“Will Smith is the coolest person on earth”? Will Smith, post-racial meritocracy and young people’s aspirations

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ESRC-funded 2012-14 qualitative interdisciplinary project, exploring:

1) What discourses of aspiration circulate in celebrity representations?

2) How do young people use these discourses in constructing their aspirations?

3) How are the discourses of aspiration in celebrity and their uses classed and gendered?
Methods

**Group and individual interviews** with 148 young people in 6 schools in England (14-17 years) about their aspirations and engagement with celebrity

**Textual analysis** of mediation of 12 case study celebrities – selected from young people’s talk – tracked over 6 months across key outlets
Will Smith

Main Sources:
- Twitter: collecting the top tweets about Will
- The Sun – all news stories about him
- ‘The Fresh Prince of Bel Air’, Season 1 – 6 (selection of key scenes from across the show)
- Additional sources:
  - ‘The Promise of Happyness’
  - YouTube ‘Inspiration video’
  - Will Smith biography
Exploring Will Smith: Neoliberalism, ‘post-race’ and celebrity culture

Celebrity culture as a site within which broader anxieties and perceived crises around the self and society crystallise (Dyer, 1984)

McRobbie (2013) ‘visual media governmentality’

“Neoliberalism has been engaged in constructing new entrepreneurial identities... in celebrity culture [we detect] fantasies of success ... the endless refashioning of the ‘self’ ... and utopias of self-sufficiency.” (Hall et al, 2013: p19)


“The happy object thus operates as part of a neo-liberal trick, placing responsibility on the individual to achieve authentic happiness and ‘success’. Happiness – and happy objects - are appealing as it allows white guilt about racism to be displaced by good feelings: it lifts us up. (Ahmed 2007)
‘He’s the boss’ - Young people’s talk about Will

Will: He’s just the boss.
Harry: He’s just one of them guys that you’re like....
Male: Yeah, all the way
Will: It’s the nod, nod of appreciation. ...
Heather: Okay. Why is everyone such a big fan of Will Smith?
Male: He’s funny
Male: He seems to get along with everyone.
Male: He’s just hot
Male: He’s just really, really funny. ...
Male: He’s just awesome.
Male: You can just tell.
Male: He’s just cool.
Imagining Will

He’s the coolest person on earth. Why wouldn’t I want to be friends with him?’ (Rick)

You can’t NOT like him because of how charismatic the guy is. Very happy: he’s really rich, he has a wife, his kids are doing pretty well. (Dave)

He’s real ... he wants to do well in life, wants to achieve something. (Schmidt)

He just seems down-to-earth and hilarious ... not the most well-behaved student, but quite clever ... What would make him happy? family and friends - normal human happiness. (Dumbledore)

He seems like a funny, happy, optimistic guy. I would surround myself with someone like that. (Taylor)

Will Smith would just make you laugh every time and be someone you could go to for advice ... he has that face and it's just like warm’ (Syndicate)
Twitter: tweets about Will

‘Life would be great if Will Smith was your father’

‘This is an antidepressant. Will Smith dancing’

‘I like that quote from will smith's movie, after earth, “Fear is a choice but don’t misunderstand me danger is real but fear is a choice.”’

‘Don't let success get to your head, and failure to your heart - Will Smith’
Will’s ‘success philosophy’

“Whatever goal you want to reach, whatever you want to do in life, your **success originates from your attitude**”

“Talent you have naturally. Skill is only developed by hours and hours of beating or your craft. I’ve never really viewed myself as particularly talented, where I excel is ridiculous, **sickening work ethic** … while the other guy is sleeping I am working. While the other guy is eating I am working … I am **not afraid to die on a treadmill**. You might have more talent in me, you might be smarter than me, but if we get on the treadmill together, there’s two things. You are getting off first, or I am going to die, it is really that simple.”
I’ve read the Declaration of Independence. I’ve read the Constitution. I have the preamble memorized. It’s something I’ve always believed in, and when Barack Obama won, it validated a piece of me that I wasn’t allowed to say out loud – that America is not a racist nation. I love that all of our excuses have been removed. ... There’s no white man trying to keep you down, because if he were really trying to keep you down, he would have done everything he could to keep Obama down. ....I’m an African American, and I was able to climb to a certain point in Hollywood. On that journey, I realized people weren’t trying to stop me. Most people were trying to help me.... If Barack Obama can win the presidency of the United States, you can absolutely be the manager at Saks. Come on. It was such a fantastic experience for me to be able to say out loud that I love America and not be called an Uncle Tom.
Celebrity’s ‘new black’ – happy diversity and not being a sore point

“People of color are often asked to concede to the recession of racism: we are asked to ‘give way’. Not only that: more than that. We are often asked to embody a commitment to diversity. We are asked to smile in their brochures. The smile of diversity is a way of not allowing racism to surface; it is a form of political recession. … Racism is very difficult to talk about as racism can operate to censor the very evidence of its existence. Those who talk about racism are thus heard as creating rather than describing a problem. The stakes are indeed very high: to talk about racism is to occupy a space that is saturated with tension. … When you use the very language of racism you are heard as “going on about it,” as “not letting it go.” It is as if talking about racism is what keeps it going. … The melancholic migrant is the one who is not only stubbornly attached to difference, but who insists on speaking about racism, where such speech is heard as labouring over sore points. The duty of the migrant is to let go of the pain of racism by letting go of racism as a way of understanding that pain”. (Ahmed 2013)
“I’d say the only thing that stops you from achieving your dreams is you. You have to constantly believe in yourself, you have to constantly know that if you wanna do it, you have to put your mindset to it and do it... So the only thing that can actually get in your way from being successful, is you, yourself. [mm] And there are people would say ‘Yeah. But then what about the people around you? What if they’re pulling you back? Bla bla bla’ The only reason they’re pulling you back is because you’re letting them pull you back. If they were really pulling you back, it’s still on yourself, because you can be smart enough to walk away, or you can just be stupid and just stand there, while they ruin the rest of your life for you, and then end up blaming it all on them. When really it was just yourself. So the only thing that gets in the way of success, is yourself.”

(Edward, black African)
So what?

• Despite young BME men obtaining good educational qualifications, their unemployment rates are higher than for their white counterparts. e.g. African graduates in their 20s are seven times as likely to be unemployed as their white counterparts (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2013)

• 25.7% of white applicants to Oxford received an offer, compared with 17.2% of students from ethnic minorities (Guardian Feb 2013)

• Black and minority ethnic groups are over-represented in the criminal justice system, under-represented in the legal profession (particularly among judges), and too often criminalised by sections of the press (Runnymede Trust 2014)
“People of colour are asked to smile in their brochures ... not to speak about racism. Racism which becomes a willful word: getting in the way, going the wrong way. Not to be willing is to be assigned as willful, as a menace, as the ones who causes the loss a good relation.... being willing to embody diversity can be a way individuals avoid the consequences of not being willing. We have to work collectively if we are to expose the costs of this avoidance”. (Ahmed, 2014)
THANKS FOR LISTENING

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