The role of Celebrity in Young People’s Classed and Gendered Aspirations

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Political context: Aspiration nation?
Low aspirations, ‘work-shy’ youth and celebrity

Youth today are workshy and materialistic, says study

YOUNG people want money but don’t want to work for it.

“Britain's teens need to learn about work ethic from immigrants” - Boris Johnson, 2013

“X Factor culture fuelled the UK riots... Kids 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’ve made success out of serious hard work.” - Iain Duncan Smith, 2011

“Kids nowadays just want to be famous. If you ask little girls, they either want to be footballers' wives or win The X Factor ... Our society is in danger of being Barbie-dolled.” - Barbara Follett MP, 2008

David Cameron: too many British children want to be popstars and footballers

David Cameron met with school children in Monrovia today and said that too many children in Britain wanted to be "popstars and footballers" when they grow up.

But….where are young people’s voices?
The project

September 2012 - July 2014

Qualitative research
Our research questions:

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?
Data collection

144 young people

6 secondary schools (11-18) in England, rural and urban, reflective of local demographics

24 group interviews with 6 students each (Year 10 & Year 12)

Follow up individual interviews with about 8 students per school

12 celebrity case studies

*Data collection complete (July ‘13). Currently analysing the data.*
Some emerging findings....

How might these be made genuinely useful to you in your work?
Group interviews
Group interviews:

We asked about:

• Liked/ disliked celebrities
• Any celebrities they would like to be/ have their job/ life
• What makes someone a celebrity
• How they consume celebrity culture

We are now exploring themes and patterns in the group interview data.
Celebrities and ‘hard work’

Contrary to policy and public discourse, young people show a **strong investment in hard work** as central to and necessary for success and future happiness.

Celebrity talk is a key way in which **investments neoliberal discourses of meritocracy** – success via hard work – are performed and negotiated.

What counts as hard work is **gendered and classed**, being read onto some bodies and forms of labour and not others.

**Evaluations of hard work are not fixed** but shaped by young people’s personal investments, resources and positioning.
‘He trained so hard he vomited’: Displaying your worth

Dave: I think it can go two ways, You’re either a celebrity who’s earned what you have, or you’re a celebrity who got lucky.

Kim: And so what, what do you, okay, so for those who’ve earned what they’ve got, what’s that through, do you think? Is it talent, or hard work?

Dave: It’s talent. Talent, obviously. Like Usain Bolt, he is, he has a lot of talent for running, but he also has to train that talent for. I think it’s been twelve years that he’s competed.

Jerome: Do you remember that thing we watched in German, where the, *The Life of Usain Bolt*, and he trained so hard that he actually vomited.
Self-sufficiency: The power of the individual

• These ways of speaking connect to powerful ideas circulating in UK society about the role of the individual in shaping their future (e.g. Conservative’s ‘hard working Britain’). Celebrity talk as a resource for young people through which to negotiate stories about meritocracy.

• Success or failure is seen as a reflection of individual determination and drive.

• Obscuring of the presence of forms of class, gender and race inequality in shaping young people’s school-to-labour market transitions.
What counts as ‘hard work’? The significance of class and gender

Dave: Reality TV stars and models like Kim Kardashian, they’re at the **bottom of the celebrity pit** ... they’ve done nothing.

Saafi: You know Kim Kardashian ***all she did was a sex tape*** [laughter] and then got famous ... I think they appreciate it more when ***they’ve had to work for it***. I don’t like it when it's like they've not had to do anything to get that and they’re gonna take it for granted.

Kirsty: ***They’d have to work for it***, I think. I think it would be better if they worked for it.

*We are interested in how dominant stories about what kinds of work (and which kinds of people) are valued in these powerful social stories, and consequently, who and what are excluded?*
Ally: And how did she do modelling? What did she do? Oh, just lift up her top, simple.

Mavie: I’m not being funny, you always bring in the newspaper and flash that around anyway. ...

Ally: That’s one of the worst ways you can earn money. It’s a rather sad way of earning money as well.

Mavie: I don’t think you can judge people.

Ally: She’s not talented in any way, is she?

Mavie: She’s got a good business.

Luigi: Yeah, she’s made a lot for herself, even though she...

Ally: Yeah, she’s got a good business, but is it her that created it? And is it her that done all the stuff? No.

Mavie: Yeah, for her kids.

Ally: She’s not a business woman, I’m telling you now, Katie Price is not a business woman.

Mavie: She owns Mamas and Papas. ...

Ally: But, she’s not a business woman, she’s pathetic, honestly

Mavie: No, she made it all.
Celebrity Case Studies
What we did and why

Explore what discourses of aspiration ('talent', 'success', 'ambition' 'work', etc) circulate in celebrity representations

12 celebrities selected based on who generated most discussion among participants (equal split male and female; range of 'fields')

| Justin Bieber | Will Smith | Kate Middleton | Emma Watson |
| Prince Harry  | Tom Daley   | Nicki Minaj    | Kim Kardashian |
| Bill Gates    | Mario Balotelli | Katie Price | Beyonce |

Tracking and textual analysis of media coverage of each over 6 months across key outlets incl. public discussion about them

Sources include: key texts / outputs (e.g. the celebrity's films, biographies, music); 'traditional' press (e.g. national papers) and social media (e.g. Twitter; YouTube)
Some findings: 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
Tweets about Will Smith: a dream father and motivational ‘guru’

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

‘This is an antidepressant. Will Smith dancing’.

‘You got a dream? Protect it. People can’t do something themselves, they tell you you can’t do it. You want something, go get it. #WillSmith’

‘Don't let success get to your head, and failure to your heart - Will Smith’
“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”
‘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.’
So what?

In many ways, Will can be seen to provide a ‘good role model’, encouraging young people to believe that they can do anything in life as long as they work hard and don’t give up

But can they? Why are we cautious?

• 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)

So, does Will Smith provide post-racial fantasies of meritocracy which obscure the presence of racial inequalities and discrimination affecting young people’s opportunities and transitions and can’t easily be overcome through hard work and determination?
Individual Interviews
What did we ask?

Biographical information
Local area and other areas where they’ve lived, their family

Imagine these celebrities went to your school...
Who they’d befriend and avoid, how the celebrities would fare socially and academically

Aspirations and choices
Happiness and success for celebrities and personally
Choices and aspirations, how they’re making these and any associated memories

Youth and Inequality
General and personal difficulties for young people in achieving their dreams
What it’s like to be young, differences by gender, social class and generation
Mariam

Somali Refugee; Muslim; 17 years old

Inner-city academy in Manchester

Lives in Moss Side: likes local area; ‘multicultural’; spends most of her time with family

Single mother and sisters; estranged from her father; mother studying ESOL and seeking part time work

Working-class but self-defined as ‘in the middle’

Fractured transitions and disrupted schooling
Celebrities: hard work, talent and deserved success

Hierarchy of good/bad celebrity - hard work and talent central

Avoid ‘famous for nothings’; but befriend celebrities like Beyonce, Tom and Bill who ‘start from nothing. They will be happiest because of what they’ve achieved’.

Role models?: ‘I’d think if they can do it, I can do it’

Beyonce: ‘cool’ and inspirational: ‘she shows you can do a lot without a man’ (e.g. having an all female band, and sacking her dad as her boss)

Relate to self-perception: individualised explanations for success:

‘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’
Mother, grandmother and Beyonce: Struggle, Strong women and Independence

Modest aspirations: Stable life, good job and happy family: ‘I just want a good life – not a million pounds’

Proving herself to others: Showing her father that she can do well without his help; inspiration for younger cousins

Feminist narrative: mother and grandmother as role models:

‘My mother showed me how to be a good mother without having a job and an education, and my grandmother showed me to be a good woman and mother with a job because she worked for my Aunties and uncles, so they both did it on their own’. 
Memories: a sideways look at young people’s aspiration

Fashion careers and popular culture

Aspirations to go to a local college and take vocational course related to fashion and marketing

Interest in pursuing a career in fashion promotion

MTV’s ‘The Hills’: “I used to watch it everyday, it stayed in my mind’

Seemingly ‘trashy’ reality TV Sparked Mariam’s aspirations. Celebrity as merely fantasy or more than this?
Discussion

• In your own practice, what challenges do you face around young people and aspiration? *(at individual, local and national level? Government policy? Reduced funding and devolution of careers education? Labour market/ youth unemployment?)*

• How do our initial findings relate to your work and the challenges you face?

• How can we make our findings useful to you / your profession? What kinds of ‘outputs’ would genuinely support you in your work?