

## Chapter 7: Role Models

This chapter considers how individuals living in late modern Western societies utilise the media as a resource through which they conceptualise and construct their sense of self. Within the present study this notion was most apparent in participants' accounts of media celebrities and pop stars as role models. The chapter therefore outlines how the concept of role models has been understood and defined from differing perspectives, and goes on to examine a number of studies which have sought to establish the relationship between role models and young people's identity formation, emphasising the significance of ethnicity and gender in their formulations. Following this, the chapter explores how participants use role models in the shaping of their self-identities and discusses a variety of complex processes through which this was achieved.

### 7.1 Media and Identity

In his book *Media, Gender and Identity*, David Gauntlett (2002) explores the role of mainstream media within people's everyday lives to examine how self-identities are shaped through media use in contemporary Western societies. Significantly, his analysis highlights that in such societies widely-held conceptions of the self have changed, now recognising identity as a more fluid and malleable phenomenon than previously conceived. Consequently Gauntlett notes that whilst earlier models of media research proposed that popular culture was a 'backwards-looking force' (p. 247), coercing individuals into prescribed traditional roles and hostile to social change, he suggests that it may now be more applicable to conceptualise the media as an – albeit limited – 'force for change' (p. 248). To illustrate this point, Gauntlett's work identifies how conventional representations of women as housewives and menial workers has been superseded by images of successful, self-reliant 'girl power' icons; whereas ideals associated with masculinity including toughness, competitiveness and tenacity (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002, pp. 75-76) have become unsettled through a new found focus on men's need for advice, their emotional well-being, and the 'crisis of masculinity' (Faludi, 1999; Clare, 2000).

However, he crucially asserts that this situation has not resulted in the demise of gender classifications, but ‘these alternative ideas and images have at least created space for a greater diversity of identities’ (2002, p. 248). Thus Gauntlett suggests that within a capitalist context, popular media facilitates ‘the desire to create *new* modes of life’ (*ibid.*, original emphasis) and, in doing so, demonstrates a disregard for tradition by encouraging individuals to formulate their identities beyond the confines of orthodox norms.

Elaborating on this issue Gauntlett claims that the conditions of late modernity not only allow space for a greater diversity of identities to arise, but ‘the construction of identity has become a *known requirement*’ (*ibid.*, original emphasis). In this formulation he explains individuals are compelled to make identity and lifestyle choices, regardless of whether such possibilities are restricted by cultural and economic circumstances or comply with existing conventions. Developing this point, Gauntlett draws upon the work of Ulrich Beck (2002) who has argued that people in contemporary Western societies aim to ‘live their own lives’ yet these are simultaneously ‘an experimental life’ (p. 26) since declining traditions have produced an environment in which uncertainty and risk predominate and all aspects of existence require maintenance and revision. As such, Beck further stated ‘inherited recipes for living and role stereotypes fail to function’ (*ibid.*) and individuals must therefore construct their own models for living. In light of this Gauntlett’s analysis importantly concludes that ideas about identity and lifestyle available in the mass media can be seen to function as cultural resources through which individuals can conceptualise their self-identities:

Magazines, bought on one level for a quick fix of glossy entertainment, promote self-confidence (even if they partly undermine it at the same time) and provide information about sex, relationships and lifestyles which can be put to a variety of uses. Television programmes, pop songs, adverts, movies and the Internet all also provide numerous kinds of ‘guidance’ – not necessarily in the obvious form of advice-giving, but in the myriad suggestions of ways of living which they imply. We lap up this material because the social construction of identity today is the *knowing* social construction of identity. Your life is your project – there is no escape. The media provides some of the tools which can be used in this work (2002, pp. 248-249, original emphasis).

Expanding on this theme, John Thompson (1995) has considered ‘the self, experience and everyday life in a mediated world’ (p. 207) in order to investigate the role of communication media within modern societies and its impact on processes of self-formation. In this work he states that the self constitutes a ‘symbolic project’ in which individuals actively create a meaningful sense of self by appropriating and incorporating available symbolic materials into a consistent narrative of self-identity. Importantly however, Thompson asserts that these materials from which individuals construct their identities are not equally accessible to all, and their use remains conditional upon the particular circumstances of people’s lives. Despite this, Thompson claims individuals’ narratives are revised over time as they assimilate new experiences and symbolic materials throughout their daily lives, and thus redefine their identities accordingly. As he explains, ‘We are all the unofficial biographers of ourselves, for it is only by constructing a story, however loosely strung together, that we are able to form a sense of who we are and of what our future may be’ (p. 210).

In his analysis Thompson identifies that before the emergence of mass media, symbolic materials utilised by people as tools for self-formation were gained through processes of face-to-face interaction. Therefore within this context he suggests individuals’ identity construction was restricted by their immediate locale and personal interactions with others. Thus Thompson maintains knowledge was limited to ‘local knowledge’, transmitted orally and modified by pragmatic concerns: ‘The horizons of understanding of most individuals were limited by patterns of face-to-face interaction through which information flowed’ (p. 211). In contrast to this he argues such conditions have radically changed with the growth of communication media, in which individuals’ self-formation is increasingly reliant upon availability of ‘mediated forms of communication’ (*ibid.*). Within this framework Thompson proposes ‘local knowledge’ has become augmented and supplanted by new modes of ‘non-local knowledge’ provided through the media, which enables individuals to obtain information beyond their particular social worlds, as he says, ‘Individuals’ horizons of understanding are broadened; they are no longer limited by patterns of face-to-face interaction but are shaped increasingly by the expanding networks of mediated communication’ (*ibid.*). For Thompson then, this increased accessibility to ‘non-local knowledge’ and a greater array of symbolic materials facilitated by communication media enhances the reflexive project of the self. That is to say, by offering

individuals a more diverse range of mediated materials the media function as a resource that individuals can exploit and incorporate reflexively into their narratives of self-identity. Moreover, as people encounter an ever growing number of symbolic materials that may be drawn upon for constructing the self, he states ‘individuals are continuously confronted with new possibilities, their horizons are continuously shifting, their symbolic points of reference are continuously changing’ (p. 212). Hence, by highlighting new opportunities for self-formation opened up through the proliferation of symbolic materials, Thompson suggests individuals experience greater difficulty reverting back to models of understanding grounded in tradition and specific locales.

Developing these ideas, Thompson argues that growing media output not only serves to enrich the reflexive project of self-formation, but can also have detrimental effects on this process. Specifically he notes that the expansion of mass media fosters a new type of interactive relationship which Thompson terms ‘mediated quasi-interaction’ (p. 218). Within this framework he claims that for many people engagement in mediated quasi-interaction constitutes one facet of their everyday social actions. Indeed, Thompson explains that although mediated symbolic materials provide individuals with a variety of resources from which they can construct their identities these are not used in isolation; instead they operate in conjunction with materials gained through face-to-face interactions with others – such as friends and family members – in their daily lives. Nonetheless, he claims in some instances individuals establish a great dependence on mediated symbolic materials and, by doing so, such materials function ‘not so much [as] a resource that individuals draw on and incorporate reflexively into their projects of self-formation, but rather an object of identification to which individuals become strongly and emotionally attached’ (*ibid.*). In consideration of these factors Thompson identifies two elements of mediated quasi-interaction that are fundamental to understanding the character of personal relationships created via the media: firstly, as mediated quasi-interaction is dispersed across space and time this helps facilitate the development of new types of intimacy with people in other locations, allowing for ‘intimacy at a distance’ (p. 219); secondly, due to the non-dialogical quality of mediated quasi-interaction this intimacy is non-reciprocal in nature, that is it does not entail the reciprocity required by face-to-face interaction. According to Thompson then ‘distant others’ encountered through

mediated quasi-interaction can act as ‘regular and dependable companions who can provide entertainment, offer advice, recount events in distant locales, serve as a topic of conversation and so on’ (p. 220) in a manner which evades the demands and responsibility of a reciprocal relationship. Thus, he maintains that the appeal of intimacy formed through mediated quasi-interaction rests on its ability to grant individuals latitude in determining the conditions of engagement and character of ‘distant others’. Hence in foregrounding the processes through which self-formation becomes interwoven with mediated symbolic materials and new forms of intimacy produced by mass media, Thompson concludes:

The growing availability of mediated experience thus creates new opportunities, new options, new arenas for self-experimentation. An individual who reads a novel or watches a soap opera is not simply consuming a fantasy; he or she is exploring possibilities, imagining alternatives, experimenting with the project of the self (p. 233).

The preceding discussion helps demonstrate that contemporary media acts as a resource through which individuals conceptualise and construct their sense of self in late modern Western societies. Within the present study this notion was evident in participants’ accounts of media figures – most notably pop stars – as role models. This analysis will therefore move onto considering the concept of role models, and how these were utilised to articulate and explore children’s understandings of their identities.

## **7.2 What Is A Role Model?**

In the previous section Thompson (1995) states that the development of mass media has produced mediated quasi-interaction which promotes new forms of non-reciprocal intimacy with ‘distant others’. Within this framework these ‘distant others’ function as symbolic materials from which identities are constructed, and may accordingly constitute role models that individuals can employ as tools to negotiate their narratives of self-identity. However, as Gauntlett (2002) notes, whilst the concept of role models is frequently used in popular discourse, commonly conceived as “‘someone to look up to”, and someone to base your character, values or aspirations upon’ (p. 211), the term itself remains ambiguous and lacking strict definition.

Comprehension of the impact of role models on people's behaviour and identities is limited. Indeed John Jung (1986) has argued that although the idea of role models has been popularly accepted by individuals and psychologists as a significant social influence, his review of psychological and sociological texts revealed numerous literature concerning roles, but no allusion to role models. Thus, according to Jung a fundamental problem which arises in existing work on the role model concept is its frequent confusion with modelling *per se*. Modelling, as he explains, 'refers to the influence of observed behavior on an observer (Bandura & Walters, 1963) [and] is usually measured in terms of increased similarity of the behavior and attitudes between the model and the observer' (1986, p. 527). Therefore, Jung states that modelling is specific to particular behaviours – such as language acquisition – which may be learnt through imitation of a model; in contrast, he claimed role modelling pertains to behaviours applicable to particular social roles, for example mother, professor and entertainer. Hence, Jung's discussion highlights the complex character of roles, suggesting that they involve a *relationship* established between individuals such as pupil and teacher, or entail an explicit set of functions exclusive to a position or profession. Moreover, he maintained that facets of social identity including age, gender and ethnicity are additionally perceived as principal elements of role. Thus, in light of this, Jung claimed that role models are understood as 'someone who demonstrates the appropriate behavior for a specific role or relationship with another person' (p. 528) and further observed that they are assumed to exercise influence over those individuals who deem them appropriate, 'although it is not entirely clear what criteria should be used to determine appropriateness' (*ibid.*). Furthermore he claimed these ideas regarding role models are particularly pertinent within popular conceptions of public and media figures' influence on youth, in which role models are assumed to affect – or have the capacity to affect – people despite an absence of definite evidence to assess this assumption. As such, Jung asserted the process of role modelling has been accepted unproblematically and without question:

Even psychologists may determine the influence of role models based on self-report from subjects (Basow & Howe, 1980; Bell, 1970). No attempt is made to verify such information or to show how it leads to actual influences on attitudes, beliefs, or behavior. Nonetheless, from self-report data, investigators conclude or imply that these role models in fact affected the subjects (1986, p. 529).

Therefore, in consideration of these factors, Jung's analysis proposed an alternative formulation for conceptualising role models. In this formulation he argued that individuals are active agents who select role models from a number of available choices that may then perform a motivational function which augments '*already existing tendencies*' (p. 526, original emphasis), rather than solely eliciting new patterns of behaviour within passive subjects. Consequently, for Jung the value of role models lies not simply in their 'learning function' (*ibid.*), but in their possible ability to inspire and motivate people, as he stated 'perhaps role models are important not because they teach observers how to behave but because they inspire observers to want to learn to behave in certain ways or to assume certain roles' (p. 533). Importantly then, his work identified that role models can potentially act as an incentive for individuals to challenge perceived limitations and boundaries to achievement, and – in the instance of minority groups – may provide figures who undermine stereotypes openly held in the public domain (pp. 533-534).

In the above discussion the role of individuals as active agents is highlighted by their ability to make selective choices from alternative role models available to them; however, the issue of how role modelling specifically functions remains unclear. This point is elaborated upon by Gauntlett (2002) whose work identifies six role model types to demonstrate their distinguishing qualities and possible points of identification for individuals. These he categorises as follows:

1. The 'straightforward success' role model: individuals such as sports people, media personalities and politicians who have achieved success within their specific discipline;
2. The 'triumph over difficult circumstances' role model: people who achieve success by prevailing over adversity;
3. The 'challenging stereotypes' role model: figures who challenge traditionally prescribed roles, expectations and assumptions;
4. The 'wholesome' role model: those who are perceived as 'clean living' and therefore deemed an appropriate example for young people to follow;
5. The 'outsider' role model: individuals who reject social conventions and are therefore spurned by mainstream society; and

6. The family role model: this group includes both personal family members and celebrity parents who are admired (pp. 214-215).

Importantly, Gauntlett notes that although these categories outline types of people and forms of behaviour which come to constitute role models, the manner in which role modelling operates on a psychological level persists in evading clarification. Indeed, in response to a survey of social psychology texts within this field, he states – in agreement with points raised by Jung (1986) – that current understandings of the issue is limited to social learning theory which proposes that ‘people learn behaviour by observing it in others – such as role models – and will repeat the behaviour if it is reinforced – in other words, if it seems to have a positive outcome, or other people appear to appreciate it (Burr, 1998; Malim and Birch, 1998; Pennington, Gillen and Hill, 1999; Brannon, 2001)’ (2002, pp. 215-216). Nevertheless, Gauntlett claims in spite of the theoretical simplicity of this approach, this formulation may still have some currency regarding role modelling despite being apparently simplistic and under-researched.

Developing this theme Margaret Nauta and Michelle Kokaly’s (2001) analysis of role models’ influence on students’ academic and career decisions accords with Gauntlett (2002) and Jung (1986), in that they proposed ‘the defining characteristics of role models and exactly how they influence various aspects of the career development process remains somewhat unclear’ (2001, p. 81). In addition they noted that although varying definitions of role models are evident in existing psychological literature, a general consensus shared by these explanations is that ‘role models are other persons who, either by exerting some influence or simply by being admirable in one or more ways, have an impact on another’ (p. 82). Furthermore within this study Nauta and Kokaly provide an overview of previous work which evaluates how role models may impact on individuals’ career development, and in doing so it becomes apparent that, as Gauntlett argues ‘social learning theory is indeed as deep as it gets’ (2002, p. 216) despite the concept broadening to encompass not only modelling behaviours but ‘whole lifestyles’. That is to say, in relation to Nauta and Kokaly’s study, students did not merely select role models whose behaviour they could imitate and emulate, but also those who provided support and guidance within their everyday lives (2001, p. 95). Moreover, in initial research they identified that 81 per cent of the

students surveyed were able to cite famous people as role models and give reasons for these choices, leading Nauta and Kokaly to suggest the significance of such figures and that their influence should not be disregarded (pp. 84-86). However, since the researchers instructed participants to identify a role model who was famous, Nauta and Kokaly's proposition that such figures are highly influential is questionable, as students may not have attached *actual* significance to these choices. This position is further compounded when taking into consideration 63 per cent of the students within this study stated that a parent was, overall, their most influential role model.

### 7.3 Who Are Children's Role Models?

The issue of young people's role model choices and their influence is central to a study conducted by Kristin Anderson and Donna Cavallaro (2002), who noted that during identity development children may draw upon role models as a source of guidance: not only seeking to emulate figures who demonstrate particular abilities and characteristics, but also because 'he or she may see *possibilities* in that person' (p. 161, original emphasis). Furthermore they stated that whilst parents and family members can act as significant role models for children – especially in early childhood – additional influences, including the mass media, provide an important source of heroes for young people too.<sup>50</sup> As such, Anderson and Cavallaro's analysis sought to investigate how the mass media impacts on children's selections of role models. To achieve this, 95 girls and 84 boys aged between 8 and 13 from ethnically diverse backgrounds were surveyed on '[who] you look up to and admire. These might be people you know, or they might be famous people or characters. You may want to be like them or you might just think they are cool' (p. 164). Moreover, participants elaborated upon their responses within small group discussions, detailing the reasons for these choices. Importantly their findings revealed that children's role

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<sup>50</sup> It should be noted that within existing literature the terms role model and hero are frequently used interchangeably. For example, whilst Anderson and Cavallaro distinguish between these titles, defining 'role models ... as known persons (e.g. parents, teachers) and heroes ... as figures who may be less attainable or larger than life' (2002, p. 161), they stated as both types of figures are relevant to their study, the terms can be used alternately. This point is further evident in Bromnick and Swallow's (1999) research, who often employ the terms role models and heroes interchangeably, yet also utilise 'mentors' (p. 118) within their work. Thus, irrespective of which term is used the fundamental meaning is arguably synonymous.

model choices were, to a degree, dependent upon the participants' ethnicity and gender (pp. 164-168). For example, although the majority of respondents elected an individual they knew personally as a role model (65 per cent), Anderson and Cavallaro identified crucial variations on this matter between different ethnic groups: a higher proportion of African American and white children chose someone they knew from their own ethnic group (70 per cent and 64 per cent respectively) than Asian American (35 per cent) and Latino (49 per cent) children. Thus, according to the researchers, a lack of Asian American and Latino representations in the media may have indicated that these ethnic groups would be more inclined to locate role models from within their personal worlds; however, paradoxically 'Perhaps Asian American and Latino children have internalized a message that they should not look up to fellow Asian Americans or Latinos as role models, or it may be a byproduct of assimilation' (p. 164). Similarly, in instances when media figures were chosen as heroes a demonstrably higher percentage of African American and white participants selected role models who shared their ethnicity (67 per cent for each), whereas Asian American (35 per cent) and Latino (28 per cent) children did not. Indeed, the analysis highlighted that Asian American and Latino respondents were more likely, in fact, to adopt white media heroes (40 per cent and 56 per cent respectively). Consequently, Anderson and Cavallaro proposed that this situation has possibly resulted from the preponderance of white and – to a lesser extent – African American media figures, as well as an under-representation of Asian American and Latino people within mainstream culture. In addition to differences grounded in ethnicity, they further observed that the children's responses were somewhat gendered; for example whilst 67 per cent of girls named a person they knew as a role model, only 58 per cent of boys did so. Moreover, children predominantly chose same-gender role models – evident across all ethnic groups and particularly forceful for boys. Hence, in consideration of these factors Anderson and Cavallaro suggested that since males are featured more habitually within the media as film stars, musicians and professional athletes 'girls may have a smaller pool of potential role models from which to choose' (*ibid.*; see also Signorielli, 1993, 2001). However the researchers also acknowledged that a contributing factor to this finding may be 'girls in this study reported watching less television than the boys did and so may have known fewer characters' (2002, p. 164). Furthermore boys' reluctance in selecting female role models, they argued, could be attributable to such figures being perceived as lacking social power and

prestige.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, despite the significance of popular culture in providing children with media heroes illustrated within this study, Anderson and Cavallaro's analysis highlighted that overall participants cited a parent most commonly as their role model. In doing so this enabled the researchers to identify qualities that children ascribed to specific role models, these being nice, helpful and understanding for parents, and skills for media figures. Therefore by foregrounding the ways in which ethnicity and gender impact upon as well as influence children's' role model choices, Anderson and Cavallaro concluded:

The mass media are hindered by a narrow view of gender, and by limited, stereotyped representations of ethnic minorities. Parents and educators must take pains to expose children to a wider variety of potential role models than popular culture does ... Doing so affirms for the children that their race and gender are worthy of representation. A variety of potential heroes and role models allows children to appreciate themselves and the diversity in others (p. 168).<sup>52</sup>

On a similar theme Jack Balswick and Bron Ingoldsby (1982) aimed to assess the kinds of heroes and heroines adolescents selected most frequently, as during adolescence they stated youth seek an individual identity less determined by family influence, and therefore public figures become a salient resource of materials from which young people can construct their identities.<sup>53</sup> To explore this notion 1092

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<sup>51</sup> This finding is further supported by Gibson and Cordova (1999) who suggested that although boys are more likely than girls to adopt same-sex role models, they tended to identify and emulate those figures who are considered powerful. Thus, the researchers stated that boys would only be likely to identify with and imitate a female role model only if this figure is viewed as occupying a position of power.

<sup>52</sup> The issue of presenting youth with a greater diversity of role models has been explored most prominently within educational research (e.g. Solomon, 1997; Zirkel, 2002), in which it is suggested that if ethnic minority children have access to same 'race'-gender heroes this enables young people to perceive greater future possibilities for themselves and increases their investment in achievement-orientated goals. However, research has also indicated the psychological pressures this places upon ethnic minority role models as they are expected to fulfill such responsibilities for being 'the multicultural and antiracist expert in their schools' (Solomon, 1997, p. 405). Furthermore, Allen (1994) argues that the employment of ethnic minorities to serve role model functions is fundamentally flawed, as it ignores these individuals' full capacities beyond this remit, and by locating such expectations on specific cultural groups may actually result in stereotyping of 'cultures and identities' (p. 194).

<sup>53</sup> Indeed, French and Pena's (1991) analysis of children's hero play claimed that although 4-6 year olds locate role models within family members and identifiable occupations, older

students from eleven high schools in North East Georgia (USA) completed questionnaires about ‘Who are your heroes and heroines currently?’ (p. 245), with responses being assigned to one of the following categories: ‘religious, music, actor or actress, literary-scholar, government, sports, comic, family member, and friends’ (*ibid.*). Significantly the findings identified that ‘heroes are much more likely to be chosen than heroines’ (p. 246), as demonstrated by participants selecting heroes in preference to heroines by a ratio of 3 to 1 and, crucially, this pattern remained unaltered when respondents’ sex and ‘race’ were taken into account. Furthermore, Balswick and Ingoldsby observed that in instances when participants named heroines these tended to be personal idols, whereas males rather than females predominated as public figures by a 7 to 1 ratio. Indeed within this study public heroes including sport, actor, music and comic personalities were selected by students most frequently, and although public heroines such as actresses, musicians and sportswomen featured, these figures ranked significantly lower in comparison; moreover, family heroines constituted the only kind of heroine to achieve a high ranking (pp. 246-248). Consequently the researchers asserted these ‘results are not surprising’ (p. 248) given within the public sphere men’s participation in professional roles exceeds that of women.<sup>54</sup> However, Balswick and Ingoldsby further claimed that this differential between men and women’s involvement in public professional roles is not as prominent as the disparity demonstrated by their findings. Thus, they suggested, male role models appear to take precedence over females as an influence on adolescent identity formation (p. 249), and may reflect inherent sexism embedded within wider societal attitudes:

We must conclude that – even given the presence of females in public roles – adolescents are more likely to perceive of male professionals in an adorational light than female professionals. Perhaps the actress or female musician can be held up as a sex symbol, but the latent sexism in our society prevents her from being accepted as a

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children increasingly select heroes from fantasy characters available through television, videos and comics.

<sup>54</sup> This argument concurs with Allen’s (1994) discussion on her personal experiences within education as an African American woman, who stated that the lack of professional female (black) role models resulted in having to emulate white male professors as models for academic success. Thus, Allen suggested that girls identify with both male and female role models, specifically due to men occupying more leadership positions (pp. 184-186).

legitimate professional in a more serious light. This is not to say that male actors and musicians are not viewed as sex symbols also, but that they may more easily gain respectability for their professional abilities, thus being more readily accepted as a hero (p. 248).

The above studies have highlighted the relationship between children's identity formation and role models, specifically foregrounding the importance of ethnicity and gender in this process. This issue is further explored by George Assibey-Mensah (1997) whose analysis investigated the 'impact of African-American male youths' perceptions of role models on their personal development' (p. 242). In this work, having outlined the various socio-economic disadvantages African American youth confront (pp. 242-243), he proposed 'youths' perceptions of a role model as one capable of being looked to and/or emulated can provide a positive stimulus for their future' (p. 243) in a number of ways, including: encouraging children to become more productive and successful individuals; enhancing children's sense of self-worth and self-esteem; assisting children in becoming responsible and law-abiding citizens; and inspiring children to set and achieve goals (*ibid.*). Therefore, according to Assibey-Mensah, 'the perceptions and values often associated with role models can help mold their [children's] personal development in a society in which problems plaguing their existence continually lead to their inability to live to their fullest human potential' (*ibid.*; see also Bryant and Zimmerman, 2003). In consideration of these points, and to examine his ideas further, Assibey-Mensah conducted a nationwide survey with 4,500 African American male students aged 10 to 18 between January 1994 and December 1995. To facilitate an understanding of participants' perceptions of role models and who these role models are, youth responded to the following questions outlined in a questionnaire: 'Who is your role model?' and 'What does your role model do for a living?' (1997, p. 244). Furthermore, to assist participants with their responses students were instructed that they could choose people who may be allocated within one of the following categories: educator, athlete and any other celebrity (*ibid.*). A significant finding demonstrated in this study was that across all age groups athletes and sports stars were overwhelmingly the most popular choice of role models, ranging from 85 per cent for 10 year olds to 98 per cent for 18 year olds; followed by film and television celebrities, ranging from 15 per cent for 10 year olds to 6 per cent for 17 year olds; moreover, none of the respondents selected an educator

as their role model (*ibid.*).<sup>55</sup> Hence, Assibey-Mensah asserted that children recognised role models as sports and entertainment figures because they observed them regularly within their daily lives, whilst an absence of black academics in the media may account for respondents not adopting educators as inspirational figures (p. 245). As such he stated, for the students ‘African-American males in high-salary jobs symbolize their perception of the essence of the American dream. This major finding indicates that with popularity goes visibility, hence a popular and visible African-American male’s idolization by almost all the respondents’ (*ibid.*). Indeed, he noted that although 95 per cent of youth identified people they regarded as role models, the respondents did not perceive these individuals as figures whose professional career paths they aimed to emulate and pursue. For example, the basketball player Michael Jordan was named by many respondents as a role model they idolised, yet playing professional basketball was not aligned with their future career aspirations. Thus, in this formulation, Assibey-Mensah claimed that for participants the image of Michael Jordan simply came to signify financial success (p. 244) although we might speculate that status and respect are also significant factors. Therefore, in emphasising the incongruity of youths’ perceptions of role models and their career ambitions he argued a tension arises between participants’ ‘interpretation of a role model and their future professional wishes or aspirations’ (*ibid.*). Consequently, Assibey-Mensah concluded within this study children fundamentally misunderstood the meaning and purpose of role models, and were unaware of figures that could provide appropriate, productive inspiration and motivation in their lives (p. 249).

## 7.4 Heroes and Self-Identity

In their exploration of young people’s heroes and their relationship to identity development, Rachel Bromnick and Brian Swallow (1999) claimed that the suitability of children’s role model choices remains an abiding concern for adults. This concern, they stated, stems from the belief that young people are suggestible to modelling themselves on ‘teen idols’ deemed inappropriate by adults (see Griffin, 1993). However, Bromnick and Swallow highlighted that this position is problematic

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<sup>55</sup> These findings appear to accord with those of Anderson and Cavallaro (2002) and Bromnick and Swallow (1999) whose studies both noted a high proportion of male participants selecting sports stars and entertainers as role models.

through drawing upon previous research conducted by Cyril Simmons and Winnie Wade (1984, 1985a, 1985b, 1987, 1988) which sought to develop understandings of young people's values. Within this work Simmons and Wade (1984) identified that 44 per cent of children could communicate ideals – such as aspirations for physical attractiveness and popularity, materialistic desires, honesty, friendliness and kindness – without reference to a role model. Moreover, an additional 19 per cent of their participants actively discarded the 'ideal other' as a concept outright, stating that they would only want to be themselves. Thus, Simmons and Wade termed this the 'myself' choice which, they proposed, challenged existing conceptualisations of youth as being susceptible to the adoration and influence of famous individuals; rather, they argued the 'myself' choice was an expression of participants' high self-worth, personal happiness and stable sense of self. It should also be noted that Bromnick and Swallow identified that the 'myself' choice maybe a consequence of declining traditional values within late modern Western societies in which a 'value gap' (Baumeister and Muraven, 1996) is created and 'has been filled by the self, with major values based on self-interest and self-actualisation. Individuals therefore have to look much deeper into their self in order to make moral decisions, add value to their lives and make it meaningful' (1999, p. 119). Thus, to investigate this notion further Bromnick and Swallow undertook research with 244 children (111 girls and 133 boys) aged between 11 and 16 from a comprehensive school within the North of England, in which participants provided responses to an eight item questionnaire. This questionnaire, they stated, was 'designed to allow participants to express freely their least and most ideals in terms of persons and concepts, their hopes and fears and personal philosophies in life' (p. 120) with two questions specifically becoming the focus of analysis: '(1) "If you were able to choose to be somebody else who would you choose ..." ... (2) "The famous person I admire the most, or the person I think of as my hero is ..."' (*ibid.*).

Significantly Bromnick and Swallow's findings concurred with Simmons and Wades' (1984), in that the 'myself' choice was evident in 23 per cent of participants responses and particularly demonstrated by older girls (1999, pp. 122-123). This, they claimed, indicated that these children were content to be themselves despite being offered the opportunity of being somebody else. Furthermore, when participants did cite heroes Bromnick and Swallow noted that these seemed diverse, lacking any shared

consensus. However, they observed that the majority of heroes discussed were selected from clearly defined groups: sporting personalities and athletes for boys, and entertainers and pop stars for girls (p. 126). In light of this Bromnick and Swallow suggested ‘that whilst there is a need for young people to express their individuality, there is also a desire for them to share common values with their peer group’ and youth are therefore ‘walking a tightrope between individualism and collectivism’ (*ibid.*). By doing so, they added ‘what appears to an adult as being a sign of conformity (e.g. being a fan of the Spice Girls) might be seen by the young person themselves as a mark of their individuality’ (*ibid.*). Hence, in conclusion Bromnick and Swallow’s analysis importantly illustrated that children were able to identify with famous people whilst maintaining a separate sense of self-identity, but simultaneously these hero choices appeared to mirror their gender identities:

There was a strong admiration of famous males by boys and girls, supporting society’s emphasis on men in public life and the lack of famous female role models. It appeared acceptable for the young women to admire a man but not vice versa. Playing, watching and talking about sport was a very prominent feature of these developing young men, with nothing appearing of comparable cultural or symbolic importance in the lives of the young women ... [Thus] ... in order to appreciate young people’s developing identity both micro and macro levels of influence on individuality must be appreciated (p. 127).

## **7.5 Role Models and Identity**

### **7.5.1 Identification, Aspiration and Inspiration**

The notion that youth utilise role models as resources from which they can conceptualise and construct their identities emerged as a prevailing theme within this present study. Indeed, participants’ differing accounts not only reflected a diversity of media figures as role models, but demonstrated that they actively used these in order to articulate various thoughts and facets of their selves. Ostensibly, the principal uses that these role models served were that they provided children with sources of identification, aspiration and inspiration. For example, figures that facilitated identification did so by expressing characteristics and/or concerns which the young

people recognised within themselves as well as their own social worlds. This point is illustrated in the case of Josie who identifies with Whitney Houston as she believes they both share a calm nature and the songs reflect her own experiences:

Interviewer: And if you had more time are there any other images that you would have used?

Josie T2: If I could have found one I'd probably have one of Whitney Houston 'cause I like to sing her songs and stuff and she's like an icon type thing.

Interviewer: Why is she an icon? Apart from her music, is there anything about her as a person that you identify with?

Josie T2: Like the words in some of her music and stuff they speak to me, the way she's so calm and she's like a role model for me.

Whilst the above example offers an instance of explicit identification with a role model, for other participants this relationship appeared to be more ambiguous and complex. In the following extract Sean highlights this notion explicitly, making both direct identifications and ambivalent associations with Morrissey. On one hand Sean aligns himself with qualities of personal integrity and 'mystery' he sees within the singer; yet on the other, has not adopted vegetarian ideals and is 'private' selectively:

Interviewer: Let's go back to the picture of Morrissey. What exactly is it about Morrissey and his music that you like?

Sean M: I like the way he, the way he writes and how it means things to him, that's important for me.

Interviewer: And are there any particular songs or albums or messages that you get from Morrissey that really stand out for you?

Sean M: Yeah there is like one of them *Meat is Murder* that is getting cross about killing animals and things, it's not very nice and things and that's what made most people become vegetarians.

Interviewer: Are you a vegetarian?

Sean M: No.

Interviewer: So you're not vegetarian but you respect//

Sean M: //I respect his view of it.

Interviewer: What is it about Morrissey's character that you like?

- Sean M: I like the fact that he keeps himself to himself and he keeps himself as a mysterious and private person.
- Interviewer: As a mysterious person.
- Sean M: Yeah.
- Interviewer: And do you think that is a good quality or bad quality?
- Sean M: Good quality because you don't want anyone to know anything about you.
- Interviewer: Do you feel you share that with Morrissey?
- Sean M: Kind of.
- Interviewer: In what way?
- Sean M: In sometimes I keep myself to myself and am private but not always, but mainly yes so it's kind of the same thing.
- Interviewer: When wouldn't you?
- Sean M: When I'm trying to get to know people and things like that I suppose.

Significantly then, these comments exemplify the equivocal character of some participants' relationships with their role models, and indicates that identifications can occur to varying degrees and on numerous levels. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that these children did not accept role models in their entirety; rather they appropriated particular traits of value as tools for expressing identity. By doing so, this would appear to concur with Bromnick and Swallow's (1999) assertion that 'young people were able to admire a famous person without identifying with them *per se*' (p. 126). Moreover, the intricate features of this relationship were further evident in role models not only functioning as identifications for participants' current selves, but as vehicles through which they could articulate their future aspirations (an issue raised previously within Chapter 6, pp. 170-172):

- Lucy T1: ... I've got Beyonce 'cause I kind of idol her, she's like really pretty and her hair's always nice and I've always liked her.
- ...
- Interviewer: Just going back to Beyonce you said you really like her and thought she was pretty. What is it about her that you think you identify with?
- Lucy T1: She's so outgoing and like she's got her mind set on her dancing and I've got my mind set on dancing and singing, and she does that all the

time and I sing and dance all the time, that's what I want to do that's why really.

- Interviewer: Let's go to the picture of Arnold Schwarzenegger, is that how you see yourself?
- Oscar O: Well, well he's like my hero and that's how I see myself like in a few years.
- Interviewer: In a few years?
- Oscar O: Yeah that's what I see myself as.
- Interviewer: So do you think that's a good image, to want to be like that?
- Oscar O: Yeah, yeah like quite muscley like Arnold Schwarzenegger yeah.

Interestingly, and in accordance with previous research (Balswick and Ingoldsby, 1982; Bromnick and Swallow, 1999; Gibson and Cordova, 1999; Anderson and Cavallaro, 2002), the above participants' role model choices are seemingly influenced by their gender. For example Lucy elects a female pop star and specifically foregrounds notions of physical beauty, which arguably suggests her aspirations are guided by conceptions of traditional 'femininity'. In contrast, Oscar selects a film action hero and ex-sports star who is synonymous with ideals of 'masculine' physicality and possibly reflects his desire to attain attributes associated with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2000). This assumption is reinforced when considering comments made previously by Oscar, in which he states his possession of 'feminine' characteristics has led to him being alienated and labelled as 'weird' (Chapter 6, pp. 143-144). Therefore Oscar's aspirations of achieving a 'muscley' physique can be read as an attempt to revoke negative perceptions about his identity, and this emphasis on acquiring a hyper-masculine façade may be understood as a performance in which he seeks to gain the approval of others (Buckingham, 1993c). However, although these role models choices appear to be determined by the participants' gender identities, on closer inspection their responses do not wholly conform with conventional gendered positionings. For instance, despite Oscar's role model signifying aspirations for the attainment of hegemonic values, his motives for making this selection are principally grounded in physical appearance – and by extrapolation desirability – qualities assumed as belonging to the 'feminine' preserve. Furthermore, whilst Lucy identifies beauty as one dimension of her role model's

appeal, this becomes secondary to them providing aspirations for career success and promoting assertiveness. Indeed, this position is apparent within other girls' accounts (Chapter 6, pp. 171-172), whose role model choices more overtly reject aspirations directed by traditional notions of 'femininity'; and in doing so appears to problematise existing research (Balswick and Ingoldsby, 1982; Bromnick and Swallow, 1999; Anderson and Cavallaro, 2002) which places emphasis on gender differences without taking into consideration the specific reasons participants utilised such figures:

- Interviewer: You've also got a picture here of a lady playing football.  
Ellie T2: Yeah that's Hope Powell the manager of the girls' England team.  
Interviewer: Why have you used her?  
Ellie T2: Because I like to play football and I want to be in the England team.  
Interviewer: So do you identify or respect her, or see her as a role model?  
Ellie T2: Yeah.

In spite of any supposed differences delineated along gender lines, participants' discussions about aspirations revealed that, for both boys and girls, ideas pertaining to 'relevance' and 'attainability' were fundamental factors in informing their choice of role models. This issue has been explored by Penelope Lockwood and Ziva Kunda (2000; see also 1997) who proposed that if individuals select role models which share similar characteristics and abilities as their own, these figures become more relevant to the self and can thus promote positive feelings as people presume such achievements will be possible for themselves. In addition the researchers claimed that if a role model's success appears attainable individuals will be inspired, believing that they too can 'achieve a similar level of success' (2000, p. 150). As Lockwood and Kunda stated:

The impact of a relevant star will depend on the perceived attainability of the star's achievements. If these achievements seem attainable, one can imagine an equally successful future self and thus draw inspiration from the star's accomplishments. If, however, the star's success seems out of reach because one has already missed the chance of achieving comparable success, because one believes one's abilities cannot improve, or because one is reminded of one's own limitations, then the inspirational impact of the role model will be undermined, and one may feel demoralized rather than inspired (p. 166).

The above principles are best illustrated by Christopher's discussion of Green Day, in which his immediate identification with this band rests on shared musical styles and status as musicians, consequently enhancing their relevance for him. By doing so, Green Day not only come to embody Christopher's aspirations of musical achievement – 'because they've done something with their life' – but also confirm his belief that he too can attain success within this field:

Interviewer: So let's move on to//

Christopher T2: //yeah I play the guitar and um, and yeah I put that there for musician. I'm into rock, heavy rock, I like playing it like, like Green Day.

Interviewer: What is it about Green Day that you like?

Christopher T2: I think the songs that they do and how they do it are good and stuff like, it's like rocky style but yeah, I like the loudness of it and how it is.

Interviewer: And what do you think about the members of Green Day?

Christopher T2: I see them like, I look up to them because they've done something with their life that's special and stuff and like, like they are very big stars and that's going into like my musician style, I really like the band so I'm going to be a rock musician too.

Moreover, what becomes prominent within this account is although the band act as aspirational figures for Christopher, they also actively inspire his musical ambitions. Indeed, the idea of role models as sources of inspiration was a recurring theme within participants' discussions, and highlighted the ways in which such figures were utilised for both realising personal aspirations as well as guiding their thoughts and everyday actions.

Interviewer: I've also noticed that you've not used any pictures of celebrities or film or television programmes. Why is that?

Rose T1: I try and be my own person, I don't really follow a certain person.

Interviewer: So you just really prefer to be your own person and don't want to follow somebody?

Rose T1: Yeah.

Interviewer: Is there anybody that you think is a positive role model for you?

- Rose T1: Yeah, Nicole Ritchie and Johnny Depp.
- Interviewer: What is it about them//
- Rose T1: //well Johnny Depp he's like really different, he's a really good actor he got me into acting he inspired me to do that ...
- Interviewer: And what about Nicole Ritchie?
- Rose T1: She's just really cool, I like the way that she, she like got over all her addictions and all that that she used to have and yeah, quite cool.

In the above example Rose's admiration for Johnny Depp's acting abilities leads her to explicitly identify him as an inspiration. More significantly however these remarks indicate that the actor directly motivated Rose's decision to pursue acting as a personal and professional interest, exemplified by her assertion 'he got me into acting he inspired me to do that'. These comments would therefore appear to support Jung's (1986) proposition that role models serve '*motivational functions*' (p. 533, original emphasis), a point further supported when considering notions of individuality expressed by the participant. For Rose, an element of the media figure's inspiration resides in his perceived status as being 'really different', and this quality of 'difference' that she recognises within the role model is arguably exploited as a means through which Rose communicates her own sense of individuality. Moreover, Rose's belief that she possesses an individual identity is made manifest in her refusal to follow celebrities, preferring instead to 'be my own person', and thus possibly demonstrates the 'myself' choice in practice (Simmons and Wade, 1984; Bromnick and Swallow, 1999).<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, whilst Johnny Depp articulates concrete ambitions and ideals which inspire the participant, her adoption of Nicole Ritchie functions in a more abstract manner. This figure's inspirational value is not grounded in any skill or ability, rather having recovered from drug abuse, for Rose, Nicole Ritchie personifies the ethos of overcoming personal difficulties and, by doing so, may come to qualify as, what Gauntlett terms (2002), a 'triumph over difficult circumstances' role model (p. 214). Hence from this it is possible to infer that the principle of prevailing over adversity constitutes an ethic which underpins Rose's conceptions of her identity and personal philosophy.

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<sup>56</sup> An onus on having a 'unique' individuality was a recurring theme within Rose's interview, as illustrated in her previous remarks about music and fashion (Chapter 6, pp. 163-164).

Thus, the preceding discussions begin to highlight that identification, aspiration and inspiration were intrinsic elements of participants' relationships with their role models. Importantly, however, these facets did not work to a linear pattern, but rather operated in multifarious and compound ways. This position is clearly articulated by the following participant, quoted earlier, who expresses aspiration and inspiration through Ronaldo whilst forcefully identifying with Sean Wright-Phillips:

Carmel O: I've got Ronaldo and a couple of pictures of other footballers I look up to because I always see myself as inspirational trying to get my own goals ... I've got Sean Wright-Phillips because I think that sometimes I want to be like him 'cause he's done so much with his life, he got adopted and he doesn't really know his other dad and like I don't see my dad often and he's been with other people and I'm with someone now different like my mum and her boyfriend so I've been with quite a bit of people in my life.

### 7.5.2 Integrity

Research by Daniel Anderson *et al.* (2001) on role model choices and body image has asserted that the mass media become increasingly significant as children enter adolescence, because they provide young people with possible heroes and, importantly, 'sources of values and behaviours to emulate' (p. 108). Within their work the researchers stated that many respondents identified with entertainment figures and used these as a basis for self-comparison which resulted in negative evaluations of themselves (p. 116). However, within the present study participants demonstrated that they engaged with role models' values, rather than utilising them as a focus of critical (physical) self-comparison. Indeed, a pervasive theme to emerge within participants' discussions is that the concept of integrity was fundamental to children's associations with their role models. These notions of integrity were expressed in various ways, but essentially foregrounded the importance participants placed on standing up for beliefs and values as well as adhering to a moral code.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Significantly, notions of integrity were not just communicated through role models, but also in the participants' assertions of specific principles; for example, opposing animal cruelty (see Jason, Appendix B.1, p. 292; Nancy, Appendix B.7, p. 410).

This point is illustrated in the case of Jimmy, whose admiration for Tupac specifically arises from him being perceived as an embodiment of these ideals:

- Interviewer: If you had more time to work on this what other pictures would you have put on?
- Jimmy W: ... I would put a couple more bands.
- Interviewer: Like which bands?
- Jimmy W: I would have put Tupac on it because he's a good guy I look up to him.
- Interviewer: In what way is Tupac a good guy?
- Jimmy W: Because he was like, he stood up for what he thought was right and then he got all the way through stuff and then he explained it in like songs and stuff and I thought that was really good.
- Interviewer: Because some people saw Tupac as a bad guy because he was a bit of a gangster type and he was involved with guns. Didn't he end up getting shot?
- Jimmy W: But the only reason he got shot was because he stood up for what he thought was right. I think that he was like really brave in what he did. I think he deserves a lot more respect than he probably does get.

For Jimmy, Tupac's integrity is explicitly located in his commitment to maintaining a moral standpoint, despite this (in)directly leading to the rapper's death. Moreover, in identifying Tupac as a figure who overcame hardship and articulated these experiences within his music, the participant arguably comes to see this as an expression of honesty and courage. In doing so Jimmy's remarks suggest these values are of significance to him, implied by his statement 'I think he deserves a lot more respect' – a similar point being raised previously within Sean's discussion on Morrissey (pp. 192-193) – and further indicates that such qualities are not sufficiently valued by others, qualified in the assertion 'I think he deserves a lot more respect *than he probably does get*'.<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, the virtue of honesty Jimmy recognises within

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<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, both sides of Jimmy's collage had identical images apart from the inclusion of an eye on how he perceived his own identity, which signified an 'awareness' that the participant felt others did not see in him (Appendix A.8.4). Thus, this possibly reflects Jimmy's belief that he is able to identify valuable qualities in people that may go unnoticed by others.

Tupac is further revealed as an integral element of role models in other participants' accounts:

- Interviewer: I've noticed a picture of Trinny and Susannah, why are they there?
- India R: Because my friends and myself are a bit like them and we want to be like interior fashion designers when we're older so they're like our idols.
- Interviewer: Your idols. So do you think they are positive role models?
- India R: Yeah.
- Interviewer: What is it about them that you like and identify with?
- India R: They're like honest about you know people, what they think people look like and how they can be improved.

India's comments demonstrate that Trinny and Susannah not only provide her with career aspirations, but more importantly, the appeal of these figures as role models seemingly resides in their possession – and display – of honest values: values she believes have the capacity to effect positive change. This appreciation of honesty is also alluded to within the following extract by Jason, who contends that his role model exhibits 'fair play' and, in doing so, can be read as reflecting the participant's convictions on moral conduct. Furthermore in expressing uncertainty about his role model's name, Jason inadvertently suggests that it is precisely the *values* that this wrestler represents which take precedence over any celebrity status:

- Interviewer: OK and who is this image [image of a wrestler]?
- Jason C: Yeah, I like him.
- Interviewer: Who is he?
- Jason C: I don't know his name I think its The Rock. 'Cause he's like my wrestling hero, he's not a dirty fighter he's a clean fighter that's good.
- Interviewer: So even within fighting there are still rules//
- Jason C: //yeah, some people like get a big chain and hammer and all that but he's a really clean fighter.

An emphasis on role models' values rather than their status is additionally evidenced by the following participant. Like Jason, Malcolm has difficulty recalling the name of

his media figure, yet maintains an association based principally upon a supposed sharing of political principles. This is exemplified by Malcolm surmising that as he agrees with Damon Albarn's position regarding Live 8 his opinions will accord on all other issues:

- Malcolm C: I've used those two [images of a guitar and Gorillaz] because I like music and I look up to them.
- Interviewer: What is it about the Gorillaz that you look up to?
- Malcolm C: I think they're a good band and also the singer, um//
- Interviewer: //Damon Albarn.
- Malcolm C: Yes him, has lots of political views that I agree with.
- Interviewer: Such as?
- Malcolm C: Stuff like the Live 8 thing he said they should have had more multicultural bands and I agreed with that.
- Interviewer: You agree with//
- Malcolm C: //his views about Live 8 and how that was run and everything.
- Interviewer: What about his other political views?
- Malcolm C: I don't know but I assume he's good like that across most stuff that I don't agree with.

Indeed the importance of integrity in role models was most prominently highlighted by participants frequently employing politics and political figures, conspicuously Martin Luther King, on several occasions<sup>59</sup>:

- Interviewer: Who would you have put for example [how I see myself]?
- Carl W: I would have put, well if there was in a magazine, someone who I think who is a hero and like who has won the Nobel Peace prize because he stood up for what he believed in and that would be Martin Luther King.

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<sup>59</sup> Notably, participants also drew upon political figures who they did not regard as role models and represented oppositional values to their own, for communicating personal principles as well as highlighting a perceived lack of integrity within these individuals. For example, George W. Bush and Tony Blair were used to express anti-Iraq war sentiments (see Appendix B.1, pp. 295, 297).

Interviewer: If you had more time to work on your collage are there anymore pictures that you would have liked to have put on there?

Richard M: Yes, I would have put a picture of Martin Luther King.

Interviewer: Why?

Richard M: He was a hero because he stood up for what he believed is right.

Interviewer: And which side [of the collage] would you have put that on?

Richard M: In the middle.

Interviewer: In the middle?

Richard M: Yes.

Significantly, although both Carl and Richard are white and may ostensibly appear to lack any similarities with their chosen role model, this factor did not preclude identification occurring on a deeper structural level, as Lockwood and Kunda (2000) have explained: ‘mismatches on surface attributes may be overcome if deeper, structural parallels between individuals and a role model are highlighted. If one perceives these deeper shared patterns, one may be influenced by a superficially dissimilar role model’ (p. 168). Thus, the common concern with integrity enables both participants to adopt Martin Luther King as a legitimate role model, and consequently, this figure comes to function as a metaphorical representation of their own ideals. For instance, Carl maintains that attaining integrity is the pinnacle of achievement, indicated by reference to the Nobel Peace prize; whilst the value of integrity for Richard is illustrated by him giving it a central position within his work, suggesting that this quality is core to how he sees himself as well as how others view him. Crucially, it should be noted that Richard’s identification with Martin Luther King raises some difficult issues, as within the interview this participant had stated he engaged in using racist discourse:

Interviewer: Also the Hitler image and ‘cruel at times’ [words], when can you be cruel? Or do you feel you’re a cruel person?

Richard M: ... To Prateech [pupil], I admit I will admit I am a bit racial to him at times I have been.

Interviewer: Why are you racist to him?

Richard M: I don’t know I’ve just been like, if I’ve been sat next to him I’ve said to David [pupil] before he smells of curry or something just mucking around which, if you think about it you know it is out of order but at

the same time it was just a funny thing to say but it doesn't mean anything.

Thus, Richard's assertions that his racist remarks are 'funny' and 'don't mean anything' concurs with previous research (Back, 1991, 1993, 1996; Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002) which suggests that racist name calling is performed under the guise of 'jokey "cussing"' (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002, p. 171) and, as Les Back (1991) has explained, 'leads to the use of racist language followed by a denial that these words mean what they stand for in a wider usage i.e. "but it don't mean nothin..."' (pp. 35-36). Moreover, Back's (1993) research on 'race, identity and nation within an adolescent community in South London' identified that:

[Whilst] black and white youth ... operate within an inclusive set of locally based identities and social relationships (p. 230) ... The Vietnamese are actively prevented from entering this 'multi-ethnic constituency'. Perhaps it is the Vietnamese who pay the price for the dialogue which occurs between black and white young people. The simple fact that Vietnamese young people are prevented from entering the nation, as defined within the neighbourhood, means that they incur the full wrath of the new racism which defines 'outsiders' in terms of 'cultural' difference (p. 228).

Therefore, Richard's comments arguably evidence a 'cultural racism' grounded within cultural difference rather than skin colour, which has been specifically directed towards Asians in recent times (see Modood, 1992, 1997, 2005a), and although his association with Martin Luther King may rest on shared values, this account remains deeply problematic.<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, the image of Martin Luther King to signify integrity is further demonstrated by Jake – a dual heritage child living in a predominantly white area – who specifically cites this figure as an example of a positive black role model:

Interviewer: For you then, in the media are there any positive black role models?

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<sup>60</sup> Indeed, further evidence of cultural racism was indicated within Richard's interview in which he described himself as Chinese whilst mimicking a Chinese accent, claiming it was 'funny' (Appendix B.3, p. 331). The only other instance where a participant arguably displayed cultural racism emerged in Darren's account in which he employed an image of a Japanese footballer, describing him as a 'Japannie' (said in a stereotypical accent) and associated this figure with humour, not football or sport (Appendix B.4, p. 348).

Jake T1: Yeah there is some, I don't know his name, it's Ladley King or something, I don't know his name.

Interviewer: Who is he?

Jake T1: He like spoke up about like the black people's needs and stuff like that; like they should be equal and stuff like that.

Interviewer: Oh, Martin Luther King.

Jake T1: That's it, yeah.

Importantly this account raises wider concerns, in that although Jake's misnaming of Martin Luther King can be regarded as secondary to him identifying with the figure's values, it may instead result from under-representation and under-exposure of positive black role models within mass media, thus signalling a need for greater representation (Anderson and Cavallaro, 2002; Younge, 2002; D'Souza and Clarke, 2005). However, participants within multicultural environments revealed that they were capable of selecting non-white role models from mainstream culture with ease; for example, demonstrated previously in the cases of Jimmy (p. 199) and Carl (p. 201), and exhibited by Emily (a black participant) who draws upon Kanye West to articulate personal principles as well as a source for black identification:

Emily K: ... Kanye West is my idol because he like speaks his mind and I speak my mind.

Interviewer: I've also noticed that you've used a lot of images of black people.

Emily K: Yeah.

Interviewer: Now, for example, if I changed these pictures so they weren't images of black people and I maybe used white people or Asian people or Chinese//

Emily K: //yeah//

Interviewer: //would it still have the same meaning?

Emily K: Yeah, I don't think the colour matters so much.

Interviewer: You don't think so.

Emily K: No, but for him [Kanye West], like some of the things he says, the way he sings about like life I don't think that could be a white man.

Interviewer: I don't know what Kanye West sings about.

Emily K: I can't explain it like.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

- Emily K: Right he sings for black people sometimes but the rest of them if you changed them it would work, yeah it would work.
- Interviewer: It would work except for Kanye West?
- Emily K: Yeah.

Emily's remarks initially foreground that her immediate association with the singer is grounded in a mutual ethos of 'speaking their minds', but this figure also comes to embody – at times – broader issues relating to black people's experiences. Crucially, Emily's observation that many images of black people within the collage are interchangeable with various other ethnicities, indicates that she does not consider 'blackness' to be an essential all-encompassing facet of her self, supported by the assertion 'I don't think the colour matters so much'. Despite this, the participant's emphasis on Kanye West highlights she believes *some* experiences are particular to black people, and in doing so Emily arguably demonstrates that although her identity does not reside exclusively in 'blackness', being black remains *one* significant element of her identity. Moreover, whilst the participant notes that Kanye West 'sings for black people' she qualifies this with 'sometimes', signifying that his appeal has broader scope. Hence Emily (un)knowingly inextricably links this singer's relationship with 'blackness' to her own, thus enforcing the idea that 'blackness' is not a totalising identity, nor the sole motive for identification – a similar notion having been made by Andre in his discussion of Jermaine Defoe within Chapter 6 (p. 123).

A significant point raised in the above discussion is that Emily's sense of self was not located within a single (black) identity, rather by making this fact explicit she (un)knowingly identifies this constitutes one facet of her character. Therefore this example comes to illustrate that the participants did not conceive their identities as unitary, but instead conceptualised them as multi-faceted and diverse.<sup>61</sup> Hence, the participants were arguably not restricted to selecting role models in accordance with overt similarities – such as 'race'/ethnicity, sexuality or gender – but demonstrated that they specifically chose figures with shared or respected values. Thus, this factor

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<sup>61</sup> This notion is clearly articulated by Alfie who states 'I see myself as loads of things' (Appendix B.8, p. 425), and also demonstrated in Charlotte's remark 'I've got loads of like sides to myself (Appendix B.6, p. 403).

may account for the comparative ease by which participants from multicultural environments were able to select role models based upon values as, for them, diversity is not only intrinsic to their identities, but also to their lived experience and social worlds.

### 7.5.3 Authenticity

The preceding discussion indicates that for participants within this study their role model choices and relationships with them were grounded in notions of integrity. Moreover, a theme which became apparent within the participants' discussions was that an important marker of integrity appeared to be 'authenticity'. That is to say, figures adopted tended to be those who articulated a legitimate and genuine account of their experiences – whether these be political or personal. Indeed, the notion of authenticity has been explored by Allan Moore (2002) in his analysis of how this concept is constructed within popular music discourse. Within popular music he argues that authenticity is constructed by a performer's ability to convey unmediated expressions of their experiences and circumstances which, in turn, the audience interpret as an articulation of their own emotions and environment:

Particular acts and sonic gestures (or various kinds) made by particular artists are interpreted by an engaged audience as investing authenticity in those acts and gestures – the audience becomes engaged not with the acts and gestures themselves, but directly with the originator of those acts and gestures. This results in the first pole of my perspective: *authenticity of expression*, ... [which] arises when an originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience (p. 214, original emphasis).

Thus, Moore's work maintains authenticity is a value constructed within the practices of production and consumption in popular music, rather than an objective or intrinsic quality that artists embody. Furthermore, he states that this quality of authenticity is confirmed and bestowed subjectively by the audience to indicate their own authentic character. Although Moore's argument is credible and evident within participant's accounts, the constructed nature of authenticity becomes irrelevant, as importantly

this quality remained a principal vehicle through which children explored and expressed their identities:

- Interviewer: You've not actually used many images of famous people//
- Nancy T2: //yeah, I didn't have enough time.
- Interviewer: But if you could, are there any people that you think you would have put on, that you look to who you think are role models?
- Nancy T2: Have you heard of um, I've completely forgotten her name now.
- Interviewer: What's she in?
- Nancy T2: She's got like; she had brown hair now she's got blonde hair.
- Interviewer: Kelly Clarkson?
- Nancy T2: That's it; I like her music a lot.
- Interviewer: What is it about Kelly Clarkson that you like and identify with?
- Nancy T2: 'Cause on her videos when she sings it's not like she just stands there, it's like she expresses how she's feeling in the words that she says, she actually expresses herself in the video she's not like just standing there singing it.
- Interviewer: Is there anything else about her, not just her music but the type of person that you think she is//
- Nancy T2: //I think she's quite happy because I watched an interview and she seemed quite happy and bubbly but I don't know if it's just for show, but she did seem happy and what not so I think she's being true, so that's good.

Significantly, Nancy's inability to recall the celebrity's name may signal, as discussed previously, that her relationship with this figure is based upon shared values rather than admiration for Kelly Clarkson's status. Indeed, the participant's remarks highlight that this singer's foremost appeal specifically resides in her principle of self-expression. For Nancy, this principle of self-expression is further affirmed by her belief that Kelly Clarkson's songs reflect *actual* emotional experiences, reinforced through that artist's visual performances and public persona presented within interviews. As such, the participant arguably comes to perceive this singer's character and articulations of personal reality as sincere, therefore demonstrating authenticity. However, Nancy herself casts doubt on the concept of authenticity, exemplified by her statement 'I don't know if it's just for show'; but immediately contradicts this

proposition, reverting back to Kelly Clarkson as an authentic figure by asserting ‘I think she’s being true, so that’s good’. Thus, the participant’s reaffirmation of her role model’s authenticity may be read as a strategy through which she aims to validate her own experiences and values<sup>62</sup>, an idea made manifest within Annabel’s account outlined below:

- Interviewer: Why have you got Green Day there?  
Annabel R: Because I like their music and look up to them ‘cause they’re cool.  
Interviewer: Is it just the music that you identify with or is it anything about them?  
Annabel R: Well that one [Billie Joe Armstrong] has been like through a lot, like his dad died when he was young and he expressed himself in music and I respect that and that’s how I see myself.

Like Nancy, Annabel considers Billie Joe Armstrong’s music to be a genuine expression of his personal experiences, and in doing so comes to see this figure as authentic; however, in contrast to Nancy, she authenticates the legitimacy of her role model by grounding him and his music in *actual* rather than perceived reality. Hence, in expressing respect for the singer’s ability to confront his difficulties and identifying with them – ‘I respect that and that’s how I see myself’ – Annabel, like Nancy, employs this role model as a means by which her own values and experiences are confirmed.

Thus, the above discussions begin to demonstrate that some participants conceptualised role models as embodying notions of authenticity, whose articulations of experience, emotional responses and values were, in turn, utilised by these young people as vehicles through which they validated their own. However, in other instances participants revealed that they did not use role models as a resource through which their own realities were represented; rather in recognising authenticity within role models, this appeared to prompt them into appropriating such approaches as a tool for self-expression. For example, in the following extract Carmel regards 50

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<sup>62</sup> This idea is seemingly reinforced when considering Nancy’s previous comments about lacking self-confidence (Chapter 6, p. 155), which arguably demonstrates that her appropriation of Kelly Clarkson and notions of ‘Girl Power’ discourse displayed by this figure are utilised strategically to construct a façade of confidence as well as reaffirm the participant’s own values.

Cent's music as a medium he employs to communicate his life story that she accepts as authentic without question, but more significantly Carmel adopts the artists' form of rapping as a method to voice her own experiences:

- Interviewer: As a person do you think that you identify with him [50 Cent] at all?  
Do you think you share any//
- Carmel O: //yeah he raps about his personal life and it's good so I do rap. I just sing about my personal stuff as him, so he sings about his stuff and I sing about my stuff and I think I'm like him sometimes, like speaking about personal stuff in life.

In addition, the participants' accounts illustrated that they not only utilised role models to convey and confirm their immediate experiences and values, but also drew upon these figures in order to interrogate and explore external worlds:

- Jake T1: ... the 50 Cent logo like the favourite like singer person I like, like look up to you know.
- Interviewer: What is it about 50 Cent that you like? What is it about him or his music that you identify with?
- Jake T1: It's just like good music and it like tells stuff but like, in like rap kind of thing.
- Interviewer: What sort of stuff? What do you mean?
- Jake T1: Like in different places, like towns and stuff like different people and like kind of telling other stories, like telling his own and other people's stories.
- Interviewer: So he's telling his life story and other people's?
- Jake T1: Yeah yeah.
- Interviewer: And why do you like that?
- Jake T1: I just think its good how like he expresses himself and it makes you think about different places and different people and stuff.

Interestingly, whilst Carmel's relationship with 50 Cent was based upon expressions of *personal* experience, as noted previously, Jake conversely appears to exploit this same rapper as an instrument for investigating *external* realities. Indeed, the participant's remarks highlight this figure does not merely focus on himself, by

emphasising 50 Cent tells ‘his own and other people’s stories’, which accordingly leads Jake to possibly believe that these representations present him with varying authentic worlds beyond his own reality. By doing so, Jake’s association with his role model may seem less self-directed than those of the above participants in that he engages with 50 Cent on both a personal as well as social level; yet, this situation is conceivably more complex when taking the participant’s particular circumstances into consideration. As detailed earlier in this chapter Jake is a dual heritage child living and attending school within a predominantly white middle-class environment, and had further expressed feelings of alienation due to encountering episodes of racism.<sup>63</sup> Thus, in light of this it is credible to suggest that the participant’s discontent with his restricted milieu impels him to search for potential future alternatives, as offered for Jake within 50 Cent’s music because ‘it makes you think about different places and different people and stuff’. Importantly therefore, this role model arguably enables Jake to negotiate his identity and a position for himself within the social world. Similarly the following participant seemingly uses his role model as a stimulus for reflection, as he perceives Eminem’s songs to be authenticated narratives of personal and social reality. However, whilst both Jason and Jake utilise notions of the external world as a means for self-reflection; Jake aspires towards locating himself socially, whereas Jason’s motives are more introverted – limited to achieving a greater understanding of himself:

- Interviewer:       What is it about Eminem that you identify with?  
Jason C:            Because he talks about his life and people and all that.  
Interviewer:       Why is that a good thing?  
Jason C:            Because it makes me think what I do during the day.  
Interviewer:       It makes you think//  
Jason C:            //what I done in the day, why I have done things and all that.

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<sup>63</sup> This participant was not willing to discuss these incidents whilst being recorded but had confided in the researcher that he frequently found himself subject to racist bullying as well as name calling – namely ‘nigger’ and ‘mongrel’ – at school by other white pupils. Furthermore, Jake stated that although he reported these events to teachers the individuals responsible for such actions had not been reprimanded, thus enforcing his belief that this school actively ignored and turned a ‘blind eye’ to racism. Indeed, Jake’s concerns about racism were supported by an incident the researcher experienced, in which a white student mimicked an Asian accent whilst walking past her. This episode was relayed to a staff member who questioned the male student about this matter. Despite this, the individual was not disciplined by the teacher as she stated he was imitating a Swedish, not Asian, accent.

### 7.5.4 Being ‘Normal’

Within the interviews some participants highlighted that a primary appeal of their role models lay in them exhibiting qualities associated with being ‘normal’. Significantly, these notions of ‘normalness’ appeared to operate in a symbiotic relationship with the concept of authenticity: that is, these participants were not only drawn to figures who they perceived as articulating authentic expressions of personal and social experiences, but also those which embraced a shared familiar reality on an experiential level. These ideas are clearly illustrated by the following participant who seemingly constructs Kelly Clarkson as an authentic artist in stressing that this singer writes her own music and controls its production: which for Keira, in ostensibly evidencing ‘girl power’ virtues, qualifies the figure as a ‘positive role model for girls’ like herself. Keira’s initial point of identification with her role model is arguably founded upon a belief that this figure is a ‘normal’ individual, implied by the statement ‘she’s very down to earth’ and also supported in the secondary status she attributes to Kelly Clarkson’s music, describing it as ‘quite good’. In doing so, the singer’s attraction for Keira may reside in that she conceptualises this figure as a genuine and independent woman who, despite having celebrity standing and privilege remains firmly grounded within a pragmatic reality – thus demonstrating ‘normality’:

Interviewer: Interestingly, you’ve spoken about rock music which is quite male dominated//

Keira T1: //yeah, yeah//

Interviewer: //so are there any female figures in rock that you particularly identify with?

Keira T1: Kelly Clarkson.

Interviewer: What is it about Kelly Clarkson that you identify with?

Keira T1: She’s very down to earth and her music is quite good and she like puts something into the music as well so she has the rock behind her.

Interviewer: When you say she always puts something into her music, I’m not sure what you mean?

Keira T1: She writes it and then she’ll sit there and she’ll have like session guitarists and session drummers and that, and she gives them like a sample of what she thinks sounds good, and then she might change it or keep it like that, so she puts a rock effort into the music as well.

Interviewer: So do you think that she has a lot of control over what she is doing?  
Keira T1: Yeah, a positive role model for girls like me.

On a similar theme Natalie's comments, in the following extract, apparently indicates that she considers her role model both an authentic and 'normal' figure illustrated by the participant placing an emphasis upon Charlotte Church's non-adherence to conventional expectations of stardom, beauty and behaviour as well as this singer 'just look[ing] like herself'. Furthermore, in recognising Charlotte Church's disregard for custom and directly identifying with this in order to express individuality (see Chapter 6, pp. 162-163), Natalie paradoxically utilises the role model's 'normalness' to signify her own sense of uniqueness:

Interviewer: What about the picture of Charlotte Church?  
Natalie M: She's a famous person and some people have their like an idol to look up to.  
Interviewer: Do you identify with Charlotte Church?  
Natalie M: Yeah. I don't agree with the stuff in the press it's just//  
Interviewer: //with what stuff in the press?  
Natalie M: Like they say that she's bad and I just like Charlotte Church.  
Interviewer: What is it about her that you identify with and look up to?  
Natalie M: Her singing.  
Interviewer: Just her singing? What about her fashion and the way she looks?  
Natalie M: Yeah, she doesn't look exactly like a pop star I think she just looks like herself she just doesn't make herself look like what anyone wants her to. Yeah, she doesn't want to act like anyone else.  
Interviewer: Is that a quality you like about Charlotte Church? Is that what you see in yourself?  
Natalie M: Yeah. I'm not told to do what anyone else I just do what I want to do.

The principle of individuality being conveyed through role models who displayed 'normal' characteristics and authenticity is also evidenced by the following participant. Interestingly, as discussed previously, Rose perceives Johnny Depp as a figure who exhibits an authentic individuality, which further appears to be located within his possession of 'normal' qualities, demonstrated by her assertions that he

avoids media attention and is instead ‘just a regular family guy’. Thus Rose’s identification with this actor, and values of authenticity and individuality she believes he embodies, can be read as being dependent upon her conviction that he exists in the same ‘normal’ world as herself<sup>64</sup>:

Rose T1: //well Johnny Depp ... he’s not into all the like media stars he’s like just a regular family guy and likes to stay out of the whole spotlight.

In contrast to the above participants who used role models that they felt personified ‘normal’ values as a means of expressing their independence and individuality, Jake specifically draws upon his to articulate political concerns about black acceptance within contemporary British society:

Interviewer: Is there anyone around today who you think is a good positive role model for black people and black children?

Jake T1: Simon Webbe.

Interviewer: Simon Webbe?

Jake T1: Yeah.

Interviewer: Why do you think he’s a good role//

Jake T1: //he’s like just a normal person who hasn’t done anything wrong, like he just sings really, just normal.

Interviewer: Yes.

Jake T1: Yeah, ‘cause like, it’s like, everyone knows him like he’s not English, like everyone knows him they don’t say anything about him.

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<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, whilst Rose is a dual heritage child of Chinese and white descent, attending the same school as Jake, she expressed no incidents of encountering racist bullying or abuse. This may have resulted from a reluctance to discuss such issues with the researcher, or alternatively, her ‘difference’ is not perceived as ‘threatening’ by others: a factor which could be attributed to Rose’s *actual* ethnicity not being overtly recognisable. Thus, despite whether the participant experiences racism in this environment or not, she demonstrated an awareness of being ‘different’ from those around her. This point was clearly exemplified by Rose’s insistence in the interview that she was ‘half Chinese and half English’ and ‘not ashamed of who I am, so I just say it’ (Appendix B.6, p. 391), which appears to indicate that racism by fellow white students was primarily motivated by skin colour ‘difference’. Importantly, therefore, Rose’s acknowledgement of her ‘difference’ from other children may arguably have underlain and instigated the participant’s assertions of individuality and ‘uniqueness’ – a point supported when considering that within this study these sentiments were expressed most forcefully by this participant. However, in utilising Johnny Depp to symbolise her ‘individuality’ and identifying with his ‘normal’ qualities, this possibly signals the participant’s desire for ‘normalness’ through which complete acceptance can ultimately be achieved.

Significantly, in identifying Simon Webbe as a positive black role model for being 'normal' and not having 'done anything wrong' the participant reveals his opinion that perceptions of black people are overwhelmingly negative and aims to challenge this with a representation of 'blackness' which he feels is not considered the norm. This situation is clarified by previous issues Jake raised within the interview, in which his collage demonstrated that he believed other people viewed him negatively on the basis of skin colour alone. According to this participant such (mis)understandings are primarily propagated by the mass media whose portrayals of 'blackness' continue to circulate images of black people as violent gangsters or subjugated 'slaves' whilst neglecting different qualities they possess, and also suggests misrepresentation is experienced by other ethnicities; ideas made explicit in Jake's following statements:

Jake T1: 'Cause like a lot of what you see on TV or in like films and stuff like that, a lot of like of the black people are more gangster types.

...

... like rap music and stuff like that like people show like black people shooting people or on like X-Box games if its, like on *Grand Theft Auto* where you go and shoot people it's a black person it's not a white person, it's like the black people who do the shooting kind of thing.

...

Like black people are gangsters kind of thing, like if they [other people] think about it that's what's gonna probably come into their head 'cause they see a lot of it like in the media and in TV and that as well, but then other things they will think as well.

Interviewer: Like?

Jake T1: Like slaves and stuff like that. Like a lot of black people are slave's, like from ages ago.

...

It [the media] doesn't really show any like nice like black people, they don't really focus on it they just focus on like all the things that black people do wrong.

...

Sometimes they [the media] show like, Asians, they're like saying a lot about like Asian people and stuff like, Iraq people they're showing a lot about them as well, because like of what Saddam

Hussein done, like saying like all of them are like that but they're not, it's a bit harsh.

For the participant, these notions are arguably compounded when considering his immediate locale which, as stated previously, lacks ethnic diversity and from Jake's position is marred by an inherent racism. Therefore, in consideration of these factors, Simon Webbe's function as a role model for this participant seems to operate on two fundamental levels: firstly, the lack of diversity within Jake's social environment leads him to conceptualise this role model as a figure who provides a source for black identification; and secondly, the participant grounds this black identification in Simon Webbe's 'normalness' which Jake specifically utilises as a method for countering racist stereotypes of 'blackness' that he believes are widespread within mass media as well as his daily life. Significantly then, Jake's identification with this role model appears to oppose Assibey-Mensah's (1997) claims that black male youths essentially misunderstand the meaning and purpose of role models by only seeing them as signifying financial success. Indeed, whilst this participant explored external realities and possible future selves through the rapper 50 Cent as a result of personal social circumstances (pp. 209-210), Jake's construction of Simon Webbe as an authentic 'normal' black individual – because 'he hasn't done anything wrong' – is seemingly employed in order to validate internal principles and affirm his current self.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, although this participant ostensibly draws upon Simon Webbe as a figure who embodies 'normal' qualities through which he aims to transcend conventional representations of black people, in describing his role model as 'not English' – when Simon Webbe actually is – Jake unintentionally conflates the concept of 'Englishness' with 'whiteness'. In doing so the participant's remarks importantly come to reflect an unknowing internalisation of dominant racist discourse in which, as Tariq Modood (2001) has explained, "English" has been treated by the new Britons as a closed ethnicity rather than an open nationality' (p. 77). Furthermore this discussion highlights that an apparent dichotomy emerges between ethnic minority participants'

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<sup>65</sup> Jake's emphasis on 'normalness' seemingly parallels those of other participants from disadvantaged areas who identified themselves as 'normal', an issue discussed within the preceding chapter (pp. 173-174). Despite Jake's comparative privilege in relation to these participants he similarly perceives his identity being located 'on the margins', and by doing so, arguably utilises notions of 'normalness' – as they did – to negate any 'outsider' status: a strategy which Rose also possibly employs (see p. 213).

conceptualisations of identity, dependent upon whether they are located within an ethnically diverse or predominantly white area. For example, as mentioned previously, Emily's relationship with Kanye West demonstrated that 'blackness' was not the sole basis of identification; rather this role model acted as a metaphoric representation of 'black' constituting one element of her self and therefore not a totalising identity. Conversely, Jake's association with Simon Webbe specifically resides in this figure portraying a 'normal' representation of black people to counter negative stereotypes, and consequently the participant raises his black identity to a primary level of significance by using it as the exclusive motive for identification.

Expanding on the issue of racism raised within Jake's accounts, it should be noted that his twin sister Josie – who attends the same school – expressed similar sentiments. Although not discussing role models directly, the participant utilised an image of the actress Marsha Hunt to articulate her Jamaican heritage which, for Josie, was most clearly communicated through this figure's afro hairstyle. Despite this usage initially appearing to conform with racist ideologies that reduce black people 'to the signifiers of physical difference' (Hall, 1997, p. 249), Josie's appropriation of the afro was instead specifically motivated by a desire to take pride in her ethnicity: a position that concurs with Modood, *et al.*'s (1997) findings within the fourth national survey on ethnic minorities, in which 'Caribbeans ... are increasingly seeking to express a new sense of ethnicity through their clothes and hair' (p. 328). However, the participant's reflections on this image importantly revealed that she had once worn this hairstyle, but racist bullying by others denied such expression and, in doing so, can be read as preventing Josie from asserting her own sense of (black) identity, a notion affirmed by the participant's emphatic response when asked if she would like her afro back. Interestingly, Josie's remarks further indicate that although she identifies racism as endemic within her life, the participant seemingly negotiates with this racist discourse, exemplified in statements such as 'I'd always comeback with a comeback', which may possibly be a strategy Josie specifically employs to weaken racist rhetoric whilst simultaneously acknowledging its existence:

Interviewer: Her name is Marsha Hunt. Why have you used this picture?

Josie T2: Because of my origin 'cause I have a natural afro, a huge afro, and it's just like my origin like Jamaican, half Jamaican.

- ...
- Interviewer: And also the picture of hair that you've used is that something that people point out to you as well?
- Josie T2: Yeah, yeah, 'cause it's always, 'cause I used to come school with my afro and then I got really badly bullied and stuff like all the time people like, afro afro, like being really horrible about it and like throwing stuff at my hair and stuff like that.
- Interviewer: So would you, at some point, still like to have your afro back?
- Josie T2: Yeah. 'Cause I liked it I just liked it but now it just, I got bullied for like since I was in Year Seven.
- ...
- Interviewer: I've noticed, like when I spoke to your brother, it is very evident that you are the only non-white person in your class. Is the bullying related to//
- Josie T2: //some of it is because I get some like 'oh go back to Pakistan' and 'go away you Paki' and stuff like that and I say get your facts right, I'm not from Pakistan I'm from Jamaica type of thing, I'd always comeback with a comeback.
- ...
- Interviewer: Are you aware of it though, being in a school where you're not surrounded by many children from diverse backgrounds, are you aware that you are different from other people or does that only happen when somebody says something//
- Josie T2: //yeah 'cause I see myself as like a friend to everyone but there is occasionally, if I get in a ruck with someone they say something racist and then I'll be like well you couldn't have been a true friend anyway if you can turn round and think something like that, so.

Significantly then, the participant's discussion illustrates that she recognises a lack of diversity contributes to her being labelled as different and living with the perpetual threat of racism rearing its head. Therefore, Josie's position seems to concur with research by Back (1993) in which 'young black people ... understand the ambiguity of their links with white peers and "live out", or negotiate, the boundaries of those links' (p. 225). Furthermore, he observed that 'There is always a potential for racist materials to be utilised strategically by whites as a means of gaining an advantage, or hurting black peers. As a result the location of black peers as "insiders" is always

contingent upon the absence of racist talk and practice' (*ibid.*). Moreover, it should be reiterated that both Josie and Jake are actually dual heritage children of Caribbean and white descent, yet this duality is apparently overlooked within their white environment and instead the participants' 'blackness' functions to continually mark them out as 'other' – thus arguably explaining Josie and Jake's close associations as well as emphasis on possessing a 'black' identity. However, this association with 'blackness' may also be fostered by findings proposed in Barbara Tizard and Ann Phoenix's (2002) work on mixed parentage young people who stated that dual heritage children 'living with white parents only' – as Josie and Jake do – 'was significantly related to being affiliated to black people [in popular culture]' (p. 126).

### **7.5.5 Negative (Black) Role Models?**

The issue of black representation was a latent theme within some white participants' discussions of negative role models, and appeared to enforce concerns that perceptions of black people still remain largely stereotyped and reductive (see Chapter 2). However, this notion was not as clearly defined as an initial reading might suggest, with participants' remarks demonstrating complex and varying responses on the matter of black portrayals. Furthermore although the participants' comments at times displayed undercurrents of racist discourse, a significant difference seemed to emerge between how 'blackness' was conceptualised by young people in predominantly white areas and those from multicultural ones. For instance within the following extract, Keira – a participant from the same white locale as Josie and Jake – specifically cites R&B (rhythm and blues) artists generically as an example of negative role models. Interestingly, despite Keira not overtly identifying these figures as black, this assumption is indicated by her selecting a genre in which black individuals prevail. Moreover, in unequivocally associating R&B – and by extension black people – with drug taking as well as violence the participant unintentionally essentialises black culture and individuals as 'bad': a point arguably illustrated by Keira's inability to name a particular singer in support of her opinion. In addition the participant's assertions that such artists promote aggressive behaviour in people is regarded as a direct product of R&B singers' videos as well as music, and for Keira, these ideas are further confirmed by information she believes the mass media provide:

- Interviewer: Who do you think is a negative role model?
- Keira T1: I think that the people in R&B take drugs or hit people and are bad.
- Interviewer: Are there any artists or musicians that you can name specifically?
- Keira T1: Not off the top of my head no, but you hear of it a lot of the time on TV and in magazines or it's due to their videos and their music that people react the way they do.
- Interviewer: What do you mean?
- Keira T1: You get like, like if you look at R&B if you look at that, a lot of singers will be in the news because they've hit someone or done something and of course the young people turn around and think that looks good yeah I'll try that being a R&B singer means you can hit people, whereas you can't so a lot of people think it's right if they do it but it's not.

Thus, Keira's statements seem to imply she conceives of black people in stereotypical and racist terms, and would apparently support Jake's argument, discussed previously, that the media propagate negative representations of 'blackness'. Nonetheless, it could possibly be suggested that this participant's (mis)understandings of these media representations may actually result from Keira's lived experience in which the lack of ethnic diversity impacts upon and influences how she perceives such figures and, in turn, black individuals. Indeed, whilst Keira's account arguably highlights that she broadly identifies black figures as signifying 'badness' and therefore generalises them as constituting negative role models, in contrast, white participants from multicultural environments employed such representations to specifically indicate negative perceptions they felt other people held of themselves:

- Interviewer: And you've got 50 Cent [how I think other people see me].
- Scott C: Yeah 'cause people say, they say like you're naughty, robbery.
- Interviewer: So he represents that you're a bit of a yob and you're a bit of a thug//
- Scott C: //only people who don't know me.
- Interviewer: Do you think 50 Cent's is a thug and a hoodlum?
- Scott C: No he's playing at angry.
- Interviewer: But do you think he's a positive or negative role model?

Scott C: A negative role model but I don't know him that much I don't know what he's done apart from in his videos, but he's playing though, playing at ultra-macho.

The discussion of 50 Cent – a black rapper – in Scott's interview above not only conveys his opinions about others viewing him as lacking positive characteristics, but significantly, by drawing upon this particular image the participant appears to demonstrate an understanding that these representations are commonly conceptualised as symbolising negative qualities. Nevertheless although Scott seemingly recognises that these perceptions of 'blackness' are grounded within stereotyped conventions, he simultaneously uses this very discourse to communicate his own thoughts as well as identify 50 Cent as a negative role model, which can therefore be read as the participant's acceptance of racist ideologies. Importantly however, Scott's emphasis on 50 Cent's public persona as 'play', arguably disrupts notions that the participant complies with stereotypical conceptions of black people as he may in fact perceive this figure's performances in an ironic manner. This point is clearly exemplified by Scott's assertions that 50 Cent is 'playing at angry [and] ultra-macho' in which he further demonstrates some awareness of male 'blackness' being constructed as a form of 'super-masculinity' (Majors and Billson, 1992; Back, 1994; Sewell, 1997); thus the participant's rejection of this figure's exaggerated masculinity can possibly be seen as Scott's unwillingness to conform with such ideological thinking. Consequently it is credible to suggest that the participant's relationship with 50 Cent is riddled with ambiguity in which he both exploits ideological constructions of 'blackness' whilst distancing himself from this position by acknowledging these representations as ironic. Hence, the ambiguity that characterises Scott's associations with this figure may be produced by his experience of living within a multicultural environment, in which he encounters ethnic diversity daily and is therefore able to negotiate what are perceived as negative representations without necessarily accepting them, nor projecting stereotypes onto black people as a whole – as Keira seemingly proposed.

On a similar theme, the following participant states black rap stars' images would be employed to illustrate his belief that other people view him as possessing delinquent traits; however Joe, unlike Scott, forcibly asserts that such stereotypical conceptualisations of 'blackness' are misguided and incorrect, demonstrated by his

refusal to categorise these figures collectively as violent and remark ‘not all rappers are bad you know’. Furthermore, when prompted to provide an example of a ‘bad’ rap artist the participant cites a specific individual and factual instance, which leads Joe to conceive of this figure negatively – and in turn, a ‘negative role model’ – rather than, as in Keira’s case, basing assumptions on broad generalisations. Thus, the participant’s discussion seemingly highlights his non-acceptance of racist discourse whilst concurrently acknowledging some portrayals of black people can be reductive ‘because that’s how they’re shown sometimes’ and, in doing so, possibly indicates Joe’s ability to see beyond commonly held conceptions that these figures are solely detrimental (Bonneville *et al.*, 2006, pp. 12-13).<sup>66</sup> Therefore the participant’s position arguably reveals that perceptions of such representations are determined, in part, by environmental context: Joe’s multicultural milieu enables him to negotiate media representations with his *actual* understandings of ethnic minority individuals and cultural materials he experiences in this social world:

Interviewer: If you had more time are there any other pictures that you would have added to your collage?

Joe C: On this side [how I think other people see me] I would probably put like black rappers because most people think young people are into rap ‘cause we’re all gangsters and that.

Interviewer: So do you think rappers represent violence and everything bad?

Joe C: No, some are, but that’s ‘cause that’s how they’re shown sometimes, but not all rappers are bad you know.

Interviewer: Can you give me an example of a rapper who is bad though?

Joe C: There was that guy from So Solid Crew he got done for having guns. It’s not cool for kids to see that sort of thing, like their idols being put in prison, but they’re not all like that you know.

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<sup>66</sup> An awareness that the media can propagate stereotyped portrayals of ‘blackness’ was also evidenced within Carmel’s account who, as discussed previously, regards rap as a positive medium for communicating personal experiences and maintains that this image should be conveyed to dispel negative representations:

Interviewer: So do you think that’s a good thing that rap does//

Carmel C: //yeah they should show them things because otherwise they get across the wrong way and they’re not what they’re made out to be like portrayed in the public.

### 7.5.6 Ambivalence

Within the previous sections participants' discussions indicate that role models were utilised in highly complex ways and, as such, these figures functioned as cultural resources from which young people could conceptualise, construct and articulate diverse elements of their selves. Moreover the participants' comments highlighted that diversity is not only indicative of their identities, but also a quality they came to acknowledge within those they identified as role models. Importantly however, such diversity was not always perceived as operating in a complementary manner but at times gave rise to conflict, made manifest by participants' recognition of ambivalence within their role models, most notably the 'good/bad' dichotomy. Thus, the good/bad dichotomy arguably signified contested aspects of participants' own identities and in mediating this conflict through role models enabled them to negotiate ambivalence they observed within their selves:

- Interviewer: But what is it about him [Eminem], apart from his music, do you think there's anything about his personality that you share?
- Diana R: No because he's quite rude actually.
- Interviewer: So he's quite rude, but you also look up to him?
- Diana R: Yeah.
- Interviewer: Do you like him because he's rude?
- Diana R: No but that's the whole point of rap and I'm rude sometimes but I don't like to be and try not to be.
- ...
- Interviewer: You said you think rap music and Eminem is rude and you can be rude sometimes, do you think that that's a good thing or a bad thing?
- Diana R: Quite bad actually, I try not to be rude and that.
- Interviewer: Quite bad?
- Diana R: Yeah.
- Interviewer: In what way?
- Diana R: Swearing and stuff.
- Interviewer: Is there anything good about rap music and Eminem that you identify with?
- Diana R: It speaks about life and Eminem is mainly speaking about his experiences.

- Interviewer: So that's a good thing?
- Diana R: Yeah, because it's telling people about what he's been through and that's what I try and do.

Interestingly, whilst Diana initially rejects identifying with Eminem 'because he's quite rude actually' the participant's relationship with this role model appears to be grounded within him embodying an ambivalence she views in her own identity, that is represented by his use of obscene language and expressions of 'authenticity'. Therefore in discriminating between this figure's perceived positive and negative attributes Diana seemingly mediates her ambivalent character by aiming to contain 'rude' behaviour and aspiring towards constructing an authentic sense of self. Similarly Steve's remarks, outlined below, indicate that his role models symbolise an ethical conflict as they simultaneously personify violence and the virtue of moral support, which consequently leads this participant to constitute these figures as both 'bad' and 'good'. Thus, in recognising the good/bad dichotomy within these role models Steve arguably appropriates them as a *moral compass* that enables this participant to negotiate his identity in relation to oppositional values they represent for him<sup>67</sup>:

- Interviewer: Do you think they [wrestlers] are good role models or bad role models?
- Steve O: Well a bit of both, why because they are violent and they teach others to look after each other.
- Interviewer: So do you think the violence is good or bad?
- Steve O: Bad.
- Interviewer: So when might they not be a good role model?
- Steve O: When they are violent and don't fight fair.
- Interviewer: So overall do you think they are quite good?
- Steve O: Yeah because they teach others to look after each other and that's how you should be with your friends.

Importantly then the above comments further demonstrate that participants within this study were capable of actively distinguishing between differing aspects of their role

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<sup>67</sup> A similar example of wrestlers embodying the good/bad dichotomy was also demonstrated by Adrian (see Appendix B.4, p. 368).

models' characters and, in doing so, seemingly problematises claims which imply children passively accept 'negative' principles and as such require 'suitable' inspirational figures (Assibey-Mensah, 1997; Bonneville *et al.*, 2006, pp. 12-13). For example Jake, who as discussed previously employed 50 Cent in order to investigate external worlds and future selves, explicitly identifies this figure as neither positive nor negative but 'in the middle, like people are'; hence possibly reflecting his belief that such contradiction is an inherent feature within all individuals whilst, at the same time, allowing Jake to mediate an identity through isolating elements in this role model he admires:

- Interviewer: Because the thing is, 50 Cent also has quite a bad reputation//  
Jake T1: //yeah//  
Interviewer: //because he acts at times like a bit of a gangster type//  
Jake T1: //yeah.  
Interviewer: So do you think that people like 50 Cent are positive or negative role models?  
Jake T1: I think they're like kind of in the middle, like people are.  
Interviewer: In what way//  
Jake T1: //like shooting and stuff, obviously that's wrong but like, he's like, made his way up kind of thing to be like singing and famous and stuff like that and achieved something with his life.

Therefore, Jake and Steve's accounts would appear to accord with work by Bettina Fritzsche (2004; discussed in Chapter 6), whose analysis aimed to explore whether young girls could gain 'empowerment' from 'pop feminist' bands. Importantly Fritzsche identified that bands such as the Spice Girls were neither positive nor negative role models, but operated as a 'toolbox' which individuals could draw upon to construct their identities. Moreover, in accordance with the preceding accounts, Jason's subsequent comments also acknowledge that his role model encompasses both good and bad traits. Furthermore by distancing himself from Eminem's supposed drug taking habit he instead utilises this figure's narratives of personal experience as a method for arguably exploring and resolving his own inner ambivalence:

- Interviewer: But do you think there is anything bad about Eminem?

- Jason C: He is really because he sort of carries stuff around with him like he takes drugs and that's bad.
- Interviewer: So you don't agree with that//
- Jason C: //no I don't agree with taking drugs and smoking, but I like his music.
- Interviewer: But you like his music because he's talking about his life//
- Jason C: //yeah he's talking about life and all that.
- Interviewer: And that makes you think about your own life//
- Jason C: //yeah all the things that I've done wrong and don't want to do again.

Significantly however, role models not only functioned as a means by which participants attempted to address internal contestation, but also apparently came to signify an expression of their external realities. As the following extract demonstrates, Noah's ambiguity appears to arise from a conflict he feels is integral to himself and his environment which may therefore indicate that role models, for some participants, metaphorically represented an ambivalence that is symptomatic of their identities and social worlds:

- Interviewer: So we'll start with 'how I see myself'. Let's start with Darth Vader, why have you used Darth Vader?
- Noah C: Not really sure of himself.
- Interviewer: Not really sure of himself.
- Noah C: Mmm.
- Interviewer: Why is Darth Vader not really sure of himself?
- Noah C: He's stuck in-between two worlds.
- Interviewer: What worlds are those?
- Noah C: Good and bad, like ours.

Thus, the above discussions help to highlight that by conceptualising their identities in relation to role models participants within this study made, as Gauntlett (2002) notes, 'decisions and judgements about their own way of living (and that of others)' (p. 250). However, the participants importantly did not seek to 'copy' these figures directly, rather they adopted relevant facets of role models to assimilate into their constructions of the (ongoing project of the) self. Hence, in light of this, for these participants role

models operated as what Gauntlett terms '*navigation points* [which enable them to] steer their own personal routes through life' (*ibid.*, original emphasis).<sup>68</sup>

## 7.6 Summary

This chapter has identified that the participants utilise role models not only as a means through which they conceptualise and construct their current sense of self, but also as a strategy for exploring future possible identities. Furthermore, in contrast to the studies discussed which stress the importance of same 'race' and gender heroes, this analysis highlighted that these factors were not crucial to participants' relationships with their role models. Instead, this inquiry revealed that the participants adapted and/or negotiated their role models in accordance with their aspirations, values and social context. These insights into how young people formulate their self-identities and those outlined previously on gender and individualism, as well as the various theories considered, are drawn together in the final chapter to suggest a number of conclusions about identities, audiences and creative and visual research methods.

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<sup>68</sup> It should be noted that Gauntlett further states 'A person's general direction ... however, is more likely to be shaped by parents, friends, teachers, colleagues and other people encountered in everyday life' (2002, p. 250). This notion was evident within the present study in which some participants expressed that family and friends' influence was integral to how they conceptualised their own identities (Chapter 6, pp. 167-168; see also Miles, 2000: p. 134).