

Heroes

•Hero: a person who knowingly, and voluntarily, acts for the good of one or more people at significant risk to themselves, without being motivated by reward¹

•Heroes are universally valued across cultures and throughout history²

•Although heroes are rare, they exemplify human excellence and deserve empirical attention.

•Adults in multiple studies consider firefighters heroes when they go above and beyond the call of duty^{3,4}. Clearly firefighters can be considered heroes.

•Understanding how children and adolescents view the character and qualities of heroes may reveal specific strengths to encourage in character development programs for youth, which can then build heroes.

Methods

•Using Q-sort methodology, 89 children and adolescents ($M_{age} = 13$, 9-19, 51% female) sorted 12 character strengths by placing them into five categories ranging from “*exactly like a firefighter*” to “*least like a firefighter*” based on their view.

•Character Strengths (*responsible, leader, generous, future-minded, purposeful, amazed, creative, thrifty, forgiving, grateful, humble, joyful*)

•At the conclusion of the sorting activity, subjects were questioned about the constructs they chose as “*exactly like a firefighter*.”

•Q factor analysis identified homogeneous groups of youth with similar views on the character strengths of firefighters.

•Similarities Between Groups or Factors

•(Q factor analysis)

•Differences Between Groups or Factors

•(Q factor analysis, Pearson Chi Square, and Correlations)

•Open Ended Answers from Interview Questions

Results

Figure 1

Firefighter Q Sort Factors			
Factor 1		Factor 1	
Character Strength	Z Score	Character Strength	Z Score
Purposeful	1.373	Responsible	1.774
Responsible	1.345	Leader	1.738
Leader	1.101	Generous	1.034
Generous	0.606		
Future-minded	0.567		
Grateful	0.019	Humble	0.057
Humble	-0.038	Joyful	-0.053
		Grateful	-0.126
		Purposeful	-0.365
Forgiving	-0.625	Creative	-0.504
Amazed	-0.724	Forgiving	-0.559
Thrifty	-1.011	Future-minded	-0.823
Joyful	-1.150	Amazed	-1.053
Creative	-1.464	Thrifty	-1.120

Note: Z-scores are the weighted averages of the values given to each character strength by individuals in the factor solution^{5,6}

•For all youth: Firefighter heroes are responsible, leaders, and generous, but NOT forgiving, amazed, thrifty, or creative.

•For some youth: Firefighters act with purpose and are future minded,

•For others: Firefighters do not act with purpose and are not future minded.

•Groups did not differ significantly on gender, age, grades, or mothers’ education.

•Correlations of the character strength ratings without concern for factor solutions revealed differences. Across the sample, older youth were more likely to see firefighters as future-minded ($r=.310$, $p=.004$) and purposeful ($r=.229$, $p=.035$), and were less likely to see them as thrifty ($r=-.240$, $p=.027$), joyful ($r=-.228$, $p=.036$), or grateful ($r=-.221$, $p=.042$).

Participant Comments

Firefighters are *Responsible*: “They’re responsible so it’s like if they didn’t put out the fire they would have to be responsible for the building burning down.”

Firefighters are *Leaders*: “They’re telling other firefighters what to do.”

Firefighters are *Generous*: “Generous is always doing favors...and they always help people like get out of the fire.”

Firefighters are *Purposeful*: “People can die in the fire...they’re helping people that really need help.”

Firefighters are not *Future-minded*: “Future-minded is the least because firefighters never know what’s gonna [sic] happen.”

Discussion and Implications

•Firefighters are fantastic examples of relatable, common heroes.

•Young people’s view that firefighter heroes are responsible, leaders, and generous, but not forgiving, amazed, thrifty, or creative may be a universal conceptualization.

•Shared conceptions and individual differences of strengths young people attribute to firefighters, a common hero, can enhance character development programs that wish to encourage youth to develop heroic character.

•Character education could emphasize groups of strengths, such as heroic strengths, rather than solitary strengths.

References

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