



# Model Behavior: An assessment of role model attachment

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## Objectives

Despite the term “role model” being around since the early 1940s, not much research has been done to understand how these relationships come to be.

By using the framework of Attachment Theory, I decided to try to understand the reasons people have for choosing to have a role model.

I hypothesized that anxious attachment scores for parental relationships would positively correlate with overall security scores in relationships with role models.

## Theoretical Background

Role models were first studied by sociologist Robert Merton in the 1940s while he was completing an ethnography about medical students at Columbia University. More recent research has suggested many adolescents do have positive role models (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Hurd, Zimmerman, & Xue, 2009) and a large percentage of adolescents believe that they can overcome dramatic obstacles to become more like their role models (Ivaldi & O'Neill, 2010).

Attachment theory, founded on the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, explains the interpersonal relationships created throughout a lifetime are shaped by relationships with primary caregivers. These early relationships, “serve as guides for future behavior,” (Schneider, 1991).

Parasocial relationships are one-way imagined relationships that individuals create with media personae and resemble interpersonal interaction (Frederick et al., 2012; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Media consumers have been described as seeking guidance from these personae (Rubin et al., 1985) and changing their behavior to emulate them (Goode & Robinson, 2013).

## Methods

Participants were recruited from students taking introductory psychology in exchange for class credit. There were a total of 106 participants, 61.3% of whom were women and 84.9% of whom were white. The average age was 19.08 with a standard deviation of 1.11.

Participants were given questionnaire packets that included relationship reflection tasks, an attachment measure (the ECR-RS), and a demographic survey. Examples are below.

Data was analyzed using SPSS Version 22.

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

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*

Crosstabulation of Gender of Participant and Gender of Role Model			
Gender of Role	Participant Gender		X <sup>2</sup>
	Man	Woman	
Unclear	2	1	32.642*
Man	30	17	
Woman	5	47	

## Results

Only 12.3% of participants identified parasocial role models. Just under half of participants (48.1%) chose their parent as a role model. Gender of role model was a close to even split with 51 men and 52 women and 3 not being identified with a gender.

A partial correlation revealed no significant correlation between anxiety around parental attachment and attachment to role models after controlling for variation attributed to participants who identified parents as role models.

An independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference in group means for attachment scores in those with parasocial role models and personal role models. Those with personal role models were significantly more attached than those with parasocial role models.

Women were significantly more attached to their role models than men.

Participants were significantly more likely to identify with a role model of the same gender as themselves.

All tables are included below.

	Personal Role Model		Parasocial Role Model		t-test
	M	SD	M	SD	
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

Attachment Score Means for Men and Women	Man		Woman		t-test
	M	SD	M	SD	
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

## Discussion

Data did not support the hypothesis that those who scored highly on the anxious attachment section of the parental ECR-RS would experience a more secure attachment to a role model.

Participants were more significantly attached to personal role models than parasocial role models which is similar to findings from other parasocial research that places these relationships closer than acquaintances, but not as close as friends (Koenig & Lessan, 1985).

Future research about role models should include mixed methods approaches to define the term more completely since many participants had different ideas of what a role model could be. While some wrote about character traits, others wrote about status. Also, there seem to be complex relationships between role model selection and gender that should be explored.

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