

## Specialist adolescent musicians' role models: Whom do they admire and why?

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### ABSTRACT

#### Background

Previous research into adolescents' musical role models has shown that young people are more likely to identify a celebrity figure as their role model due to their image and perceived fame (e.g., Duck, 1990; Bromnick & Swallow, 1999), than because of their perceived ability within a specific field. The little research that has been conducted within the musical domain has also found similar findings (see, for instance, Raviv, Bar-Tal, Raviv & Ben-Horin, 1996; Ivaldi & O'Neill, 2008, 2010). Ivaldi and O'Neill's studies were based on a typical sample of adolescents, where few were engaged with playing a musical instrument. The current study builds on this previous work by looking at the role models of young talented musicians that came from more specialist music environments.

#### Aim

The aim of the study was to see who specialist adolescents admired as their role models and why, as well as exploring the extent to which the adolescents believed they could become, and wanted to become, like the role model they identified.

#### Method

107 young musicians, aged 13-19, took part in a questionnaire study, and were drawn from two specialist musical environments: Conservatoire students (n = 59) who attended a music conservatoire junior department every week and were receiving specialist tuition, and county level students (n = 48) drawn from two local music services that were engaged in weekly rehearsals and activities. The adolescents were asked exactly the same questions as in Ivaldi and O'Neill's (2008, 2010) studies about who they admired as a musician (i.e., someone famous, teacher, friend or family member) and the reasons why (e.g., because he/she is talented, because he/she works hard). Adolescents also rated how much they wanted to become like their role model (aspirations), and how much they thought they could become like their role model (attainability).

#### Results

Overall, the adolescents admired both famous figures (54.7%) and non-famous figures (teachers – 24.5%; friends – 12.3%; and family members – 8.5%). Conservatoire students were more likely to identify a non-famous figure than the county level students. Where adolescents had identified someone famous, this was most likely to be an instrumental player, rather than a singer or song writer/composer. Given this finding, and the fact that Ivaldi and O'Neill's (2008, 2010) previous studies identified 91.7% of adolescents admiring famous figures, the current sample identified more non-celebrity figures, and more relevant famous figures. For the

conservatoire students in particular, elite performers and teachers – who would not be known by the majority of adolescents – were identified, thus indicating a specialist knowledge and level of exposure to relevant musical figures. Factor analysis of the reasons for admiring the musician identified three loadings of image (e.g., popular), higher achievement (that is, achieving more perhaps to that of others), and dedication (e.g., working hard). For both attainability and aspiration beliefs the same two loadings were generated that related to achievement and image: attainability-image (e.g., how important is it to become as popular as the figure), attainability-achievement (e.g., how important is it to become as successful as the figure), aspirations-image (e.g., wanting to be as popular), and aspirations-achievement (e.g., wanting to be as successful). This is in contrast to previous research where image and achievement loaded onto the same factor for both attainability and aspirations. Significant effects were found for the conservatoire and county students for *attainability-achievement* and *aspiration-achievement*, where conservatoire students had higher beliefs than the county students.

#### Conclusion

The findings that young talented musicians do identify musical role models because of their perceived ability provides a more positive contrast to the bleak findings of earlier research whereby the focus of the role model has been on their celebrity status. Exposure to relevant role models is critical in helping adolescents to identify more with the musical qualities of the role model, rather than the fame. This has been aided by the fact that these adolescents were part of an environment where students shared similar values for music. Thus, it is important for educators to create an environment where young people can access musically relevant figures in order to enhance their aspiration and attainability beliefs for music.

#### Keywords

Role models, conservatoire, adolescents, talent.

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