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Model Behavior: An Assessment of Role Model Attachment

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Abstract

Despite the term existing since the early part of the 20th century, little is known about role models and relationships that individuals develop with them. Using attachment theory, a cornerstone of interpersonal theory, relationships between individuals and their role models are compared to relationships between those individuals and their parents in the present study. While data did not support the hypothesis (those with anxious attachment to their parents will experience more secure attachment to their role model) promising opportunities for future research were suggested by the qualitative and quantitative data that were collected. For example, the experience of many participants revealed a potentially complex relationship between role model expectations and gender in both qualitative and quantitative data collected.

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Model Behavior: An Assessment of Role Model Attachments

Introduction

Role models, originally referred to by Thomas Merton (1963) as "reference groups" (p. 899) are individuals separate from the subject but still used for identification. Specifically, role models are often seen to have traits that the subject desires and are used as a point of inspiration (Morgenroth, Ryan, & Peters, 2015). These relationships can have significant effects on the individuals who create them (Ivaldi & O'Neill, 2010; Sanderse, 2013; Yancey, Siegel, & McDaniel, 2002). However, many of these studies assume that these relationships are not similar to interpersonal relationships. This study applies interpersonal theory to relationships with role models.

Literature Review

Role Models

Robert K. Merton first coined the phrase "role model" while doing research with medical students at Columbia University though his observations of what he first called "reference groups" (1936). Merton found, through his ethnography, that many students chose to compare themselves to a group of individuals even though they do not necessarily belong to that group. These comparisons led to the med students changing their behavior in an attempt to emulate their new role models.

The "role model" model can be an example of what is called a "secondary attachment"; that is, a fabricated relationship that is formed around an object that is distant from the subject (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990). This kind of relationship is most similar to parasocial attachment and is the focus of my research.

These kinds of attachments, similar to the relationship that many children create with an imaginary friend (Benson, 1980; Klein, 1985), involve the creation of an imaginary relationship based on understanding and support. However, adolescents have matured past the creation of their own fantasized objects and instead begun to project their desired relationship onto a real person (Fromm, 1967; Landis, 1970).

Some of the existing research suggests that many adolescents do choose to identify as someone with a positive role model; a person who they believe they can emulate and become more similar to. (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Hurd,

Zimmerman, & Xue, 2009) Later research found many adolescents believe they can overcome dramatic obstacles to become more like their role model (Ivaldi & O'Neill, 2010). Also, research done by Yancy, Siegel, and McDaniel (2002) supports the idea that adults can have powerful positive effects on certain personality traits of adolescents, such as self-esteem.

Finding a role model is a deeply personal and extremely important step in identity development. Erik Erikson, one of the most famous researchers of identity, claimed that the primary developmental task of adolescence is the formation of an individual identity so that the person has "a sense of knowing where one is going," (1968). While much of the research around identity development focuses on the stage of identity exploration (Flum & Blustein, 2006), Waterman (1993), for example, highlights the need for a closer analysis of identification with role models in creating the framework for further identity development.

Attachment Theory

John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth first explored the idea that children form "attachments" to caregivers in 1952. Their research identified attachment styles that predicted behavioral responses to being placed in unfamiliar situations along with the return to more familiar environments.

Mary Ainsworth's famous Strange Situation Test (1978) temporarily separated toddlers from their primary caregivers, revealing the three different reactions to this change. Securely-attached children were upset by the separation, but were quickly soothed when the caregiver returned. These individuals have, in countless studies, been found to have higher quality relationships throughout the rest of their lives (Bauminger, Finzi-Dottan, Chason, & Har-Even, 2008; Kerns, Klepac, & Cole, 1996; Rubin et al., 2004). Anxious-attached children were upset when the caregiver left the room, but were not soothed by the caregiver's return. Avoidant-attached children were indifferent to the loss of the caregiver and were not interested in interacting with them when they returned. Both anxious and avoidant attachments have been linked to various kinds of anti-social behavior in relationships. (Bowlby, 1973; Rubin & Rose-Krasnor, 1992).

Infants create expectations for interaction styles that slowly become internalized into working models for interpersonal relationships and "serve as guides for future

behavior" (Schneider, 1991). While many of these comparisons between infant and adult attachment style are most commonly used in the case of romantic attraction, many theorists suggest that attachment styles will be found to be consistent in all interpersonal relationships (Berlin, Cassidy, & Appleyard, 2008; Markiewicz, Doyle, & Brendgen, 2001).

Attachment theory, according to Bowlby, states that infants create expectations for relationships based off of their experiences with them (1973, 1982). Extra-familial relationships are then sought after to further confirm these expectations, creating "continuity and coherence to close relationships over time" (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986, p. 58).

The working models that children create of relationships based off of parental interaction, according to attachment theory, should influence the manner in which children think and feel about their interactions and relationships with close friends (Booth et al., 2005). Research has shown that there are strong links between attachment style and friendship quality, specifically with regard to the kinds of attachments that the individual has with their parents (Dwyer et al., 2010).

Parasocial Relationships

The phrase "parasocial interaction" was first coined by Horton and Whol to describe the relationship between audience members and media personas. These relationships are "one sided," "controlled by the performer" (Horton & Wohl, 1956) and "resemble social interaction" (Frederick et al., 2012). Media consumers may believe they are in an interpersonal relationship, but since the celebrity mediates the message it is not a balanced interaction (Cohen & Perse, 2003). Continued exposure to the media persona creates feelings of intimacy for the audience member (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Classic parasocial interaction research has been centered around television programs (soap operas, newscasts, and talk shows especially), and the popularity of social media has allowed researchers to explore these relationships through avenues like blogging (Goode & Robinson, 2013) and Twitter (Frederick et al., 2012).

Rubin et al. (1985) created a reliable (α= .93) 20-item scale to measure parasocial interaction between media users and television newscasters. Studies have used modified versions of this scale and found significant effects (e.g., Frederick et al., 2012).

Though it is not an interpersonal relationship, parasocial relationships have been conceptualized as being similar to one (Turner, 1993). Parasocial interactions have been described as intimate and friend-like (Hall, Wilson, Wiesner, & Cho, 2007; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985;). Audience members are more likely to feel like they are engaged in a relationship when the media figure communicates in a way that resembles face-to-face interaction (Meyrowitz, 1986; Nordlund, 1978; Rubin et al., 1985).

Meyrowitz (1986) examined audience reaction to loss of parasocial relationships by studying reactions to celebrity deaths and found that these losses are perceived to be very similar to the loss of a close friend. Another study found that audience members feel closer to their favorite characters from television shows than to acquaintances, though not as close as a best friend (Koenig & Lessan, 1985).

Research also suggests that individuals who have successful interpersonal relationships are more likely to create parasocial relationships (Kanzawa, 2002; Perse & Rubin, 1990; Tsao, 1996). This opposes the original view that parasocial relationships were used to supplement low social interaction; instead, parasocial relationships seem to complement interpersonal success.

Researchers have collected information that defines the experiences of media consumers as "seeking guidance from media personae, seeking media personalities as friends, imagining being a part of a favorite program's social world, and desiring to meet the performers" (Rubin et al., 1985, pp. 156-157). Rubin et al. also found that media consumers report feeling sorry for characters, missing characters, looking forward to seeing characters, seeking more information about characters, and desiring to meet them in person.

Research by Goode & Robinson (2013) found that audience members with parasocial relationships to media personas modify their communication patterns to resemble writing samples of characters, showing that there are behavioral implications to these relationships. Researchers studied comments written by fans on blogs and, using a software system that analyzed the posts for communication accommodation (Giles, 1973; Giles & Le Poire, 2001) as a measure of desired psychological closeness, found those

with higher desired closeness scores were also attempting to build relationships with these media persona more actively.

Hypothesis

The goal of this study is to learn more about role model relationships. Specifically: how is a relationship between a subject and his or her role model similar to the relationship between that subject and his or her parent? By running a correlational study using scores from an attachment measure, the Experience in Close Relationships – Relationship Structures (Fraley et al., 2011), gathered after participants reflect on their relationships, I predict significant correlation between parental and role model attachment. I predict that those who are anxiously attached to parental figures will be more likely to experience a more secure attachment to a role model. I believe those who do not have satisfactory relationships with their parents will, instead, try to create these with significant others in their lives, including media figures.

Method

Participants

Participants for the study were recruited from students taking either introductory psychology or another lower level social science course in exchange for mandatory class credit. There were a total of 106 participants, 61.3% of whom were women and 84.9% were white. The average age was 19.08 with a standard deviation of 1.11. Four (4) participants did not complete the demographic information sheet.

One participant was excluded from analysis because he identified himself as a role model. While this speaks wonders for the student's view of self, it is not consistent with conceptual definitions of a role model in that he is not an "other."

Materials

Participants were given questionnaire packets including relationship reflection tasks, an attachment measure, "designed to assess attachment patterns in a variety of close relationships," the ECR-RS (Fraley et al. 2011), and a demographic survey.

The relationship task asked participants to write about their relationship with three separate people: a role model, a maternal figure, and a paternal figure. This was included to prompt deep and intentional thinking about these relationships and encourage quality

responses on the following scales. Language was intentionally designed to allow participants to interpret the prompt as they wished and reflect on their relationship as best they saw fit.

The ECR-RS is a nine-item self-report that is used to assess attachment of both romantic and non-romantic relationships. The inventory is made up of two measurements: an anxiety score that measures participants' trust in the subject (questions #1-6) and an avoidance score that measures participants' perceived support offered by the subject (#7-9). These two scores are then averaged to generate a total attachment score. Lower scores indicate more secure attachments. Some of the questions were modified to allow for applications to parasocial relationships.

An example of the questionnaire packet is included in Appendix A. Data was analyzed with IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 22.

Procedure

After giving informed consent, participants filled out the study packet, which included questions about their relationship with their role model and their parental figures. Data was then coded by the primary investigator and analyzed with SPSS. Test run include: chi square, independent samples t-test, one way ANOVA, and partial correlation. All test outputs are included in Appendix B.

Results

Summary

Participants mostly identified personal role models with only 12.3% (13) identifying parasocial role models. One participant listed his or her future (and yet-to-be met) spouse as his or her role model, which was coded as "other." Just under half (48.1%, 51) of participants listed a parent as their role model. Gender of identified role model showed a close to even split between men (51) and women (52), with some role models' genders not being identified (3).

Main Effect

A partial correlation revealed no significant correlations between anxiety around parental attachment and attachment to role models after controlling variation attributed to students who identified parents as role models. Specifically, anxiety around mother figure ($r(103)= .118$, $p= .115$), anxiety around father figure ($r(123)= .018$, $p = .426$), and

anxiety around both parents (the average score of mother and father anxiety) ($r(103)=$ .068, $p = .245$) were not significantly related to role model attachment.

Secondary Effects

An independent samples t-test that compared type of role model and role model attachment scores revealed a significant effect, showing those with personal role models (*M*= 1.57, *SD*= .65) being significantly more attached to those role models than those with parasocial role models (*M*= 3.22, *SD*= 1.53), $t(103)= 6.95$, $p < .001$.

Women (*M*= 1.57, *SD*= .868) were significantly more attached to their role models than men (*M*=2.03, *SD*=.882), $t(100)= 2.60$, $p < .05$.

A chi square test was performed to examine the relation between gender of participant and gender of role model, which turned out to be significant, $X^2 (2, N= 102) = 32.62$, $p < .001$. Men were more likely to identify with role models who are men and women were more likely to identify with role models who are women.

Discussion

I expected to find participants who scored highly on the anxious attachment section of the parental ECR-RS to experience a more secure attachment to a role model. However, there was no significant relationship between these variables after controlling for variability stemming from whether or not the participants wrote about a parent as a role model.

Unsurprisingly, participants were more significantly attached to personal role models than parasocial role models. This is consistent with parasocial research about the placement of parasocial relationships in relation to interpersonal relationships: closer than acquaintances, but not as close as friends (Koenig & Lessan, 1985).

Qualitative data from participants' reflection tasks revealed some interesting insights into perceptions about what a role model "should" be. Most notably, a male participant spent a majority of his role model reflection task writing about his relationship with his mother and how she exhibits the qualities that he believes a role model should possess. However, at the end of the task he said that he would rather identify a male role model so he chose a coach. This suggests a complicated view of what kinds of relationships are and are not appropriate for young men and women.

Along with the quantitative data, survey responses also revealed interesting information about gender. Women were significantly more likely to have more secure attachments to their role models than men. Additionally, both men and women were more likely to identify a role model of their same gender as them. Gender seems to have a strong effect on identification of relationships to influential others. More research should be done to explore these disparities.

Limitations

One of the largest limitations of this study was the quality of data collected from participants. After reading qualitative data and coding surveys, I realized that some students simply wrote a few superficial sentences about their relationships, haphazardly circled answers, and turned in their packets. If participants did not fully reflect on their relationships, their answers on the ECR-RS may not be completely accurate.

Another limitation has to do with social desirability affecting participants' responses. I believe some college students may be hesitant to write about parasocial relationships because of their association with childlike imaginary friendships (Benson, 1980; Klein, 1985).

Suggestions for Future Research

Qualitative data revealed extremely varied definitions of role models. While some participants focused their reflections on character traits like dedication, kindness, and selflessness, others wrote about statuses like wealth, success, and power. The differences between these ideals are dramatic and reveal wildly varied definitions of what is and what is not a role model. Mixed methods studies, mainly composed of individual interviews followed by syntactic differential scales, will help to create common language with which role models can be studied.

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Appendix A- Questionnaire Packet

Role Model Section

Relationship Reflection Task: Role Model

Instructions

Please write about your role model. You may use the following space to record your thoughts.

ECR-RS: Role Model

This questionnaire is designed to assess the way in which you mentally represent important people in your life. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement by circling a number for each item.

Please answer the following questions about your role model that you wrote about above.

----

1. It helps to think about turning to this person in times of need.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

2. I would like to discuss my problems and concerns with this person.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

3. I would like to talk things over with this person.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

4. I find it easy to depend on this person.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

5. I don't feel comfortable opening up to this person.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

6. I prefer not to show this person how I feel deep down.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

7. I often worry that this person doesn't really care for me.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

8. I'm afraid that this person may abandon me.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

9. I worry that this person won't care about me as much as I care about him or her.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

Mother Figure Section

Relationship Reflection Task: Mother Figure

Instructions

Please write about your relationship with your mother or mother-like figure (if you chose her as the role model you wrote about above, please skip to the next section). You may use the following space to record your thoughts. If you do not have a mother or mother-like figure, please skip to the next section.

ECR-RS: Mother Figure

This questionnaire is designed to assess the way in which you mentally represent important people in your life. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement by circling a number for each item.

Please answer the following questions about your mother or mother-like figure. If you do not have a mother or mother-like figure, please move on to the next section.

----

1. It helps to think about turning to this person in times of need.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

 2. I would like to discuss my problems and concerns with this person.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

 3. I would like to talk things over with this person.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

 4. I find it easy to depend on this person.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

 5. I don't feel comfortable opening up to this person.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

 6. I prefer not to show this person how I feel deep down.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

 7. I often worry that this person doesn't really care for me.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

8. I'm afraid that this person may abandon me.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

 9. I worry that this person won't care about me as much as I care about him or her.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

Father Figure Section

Relationship Reflection Task: Father Figure

Instructions

Please write about your relationship with your father or father-like figure (if you chose him as the role model you wrote about above, please skip to the next section). You may use the following space to record your thoughts. If you do not have a father or father-like figure, please skip to the next section.

ECR-RS: Father Figure

This questionnaire is designed to assess the way in which you mentally represent important people in your life. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement by circling a number for each item.

Please answer the following questions about your father or father-like figure. If you do not have a father or father-like figure, please move on to the next section.

----

1. It helps to think about turning to this person in times of need.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

2. I would like to discuss my problems and concerns with this person.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

3. I would like to talk things over with this person.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

4. I find it easy to depend on this person.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

5. I don't feel comfortable opening up to this person.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

6. I prefer not to show this person how I feel deep down.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

7. I often worry that this person doesn't really care for me.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

8. I'm afraid that this person may abandon me.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

9. I worry that this person won't care about me as much as I care about him or her.

strongly disagree   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   strongly agree

Demographic Section

<div align="center">

Demographic Information

</div>

Instructions

Please complete the following demographic information. This, along with the rest of the information that you have supplied during this study, will remain confidential. However, if you feel that answering any of the following questions could uniquely identify you, please do not answer that question.

Gender:

    Man ____   Woman ____   Prefer to not say ____

Age:

    _____ years old   Prefer to not say ____

Race:

    White ____   Hispanic or Latino ____

    Black or African American ____   Asian or Pacific Islander ____

    Native American or American Indian ____   Other ____

    Prefer to not say ____

Appendix B- Tables

Table 1

Partial Correlation for Parental Anxiety and Role Model Attachment controlling for Parent as
Role Model

	Role Model Attachment	Mother Figure Anxiety	Father Figure Anxiety
Mother Figure Anxiety	.118		
Father Figure Anxiety	.018	-.068	
Total Parent Anxiety	.068	.366*	.903*

* p < .05

Table 2

Attachment Score Means for Participants with Personal Role Models and Parasocial Role

Models

	Personal Role Model		Parasocial Role Model		
	M	SD	M	SD	t-test
Role Model Attachment	1.5661	.65402	3.2244	1.52540	-6.497*
Mother Figure Attachment	1.1766	.98251	1.3269	.39887	-.543
Father Figure Attachment	1.6304	1.44302	1.6218	.73015	.021
Parent Attachment	1.4035	.83610	1.4744	.44765	-.299

*p < .001

Table 3

Attachment Score Means for Men and Women

	Man		Woman		
	M	SD	M	SD	t-test
Role Model Attachment	2.0360	.88225	1.5679	.86751	2.604*
Mother Figure Attachment	1.3266	.82364	1.0936	.98607	1.215
Father Figure Attachment	1.4572	1.38285	1.7987	1.34846	-1.218
Parent Attachment	1.3913	.75535	1.4462	.88342	-.327

*p < .05

Table 4

Crosstabulation of Gender of Participant and Gender of Role Model

Gender of Role Model	Participant Gender		X^2
	Man	Woman	
Unclear	2	1	32.642*
Man	30	17	
Woman	5	47	

*p < .001