Adolescents' Character Role Models: Exploring Who Young People Look Up to as Examples of How to Be a Good Person

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Research has explored young people's role models in general, but little is known about role models whom youth look up to in relation to their character. The authors asked 220 adolescents (*M* age = 13.4, 45% White, 15% Hispanic, 11% Black) from Massachusetts and Connecticut to nominate a character role model, someone they knew personally and looked up to as an example of how to be a good person; 142 (64.5%) listed a character role model, with family members nominated

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most frequently, followed by friends and other adults (e.g., teachers). Youth cited how their character role model treated them as well as other people as reasons for selecting their character role models. Participants also rated the quality of the relationship, role-modeling behaviors, and socialization practices. There were similar positive characteristics associated with the three character role model types, but there were also differences (e.g., family character role models were rated most positively on relationship quality as well as role-modeling behaviors, whereas friend character role models rarely provided character socialization). Findings suggested that youth understand the relational nature of character and also point to the potentially powerful role of character role models in promoting character development.

Many adults may remember their childhood role models—the people whom they "looked up to" and sought to emulate. These role models may be chosen for reasons such as having desirable talents, lifestyles, wealth, or status. However, young people can also look up to others for the way models behave and treat other people (i.e., their character). These "character role models" (CRMs) may influence young people to be good to others and to do good in the world; yet little is known about young people's CRMs. Most research has focused instead on how relationships with parents or with important nonparental adults, such as mentors, may influence young people's positive development (e.g., Bowers et al., 2014).

Although there may be similarities in the relationships that young people have with parents or mentors and those they have with CRMs—some youth may identify their parents or mentors as role models for how to be a good person—it is also possible that there are differences in these relationships. Understanding CRMs can provide researchers and practitioners with information about the relational nature of character development (Lerner & Callina, 2014)—that is, the mutually influential individual⇔individual process through which young people's character virtue development occurs. In this article, we conducted analyses of whom young people report as CRMs, why they chose their CRMs, and what they identified as characteristics of their relationships with their CRMs.

Young People's Character Development and the Role(s) of Important Others

Character has been defined as the development of "the skills, dispositions, and excellences that are required to live well and competently, the life that is good for one to live," within one's particular community or society (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006, p. 260). Based on the relational developmental systems metamodel (Overton, 2015), Lerner and Callina (2014) asserted that character develops through "a specific set of mutually beneficial relations that vary across time and . . . place, between person and context . . . and, in particular, between the individual and other individuals that comprise his or her context" (p. 323). Thus, in addition to the individual⇔context relationship, mutually beneficial individual–individual relations are emphasized (Lerner & Callina, 2014).

In young people's lives, there are many important people who play a role in their positive development, generally, and in their character virtue development, specifically (e.g., Smetana, Robinson, & Rote, 2014). Parents, friends, siblings, and mentors can make a significant, positive impact on young people's lives (e.g., Bowers et al., 2014). Caring adults seem to play an especially important role in promoting positive outcomes (e.g., Theokas & Lerner, 2006), and they

may be particularly influential when their relationship with the young person is of high quality (e.g., warm and responsive; Bowers et al., 2012; Kogan, Brody, & Chen, 2011).

Young people who have positive relationships with important others are more likely to display high levels of positive characteristics, including positive character attributes or character virtues (e.g., Bowers et al., 2012). One potential reason for this finding is that these individuals provide models for the young person to follow (e.g., Bandura, 1989; Oman, Flinders, & Thorensen, 2008), and through interacting with this person, young persons are able to learn these behaviors as they are modeled for them and reinforced (e.g., Hurd, Zimmerman, & Xue, 2009; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002). Although modeling is theorized to be a primary way young people learn about character, few studies of character development have directly asked young people about who they choose as their CRMs, why they choose particular people, or what their relationships with their CRMs are like, including how CRMs may socialize them in their character development. In the current study, we explored these questions among a sample of elementary, middle, and high school students in New England.

Role Models and Character Development

Although research has not focused on CRMs, several studies have explored role models more generally. In these studies, when researchers asked youth to identify "someone you look up to or want to be like," young people identified parents most consistently, with other relatives second (Bucher, 1998; Hurd et al., 2009; Yancey, Siegel, & McDaniel, 2002). Other role models included teachers, religious figures, friends or romantic partners, music stars, athletes, or fictional characters from cartoons or television (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007; Bucher, 1998; Hurd et al., 2009; Yancey, Grant, Kurosky, Kravitz-Wirtz, & Mistry, 2011). Some of these studies have also found that having a role model was associated with positive outcomes, such as lower levels of externalizing and internalizing behaviors (Hurd et al., 2009) and higher levels of positive health behaviors (Yancey et al., 2011).

However, these studies considered role models in general by asking young people to nominate someone they looked up to or "want[ed] to be like," with no stipulation that the person actually modeled positive qualities. In the present study, we focused on a narrower definition of a role model—that is, a CRM—in which participants were asked to choose someone who they not only looked up to, but also who they thought was an example of how to be a good person. For the present analyses, we focused only on role models whom young people reported knowing personally[1] (e.g., from their family, school, or community) because we were interested in exploring who youth identify as their CRM, the quality of their relationship with that person (e.g., DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005), how much the young person might look up to him or her, and the direct ways in which the CRM might socialize the young person around character topics (e.g., Berkowitz, Sherblom, Bier, & Battistich, 2006).

Role models are thought to influence young people's character development in two ways: modeling and direct socialization. Little research has focused on these processes for CRMs. For the dimension of modeling, role models are thought to influence young people by providing an example for them to follow (e.g., Oman et al., 2008). Role models are often successful in

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[1] Our survey also included a question about other role models not personally known (e.g., athletes or musicians).

an area young people see as important and have qualities with which they connect. Thus, to understand more deeply who and what youth see as exemplifying a "good person," it is important to know what qualities and characteristics young people identify in their role models and try to emulate. However, few researchers have asked young people those questions explicitly. For example, Bricheno and Thornton (2007) found that the most common reasons youth gave for choosing a particular role model were related to their role models' positive character attributes (e.g., kindness, honesty), positive physical attributes (e.g., strong, athletic), or being famous or rich. Accordingly, we asked adolescents about why they chose their CRMS and, to attend to the role of modeling, about how much they wanted to be like them.

If young people know their CRMs personally (our focus in this study), CRMs can influence their character development through socialization, discussion, and instruction. Parents actively shape their children's prosocial behaviors through the use of practices such as encouraging perspective taking (e.g., Carlo, McGinley, Hayes, Batenhorst, & Wilkinson, 2007), and it is likely that similar strategies may be effective for character socialization within the context of the relationships youth have with their CRMs. The parent–child relationship research literature has also emphasized the importance of the quality of the relationship itself as a context for the development of character-related constructs (e.g., Soenens, Duriez, Vansteenkiste, & Goossens, 2007; Zhou et al., 2002).

In other words, socialization practices are likely to be most effective in the context of a positive relationship, which can in turn serve as a way of modeling appropriate relationships to young people. Although there may be differences in young people's relationships with parents and with CRMs, it is also likely that findings from research on parent–child relationships may apply to CRMs. Accordingly, we also asked participants about their relationship with their CRM and the socialization practices that their CRM used.

The Current Study

CRMs may be a potentially powerful influence on young people's character development, but few studies have investigated them explicitly. To address this empirical gap, we explored who young people nominated as CRMs, why they chose them, and aspects of the relationships that they have with their CRMs. In particular, we investigated the self-reported quality of their relationships, the extent to which participants looked up to them, and in what character socialization practices (e.g., conversations) the CRM and the participant engaged. Given that prior research has suggested some differences in outcomes based on the type of role model (e.g., Hurd et al., 2009; Yancey et al., 2011), we also investigated potential differences in relationship quality and character socialization practices based on the type of role model participants selected (e.g., parents compared to friends).

METHOD

Study Design

We used data from the first wave of the Connecting Adolescents' Beliefs and Behaviors (CABB) Study, which took place from February to June 2015. CABB is a 3-year, mixed-method,

multireporter study of the role of important relationships (e.g., CRMs) and individual charac-
teristics in promoting the positive character development of students in fifth, seventh, and ninth
grades. CABB includes data from youth, their parents, and adults at their schools (e.g., teachers).
The current analyses focus only on the data collected from student participants.

Procedures

We recruited student participants through a two-step procedure by first recruiting schools and
then recruiting students from within schools. We approached 37 schools in Massachusetts and
Connecticut; fifteen agreed to participate. Due to scheduling challenges (e.g., severe weather
during the winter of 2014–2015 in New England), we collected data at 12 of those schools (eight
were Catholic/parochial and four were public). Schools received a $200 gift card.

   Once school administrators agreed to participate in the study, we provided them with packets
of consent forms to send home with students. The students' parents/guardians provided consent
for their children either online or by returning a paper copy of the consent form. At a time that was
convenient for the school, trained research staff collected data from students. Students provided
written assent and then completed a paper-and-pencil survey, which took about an hour. Students
received a $15 gift card.

Participants

We collected data from 220 students in fifth ($n = 92$), seventh ($n = 44$), and ninth ($n = 84$) grades,
with an average age of 13.43 years ($SD = 1.91$). About one half were boys (50.9%); two par-
ticipants did not provide gender information and one chose "other" for gender. Participants
self-reported their racial ethnic identification: 45% identified as White, 11.4% as Black/African
American/of African descent, 9.1% as Asian, 14.5% as Hispanic/Latino/a, 6.8% as Other, 11.4%
as multiracial, and 1.36% did not provide this information. We focused our analyses on those
participants who identified a CRM (the demographic characteristics of this subsample are given
in the Results section). Participants were recruited from schools in Massachusetts (12 schools)
and Connecticut (three schools) (hereafter, together referred to as New England). We found no
systematic differences between students from the two states on our variables of interest.

Measures

Due to concerns about the burden on participants (i.e., too many questions) and schools (i.e., too
much time away from instruction), we reduced the survey length through a three-form planned
missingness design (Graham, Taylor, Olchowski, & Cumsille, 2006). In this design, missing data
are used intentionally such that each participant receives a subset of the total survey. Some items,
termed X set items, are answered by all participants. X set items included the personal information
(e.g., gender), qualitative questions (e.g., identifying a CRM), and some constructs measured by
a single item. The remaining items (here, the quantitative questions from multi-item scales) are
divided into three sets (A, B, and C), and three survey versions are created: one with X set items
and A and B set items, a second with $X, A,$ and C, and a third with $X, B,$ and C. Participants are
randomly assigned to a version; thus, items are missing randomly. Most items used in the current
analyses were in the X set and had very low rates of unplanned missing data ($<1\%$; exceptions

noted below). Others (also noted below) were not in the *X* set and thus were not given to all participants. These items had higher rates of missing data, most of which can be assumed to be missing randomly (rates of unplanned missing data are also noted below). As described below, we used multiple imputation to account for our missing data.

The analyses presented here focus on the section of the survey that addressed CRMs whom participants knew personally. The section began with a prompt given to all participants:

> Is there, or was there, someone from your family, school, or community that you look up to as an example of how to be a good person? By being a "good person," we mean someone who generally does good things and acts in good ways (but they may still sometimes make mistakes). You can pick someone who is alive right now, or someone you used to know but who is not alive anymore. [Participant then checks either "no, nobody in particular" or "yes." If participant checks yes, they read the following]: Please think about these people, and pick the ONE person you look up to the most for how to be a good person. Please pick only one person, and answer these questions about them. If you picked someone who isn't alive anymore, answer the questions based on what things were like when they were alive.

The prompt was followed by two open-ended questions. The first was, "What is this person's relationship to you? (For example, it is your uncle, mother, teacher, friend, or someone else?)" The second question was, "Why did you pick this person? Tell us about the skills/qualities that this person has, and the things this person does, that makes him or her a good person."

We chose to phrase these questions in the above manner because we wanted to encourage participants to nominate someone who immediately came to mind when they read the words "an example of how to be a good person." We did not provide an explicit definition of what we—as the researchers—considered a "good person" because we wanted to know who the participants were thinking of in their everyday lives, even if their definition was different than what ours may have been. We asked participants to tell us why they chose that person, because in their reasoning they would provide an indirect definition of at least some components of what it mean to them to be a "good person." Participants then answered quantitative questions about their relationship with their CRM, including relationship qualities, role-modeling behaviors, and character socialization practices. For these quantitative items, we adapted several existing measures that were originally designed for other purposes (such as to index aspects of parent–child relationships).

Relationship Qualities

We indexed several aspects of the relationships that youth had with their CRMs, including emotional closeness, conflict, and overall satisfaction.

Emotional Closeness.   We used three adapted items from the Social Support and Rejection Scale (SSRS; Roffman, Pagano, & Hirsch, 2000) to form a scale. Participants rated the frequency of each item from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). The items were "Do you talk to this person about problems you have with other people?" "Do you tell this person things that are private?" and "Do you talk to this person when something makes you feel bad?" These items were not on the *X* set, with 30% planned and less than 2% unplanned missing data. Within each imputed data set, we created scale scores by averaging the three items. Scores showed excellent internal consistency reliability, with a mean α across the 20 imputed data sets of .89 ($SD = .01$).

Conflict.   We adapted one item from the Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 2009): "Do you and this person get upset with or mad at each other?" with a scale from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). This item was on the *X* set, with 2.1% unplanned missing data.

Satisfaction.   We used one item adapted from the Network of Relationships Inventory–Relationship Qualities Version (Buhrmester & Furman, 2008): "How happy are you with the way things are between you and this person?" Response options ranged from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much*). This item was on the *X* set and did not have any missing data.

Role-Modeling Behaviors

We used two items adapted from the SSRS (Roffman et al., 2000): "Does this person have qualities or skills that you would like to have when you are older?" and "Do you learn how to do things by watching and listening to this person?" with a response scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much*). These two items were not on the *X* set and thus had higher rates of missing data (30% planned and <2% unplanned).

Character Socialization Practices

To index character socialization practices, we adapted five items from a scale originally used to measure prosocial practices that parents used with their children (Carlo et al., 2007). For example, an original item was, "Your mother talks to you about being a moral and responsible person." We adapted this item to "Does this person talk to you about how to be a good person?" For all subscales, the response scale ranged from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). We indexed one negative aspect of character socialization—material rewards—and two positive aspects—social rewards and moral conversations.

Material Rewards.   To assess material rewards (the negative aspect), we used one item, "Does this person buy you gifts or allow you extra privileges (for example, more time to watch TV) for helping someone?" This item was on the *X* set, with 1.3% unplanned missing data.

Social Rewards.   We used one item: "Does this person praise you or show you love when you help someone?" This item was on the *X* set and had less than 1% missing data.

Moral Conversations.   We used three items to assess moral conversations: "Does this person encourage you to think about how you would like to be treated in certain situations?" "Does this person talk to you about how to be a good person?" and "Does this person talk to you about what you can learn from books/movies/TV shows about how to be a good person?" These items were not on the *X* set, with 30% planned and 3% unplanned missing data. Within each imputed data set, we computed scale scores by taking the average of the three items. Scores showed acceptable internal consistency reliability (average $\alpha = .81$, $SD = .01$).

Analysis Plan

We began by examining participants' responses to the question of whether they had a CRM whom they knew personally. For participants who nominated someone, we analyzed several of

their responses about these relationships. First, we looked for themes in the types of people who were nominated. Second, drawing from the quantitative measures described above, we examined adolescents' perceptions of their relationships with their CRMs, including the perceived quality of their interactions and the ways in which role models may socialize them around what it means to be a good person. To account for missing data (both planned and unplanned) on these quantitative variables, we used multiple imputation. We used Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2010) to create 20 imputed data sets, analyzed each data set using SPSS version 22, and combined the parameter estimates using Rubin's (1987) rules. Finally, we examined responses to the open-ended qualitative question about why they picked their role model.

RESULTS

Of the 220 participants, 142 (64.5%) listed a CRM they knew personally and provided analyzable details about who the person was and why the participant chose him or her. Sixty-six participants (30%) did not list a CRM, and 12 (5.5%) did not provide interpretable information. Girls were more likely to identify a CRM; 78% of girls ($n = 82$) identified a CRM compared to 52% of boys ($n = 58$), $\chi^2(1) = 17.32$, $p < .001$. The likelihood of identifying a CRM did not differ based on participants' racial/ethnic identification, $\chi^2(5) = 2.72$, $p = .75$ (we did not include the three smallest categories in this analysis), or grade level, $\chi^2(2) = 0.53$, $p = .08$.

Two authors independently coded the type of relationship and agreed on the categories of mothers ($n = 53$, 37.3%), fathers ($n = 15$, 10.6%), grandparents ($n = 10$, 7.0%), aunts/uncles ($n = 8$, 5.7%), siblings ($n = 15$, 10.6%), cousins ($n = 7$, 4.9%), friends ($n = 20$, 14.2%), and nonfamilial adults ($n = 13$, 9.01%), which included teachers/instructors, formal mentors, and neighbors. Due to the small category sizes and similarity among some categories, we combined mothers and fathers into one category of parents ($n = 68$), aunts/uncles and grandparents into the category of nonparental adult family members ($n = 20$), and siblings and cousins into another category of family members ($n = 21$). We retained the two categories of friends and nonfamilial adults. The pattern of nominations was similar between boys and girls, and it was mostly similar across grades, except a lower percentage of ninth graders (3%) nominated a nonparental family adult (compared to 15% and 13% of fifth and seventh graders, respectively), and a higher percentage of ninth graders identified a nonfamilial adult (13.4%, compared to 6% for fifth and seventh graders).

Relationship Qualities

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for relationship qualities overall and by CRM type. The overall levels of relationship qualities were generally high. Table 2 shows effect sizes for comparisons among CRM types. Given the small sample and unequal groups, we focused on effect sizes to index the differences in relationship qualities based on CRM type. We considered effect sizes of 0.50 and above to be of interest because they represented a moderate effect (Cohen, 1988) and a difference between groups of at least half a standard deviation.

Participants perceived relationships with mother/father CRMs to have the highest levels of emotional closeness compared to all other CRM types. Levels of emotional closeness were similar between grandparents/aunts/uncles, siblings/cousins, and friends, and all three of these

groups had higher perceived levels of emotional closeness compared to nonfamilial adult CRMs. Participants who chose nonfamilial adults as CRMs reported the lowest level of conflict (lower than all four other groups). The levels of conflict reported in CRM relationships with mothers/fathers, grandparents/aunts/uncles, siblings/cousins, and friends were all similar. In regard to general satisfaction, participants reported the highest relationship satisfaction if they nominated a family CRM—a mother/father, grandparent/aunt/uncle, or sibling/cousin— and reported general satisfaction was similar among all three of those groups. Participants with a nonfamilial adult CRM reported the next highest level of satisfaction, followed by those participants who nominated a friend as a CRM.

Role-Modeling Behaviors

Table 1 also shows descriptive statistics for role modeling behaviors, and effect sizes for CRM group differences on these variables are shown in Table 2. Overall, participants reported looking up to and learning from their CRMs at a high level (all mean scores were at the upper end of the response scale); again, we observed differences based on CRM type. Participants who nominated an adult as their CRM—either mothers/fathers, grandparents/aunts/uncles, or a nonfamilial adult—rated their CRMs most highly in terms of that person having qualities of skills the participant desired. Siblings/cousins, although rated less favorably on this dimension than adult CRMs, were rated more highly than friend CRMs, who were rated the lowest. With regard to how much the participants reported learning from their CRM, mothers/fathers and nonfamilial adults were rated most highly, and the ratings for those two groups were similar. Participants who nominated a grandparent/aunt/uncle reported lower levels of learning from

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics for Quantitative Variables by Character Role-Model Type Categories

| | | | Character Role Model Type | | | |
	Overall (n = 142) M (SD)	Mother/Father (n = 68) M (SD)	Grandparent/ Aunt/Uncle (n = 20) M (SD)	Sibling/ Cousin (n = 21) M (SD)	Friend (n = 20) M (SD)	Nonfamilial Adult (n = 13) M (SD)
Relationship qualities						
Emotional closeness	2.83 (1.12)	3.13 (0.89)	2.59 (1.23)	2.70 (1.18)	2.72 (1.15)	2.04 (1.43)
Conflict	1.38 (1.15)	1.75 (0.99)	0.97 (1.25)	1.33 (1.06)	1.40 (1.29)	0.15 (0.55)
Satisfaction	3.71 (0.59)	3.80 (.41)	3.79 (.53)	3.67 (.66)	3.57 (.61)	3.46 (1.13)
Role-modeling behaviors						
Desired qualities/skills	3.47 (0.75)	3.66 (0.61)	3.47 (0.76)	3.26 (0.94)	3.08 (0.85)	3.47 (0.77)
Watching/listening	3.33 (0.88)	3.59 (0.71)	3.16 (0.85)	3.01 (1.05)	2.87 (1.08)	3.42 (0.69)
Character socialization practices						
Social rewards	3.08 (1.14)	3.59 (0.78)	3.10 (0.91)	2.14 (1.11)	2.35 (1.40)	2.92 (1.32)
Material rewards	2.22 (1.41)	2.56 (1.19)	2.60 (1.23)	2.05 (1.56)	1.29 (1.38)	1.62 (1.80)
Moral conversations	2.81 (1.01)	3.13 (0.80)	2.84 (0.85)	2.24 (1.13)	2.17 (1.27)	3.01 (0.79)

Note. Means and standard deviations were computed across the 20 imputed data sets using Rubin's Rules (1987).

TABLE 2
Effect Sizes (Cohen's *d*) for Quantitative Variables by Character Role Model Type Categories

	Mother/Father Compared to				Grandparent/Aunt/Uncle (GAU) Compared to			Sibling/Cousin (SC) Compared to		Friend (F) Compared to
	GAU	SC	F	NFA	SC	F	NFA	F	NFA	NFA
Relationship qualities										
Emotional closeness	0.55	0.44	0.43	1.09	−0.24	−0.11	0.41	−0.02	0.50	0.52
Conflict	0.35	0.05	−0.02	1.13	−0.31	−0.33	0.72	−0.05	1.28	1.14
Satisfaction	−0.03	0.39	1.02	0.72	0.38	0.98	0.64	0.50	0.25	−0.21
Role-modeling behaviors										
Desired qualities/skills	0.29	0.57	0.86	0.30	0.24	0.47	0.00	0.20	−0.24	−0.48
Watching/listening	0.64	0.72	0.89	0.24	0.09	0.23	−0.38	0.13	−0.43	−0.57
Character socialization practices										
Social rewards	0.60	1.68	1.29	0.75	0.93	0.62	0.16	−0.16	−0.64	−0.41
Material rewards	−0.03	0.39	1.02	0.72	0.38	0.98	0.65	0.50	0.25	−0.21
Moral conversations	0.35	1.09	1.03	0.15	0.69	0.61	−0.20	0.06	−0.91	−0.74

Note. NFA = Nonfamilial adult.

their CRM compared to youth who chose mothers/fathers and nonfamilial adults. In turn, participants with a grandparent/aunt/uncle reported higher scores than those who nominated a friend or sibling/cousin. Friend CRMs and sibling/cousin CRMs were rated similarly in regard to how much participants reported learning from them by watching and listening.

Character Socialization Practices

In addition, Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for character socialization practices. Effect sizes for the CRM comparisons are shown in Table 2. Overall, participants reported lower frequencies of character socialization practices provided by their CRM, compared to either relationship qualities or role-modeling behaviors. There were differences based on CRM type for socialization practices as well. Mothers/fathers were rated as providing the highest levels of all three character socialization practices that we measured. Grandparents/aunts/uncles and nonfamilial adults were rated similarly in regard to providing social rewards, and these two groups had the second highest scores. Friends and siblings/cousins provided social rewards the least often. For material rewards, grandparents/aunts/uncles engaged in similar levels as mothers/fathers, followed by siblings/cousins. Participants rated nonfamilial adults and friends as providing the lowest levels of material rewards. For moral conversations, participants who chose either a mother/father or nonfamilial adult reported the highest—and similar—frequencies of engaging in such conversations with their CRMs. These conversations took place less frequently for participants with grandparents/aunts/uncles as their CRMs, compared to mothers/fathers and nonfamilial adults, but still more often than for participants with friend or sibling/cousin CRMs.

Reasons for Choosing the Character Role Model

Finally, we investigated participants' reasons for choosing their CRM. The same two authors who coded type of CRM independently reviewed the responses to the open-ended question (described above), and met to discuss the responses. They agreed that participants' responses conveyed that their CRM engaged in character-related actions, and/or that their CRM had character-related qualities. In addition, participants described selecting their CRMs based not only on their actions and qualities, but also on the context and the relationships within the context where those actions and qualities were observed. In other words, the actions and qualities seemed to factor into participants' nominations to the extent that they reflected the way the CRM treated the participant and other individuals. Based on this decision, the two authors then coded the data according to three themes reflecting participants' reasons for choosing the CRM. These themes reflected that participants selected CRMs based on (1) qualities and characteristics, (2) the CRM's relationship with the participant, and (3) the CRM's relationship with and/or treatment of other people. All responses were double coded, and the two coders discussed responses until they reached 100% agreement on codes.

One hundred and nineteen participants described choosing their CRM because of his or her qualities and characteristics, most of which were character-relevant in nature (e.g., "kind," "caring," "nice," and "trustworthy"). An example of a response that we coded as reflecting qualities and characteristics was, "I picked my dad because he is smart, nice, and brave." Fifty four participants described choosing their CRM because of the second theme, the participant's relationship with him or her. An example of a response that we coded as reflecting the participant's relationship with the CRM was, "She gives me good advice and I can always trust her. Also she is very fun to be with and does a lot of stuff for me." Finally, 22 participants described choosing their CRM because of how he or she treated others. An example of a response was, "This person always does whatever they can for others."

Importantly, the three main themes we identified often co-occurred, such that seven participants described all three, 39 described two themes (25 described qualities and how the CRM treated him or her; 14 described qualities and how the CRM treated others), and 94 described only one theme (71 described only qualities, 22 described only how the CRM treated him or her, and one described how the CRM treated others). The co-occurrence of themes was illustrated by the following response from a participant who chose her grandmother as her CRM, "She is helpful to everyone. Never likes to yell. Always sees sick people. Helps a lot at church activities. Cooks for people even when she wants to do something else." This participant described qualities about her grandmother that influenced her choice, and these qualities also reflected her knowledge of her grandmother's interactions with and treatment of other people.

DISCUSSION

CRMs can potentially play a vital role in young people's character development, but few studies have explicitly asked young people about their role models specific to character. Instead, researchers have considered role models in the most general sense (e.g., Yancey et al., 2011), or they have focused on relationships with adults, such as parents and mentors (e.g., Bowers et al., 2014), whom youth may—or may not—actually look up to as examples of good character.

We explored a more nuanced definition of a role model by asking young people whether there was a person they knew whom they looked up to as an example of a good person. We then conducted analyses to describe whom students chose as CRMs, why they chose them, and aspects of the relationships that they have with their CRMs. In particular, we investigated the self-reported quality of their relationships, how much the participants actually looked up to their identified CRMs, and the character socialization practices that the CRMs engaged in with them.

About 65% of our participants were able to identify someone they knew personally whom they looked up to as an example of how to be a good person. This percentage is similar to that found in other studies in which participants were asked to nominate role models in the general sense (e.g., Bricheno & Thornton, 2007). Also consistent with prior studies (e.g., Hurd et al., 2009; Yancey et al., 2011), the majority of participants identified a family member (most specifically, mothers), with other categories being much less common. In addition, girls were more likely to identify a CRM, but the likelihood of identifying a CRM did not differ based on participants' racial/ethnic identification or grade level.

The participants who identified a CRM perceived their relationships to be positive on many dimensions. This finding is consistent with prior research on young people's relationships with parents and important nonparental adults such as mentors, in which the majority of young people (but not all) rate these relationships as positive (e.g., Bowers et al., 2012). Furthermore, this finding is expected given that it is unlikely that participants would have nominated, as an example of how to be a good person, someone with whom they had a strongly negative relationship. Given the emphasis on relationships as a context to promote positive development in general (e.g., Carlo et al., 2007), it is encouraging that our participants believed that their relationships with their CRMs were of generally high quality, as these relationships may thus be an effective context in which character socialization may take place (Berkowitz et al., 2006).

Even given high perceived relationship quality overall, we observed differences based on CRM type. Mothers/fathers were rated as providing relationships characterized by the highest levels of emotional closeness, albeit also with the most conflict (which is typical of family relationships, e.g., Montemayor, Adams, & Gullotta, 1994). Relationships with nonfamilial adults had the lowest levels of reported conflict, but these relationships were also rated less favorably in terms of satisfaction and emotional closeness. Thus, we observed a general pattern in which closer relationships were also characterized by higher levels of conflict.

Participants also rated their CRMs highly in terms of role modeling and character socialization practices. Participants generally reported that they looked up to their CRM, wanted to be like them in certain ways, and learned from them directly. This finding itself is not surprising as we directly asked them to nominate someone to whom they looked up. Mothers/fathers and nonfamilial adults were rated most highly in regard to these characteristics, followed by grandparents/aunts/uncles, then siblings/cousins, and, finally, friends. Thus, although participants appeared to look up to their CRMs regardless of their type, they reported having this regard most consistently when their CRM was an adult.

In regard to character socialization practices, we observed a variety of patterns. Participants who chose a friend as their CRM reported the lowest levels of character socialization—positive and negative—from their CRM. Thus, it seems that friends may be less likely to provide opinions and discussion about participants' moral behavior, in either a positive or negative way. Participants who nominated a nonfamilial adult, and participants who nominated a mother or

father, reported similar levels of positively valenced socialization practices. Compared to mothers and fathers, however, nonfamilial adults were considerably less likely to provide material rewards. It is likely that nonfamilial CRMs are not in a position to provide material rewards—such as increases in the time allotted to watching television—compared to parents because they do not exert as much control over the participants' daily lives. Siblings and cousins were rated as providing material rewards more often than either friends or nonfamilial adults, but it is possible that same-age family member dynamics may be influencing these responses because the target of the questions about material rewards was not specified. For example, older siblings may provide material rewards to younger siblings in an effort to encourage their young siblings to do nice things for them.

Our initial exploratory analyses suggest that friend and sibling/cousin CRMs may not be as ideal as adults (either familial or nonfamilial) in regard to the character socialization practices they engage in with the participant. However, these findings need further exploration as relatively few participants chose friends or siblings/cousins as their CRMs. Longitudinal investigation of the benefits and outcomes that may or may not be associated with similar-age CRMs (compared to adults) is necessary. For example, although similar-age CRMs may provide comparatively lower levels of character socialization, the level they do provide (which was relatively high) may be enough for effective socialization. That question will be tested with further waves of the CABB study.

Few participants chose a nonfamilial adult, as well, so we could not conduct nuanced analyses such as differentiating between mentors and teachers. We intend that later waves of the CABB study will include more participants at more time points, which will likely permit such analyses. Based on current results, it seems that other adult CRMs can provide high levels of character socialization although the relationship itself is not as close, and has less conflict. These findings are consistent with research comparing youth relationships with parents, peers, and nonfamilial adults (e.g., Haddad, Chen, & Greenberger, 2011), which has shown that relationships with nonparental adults exhibit both peer-like and parent-like qualities. Relationships with other adult CRMs may provide certain advantages that we will investigate in future analyses.

Finally, we asked participants why they chose their CRM and identified three primary reasons: (1) the CRM's qualities and characteristics, (2) the CRM's relationship with the youth, and (3) the CRM's relationship with and/or treatment of other people. The finding that participants primarily named morally related characteristics is consistent with the findings of Bricheno and Thornton (2007), where characteristics were the primary reasons given for choosing a role model. In contrast, we found that many participants (33%) also specifically cited the relational context in which those characteristics were applied. In other words, many participants mentioned not only the characteristics of the CRM, but also the specific ways in which he or she enacted them, either with the participant or with others (or both).This finding suggests that children and adolescents often intuitively understand the relational nature of character as described by developmental scientists (e.g., Lerner & Callina, 2014).

In interviews we plan to conduct with these participants, we will explore their reasons for choosing their CRMs and how they learn from them about how to be a good person. We will also explore, using quantitative and qualitative data, the CRMs that young people have but do not know personally, such as athletes, musicians, or religious or historical figures. These types of character role models may be particularly important for young people who did not identify a character role model whom they knew personally. Finally, we will interview participants who did not nominate any CRMs to explore their reasons for not selecting a role model.

In short, in this study, we have provided a preliminary investigation of the concept of a CRM. However, these results should be interpreted in the context of several limitations. First, the results are based on a small sample from a limited geographic area (i.e., New England). Furthermore, about 80% of our participants attended Catholic schools. Given that religiously affiliated schools may have different ways of talking about role models, these results may not generalize to the general public school population. Our small sample also limited the extent to which we could investigate differences based on subgroups of CRMs such as mentors, teachers, aunts and uncles, or grandparents. Finally, the present analyses were all from the first wave of data collection. The CABB study is a 3-year, mixed-method, multi-reporter study of the role of important relationships and individual characteristics in promoting character development. Longitudinal data will allow us to investigate CRMs in more depth and over time.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the aforementioned limitations, this study represents one of the first attempts to evaluate who young people look up to as examples of how to be a good person, why they chose them, and some of the characteristics of the relationships that they have with their CRMS. As such, we have provided some insight into the CRMs of youth. We have learned, for example, that the majority of participants have someone in their lives to look up to as an example for how to be a good person. Participating youth also appeared to report differences in relationship characteristics as well as role modeling and character socialization practices depending on the type of CRM they nominated.

Overall, our results suggest that adolescents do look up to a variety of other people (e.g., parents, friends, teachers) for their character-related qualities and not only for reasons such as wealth or talent. Thus, by being good to others (e.g., treating others with kindness) and doing good in the world (e.g., community service), anyone can be a character role model for the young people in their lives. In future waves of this study, we will continue to investigate the ways in which participants' experiences with their character role models may continue to influence them and how the potentially powerful influence of CRMs may be capitalized upon to promote young people's character virtue development.

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