Me? A Hero? Gendered Work and Attributions of Heroism among Volunteers during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
The gendered features of adults’ attributions of heroism to themselves and others has received substantially less scholarly attention than the gendered dynamics of media representations of (super)heroes. Utilizing 78 interviews and 569 self-administered questionnaires completed by adults in the United States who were voluntarily making personal protective equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic, we show how respondents effectively deployed popularized assessments of the relative value of gendered labour in the private and public spheres to shift attributions of heroism from themselves to others. Though media portrayals at the outset of the pandemic depicted these volunteers working in their homes as heroes, respondents insisted that the real heroes were those working in the public sphere. Even if media representations increasingly frame women as heroes, these results suggest that the long-standing associations between men and heroism will likely remain in place if feminized labour associated with the private sphere of households remains devalued.

Keywords
COVID-19, gender, heroes, heroism, labour, work

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Introduction

Heroes are especially important to communities and societies because they enhance the well-being of others and personify who and what are considered worthy of emulation (Kinsella et al., 2015a). Like ‘cultural constellations’ (Dyson, 1996), those labelled heroes provide individuals with ‘moral beacons’ (Porpora, 1996: 210) for how they should look, act and relate to others. In western contexts, heroism is generally associated with voluntarily acting to benefit others despite the physical, emotional and/or social risks incurred by taking such actions (Franco et al., 2018; Kinsella et al., 2015b). In addition to prominent public figures, ordinary individuals are fully capable of being heroes (Franco and Zimbardo, 2006). Heroism can entail dramatic, death-defying feats, yet heroism also regularly involves caring for others and generosity (Becker and Eagly, 2004).

Heroism can also present drawbacks for individuals, communities and societies (Frisk, 2019). Prominent associations between heroism, men and masculinities facilitate the reproduction of inequitable gender orders by justifying men’s power over supposedly weak and vulnerable women (Cocca, 2016; Cree, 2020; Lorber, 2002). Although the gendered features of media representations of (super)heroes have received substantial scholarly attention, significant work remains to be done in examining the links between gender and heroism (Frisk, 2019; Kinsella et al., 2015b). Regarding attributions of heroism, Kinsella et al. (2017: 9) provocatively ask, ‘Do women have to achieve more to be recognized as heroes?’

We answer this question with an emphatic yes, but with a twist. We argue that women and men must achieve more to be recognized as heroes if their heroism is based on feminized labour associated with the private sphere of households. The ideology of separate spheres cleaves space into two distinct categories differentially associated with women and men. The private sphere of homes, care work and unpaid labour is associated with women and femininities. The public sphere of businesses, politics and paid labour is associated with men and masculinities. Following its initial development in the 19th century, how the spheres interface in practice has regularly been reorganized in response to shifting political-economic conditions and policies (Hochschild and Machung, 1989; Laslett and Brenner, 1989). Although women increasingly entered the public sphere in the United States following the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s, the ideology of separate spheres is still centrally important to how gendered labour is accomplished and understood in both spheres. Paid work in the public sphere is still strongly associated with men and masculinities, for example, but women in the United States complete more unpaid labour on behalf of volunteer organizations outside their households at least in part because this unpaid work is associated with caring dispositions and skillsets commonly linked to women and feminized labour in the private sphere (Gerstel, 2000; Leap, 2019).

By analysing 78 semi-structured interviews and 569 self-administered questionnaires completed by those who voluntarily made personal protective equipment (PPE) at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we show how individuals who were labelled heroes at the outset of the pandemic shifted attributions of heroism from themselves to others by repeatedly drawing on the ideology of separate spheres. Although our respondents,
whom we refer to as ‘makers’, were voluntarily subjecting themselves to a range of risks by producing and distributing PPE to help others during the pandemic, they overwhelmingly rejected the idea that they were heroes even though they were being lauded as such in the news media (e.g. Congresswoman Abigail Spanberger, 2020; Heloise, 2020). Drawing on understandings of heroism that associate it with masculinized work in the public sphere (Featherstone, 1992), makers generally insisted there was nothing heroic about the sewing and 3D printing they were doing in their homes to protect others from a deadly virus. They emphasized that the hero label should be reserved for businesses and individuals working in the public sphere during the pandemic. Echoing popular assessments of gendered labour that have repeatedly elevated the value of masculinized work in the public sphere over feminized work in the private sphere (Daniels, 1987; DeVault, 1991), men and women respondents lionized others’ work in the public sphere while deploying devalued assessments of work completed in their households to shift attributions of heroism from themselves to others.

Other scholars contend the lack of representations of women acting heroically in news and popular media is a key reason why heroism is more commonly attributed to men (Becker and Eagly, 2004; Cocca, 2016; Rankin and Eagly, 2008). We argue that the link between men and heroism is also informed by gendered assessments of labour that obscure the importance and risks of feminized work in the private sphere. Even when the news media were portraying men and women who were voluntarily making and distributing PPE as heroes, those doing this work drew from devalued depictions of feminized work to insist they were not heroes. Disrupting the cultural links between men, masculinities and heroism, we show, can require more than just increased public attention to women acting heroically. It also requires acknowledging the complexities and significance of feminized work completed in the private sphere so that it can be recognized for what it often is – heroism that involves voluntarily placing one’s self at risk to enhance others’ well-being.

We utilize this analysis to synthesize and extend the literatures on pandemic heroism and the gendered contours of heroism. Although scholars have critically engaged with attributions of heroism at the outset of the pandemic (Halberg et al., 2021; Kinsella et al., 2022), this scholarship has not considered either the gendered contours of heroism or heroes beyond the public sphere. Further, although there is an extensive collection of content analyses examining the gendered dynamics of representations of heroes, fewer studies focus on the gendered dynamics of attributing heroism to others. This is especially true in respect to adults’ assessments of heroism (Kinsella et al., 2015b). This deserves closer analysis because attributions of heroism are closely coupled with the reproduction, and potential subversion, of hegemonic gender orders that empower some men at the expense of women and other men (Cocca, 2016; Cree, 2020; Lorber, 2002).

**Gendered Representations of Heroes and Gendered Inequalities**

Media representations of heroes inform how individuals and groups do gender by legitimating certain behaviours as appropriate for men or women (Coyne et al., 2014; Pennell
Representations of heroes have long provided powerful symbolic models against which actual men and women were judged as worthy of status and respect (Connell, 1995; Cree, 2020). Although individuals can challenge the gendered dynamics of such representations (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Dallacqua and Low, 2021), others often still hold them accountable to expectations legitimated by these representations (Marsh, 2000; Moeller, 2011). By engaging with these representations, individuals and groups situate themselves within inequitable gender orders (Cocca, 2016; Dyson, 1996).

Although evidence suggests women have been more likely to act heroically in some situations (Becker and Eagly, 2004), across a range of national contexts heroism is generally associated with men and masculinities (Cocca, 2016; Danilova and Kolpinskaya, 2020; Lorber, 2002). Even the fictional worlds of superheroes, which provide opportunities to celebrate ‘ultimate androgyny’ (Taylor, 2007: 346), regularly feature powerful men rescuing vulnerable damsels in distress (Burch and Johnsen, 2020; Scott, 2013). Female characters such as Wonder Woman provide exceptions to this trend, but they can still facilitate the reproduction of a hegemonic gender order because these heroic women are often dependent on men to validate their (hetero)sexual desirability and vanquish evil (Avery-Natale, 2013; Cocca, 2016; Gilpatric, 2010; Magoulik, 2006). Consequently, such depictions can promote a patriarchal gender order closely linked to heterosexuality even though female heroes may kick some ass (Cocca, 2016; Magoulik, 2006).

Representations of heroes also legitimate hierarchies among men and masculinities. Particular men are represented as heroes worthy of status because of their unique bravery, selflessness or abilities to utilize exceptional skills – often to protect women from men portrayed as exceptionally evil (Cree, 2020; Kelly, 2012; Lorber, 2002). Even when not fighting bad guys, depictions of heroic men equate certain practices and body types with status and respectability (Avery-Natale, 2013; Burch and Johnsen, 2020). In short, representations of heroes have regularly provided exemplary hegemonic masculinities that justify hierarchal gender relations between, and among, men and women (Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Gendered Perceptions of Heroes and Work

Although Porpora (1996) encouraged greater attention to adults’ attributions of heroism over two decades ago, studies examining individuals’ assessments of heroism have continued to focus on children and adolescents (Estrada et al., 2015; Gash and Bajd, 2005; Holub et al., 2008). This is especially true in respect to analyses of the gendered features of hero attribution (Danilova and Kolpinskaya, 2020; Kinsella et al., 2015b). The limited studies focusing on adults diverge from and parallel studies on youth. In contrast to children, adults regularly indicate that they either do not have a hero or express reservations about identifying one (Danilova and Kolpinskaya, 2020; Porpora, 1996; Yair et al., 2014). Nevertheless, laboratory studies show that popular depictions of heroes can influence adults’ understandings of themselves (Pennell and Behm-Morawitz, 2015) and whether men or women can be heroic (Rankin and Eagly, 2008). Echoing research on children, women are more likely than men to indicate that a woman is their hero (Danilova
and Kolpinskaya, 2020; Donoghue and Tranter, 2018; Rankin and Eagly, 2008). Nevertheless, overall, adults are more likely to identify men as heroes (Danilova and Kolpinskaya, 2020; Donoghue and Tranter, 2018; Rankin and Eagly, 2008) or associate masculinized occupations such as ‘fireman’ with heroism (Keczer et al., 2016). Men and women also sometimes associate different characteristics with heroism. Kinsella et al. (2015b) found that men were more likely than women to associate fearlessness, strength and saving others with heroism.

The gendered dynamics of hero attribution are related to whether and under what circumstances men and women are depicted as heroes in news and popular media (Cocca, 2016). Becker and Eagly (2004) contend that heroism tends to be associated with masculinity because men are generally overrepresented in occupations in the public sphere whose death-defying rescues of people in distress receive consistent public recognition. Consequently, although women also routinely risk their well-being to help others, men are more strongly associated with heroism because men’s heroism gains more public recognition (Becker and Eagly, 2004). A follow-up study by Rankin and Eagly (2008) supports this contention. Respondents were more likely to name men when asked to identify public figures who were heroes. However, when respondents were asked to identify heroes whom they personally knew, they were equally likely to identify men and women as heroes. When presented with a hypothetical rescue scenario, male and female respondents were equally likely to consider the fictional rescuer as heroic whether the rescuer were depicted as a man or woman (Rankin and Eagly, 2008).

Becker and Eagly (2004) are right that men are overrepresented in occupations in the public sphere that are often lauded for heroic work, yet what is unclear is why work commonly associated with women in the private sphere is not considered heroic. Featherstone (1992), for example, explicitly frames feminized work in households as the antithesis of heroism. Presumably, if attributions of heroism are contingent on recognizing that individuals’ actions benefitted others at the risk of harming their own well-being, work associated with the private sphere and femininities must be understood as either failing to benefit others or being risk free. Given that work associated with femininity and the private sphere is widely considered central to caring for others (Laslett and Brenner, 1989), failing to consider this work heroic must be at least partially because it is not considered risky. Featherstone (1992: 165) seemingly confirms this when he notes, ‘A basic contrast then, is that the heroic life is the sphere of danger, violence and the courting of risk whereas everyday life is the sphere of women, reproduction and care.’

Because the meanings associated with heroism, work and gender are social constructs, there is nothing inevitable about the conceptual links between heroism and work in the public sphere associated with men and masculinities. Seale’s (1995, 2002) analyses of terminal illness are illustrative. Seale (1995: 598) frames those who care for those dying from such illnesses as engaging in ‘specifically female heroics’. Further, newspaper coverage of cancer patients deployed gendered representations to frame women as heroes who were uniquely capable of utilizing emotional labour to effectively cope with devastating cancer diagnoses (Seale, 2002). In both cases, Seale (1995, 2002) portrays women as heroic due to their skilled utilization of caring and emotional labour commonly associated with the feminized private sphere.
Heroic Work during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Contrary to the general trend of focusing on the positive features of heroism (Frisk, 2019), initial analyses of the COVID-19 pandemic have emphasized its potential drawbacks (Kinsella et al., 2022). Emphasizing how heroic acts are undertaken within institutions that inequitably distribute risks and social obligations to address them (Halberg et al., 2021), neoliberal policies and ideologies shaped the need for and portrayal of pandemic heroes (Lohmeyer and Taylor, 2021). Labelling first responders, healthcare workers and other ‘essential’ personnel heroes positioned them as individually responsible for addressing problems exacerbated by decades of neoliberal policies (Lohmeyer and Taylor, 2021). Meanwhile, the culpability of state institutions in helping to create conditions of suffering and any responsibility to effectively address them was minimized (Cox, 2020; Halberg et al., 2021; Kinsella and Sumner, 2022; Lohmeyer and Taylor, 2021).

These portrayals also threatened to undermine the well-being of workers, as attributions of heroism made it more difficult to acknowledge workers’ needs for institutional supports, personal protective equipment, adequate pay and boundaries delineating how much they should sacrifice for others who often refused to participate in collective efforts to blunt transmission rates (Cox, 2020). Analyses of frontline workers’ responses to public efforts to label them heroes are especially notable. Danish nurses reported that their experiences did not align with their understandings of heroism (Halberg et al., 2021). They reported feeling overwhelmed, afraid and largely unprepared to work with COVID patients. Like a variety of frontline workers in the UK and Ireland (Kinsella et al., 2022), Danish nurses also reported that being labelled a hero facilitated the expectation that they should endlessly sacrifice their own well-being on behalf of others.

Cox (2020) advocates ceasing labelling healthcare workers heroes, but others conclude that the label can still be useful for describing responses to the pandemic. Instead of portraying pandemic heroes as endless wells of sacrifice and bravery, it is necessary to acknowledge the social institutions that worked to facilitate the need for heroic acts, the negative consequences that can stem from sacrificing on behalf of others and how attributions of heroism can create unrealistic, potentially harmful expectations (Halberg et al., 2021; Kinsella and Sumner, 2022). In short, heroes must be contextualized within institutions and considered fully human.

Methods and Data

This analysis utilizes 569 self-administered online questionnaires and 78 semi-structured phone interviews completed by US adults between July 2020 and January 2021. Both data generation techniques were approved by the authors’ institutional review boards. Inviting PPE makers to complete either a questionnaire or a telephone interview accommodated their time constraints and comfort with different technologies. There was a greater risk of social desirability bias during interviews because respondents were required to talk with a person. When asked whether they considered themselves heroes for making PPE, for example, interview respondents could have been more inclined to indicate that they did not because they wanted to avoid seeming narcissistic to the
interviewer. However, responses across data generation techniques were consistent in content on this and all other questions utilized in this analysis. Consequently, we do not suspect social desirability bias had a more substantive impact on interview responses. On average, respondents completed questionnaires in 36 minutes and interviews in 53 minutes.

We used professional, personal and virtual networks to distribute flyers and invitations to participate in the study. Paralleling prior analyses of disaster responses (Penta et al., 2020), social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Reddit were especially useful for identifying potential participants because makers often used social media to organize PPE production. Because individuals who acquired raw materials and organized distribution networks were just as important as makers in getting PPE into the hands of users, they were included in the study.

As Table 1 illustrates, women, whites and relatively well-educated individuals are overrepresented in the sample as compared with the population of the United States. Other analyses that distributed online calls to participate during the pandemic reported similarly skewed samples (Craig and Churchill, 2021; Friedman et al., 2021). The dynamics of making and volunteering in the USA could also help explain the sample composition. Sewing and 3D printing requires specialized equipment that presents classed barriers to participation (Stalp, 2015), and the gendered and racialized dynamics of volunteerism in the USA have often encouraged white women to engage in volunteering at higher rates than other groups (Pham, 2020). Although we purposefully contacted maker groups comprised primarily of people of colour to try to further diversify our sample, non-response bias could have also skewed the sample.

We cannot generalize our findings beyond our sample, but our dataset does have some notable strengths. The regional composition of questionnaire respondents is within \(\pm 5\%\) of population estimates of the four Census Bureau regions of the USA (US Census Bureau, 2022). Our data are also comprised solely of individuals’ first-hand assessments of their responses to the pandemic as it unfolded. As a result, it is an emotionally evocative dataset with detailed descriptions of makers’ efforts to survive a worsening disaster.

Following analyses of hero attribution that advocate utilizing open-ended questions to assess individuals’ attributions of heroism (Danilova and Kolpinskaya, 2020; Donoghue and Tranter, 2018), we focus primarily on data generated through open questions. In addition to asking makers to detail the who, what, where, why and how of PPE production, we asked respondents whether they believed they or anyone else was a hero for their responses to the pandemic. Following Charmaz (2003), we utilized an open, iterative approach to data analysis. We first read and re-read responses to identify themes respondents regularly invoked. After identifying and analysing key themes such as ‘risks incurred through making’ and ‘attributing heroism to PPE group organizers’ in greater detail, we determined that the ideology of separate spheres was centrally important to makers’ attributions of heroism because it effectively integrated the themes that emerged during the initial stages of data analysis.

Respondents are identified by their gender and region in the ensuing analysis. Each quote comes from a different maker. We begin by focusing on makers’ descriptions of fabricating PPE to highlight that their actions were heroic. We then illustrate how makers
overwhelmingly rejected the suggestion that their work was heroic even though they incurred a multitude of risks to enhance others’ safety. Finally, we illustrate how makers deployed the gendered ideology of separate spheres to shift attributions of heroism from their work in the private sphere to other individuals and entities working in the public sphere.

### Heroic PPE Production: Voluntarily Incurring Risks to Bolster Others’ Safety

Supplies of PPE were quickly exhausted in the USA in early 2020. After decades of neo-liberal reforms had weakened public health infrastructure and encouraged for-profit
production facilities to be moved out of the United States, neither state institutions nor private businesses could provide adequate PPE supplies (Leap et al., 2022a, 2022b). Individuals and civic organizations were encouraged to voluntarily produce and distribute substantial amounts of masks, face shields, hand sanitizer and other protective equipment. Across the USA, makers who answered this call were publicly lauded as heroes by news media and state officials. A June 2020 article in the *Washington Post* portrayed makers as heroes (Heloise, 2020) and US House Representative Abigail Spanberger officially recognized makers as heroes (Congresswoman Abigail Spanberger, 2020), for example.

Nevertheless, it may not be readily apparent that makers met the definition of heroes who were voluntarily risking their well-being to assist others. Pham (2020), for example, echoes Featherstone (1992) when she contrasts the working conditions of low-paid garment workers with the supposedly safe working conditions enjoyed by volunteer PPE makers. She notes, ‘[Garment workers are] not making masks in the safety and comfort of their homes’ (Pham, 2020: 322). However, makers often exposed themselves to a multitude of physical, emotional, financial and social risks to get PPE to those who desperately needed it.

Repeatedly, makers indicated that they incurred aches, pains and repetitive motion injuries from spending hours on end producing PPE. One interviewee had even gone to the hospital after her legs became swollen following an especially intense mask production session. Makers also placed themselves at risk of infection as they sought out materials for production and then distributed finished PPE. In response to a questionnaire item that asked makers to detail any drawbacks associated with producing PPE, a Midwestern woman remarked, ‘Some people do not realize the time it takes and the risks I took with my own health when I stood in line for hours to get fabric. The assumptions that it was easy made me feel undervalued.’

Beyond physical risks, makers regularly indicated that it was emotionally overwhelming to know that others might die if they did not produce enough PPE. This caused considerable emotional turmoil for a man in the Western United States who was helping organize a network of makers that was producing tens of thousands of pieces of PPE. During his interview, he explained:

> For several months, it was just making. That’s all I did. I woke up at 6 every morning, started working on making stuff, trying to organize, call people, try and track down materials to get stuff done. I would work until 10 o’clock at night and got to a point where I was like, super stressed out, I was having mental breaks. I was losing hair, and I ended up having to kind of step away for a little bit. And it was, it was tough. But it’s one of those things where, you know, you’re helping people, you know, it’s really, really important. You know, it’s not like you’re shipping teddy bears, you know, we’re shipping protective equipment to help people. It’s really difficult to walk away.

Makers also subjected themselves to financial risks. In materials alone, nearly two-thirds (65.4%) of questionnaire respondents reported spending at least US$100 for supplies to fabricate PPE. More than a quarter (26.9%) of respondents reported spending over US$350, and it was not uncommon for makers to indicate that they had spent well
over US$1000 on materials. Makers were sometimes reimbursed for some of their costs, but, most commonly, they were not. Of those that reported spending over US$350 on materials, 62.1% indicated that they had not received any reimbursements. Makers also ran the risk of getting stuck with substantial bills when plans for reimbursement unexpectedly failed. One Southern man reported losing nearly US$1000 after not being reimbursed. In some cases, these expenses undermined makers’ financial well-being. Responding to the questionnaire item concerning drawbacks associated with PPE production, a Northeastern woman noted:

It was a financial strain. I now have a lot of materials that I will continue to use, of course, but I definitely spent more out of pocket than I was reimbursed for. A lot of these purchases were made using my unemployment cheques.

Finally, makers routinely indicated that fabricating PPE facilitated interpersonal conflicts in their households and communities. Numerous women noted tensions with others in their households who did not appreciate the amount of space PPE production required or that they had shifted some of their time from domestic chores and childcare to produce PPE. Makers also risked social standing in their communities. Respondents reported being judged negatively by others who did not like the aesthetics of their PPE. Others reported being ‘ostracized’ from collective group efforts. Some even experienced abuse from those opposed to mask wearing. Detailing the drawbacks of PPE production on the questionnaire, one Southern woman explained: ‘Anti-maskers are quite nasty and rude and have been going out of their way to make my life difficult. We had to anonymously coordinate deliveries and donations because people were so rude to our drivers and seamstresses.’ Similarly, a Southern man remarked, ‘The Karens and anti-maskers are vocal and abundant. It’s disheartening.’

Voluntary PPE production has been characterized as largely risk free (Pham, 2020), but makers provided far more complex characterizations of their work. Although our respondents were relatively privileged in terms of socio-economic status and race, they described a multitude of physical, emotional, financial and social risks associated with PPE production. Makers made significant sacrifices and incurred a multitude of risks to help others during the pandemic.

I’m Not a Hero: Makers’ Denials of Their Heroism

Makers were rightly recognized as heroes for their work at the outset of the pandemic, but did makers consider themselves heroes? Among questionnaire respondents, exceptionally few men (6.3%) and women (5.8%) indicated that they considered themselves heroes for producing and distributing PPE. During interviews, makers also overwhelmingly rejected the suggestion that they were heroes. Some even laughed when asked if they believed they were heroes, as if equating heroism with their efforts to voluntarily save others’ lives verged on humorous absurdity. One Southern woman’s reaction is notable. After being asked if she considered herself a hero, she immediately guffawed before exclaiming, ‘Nooo. No, that’s ridiculous.’
Makers provided a variety of reasons for rejecting the hero label. Some did not want to seem narcissistic. A Midwestern woman noted, ‘I never want to glorify myself, but I am willing to call others heroes when they are willing to sacrifice for others.’ Reflective of how incurring risks and assisting others are both centrally important to attributions of heroism (Kinsella et al., 2015b), others indicated that they had not incurred enough risks or assisted enough people to be considered heroes. After being asked during her interview whether she considered herself a hero for fabricating and donating over 600 masks, one Southern woman explained, ‘To me, [heroes are] someone who is like literally putting their life in danger for other people. I’m sitting at my sewing machine getting a little carpal tunnel.’ Echoing the association between pandemic heroism and limitless sacrifice (Halberg et al., 2021), makers routinely set exceedingly lofty thresholds of assistance rendered to others for a maker to be considered heroic. Describing when he considered other makers heroes, one Northeastern man noted, ‘People who have been able or willing to devote every waking moment to it.’ In response to the same questionnaire item, a Southern woman noted, ‘I have known individuals who have donated 100% of their time to making masks nonstop.’

Reflective of some adults’ hesitancy to venerate others through attributions of heroism (Yair et al., 2014), makers also sometimes expressed ambivalence about labelling anyone a hero because lauding individuals distracted from the need for collective responses to the pandemic. A Midwestern man’s sentiment is notable:

‘Heroes’ is a hard word for me. It feels very ego-focused. We need heroes because we need to point to *individuals* who have gone above and beyond, who have made heroic personal sacrifices, done brave and helpful things. But . . . We all have a role to play in dealing with this pandemic. Some of us have already established roles that make their contributions more risky. But ultimately, we all have to make sacrifices. We all have to care for others. And ‘hero’ misses the point.

A Northeastern woman echoed this while linking the need for pandemic heroism to failed state responses. Reminiscent of Danish nurses’ assessments of heroism (Halberg et al., 2021), while answering the questionnaire item regarding who she considered heroes, she wrote:

The term hero is very complicated. The hero rhetoric makes martyrs out of [frontline] workers when it would not have to come to that if the government ensured everyone had the proper protective gear and/or a liveable income under safe conditions.

Finally, and echoing sentiments expressed by frontline workers in the UK and Ireland (Kinsella et al., 2022), makers often indicated that they were not heroes because they were unremarkable and simply doing what they should. After being asked whether she considered herself a hero for making and distributing 400 masks, one Southern woman replied:

I don’t think so. I don’t know. Now, I guess I see it as, this is, you know, like people in WWII or WWI or the Revolutionary War. They were born for those moments, and they lived up to
them. And this is just me living up to what my time and day is asking of me. It’s just stepping up and using talents that I know God has given me to serve and to help. Don’t think I’d say hero, no. (laughing) But just someone who saw a need and stepped up.

When asked in a follow-up question whether she considered soldiers, nurses, doctors and teachers who stepped up during the pandemic heroes, she replied, simply, ‘Yes.’ As we illustrate in the following section, attributing heroism to those working in the public sphere was a recurring way that makers denied their own heroism while emphasizing the heroism of others.

**They’re the Heroes: Makers’ Descriptions of Others’ Heroism**

Although very few makers personally accepted the hero label, roughly 75% of men and women questionnaire respondents indicated that at least some of the other makers fabricating PPE were heroes. Further, over 90% of men and women indicated that there were individuals beyond makers who should be considered heroes due to their responses to the pandemic. Unlike studies that find men and women tend to associate different characteristics and occupations with heroism (Danilova and Kolpinskaya, 2020; Kinsella et al., 2015b), men and women in our sample generally utilized the same standards to assess heroism. Nevertheless, gender was still centrally important to how makers attributed heroism because both men and women consistently drew on the gendered ideology of separate spheres to delineate who was a hero. By drawing on popularized assessments of gendered labour in the public and private spheres, makers shifted attributions of heroism from themselves to others.

Businesses that transitioned into PPE production, makers who prioritized PPE over paid employment, those involved in community organizing and ‘frontline’ or ‘essential’ workers all featured prominently in makers’ delineations of heroism. These depictions of heroism were sometimes deployed in isolation, yet they were also regularly interlaced to associate the public sphere with risks, sacrifice and, subsequently, heroism. In contrast, and as is common in respect to feminized work associated with the private sphere (Daminger, 2019; Daniels, 1987; DeVault, 1991), the complexities and significance of work completed by makers in their homes was dismissed.

Businesses operating in the public sphere that transitioned into PPE production were routinely lauded as heroic. When describing whom she considered a hero, a Southern woman wrote, ‘The bourbon industry in KY stopped making bourbon and made hand sanitizer! General Motors and Ford shut down to make ventilators. Tech Schools started making face shields with their 3D printers. Those people are heroes.’ Respondents regularly stressed that businesses were heroic because they appeared to be jeopardizing profits by engaging in PPE production. A woman in the Northeast noted, ‘Companies that quickly switched to supply and distribute what was needed. Many of them risked their profit that allows them to exist as a business.’ Likewise, a Midwestern woman wrote, ‘Businesses that are sacrificing profit for the greater good.’ Paralleling this focus on businesses risking profits, respondents were sometimes only willing to attribute heroism to
other makers when they risked their paid occupations in the public sphere by devoting
time to PPE production. Explaining when he considered other makers heroes, a Southern
man explained, ‘People giving up jobs to organize the large donation drives and coordi-
nating directly with the hospitals/organizations.’

As the preceding man’s response alludes to, community organizing in the public
sphere also featured prominently in makers’ attributions of heroism. Describing when
she considered other makers heroes, a Midwestern woman wrote:

The [Midwestern] Mask drive organizers, they have been on the cutting edge of making this
happen in our community and are continuing with not only making masks but setting up stations
around the community for donation and receiving (free) masks.

Similarly, a Western woman noted:

The folks who are organizing the collection and distribution of the items. Those of us making
them are doing what we can, which is really just doing what we should. I don’t have the skill
set to do community organization – those that do this are the heroes.

In some cases, makers linked community organizing to enhanced risks. In response to the
same questionnaire item, a Northeastern woman wrote, ‘Those who go out and interact
with the community and put themselves at greater risk.’

Paralleling public attributions of heroism during the initial phases of the pandemic
that often focused on workers in the public sphere (Cox, 2020; Lohmeyer and Taylor,
2021), makers also repeatedly referenced ‘frontline’ and ‘essential’ workers when
describing whom they considered heroes. Reflective of the pandemic hierarchy of heroes
that placed medical professionals at the very top (Kinsella et al., 2022), ‘healthcare
workers’ were referenced by an overwhelming majority of makers in questionnaires and
interviews. A Western woman who produced and distributed 11,000 masks is illustrative.
After being asked whether makers could be considered heroes, she shifted the conversa-
tion directly to healthcare workers:

You know, my thought was that the real heroes are the healthcare workers. They are the ones
who really sacrificed themselves. And to me, you know, making masks is part of the effort to
be worthy of their service. You know, to deserve their sacrifice. Yeah, the real heroes are really
the healthcare people.

Less common, yet still noted by a sizable share of makers, were delivery drivers, first
responders, grocery store staff, janitors, local governmental officials and teachers.

Although makers repeatedly linked heroism to labour in the public sphere, makers
generally did not link heroism to labour in the private sphere when describing other pan-
demic heroes. References to risks were often centrally important to makers’ attributions
of heroism, but makers did not associate risks with the private sphere when describing
pandemic heroes. Makers did not indicate that they considered other makers heroes
because producing masks risked physical injury or intra-household tensions, for
example. Further, in only a handful of instances did respondents portray work associated with the private sphere as involving significant sacrifices worthy of commendation. One Southern woman provided an exception. When describing makers she considered heroes, she wrote, ‘Possibly people who have made PPE full time – turning their home or workspace into more of a factory.’ However, even her invocation of ‘possibly’ seemed to indicate some trepidation with describing such makers as heroes. Further, linking heroism to homes transformed ‘into more of a factory’ still emphasized the links between heroism and the public sphere because only those homes that were made more reminiscent of a workplace in the public sphere were indicative of heroism.

The substantial risks and sacrifices that warranted attributions of heroism were overwhelmingly associated with work in the public sphere. Not work in the private sphere, which was often feminized and portrayed as relatively insignificant. The following passages are illustrative. When describing whom she considered a pandemic hero, a Southern woman replied, ‘People working the actual front lines are heroes. Not those of us sewing at a sewing machine safely in our homes.’ In response to the same question, a different Southern woman remarked, ‘Those that were able to invent things to help. Organize mass groups to make PPE. I was just a wife at home making as many as I could to help.’

**Discussion and Conclusion: Gendered Work and Attributions of Heroism**

Paralleling previous considerations of heroism (Kinsella et al., 2015b), makers repeatedly referenced risks and providing benefits to others when assessing their and others’ heroism. In contrast to prior analyses (Danilova and Kolpinskaya, 2020; Kinsella et al., 2015b), makers generally deployed the same criteria in their assessments of heroism regardless of whether they were men or women. Nevertheless, gender was still centrally important to respondents’ attributions of heroism. Makers repeatedly associated heroism with work in the masculinized public sphere. Work in the feminized private sphere was not heroic, according to respondents, because it was unremarkable work that did not involve significant risks or sacrifices.

Whether and how men and women are represented as heroes in news and popular media is especially important to attributions of heroism (Cocca, 2016). Becker and Eagly (2004) and Rankin and Eagly (2008) contend that men are more readily associated with heroism because they are overrepresented in occupations that consistently receive public recognition for heroic acts. Seemingly, the association between men and heroism is largely due to the relative visibility of men’s heroism in the public sphere and invisibility of women’s heroism in the private sphere. Our findings indicate that even when men and women are publicly commended for heroic acts in the private sphere, popularized assessments of gendered labour that devalue feminized labour in the private sphere can be deployed to delineate whether those publicly lauded for such heroism are actually worthy of such accolades.

In the case of PPE makers, even when individuals were intimately aware of the benefits and risks associated with their work, they still overwhelmingly rejected portrayals
celebrating their heroism. By downplaying the risks and significance of voluntary work to produce PPE in the feminized private sphere, they shifted attributions of heroism from themselves to those working in the public sphere during the pandemic. This was not simply because respondents wanted to avoid appearing narcissistic. Among the hundreds of responses we received, in only a very limited handful of cases did makers associate others’ heroism with labour in the feminized private sphere. If makers were just trying to avoid appearing vain and the relative value of gendered labour in the public and private spheres was not central to their attributions of heroism, respondents would have been just as likely to associate others’ heroism with work in the public and private spheres.

Work completed in the private sphere by both men and women is not simple, insignificant or risk free. Although this work is regularly taken for granted, it requires skilled physical, emotional and cognitive labour (Daminger, 2019; DeVault, 1991; Leap et al., 2022a). As makers’ descriptions of their work emphasize, this work is also associated with a range of risks. Nevertheless, so long as the significance and risks of work associated with the private sphere continue to be downplayed, it seems reasonable to conclude that the heroism of those doing this work will continue to be obscured even when it gains public recognition.

What is required to complicate the long-standing link between men, masculinities and heroism is both an expansion of the public recognition of heroic women and an expansion of what work is considered worthy of respect and commendation. Only then can the true scope of heroism be acknowledged. Without acknowledging the true value and complexities of work associated with the private sphere, it seems unlikely we will ever fully recognize the heroic men and women who voluntarily risk their own well-being to help others through such work.

Like heroism in the public sphere (Halberg et al., 2021; Kinsella et al., 2022), heroism in the private sphere cannot be disassociated from social institutions or the personal costs that are often incurred by heroes. Labour in the private sphere is also informed by state, market and cultural institutions that encourage some to sacrifice their well-being on behalf of others (Hochschild and Machung, 1989; Laslett and Brenner, 1989; Leap et al., 2022a). PPE makers would not have needed to place their health, finances and social standing at risk if PPE stockpiles and manufacturing facilities in the United States had not been hallowed out by decades of neoliberal political-economic restructuring (Leap et al., 2022a, 2022b), for example. Feminized work in the private sphere can be heroic, and this heroism is just as political as heroism in the public sphere.

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