring	7.6	Famous	4.1	Beautiful		Beautiful	5.9
Friendly	3.6	Rich	3.5	Brainy		Brainy	3.3
Gentle	4.8	Skilful	7.1	Confident		Confident	3.0
Helpful	3.2	Strong	6.7	Dress-well		Dress-well	3.0
Honest	5.0	Warrior	3.0	Funny		Funny	3.3
Kind	5.0	<i>Domain</i>		Good-looking		Good-looking	3.8
Loving	7.3	Sport	4.3	Hard-working		Hard-working	3.8
<i>Domain</i>				<i>Domain</i>		<i>Domain</i>	
Family	4.4			Music		Music	2.1
<i>Function</i>				Arts/sciences		Arts/sciences	2.6
To do good	2.7						
10-year-olds		15-year-olds		10-year-olds		15-year-olds	
Variable	Std Res	Variable	Std Res	Variable	Std Res	Variable	Std Res
<i>Characteristic</i>				<i>Domain</i>		<i>Characteristic</i>	
Friendly	2.1	<i>Domain</i>		Audio-visual	7.1	Brainy	2.4
Gentle	3.9	Politics	3.0	<i>Function</i>		Classy	6.5
Good	4.0	<i>Function</i>		To risk their	2.9	Confident	2.4
Helpful	3.3	Good- example	5.8	lives for others		Hard- working	9.8
Kind	2.8	To show how	3.9			Inventive	6.6
		well things can				Warrior	3.4
		be done				<i>Domain</i>	
						Music	2.4
						Sport	3.3
						<i>Function</i>	
						To entertain	3.8
						To excel	4.3

chosen more often) was not found in these Irish data. However, the historical relation of proximal with female choice was supported with strong and significant association in both the Irish and Slovene samples. In the Irish sample of 15-year-olds the males chose distal heroic figures more than expected by chance (86%) and the females chose distal heroic figures at lower than expected rates (71%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 231) = 7.30, p < .01$ , adjusted standard residual = 2.7. In the Slovene sample of 15-year-olds 89% of the males (higher than expected) and 78% of the females (lower than expected) chose distal heroic figures,  $\chi^2(1, N = 364) = 8.69, p < .005$ , adjusted standard residual = 2.9.

*Patterns in Ireland and Slovenia (15-year-olds only)*

The data were analysed for each variable separately (characteristic, domain and function) by country (Ireland and Slovenia) and are presented in Tables 2, 3 and 4. There were significant differences between the national samples in the frequency with which heroic characteristics were chosen (see Tables 2 and 6). In the Irish sample higher proportions of pupils chose the individual characteristics of brilliant, confident, important, skilful, strong and hard-working than expected by chance. They also chose the social characteristics of caring and loving at higher rates than expected by chance.

TABLE 6

Adjusted standardised residuals for social/individual characteristics among 15-year-olds in Ireland and Slovenia

Ireland		Slovenia		Ireland		Slovenia	
Variable	Std Res	Variable	Std Res	Variable	Std Res	Variable	Std Res
<i>Characteristic</i>		<i>Characteristic</i>		<i>Characteristic</i>		<i>Characteristic</i>	
Caring	4.1	Good	3.7	Brilliant	5.1	Beautiful	3.4
Loving	3.8	Helpful	2.1	Confident	2.2	Brainy	3.0
<i>Domain</i>		<i>Domain</i>		<i>Domain</i>		<i>Domain</i>	
Family	5.1	Community	4.0	Hard-working	8.5	Inventive	3.1
Politics	4.3	<i>Function</i>		Important	3.5	Warrior	3.4
		To do good	3.2	Skilful	4.2	<i>Domain</i>	
		To protect	2.1	Strong	3.3	Audio-visual	8.9
		To risk their lives	3.3	<i>Domain</i>		Fashion	2.3
				Music	3.5	<i>Function</i>	
				Sport	3.4	To entertain	4.5

  

Slovenia							
Male		Female		Male		Female	
		<i>Social</i>				<i>Individual</i>	
Variable	Std Res	Variable	Std Res	Variable	Std Res	Variable	Std Res
<i>Characteristic</i>		<i>Characteristic</i>		<i>Characteristic</i>		<i>Characteristic</i>	
Good	2.3	Caring	2.6	Active	3.1	Beautiful	3.9
<i>Domain</i>		Friendly	3.2	Brave	3.1	Dresses Well	2.9
Politics	2.0	Gentle	2.7	Inventive	3.1	<i>Domain</i>	
		<i>Domain</i>		Skilful	2.7	Fasion	3.5
		Family	2.5	Strong	3.3	Music	2.4
				Warrior	3.9		
				<i>Domain</i>			
				Sport	5.4		

The Slovene sample in turn chose the individual characteristics of beautiful, brainy, warrior and inventive, and the social characteristics good and helpful, at higher rates than expected.

Very few children in either sample chose political or religious heroic figures, or heroes in the arts/sciences and fashion (see Tables 3 and 6). The Irish sample identified family, musical and sporting heroes at significantly higher rates than expected, and the Slovenians chose audio-visual and community-based heroes at higher rates than expected.

Slovene young people believed the functions of heroes were to do good, to entertain, to protect, and to risk their lives for others at significantly higher rates than expected (Tables 4 and 6).

#### *Participant gender and hero choice in the Slovene sample*

Choice of male hero was higher for boys (69%) than girls, and choice of female hero was higher for girls (90%) than boys,  $\chi^2(1, N = 363) = 106.38, p < .001$ , adjusted standard residual = 10.3. The boys chose the social characteristic of good and the individual characteristics of active, brave, skilful, strong, warrior and inventive, at higher rates than expected by chance (see Tables 2 and 6). The girls chose the social characteristics of caring, friendly and gentle, and the individual characteristics of beautiful and dresses well at higher rates than expected by chance. As in Ireland, boys chose sports heroes at higher rates than expected, while the girls chose family heroes at higher rates than

expected. Only very small numbers of participants chose heroes in fashion or in politics. In the former case they were all girls, while in the latter they were all boys (see Table 3). The pattern of choices for boys and girls were similar in terms of heroic function (see Table 4).

### *Heroic sources and prevalence of North American figures*

Are heroic figures global or local? This can be examined in two ways: (a) we can compare proximal (family and community) heroes and distal heroes (politics, the audio-visual, religion, music, sport, fashion, arts/sciences), and (b) we can examine the hero's nationality. No chi-square statistics were performed in these comparisons. Only 17% of the Slovene sample chose proximal (family and community) as compared with 23% for the 15-year-old Irish participants (and 25% when 10-year-olds were included). While we can assume that many of the distal heroes are learned about through the use of digital media, we assessed the extent to which heroic characters are global by examining the hero's nationality.

If we examine participants who located their hero in the audio-visual domain, the Irish sample chose American heroes at a higher proportion (53%) than the Slovenians, whose more broadly ranging selection of heroic figures in this domain contained 45% of American stars. No one star was clearly more popular than the others in either sample. Stars included James Bond, Brad Pitt and Jennifer Lopez. The Irish youths chose musical and sports stars including Bono (music) and Sonia O'Sullivan (running). Among the Slovene heroes were Michael Schumacher (motor racing) and Britney Spears (music).

In general, across all domains (family, audio-visual, politics, the community, religion, music, sport, fashion, literature and arts/sciences), 61% of the Irish sample's heroes were Irish, 15% were from America and 13% from England. The cross-domain figures for the Slovenians sampled were: 20% from their own country, 35% from America and 6% from England. The other heroes were widely dispersed across different countries of origin.

## DISCUSSION

In our discussion we concentrate on evidence concerning variation in heroic domain, gender differences, and choices reflecting preference for heroes with key characteristics and functions. The characteristics in some cases were mainly concerned with individual prowess (e.g., beautiful, brave and rich) and functions such as taking risks and excelling and in other cases the heroes had characteristics expressing collective social value (e.g., caring, honest, gentle and kind) and functions such as to do good, to protect and to show a good example.

We turn first to comparisons of heroic choice in Ireland and Slovenia and the issue of globalisation of hero choice. There are clear national differences. We note the Slovene sample (15-year-olds) chose audio-visual heroic figures (from TV, video and computer games) much more frequently than their Irish counterparts. The Irish – who probably have closer links with the US – chose American heroic figures within the audio-visual domain more often. The greater interest in the audio-visual among the Slovene sample was not associated with greater numbers of American heroic figures in this domain. Hence, globalisation has not influenced their choice directly within this domain. It may be that this difference is related to estimates of the higher numbers of hours Irish young people report they spend watching television (2.4 hours per day) as compared with Slovene youths (2.0 hours per day) (Martin & Morgan, 1994; see also Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, 1999). It is interesting to note that, in the Irish/US comparison in Gash and Conway (1997), it was the Irish who chose heroes from TV more frequently than the US pupils. Overall, however, across all domains, the Slovene sample chose American heroic figures more frequently than the Irish sample. The Irish, in turn, were more likely to choose an Irish figure than the Slovenians were to choose a Slovene figure. So the higher frequency of the Slovene hero choices in the audio-visual domain is associated across domains with less emphasis on their own national heroes. Could this be due to the great interest in Slovenia at the time of data collection in joining the EU, so reflecting an

outward looking position? If so, a future data collection may show a decrease in this tendency as the Slovenians assert themselves within the European Union. Alternatively could economic success make certain types of hero attractive? This is a question for future study.

Continuing with heroic domains: musical, sporting and family heroes were much more important in Ireland than Slovenia. Community heroes were more important in Slovenia, which is probably associated with the greater importance of 'to do good' and 'to risk their lives for others' in the Slovene sample. The low frequency of community heroes, particularly in Ireland, together with the low numbers of political heroes in each country does not augur well for social political engagement and sends a strong evaluative signal about the lack of success of present programmes of civic and political education. This view is echoed by Robert Putnam in Holmquist (2005): 'The rate of adjustment (to change) has got to be quicker and something must be done to recover the social capital that has been lost, or things will get much, much worse very, very quickly' (p. 2). Changes in the education programmes provided might alter this and in support of this course of action Gash and Conway (1997) have shown some increases in pro-social choices following an intervention that included discussions promoting local heroes.

The predicted developmental shift in studies from pre-television times from proximal to distal heroic figures was not found with these age groups in Ireland (Hill, 1930; Stroughton & Ray, 1946). Gash and Conway (1997) did not find this trend even though they examined 9- to 10-year-olds. We suggest this is because today many heroic figures appear early in the imaginations of children watching television. Early heroes are now fantasy figures from digital technology like Lara Croft or Ninja Turtles rather than people in the child's community. Audio-visual media were also more important for the younger Irish participants, and so for many it is a constant medium for learning about the world.

Other research signals the predominance of stereotyped figures in the media (Ruble & Martin, 1998). In line with this, there are clear tendencies for gender to be associated with type of heroic figure chosen in each country. First,

males tend to choose distal heroes more than females, who prefer proximal heroic figures. This gender difference was also found in Gash and Conway (1997). The greater proportions of Irish pupils who chose proximal heroes are associated with higher proportions of family and community hero choice in this sample. Second, males choose male heroes frequently and females are more highly represented in those who choose female heroes. This pattern supports the findings in Gash and Conway (1997). Since we did not ask the participants in the present study to indicate how much television they watched, we cannot determine whether heavy television viewing is correlated with greater stereotyping.

Significant developmental trends were shown in the Irish sample for social and gender choices of heroic characteristics. Nearly all the social categories exhibit strong female gender links: caring, friendly, funny, gentle, helpful, honest, kind and loving. Good and loyal are the only social characteristics not associated with gender, though the 10-year-old boys value 'good' so much that overall younger Irish participants value good more than older ones. In contrast, individual qualities exhibit strong links with each gender: males prefer fame, riches, skill, strength, the warrior and class; and females prefer beauty, brains, confidence, dressing well, good looks and hard work. None of the pro-social qualities increases with age: significant decreases were recorded for being friendly, gentle, good, helpful and kind. Some individual characteristics in contrast increased with age: brainy, confident, warrior and inventive.

The balance between the individual and the social is somewhat different in Ireland as compared with Slovenia. In terms of the social dimension, the Slovene sample construed heroes as helpful, good (both as a characteristic and as a function), protective and willing to risk their lives. Although the numbers were small, they chose community heroes more than the Irish participants. Social values the Irish expressed were being caring and loving. They also valued the family and politics more – though in small numbers for the latter. In terms of individual qualities, the Irish valued brilliant, confident, important, skilful, strong and hard-

working people, and emphasised both music and sport. The Slovenes, on the other hand, emphasised the following qualities: beautiful, brainy, good dresser, warrior and inventive, and heroes who existed in the entertainment and audio-visual domains. While music and sport have both been mentioned as important elements in Irish children's construction of Irish identity in recent research by Waldron and Pike (2005), we wonder if the importance of community, warriors, risking lives and protecting is related to Slovenia's emergence from Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Caring, loving and loyal are socially oriented and their greater use by the Irish is probably associated with greater choice of family heroes.

In future studies of this type it would be an advantage to assess the use of digital technologies among participants, including types of programmes they watch and their preferences. We remain confident that these data may help people in their thinking about influences on the construction of personal identity in a period of significant social change.

In conclusion, we argue from these data that television and digital media play a powerful supportive role in the construction of young people's heroic images. Researchers (e.g., Ruble & Martin, 1998) have called for a greater understanding of the process of gender identity construction. At a time of great societal change, the developmental emergence of individual as opposed to social characteristics in Irish teenagers points to a need to provide outlets for these values. A practical task for communities is to provide more opportunities for sport to young people, which is a desired healthy option for Irish young people (Health Service Executive, 2005). In addition, an ethical task for educators, whether they work in schools or in the media, is to promote pro-social rather than violent images. We hope the present data will inform and stimulate such a movement.

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