

## DIRECTIONS FOR LIVING

### Role models, pop music and self-help discourses

**T**HIS CHAPTER CONSIDERS further kinds of media messages which suggest 'ways of living'. Pop stars and other celebrities are often considered to be 'role models', and so we will discuss the meaning of this rather loose concept. We will then consider the rise of 'girl power' bands like the Spice Girls and Destiny's Child; note the more and less macho aspects of male pop icons; and discuss the popularity of Britney Spears, based on interviews with her fans. This is followed by an analysis of successful self-help books, ideas from which tend to 'trickle down' into popular culture more generally. What do they tell women and men about constructing a comfortable identity and lifestyle? And what can the popularity of these messages tell us about changing cultural ideas of masculinity, womanhood and the acceptable modern sense of self?

#### **WHO IS A ROLE MODEL?**

The idea of 'role models' comes up often in public discourse, but it's not always clear what the term means. A 'role model' seems to be popularly understood as 'someone to look up to,' and someone to base your character, values or aspirations upon. To begin our discussion of what people are talking about when they propose (or oppose) supposedly influential figures, here is a collection of examples of public talk about various 'role models'.

- In November 1998, the British government announced plans to set up a panel of 'role models' to inspire teenage girls. Newspapers reported

that they had considered asking the pop star Geri Halliwell, posh actress Emma Thompson and therapist Susie Orbach. The idea was apparently dropped after the papers made fun of it: 'No youngster would be seen dead with a Government-approved role model,' noted one journalist (Phillips, 1998).

- In December 1999, as Victoria Beckham (Posh Spice) showed young women that motherhood was cool, and Cherie Booth (wife of the Prime Minister) demonstrated the joys of pregnancy in her mid-forties, there was concern that 'celebrity mum' role models would encourage teenage pregnancy – or put pressure on ordinary mothers who do not enjoy such highly-resourced lifestyles (Phillips, 1999).
- In September 2000, the British news media reported that researchers had suggested that the government's 'Playing for Success' scheme, which promoted (male) professional footballers as role models, was a bad idea because it alienated many girls and some boys, and reinforced masculine stereotypes (BBC Online, 2000b).
- In the US, however, the professional footballers who were described in one *San Francisco Chronicle* story as classroom 'role models' were all female – the stars of the American women's soccer league were said to be very proud to serve as an inspiration to young women (28 April 2001). Women's World Cup champion Brandi Chastain had been helping to train promising Bay Area girls. 'Brandi is bigger than a movie star at our school,' said one.
- In November 1997, a child welfare supervisor in Dallas, Texas, ordered the emergency removal of a baby boy from foster parents, because the couple were lesbians and therefore did not, in her view, serve as decent 'role models'. The state's social services department quickly overruled the decision, and demoted the supervisor. These events sparked much controversy and debate (Verhovek, 1997).
- In July 2001, the Australian media went crazy for *Big Brother* contestant Sara-Marie, described in celebrity magazine *NW* as 'the best ever female role model on TV'. She is celebrated for being highly entertaining, intelligent, and larger than the skinny norm of other TV stars. 'She proves that bigger certainly can be better,' *NW* enthuses, 'living proof that curvy girls are sexy' (*NW*, 2001: 14). The magazine even gave away a free cut-out Sara-Marie face mask, so that all Australians can look like their idol.
- In the USA, the *New York Times* often debates the value of various role models. On 28 December 1997 and again on 7 April 2000 it discussed whether the Barbie doll was a good role model for girls; on 27 September 1998 the status of the Miss America Pageant as a 'proper role

model for girls and young women' came under scrutiny; and on 29 May 2001, the paper interviewed biological scientist Dr Jill Bargonetti whose position as 'one of the few [prominent] black women in science' made her 'a role model and mentor for many minority students'.

- The *New York Times* doesn't forget men, either: an article on 9 April 2000, for example, noted the number of comically dumb male characters on TV, such as Homer Simpson, and worried about men's lack of intelligent role models; a piece on 30 December 1999 discussed, with Bronx teenagers, whether Puff Daddy was a good role model, after the successful performer and producer had been arrested on a firearms charge; and on 6 December 2000 profiled Stanley Williams, an 'anti-gang role model' who spreads a message against violent gangs to young people, from his cell on death row – he is 'up for both a Nobel Peace Prize, and execution' the newspaper notes.
- Film reviewers frequently bring up the idea of 'role models', particularly if there is a female character who may be of interest to girls or young women. For example, the *Dallas Observer's* Michael Sragow was impressed with the title character in Disney's *Mulan* (1998): 'Mulan's virtues as a female role model are manifold. She's smart and independent; just as important, she's comely yet no bombshell' (Sragow, 1998). The title character in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) was called a 'really great positive role model' by the star herself, Angelina Jolie, who even told magazines that Lara was 'the perfect woman'. *Heat* magazine agreed, saying that Jolie 'kicks ass and is a good role model for teenage girls'. (More movie examples appear in Chapter 4, pp. 65–75.)
- Numerous obituaries for pioneering journalist Katharine Graham, ex-head of the *Washington Post*, described her as an inspiration to women. 'Graham is widely credited with serving as a role model for women, especially women in journalism, because her life entailed an extraordinary transformation,' noted the *Los Angeles Times* (18 July 2001), from conventional housewife, to defiant and powerful reporter and editor.
- A few days earlier in the *Los Angeles Times*, members of Backstreet Boys were discussing bandmate A. J. McLean's spell in a rehabilitation centre (14 July 2001). 'It's important for us to be honest about it and not push it under the rug,' said Kevin Richardson. 'We have a lot of young fans, and it's important to be a good role model'.
- The website 'Role Models on the Web' ([www.rolemodel.net](http://www.rolemodel.net)) suggests several people whom young people may wish to take as their inspiration, including:
  - Diane Sawyer, who overcame her shyness to become 'one of the finest investigative reporters on television'.

- Bill Koch, an entrepreneur who 'pioneered' new forms of environment-friendly energy, and winner of the America's Cup sailing race.
- Jehan Sadat, Egyptian feminist and 'powerful decision-maker', 'a devoted activist for peace and women's rights'.
- Steven Spielberg, who 'has given us a legacy of films and dreams, to encourage the dreamer in each of us'.
- Rosie O'Donnell, the actress, comedian and talk-show host who 'challenges the social order of things with her honest, straightforward style'.
- Tiger Woods, the star golfer who 'thinks his golf is just a vehicle for him to influence people'.

## SO WHAT IS A ROLE MODEL?

From the examples above we can see that role models can be divided into six slightly different types.

- 1 **The 'straightforward success' role model:** people who have been successful in their chosen field, such as any popular film star or leader - Brad Pitt, Cameron Diaz, Tony Blair or Mary Robinson. This category, when used by authority figures, excludes people who have done well but have tarnished their reputation by being associated with inappropriate or 'immoral' practices - although cult status as an 'outsider' role model (see number 5) may well depend on the latter.
- 2 **The 'triumph over difficult circumstances' role model:** people who have overcome adversity to achieve success often become the most popular role models. For example, Tiger Woods surmounted the racism of the golf world to become its youngest-ever champion; Maya Angelou escaped from the abuse and poverty of her childhood to become an inspirational, best-selling writer; Nelson Mandela remained strong through 27 years of imprisonment and became a leader of huge international standing; Katharine Graham overcame the sexism of the newspaper world to become one of the most influential reporters; and the 'Role Models on the Web' site is very excited about Christopher Reeve, 'fighting back' after being paralysed. This type of role model is sometimes inappropriately used to argue against those who complain about injustice - as in 'You can't say that Hollywood is racist - look at the success of Eddie Murphy'.
- 3 **The 'challenging stereotypes' role model:** female action heroes like Lara Croft counter the idea of 'feminine' women, and the idea that only men can fill tough leading roles. Madonna was famously a confi-

*missteps  
Reeve*

dent and assertive sexual icon in the late 1980s and 1990s, challenging traditional assumptions about female sexuality. (Men with unusually 'feminine' traits, though, are rarely seen as role models.) Disabled people who succeed in jobs where some might be surprised to see them also fill this role. Because of the difficulty of challenging oppressive ideas, this category is linked to 'triumph over difficult circumstances'.

- 4 **The 'wholesome' role model:** these are the 'role models' which older generations are comfortable showing to their children, such as 'clean-living' pop bands, the better-behaved sports stars and stars who say 'no' to sex before marriage. Supporting such figures is 'risky' for conservatives because there is always the possibility that the icon will become a public disappointment, as in the Backstreet Boys case. And in 1999, Angela Phillips reported: 'Last year Emma Thompson was held up by the government as the role model every young woman should aspire to, as an antidote to teenage pregnancy. This year - whoops - as the unmarried mother of a baby girl, she's slipped from that particular pedestal'.
- 5 **The 'outsider' role model:** rejected by mainstream culture, the outsider role model is a hero to those who reject conventional social expectations, such as Marilyn Manson, Eminem and even dead stars like Kurt Cobain and River Phoenix. There seem to be fewer well-known women in this category - suggesting that popular culture is less kind to very transgressive females - but possible recent nominees include hip hop star Lil' Kim and the artist Tracey Emin, for their sexual frankness, and other strong independent free-thinkers from the music world such as Sinéad O'Connor, Mary J. Blige and Shirley Manson.
- 6 **The family role model:** this category includes looking up to members of your own family, and other popular celebrity parents such as Victoria Adams and David Beckham; as well as being negatively defined by those who label certain parents as 'inappropriate role models' (as in the Texan lesbian foster parenting controversy mentioned above, p. 212).

These categories broadly summarise the kinds of people, and positions they represent, that become talked about as 'role models'. It remains unclear, though, in a psychological sense, how 'role modelling' might actually work. Social psychology books usually have little to say about 'role models', although they do trot out the shallow 'social learning theory' which suggests that people learn behaviour by observing it in others - such as role models - and will repeat the behaviour if it is reinforced - in other words, if it seems to have a positive outcome, or other people appear to appreciate it (Burr, 1998; Malim and Birch, 1998; Pennington, Gillen and Hill, 1999;

Brannon, 2001). This 'theory' is very simple – more of a thought than a theory – but it could, of course, still be correct, even though we currently lack an understanding of the processes involved.

In a recent discussion of the psychological literature on 'role models' specifically, Nauta and Kokaly concur that 'the defining characteristics of role models and exactly how they influence various aspects of the career [and, we might add, aspirational] development process remains somewhat unclear' (2001: 81). Although there are different definitions of 'role models', there is general agreement that:

role models are other persons who, either by exerting some influence or simply by being admirable in one or more ways, have an impact on another.

(2001: 82)

Fair enough. As Nauta and Kokaly assess the few theoretical discussions of how 'role models' might have an impact, it becomes clear that social learning theory is indeed as deep as it gets, although the idea of 'people learning behaviour through observation' has been expanded, in the obvious way, to accommodate the loose modelling of whole lifestyles. In other words, watching *Tomb Raider* or *Charlie's Angels* might encourage girls to become somewhat more independent and feisty, without them needing to directly copy an extensive fight sequence or to go on a perilous quest for ancient artefacts. In their preliminary survey research, Nauta and Kokaly found that 81 per cent of respondents could name a famous person who was a 'role model' for them, and could describe some reasons or attributes to explain this (2001: 84–86). Since the respondents were responding to a request to name a famous role model, however, it would be inappropriate to infer that the majority of these people felt that famous role models were deeply important to them; and we can note that when asked to name their greatest overall role model, 63 per cent of respondents chose one of their own parents.

## GIRL POWER

The field of pop music offers many icons and potential role models. Pop music today is not only the sounds on the recordings we buy, or hear on the radio or played in shops, cafés, bars and clubs, but is also the carefully packaged set of images we see through television and magazines. In gender terms, the 1990s took an interesting turn when the Spice Girls burst onto the scene in 1996, shouting (literally) about 'girl power' at every opportun-

ity. Mixing conventional glamour with a feisty, ultra-confident, 'in your face' approach, the Spices – driven by Geri Halliwell – really did push the 'girl power' agenda for a while. (After Geri's departure in 1998, they became just another girl band.) In her autobiography, *If Only*, Geri recalls a point in 1994 where she wondered whether the band was going to work or not:

I asked a DJ friend what I should do. 'Girl bands don't work,' he said bluntly.

I disagreed with him. The music scene *needed* young, positive female recording artists. At twelve years old I had Madonna to look up to. The teenagers today needed someone like that.

(Halliwell, 1999: 221)

Outlining the characteristics of each Spice Girl to a journalist from *The Face* in 1997, Geri explained, 'We've all got balls, but I've got quite big balls, basically' (March 1997: 78). In the same year, British newspaper the *Guardian* thought it might be amusing to send along a well-known older feminist, Kathy Acker, to interview the group. Whilst rather overwhelmed by their noise and energy, Acker was relatively impressed. She confesses to being a little concerned about the individualism of their 'do what you want' message, but Geri tells her that the Spice Girls between themselves, and with their fans, are a community which is more powerful than the sum of its parts. She says:

Normally, when you get fans of groups, they want to act like you, they copy what you're wearing, for instance. Whereas our fans, they might have pigtails and they might wear sweatclothes, but they are so individual, it's unbelievable. When you speak to them, they've got so much balls! It's like we've collected a whole group of our people together! ... I can remember someone coming up to us and going, 'Do you know what? I've just finished with my boyfriend! And you've given me the incentive to go "Fuck this!"'

(Acker, 1997: 14)

Acker asks whether the Spice Girls want boyfriends. Mel B replies:

I think whoever we would choose to be with should respect the way we are – and our job as well. The way we are together. None of us would be interested in a man that wanted to

dominate, wanted to pull you down, and wanted you to do what he wanted you to do.

(ibid.)

The Spice Girls, in this interview as in many others, said many other things about fulfilling your dreams, going against expectations and creating your own opportunities for success. Acker notes that in the 1980s, feminism was represented in Britain and America by intellectual, middle-class women and was popularly seen as elitist and anti-sex. She notes with pleasure that in the 1990s, the Spice Girls were able to confidently represent 'the voices, not really the voice, of young women and, just as important, of women not from the educated classes' (1997: 19). She continues:

It isn't only the lads sitting behind babe culture, bless them, who think that babes or beautiful lower and lower-middle class girls are dumb. It's also educated women who look down on girls like the Spice Girls, who think that because, for instance, girls like the Spice Girls take their clothes off, there can't be anything 'up there' [in their brains].

(ibid.)

The 'girl power' concept was a celebration of self-belief, independence and female friendship, and whilst cynics muttered that it was an empty ideology – sneering that its goals were only the right to shout 'girl power' a lot – it nevertheless did seem to be empowering for young girls. Pop music expert Sheila Whiteley notes that the Spice Girls were 'a challenge to the dominance of lad culture . . . they introduced the language of independence to a willing audience of pre- and teenage girls' (2000: 215). Putting forward a thesis similar to Acker's, Whiteley notes that although the discourses of feminism were well-known in the 1990s, they were assigned a negative image in tabloid newspapers and other popular media, and presented as 'heavy' and opposed to men and sex. She says the Spice Girls changed that:

The impact of the Spice Girls . . . was to provide a new twist to the feminist discourse of power and subjectivity. By telling their fans that feminism is necessary and fun, that it is part of everydayness, and that girls should challenge rather than accept traditional constraints – 'What you looking at boy? Can you handle a Spice Girl?' – they sold the 1990s as 'a girl's world' and presented the 'future as female'.

(ibid.: 216–217)

Whilst it was easy for cynics to criticise the 'girl power' idea as a bunch of banal statements about 'believing in yourself' and 'doing whatever you want to do', it was still an encouraging confidence boost to young women and should not be dismissed too readily. At the time, TV programmes and magazine articles – as well as letters written to pop magazines and the anecdote everyone had about the super-confidence of their little sister or daughter – suggested that 'girl power' was more than a phenomenon imagined within the media and did indeed have an impact in the real world.

Other female stars and groups inherited this inspirational mantle, although without the clear hook of the Spice's 'girl power' slogan. Geri went on to be a slightly lesser star, and gay icon, in her own right. Interviewed by *Attitude* magazine in 2001, she was still saying life-affirming and liberal things like, 'I believe that anything is possible for anyone – shutting down possibilities is a waste of living', and, 'Last week I was entertaining the idea of becoming a lesbian' (Flynn, 2001). In the same month she told *Marie Claire*: 'I'm a tomboy who likes to dress as Barbie,' and 'I do get comments about how I look, but I have to try and let that go . . . What matters is how I feel about myself' (Forrest, 2001).

In 2001, *Destiny's Child* were the most clearly defined 'girl power' icons, and conveyed the message in their actual songs more clearly than the Spice Girls ever did. And they were a massive international success: the album *Survivor* (2001) sold five million copies within five weeks. Previous album *The Writing's On the Wall* sold over nine million worldwide. Almost all of the songs on *Survivor* were both written and produced by key band member Beyoncé Knowles. An MTV documentary celebrated their "'take no mess" attitude' and gushed that the group communicated a 'message of self-reliance and personal strength in the most alluring of packages'. It also noted that this was 'a new kind of act: fierce, foxy and frankly intelligent, proudly shouting out their self-sufficiency' (*All Eyes on Destiny's Child*, MTV, June 2001). Their big 1999 hit 'Bills, Bills, Bills' was a goodbye note to a boyfriend who didn't pay his way and was always borrowing money from the richer female protagonist. 'Independent Women Part 1' (2000) continued the emphasis on women having their own money and paying their own bills – financial independence – celebrating 'All the honeys makin' money', and asserting 'I depend on me'. In 'Independent Women Part 2' (2001) the women insist that they will never be controlled, and will offer no love or commitment.

These words are notable simply because they are so different to the typical loving or 'I want you' lyrics common in pop music. *Destiny's Child* have made 'I don't want you' lyrics unusually popular. And it goes down well with the audience. One fan comment posted at online store

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Amazon.co.uk says that Beyoncé is 'truly inspirational' and notes that the group are 'promoting a more sophisticated "Girl Power" message that the Spice Girls failed to carry' (12 May 2001). Another user seems slightly more jaded: 'We've heard the "girl-power" lark time and time before, but Destiny's Child are acutely aware of its selling power and the appeal it has to the "Jerry Springer generation"' (30 May 2001). This comment contains two points – one, that the 'girl power' discourse is actually a commercial tool (and therefore, by implication, not actually very challenging) and two, that there is a generation brought up on shouty daytime TV shows for whom the idea of criticising and dumping inadequate partners is a source of *pleasure*.

In an online interview, Beyoncé said that the group's central message is 'for women to be independent, strong women, and for women to demand respect' (Yahoo! Chat Event, July 2000). A fan from Florida agrees, at Amazon.com, 'Survivor is a good CD for young women to listen to compared to some of the other artists out there' (11 May 2001). And another American fan comments:

'Independent Women' and 'Survivor' are unforgettable ... Beyoncé's writing is exceptional, she speaks to our generation – delivering messages in unique ways. The girl is tough. I hope she keeps going going going.

(2 May 2001)

As with the Spice Girls, Destiny's Child use sex appeal to sell their music, and critics would assert that the promotion of a particular image of thin, attractive women is not a pro-feminist thing to be doing. On the other hand, of course, it could be argued that these are positive, attractive images of black women which might counteract the emphasis on beautiful *white* women in the mass media. We should also note that mainstream *male* pop stars are required to be thin and conventionally good-looking too.

## MUSIC FOR BOYS

Away from the world of (possibly) empowering girl groups, pop stars are, of course, a mixed bunch. Male artists range from the machismo of many rap artists – including Eminem, DMX and the Wu Tang Clan – to the squeaky-clean, super-groomed image of boy bands such as \*Nsync, Backstreet Boys and Westlife. The world of DJs and dance music is still very male dominated, although female DJs such as Lottie and Lisa Lashes have appeared on the scene. Leading rock bands – in particular the 'nu metal' school such as

Limp Bizkit and Linkin Park – remain male in terms of line-up and masculine in terms of attitude. The more gentle UK rock bands like Travis and Coldplay do, however, remind us that all-male groups can produce emotional and sensitive songs. (Which is not to say that a melancholic 'indie' song is *necessarily* better than an assertive rock anthem.)

There has also been a significant stream of effeminate or androgynous men in pop, from David Bowie, Marc Bolan and the New York Dolls in the 1970s, to several 1980s bands – Japan, Culture Club, Duran Duran, The Human League, The Cure and Depeche Mode for example – through to 1990s artists such as Placebo, Jarvis Cocker of Pulp, Richey Edwards in the early Manic Street Preachers and even Marilyn Manson. Modern boy bands such as \*Nsync and 911 typically have a line-up of more-or-less effeminate 'lads' – an odd mix – who are eager to show their caring and sensitive sides in teen pop mags. This considerable number of male pop stars who are not conventionally macho, or who do not dress in a traditional masculine style and who wear make-up and discuss affairs of the heart in pop songs, must send out some kind of message to their adolescent fans. One place where such a message becomes more explicit is in the pages of pop magazines. One of my email interviewees (found via a message board on a music website) told me:

I still remember reading an interview with Martin Gore from Depeche Mode in a mid-1980s *Smash Hits*, where he was asked about his effeminate clothing and make-up, and he said that he personally enjoyed expressing himself in that way, and had found that *women tended to prefer* a man who was in touch with his 'feminine' side too. I wasn't a Depeche Mode fan, but this made a big impression on me and encouraged me to disregard some of the masculine conventions of school life, and so actually in the long run helped me to be a better and more interesting person.

(30-year-old male from Leicester, England)

A more recent example comes from UK *Top of the Pops* magazine's regular 'Pop Therapy' page from May 2001, headed 'People said I was effeminate'. Here, Darren Hayes from pop duo Savage Garden confessed that he was picked on at school:

People made fun of me because ... I could sing and I was interested in things and did things that weren't considered manly, tough or cool ... I would sit and read, write poems and lyrics and try to sing as much as I could ... People thought I was really effeminate cos in their eyes what I was doing was girls' stuff.

He explains that he 'stuck to it and never gave up', and rose above the taunts, although these experiences led to a later period of insecurity. Eventually the bullying stopped – 'I was who I was and they could see I was strong enough to know that.' Asked what advice he would give to someone going through a similar situation, he replies:

My advice for anyone would be – and I know it sounds like a cliché – to be true to yourself and stick to your guns. Believe me, you *will* beat them!

The magazine adds its own advice in a helpful box:

Be proud of who you are, you're one of a kind! No matter what you look like, sound like, how you dress or what you do, you are what you are and no one has the right to try to change that.

Messages of empowerment and self-belief such as this may be ignored, overlooked, or laughed at by some young readers, but nevertheless will convey a comforting or inspiring message to others.

A concrete example of the impact of male popular music icons comes in the personal account of another of my email interviewees, Jon, a 20-year-old male from Philadelphia, USA. At school Jon had been confused about his sexuality, as he was attracted to men, but no one else seemed to feel this way, or discuss such things. In his teens, he dated girls to 'fit in', but was profoundly troubled:

It got very scary for me towards the end of 9th grade, I would cry so hard in the shower trying to figure out why I felt this way and why no one else did. I came very close to trying to kill myself because I just felt so different.

Then in 10th grade [age 16] something amazing happened that would end up changing my life for ever, I bought my first David Bowie CD, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars*. Let me just say it blew my mind away! I saw for the first time in my life a man who was a little bit like me! He had homoerotic lyrics all through that CD and I realized for the first time that I was not alone . . . After that I started to get into other artists who were open about their sexuality, Erasure, Pet Shop Boys, and Placebo. I listened to them religiously, and they gave me the strength to tell people that I was gay for the first time.

representation  
of  
identity formation

I was the only openly gay male at my school and that became very hard for me. But I just continued to sit in my room and listen to these openly gay men singing about love, sex and the hardships of growing up gay. I am not sure if bands like Erasure, Pet Shop Boys and Placebo know how much effect their music has on younger gay teenagers, but all I know is that through their music they saved my life, helped me figure out who I am, made me feel like I belonged somewhere, and gave me the strength and courage to be proud of who I am.

Today, Jon is at college, has a steady boyfriend and several gay friends and is very comfortable with his sexuality. Whilst this case may not be typical, it provides one illustration of the power of role models in popular culture, and the way in which they can sometimes provide support or inspiration which may not be available from family and friends in everyday life.

### EMINEM: ROLE MODEL

'OK, I'm going to attempt to drown myself – You can try this at home – You can be just like me!' So begins white rapper Eminem's 1999 song 'Role model', an obviously sarcastic rant against those people who say he's not a good role model, when he never intended to be one. Explaining the song in his book *Angry Blonde*, he says: 'I wanted to be clear: Don't look at me like I'm a fucking role model' (2000: 48).

Nevertheless, that is how many people look at the highly successful star. Numerous journalists, politicians, parents and campaigners have denounced him for his total failure to be a 'good role model'. In February 2001, a member of the House of Lords in Britain called upon the Home Secretary to bar Eminem from entering the country as this 'icon of the drug culture' would be a bad influence upon children; and in July 2001, members of the House of Congress Telecommunications Subcommittee in the US were adamant that Eminem's lyrics were so dangerous to children that further steps should be taken to protect them and warn parents (Boliiek, 2001). Hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles in 2000–2001 discussed whether Eminem was a 'bad role model', or a brilliant but misunderstood artist. The idea that he was playing a 'character', and/or mirroring the 'dark side' of American society, was not a satisfactory defence for those who felt that many young fans would take the misogynist and homophobic lyrics at face value.

## BRITNEY SPEARS: ROLE MODEL?

Pop superstar Britney Spears shot to international fame in the late 1990s. By her twentieth birthday in December 2001, she had sold over 40 million albums (*Rolling Stone*, December 2001). *Money* magazine (April 2001) reported that Britney had album and concert sales in excess of 200 million US dollars within the year 2000 alone. Her early smash hit, 'Baby One More Time', raised eyebrows with its schoolgirl video and ambiguous lyrics (did 'Hit me baby one more time' refer to sex, violence, or neither?). Nevertheless, Britney became a 'girl power' icon of sorts, helped along by her assertive dancing, sometimes-independent lyrics and general success story. The second album, *Oops! I Did It Again* (2000), was less 'fluffy' than the first and contained several messages of self-reliance and inner strength, and not needing a man to be happy. Spring 2001 saw the publication of a novel, *A Mother's Gift*, written by Britney and her mother, Lynne Spears, telling the not entirely surprising story of a girl who has a close relationship with her mother and who wants to be a pop star. The book was much too 'sugary' for the critics, but was nevertheless lapped up by younger fans. Britney's creativity was seen to continue on the slightly more 'grown up' third album, *Britney* (2001), for which she had co-written several songs.

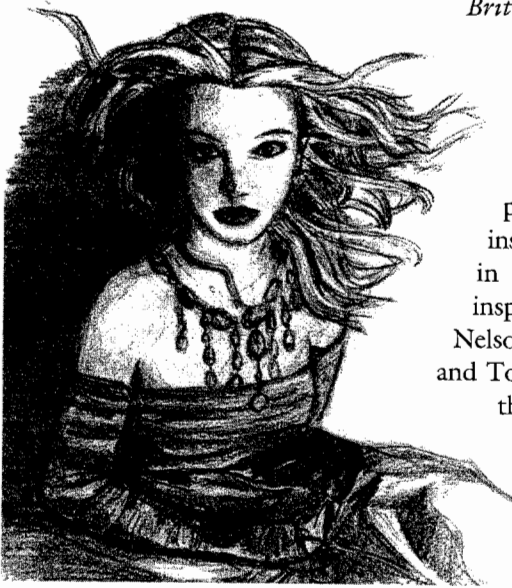


Figure 10.1 Drawing of Britney Spears, posted on the Web by her fan, Carolina Repiso Toquero

A poll by Mori for the BBC in January 2001, which asked a sample of the British public to name the person they found to be 'most inspirational', saw Britney come in seventh place. Although less inspirational than figures such as Nelson Mandela, Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair, Britney scored higher than such well-known icons as Jesus and Mother Theresa (Ananova, 2001). On the other side of the world, thousands of viewers of MTV Asia voted Britney Spears as their 'biggest' female role model (MTVAsia.com, 5 February 2001).

The question of whether or not Britney is a good 'role model' has been played out in the media several times already. Her well-publicised vow of chastity before marriage has meant that politicians and health campaigners have found it useful to refer to Britney in their campaigns against teen pregnancy (although the star has been noticeably less emphatic about this in interviews since mid-2001). But some public moralists have still felt that Britney is too provocative in her clothing and dancing. In February 2001, Myrna Shure, a developmental psychologist and author of *Raising A Thinking Child*, was quoted in the press, asserting, 'She's corrupting our kids. It's not just teenagers we're talking about. Little girls are emulating Britney too. I believe she's an awful role model.' Organisations such as the American Family Association have warned parents that Britney may not be as 'wholesome' as she might seem. At the more extreme end of the scale, evangelical Christians on the 'Dial-the-Truth Ministries' website assert that Britney's music and performances are intended to provoke 'youthful lusts', and they even call her a 'whorish woman' (see Watkins, 2000) – not really a remark filled with Christian generosity. (The same group says that parents who do not stop their children from listening to the Spice Girls are 'co-conspirators in this cultural rape of their daughters' (Thomas, 2000)).

The judgements of young pop fans often seem to be quite moralistic anyway. In summer 2001, hundreds of young people posted replies on an Internet message board which asked, 'Putting your opinion on who is a better performer aside, who do you think is a better role model for young people, Britney Spears or Christina Aguilera?' ([www.dotvsdot.com](http://www.dotvsdot.com)). The posted comments typically point to the virtues of whichever is the preferred star, and attack the other one for dressing or acting in a way which is seen as being too sexually provocative, sometimes even calling that star a 'slut' or a 'bitch'. A couple of representative comments:

I don't see how anyone can see that skank Christina as a role model to young people! Britney talks about how she attends church as much as possible, and speaks out about her strong morals. Christina's latest music video consists of her touching herself, other people touching her, and vulgar lyrics. Ya, she's really a saint!

(‘Peach’, at Dot vs Dot message board)

To tell you the truth, I think that both of them are pretty good role models. I think that Christina might be a better one because she doesn't dress like Britney as much – but she does sometimes. If you think about it, there are little kids that look up to these

girls and if you look at the way they dress – then, well they have a good chance of growing up to dress like that. I think that both girls are very talented and they should be proud of it. But I just think that they should cover up a little more.

(‘Jessica’, at Dot vs Dot message board)

Of course there is much sexism in the amount of criticism these women receive for supposedly ‘sexual’ dress or behaviour, whilst numerous male performers are just as provocative in their videos – or more so – but are not attacked in the same way.

Britney herself has struggled with the ‘role model’ image. In various interviews she has conceded that she is a role model to girls, and feels, in some ways, obliged to act accordingly. At the same time, she has defended her ‘sexy’ image, saying in June 2000: ‘I don’t understand [what the problem is]. I’m 18, I’m a girl, it’s nice to feel sexy . . . I feel comfortable doing it and it’s not like I walk around in hot pants’ (Ananova, 2000). In December 2001 she told *Glamour* magazine, ‘I don’t see anything wrong with being sexy. I think that’s a beautiful thing.’ However, she told *US Weekly* magazine that she didn’t want to be considered a role model in terms of sex and relationships, saying, ‘I just want to live my life’ (4 June 2001). Soon afterwards, though, *Arena* magazine asked Britney how she would like to be remembered, and she replied: ‘As somebody who was a good role model to young people’ (August 2001).

Such contradictions run through the whole Britney package, and no doubt add to her appeal – there’s something for everyone. For the moralists, there’s the church-going all-American girl who said she wouldn’t sleep with her boyfriend; but for those unimpressed by such wholesomeness, there’s the writhing sex kitten who refuses to be told to tone down her performances. For those who don’t like manufactured pop mannequins, there is the control freak who exercises a growing amount of control over her image and music. For those worried about her conservatism, there’s the independent-minded pop queen who says of her gay dancers, ‘I love them – they’re my best friends . . . I think it’s very cool’ (*Smash Hits*, 28 November 2001). This slippery identity means that some potentially offensive bit of the Spears persona is usually counteracted by another bit; and perhaps adds to the enticing sense of mystery – who *is* the real Britney? – which kept Madonna going for so long.

### BRITNEY SPEARS: WHAT THE FANS SAID

In March, April and May 2001, I conducted several interviews, by email,

will march into canon  
 something for everyone - like Dirty Pants

with female Britney Spears fans from around the world. (I also did some follow-up interviews after the third album, *Britney*, was released in November 2001). I contacted these fans by writing directly to young women who had created their own Britney fan sites, or to those who had posted messages on message boards within Britney fan sites. Others contacted me after I posted notices saying that I wanted to ask ‘a few questions’ to Britney Spears fans, for my research, on those website message boards. I interviewed girls rather than boys, because of the (perhaps rather simplistic) notion that Britney would be a role model to girls specifically – because young women face slightly different expectations and judgements in society. Of course, Britney’s songs of self-belief, and love, as well as her successful career, could well be inspirational to boys too. My small number of email exchanges with male Britney fans would suggest that this question would be more difficult to explore, however – the boys (stereotypically enough) indicated that Britney inspired feelings of *desire* rather than feelings of inner confidence. This is confirmed by the sharp difference between what males and females say about Britney on websites and Internet message boards: for every girl who finds Britney ‘cool’, there is a boy who finds her ‘hot’.

My interviews with female fans showed a real depth of passion and commitment to their idol. (For the sake of clarity, I have added some punctuation and corrected some spellings in the quotations below, but

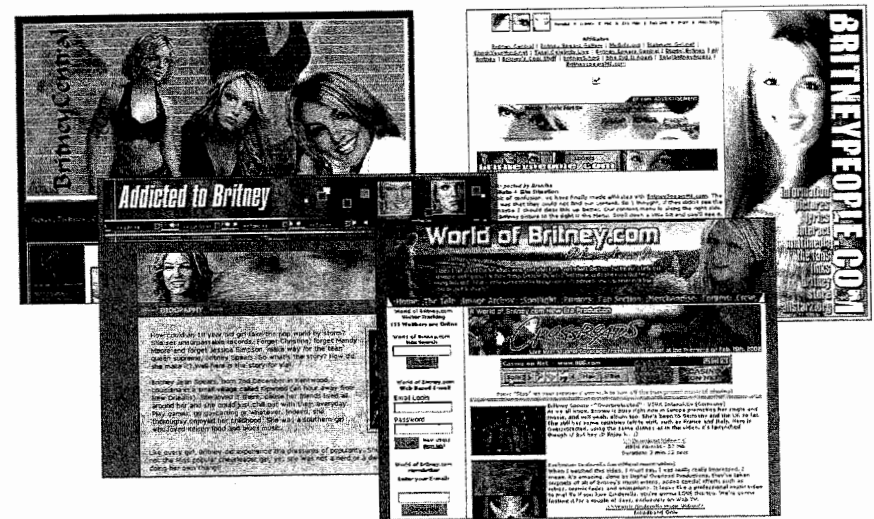


Figure 10.2 Just four of the many Britney Spears fan websites

otherwise the respondent's sentences remain unchanged.) To almost all of the fans, Britney was much more than a performer who made music and videos which they enjoyed. She was an icon, and, more particularly, an *inspiration* to these young women:

I like Britney because of the way she thinks. [...] Really she is just comfortable with who she is and that is really cool. [...] Sometimes I pretend I am her just to boost up my confidence like as if I am acting, and this really helps me out when I meet new people. Like a mask in a way. Really if you pretend to be like Britney you can have more fun, but I like to be myself with more edge and 'coolness' if you get my drift. [...] I do believe that Britney sends out good messages to girls. She shows self esteem which makes girls believe that they can achieve anything, and she shows us that there is another Britney behind all the hair and makeup that is just average which shows us girls that we can be anything we want.

(15-year-old female from Sydney, Australia)

I think that Britney sends out the message for us girls to have self-confidence. I have a great amount of confidence in myself. [...] It's definitely a good thing to have self-confidence in what you do, wear, etc. If you don't have confidence in yourself how do you expect anyone else to. [...] With all these girl power songs coming out, saying how we don't need guys, I have so much confidence – it definitely helped me out. Like 'look at me now, you can't have me, too bad, you lost'.

(17-year-old female from Mississippi, USA)

[Britney] makes me feel confident inside, her words are just there saying, you know, I am who I am, like it – or leave, I don't need to depend on someone! [...] I know that there are a lot of people who say she is a bad influence, but I honestly feel as if she's a real girl . . . who deserves to be treated like every other 19 year old girl. She sends out the most important message – 'Be happy with yourself, and love yourself'. My favorite quote I have ever heard from Brit is 'You can't love anyone until you learn to love yourself'.

(16-year-old female from California, USA)

Britney gives me a message of accepting yourself, and not letting

boys push you around. She also advocates 'Girl Power' for instance in one of her songs ['What You See (Is What You Get)'] she says, '[. . .] You should never try to change me, I can be nobody else and I like the way I am . . . I can promise you baby what you see is what you get.' Here she is basically saying that [. . .] if a boy wants to change her than he better leave. That shows girls not to let their boyfriends boss them around. To be their own woman. Also in 'Stronger': 'I am stronger than yesterday, now it's nothing but my way, my loneliness ain't killing me no more . . . I'm stronger.' Here her boyfriend just dumped her but she is stronger because of it. If a girl ever broke up with her boyfriend she could listen to these songs and get empowered.

Britney is such a good role model. [...] For her to advocate abstinence, and still have guys pining after her shows a lot about her. It shows you don't have to have sex to be sexy. I don't really know why I would want to copy Britney as a person. I mean wouldn't my mom seem like a better person, or Princess Diana, or Mother Theresa. There is just a spark that Britney shows that attracts everyone to her. Britney is the best thing to ever happen to me I think. I make it seem like my life is really horrible or something, which it isn't, I just wish that Brit was my older sister or something. That is how I look up to her. Like a younger sister looks up to an older sister.

She always makes me happy, and happiness is confidence. [...] Oh also in her book she explains about her troubles, how long it took her to get where she is, and all of her hardships. I realize that if I work hard I could be where I want to be and Britney helps me see that.

(15-year-old female from Pennsylvania, USA)

Several others also mentioned the songs 'Stronger' and 'What You See (Is What You Get)' – from the album *Oops! . . . I Did It Again* (2000) – as particularly inspiring ones. ('Stronger' was also an international hit single in 2000–2001). These songs were brought up by young women from all over the world (specific song titles were not mentioned in the questions):

I think that 'What You See Is What You Get' is the song I can relate to the most. In the song she sings about how her boyfriend should like her for who she is, and not try to change her, or there will be consequences.

(15-year-old female from Texas, USA)

'What You See Is What You Get' – it's just great and it lets every girl out there know that it's good to let the guy know that you're not gonna change your whole life style for him. He should accept you, and that's nice to know [that Britney is] preaching that.

(14-year-old female from Florida, USA)

[The lyrics to 'Stronger' and 'What You See (Is What You Get)'] mean so much to me, because for so long in my life, I did everything I could to try and please everyone else, and it got me nowhere but heartache. But Britney came along, and she's shown me that I don't have to put up with shit!

(16-year-old female from California, USA)

['What You See (Is What You Get)'] is very important. It sums up Britney's personality. She always says how she's just herself and can't change her attitudes/habits for anyone else. I model myself after her quotes. I am very self conscious, and strive to like myself more, as most teenage girls do.

(16-year-old female from Massachusetts, USA)

'Stronger' ('Stronger than yesterday, now it's nothing but my way, my loneliness ain't killing me no more') shows that I need nobody to live my life and I will be OK if I am alone.

(11-year-old female from Athens, Greece)

Britney Spears is a role model to me for her honesty and kindness. Her song 'Stronger' makes me feel as if I am a girl in that position. I think a lot of people think that too.

(9-year-old female from Georgia, USA)

Britney is so cool. [...] If somebody is horrible to me then I always get quite upset, but I then made 'Stronger' my new theme tune. It plays inside my head every time somebody says something that hurts my feelings and at times like that.

(13-year-old female from Bristol, UK)

Following the release of 'Britney' the latter correspondent added:

Britney still inspires me. As she gets older I'm also getting older with her. So, I kind of grow up with her music. So, as her music

gets more sophisticated I am also getting more sophisticated. I love the line 'Say hello to the girl that I am' in 'Overprotected'.

(as above)

Another fan found 'Oops' to be particularly meaningful:

Singing 'Oops! I Did It Again' makes me feel sexy and confident. In this song the girl is in charge of the relationship and the guy is just infatuated with her, but she's just playing with him – which is a relief from all those stupid rap songs where the girls are just there to please the guy. This song empowers me to be me and guys will soon follow! [Videos like the one for 'Oops' are] just good clean happy fun, and since all guys like Britney, it shows girls that they don't have to be a slut to get guys to like them.

(15-year-old female from New Jersey, USA)

Some fans were wary of calling Britney a 'role model' as such:

I'd prefer not to copy a 'role model', because every person must have their own taste.

(11-year-old female from Astana, Republic of Kazakhstan)

Does Britney help me feel more confident? Not really. I like being my self but if I didn't, a singer wouldn't help me.

(11-year-old female from Athens, Greece)

Britney shouldn't be looked at as a role model, she didn't ask to be looked up to, she simply had talent and made it shown. [...] Many parents say she is a bad role model for their children but that's their job, not hers. [...] I think she is a good influence because she grew up ordinary but she became something extraordinary. A normal girl, when she was my age she wasn't extremely popular, wasn't the smartest or most beautiful, but she was herself and she liked who she was, and is. It gives me the strength to think 'Wow, she was just a normal girl with an abnormal future.' It makes me think 'If she can be successful, so can I.'

(14-year-old female from Lansing, Michigan, USA)

I do not look to Britney Spears as a 'role model'. No celebrity should be considered a role model, in my opinion. Teachers,

parents, siblings, and coaches have accessible personalities and should be the real role models.

(19-year-old female from Washington, DC, USA)

Nevertheless, this 19-year-old fan goes on to explain that Britney is certainly a powerful *inspiration* to her:

But I admire Britney very much. I admire her ambition, her positive attitude, and her relentless work ethic. I admire the way she does not take herself too seriously, and openly admits/makes mistakes. She feels real. [...] She does send out a good message to girls – be secure in yourself and your body, no matter what anyone says, you'll pull through if you exude confidence. Britney has worked very hard for what she wants and she got it all, and makes it clear to her fans that we can achieve what we dream of, too. So many girls, myself included, have no one to tell them that nowadays. [...] I would not say that Britney, or any celebrity, should be a role model, because when you take on a role model with a calculated image, there's going to be a conflict of identities; girls need to be themselves, not a celebrity, and Britney herself makes that clear. Britney makes my friends and myself feel confident because she is a girl our age who has so many great talents, yet is seemingly grounded. That makes us feel as though we can excel without giving in to so many pressures. She [...] has power and beauty, and that makes girls proud to be girls (smile).

(19-year-old female from Washington DC, USA)

Similarly, some fans were sensibly cautious about the idea that a pop star would turn you into a better person (an assumption perhaps contained in questions of mine such as, 'Does Britney help you feel confident about being yourself?'). The respondents were nevertheless still eager to assert how inspiring Britney could be:

Confidence really comes from within, I don't think that an artist like Britney can really make you be confident, [but] they help you. I believe Britney's music has helped me be more secure about myself and be less afraid of what guys think about me. Her songs are very inspiring to me. [...] I think Britney sends out a positive message to not just girls but guys as well. Her lyrics are never negative and she also tries to get girls to be who

they are. 'Just be yourself' as I've heard her say many times, which is true, and 'Never give up, cause you can do anything you want, you really can,' as she has said in Britney TV specials. [...] I enjoy 'What You See (Is What You Get)' – it's an inspiring song that basically tells girls to be themselves.

(16-year-old female from Saskatchewan, Canada)

After the release of 'Britney' this respondent added:

I still think Britney is very inspiring and even more so now that she's actually co-written some of the songs she sings in her new album. She's got a lot of talent.

(as above)

As mentioned above, Britney Spears has been the target of complaints from church leaders and parents, who have asserted that Britney is a bad role model because of her revealing clothing and (arguably) provocative dancing. Almost all of the fans were aware of these criticisms and brought up the issue (without being prompted by any direct questions on this matter). A few of them could see the argument against Britney's clothing:

I don't think Britney is a good role model. I like her music, it's just the way she dresses sometimes. I don't think it's good for young girls to see that, because they might think it's OK to dress like that.

(15-year old female from Texas, USA)

Just because she dresses sexy, doesn't mean she is a slut. I could see why people might think it is a wrong message. [...] I don't think there is anything wrong with girls wanting to look sexy. I do think there is something wrong with 6 year olds dressing like Britney, but the parents should be responsible for that. And the clothes companies that distribute those clothes should be held responsible.

(15-year-old female from Pennsylvania, USA)

Other fans, less surprisingly, defended Britney and admired her self-confidence:

I think Britney does send out good messages. She tells you to believe in yourself and that everything you want to do, if you try

hard enough, you will get it. I think her sexy dressing can be a positive message if you look at it that way. By showing off skin she shows she is confident about herself and isn't scared to show everyone how she is.

(13-year-old female from New Jersey, USA)

Some detected sexism in the complaints about their idol:

Why is it okay for guys to get on TV and rap and sing while they grab themselves, [but] it's not alright for a girl to get on stage and do a dance while showing bare midriff, and shaking her stuff a little. I don't get it.

(17-year-old female from Mississippi, USA)

After all of this discussion of Britney Spears as a 'role model', it is also worth mentioning that fans would often say that Britney just makes them *happy*. To give just one example:

She has songs on her albums that are upbeat and fun to sing to and that I can relate to. I don't know why I first started to like her. I think it was when I saw a special on MTV about her. She was so positive about things, and had all the guys after her, and she seemed like a good person with good morals. Whenever I see a picture with her (they are all over my wall) or a commercial, or something with her in it, it makes me happy. [...] Whenever I have a rough day, or am tired, or sad, or just want to have fun I pop in my Britney albums and everything is ok.

(15-year-old female from Pennsylvania, USA)

This set of email interviews with Britney Spears fans around the world, then, shows that these young women were inspired, first and foremost, by Britney's self-confidence. The message that you should 'love yourself' and not worry too much what others think of you – as long as you are doing your best, being a teenager – seemed to have had quite an impact on these respondents. Britney's 'no sex before marriage' message was seen as important by some, irrelevant by others. Although the pro-marriage position is rather conservative, the message that girls should not have sex until they feel ready for it is one that would be seen as positive by many groups, including most feminists, educators, parents and politicians, as well as the more predictable church leaders.

Although some of her critics portray Britney as a rather doll-like male

fantasy – and earlier singles such as the execrably-titled 'Born To Make You Happy' ('I don't know how to live without your love/I was born to make you happy') didn't exactly challenge this idea – Britney's fans see her as assertive, strong and confident, and an example that young women can make it on their own. The independent, self-assured message of songs like 'Stronger', 'What You See (Is What You Get)' and 'What It's Like To Be Me' seemed to be favoured over the more slushy lyrics of songs like 'From The Bottom Of My Broken Heart' and 'One Kiss From You', which were seen as less interesting and relevant, although the fans clearly enjoyed them too. Even the more recent single with the not-entirely-empowering title 'I'm a Slave 4 U' (2001) was not seen as subservient – fans knew that the song was meant to be *about music* and saw it as a celebration of Britney growing up, citing lyrics such as, 'All you people look at me like I'm a little girl, well did you ever think it'd be OK for me to step into this world?'. The fans were also very keen on 'Overprotected' (released as a single in 2002), which is another assertion of independence and self-reliance. (It might be said that the interviewees were perhaps reacting affirmatively to my questions about whether Britney was a good role model, and so produced more thoughts about Britney's positive influence than they otherwise might; nevertheless, it would seem unlikely – and rather patronising – to suggest that these girls and young women dreamt up their elaborate tributes to the power of Britney without really meaning them.)

Of course, although Britney Spears is hugely popular, the majority of young people are not big Britney fans. Indeed, some teenagers don't like her at all. On one 'Anti-Britney Spears' webpage, part of 'Felicia and Randeem's Music Site', these two American teenagers comment:

Ugh! Britney Spears. [...] She's untalented, a bad role model, [...] and she dresses like a cheap hooker. [...] Britney is teaching young girls that in order to be popular, you need to show off as much skin as you can. For all those young girls who are reading this, that think Britney is their role model, well all I have to say is you need someone better to look up to. You need to idolize someone who actually does something good in this world. Sure you may think Britney is pretty and she gets all the guys to drool over her, but what does it get you in the end. Guys only look at you as a sex object. They don't care if you have a brain [...] You can ask almost any guy why they love Britney and they will all say the same thing. They like her because she's hot and she has a nice body. They will hardly ever say they like her because she sings good or they love her mind.

Is that what you young girls really want? To be thought of as nothing more than a body? If that's what you want then you can go on idolizing your precious Britney. But as for me, I want people to like me for how intelligent I am, not for how much skin I'm showing.

(Felicia and Randeem's Music Site, 2001)

Although different people will account for the Britney phenomenon in varying ways, then, it seems clear that to Britney's fans, she offers a message of empowerment, confidence and independence. This is not just an 'idea' but something which the fans seem to carry forward into their lives. Although critics are concerned with the amount of sultry pouting and skin display which Britney has employed to achieve success, she nevertheless 'works' as an icon who shows that young women can be provocative but remain in control, and can run relationships on their own terms, or simply exist as a happy independent being.

## ROLE MODELS: SUMMARY

The idea of 'role models' remains a little vague, in academic terms, and psychologists don't seem to have found any very clever way of describing the process by which individuals may employ role models in their self-development. That's okay, though, as it leaves the way clear for a straightforward understanding of how role models might work: that as people grow up, and indeed advance into their twenties and later years, they look for inspiring or comforting figures who offer positive-looking examples of how life can be lived. These identities are not 'copied' in any big or direct sense, but they feed into our on-going calculations about how we see life and where we would like to fit into society. As we construct our narratives of the self – see Chapter 5 – we are able to appropriate (borrow) the positive bits of other people's attitudes or lives that we fancy for ourselves. This means that media stars can be seen as an inspiration for one aspect of their character but not for another – Britney Spears, for example, can be seen as an icon due to her apparent independence and success, whilst other aspects of her persona, such as her religious beliefs or provocative clothing, may be ignored. Because of this selectivity, it is perhaps unnecessary for authority figures to feel that 'role models' should be flawless.

## SELF-HELP BOOKS AND THE PURSUIT OF A HAPPY IDENTITY

In Chapters 5 to 7, on the ideas of Giddens, Foucault and queer theory, we saw the emergence of an approach to personal identities which suggests that in modern societies, individuals feel relatively unconstrained by traditional views of their place in the world and carve out new roles for themselves instead. As a person grows and develops, they typically continue to work upon their sense of 'self' – their self-identity – and gradually modify their attitudes and self-expression to accommodate a mix of social expectations and also, importantly, *what they themselves are most comfortable with*. (It is during this thinking-through of self-identity that role models may be of significance.)

In the future, it is anticipated that this role freedom will become even greater. The media, as we've said before, gives us ideas about gender, and relationships, and ways of living. These ideas come over in TV, movies, magazines and pop music, all of which we have discussed. The most explicit carriers of advice about gender, lifestyle and relationships, though, are self-help books – also known as 'popular psychology' and in some cases 'recovery' texts – which we turn to now.

It may not be obvious why we'd be looking at self-help books here: they may be popular as non-fiction books go – even a 'publishing phenomenon' – but a lot of people don't read them. If they count as 'popular mass media' at all, they are on the margins. But there are two reasons for taking a look at self-help texts:

- 1 The ideas in self-help books 'trickle down' into popular culture. Note the rise of 'therapy speak' in movies as diverse as *The Mexican* and *HeartBreakers*, as well as obvious places like *Analyze This* and any Woody Allen film. When Bette Midler says in *What Women Want* that men are from Mars, we all know what she's talking about. In TV too, from the relationship-obsessed women in *Ally McBeal* to the trying-to-be-tough guys in *NYPD Blue* and obviously *The Sopranos*, the language of therapy and self-help can't be avoided. Women's magazines, in particular, both dissipate and assume a working knowledge of today's self-help clichés. And Elayne Rapping (1996) observes that there are numerous successful TV shows, in the mould of *Oprah* in the US and *Tricia* in the UK, which have a very strong relationship with self-help publishing, using self-help authors as star experts and directing viewers to their books for solutions.
- 2 As well as noting that ideas from self-help books go forth into everyday

culture, we can assume that the approach of the books – and the most successful ones in particular – is in itself a *reflection* of the changes in society and the needs of (some) readers. Giddens has described self-help books as ‘a kind of on-the-ground literature of our reflexive engagement with our everyday lives’ (Giddens and Pierson, 1998: 141), and whilst we should be cautious about reading them as accounts of a universal reality, these popular publications must tell us something about life today.

The books aimed specifically at either women or men are of additional interest because they describe aspirational but reasonably realistic (as opposed to utopian) models of how we might expect women and men to present themselves in today’s society. Where academic texts on feminism or masculinities fail to actually assert how women and men should act in modern society, these books step in and spell it out – a role which they share, incidentally, with lifestyle magazines (see Chapters 8–9).

### EXTENDED ANALYSIS AVAILABLE

This short discussion of self-help books is based on a much more substantial on-going analysis of these texts, which I will publish in the future. Meanwhile a much extended version of the present discussion of self-help books appears on this book’s website at [www.theoryhead.com](http://www.theoryhead.com) (Gauntlett, 2002).

### Personal narratives and lifestyles

As we saw in Chapter 5, Giddens (1991, 1992) argues that in modern societies, individuals have to construct a ‘narrative of the self’ – a personal biography and understanding of one’s own identity. Self-help books typically incorporate the same kind of idea, and I would argue that they typically suggest one of three challenges to the readers’ own narrative:

- 1 Many self-help books suggest ways in which readers can make their narrative of self more strong, coherent and resilient, so that they can acquire a greater sense of personal power, confidence and self-direction. These are books for people who lack self-belief and many of them are marketed at women. *Does that mean to be a normal f*
- 2 Other self-help books are about *transforming* the self – rewriting the previous narrative, or ditching it altogether, in order to become a new,

*you must take self belief?*

strong, positive person. These are books for people who want to overcome character flaws which prevent them from feeling fulfilled, and most of the titles for men fall into this category, as do many more for women.

- 3 A different kind of self-help book encourages the reader to amend their narrative of themselves and their view of others, so that the world ‘as it is’ can be accepted more happily. This approach is less common, but includes the super-successful *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, which (as we will see) argues that men and women can get along really well as long as they accept that they are from totally different planets.

As we saw in Chapter 6, Michel Foucault became interested in ‘techniques of the self’ and ‘the care of the self’ – questions of lifestyle which today are tackled by self-help books. In the introduction to *The History of Sexuality Volume Two, The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault helpfully proposes a methodology for this kind of study:

A history of the way individuals are urged to constitute themselves as subjects of moral conduct would be concerned with the models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by oneself, for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object. This last is what might be called a history of ‘ethics’ and ‘ascetics,’ understood as a history of the forms of moral subjectivation and of the practices of the self that are meant to ensure it.

(1992: 29)

Foucault, then, lends support to the idea that we can learn about our culture by looking at its self-help books; he was interested in the ways in which a society enabled or encouraged individuals to perceive or modify their self-identity.

### Solutions to every problem

Self-help books cannot easily be pigeon-holed or stereotyped with any accuracy. Literally thousands of new self-help titles are published every year (Stine, 1997), and during the 1990s sales of self-help, popular psychology and ‘recovery’ books grew to over 60 million per year in the USA (American Booksellers Association, 2001). The shelves of any major bookstore will

offer many titles on being confident, being positive, being successful and loving yourself. There are also numerous titles on relationships, covering issues such as how to find a partner, how to keep a partner, how to have better sex, how to communicate with your partner, how to escape your abusive partner, and how to begin a new life afterwards. There are subdivisions of each category – books on each of the above areas aimed at larger people, older people and black people, for example. Many self-help books are explicitly aimed at women, many others are not gender-specific and a smaller number are for men in particular. When asked about the relative numbers of women and men reading self-help books, some booksellers specialising in this genre indicated that a growing number of men were joining women in seeking advice from these texts on how to improve and transform their lives (see Gauntlett (2002), on website).

### Self-help for men

My study of a number of recent self-help books for men (again, see Gauntlett (2002)) took in volumes such as *Understanding the Tin Man: Why So Many Men Avoid Intimacy* by William July II (2001), *Ordinary Heroes: A Future for Men* by Michael Hardiman (2000), *If Men Could Talk, This is What They Would Say* by Alon Gratch (2001), *Ten Stupid Things Men Do To Mess Up Their Lives* by Laura Schlessinger (1998) and *Success for Dummies* by Zig Ziglar (1998). Although they varied considerably in approach and style, it was found that these books shared the following messages:

- Men are not monolithic and unchangeable. Men can change for the better.
- Men are not good at intimacy, expressing their more vulnerable or loving feelings, connecting with others, or admitting pain or failure. They can and should improve in all of these respects.
- Men generally place too much emphasis on work and fail to develop a fulfilling personal and home life. But nobody on their deathbed regrets that they spent too little time at the office.
- You may be able to 'do what you like' in modern society, but you won't be happy without a mixture of love and responsibility.
- Men cultivate a tough outer appearance, distinguishing themselves from women, but inside they have a complex emotional life and needs that are remarkably similar to women's.

The books are generally built on the same assumptions that underlie theories of late modernity (or postmodernity, as some would call it), such as we saw

in the work of Giddens: relationships have become more fluid; traditional ties have broken down; identities are flexible; and there are increasingly loose and 'free' choices of lifestyle and sexual activity available. The self-help authors do not want to be academic observers or theorists, though – their approach is, of course, much more proactive: they tell readers how they can lay a stable path through the quagmire of modern living, making firm (and usually very *responsible*) choices in order to gain happiness and fulfilment.

### Self-help for women

My study of books aimed at women included *The Go-Girl Guide: Surviving your 20s with Savvy, Soul and Style* by Julia Bourland (2000), *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*, an excursion into self-help territory by renowned black feminist and cultural critic bell hooks (1993) and Laura Schlessinger's *Ten Stupid Things Women Do To Mess Up Their Lives* (1995). (See Gauntlett (2002), on website, for a more detailed discussion). These diverse texts were all agreed on the following messages:

- Modern living can be difficult and stressful. The solutions include positive thinking and a planned approach, in which you tackle problems in an assertive but not reckless way. Thinking about your needs, with the help of a self-help book, is a good idea.
- You should absolutely *do what you want to do*. Doing things in life just because others expect you to, or because of habit or tradition, is a very bad idea.
- Self-esteem is very important. You have to feel good about yourself.
- Don't make excuses. Take control of your life.

It can be noted that unlike the books for men, which focused on men's emotional tardiness, insecurity and screwed-up inner life, the successful books for women generally encourage readers to feel that they have no problems inside, as long as they can be confident; with self-assurance and a positive approach, they suggest, anything can be achieved.

### More self-help for everyone

There are, of course, many self-help books which are not aimed at either sex in particular, because their advice about life-planning, relationships or overcoming problems is intended to benefit everybody. Here we'll briefly look at two rather different examples. (Again, longer discussions appear on this book's website).

*Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* by John Gray (1993) is one of the best-known self-help books today, often referenced (whether in admiring or mocking tones) in movies, TV shows and magazines. It has sold 'more than seven million copies in the United States and millions more in 40 different languages around the world' (www.marsvenus.com). In fact the book has been turned into a publishing 'franchise', with the same basic ideas being reworked into many more books by the same author (including *Mars and Venus in the Bedroom*, *Mars and Venus in Love*, *Practical Miracles for Mars and Venus* and several others), plus cassettes, CDs, videos, computer software, courses, workshops, a syndicated newspaper column, a radio show, a TV show (www.marsvenustv.com), a musical stage play (!) and even a board game, all bearing the *Mars and Venus* brand.

Unlike most self-help books, which encourage readers to change their circumstances when they are not happy with them, *Men Are From Mars* is all about changing one's *perception* of reality so that it can be accepted more happily. 'When men and women are able to respect and accept their differences,' Gray explains, 'then love has a chance to blossom' (1993: 14). The book is built on the explicit assumption that women and men are 'completely different' (ibid.: 5), illustrated by the metaphor of the book's title, which suggests that the problem with (heterosexual) relationships today is that men and women have 'forgotten' that they originally came from different planets. This is, in short, a way of asserting that traditional sex stereotypes were right all along – men are rational and analytic, whilst women are emotional and talk a lot (ibid.: 36). Gray says that when women and men don't get along perfectly in today's world, it is because they have made the modern mistake of assuming that men and women are fundamentally similar, which leads to misunderstandings, tension and frustration. The solution lies in appreciating these 'natural' differences and taking the time to communicate more clearly based on these principles.

Although it is common to see the success of *Men Are From Mars* as a modern, liberal 'touchy-feely' phenomenon, then, this is quite inappropriate, as the book proposes a return to 1950s-style gender roles within relationships. The aim of *Men Are From Mars* is to foster relationships where a heterosexual couple are equally 'understanding' of each other – which sounds nice – but are not actually equals. The Mars-Venus programme may bring happiness and reconciliation to couples who were previously insufficiently sympathetic to each others' character traits – as many satisfied couples now apparently attest – but it remains problematic. If a Mars-Venus couple were to procreate, for example, they would seem to be destined to bring up children whose ridiculously outdated views of gender would cripple them in the modern world.

The main problem with *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, though, is its failure to recommend real, root-and-branch change. Many of the men described in Gray's relationship anecdotes are emotionally retarded shells, unable to connect or communicate on any deep level. These cases could be read as a disturbing indictment of our culture which produces such men; but Gray's idea is that we should just accept it. He knows that change is difficult – and so he tells women to love and respect their male partners' strange behaviour. He tells men to change a little – by listening to their partners more, without responding with hurt or hostility – but it's not enough to break society's cycle of producing men and women who feel that they are from different planets (as the book's success shows). Whenever the book edges towards suggesting real change for its male or female users, it consistently shies away and seeks refuge in the idiotic mantra of its title. If a woman is frustrated that her man will not change, 'she is forgetting that men are from Mars!' (ibid.: 104), Gray writes gleefully, but not all readers (one hopes) will find this glib explanation to be entirely helpful.

An entirely different approach is proposed in *Life Strategies* by Phillip C. McGraw (2001) – 'Dr Phil' from TV's *Oprah*. This book is another hit, having sold over one million copies within two years of its first publication in 1999. Unlike Gray, McGraw does not think that one should learn to accommodate unhappy situations. If something isn't working, says Dr Phil, change it. The words 'Stop Making Excuses!' are plastered across the book's front cover. The back summarises the content well:

Whether it's a bad relationship, a dead-end career, or a harmful habit, Dr McGraw helps you wake up and get out of your rut. It is never too late to take charge of, and be responsible for, your life.

McGraw asserts that you have to be your own 'life manager', and make the same assertive demands of yourself that you would make if you had been hired to 'manage' someone else (2001: 169, 226). McGraw asks his readers to consider whether they are doing what they *really* want in life, or if it is just the result of habit or compromise (ibid.: 14). You have to be 'accountable for your own life' (ibid.: 15), and accepting an unhappy deal is not recommended. McGraw suggests strategies and planning techniques to achieve this.

Readers who had posted their views of the book at Amazon.com seemed to appreciate the emphasis on personal accountability, the 'realism' and drive for solutions – as opposed to over-optimistic or victimisation perspectives – and the author's 'straight talking' approach. On the other hand, one

reader suggested that the advice is all common sense and that Dr Phil fails to recognise that life is about the *journey*, not planning its conquest.

## SELF-HELP: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

On the whole, the self-help literature proposes a quite consistent set of messages, centred around the acquisition of self-belief, self-esteem and the confidence to change things and seek a better life. All of them emphasise success in personal relationships above achievement at work, although several of them stress that *happiness* in one's work is important too.

With the exception of John Gray's compassionately worded but disturbingly stereotyped *Men Are From Mars* thesis, self-help books typically assert that personal change is *necessary* and *essential*. They are usually very clear on this point – indeed, the tough-talking Laura Schlessinger would say that the failure to pursue fundamental change is 'pathetic'.

To summarise the most common self-help messages:

- believe in yourself and you can achieve anything. Social 'barriers' can generally be disregarded if you have the will to overcome them.
- you can't let the world 'happen' to you; instead you must take control of your life.
- it may not be obvious what would make you happy in life, and what is available to you. These things have to be worked out; and then you can strive to get them. ('You have to name it to claim it,' as McGraw says).
- women and men are fundamentally similar on the 'inside', although men may have learned to be overly insular, emotionally withdrawn and bad at communicating, whilst women may not be confident or recognise the full range of their capabilities. But in any case, both women and men can adopt new ways of thinking and behaving so that they can become fully-functioning, balanced, self-assured, emotionally intelligent people.
- change is always possible.

As I have noted already in this chapter, these approaches and ideas are very much in line with Anthony Giddens's view of modernity – a world of fluid relationships, where identities and personal connections have to be worked on and negotiated, and where we continually have to make choices about who we are, how we will present ourselves, and who we want to associate with. The book of tradition has been (more or less) ripped up, to be replaced with a bookstore bulging with new lifestyle manuals – some of

which, like *Mars and Venus* and *The Surrendered Wife* (Doyle, 2000), offer a return to tradition for those who want it, whilst others, like *Life Strategies* and *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway* (Jeffers, 1997) and thousands more, propose an assertive new approach where social forces are to be pummelled into submission by the independent, feisty individual.

Whilst commentators upon the self-help scene such as Elayne Rapping (1996) and Wendy Simonds (1996) are concerned that the desire for inner healing may have replaced the quest for bigger changes in society – which is a reasonable concern – I think the two are not mutually exclusive, but can go hand-in-hand. Rapping, to be fair, recognises that this might be a possibility, but she is further concerned about the tendency of self-help and the 'recovery' movement to lead people towards 'shelter from the storm of modern life', which she suggests is a weak ambition; 'staying dry, while important for survival, is not really our ultimate goal', she says (1996: 185), meaning of course that modern life is something to be encountered and challenged, not hidden away from. This would be a good point, but I have found that most of today's self-help bestsellers promote a forceful engagement with the world, not a retirement from it. They are very individualistic, of course – they are about finding empowerment, success and happiness for yourself, not your community or social group – but they promote values of compassion and emotional sensitivity too, so we can hope that those individuals who reach a happy, self-actualised state will then go on to spread their good fortune, and try to help others. (That may be optimistic, but not necessarily wrong.) Self-help books generally ignore social constraints – they do not tell readers that they will most likely not get on well in life because of sexism, racism, or other forms of discrimination and oppression – which makes them bad as social analyses; but they are not intended as sociological studies, they are meant to encourage and empower individuals to believe in themselves regardless of their social category or background, so the books cannot really be criticised on that basis.

## EMOTIONAL LITERACY

I have considered self-help books here because they offer the most explicit expression of an outlook and approach which is becoming increasingly widespread in modern societies: the rise of emotion and communication skills; the drive for equality in all areas; and in particular the need for fulfilment and to be 'your own person', which is a goal at the heart of many movies, pop songs and magazines. This ethos has taken hold in the more austere corners of public life too: in the past, political leaders could be relatively aloof and unapproachable, as long as the people had faith in their

abilities. Today, it is 'emotional intelligence' which is seen as the heart of impressive leadership. Tony Blair is said to have mastered it and so maintains an enviable popularity in modern politics where an ability to 'connect' with the people has become essential, and where the public fascination is with the 'emotions and ambitions' that drive government, not the policies themselves (Rawnsley, 2001). Furthermore, in January 2001 the British government launched the manifesto of Antidote, the 'Campaign for Emotional Literacy' ([www.antidote.org.uk](http://www.antidote.org.uk)) which aims 'to create an emotionally literate culture, where the facility to handle the complexities of emotional life is as widespread as the capacity to read, write and do arithmetic'. So we can note that self-help, formerly a kind of popular resistance to 'establishment' norms of emotional conservatism, restraint and self-control (in British terms, the 'stiff upper lip'), is now being recommended by governments – hoping that self-help discourses will penetrate culture from the 'top down' – as well.

### **FEARLESS AND ASPIRATIONAL DISCOURSES**

In this chapter we have looked at the 'girl power' slogans of the Spice Girls, the assertions of independence in hit singles from Britney Spears and Destiny's Child, the positive and negative aspects of male pop idols and the promotion of self-reliance and inner strength in popular self-help books. In each of these examples, as in the lifestyle magazines considered in the previous chapters, we see possible insecurities within modern self-identities being addressed through fearless, confident discourses, generally in a glamorous and aspirational form. In the final chapter I will seek to draw together the theories and the media examples to suggest some conclusions about the interaction between media, gender and identity today.