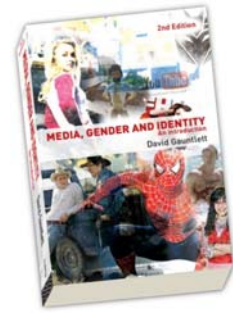


David Gauntlett:

Media, Gender and Identity, second edition

EXTRA MATERIAL (2008)



Media, Gender and Identity, second edition, is a book by David Gauntlett, published in 2008. The book's website at www.theoryhead.com offers a number of free 'extras'. This is one of them.

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Examples of talk about 'role models', and six types of role model

In the second edition of *Media, Gender and Identity* (2008), I give some examples from 2007 of people talking about 'role models'. In the first edition of the book (2002), I offered a longer list of examples, which now appear here. These examples are somewhat dated now, of course, but are a perfectly good selection of ways in which people evoke the notion of 'role models'. This is followed by the six 'types' of role model that I identified.

Who's a role model?

The idea of 'role models' comes up often in public discourse, but it's not always clear what the term means. A 'role model' seems to be popularly understood as 'someone to look up to,' and someone to base your character, values or aspirations upon. To begin our discussion of what people are talking about when they propose (or oppose) supposedly influential figures, here is a collection of examples of public talk about various 'role models':

- In November 1998, the British government announced plans to set up a panel of 'role models' to inspire teenage girls. Newspapers reported that they had considered asking the pop star Geri Halliwell, posh actress Emma Thompson, and therapist Susie Orbach. The idea was apparently dropped after the papers made fun of it: 'No youngster would be seen dead with a Government-approved role model,' noted one journalist (Phillips, 1998).
- In December 1999, as Victoria Beckham (Posh Spice) showed young women that motherhood was cool, and Cherie Booth (wife of Prime Minister) demonstrated the

joys of pregnancy in her mid-forties, there was concern that ‘celebrity mum’ role models would encourage teenage pregnancy – or put pressure on ordinary mothers who do not enjoy such highly-resourced lifestyles (Phillips, 1999).

- In September 2000, the British news media reported that researchers had suggested that the government’s ‘Playing for Success’ scheme, which promoted (male) professional footballers as role models, was a bad idea because it alienated many girls and some boys, and reinforced masculine stereotypes (BBC Online, 2000b).
- In the US, however, the professional footballers who were described in one *San Francisco Chronicle* story as classroom ‘role models’ were all female – the stars of the American women’s soccer league were said to be very proud to serve as an inspiration to young women (28 April 2001). Women’s World Cup champion Brandi Chastain had been helping to train promising Bay Area girls. ‘Brandi is bigger than a movie star at our school,’ said one.
- In November 1997, a child welfare supervisor in Dallas, Texas, ordered the emergency removal of a baby boy from foster parents, because the couple were lesbians and therefore did not, in her view, serve as decent ‘role models’. The state’s social services department quickly overruled the decision, and demoted the supervisor. These events sparked much controversy and debate (Verhovek, 1997).
- In July 2001, the Australian media went crazy for *Big Brother* contestant Sara-Marie, described in celebrity magazine *NW* as ‘the best ever female role model on TV’. She is celebrated for being highly entertaining, intelligent, and larger than the skinny norm of other TV stars. ‘She proves that bigger certainly can be better,’ *NW* enthuses, ‘living proof that curvy girls are sexy’ (*NW*, 2001: 14). The magazine even gave away a free cut-out Sara-Marie face mask, so that all Australians can look like their idol.
- In the USA, the *New York Times* often debates the value of various role models. On 28 December 1997 and again on 7 April 2000 it discussed whether the Barbie doll was a good role model for girls; on 27 September 1998 the status of the Miss America Pageant as a ‘proper role model for girls and young women’ came under scrutiny; and on 29 May 2001, the paper interviewed biological scientist Dr Jill Bargonetti whose position as ‘one of the few [prominent] black women in science’ made her ‘a role model and mentor for many minority students’.
- The *New York Times* doesn’t forget men, either: an article on 9 April 2000, for example, noted the number of comically dumb male characters on TV, such as Homer Simpson, and worried about men’s lack of intelligent role models; a piece on 30 December 1999 discussed, with Bronx teenagers, whether Puff Daddy was a good role model, after the successful performer and producer had been arrested on a firearms charge; and on 6 December 2000 profiled Stanley Williams, an ‘anti-gang role model’ who spreads a message against violent gangs to young people, from his cell on death row – he is ‘up for both a Nobel Peace Prize, and execution’ the paper notes.

- Film reviewers frequently bring up the idea of ‘role models’, particularly if there is a female character who may be of interest to girls or young women. For example, the *Dallas Observer*’s Michael Sragow was impressed with the title character in Disney’s *Mulan* (1998): ‘Mulan’s virtues as a female role model are manifold. She’s smart and independent; just as important, she’s comely yet no bombshell’ (Sragow, 1998). The title character in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) was called a ‘really great positive role model’ by the star herself, Angelina Jolie, who even told magazines that Lara was ‘the perfect woman’. *Heat* magazine agreed, saying that Jolie ‘kicks ass and is a good role model for teenage girls’. (More movie examples appear in chapter 4).
- Numerous obituaries for pioneering journalist Katharine Graham, ex-head of the *Washington Post*, described her as an inspiration to women. ‘Graham is widely credited with serving as a role model for women, especially women in journalism, because her life entailed an extraordinary transformation,’ noted the *Los Angeles Times* (18 July 2001), from conventional housewife, to defiant and powerful reporter and editor.
- A few days earlier in the *Los Angeles Times*, members of Backstreet Boys were discussing bandmate A. J. McLean’s spell in a rehabilitation centre (14 July 2001). ‘It’s important for us to be honest about it and not push it under the rug,’ said Kevin Richardson. ‘We have a lot of young fans, and it’s important to be a good role model’.
- The website ‘Role Models on the Web’ (www.rolemodel.net) suggests several people whom young people may wish to take as their inspiration, including:
 - Diane Sawyer, who overcame her shyness to become ‘one of the finest investigative reporters on television’.
 - Bill Koch, an entrepreneur who ‘pioneered’ new forms of environment-friendly energy, and winner of the America’s Cup sailing race.
 - Jehan Sadat, Egyptian feminist and ‘powerful decision-maker’, ‘a devoted activist for peace and women’s rights’.
 - Steven Spielberg, who ‘has given us a legacy of films and dreams, to encourage the dreamer in each of us’.
 - Rosie O’Donnell, the actress, comedian and talk-show host who ‘challenges the social order of things with her honest, straightforward style’.
 - Tiger Woods, the star golfer who ‘thinks his golf is just a vehicle for him to influence people’.

So what is a role model?

From the examples above we can see that role models can be divided into six slightly different types:

1. **The ‘straightforward success’ role model:** People who have been successful in their chosen field, such as any popular film star or leader – Brad Pitt, Cameron Diaz, Tony Blair or Mary Robinson. This category, when used by authority figures, excludes people who have done well but have tarnished their reputation by being associated with inappropriate or ‘immoral’ practices – although cult status as an ‘outsider’ role model (see below) may well depend on the latter.
2. **The ‘triumph over difficult circumstances’ role model:** People who have overcome adversity to achieve success often become the most popular role models. For example, Tiger Woods surmounted the racism of the golf world to become its youngest-ever champion; Maya Angelou escaped from the abuse and poverty of her childhood to become an inspirational best-selling writer; Nelson Mandela remained strong through 27 years of imprisonment and became a leader of huge international standing; Katharine Graham overcame the sexism of the newspaper world to become one of the most influential reporters; and the ‘Role Models on the Web’ site is very excited about Christopher Reeve, ‘fighting back’ after being paralysed. This type of role model is sometimes inappropriately used to argue against those who complain about injustice – as in ‘You can’t say that Hollywood is racist – look at the success of Eddie Murphy’.
3. **The ‘challenging stereotypes’ role model:** Female action heroes like Lara Croft counter the idea of ‘feminine’ women, and the idea that only men can fill tough leading roles. Madonna was famously a confident and assertive sexual icon in the late 1980s and 1990s, challenging traditional assumptions about female sexuality. (Men with unusually ‘feminine’ traits, though, are rarely seen as role models). Disabled people who succeed in jobs where some might be surprised to see them also fill this role. Because of the difficulty of challenging oppressive ideas, this category is linked to ‘triumph over difficult circumstances’.
4. **The ‘wholesome’ role model:** These are the ‘role models’ which older generations are comfortable showing to their children, such as ‘clean-living’ pop bands, the better-behaved sports stars, and stars who say ‘no’ to sex before marriage. Supporting such figures is ‘risky’ for conservatives because there is always the possibility that the icon will become a public disappointment, as in the Backstreet Boys case above. (And in 1999, Angela Phillips reported: ‘Last year Emma Thompson was held up by the government as the role model every young woman should aspire to, as an antidote to teenage pregnancy. This year – whoops – as the unmarried mother of a baby girl, she’s slipped from that particular pedestal’).
5. **The ‘outsider’ role model:** Rejected by mainstream culture, the outsider role model is a hero to those who reject conventional social expectations, such as Marilyn

Manson, Eminem, and even dead stars like Kurt Cobain and River Phoenix. There seem to be fewer well-known women in this category – suggesting that popular culture is less kind to very transgressive females – but possible recent nominees include hip hop star Lil’ Kim and the artist Tracey Emin, for their sexual frankness, and other strong independent free-thinkers from the music world such as Sinéad O’Connor, Mary J. Blige and Shirley Manson.

6. **The family role model:** This category includes looking up to members of your own family, and other popular celebrity parents such as Victoria Adams and David Beckham; as well as being negatively defined by those who label certain parents as ‘inappropriate role models’ (as in the Texan lesbian foster parenting controversy mentioned above).

These categories broadly summarise the kinds of people, and positions they represent, that become talked about as ‘role models’. It remains unclear, though, in a psychological sense, how ‘role modelling’ might actually work.

If you are interested in gender and role models, the book *Media, Gender and Identity – Second edition* by David Gauntlett (2008) contains a number of relevant discussions.

For information about the book see www.theoryhead.com