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editorial: role models

On Education

Determining which people we should look to for personal guidance and what role they should play in shaping our lives is a perennial issue of moral and philosophical inquiry. Although our particular answers to these questions change in different historical, sociopolitical and educational contexts, each generation, and indeed each individual, faces them in some form or other. There is certainly no shortage of potential role models in contemporary societies, but how do we decide which role models, if any, are worth emulating? The authors of this issue of on_education engage with these and related issues and questions concerning role models and their often ambivalent educational role and functions in educational contexts. They come from various areas of educational theory and research, and thus the issue as a whole provides an overview on some of the most important current controversies on role modelling and exemplarism in education.

Keywords: democratic education, emulation, moral education, moral exemplarism, role models

Determining which people we should look to for personal guidance and what role they should play in shaping our lives is a perennial issue of moral and philosophical inquiry. Although our particular answers to these questions change in different historical, sociopolitical and educational contexts, each generation, and indeed each individual, faces them in some form or other (see, for instance: Macho, 2011; Schütte & Nielsen-Sikora, 2023). There is certainly no shortage of potential role models in contemporary societies, but how do we decide which role models, if any, are worth emulating?

Take the example of social media. These platforms are rife with commercial content expressly designed to subtly influence consumer behavior and increase usage, often with the help of cutting-edge psychological research. In a recent Pew Research Center (2022) poll in the United States, over half of adolescents reported being online “almost constantly,” with roughly a fifth using YouTube or TikTok at this frequency. These platforms are not only home to advertisements and marketing ploys directed at their users, but also so-called “influencers,” independent personalities who generate income in part by using their media presence to plug various products to their viewers (see also: Nymoen & Schmitt, 2021). These individuals can have a significant effect on young people’s lifestyle choices and self-concepts. According to the “YouTube Generational Study” conducted by Google in 2015, 4 in 10 millennials said that their favorite content creators “understand them better than their friends.” Given the amount of time young people spend with these content creators online, the age-old questions surrounding role models and their influence in our lives gain renewed relevance in the digital public sphere.

Or consider the realm of politics. Political history is full of examples of problematic followership, cults of personality, as well as exemplary political leadership, and these phenomena are just as

present today. For example, the rise of left- and right-populism in Western politics is often propagated by strong personalities, and a common aspect of their message is the weakness, inefficiency or unreliability of democratic processes (Mazzoleni, 2008). These personalities can develop sizable followings, and their influence can not only lead to real disruptions in democratic politics, but also make the task of populating our governmental bodies and executive branches with democratically-oriented individuals much more difficult. Against this backdrop, one may wonder whether role modelling itself is incompatible with a democratic culture and ethos (cf. the debate about 'heros' and democracy: Thomä, 2019; Bröckling, 2020).

The educational significance of role models grows not only out of intersections between economics, politics and education, but it is also a classical issue in debates about moral education. Issues surrounding role modelling, moral exemplarism and their relationship to moral growth have significantly increased in prominence in Anglo-American educational research. A major contributor to this trend has been the rise of neo-Aristotelian approaches to moral philosophy and moral education (e.g. Sanderse, 2013; Kristjánsson, 2006; 2015; as well as the critique of: Carr, 2023). In the Aristotelian framework, moral educators must themselves be morally exemplary, since only then would they have the understanding necessary to recognize ethically sound action and to correct students when they have made a mistake. On a more theoretical level, the Aristotelian framework considers exemplary individuals rather than abstract moral principles (such as the principle of utility or the categorical imperative) to be the standard-bearers of ethical action. From this perspective, the perennial questions concerning role models and their influence become pertinent, especially when one takes into account the fast pace of cultural and also moral change in contemporary societies.

These are just a few examples of debates about role models and their often ambivalent educational role and functions in educational contexts. The authors of this issue of on_education engage with these and related issues and questions. They come from various areas of educational theory and research, and thus the issue as a whole provides an overview on some of the most important current controversies on role modelling and exemplarism in education.

The Editorial Team

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