Who do You Want to be Like? Factors Influencing Early Adolescents' Selection of Accessible and Inaccessible Role Models

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Abstract

The present study investigates the impact of accessible and inaccessible role models on early adolescents' conceptions of their identities. Accessible role models are those who have regular direct interactions with adolescents, whilst inaccessible role models such as celebrities have no direct connection. The current investigation was based within a broader educational intervention that targeted the educational resilience of socially disadvantaged school students by prompting them to interact with material drawn from outstanding Irish career role models. Data were collected by interviewing 15 students and subsequent thematic analysis of their interview transcripts. Results revealed that adolescents mostly selected role models who they perceived as emotionally available, relatable and successful, within proximal contexts. These accessible role models gave adolescents behavioural cues on how to overcome difficulties and attain success, leading to reflections of greater self-esteem. Adolescents also selected inaccessible role models to scaffold ideals for their longer-term future selves, based on how the role models' life stories connected personally to their lives. This signals how adolescents select and use different types of role models in their identity formation.

Keywords

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During adolescence many individuals become increasingly preoccupied with who they are (Breger, 1974, McAdams, 2001, Vygotsky, 1978). As the world has become more interconnected by technology and other infrastructure, local communities are becoming more impacted by global structures and individuals may have more freedom in defining their own lives (Côte & Levine, 2002). There are now more opportunities to readily experience other cultures, social structures and ways of life. Although there are many obvious benefits to a more interconnected and interdependent world, creating personal identity may have become less straight-forward (Côte & Levine, 2015). Adolescents are exposed to more diverse models of life, and questions concerning their identities may no longer be easily answered by parents and proximal community members alone. Instead, distal public figures may demonstrate alternative models of life and inspire adolescents to pursue a similar future, meaning that a wider range of people may be identified as role models. The multiple models of success available to adolescents living in a globalised world may inspire them to seek more diverse answers to the questions of both who they are within continuously changing societies, as well as who they want to be like.

There is evidence that people, especially during adolescence, look to others to better understand who they are, and who they want to be (Bandura, 1971, Erikson, 1968). Social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1963) suggests our behaviours are learned by observing and imitating others, i.e. other people act as psychological models. When people turn to specific others with the intention of learning from them about their role, those people whom we turn to can be considered role models. For example, an individual may look to Mark Zuckerberg's financial success and, if they desire to amass the same fortune, imitate his behaviours to attain

the same result. Role models tend to be conceptualized as people who you want to be like – connecting social learning theory to identity goals. Empirical studies have indicated that individuals who identify with role models tend to experience a variety of positive outcomes, such as increased motivation (Lockwood, Jordan & Kunda, 2002), higher self-esteem (Yancey, Siegel & McDaniel, 2002) and better academic achievement (Herrmann et al, 2016).

This current study of role models in adolescence is situated within the context of an educational intervention, aimed to increase educational resilience in a cohort of Irish adolescent school students in socially disadvantaged schools, by exposing them to outstanding Irish career role models through the medium of the English curriculum (Symonds, Torsney & Duffy, 2017). Specifically, this study focuses on which role models were most salient for the adolescents' identities – how did (if at all) different types of role models feature in adolescents' descriptions of themselves and their futures?

Conceptual Framework

Identity in Adolescence

One of the most influential assertions made by early pioneer William James in psychological identity studies (James, 1890) was that people's identities consist of two parts: the "I" and the "me" selves (James, 1981). James conceptualized the "I" as the agentic, rational and reflexive core, which also works as a thread of continuity between the past and the present. On the other hand, the "me" refers to more formally constructed parts of the self, e.g. our perception of our self in relation to our profession, body, interpersonal relationships and religion. James posited that the "me" is not rooted purely in biopsychology and thus asserted there to be a sociocultural aspect to the self: the social context of the person directly impacts who they are. He further suggested there was no singular context a person is shaped by, but that a person's "me"

might be different within each specific context: "a division of the [wo]man into several selves" (James, 1981, p. 294, insertion by authors) – interactions with others impact who we are. It is then the role of the "I" to reconcile the several selves into one whole, which "may be a discordant splitting…. or it may be a harmonious division" (ibid.) The "I" is thus reflexive in reconciling selves, which may, or may not, together posit a clear image of identity for the individual.

Early sociocultural theories on the self, or identity, also included Cooley's looking-glass self, which supposes that a person constructs themselves by considering how others perceive and judge them (Cooley, 1902). Similarly, Mead posited that the central "I" makes sense of the "me" through social interactions, which involve shared meaning between social actors, i.e. there is a continuous negotiation of who I am, dependent on how social interactions confirm or reject pre-existing ideas about the self (Mead, 1934). To summarise, early sociocultural psychological theories pioneered the idea that identity may not be one inherent quality, but rather a negotiation between the inner "I" and the environment, mediated by all real and imaginary interactions.

More recently this early work has been used to ground the supposition that human identity rests on three pillars: belonging, individuality and continuity (Côte & Levine, 2015). This conceptualization of identity has also been inspired by Tajfel's work on intergroup relations, wherein affiliation, or a sense of belonging within any group mediates biases; both positive biases to other in-group members and negative biases towards out-group individuals (Tajfel, 1982). Most groups are not homogenous and different group members have different roles to play or perform, and so conflictingly, humans also strive to be different and unique (Côte & Levine, 2015). The final and arguably most important pillar of identity in Côte and Levine's (2015) conception is continuity across time. Not only do past experiences impact the present

person, but without a chronological thread connecting the past to the present, the person is reduced to a series of independent unrelated interactions, rather than being a cohesive and predictable social actor.

Detailed work on identity as a story, or narrative, posits that we construct our identities to make sense of autobiographical facts and experiences over our lifetime (McAdams, 1985). This identity narrative is constructed by the "I" self, (James, 1890, Côte & Levine, 2015), which reconciles all interactions and impressions to create an understanding of who I am. The identity narrative also plays a role in causal coherence (McAdams, 2001) whereby a person can connect past events with ensuing psychological or social consequences. This naive understanding of cause and consequence may also play a role in considering the future self, or who you want to be, and in developing strategies to attain this possible self (Oyserman & Markus, 1990).

Role Models in Adolescence

Considerations about future identity are of key relevance during adolescence (Breger, 1974, McAdams, 2001). There, adolescents often look to adults' lives as models for their possible future selves (Erikson, 1968). Social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1963, Bandura, 1969) suggests that observers first recognise the behaviour of others, then cognitively code the meaning of the modelled behaviour, then increase their own motivation to match the modelled performance (Bandura, 1971, p.24). This psychological process related to modelling is likely to be embedded in many interactions adolescents have with others.

Leading from this, role models can provide tailored clues about what it means to experience a role within a social group, or combination of roles, by modelling a specific identity. There appears to be little consensus on an exact definition of role model, but a useful, albeit general, conceptualization may be someone "deemed worthy of imitation" (Pleiss & Feldhusen,

1995) by a role aspirant, who is the person who aspires to take on elements of the modelled role, connecting to Bandura's social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1963). This emerges in theories of role models, where the similarity hypothesis suggests that people select role models who are more similar to them in culture (McLean, 2005), gender, ethnicity (Yancey et al, 2002) and race (Zirkel, 2002).

Persons identified as role models tend also to be perceived as successful and an inspiration to others (Morgenroth, Ryan & Peters, 2015). It is likely that what constitutes success is perceived differently by different people and thus a shared notion of success between model and aspirant may be another similarity between the two actors. There has been some evidence supporting this similarity hypothesis, as the similar selected role model may provide a concrete example of 'people like me' (Zirkel, 2002) attaining success.

From an identity perspective, role models may provide ideas of what the aspirant's future self (or selves) might look like. As a person makes sense of their identity in defining the narrative around who they are, the continuity or causal coherence might impact their present identity as a strategy to attain their desired future self. There has been some empirical evidence that role models may affect young people's motivation (Morgenroth et al, 2015) in terms of achieving their goals. Further, as similar role models may demonstrate what is realistically possible for the role aspirant, the aspirant may feel more optimistic about their own futures, which may lead to a variety of positive psychological and behavioural outcomes (Chen et al, 2013, Hurd, Zimmerman & Xue, 2009). However, there is some evidence suggesting that role models who are not appropriately matched with aspirants, may have no effect, or even a negative impact, on the aspirant (Bird, Kuhns & Garofalo, 2012, Hurd et al, 2009). For example, when role models are perceived as successful in a domain that is not relevant to the aspirant, there may

be no impact (Morgenroth et al, 2015). Similarly, when role models' success is perceived as unattainable, the aspirant may become demoralized and "self-deflate" (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997).

Bird et al., (2012) identify two categories of role model in the context of lived proximity to the role aspirant: accessible and inaccessible. Accessible role models are those whom the role aspirant has a personal relationship with, often a parent or other family member, and who the aspirant can access, often daily. Inaccessible role models have no personal relationship with the role aspirant and tend to be celebrities or other public figures, e.g. pop stars, athletes or billionaires, and whom the aspirant has no personal access to. To date there are few investigations explicitly looking at the differential impacts of accessible and inaccessible role models, and in general it seems they may have similar functions in relation to how aspirants construct their identities. There is however evidence that accessible role models specifically provide socioemotional support and mentorship (Madhavan & Crowell, 2014), including resources and opportunities (Hurd, Zimmerman & Reischl, 2011, Hurd et al, 2009, Madhavan & Crowell, 2014) and provide day-to-day support in affirming adolescents' identities as positive and belonging (Bird et al, 2012).

This complex interplay of personal identity formation with role model selection and proximity, contextualises the current investigation on how adolescents select role models and how these role models impact adolescent identity formation. Empirical evidence suggests that optimistic possible selves and positive self-evaluation, i.e. positive self-esteem, may play a role in overall well-being (Bouchard et al, 2017, Di Fabio & Bucci, 2015, Krok, 2015), so the impact of role models on socially disadvantaged adolescent school students may be vast in terms of primary and secondary outcomes.

The Current Study

The aim of the current investigation was to examine the psychological interactions between role models and identities in adolescents, with a focus on accessible and inaccessible role models. The investigation was carried out in the context of an educational intervention: the Professional Student Programme for Educational Resilience (PROSPER) (Symonds et al., 2017) designed to support socially disadvantaged adolescent school students build their capacity for engaging in schoolwork despite experiencing barriers to education (a form of educational resilience). The intervention material was broadly based on nine outstanding Irish career role models (Symonds et al, 2017), whose experiences were intended to inspire adolescent participants to develop their educational resilience competencies, i.e. the skills they needed to engage in schoolwork therefore participate successfully in the academic component of school. The current investigation sought to directly examine the experiences of the adolescent participants in relation to the intervention role models, as well as role models more broadly. Specific research questions were:

1) What was most meaningful to the adolescents, about the inaccessible role models they selected from PROSPER and the other (in)accessible role models apparent in their lives?

2) What was the impact of those inaccessible and accessible role models on adolescents' conceptualizations of their own identities?

Methods

Educational Intervention

PROSPER ran between September 2017 and May 2018 in three secondary schools in Dublin, Ireland, as a research-practice partnership between educational psychologists at University College Dublin and the English teachers in those schools. The intervention consisted of 30 lessons that were designed to enhance students' momentary engagement in schoolwork, delivered through the medium of English lessons, and meeting objectives set out in the Irish national curriculum for Junior Cycle English. One lesson was taught each day for six weeks, to all First Year (age 12/13-years) and Second Year (age 13/14-years) students in the school. The current study concerns the Second Year students who were given the intervention between January 2018 and May 2018.

To create the intervention material, nine career role models were interviewed in depth by the PROSPER manual authors (Symonds et al., 2017). Of the nine role models, seven were men and two women. All were raised in Ireland although two were born elsewhere (the Congo and Germany). All role models were white. Four had been brought up in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods. All the role models had overcome significant challenges in their lives. These challenges included being bullied, being gay, being a teenage mother, starting a business, experiencing mental illness, experiencing physical illness, overcoming gender prejudice, and overcoming social disadvantage.

The role models were asked to speak about how they succeeded despite the odds, and to advise educationally disengaged adolescent school students on how to succeed in school. Each interview lasted between 40 minutes to one hour, and the transcripts were used as the basis for at least one active learning activity in each of the 30 PROSPER sessions, which was delivered

through a range of mediums including written narrative, audio recordings of the role model interviews¸ video material of the role models' professional activities (e.g. an interview with a role model politician, and a short film of a role model's poem), and text and visual material provided by the role models (e.g. a detailed response to a client by an award winning architect). The PROSPER student workbooks were premised with short biographies of each role model, then each role model identity narrative and related material was interspersed throughout the intervention. This interleaving was designed to maximise students' chances of connecting with one of the role models, by allowing them to have repeated 'interaction' with the role models across time.

Within the context of the intervention, the current small-scale qualitative study took the opportunity to more deeply investigate how role models emerged in adolescents' descriptions of their identities, with a view to enabling revision of the intervention and providing fundamental information on early adolescent identity and role models. The qualitative design was chosen to "explore unanticipated issues as they emerge" (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p.47) and thus more freely elicit meanings that adolescents ascribed to the role models and their relationship with identity.

Participants and Procedures

The initial participant pool included all Second Year (age 13/14-year-old) students who had been exposed to the PROSPER intervention in one Dublin secondary school. The school had been given a classification of social disadvantage by the Irish Department of Education and Skills under the Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools (DEIS) programme (Weir, 2006). Selection of schools for the DEIS programme is based on a set of indicators that mark schools against national averages. These include having more children who qualify for free

medical care, fewer children who graduate from school, and more children who qualify for free school books given their parents' lower levels of income (Weir, 2006).

Convenience sampling allowed for maximum number of participants, so parents of all 80 second year students were sent opt-in consent forms. Owing to the typical low parental response rate in socially disadvantaged schools in Ireland, seventeen consent forms were returned. The researchers did not ask the school to send further reminders to parents, because this would have added to the burden on the school already posed by the PROSPER intervention study. Furthermore, a sample size of 17 was considered adequate for the intended research, because it enabled more in-depth analysis of the narrow topic on role models in a smaller number of transcripts, which yielded higher information power (Malterud, Siersma & Guassora, 2015).

Two of the 17 students were absent both days of the data collection, leaving the final number of participants at 15. Of the final 15 students, 11 were male. 14 students were between 14-15 years old and one student was 17 years old. 13 students self-identified as Irish, 2 did not. All adolescent participants were given written and verbal information about the study and asked for their assent to participate.

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews, administered by the lead author. Interviews were held in the school's conference room over two days, one week apart, and lasted between 10 and 25 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and recordings were stored on a hard drive, accessible only to the lead author. Eight of the recordings were transcribed by the lead author, whereas seven recordings were shared via a secure upload/download folder in Google Drive and transcribed by a PROSPER research assistant. The transcripts were de-identified by the lead author before analysis. All names given are pseudonyms, chosen by the authors.

Interview Schedules

The interview questions were categorized under two headings, 1) self-selected role models, and 2) PROSPER role models. Of the 15 questions, four asked explicitly about role model selection, for example "can you tell me about any people you look up to or learn from?" and "what about them stands out to you?". Four questions covered the impact of role models, for example "can you tell me about what you learn from them?", and a further three questions asked specifically about role model impact on identity, e.g., "how do they [role model] make you feel about yourself?" or, "did they [role model] make you think of yourself in a new way?". The core interview questions remained the same for all participants, but additional questions were asked when clarification was needed, or further information deemed useful.

Analysis Plan

The data were analysed using thematic analysis (TA) according to Clarke, Braun and Hayfield (2015). TA is a useful method for systematically reviewing and organizing data to find patterns across it (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Unlike some other analysis methods, TA is relatively flexible (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and allows a certain freedom in tailoring the analytic approach to the needs of the research. As there were specific research questions in mind the coding and ensuing analysis of the current data included both induction and deduction as described below. Despite its flexible nature, the six phases of TA that are generally adhered to (Braun & Clarke, 2012, Clarke et al, 2015), were followed in this report, wherein they provided a useful scaffold to logically conduct the analysis.

Familiarisation. The first step in analysing the data was transcribing the interviews then uploading the transcriptions to NVivo 12 Plus software. The transcriptions were read, general annotations were made, then the transcriptions were re-read and brief summaries of each were

written. Finally, the interview recordings were listened to again to ensure any relevant non-word details had been adequately captured by the transcripts.

Coding. Initially the intention had been to code four interviews to establish first codes, then refine these and then do the rest, however, as the transcripts were relatively short, all of them were coded in the first round, leading to 58 initial codes. Codes were created based on words, phrases or ideas which arose in multiple locations in the transcription (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), relating to the core research topic of role models and adolescent identity. In this way, deductive foci guided the analysis away from Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), yet allowed induction by using spontaneous and prompted utterings of participants across transcripts to create in vivo codes. The resulting codes were reviewed and refined, as they were judged to be too vague, irrelevant to the research questions or duplicates (e.g. "personal relationship", "personal connection").

Searching for themes. Once the codes had been refined, they were visually mapped and grouped together by subjectively determined groups, or 'themes'. These were selected by keeping both the research questions in mind and by attempting to fairly reflect the content of the data (Clarke et al, 2015). These themes were labelled as overarching concepts that nested multiples codes within, e.g. *future desires/goals*, and *accessible role model selection*.

Reviewing themes. After general themes were established, the entire coding structure was reviewed to determine whether the themes were a good fit to the data. Codes were re-allocated to different themes when they did not fit, and the themes were re-organized on hierarchical levels: overarching themes, themes and sub-themes (Clarke et al, 2015), keeping the research questions in mind (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Defining and naming themes. The themes were then renamed more succinctly and brief summaries of their content were written. At this stage, the transcripts were read again to locate quotations which would most poignantly illustrate the essence of each theme.

Synthesising themes. After the themes had been named, defined and supported with examples from the data, they were re-organized into the order that most coherently addressed the research questions and logically led to concluding remarks.

Results

Research Question 1

What was most meaningful to the adolescents, about the inaccessible role models they selected from PROSPER and the other (in)accessible role models apparent in their lives?

Regular psychological support.

Participants most often identified adults as role models who directly, and regularly supported their emotional and cognitive psychological functioning. Out of the 15 adolescents interviewed, 12 mentioned they selected their role models for this reason. Three participants said that the adults they selected as role models were "always there" for them (Charlie, Aoife, Ciara), whereas others mentioned that they looked up to adults who were perceived as always helping them when they needed something (John, Francis, Martin, Afzal). Only one student (Kathleen) identified a peer their own age as a role model and explained her selection by discussing how this peer "would always help" and "stick up for" her. The type of support adolescents described valuing included providing useful general advice, e.g. "like 'work hard and all', 'don't give up on things'…. that sort of stuff" (Amal), as well as specific advice, e.g. "they tell me how I did and what could I do better" (Afzal). Although helpfulness was the most common reason given for selecting a role model, qualities of kindness and caring were also discussed as important

factors by several participants, e.g. "she's such a nice and caring person and I just want to be like that" (Ciara). Adolescents also consistently mentioned adults who made them feel "happy" about themselves (John, Meg, Antoni, Martin, Edward, Aoife, Afzal). Only accessible role models were mentioned in this category.

Relatability.

Participants tended to select those adults as role models with whom they could best relate, either in terms of shared interest, shared experience or shared background. For example, Charlie was interested in cooking and looked up to a celebrity chef outside of PROSPER. Afzal mentioned racism and being discriminated against and related to a PROSPER role model who had been discriminated against because of his hair colour. Kathleen looked up to another PROSPER role model who had had a baby as a teenager, as her mother had also been young when Kathleen was born. Kathleen also identified her friend as a role model, as she felt they had experienced similar occasions of peers being "judgy". Aoife looked up to her uncle, who is a doctor, which she considers similar to her ambitions to become a veterinarian. Francis selected his martial arts coaches as role models, as they shared an interest for their specific sport.

Amal discussed looking up to an inaccessible role model outside of PROSPER because of a combination of the interest in technology they shared and his perception of a similar background: "he seems to have quite a normal life…being normal makes people sympathize with him and think they could be like him". What Amal perceived as "normal" seems to have related to their shared experience of attending public school and not "getting perfect scores on tests". He mentioned that although "the creator of Amazon, or Bill Gates" were highly successful in his field of interest, they were unrelatable to him as he believed that he "could never be like them

from the start" – their success was perceived as unattainable. In this category, adolescents referred to both accessible and inaccessible role models.

Conception of success.

The adolescents interviewed were actively thinking about their futures and seemed to have specific notions of what future success would look like. This was relevant in selecting both inaccessible and accessible role models. The adults that they mentioned they looked up to were all deemed successful by the students. For example, Paul selected Muhammad Ali as a role model, "because he's probably the best boxer ever and I want to be like him"; Charlie named celebrity chefs as role models: "it'd be amazing if I could like turn out like them as successful and as good a chef".

Success was generally understood as having a fulfilling job and making money (Amal, Paul, Michael, Francis, Afzal, Charlie), and more generally as being "good" (Michael, Paul) and "do[ing] something great in the world" (Antoni). Students also spontaneously discussed success in terms of academics, as Charlie also identified his sister as a role model as she "did well in school" and Kathleen explained that her uncle had "done very well with his education". Mostly, participants' conceptions of success were related to their own interests and those individuals who had excelled in their areas of interest were perceived as most successful. These successful adults were deemed worthy of imitation and inspired participants to want to be like them. Interestingly, one participant felt her mother "could've done more, and I don't want to be like that way" (Kathleen). In this instance the participant deemed a potential role model as not successful, and perhaps thus an undesirable scaffold for a potential future self.

Research Question 2

What was the impact of those accessible and inaccessible role models on adolescents'

conceptualizations of their identities?

   Role models give behavioural cues.

   Several participants mentioned that once they had selected a role model they looked up

to, they imitated them. Aoife "copied" her uncle's general behaviour, Charlie started cooking

more in efforts to become a better cook like his role model and Amal was inspired by his role

model's high ambition. A role model from the PROSPER programme discussed his experience

standing up to bullies, which Afzal sought to imitate, i.e. "you gotta stand up and be strong and

face it". Francis discussed how one role model "was able to get his point across by […] banging

on the table and shouting" and explained that he was "focused on" the body language used by the

role model – he had taken note of the role model's strategy in exercising his voice and discussed

an incident in which he used this same strategy.

   Participants had also taken note of specific strategies role models had used to attain the

success for which they were admired. One strategy students noted and were actively trying to

imitate was in "starting off with small goals" (Meg), then setting themselves bigger goals ("he

didn't want to be a millionaire…but he wanted to be a billionaire" (Amal)) with the intention of

eventually becoming "the best [at] what they do" (Charlie). Beyond specific goals, the

adolescents also discussed how observing these qualities of their role models encouraged them to

"stay on track" (Amal) and "get their heads down" (Meg). Here, both accessible and inaccessible

role models were identified.

Overcoming difficulties and defying expectations.

Participants consistently mentioned challenges in their own lives, as well as those in their role models' lives. In relation to the PROSPER role models, one outstanding female scientist was discussed most frequently, as she had had a baby as a teenager and subsequently, through education, become very successful in her field. Participants seemed to be impressed not specifically with her current success (a "good job" (Ciara)), but rather with the challenge she faced and overcame. Beyond the pregnancy itself, participants also recognized that with pregnancy came stigmatization - "everyone was saying she wouldn't be able to do anything" (Francis) - and it was the role model's perseverance in spite of the stigmatization that was most inspirational to them. Similarly, participants discussed a PROSPER mixed martial artist role model who was the first person in his family to achieve a school leaving qualification. Here, it was not the fact that he received his qualification that was noted, but the fact that he defied expectations to attain his success.

The participants seemed to respond to the strategies employed by the role models to overcome their respective challenges. One participant "learned that[…] when you get challenged in your life, it's meant to happen, but, […] you just need to figure out how to get over the challenges and just not to worry about them" (Martin) – a sentiment which was echoed by various other participants. Another student discussed how difficult it was for his sister to obtain her Ph.D. and that he "just thought, you know, it's pretty amazing that she got through them all" (Charlie). Kathleen admired her friend who, despite that "people have called her fat", was able to not only ignore the insults, but furthermore continue to "stick up for [other] people". The way role models responded to challenges, whether through perseverance, commitment to their goals,

education or asking for help, provided scaffolding by which participants could address challenges in their own lives.

The challenges discussed by the participants were generally recurring issues in which they felt they had been treated "unfairly" due to a lack of power or status: Afzal mentioned racism, Amal mentioned his "small beginnings" and Charlie conceptualized himself as an "underdog". Although participants discussed structural inequalities and feeling powerless at times, in general it seemed they were hopeful for the future. Many of the participants discussed the admiration they felt towards role models who not only overcame difficult situations, but specifically exceeded low expectations, by "going off…[with] a real sense of devotion" (Francis) and "showing everyone wrong" (Meg). It seems plausible that participants were inspired by their role models that with hard work they could overcome challenges in their own lives. Although both inaccessible and accessible role models were mentioned in this category, participants mainly referred to inaccessible role models as models for overcoming challenge. This may have resulted from the deliberate attempt through PROSPER to bring real world examples of resilience to the socially disadvantaged adolescents.

Being accepted as me.

Although some participants mentioned that sometimes they felt uncomfortable being themselves (Aoife), the consensus was that it was important not to "forget who you are" (Francis): "you sort of realize, I'm okay the way I am…I should be happy with just who I am" (Ciara). In addition to general notions of success discussed earlier, participants mentioned they aspired to pursue jobs or futures which were fulfilling and would make them "happy" (Kathleen). It was also emphasized that once they knew what they wanted to do, they're "definitely gonna try and get it" (Charlie). It was important to the students to be themselves and

follow their passions, as Charlie explained it's a "waste…[not to be yourself] because then you forget who you are".

The role models the participants discussed seemed to inspire them by demonstrating that through hard work and perseverance it could be possible for anyone to achieve any desired future – "if you believe something you can do it" (Kathleen). The accessible role models instilled this sense of confidence by providing personal support or giving concrete advice on how to achieve their goals. Martin explicitly mentioned his role model "teaches [him] to be himself and don't worry about what anyone else thinks". Inaccessible role models, who tended to be chosen based on relatability and success, provided proof that someone like them could achieve success. The adolescents interviewed were at different stages in pursuing their goals, but exposure and interaction with various role models seemed to facilitate the idea that once they did know what they wanted, they could "actually do something about it" (Meg) and in working hard, attain their goals.

Discussion

The results indicated why some of the adolescent students involved in the PROSPER intervention chose specific adults as role models, and how these accessible and inaccessible role models impacted their identities.

Research Question 1

The first research question was, 'what was most meaningful to the adolescents, about the inaccessible role models they selected from PROSPER and the other (in)accessible role models apparent in their lives?'

Consistent with existing literature, students seemed to mainly select role models they deemed available for regular psychological support (similar to Madhavan & Crowell, 2013,

Zirkel 2002). This finding supports previous work suggesting adolescents first turn to adults in their daily lives as role models (Bird et al, 2012). Most adolescents interviewed identified close family members, including parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, as their role models. The reasons given for their choices tended to focus around emotional support as these adults made themselves available to talk and listen (Antoni, Ciara, Aoife, Afzal) and cognitive support: both general, in teaching the adolescents "everything" (John, Ciara, Martin), and specific, in giving advice on how best to attain goals.

The impact these accessible role models seemed to have on the adolescents was generally non-specific; rather, the adolescents discussed admiring these adults for being kind, helpful and socially interconnected. Further, some adolescents discussed wanting to be like their accessible role models but did not verbalize any specific reason why, or how. This may, however, have been due to methodological limitations of the current study, e.g. shyness with an unfamiliar researcher, or fear of giving the wrong answer (Breakwell et al, 2006). Another factor to consider, is that adolescents may not have fully disclosed who their role models really were, given that interviews took place in a formal school setting. Participants may have omitted looking up to adolescents in their communities, who may be perceived to be successful in terms of social status, i.e. cool.

When discussing inaccessible role models, adolescents tended to describe admiring those who had success in a specific career domain the adolescent was interested in pursuing. This finding seems to be in line with existing literature (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997), role model selection is impacted by success in a domain of interest to the aspirant. There also needed to be an element of personal relatability to link the role model to the adolescent, within the career domain. Five of the adolescents expressed keen interest in martial arts, and only one of them

(Paul) chose a non-Irish martial arts role model – the other four identified the mixed martial artist from PROSPER who was from a nearby Dublin suburb, perhaps because of geographic proximity. One Polish adolescent with an interest in soccer named a Polish soccer star as his role model. Another participant listed celebrities from poor backgrounds as most relatable and felt a shared experience of being the "underdog" (Charlie).

Outside of the career context, adolescents also selected role models who had experienced significant success in the face of challenge: i.e. resilience. In our study examples included navigating teenage pregnancy and the associated stigma, discrimination, and performing poorly in school. Kathleen selected an outstanding female scientist as a role model, who had a child as a teenager, just as Kathleen's mother had been when she had Kathleen. Kathleen internalized from that role model, that when facing an obstacle, it is still possible to attain success if you believe in yourself. Similarly, Afzal perceived his experience being bullied due to racism as similar to the PROSPER role model's experience of being bullied due to his hair colour, and concluded that if the role model could overcome this, so could he. Notably, there were no role models of colour in PROSPER. The example of Azfal may indicate that when children of colour do not have access to successful adults who are similar in ethnicity or race, they may choose role models based on other salient similarities.

Interestingly, not all adolescents matched their role models to themselves by gender: three of the four girls interviewed identified men as role models. This trend has been observed in previous research and has been attributed to a smaller pool of successful women compared to men (Lockwood, 2006). Inherent in Western patriarchal social structures there are consistently fewer women than men in positions of power or success (Celis & Lovenduski, 2018). The fewer women there are, the less likely it is that adolescents may find someone matched not only for

interest and perceived success, but also mirroring other aspects of their identities. It thus seems likelier that boys can find identity matched role models; which is interesting, considering the evidence that gender-matched role models may have the greatest positive impact (Lockwood, 2006, Zirkel, 2002).

Although previous work has found evidence that adolescents who are white and of higher socioeconomic status are more likely to have a role model (Yancey et al, 2002), in this study, underrepresented adolescents (female or of colour) could clearly identify both accessible and inaccessible role models. Here, although the pool of role models matched on gender and ethnicity was limited, adolescents still identified very generic similarities between themselves and their role models, to locate themselves in relation to the successful adult. It must be considered that in cases like this, when the only available role models have different characteristics to the role aspirant, it might result in fewer direct connections between characteristics for modelling purposes, reducing the value that people tend to derive from those role models (Zirkel, 2002). However, it remains that even though the value of dissimilarity might be present it might not always be identified, perhaps pointing an interesting way forward for intervention on role models for underrepresented adolescents.

Research Question 2

The second research question was, 'what was the impact of those accessible and inaccessible role models on adolescents' conceptualizations of their identities?'

The role models selected by adolescents through the range of mechanisms described above, also acted to provide a scaffold for adolescents' future selves. In examining 'successful' adults' lives and the strategies they employed to overcome challenges, adolescents identified strategies for reaching their own goals (e.g. working hard at school), and desired future selves.

The role models also served to illustrate coherent identity narrative identities, built from the consolidation of different autobiographical facts and experiences. When adolescents deemed these role model identities worthy and successful in some manner, both relatable inaccessible and accessible role models acted to provide evidence that adolescents could be optimistic about forming a coherent and effective identity in their own futures.

Given that the adolescents in this sample were housed in a socially disadvantaged school and were each representative of a certain amount of social disadvantage, it was interesting to note that few named accessible adults as their career role models. In this context, the highly successful inaccessible role models inspired socially disadvantaged adolescents to consider successful future selves whilst their accessible role models provided the psychological support for their daily functioning. Assuming that the accessible role models had no personal experience of the types of career successes modelled by the inaccessible role models, it may be that there was a gap between the psychological supports they provided, and the types of inputs directly relevant to attaining these types of outstanding career successes. It would therefore be interesting to see whether the adolescents proceeded towards the inaccessible role model career pathways, or whether they took different pathways for which they had more proximal psychological support.

Conclusions

Consistent with previous work (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997), adolescents seemed to gauge whether adults were relatable based on three categories – shared interest, background and experience. Adolescents did seem to interact somewhat differently with accessible and inaccessible role models. Whereas all role models provided information about possible futures and mechanism to get there, the accessible role models served the primary function of providing

socioemotional support. The adults identified as accessible role models were valued for their

helpfulness, their availability to talk and for the positive affect they invoked in the adolescents.

Although some adolescents discussed their futures with their accessible role models, generally

their interactions appeared to be less goal-driven and more focused on fostering a comfortable

interpersonal relationship and positive self-esteem. It thus seems that accessible role models'

regular psychological support may mediate a secondary outcome of positive well-being in the

adolescents. Inaccessible role models were clearly not able to provide the same support but in the

study context of social disadvantage, demonstrated a more extreme example of success than the

accessible role models did. In combination, the accessible and inaccessible role models

amplified different pathways to adaptive outcomes for the socially disadvantaged adolescents.

It is likely that modern information and communication technology provides exposure to

far more inaccessible role models than in previous times. This wider pool may allow adolescents

to conceive of possible futures for themselves that their local context would not be able to

provide. In circumstances where adolescents feel restricted by their social circumstances, they

may indeed construct their identities through forging connections with a completely different

sociocultural context through inaccessible role models. For example, using social media, LGBT

adolescents may connect with a much larger number and variety of successful LGBT adults, than

in their geographical proximity alone. Similarly, in a predominantly white Irish context,

adolescents of colour may use the internet to identify successful individuals of the same ethnic

background, as examples may be limited in their physical communities. Increased access to these

inaccessible role models may allow adolescents to have more options in terms of who they *want

to be*. This may be especially pertinent for disadvantaged or underrepresented adolescents, who

may have fewer identity-matched role models available to them locally, and thus a decreased

likelihood to benefit from possible positive impacts thereof. Additionally, without practical and emotional support from accessible role models in their local communities, it may be difficult for adolescents to feel empowered to actively pursue these idealized selves. The conclusions drawn in this current work seem to support those of Bird et al.'s 2012 study: adolescents may have the best outcomes when they are able to form a personal relationship with an adult who is able to help them and give them specific advice. Further studies may wish to consider the tensions and harmonies between the psychological support that accessible role models provide to socially disadvantaged adolescents and the career pathways illuminated by the inaccessible role models, in terms of both fundamental research and intervention.

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