

**THE RELEVANCE OF SPORTING ROLE MODELS IN THE LIVES OF
ADOLESCENT GIRLS**

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Abstract

It is well documented that, despite recent strategic initiatives and improvements, adolescent girls in comparison with boys continue to be under-represented in sport and physical activity participation. There is widespread popular belief that successful elite female athletes, such as Susie O'Neill and Cathy Freeman, are influential role models who inspire girls to participate in sport. According to Bandura's social cognitive theory, role models have always been one of the most powerful means of transmitting values, attitudes and patterns of thought and behaviour to an observer. This paper challenges the idea that elite athletes are relevant role models for all teenage girls.

A recent study investigated the role models of teenage girls and the degree to which teenage girls have role models in sport. Methods used included two focus group interviews and a survey (n=357). Results showed that a relatively small percentage of girls perceived a sports person to be their role model, with a large percentage of girls nominating a family member or friend as their role model. Results from the study also supported Lockwood and Kunda's (1999, 1997) notion of domain relevance and perceived attainability, with the majority of girls describing their role models as older, female and who shared a similar domain of interest. It is recommended that, as well as elite sport stars, lower profile females such as family and peers are used as role models for adolescent girls to increase their participation in sport and physical activity.

Introduction

It is well documented that, despite recent strategic initiatives and improvements, females in comparison with males continue to be under-represented in sport and physical activity (Australian Sports Commission, 2002). Focusing on adolescents in New South Wales, the Schools Fitness and Physical Activity Survey revealed that while 80% of teenage boys were participating in regular physical activity, only 60% of teenage girls were doing the same (Booth et al., 1997). Further, there is a trend for girls to drop out of sport and physical activity during the teenage years. A report by the Women's Sport Foundation of Western Australia states that in regard to school sport the lowest participation for females was at age 15. It appears that 60% of participants had dropped out by that age (Malaxos and Westwood, 1997). The results of a recent study in Central Queensland indicated that besides an overall low level of adolescent female physical activity, there was a decrease in the percentage of Year 11 girls who were moderately active, when compared with Year 8 girls (Schofield, Mummery, Schofield & Walmsely, 2002).

This trend of relatively low participation and high drop out is not unique for Australia. It is a global issue. An international comparative study (De Knop, Engstrom, Skirstad and Weiss, 1996) supports the Australian research in participation rates. It investigated trends in youth sport in 20 countries from around the world and was a collaborative effort of the Committee on Sport and Leisure of the International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education (ICSSPE). The researchers conclude that girls were less active than boys and they found that this was especially true in traditional sports and team sports,

where competition is fundamental. It also identified the drop out rate among teenagers, especially among girls, as one of the most current problems in sport and physical education. This has been found in all countries where researchers had studied this phenomenon and is seen to be a global issue in developed countries. As participation in sport and physical activity can have a strong positive impact on health, psychological well-being and social development (Bauman, Bellow, Booth, Hahn, Stoker and Thomas, 1996), an important challenge is to encourage adolescent girls to become involved or continue their involvement in these activities.

There is widespread popular belief and anecdotal evidence that successful female athletes, such as Susie O'Neill and Cathy Freeman are influential role models who inspire girls to participate in sport. Watching their outstanding performance and seeing their high profile in the media, adolescent girls may wish to be like them. Vescio and Crosswhite (2002; Crosswhite and Vescio, 1999a, 1999b) who investigated good practice case studies that increased teenage girls' participation in sport and physical activity discovered that role models are indeed a key factor. They examined a total of 25 case studies across a wide range of sports and populations in New South Wales. The evidence suggested that there were a number of crucial elements that are the key to successful sporting programs for adolescent girls. One of these elements was the involvement of role models. Usually high profile role models were used - elite athletes such as Belinda Clarke for cricket, Sharon Finnan for Aboriginal girls in netball and Layne Beachley for surfing. However, some case studies indicated that other people such as a staff member who enjoyed participating in physical activity, but was not highly skilled, proved to be an

appropriate role model. A follow-up study was conducted to determine who exactly are role models for teenage girls and if female sport stars are indeed role models for adolescent girls. This paper reports on the follow-up study and explores the relevance of sporting role models for adolescent girls.

Background

The concept of role model needs clarification as different meanings are given in the literature (see MacCallum and Beltman, 2002, for a review). For the purpose of our study a role model is considered to be someone a person likes to imitate, to be like (Yancey, 1998). It is a person who is perceived as exemplary and worthy. This definition is chosen because it clearly distinguishes role models from mentors. Although the concepts are related there are some pertinent differences (Javidan, Bemmels, Devine and Dastmalchian, 1995; Daloz, 1986). A mentor is an adviser, coach, guide or confidante who has a personal relationship with the mentee. He/she plays an active role in supporting the mentee when facing challenging tasks or difficult periods. A mentor often is a role model for the mentee but doesn't have to be one. In contrast, a role model plays a more passive role, evolves over time and doesn't necessarily have direct personal contact. In fact he/she may not be aware that he/she is the role model for a particular person.

In the psychology of learning, role models are an essential component of the socialisation process. In social learning theory, also known as social cognitive theory, Bandura (1986)

argued: “modelling has always been acknowledged to be one of the most powerful means of transmitting values, attitudes and patterns of thought and behaviour” (p.47). People learn by observing the behaviour of others and the consequences resulting from that behaviour. Whether new patterns of behaviour occur depends partly on the observer’s perceptions of self-efficacy, which is the belief about one’s capability to act or perform in a certain situation. Bandura’s notion of model-observer similarity is particularly relevant here. Model-observer similarity refers to the degree that models are alike to observers in, for example, age, gender and motor ability. It has been found that similarity to models enhances the observers’ self-efficacy and motivates the observers to perform because they believe that if similar others can do it, they can as well. Generally, the more alike models are to observers, the greater is the probability that modelling will facilitate observers’ behaviour (Bandura, 1986; McInerney & McInerney,1998). Another important part in this theory is the distinction between mastery and coping models (Schunk and Zimmerman, 1996). Mastery models demonstrate a perfect performance from the beginning. Coping models, on the other hand, make mistakes, but are able to overcome their difficulties and improve their performance. Research (Weiss, McCullagh, Smith and Berlant, 1998; Schunk and Zimmerman, 1996) suggests that observing coping models can enhance children’s self-efficacy more than observing mastery or expert models.

Based on this theory it is debatable if watching the superb performance of an elite athlete will inspire all teenage girls to participate in sport. Those girls with similarities to the athletes may be motivated, however this may not be the case for those who perceive

themselves as very different from elite athletes. Empirical studies by Lockwood and Kunda (1999, 1997) support this idea. They found that 'Superstars' were more likely to be effective when they were considered relevant ie. with some similarity to the observer. They also noted that relevant superstars as role models only provoked inspiration and self-enhancement when their success seemed attainable to the observer, but self-deflation when it seemed unattainable. Further to this idea of relevance and attainability, Lutter and Jaffee (1996) contend that it is often assumed that good role models for girls are well-known or Olympic athletes. However, their research revealed that girls are far more likely to be influenced by someone close to home, such as a parent or family member, than an elite athlete. In a similar vein, a study on parental influence on children's soccer participation (Babkes and Weiss, 1999) indicated the importance of parents as role models. It was found that parents who were perceived as positive exercise role models had a positive impact on their children's soccer participation. The tendency to select role models from familiar and every-day environments was also evident in a school based developmental study on role models carried out by Doyle (2001; Doyle and Wilde, 2001). Using cross-sectional methodology, their study showed that, while not to the same degree as younger girls, the majority of teenage girls were able to nominate a role model from within the school context, and that the personal qualities of a role model played an important part in their selection as a role model for these teenage girls.

It is often assumed that only adults are appropriate role models, however at times, peers may be more effective to take on this role as they are more similar in age and expertise. Peers often represent a coping model rather than a mastery or expert model. Research

using peer coping models in a learn-to-swim program for children who were afraid of swimming found that these models were very successful (Weiss, McCullagh, Smith and Berlant,1998). They contributed significantly to the physical and psychological development of the children.

It is noteworthy though, that not everyone, when asked to nominate a role model, will actually do so. Bromnick and Swallow (1999) discovered that almost a quarter (23%) of teenagers were happy to be themselves. Their results show a trend towards a preference to 'being myself' as adolescent girls get older. Further they found that role models for teenagers were drawn mainly from certain domains: sporting heroes for boys, popstars and entertainers for girls. The 'being myself' choice also featured strongly in a German study exploring if athletes are models for boys and girls (Biskup and Pfister, 1999). The researchers conclude that role models are not exactly 'in' as only half of the children said that they had a model.

Reviewing the literature it is evident that elite athletes, popstars and entertainers as well as parents and peers can all be considered as potential role models for adolescent girls. There is a clear gap in the literature however, in regard to identifying who are role models for adolescent girls in the Australian context and in particular, how relevant sporting role models are for this target group. Hence, the aims of the following study were twofold:

1. To determine the extent to which adolescent girls have sporting role models

2. To identify the qualities or characteristics of role models in terms of age, gender, domain of interest and sporting ability.

Method

The study consisted of two parts. Part A included two focus group sessions to explore the relevance of role models for adolescent girls and to identify key areas for research investigation. Part B consisted of a survey that collected both qualitative and quantitative data regarding teenage girls' choice of role models and role model characteristics.

Part A: Focus groups

Two focus groups were conducted with female students (years 9-11, age range 13-17) from two high schools in Sydney. The selected schools were located in different demographic areas. One was a non-government girls' school in the northern suburbs of Sydney, and the other school was a co-educational government school located in the western suburbs of Sydney. The focus groups had 11 and 13 students respectively with 3-4 girls from each year group. Each group included girls from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (European and Asian) and had a mix of 'sporty' and 'non-sporty' girls as identified by the physical education teacher. 'Sporty' girls were girls who participate in organised sport either in a school or club environment. The researchers facilitated the discussion in the focus group using a semi-structured interview schedule.

The main questions were:

- Who is the famous person you admire or think of as your hero/role model?
- What are the qualities or characteristic of your hero (role model) in terms of age, gender, domain, sporting ability and personality?
- What sport or physical activities are you involved in and to what extent (club, representative, state, national level)?

The terms “hero” and “role model” were used interchangeably to initially encourage broad discussion of persons they admired or felt inspired by. The researchers followed up certain responses with further questions, for example:

- Do you have role models that are members of your family, or people that are in your neighbourhood, not necessarily famous people?
- I notice that the people are older than you. Does a role model need to be older than you?
- I notice that the names are all female, why?

The discussions were audio-taped and then transcribed verbatim for qualitative analysis.

Part B: Survey

On the basis of information gained from the focus groups and findings from the literature review a questionnaire was developed. The 5 page questionnaire contained four sections. The first section related to *identifying your role model*, the second one to *describing your*

role model, the third to *interacting with your role model* and the final section related to *personal characteristics of the respondent*. Examples of questions are:

- Is there a person you think of as your role model?
- What is their gender?
- What is their age? (estimate if you are not sure)
- Tell us more about your role model
- Describe how you interact with or relate to your role model
- What is your main area of interest? (eg. Fashion, music, sport)
- What sport or physical activities are you presently involved in and to what extent?

The questionnaire was piloted with 15 female students attending year 9 at a Sydney high school. A different high school was selected for the pilot because the researchers wanted to avoid repeated sampling. After completing the questionnaire, the researcher discussed the questions with the students to refine the wording and avoid confusion. Any ambiguous questions were deleted or rephrased. Subsequently, a total of 357 female students from years 7-11 (age range 12-17) attending one of the two first mentioned high schools completed the questionnaires. The respondents represented a range of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; the most frequently mentioned were (in descending order): Australian, English, Italian, Irish, Chinese, German, Greek, Lebanese and Vietnamese thus aligns with the range of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds of the Sydney population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). A teacher and/or researcher supervised the administering of questionnaires, which took place either after assembly or in mentor time in randomly selected class groups. It took students between 10 and 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Responses on the

questionnaires were entered and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software program. Frequencies were calculated and the qualitative comments were manually coded and analysed to further explain the quantitative results.

For both Part A and Part B, the relevant school authorities and parents had granted permission to conduct the research. The students were informed about the purpose of the study as well as that all responses would be treated confidentially.

Results

Part A: Focus groups

In the first focus group, when asked who they admire or think of as their hero, the girls mentioned a range of people such as Susie O'Neill, Anna Kournakova, Dawn Fraser, Moonia Gerard, Elle McPherson, Natasha Stott-Despoya, Mother Teresa, Princess Diana, a famous American violinist and Paralympians. One girl didn't have a role model, but rather admired several people based on certain qualities. When the researcher noticed that all role models mentioned were female the girls responded with "comes naturally", "females are more like us", "essential to look at other women" and "I think of women to relate to". Further discussion revealed that girls also perceive family members as their role model, for example their mother, father, sister, aunt or cousin. Some teachers were equally admired such as the Principal, a Physical Education and an English teacher.

Results relating to identifying a famous person as your role model were somewhat different in the second focus group. In this group, the first respondent answered: “Don’t think there is really one person I admire heaps...there is not one person my hero.” All girls agreed with her and couldn’t name a single role model, however they identified several people who had certain qualities that they admired. These people included: Cathy Freeman, Ian Thorpe, Sir Donald Bradman and Denise Beckwith (Paralympian swimmer who visited the school). In addition, family members such as parents, siblings and cousins, as well as boyfriends and other friends were perceived as inspiring people.

When discussing the gender of role models they agreed with each other that role models don’t have to be the same sex as you. However one girl added: “I’m inspired by the ladies who do great because a lot of the time it is the men who are getting paid for what they do, they are always on tv.”

Respondents in both focus groups said that the people they admired were usually older than they were because they are still young themselves and role models have achieved something, which takes time, and are therefore older. One girl added: “You have missed the boat if you look at younger people... makes me a bit depressed as we have passed that stage in our life.”

Considering the domain of the role model, the areas of sport and family were dominant, however other areas such as teacher, friend, model and public figure also featured. It is noteworthy that girls often mentioned someone with similarities to themselves. For

example, the girl who named Susie O'Neill is a competitive swimmer, while the girl who mentioned the basketball player, played basketball. The girl who said Natasha Stott-Despoya intended to go into politics herself and the girl whose role model was the American violinist played the violin.

A number of high profile elite athletes were mentioned as role models including Susie O'Neill, Cathy Freeman, Dawn Fraser, Ian Thorpe and Don Bradman. On the other hand, several girls found athletes inspiring who are competent, but not necessarily at the elite level. For example, a girl who did Irish Dance admired another dancer in her club, and a girl who played basketball described an older basketball player from her association as inspiring. Many girls felt inspired by Paralympians because they demonstrated courage and had to struggle to succeed as athletes.

Part B: Questionnaire

When asked to nominate role model 64.4% of the respondents were able to name one while 23.6% didn't have a single role model but could name a person or persons whose qualities they admired coming close to being a role model. 12% of respondents didn't have a role model or someone close to being a role model and qualified it by saying that they liked being themselves. One girl commented: "I feel that I should work hard at aspiring to be the best person I can be and not someone else." Another one said: "Why should you spend your life trying to be like someone else?"

In regard to role model characteristics, 86.6% were female while 13.4% were male. See Table 1 for the age of the role models.

Table 1
Percentage of role models in age groups

Age of role model (in years)	Percentage (%)
10-19	22.4
20-34	32.2
35-49	38.6
50+	5.2
Don't know	1.6
Total	100

The evidence indicates that the majority of role models were in the 35-49 age group followed by the 20-34 age group. A substantial percentage (22.4) were in the 10-19 age group while only 5.2 % of role models were 50 years and over. Approximately 3% of respondents nominated role models younger than themselves. 4.5% nominated a role model of the same age and 92.2 described their role model as older (see Table 2).

Table 2
Percentage of role model's age in comparison to girl's age

Age of role model	Percentage (%)
Younger than girl	3.3
Same as girl	4.5
Older than girl	92.2
Total	100

Table three provides an overview of the percentage of role models from a particular domain. It is noteworthy that a role model can fit in more than one domain, for example, the role model can be a family member and public figure.

Table 3
Percentage of role models from a particular domain

Domain	Percentage (%)
Family member	41.0
Friend	21.1
Sports person	8.4
Actor/entertainer	8.1
Pop star	5.6
Music industry	4.5
Public figure	2.8
Teacher	1.1
Academic/scholar	0.6
Coach	0.6
Other	6.2
Total	100

The majority of role models were family members of the respondents (41.0%), with the mother frequently featuring as a role model. Friends (21.1%) were also commonly nominated as role models. Only 8.4% of the girls had a sporting role model and 8.1% chose an actor/entertainer. Less frequently mentioned were role models from the pop and music industry, public, teaching and coaching domain.

Discussion

Using survey and focus group methodology, this study showed that while adolescent girls may admire the feats of elite athletes, they do not typically adopt these stars as their role models. For example, the focus group discussions identified a number of elite athletes that girls described as inspirational, yet these sport stars were clearly in the minority when the girls were asked to nominate their role model in the survey. This finding contradicts the popular notion that high profile athletes and other celebrity stars are the primary influence and motivator in adolescents' lives, particularly when it comes to

modeling their behaviour in order to achieve similar goals. The reason why elite athletes aren't popular role models for girls may be that their performance is too far removed from the girls and unattainable for them. According to Lockwood and Kunda (1999, 1997), when the success of the "Superstar" is unattainable she/he won't provoke inspiration and could even cause deflation. A perfect performance by a mastery model is unlikely to enhance the girls' self-efficacy and a coping model may be more appropriate (Schunk and Zimmerman, 1996; Weiss, McCullagh, Smith & Berlant, 1998). This explains why the girls admired Paralympians who in their words "had to struggle to succeed as athletes". They represent coping models. Similarly, this may be why friends (21%) were popular role models as peers often represent a coping rather than a mastery model. Their success may have been perceived as attainable for the adolescent girl.

It is interesting to note that when adolescent girls were asked to nominate a role model the most frequently mentioned domain was family (41%) and mothers in particular. On the one hand, this is not surprising because the literature suggests that adolescent girls do admire someone close to home such as family members (Lutter and Jaffee, 1996). On the other hand, it is a surprise that mainly mothers were chosen amongst the family. This has not been discovered in previous research.

In the survey the majority of adolescent girls were able to nominate a role model, or a person whose qualities they admired coming close to being their role model. There were, however, a relatively small proportion of girls failing to nominate a role model indicating their preference to 'be themselves'. This is in line with the literature (Bromnick and Swallow, 1999; Biskup and Pfister, 1999), although other studies have discovered larger

proportions of children without a role model. The discrepancy may be explained by the fact that in this study the researchers asked for a role model or someone who came close to being a role model. Just looking at the percentage of girls with a role model and disregarding the group that nominated someone who came close to being a role model, would decrease the discrepancy. Bromnick and Swallow argue that the 'myself' choice could reflect a trend in our culture towards greater value placed on the self in young people. An important challenge for teenagers nowadays is to develop a strong sense of self. Being yourself is regarded as a positive attribute, however in other cultures which emphasise collectivism, teenage girls may respond differently when asked to nominate their role model. This warrants further investigation.

When identifying the qualities of role models in terms of gender and age, typically, the role model was an older female aged less than 50 years. These findings were consistent with one focus group discussion where the issues of gender similarity and perceived attainability in terms of years ahead in which to achieve similar goals were raised as key factors for role model selection. The relevance of domain of interest was also identified as a key variable for role model selection. For example, one respondent who nominated the netball player Liz Ellis said: "She plays Goalkeeper and Goal Defence, same as me." This supports Bandura's notion of model-observer similarity and the notion of relevance (Lockwood and Kunda, 1999 and 1997). It provides further explanation for the limited appeal of sport stars to adolescent girls because the domain of interest of the stars and the girls may not match.

Data from the focus groups indicate that the sporting ability of sporting role models, high level of competency (e.g. elite athletes) as well as lower levels of competency (e.g. slightly older more experienced team members) featured. This suggests the importance of non-elite role models as playing a pertinent role in the participation of sport by adolescent girls. Consequently, this finding has immediate implication for the usage of high profile sports role models used to promote sport participation. Heeding this, further research is warranted into the sport competency levels of girls who nominated elite and non-elite athletes as their role models. This would provide further information regarding the notion of attainability and role model effectiveness.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study has given a unique insight into the relevance of sporting role models for adolescent girls based on data collected through focus group interviews and a survey. The main results were that only a relative small percentage of girls perceived an elite athlete to be their role model with a large percentage of girls nominating a family member or friend as their role model. Results also supported Lockwood and Kunda's (1999, 1997) notion of domain relevance and perceived attainability, with the majority of girls describing their role model as older, female and who shared a similar domain of interest. Level of competency of the role model may vary to include coping models, which may enhance the level of self-efficacy and perceived attainability for the girl.

Based on these results a number of recommendations can be made regarding adolescent girls' participation in sport and physical activity. It is suggested that in order to increase teenage girls' participation family members need to be encouraged to promote positive behaviour towards sport and physical activity as this is the largest domain from which adolescent girls select their role models. Further, it is recommended that schools and sports clubs use both elite female athletes and female peers as role models (mastery and coping role models) to inspire teenage girls to participate. These role models need to come from a range of sports to ensure that the domain of interest of the role model and girl can match. Finally, although there are many female sport stars they are often unknown or invisible to the girls due to their under-representation in the media. In light of this, it is suggested that the media increase their coverage of women's sport and provide more information regarding individual athletes and their qualities. In a nation where sport is celebrated, role models can play a crucial role to inspire adolescent girls to become or stay involved in sport. Providing adolescent girls with relevant role models is the challenge!

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