

WHY ADOLESCENTS ADMIRE FAMOUS MUSICAL ROLE MODELS: IMPLICATIONS FOR ASPIRATIONS, EXPECTATIONS AND IDENTITY

Antonia Ivaldi and Susan A. O'Neill,

Loughborough University, UK and Simon Fraser University

ABSTRACT

Few studies have examined why adolescents admire musical role models and the influence role models may have on the construction of adolescents' social and personal identities. The aim of this study was to explore what discourses adolescents use when talking about their role models, and the implications that these might have for the construction of adolescent identity.

Seven focus groups were conducted, each involving four males and four females between 14-15 years of age. Participants were presented with 19 pictures of famous musicians, from classical and popular genres (e.g., Pavarotti, Charlotte Church, Robbie Williams and Britney Spears) and were asked to discuss whether they were familiar or unfamiliar figures, and whether they were liked or disliked and the reasons why. Eight of the adolescents were then interviewed individually and were asked to talk about their past, present and future role models.

Discursive analysis revealed that adolescents talked about, and used their role models in three different ways: (1) As a source of empowerment: discourses illustrated ways in which the role model was used to create a powerful image for the adolescent, (2) As objects of the gaze: discourses revealed how the adolescents positioned each other as the gazer of the role model, and (3) As sources of negotiation for group identities: the adolescents used their role models as a means of category affiliation as they talked about the notion of being privileged.

Few studies have examined why adolescents admire musical role models despite the importance that music plays in their lives. The present study's findings contribute to our understanding of how adolescents draw upon and use discourses associated with their role model in constructing a sense of self.

1. INTRODUCTION

Previous research (Duck, 1990; Bromnick and Swallow, 1999) has found that the majority of adolescents identify famous figures rather than non-famous figures as their role models. However, it has tended to draw from a variety of domains including television, film and sport. Little research has concentrated on music per se. This is surprising, given the growing amount of research that has indicated how important music is to young people (see, for instance, North, Hargreaves and O'Neill, 2000).

Within the context of this study, role models are defined as someone that an adolescent admires or identifies with, and who

may or may not have expectations or aspirations to become like his or her role model.

1.1 Why celebrities as ideals?

A wealth of research has documented an increase in media use by adolescents (e.g., Arnett, Larson and Offer, 1995). As a result of this increase in media use, previous research into the adoption of role models by adolescents has suggested that adolescents are more likely to identify a celebrity as their role model, rather than a non-famous figure. Duck (1990) argued that the impression from more recent studies is that media figures have "taken over" as the main source of ideals for children, whilst non-famous people, or real life acquaintances are viewed less positively. Duck found that the main reasons why girls chose their ideal was because of the role models' looks (e.g., pretty, beautiful, thin, good figure etc). The main reasons for boys choosing their role models related to physical strength (e.g., strong, muscular, good fighter, rescues people). Choices were also based on popularity and being famous.

1.2 The construction of adolescent identity

Traditional theories of identity, such as social identity theory, are concerned with what kinds of identities individuals have, how different identities are distinguished from each other, and what part these identities play in society. However, increasingly, researchers are turning their attention to questions of *whether*, *when* and *how* identities are used, rather than asking what kinds of identities individuals have and how to distinguish between them (Widdicombe, 1998; p.195, see also Abell and Stokoe, 2001). This focus coincides with a shift from conceptualizing identity as a private cognitive process to a form of understanding the self that is located within a discursive theory of language (Abell and Stokoe, 2001). This study adopts a social constructionist approach to understanding identity, that is, it views identity as something that is not fixed, rather, is constructed by everyday social encounters. Thus, identity is not an achievement of the individual, rather, it is born out of negotiation of shared understandings. The premise of social constructionism, therefore, is that selves and identities are socially constructed in discourse (Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). This understanding of the self is embedded in the language used in everyday life.

1.3 Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to explore the discourses that adolescents draw upon and use when talking about their musical role models,

and to ask what function do these discourses serve in the construction of adolescent identity. This paper provides an overview of the different ways in which the adolescents use their role model to negotiate and construct different identities.

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants

55 adolescents, aged 14-15 years were chosen from two schools. They were selected based on their responses to a music questionnaire that had previously been administered, in order to provide a range of musical experience. Seven focus groups were formed, three from one school and four from the other. Six of the groups contained eight participants, whilst one group contained seven participants. The groups were formed with the intention of having an equal number of males and females and musicians and non-musicians in each. Two months after the focus groups were completed, individual in-depth interviews were conducted with eight participants (four female and four male) who had taken part in the focus groups. In a similar way, they were selected to provide a range of musical experience.

2.2 Measures and procedure

Each focus group was presented with 19 picture cards of famous musicians from both popular and classical genres. The musicians presented were Pavarotti, Charlotte Church, Madonna, Robbie Williams, Vanessa-Mae, Evelyn Glennie, Elvis Presley, Jimi Hendrix, Jennifer Lopez, Britney Spears, Beethoven, Mozart, Craig David, Eminem, Nigel Kennedy, Jane Glover, Westlife, Guy Johnston and the popgroup Hearsay. Participants were asked to talk about who they recognized/did not recognize, who they liked/disliked etc. In the individual interviews, participants were asked to talk about their role models in the past, present and future, concentrating in particular, on the influence that the role model had for them at that time.

2.3 Data analysis

Data from the focus groups and individual interviews were analysed using a discursive approach. The focus of discourse analysis is on how the discourse is being said, rather than what is being talked about. The analysis followed the recommendations of Potter and Wetherell (1987), and focused on how adolescents positioned each other in their talk. Positioning is the location of selves in conversation (Davies and Harré, 1990). There are two types of positioning, (1) interactive positioning, where what one individual says positions another, and (2) reflexive positioning, in which the individual positions him or herself. These positions may or may not be intentional and can be challenged by the other speaker(s), forcing the individual to take up a position involuntarily, resulting in the repositioning of the individual (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999).

The following section provides the discursive analysis where the following three themes are presented; (1) musical role models as sources of empowerment, (2) musical role models as objects of the

gaze, and (3) musical role models as sources of negotiation for group identities. These themes are drawn from both individual and focus group data

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Theme 1: Musical role models as sources of empowerment

This theme comes from the individual interview of Lucy, a 14-year old. The analysis is centred around discussions of her first role model, a female artist who sang in the pop duo known as *Shakespeare's Sister*. The analysis reveals ways in which Lucy's choice of role model is used as a form of empowerment.

Creating a powerful image

Lucy talks about how her role model resembles a witch, and as a result, constructs an image of her role model as a symbol of power, which she then adopts for herself. She does this not only by saying she "really wanted to be like her", but also by altering her appearance and behaviour to imitate or resemble her perception of the role model's image (e.g., wearing black clothes):

"..I never got into pop bands when I was younger it's just this whole you know black make-up, it wasn't actually swearing but it was just like cool, my mum wouldn't like me watching that I watched it and (it's just) like admired her because she went from Bananarama to like extreme, it was like, I don't know I really wanted to be like her, I actually just started running around the house singing her songs and wearing not wearing black clothes but like stealing my mum's black cardigans and stuff and trying clothes on, and it was like, I'm Shakespeare's Sister don't mess with me..... I went to a very Catholic school and it was like oh you know, I just started to learn about witch craft and stuff I never practised or did anything like that it's just she looked like a witch and she looked scary and powerful and she looked dark and evil and I thought I'd love to be her and get all my friends because my head teacher was a nun so I just thought oh I'd love get her one day because she was very mean"

To help interpret Lucy's metaphor of the witch, we can turn to Haste's discussion of the witch being one of four images in which Western culture portrays women (the others being wife, whore, and waif). According to Haste (1993), viewing woman as witch is the most threatening image, as the witch has autonomous sexuality, making demands on men. Thus, the witch has the power over men. In addition to sexual power, the witch, according to Haste, also has social and magical power, with the magical power enabling the witch to be totally mystifying to men.

Adopting the metaphor of the witch holds certain functions for Lucy. Drawing on Haste's discussion, parallels can be drawn between the social power of the witch and the social power that Lucy gains when her friends hold her in high regard. As the ringleader, Lucy has social influence over her friends by encouraging them to go against the nuns. If, as Haste suggested, the witch is often viewed as a whore, complete with sexual power, then Lucy's reference to a witch and witchcraft functions as a way

of offending the nuns, as a witch represents true evil. So, whilst it is not the case that Lucy is actually adopting the image of the witch, she is, through metaphor, adopting the social power ensued within it.

It is also interesting to note that Lucy does not talk about any of the musical qualities of the role model (e.g., that she liked her because she was a good singer, etc.). Her interest in the musical aspects of the role model appears subordinate to the powerful image of the witch.

3.2 Theme 2: Musical role models as objects of the gaze

The following analysis comes from one focus group. The theme 'positioning others as the gazer' explores how adolescents placed each other in the position of the gazer, and the implications of this for the gender categories that are constructed. The discourses come from the adolescents' discussions of whether they thought being good looking was a reason for admiring a role model.

Positioning others as the gazer

?: Good looking isn't (really as important)
 Maria: I think sometimes it is//
 Rachel: It is if you are in a boy band
 Rich: -----|[(it isn't)]
 Maria: Yeah
 ?Male: (XXX) not music//
 Simon: It's how they dress as well in't it
 Rich: That's just, that's going to get the girls not us lot is it if we see it as like I don't know BoyZone dressed nicely we're not going to go oh yeah
 Maria: Yeah but Britney Spears you go Oh yeah//
 Simon: Yeah but women go out and buy a (XXX)
 Rich; ---|[yeah but we don't like her music though do we we just like her]
 Maria: -----|[Yeah but she's good looking, that's what I'm saying, it's important in't it].....
 Rachel: it depends like some CD covers you like got like, like boys like women on the front and they just buy it for that 'cos my brother does like buy it for the covers
 Rich: -----|[I wouldn't].....
 Rachel; Yeah but you've got you get posters on the wall and everything, they've got to be good looking

Tseëlon (1995) discussed the notion of females being the object of the gaze. She presented three different selves of the female in relation to the male gaze; the visible self, the clothed self, and the fragile self. It is the visible self that is mostly apparent in the extracts illustrated here. Tseëlon argued that the visible self goes beyond that of the importance of clothes or creating a good impression; it relates to the idea of feeling exposed, observed or on show.

Tseëlon stated that the image of the woman is an object of male desire in that they are to be idolized and either conquered or destroyed. However, whilst Tseëlon talks only of the female, it is evident from the adolescents' discourse that this invasion applies

to the male role models as well. The adolescents continually try to place the opposite sex in the position of the gazer. For example, Rachel places the boys into the position of the gazer by making reference to boys buying CDs just because of the women on the covers. Another device that the females use to try and position the boys as the gazer is to use anecdotes of their brothers as examples that all boys buy music because of the women on the covers. Rachel states that her brother buys music based on what the musician looks like. Rachel also uses the argument that the boys have posters on their wall; therefore they must be good looking in order to warrant having them on the wall. This reference to the posters on the wall also allows Rachel to place the boys in the position of the gazer. The idea that women are objects within posters has similarities with Mulvey's (1975) presentation of the female in cinema. She used the term *scopophilia* to represent a gaze at others that is voyeuristic in nature. Rachel refers to the posters as a way of positioning the boys as voyeurs. The boys try to resist this position by also trying to place the girls as voyeurs when it comes to boy bands.

3.3 Theme 3: Musical role models as sources of negotiation for group identities

The final repertoire comes from data from three focus groups. The analysis is based around the groups' discussions of one of the pictures of the musicians, that of Guy Johnston (see Appendix A), who, at the time of interview, had won the Young Musician of the Year competition at the age of 18 (This is a very prestigious music competition televised live in the UK. The winner of the competition generally goes on to receive worldwide fame, performing with top orchestras and making professional recordings).

Privileged status

Joe: He looks gay
 Fred: He does, he looks like he's playing (X).....
 |[he looks like a private school,----- kind of person, yeah=
 Lucy: -----|[yeah, quite posh]
 Fred: =big manor house
 Liz: Yeah, Prince William or Prince Harry, that kind of person.....
 Rachel: Well he's not not going to be liked but
 Liz: Because he just looks like rich and posh and got whatever he wanted.....
 Fred: Because going on how expensive cellos are it's like//
 Liz: You get, got whatever you want you're really spoilt and everything so
 Fred: Yeah, maybe either, either an only child or loads of brothers and sisters
 AI: Why either a//
 Rachel: No I think
 Fred: Well only children tend to get spoilt more than loads...
 Lucy: And then if you are in a big family you try and be individual like.....
 Liz: The thing is though it must have cost a lot to teach him how to play it
 Fred: Yeah because he looks like he's had private lessons
 Liz; Yeah and he's wearing a posh suit

Fred states that Guy Johnston looks like someone that has been to private school and perhaps lives in a big manor house. The reference to a private school education and a big manor house implies wealth as well as a higher social status. Liz's reference to Prince William and Prince Harry carries similar connotations, since these two figures are representative of those that have come from a privileged background. The adolescents' discourse implies that this background is one that they cannot relate to, a different category group to which they belong.

Through the adolescents' accounts of Guy Johnston, and the reference to Prince William and Prince Harry, the adolescents construct an in-group and an out-group, where membership is determined by wealth, education and a higher social status. (The concept of in-groups and out-groups comes from Tajfel's (1978) social identity theory). The adolescents place themselves in the out-group by placing Guy Johnston, Prince William and Prince Harry in the in-group. This exclusion from the in-group has important implications for the adolescents' social identity. Abrams and Hogg (1990) stated that generally, one group is perceived to have more resources, power, status and prestige. Individuals who belong to more subordinate groups are therefore more likely to develop a negative social identity. However, it is possible to negotiate this negative identity in order to maintain a more positive social identity. The extracts show that the adolescents did attempt this negotiation. They achieved this by drawing on the negative characteristics that they associated with this particular in-group, such as not going to be liked and being spoilt.

Within the privileged status theme, the adolescents also make reference to the opportunities that are available to those that are privileged. Particular reference is made to Guy Johnston where they discuss the opportunity that he has been given to learn to play the cello and have private lessons. By making these assertions, the adolescents again position themselves in the out-group. Thus, the adolescents suggest that because they did not have the opportunity to have private lessons, they have therefore missed out on the chance to become a good musician.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to provide an overview of how adolescents draw on and use their social representations of musical role models in their construction of identity. Three themes were presented, (1) musical role models as sources of empowerment, (2) musical role models as objects of the gaze, and (3) musical role models as sources of negotiation for group identities. By looking at adolescents' discourses, the study has demonstrated ways in which adolescents use rhetorical devices when talking about their role models in their construction of identity. In particular, the paper has focused on how the adolescents position themselves and others in their talk and the implications that this has for negotiating their identity.

5. REFERENCES

1. Abell, J. & Stokoe, E. H. (2001). Broadcasting the royal role: Constructing culturally situated identities in the Princess Diana *Panorama* interview. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 40, 417-435.
2. Abrams, D. & Hogg, M. A. (1990). An introduction to the social identity approach. In D.Abrams & M. A. Hogg (Eds.), *Social identity theory* (pp. 1-9). London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
3. Arnett, J. J., Larson, R., & Offer, D. (1995). Beyond effects: Adolescents as active media users. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 24, 511-518.
4. Bromnick, R. D. & Swallow, B. L. (1999). I like being who I am: a study of young people's ideals. *Educational Studies*, 25, 117-129.
5. Davies, B. & Harré, R. (1990). Positioning: the discursive production of selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 20, 43-63.
6. Duck, J. M. (1990). Children's ideals: the role of real-life versus media figures. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 42, 19-29.
7. Haste, H. (1993). *The sexual metaphor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
8. Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16, 6-18.
9. North, A. C., Hargreaves, D. J., & O'Neill, S. A. (2000). The importance of music to adolescents. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 70, 255-272.
10. Potter, J. & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and psychology*. London: Sage.
11. Tajfel, H. ed. (1978). *Differentiation between social groups: studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations*. London: Academic Press.
12. Tseëlon, E. (1995). *The masque of femininity*. London: Sage.
13. van Langenhove, L. & Harré, R. (1999). Introducing positioning theory. In R.Harré & L. van Langenhove (Eds.), *Positioning theory: moral contexts of intentional action* (pp. 14-31). Oxford: Blackwell.
14. Widdicombe, S. (1998). Identity as an analysts' and a participants' resource. In C.Antaki & S. Widdicombe (Eds.), *Identities in talk* (pp. 191-206). London: Sage.
15. Widdicombe, S. & Wooffitt, R. (1995). *The language of youth subcultures*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

6. Appendix A



Guy Johnston