

# Celebrity culture and young people's aspirations: a resource for careers education?

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**This** article presents findings from the research project 'The role of celebrity in young people's classed and gendered aspirations' (funded by the Economic and Social Research Council). Drawing on interviews with 148 young people in England, the project addresses concerns about the impact of celebrity culture on youth aspirations. The article presents selected findings to demonstrate how celebrity culture variously informs the ways in which young people think and talk about their futures in work, and makes some suggestions about how careers education might engage critically and generatively with celebrity.



## Introduction

In England, media and policy discussions of celebrity and young people's aspirations contain contradictory messages. Celebrities have been used as 'role models' promoting educational initiatives. This includes national campaigns using footballers endorsing literacy (National Literacy Trust, 2007-08); African American musician will.i.am encouraging young people to learn coding for campaigns such as [code.org](http://code.org); and celebrity physicist Brian Cox being cited as inspiring more young people to pursue STEM careers (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) (Channel 4, 2011).

Yet, alongside this, there are growing concerns that celebrity culture is having a negative impact on young people's aspirations, encouraging them to value fame, fortune and 'quick wins' over achievement based on

hard work or skill. These concerns have been raised by many organisations and individuals, including UK teachers' unions, politicians and media commentators (see Allen and Mendick, 2012). For example, in the wake of the 2011 English riots, Conservative politician and Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, said:

*X Factor* culture fuelled the UK riots... Kids are meant to believe that their stepping stone to massive money is the *X Factor*. Luck is great, but most of life is hard work. We do not celebrate people who have made success out of serious hard work. (in Wintour and Lewis, 2011)

Meanwhile, small-scale surveys are regularly cited as evidence of teenagers' 'unhealthy appetite for fame', and claims that young people with celebrities as 'role models' are more likely to be disengaged from education (DCSF 2009). Recently, Primary Headteacher Andrea Downey wrote on a popular teaching blog that young children in her school look up to celebrities but have little understanding of 'the level of sacrifice that goes alongside careers' of premiership footballers (Teachers Toolkit, 2014).

In the context of this growing chorus of voices decrying the negative impact of celebrity culture on young people's aspirations and work ethic, celebrity arguably occupies a fraught terrain for practitioners' working with young people, including those in careers education. While academic researchers have demonstrated how popular culture operates in young people's everyday lives (Allen and Mendick, 2012; Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Nayak and Kehily 2008),

in practice, celebrity and popular culture is often relegated from classrooms and the 'serious' work of schools and colleges.

Our own research on 'Celebrity Culture and Young People's Classed and Gendered Aspirations' (funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Project Reference: ES/J022942/1) suggests that rather than dismiss it, celebrity culture could be a useful resource in careers work with young people. In this article, we share some findings of the research in regards to the role of celebrity in how young people think about their futures in work, and discuss the potential implications of this research for the development of careers education.

## The study: making sense of celebrity talk

As the first UK-based empirical study of young people's relationships with celebrity, we set out to produce knowledge about a relationship that was hitherto assumed. Our starting point for the research was to consider how young people's understandings about achievable and desirable educational and career pathways are informed by celebrity culture, and how these intersect with young people's class and gender positions. As sociologists of education and youth, we were motivated to do this research by a much larger commitment to considering how these processes relate to broader agendas around educational inequality and social mobility.

In this project, we argue that young people's talk about celebrity is more than just 'talk about celebrity'. Rather, we see young people's talk about celebrity (both about individual celebrities and wider celebrity culture) as part of their 'identity work', understood here as the ongoing processes through which people come to understand their place in the world. The idea that identity requires 'work' suggests that our identities are not fixed or innate but always in process, and produced through 'discourses' (sets of meanings and practices) that are available to us within particular contexts. Such identity work is not entirely of our choosing: we cannot simply 'be' whoever we want to be. Rather, our identities are shaped by broader social, cultural and economic processes. Schooling systems, family practices, legal frameworks and popular culture

are part of this context, informing how we come to know ourselves and think about our place in the world. Thus, in our research we have been interested in how ways of talking and knowing about celebrity (and individual celebrities) form some of the ways that young people think about themselves and others.

In this research, we examined the discourses of aspiration (and associated meanings like success, ambition, talent, fulfilment and work) circulating in celebrity representations and how young people negotiate these in constructing their own aspirations for education and work. To do this we combined interviews with 148 secondary school students aged 14-17 years old (school years 10 and 12), with an analysis of celebrity representations. We selected young people in these year groups because they were at points in their educational careers where they were making decisions about their futures.

In total, we conducted 24 group and 51 individual interviews in six 11-18 co-educational state schools in England, two in each of: London, a rural area in South-West England and Manchester (a city in Northern England). In each school, we held four group interviews, two with students in year 10 and two with students in year 12. The participants were made up of 81 females and 67 male from a diverse range of ethnicities; 63 of the participants said that at least one of their parents had been to university and 64 that none had, with the remainder unsure or choosing not to answer.

We used the group interviews to examine the shared negotiation of meanings around aspiration and celebrity, for example asking participants to identify celebrities who they most liked and/or disliked, what they thought makes someone an 'ideal' celebrity, and how they consume celebrity. In individual interviews, we explored in more depth participants' perceptions of celebrity as well as their educational biographies and aspirations for the future. From the group interviews, we selected 12 celebrities who generated most discussion among participants. Over six months we tracked and analysed their media representation across selected outlets (such as national newspapers and social media platforms such as *Twitter* and *YouTube*).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For further details of the project methodology please visit the project website: <http://www.celebyouth.org/about/>

## Thinking about careers through celebrity

Our research suggests that celebrity plays an important role in young people's understandings about their lives, broader society and their place in it. In relation to their career aspirations, our research shows how 'celebrity talk' is implicated in the ways in which young people think about their futures in work. In the research, discussions about celebrities often led young people to have in-depth and energetic debates about what different jobs and workplaces they might be like to work in, and what they thought makes for a 'good job' and 'fulfilling work'. In other words, by talking about celebrities they liked or whose jobs they would enjoy having, young people in our research were saying something about themselves, using celebrity talk to construct and perform an imagined future self in work.

One example of this is in participants' interest in and talk about a relatively new type or 'genre' of celebrity: what we came to label as 'geek celebrities'. These included public figures from the fields of technology, business, enterprise and technology, such as Microsoft's Bill Gates, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, and a group of *YouTube* celebrities (mainly young people who had acquired a following through the global video sharing site). These celebrities were overwhelmingly discussed in positive ways and admired for their talent, innovation and wealth creation. Several participants referred to these celebrities as doing the kinds of jobs they would like to achieve. In the example below, two young men (Year 10) from a London school (who both chose the pseudonym Bob) discussed whose celebrity life they would most like:

**Bob 1:** Richard Branson, who's like really rich, and he like he has a big business, so you can like improve someone's ideas and make better business as well. He owns a private island, that's pretty cool as well.

**Bob 2:** I would say Bill Gates because he's really rich and yeah. I just like his lifestyle...because he created like a whole new generation to like technology, and that's something I want to do. Cos he's really successful because of what he created, so that would be really nice.

**Interviewer:** How about you with Richard Branson?

**Bob 1:** Sometimes business can help people you need business to like run or start like business or marketing or something and some people's careers are to be businessmen and to have like Richard Branson as inspiration, he can help people get some ideas to how to make money and stuff and make profits.

In another discussion between year 10 pupils about the wealth of Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg and Mark Pincus (the creator of the social network gaming company that created *FarmVille*), we see how these celebrities become associated with particular ideas about what makes 'good work':

**Penelope:** They work but they, what they are working [sic] is good.

**Laura B:** Like they enjoy what they do.

**Bob S:** They have to earn it though.

**Tim:** Yeah but at the end it's like with their mates.

In these examples, we can see how celebrity talk can provide a way in to bigger discussions about what kinds of things are important to young people as they think about their working futures: self-fulfilment, creativity, autonomy, recognition, making a difference, enjoyment, good colleagues, as well as monetary success.

Our research also provides evidence that celebrity culture can provide a resource that prompts young people to investigate careers of which they were not otherwise aware of or think were possible for 'someone like me'. For example, several participants discussed how texts from celebrity and popular culture had inspired them to pursue particular career paths and make particular subject choices. Sabeen a working class, British Asian participant, discussed how she had been inspired to pursue a career in law after watching the TV show *Judge Judy*:

**Sabeen:** I'd like to be a lawyer...

**Interviewer:** And what is it about becoming a lawyer, do you think? Er, just listening to people, helping people out. You're making sure they're happy

by doing like, you can, through law, through bringing them justice and in general making them happy... to know that I've actually brought some justice and truth.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. And is there, do you have an early memory about when you first decided that that's what you wanted to do, or become interested in it?

**Sabeen:** Yeah [laughs] it was in Year 6, in primary school, and I saw *Judge Judy* [on the television] and she's just going on and on. [laughs] And I was like, I want to be that. I want to be a part of, in the courts, defending people and having arguments [laughs], which you get paid for. I was like 'how am I going to do that, I want to do that'... Just the control that she had over them. And she's straight to the point, no messing, and she got it done, she got the job over and done with. Which is quite good.

Similarly, Mariam a working class, Black African and Muslim participant discussed how she was inspired to pursue a career in fashion promotion by the reality television show *The Hills* about women working as interns for fashion magazine *Teen Vogue*. After watching the show, Mariam started researching careers in fashion journalism and promotion, exploring local college courses she could take to achieve this aspiration.

By transmitting information about careers, celebrity might be seen to provide forms of 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent 1998) and 'imagined' social capital (Quinn 2010). These may be particularly valuable for pupils who are unable to access such knowledge and capital within their immediate family networks. In these ways, celebrity can be a resource within existing careers education pedagogy that 'contributes to social mobility, helping people to discover and access opportunities that might exist outside of their immediate networks' (Hooley, Matheson and Watts, 2014). Encountering different worlds *through* popular culture – from *Judge Judy* to *The Hills* to *YouTube* - can allow them to think about themselves in professional careers that are not normally possible or imaginable for 'people like me' because of their class, ethnicity or gender (Allen and Mendick, forthcoming).

However, it is important to stress that while these spaces of imagination are important, they can only do so much. While our participants' accounts prompt us to consider how we might take seriously the role of celebrity culture in careers education – as a catalyst that triggers ideas about future careers and generates interesting conversations about 'work' – celebrity culture is not an unproblematic resource within young people's identity work. As we discuss in the next section, care is needed to ensure that young people's engagement with celebrity is drawn upon critically and in the pursuit of social justice.

## Working critically with celebrity culture

As we have found in this research, celebrity – and popular culture more generally – is replete with stories of 'success' and upward mobility based on personal 'assets' of hard work, self-responsibility and passion (see Mendick et al, 2015). African American film star and musician Will Smith is a prime example of this, both his on-and off-screen persona advocating the power of hard work and determination to the achievement of his goals:

Where I excel is ridiculous, sickening work ethic. While the others guy's sleeping, I'm working... I'm not afraid to die on a treadmill. You might be more talented than me, smarter than me, but if we get on the treadmill, there's two things: you're getting off first or I'm gonna die... Whatever goal you want to reach, whatever you want to do in life, your success originates from your attitude.<sup>2</sup>

These ways of speaking about oneself connect to powerful ideas circulating in UK society about the role of the individual in shaping their future within a 'meritocracy', where politicians such as David Cameron assert the importance of hard work to achieving one's aspirations and finding happiness (Cameron, 2012).

As sociologists we are concerned with what these stories of celebrity 'success' open up and close down for young people. If success and failure become

<sup>2</sup> This quote comes from the *YouTube* video 'Will Smith shares his secrets of success' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q5nVqeVhgQE>

understood as outcomes of an individual young person's resilience, determination and drive, only he or she is to blame for not achieving their aspirations. Asserting the power of the individual to determine their future problematically obscures the presence of forms of class, gender and race inequality which continue to shape young people's opportunities and school-to-work transitions.

Indeed, despite significant progress in educational achievement and career advancement across social class, gender and ethnicity over the last 50 years, inequalities persist in young people's choices and opportunities (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; McDowell, 2012). In the wake of the financial crash of 2008 and implementation of austerity measures, young people face particularly bleak futures with a drastic rise in university fees, a growing number of young people in low paid and casual work (Resolution Foundation, 2014), and a withdrawal of social security providing safety nets for young people in need. Alongside this, evidence suggests that top professions such as Law, Medicine, Politics and the Media remain the preserve of a narrow social elite (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014).

So while it is important to acknowledge how celebrity stories can be resources for young people to imagine different futures for themselves, it is also crucial that we consider such stories circulating within celebrity culture might work to mask the presence of inequalities in young people's opportunities to realise their aspirations. Indeed, when we asked Mariam what might prevent her from achieving her aspiration to work in the fashion industry, she – like many participants – looked to herself: *'What might stop people achieving their dreams? If you work hard, you will achieve your goals...I guess I need to change myself and be more determined to get what I want.'* Yet, research shows that access to the fashion industry – like many professional sectors – remains unfairly skewed to favour those with resources such as industry networks and funding to undertake unpaid internships (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014).

Furthermore, the research demonstrates the continued significance of factors such as gender, class and ethnicity on the kinds of careers young people think are even possible or desirable. This was reflected in some of ways in which young people talked about

different celebrities and the career-identities these celebrities were associated with. For example, while 'geek celebrities' were popular with participants, this group of celebrities were overwhelmingly represented by white and middle class male celebrities. Furthermore, young male participants were far more likely to identify with these celebrities when talking about their own career aspirations. Such patterns resonate with research on young people's relationships with STEM which suggest that for young women in particular there remain conflicts between their 'self-identity' and perception of what it means to be a 'scientist', 'mathematician' or 'engineer' which may deter them from pursuing these pathways (Archer et al. 2012; Mendick 2006, Macdonald 2014).

The question then is how celebrity can be used within careers work to open up a *critical* dialogue about inequality and social justice in relation to young people's access to particular careers. Such a dialogue must not seek to deter them from aspiring to these careers, killing off their optimism or hope. Rather, it must provide the tools and vocabulary through which young people can better locate their experiences, and identify the the gendered, classed and raced dimensions of the world around them, and thus of their own imagined (and real) futures.

## Conclusion: Using celebrity generatively and critically within careers work

As part of this research project, we developed a website that makes available some of the research findings for practitioners to use within their work with young people (<http://celebyouth.org/mythbusting/>). The site also busts several myths that circulate around young people, celebrity and aspirations. One of these is that *'there is no value talking to young people about celebrity in schools.'* As we hope to have shown in this article, celebrity and popular culture can provide an accessible and informal way to engage young people in critical discussions about their futures in work.

Through the course of the research, we met a number of teachers, youth workers and career educators. Some of these were provoked by the study to explore further the role of celebrity in the lives of the young people they worked with, and think anew

about how celebrity could be used generatively and productively within their work. For example, teacher Jon Rainford (2013) asked his students if they'd like to be famous. What emerged were interesting and revealing discussions about their views on achievement and routes to 'success' more broadly. Arguably, such discussions about abstract and distant figures within popular culture can provide a useful jumping off point for more personalised discussions about individual young people's aspirations and plans including critical conversations about opportunity, fairness and the structural inequalities shaping young lives (see also de St Croix, 2013).

We have provided some suggestions about how celebrity might be used critically and generatively within careers work in schools and colleges. Furthermore, the project website is intended to stimulate dialogue with practitioners about how celebrity features in their work with young people – now and in the future. However, while celebrity talk can spark interesting conversations with young people about their futures, in a wider context of austerity and cuts to funding for careers education, we realise the limitations to this. If young people have increasingly limited and unequal access to good careers guidance and support (Hooley et al., 2014) in order to move forward with their ideas, such conversations can achieve very little.



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