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Abstract

In this article, we examine how Black youth in rural South Africa construct role models and connect them to their own life aspirations. We pay particular attention to individual and group identity development in shaping these perceptions. Based on analysis of qualitative data from 99 Black male and female youth aged 14 to 22, we find that (a) the choice of role models reflects a balancing strategy to reconcile individual and group identity development; (b) while the reasons they give for choosing role models are aligned with dominant models of upward mobility in the new South Africa (and globally), our respondents are also attuned to the difficulty of attaining such success; and (c) the choices underscore the continued importance of close and extended kin amidst an increasingly ego-focused life strategy aimed at individual status attainment. These findings can contribute to improving the effectiveness of intervention programs aimed at strengthening the role of positive influences in the lives of Black youth in South Africa.

Keywords

mentoring, South Africa, education, parenting, positive youth development, identity development, kinship

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Introduction

A role model, defined as an individual who provides a code of behavior and a set of values to be emulated, is seen as essential for young people as they transition into adulthood in nearly all societies. Such individuals offer critical guidance for young people as they attempt to navigate the period of their lives appropriately termed by Rindfuss (1991) as “demographically dense” and nurture an identity that supports healthy development into adulthood. They are perhaps most needed for Black, low-income adolescents such as those growing up in post-apartheid South Africa, who face elevated risks of grade repetition and dropping out of school, being unemployed, early childbearing, and engaging in substance abuse and criminal activities (Barbarin & Richter, 2001). Yet, the common wisdom in South Africa is that this group lacks effective role models in their lives which can, at least partially, explain the negative outcomes that are apparent. Indeed the proliferation of intervention programs focused on “filling the gap of missing role models” is a clear indication of the priority that is placed on this issue. The issue has even been codified in the National Youth Charter which specifically mandates the “provision of positive role models” as a key task of every implementing body.

While attributing poor behavioral and achievement-related outcomes to the lack of role models is intuitive and backed up by evidence (Aaro et al., 2006; Kalichman & Simbayi, 2003; Lubben, Davidowitz, Buffler, Allie, & Scott, 2010), there has been surprisingly little attention paid to more basic questions: How do Black youth in South Africa construct role models? Who do they admire and why? Moreover, to what extent do social and cultural factors influence identity development among young people? With the exception of one study that explicitly focused on the construction of role models (McLean, 2004), much of the material is based on normative assumptions of the role of adults in the lives of young people. In this article, we address this gap in the literature by analyzing how Black youth in a rural community identify role models and their specific functions and connect them to their own aspirations in life. We bring together key concepts from the literature on identity development and adapt it to the specific cultural and social circumstances of rural, South African social life to guide the analysis.

Growing Up in South Africa

Because of racial segregation in residence, schooling, employment, and every aspect of social life, most Black children in apartheid South Africa grew up with starkly different perceptions about the value of education, life opportunities, physical security, and the role of the state. Chikane (1986) has

described how the state of siege in townships forced Black children to learn survival skills and adaptive behaviors at very early ages. Much of this behavior was modeled on family members, peers, and freedom fighters who were actively resisting the draconian race-based policies of the apartheid state. Compounding the situation was educational segregation. Nasson (1984) has argued that the existence of segregated educational systems reinforced notions of powerlessness and polarization among Black children. Finding positive role models for the value of education in a context constructed explicitly for maintaining White supremacy was clearly difficult. Preston-Whyte and Louw (1986) have drawn attention to how delayed access to schooling, grade repetition, and lack of job opportunities for Black youth affected their attainment of adult status within their own communities. In reality, however, Black youth were thrust into adult roles earlier as breadwinners in their households (Preston-Whyte & Louw, 1986).

The collapse of apartheid in the early 1990s brought with it optimism about the future and high expectations in terms of education and employment, particularly for young, Black South Africans. A National Youth Commission (1997) was created to address the challenges facing young people and to develop policies to assist them in making successful transitions to adulthood. This task has been made very difficult in light of high unemployment rates that continue to have the greatest impact on the African population (Leibbrandt, Woolard, & Woolard, 2009). While laudable efforts have been made to improve the quality of education for the formerly disadvantaged groups, Black and Colored students are still more likely to have substandard education. This partly explains why progression in high school varies substantially across racial groups despite nearly universal enrollment in primary school (Lam, Ardington, & Liebbrandt, 2006). Childbearing during the schooling years is highest among the Black population and has been associated with higher drop-out rates (Marteleto, Lam and Raamchod 2008), though schooling can be resumed and completed successfully if support for childrearing exists in the household (Madhavan and Thomas, 2005).

There is now a well-developed literature on the relationship between family attributes and outcomes for children and adolescents in South Africa. Anderson, Case, and Lam (2001) found that mother's education has a positive effect on children's completed years of schooling in an urban context. Anderson (2005) argued that biological links are an important predictor of family investments in children's education. However, other work has shown that the presence of grandparents in the household is associated with higher educational attainment in a rural context (Townsend, Madhavan, Tollman, Garenne, & Kahn, 2002). Some work has argued that the absence of biological fathers is associated with a higher risk of teenage pregnancy (King et al.,

2004) and that a positive parental relationship lowers risky sexual behavior (Brook, Morojele, Zhang, & Brook, 2006). While the influence of role models is implicit in many of these studies, none of these studies actually tells us much about how children, themselves, think about role models. This is because most surveys treat children as passive entities who respond to various factors instead of independent social beings with agency. Children's own voices are rarely heard; instead, much of what we learn is based on assumptions about the nature of relationships between particular family members and children. Where young people's voices are heard, usually in small qualitative studies (Richter & Smith, 2006; Swartz & Bhana, 2009), we learn about the perceptions and expectations of parents but far less is understood about how children think about other family members and non-family members living in the larger community. This is what we address in this analysis.

Identity Formation and Role Models in Rural South Africa

Our approach to understanding how young people construct their role models is informed by well-established theories of identity formation adapted to the specific cultural and social circumstances of rural South African life. Much has been written about identity formation as a critical process in human development, but most of this work is focused on individual or ego-based identity formation (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, & Orlofsky, 1993). In such a model, young people develop an identity modeled on particular role models who they feel offer them the most promising path to attaining individual goals. In addition to developing individual identities, it has been noted that young people in societies based on a more collective welfare ethic also develop a strong sense of group identity because of a strong relationship to the group (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Phinney, 2000). As a result, young people in such contexts need to manage their development of individual and group identities simultaneously.

This is indeed the case for Black youth in rural South Africa who draw on specific kin-based and non-kin relationships as role models to guide them in the process of individual and group identity development. Group identity in this context refers to kinship group which has long been established to be a key socializing arena for young people in many African contexts (Fortes, 1958; Mkhize, 2006; Nsamenang, 2010; Riesman, 1992). In keeping with a model of socially distributed child rearing (Serpell, 1993), various members of both maternal and paternal kin groups play important roles in guiding children into adulthood. They also assume partial responsibility for the welfare of children. In the rural area in which the present study is situated, maternal

and paternal aunts have traditionally been responsible for providing sexual education to girls (Junod, 1966). A maternal uncle is often treated as a father figure and grandparents are sought after for moral guidance (Niehaus, 1994). As a result, biological parents are not the primary or only guide for identity development as may be the case in a nuclear family arrangement. Moreover, extended kin, both co-residential and non-residential, may hold greater weight than biological parents in certain spheres of child development. In this way, kin identity, with its accompanying set of benefits and burdens, is transmitted through generations.

Cultural factors promoting group identity need to be situated in a larger narrative about apartheid era policies and current day conditions that have necessitated extended kin involvement in child socialization. Black families in rural South Africa lived in “stretched,” dispersed, and fluid forms (Spiegel, 1996) due to apartheid era laws, such as the Group Areas Act, that circumscribed where Black people could live and forced men to migrate far away from families in order to work (Ramphele & Richter, 2006). As a result, Black children had very limited contact with fathers and other men (Murray, 1980). Moreover, men’s role as providers for their families was highly constrained by pervasive economic insecurity which, in turn, affected their interactions with their families, in particular, their children (Hunter, 2006). It also undermined men’s status as role models and caused feelings of shame because of their inability to meet their paternal responsibilities (Case & Wilson, 2000; Thabane & Guy, 1984). Given low marriage rates and high rates of out-of-wedlock childbearing for Black women, which continue today, children grew up primarily in female-centered families without marriage (Preston-Whyte & Louw, 1986). Not surprisingly, therefore, mothers, grandmothers, and aunts have always been key sources of support in the lives of Black children.

The primacy of kinship group identity is counter balanced by a more individual ethos directed toward the acquisition of individual material wealth (Hunter, 2010) that is apparent in the post-apartheid climate with its elusive promise of upward mobility and opportunity for all. Put simply, young people want to pursue an individual identity characterized by conventional markers of success, for example, education, stable employment, financial and material wealth accompanied by the autonomy to choose romantic partners. However, this is tempered by the reality of the post-apartheid context which has yet to deliver the opportunity for such mobility. Moreover, economic gains for the Black population as a whole have been slow which has necessitated continued labor migration by both men and women (Posel, 2006). Taken together, all these factors necessitate the continued role of extended kin in the lives of young people as sources of support and inspiration. The high level of uncertainty about the present and the future makes it difficult

and perhaps undesirable for Black youth to pursue a life strategy aimed exclusively at individual growth and success. Therefore, maintaining a group identity continues to be paramount.

Given the inherent tensions in balancing individual and group-level agendas, it is important to identify who young people admire and for what specific functions. For example, successful completion of secondary school, particularly for girls, is considered to be an impressive individual achievement in a climate with substandard schools and enormous uncertainty associated with the returns to education. Role models in the form of an engaged teacher or a family member who successfully completed high school provide a means to decrease the uncertainty (Nixon & Robinson, 1999). Similarly, the presence of someone who has a stable job is very critical in a context in which family functioning has been profoundly affected by apartheid era policies and high rates of unemployment. However, it may be equally important to model behavior from grandparents and aunts who may not provide a template for individual upward mobility but instead offer codes of behavior that conform to cultural models of status acquisition as well as a needed safety net amidst pervasive insecurity. In using this model, therefore, we expand spheres of agency and opportunity for young people to draw on available resources to help them navigate both individual and group identity development amidst the many challenges they face.

Data and Methods

Site Description

The study was carried out in 2002 in South Africa's Mpumalanga province, located 500 km northeast of Johannesburg. The Agincourt subregion is typical of much of southern Africa in three important respects: (a) the land is insufficient to support subsistence agriculture; (b) there are very few local employment opportunities; and (c) the population has high levels of mobility. This rural area was, under apartheid, part of the "homeland" system that aimed to concentrate the Black population in areas with little infrastructure and poor land. The population of about 83,000 lives in 25 villages established through forced resettlement between 1920 and 1970. The main ethnic group is Tsonga, but Pedi and Sotho are also common in the area. Most families live in multigenerational, extended family arrangements in which adult siblings live close to one another (Niehaus, 1994). These *stands* occupied by kin are often physically very close to one another; people and food flow constantly between them, and labor, including child care and supervision, is commonly shared or exchanged.

All villages have at least one primary school and most have close access to a secondary school. The quality of schools varies substantially, but they are generally considered to be inferior to private schools in urban locations. Indeed, it is common to find children in wealthier households studying at private schools located in towns and cities. As in the rest of South Africa, enrollment rates are high but drop outs are common in secondary school, particularly among girls, and the number of students completing the last 2 years (not mandatory but needed for university admission) is quite small. The most common types of formal sector employment are teaching, nursing, and retail. The informal sector includes small-scale commerce of food stuffs and domestic work. The lack of viable employment in the area pushes people into temporary or permanent labor migration to the nearby game park, small towns, and to Johannesburg. Labor migrants, particularly female, often leave their children behind in the care of their families and make periodic visits. Last, the area is located in a province with the second highest HIV prevalence rate in the country (South African Department of Health, 2007).

Data Description

The data for this analysis come from an ethnographic study—Children’s Well-Being and Social Connections (CWSC)—that was designed to investigate, in detail, the wide range of social connections that link members of different residential households and their impact on children’s well-being. The initial sample for the CWSC study was drawn from the Agincourt Health and Demographic Surveillance System (AHDSS). Since 1992, it has been conducting annual censuses to collect demographic data in the 25 villages. Because the CWSC was an ethnographic study, the initial sample was limited to two villages, one above and one below the median level of access and services for the area. We selected two households that had at least one child aged 10 or 11 from each of three wealth stratum at random in each village. Using the AHDSS as a sampling frame offers several advantages. One, it enables us to ensure a limited amount of variation and randomization which is usually very difficult to achieve in qualitative research yet one of the main objects of criticism. Two, it allows us to draw on existing data to enrich contextual information and also to reduce the burden on respondents by not repeating questions that have already been asked. Three, the AHDSS provides valuable infrastructural support and facilitated access to the community. Working with eight trained local fieldworkers from the area over a period of 4 months, we mapped out the totality of connections between the initial household and members of other households that were deemed to have the most important connections. We arrived at these judgments through close

and repeated observations of visitation patterns, movements of people and resources, in-depth interviews with members of various households, and field-worker judgment aiming for groups which, while not closed, had a noticeable drop-off of contact beyond their boundaries. Each of the resulting 12 contact groups contained 6 to 8 connected households and together contained 349 children under the age of 22 in 2001.

In the course of fieldwork, we used a variety of data collection instruments to collect data on different dimensions of social connectivity in different scales of time ranging from the life course to daily activities. These include kinship diagrams, residential/education histories, interview data with various members of each family, detailed daily observation records, and copious field notes. In this analysis, we rely primarily on semistructured education interviews with 99 youth aged 14 to 22 in which we asked them about the value of education, their relationship with teachers, challenges in schooling, role models, mentors, peers, and their life ambitions. These interviews were conducted mostly in English as it is widely spoken in the area; however, Shangaan, the local language, was used to emphasize or clarify certain points. The instrument was developed with extensive guidance from our local fieldworkers and piloted before data collection began. All textual data in the form of interviews, observations, and narratives were analyzed using NVIVO qualitative software.

Analytical Approach

We used a modified grounded theory approach and conducted multiple waves of coding: (a) to create an open coding schema on themes related to role models, support from family, educational challenges, and life ambitions; (b) to compare and contrast profiles across individuals to examine processes identified during open coding; and (c) to select patterns within and across cases to describe how role models are constructed. To develop a parsimonious categorization of role model functions, we followed Allen's (1992) grouping of role models as "ethical templates for exercise of adult responsibilities"; "symbol of special achievement"; and "nurturer/mentor" particularly in education. In addition, we differentiate the personal nature of a "role model" as always self-referential, self-selected, and bound by time and space and the social symbol of the "hero" (Ingall, 1997). Where appropriate, we present quotes and vignettes to emphasize particular patterns. All names are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality, and all study protocols were approved by ethics boards in the United States and South Africa. Whereas our data do not allow us to make broad claims of generalizability, they are representative of the youth in this community and offer important insights that can be

Table 1. Selected Sample Characteristics.

	All	Male	Female
Age distribution			
14-16	38%	47%	32%
17+	52%	53%	68%
Percentage who are at grade for age	45%	53%	39%
Percentage who have ever repeated a grade	43%	44%	43%
Percentage who have dropped out	15%	7%	21%
Percentage of girls who have a baby	17%	N/A	30%
Percentage who have dead parent (s)	10%	7%	13%
<i>n</i>	99	43	56

applied to a broad national context. Even though the data were collected 10 years ago, the context in which young people are moving to adulthood has not changed drastically. Unemployment is still high, and educational attainment is still a challenge for young people and labor migration continues to be a feature of Black family life in the study site (Collinson, 2010).

Sample Description

Table 1 provides selected descriptive characteristics of the 99 respondents in the study.

Even basic descriptive data underscores the challenges that young people face in this context. Less than half of the respondents were at grade for age at the time of interview due to having repeated a grade at some point. Fifteen of the respondents, overwhelmingly female, had dropped out of school at the time of the interview, a common occurrence in this context partly attributable to childbearing. Ten of the respondents had lost at least one parent, an increasingly common occurrence in the context of HIV/AIDS. We now turn to our findings, which highlight how young people think about those, near and far, who can support young people's attempts to navigate this uncertain environment.

Who is Considered a Role Model and Why?

We asked our respondents the following questions: (a) who are the people in your family who you would like to be like? and (b) are there people in the village who you would like to be like? While most of our respondents named at least one person for each question, it is notable that 16 respondents, divided

fairly evenly across gender, did not or could not name anyone for either category. While there is no clearly discernible pattern that distinguishes these youngsters from the rest, it is notable that two boys lost a parent at young ages, another dropped out of school, and a fourth changed schools frequently. For girls, common characteristics are grade repetition and having a baby.

The responses to “why” particular people were chosen were categorized into the three functions of role models: ethical template, symbol of special achievement, and mentor/nurturer. These are not mutually exclusive in that someone who has completed secondary school and has attained a good job is a role model not only because of his/her “special achievement” but also because he/she provides an ethical template of responsibility. In this sense, “ethical template” is not limited to only moral character. In addition, we asked questions pertaining to specific tasks such as helping with homework and encouragement to go to school to identify with greater specificity the nature of mentoring and nurturing that people assume. Table 2 shows the distribution of people identified as role models and the reasons for choosing them.

The Role of Parents and Siblings

Biologically closest and often geographically accessible, parents and older siblings are expected to be key role models for children. We found that just over half of all respondents (57%) mentioned mothers as role models and almost all (89%) did so because of their roles as “nurturer/mentor.” Encouragement to succeed in school accompanied by support for homework and other activities were the most common reasons given by young people in identifying mothers as nurturers and mentors. Maintaining children’s motivation to do well in school is a challenging task in a context in which school quality is mediocre and the returns to education are not obvious. Therefore, parents resort to “mentoring” their children through scare tactics as explained here by a 17-year-old male, “My mother, she say if I don’t go to school I will lose many things in life including my future. I might get involved in criminal activities which may impact negatively on my future.” Such efforts are appreciated by young people who need someone to remind them that education will pay off as made clear by a 16-year-old male, “My mother and brother tell me to go to school. They want me to live a better life when I am an adult person.” Only a handful of respondents identified their mothers as being “ethical templates” or “symbols of special achievement.”

Fathers featured even less prominently with only 23% of all respondents mentioning them as role models for any function and within that, most choosing them for nurturing/mentoring (87%). It is possible that parental modeling and behavior is taken for granted and therefore not perceived as worth

Table 2. Role Models and Their Functions (%).

	All	Male	Female
Percentage who mentioned mothers ^a	57%	50%	64%*
Ethical template ^b	7%	5%	8%
Symbol of special achievement ^b	4%	0	6%
Nurturer/mentor ^b	89%	95%	86%
Percentage who mentioned fathers ^a	23%	23%	23%
Ethical template ^b	4%	0	8%
Symbol of special achievement ^b	9%	10%	8%
Nurturer/mentor ^b	87%	90%	84%
Percentage who mentioned siblings ^a	32%	19%	43%**
Ethical template ^b	13%	12%	13%
Symbol of special achievement ^b	12%	13%	12%
Nurturer/mentor ^b	75%	75%	75%**
Percentage who mentioned extended kin ^a	64%	72%	59%*
Ethical template ^b	31%	27%	34%
Symbol of special achievement ^b	26%	21%	29%
Nurturer/mentor ^b	43%	52%	37%
Percentage who mentioned village/community members ^a	75%	72%	78%
Ethical template ^b	42%	33%	49%*
Symbol of special achievement ^b	37%	48%	29%
Nurturer/mentor ^b	21%	19%	22%
Total number of respondents	99	43	56

^aPercentages are out of total number of respondents.

^bPercentages are out of number who mentioned the type of individual.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ for testing gender differences.

mentioning in response to questions about role models. To probe this issue further, we examined our field notes (based on researcher observations and discussions with family members) to identify particular issues that may explain the absence of certain family members as role models in young people's responses. Three issues that came up frequently in these discussions were (a) alcohol consumption, (b) relationship complications, and (c) irregular church attendance, all considered to be signs of bad character and fostering family conflict. Ten of our respondents either themselves mentioned someone with an alcohol issue or had family members discuss the issue. Lack of church involvement, often in conjunction with alcohol consumption, came up in six families and was often the main reason for marital and sibling tension. Six respondents were linked to family members, particularly fathers,

who had experienced a number of relationship challenges including extra-marital affairs and the inability to complete bride wealth payments. It must be noted, however, that efforts to avoid certain behaviors are complicated by the fact that one person's negative role model may be another's positive role model. This is true for the young people in our study who mentioned a father for at least one role model category even when other family members spoke at length about his problems with alcohol or lapses in church attendance. This is, perhaps, not surprising given that children often use different criteria to assess their parents and, in some cases, may be more forgiving of certain behaviors. Moreover, it may also be an indication of young people exerting some agency in determining which behaviors are worthy of modeling.

About one third of the respondents mentioned older siblings as role models but once again, their main role is that of nurturer/mentor (75%). Among the few who did attribute one of the other two functions to their older siblings, emphasized moral character as evident in the following description made by a female respondent of her brother: "He passed matric [12th grade], he did not fail since he started school; he is a peaceful person, does not drink liquor or smoke cigarettes." Those who fulfill more than one role stand out as in the case of a 14-year-old respondent talking about her older half sister: "Lisbeth, because she is educated, has a job, beautiful and she looks after her child." In this case, Lisbeth has attained both culturally defined norms of success (responsible mother) and conventional markers of upward mobility (education and employment). It is perhaps not surprising that girls look up to older female siblings given that, in rural areas of South Africa, gendered expectations continue to exert a powerful influence of how young men and women are guided through the early life course. As has been noted in other contexts, female role models exert a strong influence on young women particularly in education (Buck, Plano Clark, Leslie-Pelecky, Lu, & Cerda-Lizarraga, 2008; Nixon & Robinson, 1999; Quimby & DeSantis, 2006).

The Role of Extended Kin

Extended kin in this context refers to maternal and paternal aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins. As explained earlier, it is not uncommon for children to be socially closer to extended kin than to biological parents and it is expected that kin play a role in socialization. This is reflected in Table 2 where we find that 64% of respondents mentioned at least one extended kin as a role model. Broken down by function, 31% cited them as ethical templates; 26% cited as symbols of special achievement; and 43% for being mentors/nurturers. In expanding on the nurturing roles of aunts, common sentiments resemble the following explanation given by a 16-year-old boy:

“She is kind to everyone, always willing to help. When someone asks for something or money she gives.” Not surprisingly, employment and education dominate the list of markers of achievement followed by the accumulation of wealth. Our respondents elaborated on the markers of success with statements such as, “My uncle because he owns a private school and has money; he succeeds in everything he plans” and more modest ambitions as made evident by a 16-year-old female talking about her female cousin, “I want to be like her because she is working at the bank in a nearby town. One day I will be like her because she got a good job because of education.” The achievements of cousins may also serve as an impetus for competition among age mates as made clear by a 21-year-old female respondent who said, “My mother’s elder sister’s son was doing well [in school] and I wanted to be better than him.” As in the case of siblings, multiple accomplishments are held in high esteem as made clear by a 15-year-old boy, “I want to be like Oliver [his aunt’s son] because he is gifted in soccer. He is playing for a soccer team in [a nearby town] and they pay him for that. Another thing is that he passed matric while he was still young.”

Despite cultural norms that assign a key role for aunt and uncles in child rearing, it is interesting that approximately 58% of respondents (not shown) did not mention aunts or uncles as role models in any category. Moreover, based on field notes and conversation transcripts with other family members, we know that problematic behaviors, in particular, excessive drinking, is evident in nearly every case where uncles were not mentioned as role models. While direct causation clearly cannot be made between the two, it suggests that young people may use subtle forms of distancing to manage individual and group identity development. On one hand, they are aware of the normative expectations that place aunts and uncles in positions of high regard. However, they may also be expressing some agency in choosing particular behaviors to model (or avoid) if the behaviors are seen as threatening individual life ambitions. They may, therefore, expand the sphere of potential role models beyond family members as discussed in the next section.

The Role of Village and Community Members

The most common figures in this category are teachers, church leaders, and older friends. Seventy-five percent of respondents mentioned at least one member of the village or community as a role model with the majority cited for being ethical templates (42%) or symbols of special achievement (37%). When asked about specific reasons for being named an ethical template, moral responsibilities, fulfillment of education and career responsibilities were the most common responses. The powerful role of Christianity is made

evident in the response of a 16-year-old female, "I would like to be like Natasha [a friend], because she is a Christian, her behavior is good, and she respects elderly people." Valuing "moral behavior" is evident for boys as well as expressed by an 18-year-old explaining why he looks up to particular friends: "They don't take alcohol and abuse drugs like cigarettes, and they don't like fighting and they get on well with each other because they've got girlfriends [meaning that they do not fight over each other's girlfriends]." Even though the numbers are small, the gender difference in citing "ethical template" is notable (33% of males vs. 49% of females).

"Special achievement" may include entrepreneurial success such as owning a local grocery store, attainment of political status as in the case of local ward councilors, and the acquisition of material wealth in the form of cars and houses. Young people recognize that it takes perseverance to attain such positions as reflected in the words of a 16-year-old male respondent explaining his choice of an older male resident in his village:

I don't know his actual job. He was once unemployed for some years after having passed his matric. He was always wishing to get employed. Because of his dedication and self-motivation he eventually was successful in getting a job. He is now working and earning a good salary. He had a goal and a direction. He knows what he is doing. I like him very much.

This assessment suggests that young people may look to individuals who are distant enough to represent a life substantively different from their more proximate social worlds but who offer realistic life projects that are possible to achieve. Those who are admired for achievements that are rarely attainable are put in the category of "hero."

Who is Considered a "Hero?"

We asked our respondents to identify three people in South Africa who they would like to be like and to explain their choice. Table 3 provides a breakdown of categories of hero figures and the reasons for choosing them.

As might be expected from youngsters in this age group, nearly all of them mentioned at least one hero figure. Out of the 99 respondents, 84% named at least one person and 18 reported having actually met the person (not shown). The 15 respondents who did not or could not mention anyone tended to be older girls half of whom (56%) had both dropped out of school and had a child.

An overwhelming number of our respondents (74%) chose performers, celebrities, and TV personalities as heroes followed by athletes and politicians. The gender breakdown for both these categories is in line with our

Table 3. Distribution of Hero Types and Reasons for Choosing Heroes (%).

	All	Male	Female
Percentage who mentioned a hero figure as ^a :	84%	86%	84%
Performers/celebrities/TV personalities ^b	74%	52%	91%***
Athletes (soccer stars) ^b	34%	68%	5%***
Politicians ^b	31%	32%	30%
Businesspeople ^b	1%	3%	0
Preachers ^b	1%	0	2%
Percentage who cited the following reasons for naming hero figure(s)			
Talent (athletics, musical, educational) ^b	69%	70%	68%
Political/social achievements ^b	35%	41%	30%
Money/lifestyle/fame ^b	29%	41%	19%
Respectable/moral behavior ^b	11%	14%	9%
Physical appearance ^b	5%	0	9%*
Percentage who mentioned hero of the opposite sex ^b	29%	14%	51%***
Total number of respondents	99	43	56

^aPercentages are out of total number of respondents.

^bPercentages are out of number who mentioned the type of individual; Percentages do not add up to 100 because the categories are not mutually exclusive.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ for testing gender differences.

expectations; boys look up to athletes whereas girls are more enamored with performers and celebrities. The one boy who mentioned a business person was referring to the “very rich McDonalds owner.” The notable difference in choosing heroes of the opposite sex (14% of males vs. 51% of females) reflects the continuing inequities in opportunity structure that exist in South Africa along race, class and gender cleavages.

When asked why they chose the people they did, 69% mentioned talent particularly in sports and music with slightly more girls than boys giving this reason. Common sentiments echoed the words of a 16-year-old male who said of Jabulani Nkosi (a comedic actor), “He entertains people and I would like to imitate him. It always makes me feel good to do things that make people laugh.” TV personalities have a following for many reasons including English proficiency as explained by a 21-year-old mother about a TV presenter: “He speaks English as if it is his mother tongue; he speaks frequent [fast] English. I want my children to be schooling in private schools so that they can speak English like Robert Morewa.” The respondent, in this case, has, against considerable odds, completed secondary school after having had

a baby and was making a concerted effort to find a job that would take her out of the village. The link between private schools and “good” English is a common sentiment expressed by many young people who see private schools as the means to upward mobility. In this case, it has added significance because the respondent’s father who holds traditional values about gender roles had made a decision to send only her younger brother to a private school. Therefore, this respondent is actively charting out an individual identity for herself (and her children) by modeling her aspirations in line with a Black celebrity who represents the type of success that is presented as possible for all South Africans in the post-apartheid era.

Next is political or social achievement which was mentioned by 35% of those who cited a hero figure. Given South Africa’s apartheid history, one might have expected this number to have been higher, but most of the respondents came of age during the dismantling of apartheid and therefore may not feel a real connection with the struggle (indeed Nelson Mandela ranked lower than the singer Brenda Fassie). However, those who cited the iconic Mandela did so with sincere adulation as evident in the following two statements:

He is the first Black president of South Africa. I am proud of him. He changed everything in the country in all spheres politically, economically and socially. He is the key player in the eradication of apartheid in South Africa and now he is busy in poverty alleviation programs. He is a real leader born to lead and has the ability to change things in the country. (Male, age 17)

He has a bright future. He can exercise patience and perseverance even in times of difficulties. He had a vision which he fulfilled. He is a born- leader. He is the inspiration of the nation. He is the most famous person in the whole world and full of charisma. (Female, age 14)

Surprisingly, money, lifestyle (material goods), and fame ranks third on this list with more males mentioning it than females. It is possible that this underestimates young people’s value of money given that talent, which ranked higher, could be a proxy measure for wealth and fame. Finally, we find only 11% of respondents mentioning moral and respectable behavior and 9% mentioning physical appearance.

Discussion

Our discussions with young people in a rural context in South Africa about role models highlight three important findings. One, the alignment of role models with particular functions reflects a strategy that young people undertake to balance individual and group identity development. Two, while the

reasons they give for choosing role models are consistent with dominant models of upward mobility in the new South Africa (and globally), our respondents are attuned to the difficulty of attaining such success. Three, these choices underscore the continued importance of close and extended kin amidst an increasingly ego-focused life strategy aimed at individual status attainment.

The admiration of mothers for being steadfast sources of support and mentorship is partly a function of gendered expectations but also a reflection of the role that mothers have played in keeping families functioning under apartheid restrictions when fathers were forced to be away from their families as well as in current day conditions when most rural Black families face severe economic vulnerability. They have always been and continue to be essential components of young people's social support. Moreover, because of apartheid era education policies that severely disadvantaged the Black population, particularly women, the mothers of our respondents never had the opportunity to pursue higher education or attain prestigious employment, both examples of "special achievement." Older siblings do offer this type of role modeling but their most notable value to our respondents appears to be for mentorship and nurturing. Extended family and local community members are more likely to be named as ethical templates and symbols of special achievement. While hero figures, particularly, Black celebrities, provide a window into the possibilities that the new South Africa offers in terms of individual success, their lives are not easily replicable. Similar to findings in Western settings (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997), young people recognize the distinction between mostly unattainable "hero status" and practical and accessible "role models." While young people certainly dream about having the glamorous lifestyles of successful soccer and pop stars, they are far more grounded in more realistic trajectories such as mastering the use of English, completing secondary school, and attaining a stable job as modeled by local community and extended family members.

Our explanation for the alignment of particular individuals with specific functions is rooted in young people's attempts to balance group with individual identities. Mothers (and to a lesser extent fathers) and extended kin such as grandparents symbolize a powerful connection to a kin group and, therefore, model nurturance and reciprocity as means to promote group identity. Siblings and extended kin who are age mates, that is, cousins, appear to straddle the two. On one hand, they are identified with those features that strengthen group identity because they are kin but because of their age, they also provide a role model for those values more closely associated with individual identity formation, namely, educational attainment and employment. Unrelated community members offer the space to prioritize individual

aspirations (employment and accumulation of wealth) over group identity precisely because they do not come with the obligations of kinship. While the balancing of individual and group identities can be a source of tension, we suggest that it may also increase agency and opportunities for young people by offering them a larger range of people to turn to for specific functions. However, young people's construction of role models is a dynamic process that is shifting in line with cultural, social, and economic factors. For example, the role of extended kin, as reflected in this analysis, may change over time as socioeconomic conditions improve for Black families and labor migration becomes less important. Similarly, conditions are likely to be different in urban contexts where extended kin may not be as readily available. In sum, amidst a climate of acute economic, social, and physical insecurity and uncertainty, young people in rural Black communities need to carefully weigh out the costs and benefits of pursuing individual models of status attainment. Using close and extended kin as role models to develop and strengthen group identity ensures not just a safety net but may also reflect a conscious effort to keep alive values in line with a more collective sense of responsibility and welfare. In this sense, the emulation of lives that emphasize individual success occurs in a context in which group identity development is not only important in its own right but is necessary for young people to attain success.

Our findings can improve the effectiveness of intervention programs to strengthen support systems for young people in several critical ways. First, the fact that fathers and mothers do not feature prominently as ethical templates or symbols of special achievement should be a wake-up call to intervention programs, particularly those aimed at educational attainment, that exclusively focus on the improvement of parent-child relationships. While we are, by no means, minimizing the importance of this relationship, we would strongly encourage programs to include extended kin and other community members who, according to the data presented here, feature prominently as symbols of special achievement. Second, it is important to identify those people who young people may be actively avoiding, including close and extended kin, because of certain behaviors such as excessive drinking. While the literature on South Africa is replete with discussions of the "negative influences" on young people, very little attention is paid to agency that young people exercise in distancing themselves from some of these behaviors. Third, while hero figures are clearly admired as they are in much of the world, their use as role models in intervention programs should be done in a more judicious manner that leverages their inspirational appeal as symbols of "special achievement" with a more tempered expectation of their ability to motivate behavioral change. More generally, our data suggest that

intervention programs need to be sensitive to the fact that Black youth in the new South Africa are managing different (often competing) sets of priorities which is reflected in their identification of a range of role models each linked to specific functions. Therefore, more effort needs to be made to listen to what young people themselves have to say about those they admire and why.

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