Can Exemplars Promote Character Development in the Wake of Adversity?

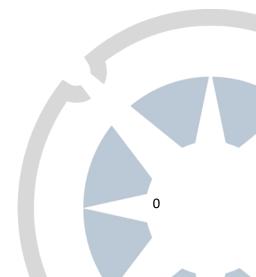## Sara Mendonca

Michael Brady

Eranda Jayawickreme

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Sara Mendonca1, Michael Brady2, and Eranda Jayawickreme1

1Department of Psychology & Program for Leadership and Character

Wake Forest University

2University of Glasgow

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Abstract

Can narratives of moral exemplars who have overcome adversity help facilitate character growth following the experience of adversity? Recent theoretical and empirical work suggest that moral exemplars may help model character formation. Additional, while adversity can lead to substantial suffering, such experiences *may* also lead to positive changes, such as growth in the individual virtues of strength, vulnerability, morality, and wisdom, as well as the social virtues of love and trust. In this chapter, we provide an interdisciplinary exploration of whether and how specific types of exemplars can promote character development in the wake of adversity. We define what moral exemplars are, evaluate their utility in character formation, and discuss their possible value in fostering growth in the wake of adversity.

Key words: moral exemplars, post-traumatic growth, character, adversity, trauma

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Can Exemplars Promote Character Development in the Wake of Suffering?

Can narratives of moral exemplars who have overcome adversity help facilitate character growth following the experience of adversity? Although experiencing adversity, failure, illness,

and setbacks is an inescapable part of human life and can lead to great suffering, it may also lead, for some, to positive changes (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; although the ubiquity of such change is disputed, Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014; 2016). Moreover, at this writing, recent philosophical explorations on moral exemplars have highlighted their pedagogical functions (e.g., Zagzebski, 2017). This work has focused on their potential function to model individual virtues of strength, vulnerability, morality, and wisdom, as well as the social virtues of love and trust (Brady, 2018). Such virtues may be strengthened in individuals who have successfully navigated adversity (Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014; 2016). Additionally, philosopher Ian Kidd (2018) had made the case for discussions of adversity to be included in exemplarist narratives. Specifically, the inclusion of experiences of adversity into such narratives may increase admiration for the exemplar, enable more effective emulation, and affirm deep truths about the human condition.

In this chapter, we therefore address the question of whether specific types of exemplars can promote character development in the wake of adversity. We provide an interdisciplinary review of what moral exemplars are, their utility in promoting character development, and their possible value in fostering character growth following the experience of adversity.

The Value of Exemplars

Philosophical theorizing supports a particular view of exemplars. They are to be understood as "paradigmatically excellent persons"(Zagzebski, 2017, p. 20): not simply good people, but the very best people. What makes them so is that they possess deep and reliable

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character traits – virtues or excellences, on a traditional understanding – to a very high degree. Common sense seems to line up with this idea of exemplars as people who are maximally good and virtuous, and who count as exemplary because of their inner traits, skills, and abilities. When asked to name an exemplar, people very often mention figures such as Jesus, Gandhi, or Mother Theresa. On this view, exemplars appear to be saintly people. But the category of exemplars – of those who are paradigmatically excellent – need not be restricted to those who are paragons of spiritual and moral goodness. People might identify as exemplary those who perform heroic tasks – such as Oskar Schindler – or those who embody exceptional wisdom – such as Gautama Buddha. As a result, alongside the saint, it is possible to think of exemplars as including the hero and the sage.

Exemplars might be regarded as valuable for very many reasons. The first relates to their own goodness and virtue, and so to the valuable things that they reliably bring about. But a second, and arguably more important, kind of value is the value of exemplars *to others* who engage with or know about or have a relationship with the exemplar. The thought here is that exemplars can be valuable for others insofar as they inspire and motivate them to become better people, or insofar as they promote character development. Exemplars inspire people, in other words, to improve themselves and their characters, and as a result to do better in word and deed.

To see how this is meant to work, note that philosopher Linda Zagzebski thinks that exemplars, as people who are paradigmatically excellent, are equally people who are most *admirable*. This point has two important implications.

The first implication is epistemic: we identify exemplars, come to gain knowledge of those who are most admirable, through the emotion of admiration. (Instead of asking who someone takes as a role model or finds exemplary, we might equally ask, on this view, whom

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they admire.) The second implication is practical: feelings of admiration have motivational force, and so having someone as an exemplar should bring with it a motive to be more like them. As Zagzebski (2017, p. 24) puts it, "a person who is admirable in some respect is imitable in that respect. The feeling of admiration is a kind of attraction that carries the impetus to imitate or emulate with it. When I speak of emulating X, then, I mean taking X as my model, attempting to become more like X. I do not think of emulation in such a way that whenever A emulates X, it is possible for A to become as good as X, nor does it include A's belief that she can do so."

If so, then a central value that exemplars have is to motivate similar kinds of behavior in those for whom they are exemplary, and hence in those who admire them. As Zagzebski (2017, notes, the psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2003) makes a similar point, although he talks about feelings of elevation rather than admiration. He writes of such feelings that they are "elicited by acts of charity, gratitude, fidelity, generosity, or any other strong display of virtue … [and give] rise to a specific motivation or action tendency: emulation, or the desire to perform the same kind of acts oneself (Haidt, 2003, p. 42)." Exemplars are therefore valuable because they move others to be more like them – more excellent in various respects – and to do the kinds of things that excellent people do for the reasons that they do them.

Exemplars, understood as paradigmatically excellent people, would seem to have a

specific value in promoting character development for certain groups of people in certain circumstances (e.g, Bornstein, 2019). For instance, people might well look towards, admire, and be moved to emulate exemplars when they are concerned with doing the right thing, or interested in self-improvement. People might, by the same token, point to the paradigmatically excellent person and try to get others to admire and emulate them when they are educating their children, or inspiring our students. There are other circumstances too. For instance, exemplars might help

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people understand the highest potentialities of human beings, represent the very best things that people can achieve, and be the source of hope and meaning for many people.

Although we will return to such examples later, this chapter concerns a different category of people: those who have suffered trauma or adversity. Our question is: can exemplars promote character development for these people? We argue that they can. However, we propose that a different kind of exemplar is likely to be more effective in promoting character development in those who have suffered than the exemplar as traditionally understood, that is, the paradigmatically excellent person. Moreover, we argue that the usefulness of such exemplars for those who have experienced adversity is primarily a function of *identity* rather than *admiration*: those people who face adversity are more likely to be moved by an exemplar because they identify with that exemplar, rather than because of any feelings of admiration or elevation that they have. Exemplars can promote character development in the wake of suffering, therefore, but on a somewhat different model to what was proposed by Zagzebski (2017) and Haidt (2003).

The rest of the chapter will proceed as follows. In the second section, we will make the case that there are different kinds of exemplar. Some are as Zagzebski (2017) supposes. *But others are admirable and exemplary people who fall short of paradigmatic excellence.* In the third section, we will make a theoretical case that such exemplars promote character development in those who have suffered, not primarily because they generate feelings of admiration, but because those who have suffered can identify with the exemplar, who is valuable because they show the possibility of overcoming adversity. In the final section we will show how this view of exemplars, and their effectiveness, is supported by extant psychological theorizing

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about the importance of identification with exemplars, and suggest possibilities for new

directions in exemplar research.

Different Kinds of Exemplars

In Zagzebski's (2017) view, exemplars are paradigmatically excellent people: they are the very best kind of characters and possess and display virtues of intellect and character to a very high degree. There are corollary epistemic and motivational claims too: that we can identify exemplars via the emotion of admiration, and that this emotion motivates people to emulate the exemplars. Now, whereas it is true that the saint, the hero, and the sage capture one model of exemplar, and equally true that it is possible to identify exemplars, and be inspired to emulate them, because one admires or has feelings of elevation when encountering them, there is some room to doubt that this model exhausts the concept. One reason is that we can separate the claim about exemplars being the very best kinds of people with the very best kinds of character, from the epistemic and motivational claims that are meant to accompany them.

To illustrate: suppose that Jack is motivated to apply to study philosophy at Oxford because he sees that Jill, in the year above, has just been accepted to study the subject at that University. What is important to Jack is that Jill is from a relevantly similar socio-economic background: Jill is from an area of multiple deprivation, and the first in her family to apply to university, let alone the first to apply to Oxford. It is because of these facts about Jill, and the similarity in economic status between them, that Jill counts as an exemplar for Jack. Moreover, it need not be the case that Jack identifies Jill as an exemplar, or is motivated to emulate her, because he admires her. Jill's motives or character do not seem to have a bearing on the excellence of her achievement in this instance, a point which is apparent because she would still count as an exemplar for Jack even if her motives were, to him at least, morally dubious: perhaps

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Jill thinks that going to Oxford is the best way for her to become a member of parliament (MP) for the British Conservative Party, and Jack strongly dislikes the Conservative Party and its MPs. So, it is not admiration that is playing the relevant epistemic and motivational roles here; instead, Jill counts as an exemplar for Jack, who is motivated to emulate her, because he *identifies* with Jill, who shows what is *possible* for someone of their socio-economic background. Nor is it obvious that Jack is wrong to regard Jill as an exemplar. After all, she has done something pretty exemplary – she has been admitted to Oxford, in spite of not having the usual advantages of a private education and all that it entails – and is clearly, as a result, admirable. Jill clearly displays

"a human power in a high degree of excellence." namely the intellectual ability and skills to be accepted into Oxford. But Jack need not identify her as exemplary as a result of admiring her for this power, nor be motivated to emulate her as a result of admiration.

By the same token, a person can be moved to emulate an exemplar, as a result of admiring them, but this person can fall (way) short of paradigmatic excellence. Even if we agree with Zagzebski (2017, p. 104) that "admirability is a deep feature of exemplars; in fact, it is what makes them exemplars," we can nevertheless separate admirability from excellence. One way in which this can happen is relatively trivial and doesn't threaten Zagzebski's (2017) point: for it often happens that people in fact admire those who are bad, and so who are far from paradigmatically excellent. It is clearly the case that the violent, mendacious, bigoted, untrustworthy, selfish, and narcissistic people can have their admirers (as the careers on many politicians will attest to). Examples like this do nothing to threaten the connection between admirability and excellence, since it is plausible to assume that admirability, and what people actually admire, can diverge widely. What is needed, then, are examples where people are

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genuinely admir*able* – where people are *right* to admire them – and yet they are admirable for features which fall short of excellence. Luckily for our thesis, examples are easy to find. Zagzebski (2017), as has been seen, thinks that exemplars must possess "a human power in a high degree of excellence." This idea suggests that she thinks that admirability has a similarly high bar, and so to be admirable is to be paradigmatically excellent. But this assertion does not seem true. One way to make this point – but not the only one, as will be seen – is to note the obvious connection between admirability and achievement: if something is an achievement, then it is fitting to admire that thing, and hence that thing is admirable. But what counts as an achievement is very much relativized to a person's abilities, context, and time. It is an achievement for a five-year-old to tie her shoelaces, but not normally for an adult; it's an achievement for someone who is painfully shy to ask a question at an academic conference, but not for someone who is confident; it was an achievement in the 13th century to travel to another country, but not nowadays; and so on. In all of these cases, the person in question might count as admirable in virtue of their character and resultant behavior: the five-year-old for persevering; the painfully shy person for their courage; the traveler for their adventurousness. But none of the three seem to possess "a human power in a high degree of excellence"(p. 104).

There is, moreover, a good reason for this, based in the nature of achievement itself. Consider, to illustrate, Gwen Bradford's (2015) convincing account of the nature of achievement, as described and defended in her book of that name. Bradford's basic claim is that achievements have two essential components: they involve *difficult processes*, and result in a product that is *competently caused*. With respect to the former, Bradford (2015, p. 12) writes: "One feature that appears to distinguish his achievement – and, we will contend, all achievements – is that it is *difficult*. If tying my shoes presented a

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particular difficulty for me to overcome … then my success might count as an achievement too. If writing a novel were so easy that anyone could do it, we wouldn't think of it as an achievement. Finding a cure for cancer is turning out to be difficult task. Writing a dissertation, running a marathon, or even smaller scale achievements, such as winning a game of chess, baking a soufflé, or cultivating a bonsai—all of these achievements are difficult to do. Were it the case that any of these activities were easy, we wouldn't think of them as achievements … This suggests that difficulty is a necessary component for achievements."

It follows from this argument that achievement is a positive value that is highly relativized to people, their abilities, their contexts, and their times, because what counts as difficult for people is relativized to these things as well. As we have already explained, it is difficult for a five-year-old to tie her shoelaces, or for someone who is painfully shy to speak in public; and it was difficult for someone in the 13th century to travel to another country. If so, then admirability – or at least, admirability that is grounded in achievement – will likewise count as a positive value that is highly relativized to people, their abilities, and their contexts. It follows from this that admirability need not be the province of those possessed of human powers in a high degree of excellence. Many other people can be admirable for who they are and for what they do, insofar as who they are and what they do constitute achievements with respect to their abilities, context, and place.

If this is correct, then we need not think of exemplars as paradigmatically excellent. How does this bear on our overarching question, viz. the value of exemplars for those who have suffered trauma or adversity? Given the possibility of different kinds of exemplars, might some

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be better suited to those who suffer than others? This topic will be diiscussed in the following section.

Idealized vs. Realistic Exemplars

Some exemplars are paragons of excellence: the saint, the hero, and the sage are three such types. But if the above is correct, exemplars must be admirable, but need not be the highest ideals of character. Might certain exemplars be better fitted for those who are suffering or facing adversity? First, we will discuss reasons for thinking that exemplars who are paradigmatically excellent might *not* be the best type of exemplars for the suffering. We will then explain why such thinking supports the idea that exemplars with whom a sufferer *identifies* are more likely to be motivationally effective, and for a number of reasons. Taken together, these arguments make a strong theoretical case for identifying a particular kind of exemplar as having particular value for those who are suffering, a case which we hope to test in future studies.

Why ideals might not be motivationally effective. There is some reason to think that those people suffering from adversity might not be motivated to emulate paradigmatically excellent people, and so exemplars, as traditionally understood, might not have much value for them. From a philosophical or normative perspective, scholars might be skeptical about how attractive and inspiring paradigmatically excellent people are. For instance, philosopher Susan Wolf (1982), in a famous paper entitled *Moral Saints*, wrote:

"I don't know whether there are any moral saints. But if there are, I am glad that neither I nor those about whom I care most are amongst them. By *moral saint* I mean a person whose every action is as morally good as possible, a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be. … I believe that moral perfection, in the sense of moral saintliness,

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does not constitute a model of person well-being toward which it would be particularly rational or good or desirable for a human being to strive" (p. 419).

Such a paradigmatically excellent person is not someone that Wolf wants to emulate. One reason for this stance is that Wolf thinks that the saintly person elevates moral reasons above all others and is therefore incapable of enjoying many non-moral goods; to this extent, they might strike people as somewhat boring or narrow, dull or humorless, or as having a life which is 'strangely barren.' Although admirable for her *moral* excellence, hers is not a *character* that we should seek to emulate or hope that our children emulate; the moral saint might not exhibit

personal excellence, in other words.

A second reason why paradigmatically excellent people might not be valuable for those who are suffering is that the distance between an ideal kind of person and one who is facing adversity might end up demoralizing, rather than inspiring, the sufferer. This conclusion was reached by Monin (2007) who, as Han et al. (2017, p. 2) wrote, "argued that although the upward social comparison to moral exemplars is supposed to induce positive emotional and behavioral responses, people may feel threatened by the comparison when the presented examples are perceived to be extreme, such as in the case of moral rebels … Observers may feel overwhelming inferiority and, as a result, resentment." As Han at al. (p. 2) report, "participants in a social psychological experiment reported negative opinions about moral rebels in the domain of social equity (e.g. racial inequality), and tended to dislike their behavior … A severe discrepancy between the moral behavioral tendency of ordinary people and that of moral exemplars is likely to produce self-conflict, induce self-defense to reduce the conflict, and decrease motivation, as explained by the cognitive dissonance theory." This factor might be especially true for those who are suffering after trauma or other forms of adversity, and who feel

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demoralized rather than inspired by examples of people who dealt excellently with their own trauma or adversity. A person suffering from serious chronic pain might thus be demoralized, rather than inspired, by the fact that Nietzsche produced many of his greatest works while suffering through years of chronic illness, on the grounds that they lack the genius that Nietzsche possessed. A person suffering as a result of wrongful imprisonment might come to feel overwhelming inferiority when thinking about Nelson Mandela's exemplary strength, compassion, and patience while he was imprisoned in South Africa. A soldier who has suffered life-changing injuries in armed conflict might resent being told about someone in her position who went on to become a Paralympic Gold medalist. And so on. The phenomenon that Han and colleagues described therefore suggests that paradigmatically excellent sufferers might not always be the best models for ordinary people who are suffering from trauma and adversity.

A third reason to be skeptical about whether paragons of excellence make for good exemplars, at least for those who face adversity, is also grounded in what will typically be very significant differences between them. Earlier we discussed that what counts as an achievement is highly relative to a person's abilities, context, historical and social situation, and so on. But what

is true of achievement is true of many other normative concepts too: what counts as a reason, or a good idea, or a valuable goal, or a satisfying career, or an attractive partner, or a worthwhile political cause are also clearly relativized to a specific persosn's context, character, tastes, goals, social and historical milieux, and many other factors. Consider the notion of a reason, to take the most general normative concept here and, by reason, we mean good reason, rather than motivating reason). What a person has reason to do depends upon some or all of the things just mentioned. But this means that what a paradigmatically excellent person has reason to do will differ very considerably from what the rest of of humanity have good reason to do, given the

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very great differences between a paradigmatically excellent person and the rest of humanity. So, the hero has good reason to put herself in the face of great danger in the service of the greater good, given her possession of great courage; those people who are not heroic do not have this reason, however, because they lack that kind of strength enabling them to deal with great danger effectively. The sage has good reason to offer advice to those who ask her, given her great wisdom and knowledge; those individuals who are not wise do not have this reason, and should not be in the business of giving advice to anyone who asks. This poiunt seems patently obvious, and reinforces, from a normative standpoint, the claim that paradigmatically excellent people might not inspire or motivate others, including those who are suffering.

A good explanation for this lack of motivation – in addition to claims about the unattractiveness of some ideals, and that exemplars might generate resentment rather than emulation – is that ordinary people recognize that they lack the reasons to do what paradigmatically excellent people have reason to do. The failure of motivation in such instances is not a fault or error on the part of the people in question; it results from their *correctly* assessing the normative situation as one in which what they have reason to do diverges from what paragons of excellence would have reason to do. Here emulating an exemplar – doing what she does or would do – turns out to be *irrational*, given the significant differences between the circumstances in which the respective groups of people find themselves.

We want to mention a final way in which paradigmatically excellent people might not be suitable exemplars for those who suffer. This instance is apparent when we consider forms of suffering and adversity that are the result of the sufferer's own bad behavior. Consider, to illustrate, a person feeling shame and remorse as a result of doing something extremely shameful

and immoral. There seems to be a conceptual difficulty in thinking that a paradigmatically

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excellent person could function as an exemplar in this instance, if we assume that

paradigmatically excellent people do not engage in extremely shameful and immoral behavior.

Such behavior would seem to debar one from being a saint, and also, arguably, from being a hero

or sage. If so, then paradigmatically excellent people cannot function as models for how to

respond properly or appropriately when feeling shame or remorse, and as a result are not

someone the sufferer can emulate in order to improve themselves. Of course, someone might

claim that the sufferer could be inspired to improve themselves morally by looking toward

someone who is a moral saint. But that situation seems a different case than the one we are

considering, where the person is looking for a model or exemplar *with respect to coping with her*

shame and guilt. And it does not seem that paradigmatically excellent people are fitted for *this*

task. If so, there is another reason to suspect that exemplars, understood as paragons of virtue,

might not be as valuable for those who are suffering as other kinds of exemplar. We turn, then, to

the question of which other kinds or types might do better on this score.

The importance of identity and relevance in exemplars. There is a common idea running

through the objections above, which is that paradigmatically excellent people might not inspire

or motivate emulation if they are too distant, too unlike the rest of humanity. This thought seems

to underlie Wolf's claim that moral saints have a life that is strangely barren, one that appears

alien to most people. It underlies the feelings of inferiority and subsequent resentment that

Monin (2007) reports many people experience when presented with moral rebels and otherwise

morally exemplary people. This thought also explains why there is a divergence between what

paragons of excellence have reason to do, and what ordinary people have reason to do, and hence

why the latter might not be rationally motivated to emulate the former. Finally, it helps to explain

why moral saints are poor models when it comes to helping sinners deal with their shame and

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guilt. In all cases, it is the distance or lack of similarity between paradigmatically excellent

people and the rest of humanity that generates problems. If so, then we propose that a better

model for exemplars for ordinary people, and especially for those who suffer, will emphasize the

importance of closeness and similarity. That is: we propose that exemplars might be more

effective in generating emulation and self-improvement if they are people with whom people can

identify with or feel close to. Let us run through the cases above, in order to make the conceptual points clearer; we will examine empirical support for this hypothesis.

The case of Jack and Jill is a pretty clear instance where identity and possibility do the motivational heavy lifting. As we suggested, Jill counts as an exemplar for Jack because he identifies with Jill, on the grounds that she is from a similar socio-economic background. Moreover, Jack seems motivated to emulate Jill precisely because of this similarity: Jack might well think 'if she can do it, then so can I,' and thus capture a mantra that is often at the heart of emulation of others. (A similar motivational story can plausibly be told with respect to cases where people are motivated to emulate role models or motivated as a result of social comparison with others. Sometimes this emulation will involve upward comparison, but often – and unlike the case of exemplars – it will be downward, as when people are moved to take some option on the grounds that someone lacking in admirable qualities nevertheless manages to succeed.)

For many people, the moral saint is not someone they are moved to emulate; for as we have argued, theirs is a life that most people will find alien or 'strangely barren.' The moral saint is not motivating, then, precisely insofar as she appears to be someone unlike most people in important ways. By the same token, the problems of feelings of inferiority and demoralization that Monin (2007) highlights are generated by moral exemplars perceived to be 'extreme,' and the 'severe discrepancy' between their behavior and those of most people. Here too it is the fact

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that exemplars are radically unlike ordinary people which generates cognitive dissonance, internal conflict, and the changes in motivation that are a way of dealing with this difference. It also seems clear that the closer people are to an exemplar – the more individuals identify with them – the closer their reasons for acting in ways that will mirror theirs. So, similarity in character, context, and values will bring with it similarity in reasons to act, and subsequent motivation, at least insofar as people are rational. Finally, those who are suffering from shame and guilt as a result of their own behavior will tend to seek out those who have behaved in a similar fashion but who have redeemed themselves, as models of how they too can come to apologies, make reparations, and achieve redemption. Here those who have redeemed their moral failures, rather than exemplified moral saintliness, will be the examples to follow.

One reason why identification is motivationally important, and which is especially apparent for those who are suffering or facing adversity, is that similarity between people and an

exemplar increases their *confidence* that the efforts to take such a path and emulate that person

will be worth it. Such confidence is extremely important. For those who have suffered trauma or

other seriously debilitating experiences will have, more often than not, significantly depleted

bodily, psychological, and social resources. (Indeed, such depletion might well be the condition

or consequence of the traumatic events and experiences.) Limited resources will thus be more

valuable and require very careful management and deployment. As a result, those who have

suffered trauma will be inclined to look towards exemplars who are good bets for emulation; and

the greater the similarity between sufferer and exemplar, the better bet for emulation they seem

to be. So, if someone relatively similar to the sufferer overcame that kind of hurdle (maintained

sobriety; coped with debilitating illness), or achieved that kind of goal (become more patient;

learned to read), or managed to survive that kind of experience (break-up of a marriage; a violent

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assault), or was the recipient of that kind of good fortune (fell in love; recovered their faith), then

the greater evidence they have that all of these things are possibilities for them.

A second reason is more social. It is not simply that identifying with an exemplar

increases a person's confidence that expending effort in emulating the exemplar will be

worthwhile. The most effective exemplars will be ones people identify with because such

identification is a way of transcending purely individual concerns, acknowledging one's identity

as part of some group or collective, and coming to feel a measure of *solidarity* with them. As is

well known, feelings of solidarity and similar positive group emotions – feelings of 'collective

effervescence,', to use Durkheim's term (Durkheim, 1995) – can have very great motivational

force. People often do things together that they would not do alone because they identify as part

of a group or collective, which is why efforts at cultivating collective emotional responses is so

key to effective social and political movements Goodwin et al., 2004). Such work is vital, in part,

because it motivates individuals to ignore or sacrifice some of their own interests so that the

group flourishes. This phenomenon means that identifying with an exemplar can provide a

motivational boost: people think that they are facing something together, that they are standing

beside another person or group of people in solidarity, and such thoughts can help them ignore or

downplay the individual costs of emulating the group members. This sense of togetherness and

collective identity would seem to be particularly vital when a person is facing difficulty and

adversity. Identifying with others who have gone through hard times might be important to

bolster people's hopes when obstacles stand in their way, to imagine that this is a collective rather than an individual effort, and to be encouraged to persist as a result of this impression. So, identifying with an exemplar can be important for forging a sense of solidarity with them, and feelings of solidarity can be important to the success of their efforts to emulate or imitate them.

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Empirical work supports the view that identity and relevance are important for those who are seeking exemplars. As Han and colleagues (2017, pp. 2-3) note, attainability refers to the perceived possibility of being able to emulate a presented exemplary behavior with a reasonable amount of effort (Lockwood & Kunda, 1977). Past research suggests that, as the degree of perceived attainability increased, participants were more likely to emulate exemplary behaviors (Cialdini, 1980). People are also more likely to emulate presented exemplary behavior when the exemplars are perceived to be similar and relevant (Dasgupta, 2011). Markers of relatability may involve affiliation with the same social or cultural group (Gino et al., 2009; Loe et al., 2000;), being in the same age group (Gould et al., 2003; Kazdin, 1974;), a shared interest (Lin-Siegler et al., 2016; Lockwood and Kunda, 1997;), or even shallow markers of similarity, such as having the same birthday (Walton et al., 2012). For instance, Han et al. (2017, p. 3) note that "In general, similarity in general background as well as more specific forms of model-observer similarity significantly improve the likelihood of emulation" (see also Wenzel, 2004). The Han et al. (2017) research found that stories of attainable exemplars provoked higher levels of moral elevation among participants and were seen to be significantly easier to emulate than unattainable exemplars. Moreover, the presence of concrete and feasible behavioral options maximized the impact of the interventions (see also Leventhal et al., 1965).

Other studies conducted by Han and colleagues (2022) have been more purposeful in determining the importance of attainability and relatability. Given that previous research suggested that both attainability and relatability appeared effective in promoting emulation (Han et al 2017), it was less clear whether each can work independently of the other. Based on two separate studies examining samples drawn from a population of adults and a population of college students, researchers determined that relatability and not attainability had much greater

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influence on emotional and motivational responses of participants (Han et al., 2022). Perceived relatability to people described in stories presented to participants increased emulation. This

research was ultimately interested in the prosocial behavior motivated by exemplars; however, the overall effect of relatability on participants' affective responses and inspiration for behavioral change is key when considering what may be more useful when considering what type of exemplar may help those who are suffering.

Pilot Work Examining the Value of Exemplars for Promoting Growth Following Adversity

Large scale studies of whether attainability and relevance, or similarity and possibility, better promote engagement with and growth from exemplars in those who have suffered trauma or other forms of adversity is missing from this work; however, pilot research suggests that relatability may be key to help those who are suffering, but that attainability is still important. The present authors conducted a series of focus groups with people who expressed interest in participating in a post-traumatic growth intervention based on the Second Story intervention (Roepke et al., 2018). The goal of these focus groups was to examine the question of when role models may be helpful in promoting growth in individuals recovering from an adverse event in their lives.

Of eleven people responding to questions of whether exemplars would be helpful when going through a hard time either by providing lessons or acting as a guide, all could find a type of exemplar that had helped them. Interestingly, six of the participants chose exemplars from social media, whether it was Instagram or a podcast, and based their choices on individuals who were relatable and did not "sugarcoat" topics such as grief. In addition, the participants rejected heroism as a way to cope with pain. Importantly, participants admired the exemplars based on what they had achieved relative to their struggle with adversity. This finding is important

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because even for the three participants that chose everyday people in their lives, including family members and co-workers, a key factor was that people did not want to feel intimidated and pressured to aspire to handle something as well as someone else. Even one participant who chose a movie did so because she felt she could relate to the characters because the story was realistic in showing true hardship, but also how to deal with it.

Compellingly, all participants spoke of feeling commonality with their role model of choice in one area of their life or another and that helped them access the positive attitude of their role model. It is clear according to these individuals that exemplars may be helpful, but they alluded to times when they may not be helpful, such as when their lives seem too perfect or not

like regular people. Although more extensive research is needed if interventions aimed to promote post-traumatic growth are to be maximally effective, it seems that for those who are suffering, exemplars are most valuable when they are relatable and can show that overcoming adversity is feasible.

Challenges in Utilizing Exemplars to Promote Character Growth Following Adversity

However, there may be multiple contexts in which exemplars many do not help in promoting character development in the wake of adversity. For example, research on social comparison highlights the risks of exemplars: for example, one study of individuals with spinal cord injuries indicated that some individuals engage in *upward contrast* (a negative response to seeing others who are better-off) and that this contrast is linked to depressive symptoms (Buunk et al., 2006). Similarly, recent research focused on online social comparison indicates that Facebook use predicted upward social comparison that in turn harmed individuals' self-esteem and well-being over time (Schmuck et al., 2019). These risks may be particularly relevant for those higher in neuroticism, as evidence suggests such individuals may be less likely to identify

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with an upward comparison target and less likely to experience positive affect in this scenario (Buunk et al., 2001). Relatedly, when discussing reactions to trauma, heavy-handed discussion of role models who transcended adversity could induce some individuals to feel pressure, shame, invalidation, or minimization of their own struggles.

Moreover, in times of political and ideological divisiveness, discussions of role models can run the risk of alienating some individuals and/or sparking political debate about whether a given public figure should actually be revered – potentially detracting from the original focus of discussion/intervention. To maximize the benefits and minimize the risks of discussing exemplars, it is likely useful to encourage individuals to identify their own role models (vs. imposing one); to offer examples of relatable people (vs. remarkably heroic people]); to directly address the risks inherent in social comparison; and to center cultural responsiveness and cultural humility in discussing exemplars with diverse groups (all of which we have argued for in this chapter).

Conclusions

Future research can shed light on the role moral exemplars can play in fostering adaptive responses in the wake of adversity. Such research may include qualitative interviews in which

survivors of adversity and trauma who have experienced positive changes are asked whether

exemplars or role models were helpful as they adjusted to life in the wake of adversity;

longitudinal studies in which the link between specific types of role models and exemplars (in

terms of their functionality) and trajectories of change are examined; and intervention work in

which participants are encouraged to reflect on specific role models and exemplars as part of

their activities. One of the multiple benefits of such future research is that it would represent a

deep integration of philosophical insight and psychological investigation.

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