

Applied and Independent Learning

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Role Models & Adolescence

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Many studies had as a subject the role models in relationship with adolescence. In fact, it is because adolescence is a stage of life where the person has not yet developed an independent way of thinking neither the autonomy in decision making. Thus, the adolescent is usually seeking a direction, and this direction or orientation sense can be achieved through considering a person as a role model. “When you find yourself admiring and wanting to be like someone, you have found yourself a role model or possible mentor.” (Erazik,2000).

Actually, a role model is not necessarily a famous person “When looking for a role model, you do often not have to look far. Consider all possible avenues. Mentors can be parents, teachers, coaches, club advisors, community leaders, or anyone you admire” (Erazik,2000); it is a person that other people tend to take as an example. Adolescents usually tend to have a role model or a person who is the major example or “ideal” that they follow or imitate. Adolescents have many reasons and criteria upon which they chose their role models. Usually, choosing a role model involves many things such as collecting his/her photos. As far as the consequences are concerned, most role models affect either more negatively than positively the adolescent in the way that the admiration of a role model can cause the adolescent to blind imitate, low perform in school; waste money and time; have problems with his parents, and not to feel integration within society.

Many sociologists and psychologists have discussed the need of adolescents to adopt role models. In actual fact, the adolescent resembles to a driver who drives on a dark road without front lights; he does not know what direction to take until he finds the person he asks for direction. Naturally, when the person leaves childhood behind, he/she often look for an idol. This latter can either be a parent, a teacher, a movie star, or a football player. Adolescent generally chose their models based on the image they conceive of them. As a matter of fact, the role model can mean power, fame, authority on others, or wealth. When asked about a role model and the reason behind her choice, a young adolescent’s response was the following:

“If I were to choose to be somebody else I would choose to be a member of the Spice Girls (a pop group). I would like to be a group member because they are popular, pretty, funny, and well known. I would most like Geri (a member) because she is pretty.” Educational Studies (1999).

All those advantages make of the role model an example that the adolescents want to follow because the star or the role model represents all adolescents dream to achieve in their life. The role model starts then to be the example to follow. Of course, not all adolescents have the same role models because it depends on the preferences of each one, and also the kind of education they received. Some adolescents may prefer Tiger Woods because of his work in the social domain, some others may prefer Brad Pitt because he is known for his sense of family, and others may prefer Wentworth Miller because of his sexy look. However, most adolescents in Morocco starting from junior high school, high school and some university students are more interested in the look of the star rather than anything else. Some others may prefer a person and consider him/her a role model based on a combination of both the physical appearance and the contribution in the social or political field. An example of people admired for more than their physical appearance is the famous movie star Brad Pitt who is known and admired for his sense of family; one of ex-classmates claimed “he would sit in class and write letters to his mom and his grandma. One of the things I liked best about Brad was the value he placed on family.” (Role Model of the Month,2006). Another example is Jihan Sadat who is “a beautiful, courageous, brilliant, controversial heroine from Egypt... while she lived in a world wholly dominated by men, Jihan Sadat defied the traditions of her country and culture. She has contributed much to her country and freedom for women.” (Role Model of the Month,2006). Jihan Sadat became then an example for women in Egypt, and in the whole Arab countries because she is more than beautiful; she defends a cause.

By choosing a role model, the adolescent seems to have found the light for his path, and starts to act depending on this light. In other words, it is easy to figure out if the adolescents have role models and who they are. In fact, the key thing is their rooms. Many adolescents express their loyalty to role models by putting their photos on the wall; buying magazines that talk about them; trying to emulate their hairstyle, hair color, and maybe the way of dressing. Maybe the most obvious example that can be mentioned is that of the new trend of hairstyle for boys. You find that most male adolescents have their hair wet using a gel, and comb it in a weird way. The result is of course a head that resembles to a hedgehog, but the big majority of adolescents like it just because one day a speaker in the channel Viva TV has decided to appear on air that way (Role Model on the Web, 2006). Most adolescents like this channel and also this speaker, so they have just imitated this new, weird hairstyle. This concept can be applicable on girls also. Indeed, an important number of girls nowadays have their hair dyed in blond to emulate Shakira, Britney Spears, or Paris Hilton. Some others prefer to tint their hair in weird colours such as red or pink to follow the example of the American singer Pink. The devotedness to a role model can be also demonstrated through buying all the work of this role model (songs, movies, books, magazines...), and also by official websites or forums created by fans to talk about the latest news, exchange photos of the star, admiring together the work of this star.

The blind imitation of a star comes to underline the dangerous influence that a role model can execute on the adolescent. In fact, studies have showed that a big percentage of the smoking sample smokes because they have seen their fathers, whom they consider as role models in an early age, smoke “Numerous studies have demonstrated that most adolescents whose friends and/or parents use substances are more likely to use substances and to use them more frequently than youth whose friends and/or parents are non users” American Journal of Public Health (2005). The bad influence of role models on their fans can be illustrated by the

imitation of each thing the star does; and nowadays this imitation results in a whole generation having the same weird hairstyle just because they share the admiration of the same star. Worse than that, adolescents may imitate some things about their idols without even knowing the significance of what they do. For example, many artists put a ring in their index and adolescents do exactly the same thing without knowing that is a symbol of homosexuality. Many adolescents from Bob Marley's fans try to imitate the same hairstyle, clothes, way of dancing, and sometimes even his behavior. It is common in Moroccan high schools that teenagers who like Bob Marley consume drugs because they are influenced by his music and lyrics that talk about soft drugs such as marihuana and seek to legalize them. This blind imitation cancels the dependence in critical thinking of the adolescents and rejects the scientific thought that says that any kind of drugs is harmful for the body and the brain.

Another aspect of negative influence of role models on their fans can be demonstrated through psychological chocks. As a matter of fact, when the adolescent takes a football player as a role model for example he follows all his news, matches, training sessions, and he buys all his magazines and posters. However, when this star's team loses a match the fan considers this as a personal failure, which may affect his psychological development because the personality of the person during this age is fragile and its development can be affected by any small incident. When Mara Dona was accused of taking drugs, and as a result, was stopped from playing football, a whole generation of his fans was deceived and tugged between supporting their role model and the rules of a fair game. This kind of dilemma can make a lot of adolescents suffer from mistrust because they have lost the sense of guidance this role model used to give them. Not only that, the adolescent tries to investigate in the personal life of his role model also. When girls for example are attracted by a singer or actor, they try their best to know who is his girlfriend, and how she is like, and they start to ask questions such as

“why her” or “what is special about her”, and they may even feel a sort of envy; all this can create problems of identity and confusion.

Role models can also affect the academic performance of adolescents. Actually, when an adolescent spends most of his time in front of his computer screen looking for the new things about his role models, or when he abandons his studies in order to watch a TV program about his role model, or when he spends a lot of time trying to imitate the way his best football player plays...the adolescent wastes a lot of time that can be devoted to studies. Moreover, many TV shows and programs are broadcast at night, which may negatively affect the sleeping habits of the adolescent, and as a result his psychological and physical balance and of course his level of concentration at school. Some studies show that TV negatively affects the critical thinking of the adolescent. “More recent and generally more sophisticated studies have garnered evidence that television may indeed slow cognitive growth...While early reviews were generally inconclusive more recent summaries all support, to varying degrees, the existence of a negative impact of the television on achievement”Gaddy (2006).

Also when an adolescent gives up buying useful books to buy magazines that talk about the latest gossips about his idol, he causes his intellectual level to retreat. Not only that, it is also a waste of money; many adolescents subscribe to magazines whose only job is gossiping about the stars, which is a successful business given that an adolescent would give anything to have the latest poster of his idol or to know a little more about his personal life. The waste of money can be demonstrated through the voting for a star in a competition such as Star Academy show through text messages on mobile. This is a real waste of money because it costs a lot given that the program takes place in France or Lebanon and the people vote from all over the world.

The negative influence of role models goes beyond blind imitation, lower academic performance, and waste of money and time. In fact, it relates also to problems with family and

worse than that, rejection by society. In effect, when an adolescent from a lower or middle class admires a star and seeks to look like him, this needs money to be done, especially that fashion businesses now generate their income from selling clothes that look like stars' clothes or that has the picture or signature of the star on them. When an adolescent who belongs to an humble family tries to express his admiration by buying those clothes and cannot find enough money to do so, this results in a feeling and maybe a complex of inferiority, and also rebellion against his parents and family blaming them that they understand nothing in the problems of adolescents and also of the humble life he or she leads. Parents in their turn would rarely accept that their son dresses in a weird way or their daughter to have an "indecent" look, especially if they consider their children's idols as being of a bad influence on them. That is why, a lot of conflicts between parents and teenagers are due to the programs those latter watch and the time they spend watching them, and sometimes to avoid those quarrels, teenagers change the channel each time a parent comes in or just turn of the TV and pretend to be studying. All this, widens the gap between teenagers and their parents and decreases the communication between them. As result, teenagers lose the sense of guidance by their parents that they seek in their role models.

The rejection by society comes as a result of all the aforementioned aspects. The Moroccan society is known to be conservative, so obedience to parents is seen as a duty and conforming to traditions and customs as an important aspect of belonging to this society. When an 18 years old teenager for example wears a pair of jeans that is all torn, he is seen as a signal of immaturity and that he is not yet ready to enter the world of manhood. Wearing jewellery by man is also badly seen because it is mostly considered violating the feminine territory. The same thing is applicable to girls when they try to wear tight clothes; they are seen as indecent and less respectful. Sticking pictures on walls is not always tolerable by society especially if the pictures show a degree on intimacy or indecency. It is mostly seen as

offensiveness to the purity of the traditions where intimacy is given a high value and decency is considered as a disgrace or dishonour.

To conclude, role models can have a negative influence on their fans at many levels. In other words, the admiration of a role model can result in the blind imitation, the lower academic performance, waste of time and money, and also problems with parents and problems to conform to the values of society. However, we should not forget that the problem is not in the role model himself because there are many stars who conduct campaigns to fight against tobacco, drugs, unsafe sex, and racism. Again, the problem is in the way the star is conceived by millions of adolescents and if someone is to be blamed it is the media and showbiz and the way they advertise for a lot of stars just to keep their business going using generations of adolescents and influencing them. In fact, there are a lot of positive examples of good role models either in the Moroccan or the western culture, but they are not really well known, or even if they are known, media does not put a heavy weight on them. The examples to be cited are Marten Luther King who was a real leader and influenced a whole generation by his ideas of equality between races and social classes “Martin Luther King, Jr., is considered a hero because he had the courage to challenge the beliefs of many in his fight for equal rights; in the end he gave his life to the cause.” (Erazik,2000). Another example is Christopher Reeve who “used to play a hero as Superman in the movies, is considered a "real life" hero for his determination and positive outlook after becoming paralyzed-and for his ability to inspire others to have courage when facing extreme physical limitations.” (Erazik,2000). Other examples are Tiger Woods the famous golf player who does a great job in the social field to help deprived children to study and improve their situation, Oprah Winfrey who is the example of a woman who started her life from scratch and is now a famous American figure, and who also does a lot of remarkable work in the social field. The Moroccan figures are less known, but it does not mean that they are less important. People

like Naoual Moutawakil, Abdelhak Ezarouali, Abdelmajid Dolmi, and Abdellah ElAroui need to be better acknowledged and accredited for their work, so that adolescents can benefit from their rich experiences and have a better guidance, a guidance that conforms better to the Moroccan values. This way, we will be sure that the driver found the path and is already on the rails of becoming a better citizen because when you admire the “right” role model, it can help you make even better decisions concerning your career “A role model can help you learn how to achieve success in school and in your career, and he or she can help you define what kind of person you want to become. Role models and mentors also can inspire you to avoid making negative choices”. For this reason, parents have to follow the media to see what kind of role models it is valuing and also to give guidance to their children in terms of their choice of role models.

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