

Praying at the altar of the stars

IMAGINE for a moment that you are famous. How different would your life be? For a start, you would be incredibly powerful. Feel hungry? Don't bother walking to the shop to buy some lunch – you almost certainly have someone paid to do that for you. Feel sexy? Just ring up one of your thousands of admirers if you fancy a night of passion. There's always someone available for you. Feel a little under the weather? Well, your publicist will simply have to cancel the afternoon of press interviews while you put your feet up and have a nice long bath...

Now imagine, if you have to, that you are a diehard fan of a famous individual. How much of your life is spent thinking about that individual? How much money have you spent on him or her (concert tickets, books, travel, souvenirs and other merchandising)? How important is it to your identity that you are a fan of that person? How would you feel if that person did something bad and it became embarrassing to be associated with them?

This bizarre state of affairs – a small group of human beings idolised by a much larger number – has existed in most societies to some extent through history. Very often those idols are never seen by their admirers because they only exist as legendary figures in oral narratives, so it doesn't matter whether they're real or not. Or they may be known, like monarchs or great military figures, largely through their representation on money or portrait paintings. For most people, the idols are just part of the cultural fabric, some of them superhumans to emulate, perhaps with moral significance.

In contemporary society, thanks to the



DAVID GILES and JOHN MALTBY examine the current state of psychological research on celebrities and those who 'worship' them.

influence and ubiquity of the mass media, relationships between idols and their public have become much more complicated. The media present us with thousands of figures from across the world, of all ages, with all manner of qualities, some without any discernable 'qualities' at all. Media psychologists use the term 'parasocial' to describe the relationships between audiences and these figures (e.g. Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956). They are 'parasocial' because they exist beyond the person's social network (though some social psychologists seem reluctant to acknowledge that they are different from ordinary relationships, while others think they are not relationships at all).

Is celebrity then just an extreme form of popularity? We flock to attractive people in our immediate environment: even in pre-school social groups there seem to be 'stars' that command more attention than other children (Hartup, 1992). It is tempting to think of such individuals as possessing some magic 'charisma' that seduces the rest of us blindly into their slipstream – but as Durkheim and others (e.g. Shils, 1955) have pointed out, the secret of charisma lies in the interaction between leaders and followers. The explosion of celebrity in the last hundred years can hardly be the result of an excess

of charismatic individuals in the population!

Therefore, we have to acknowledge the role that the mass media have played in creating celebrity culture (Gamson, 1994) and providing so many different personalities for audiences to engage with. The historian Leo Braudy (1997), in a superb analysis of the fame phenomenon, argues that until coins appeared as items of exchange we weren't used to seeing many faces other than those of our nearest and dearest. Movies, radio, television and the internet have filled our sensory worlds with faces, voices, bodies and personal histories that bring celebrities alive in a way undreamt of centuries ago. When, as part of an experiment on self-concept, Aron *et al.* (1991) asked their participants to generate visual images of certain individuals, the vividness of their images of the movie actress and singer Cher was higher than that of their own mothers!

It may not be worth trying to explain the phenomenon of celebrity by examining celebrities themselves. After all, it is hard to see what Cher has in common with, say, Jordan and David Beckham, apart from celebrity status itself – very much an end-state attained through different routes (Giles, 2000). Further, while there are some recent empirical studies of the desire for

fame and the experience that results from it (Mrowicki & Giles, 2005; Rockwell & Giles, 2005), celebrities are a difficult population for a researcher to recruit participants from. Instead, social psychologists have started to explore the meanings that celebrities hold for the media audience, and inevitably the more problematic aspects of what has become known as 'celebrity worship'.

Measuring celebrity worship

The first stage of this research field involved the construction of a measure of celebrity worship, a psychometric instrument that attempted to capture elements of a number of existing measures. Wann's (1995) Sport Fan Motivation Scale identified eight factors predicting sport fandom: fandom as a source of self-esteem; as an avenue for escape; as entertainment; family affiliation; group affiliation; aesthetic appeal; excitement; and economic reasons (e.g. betting). Stever's (1991) Celebrity Appeal Questionnaire focused particularly on entertainer and hero/role model factors. The Parasocial Interaction Scale of Rubin *et al.* (1985) emphasised the one-way friendships between entertainers and the audience.

Additionally, other authors in the literature about fan motivation (e.g. Jenson, 1992) kept emphasising 'psychopathology' and pathological over-identification with celebrities. Using these elements, McCutcheon *et al.* (2002) introduced the Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS), a 34-item scale that was initially administered to 262 people living in central Florida and then refined to 17 items. They suggested a 'probabilistic item hierarchy' to celebrity

worship, comprising one dimension in which lower scores on the scale involved individualistic behaviour, such as watching, listening to, reading and learning about celebrities, whilst the higher levels of worship are characterised by empathy, over-identification, and obsession with the celebrity.

Later research using larger UK samples has produced a similar picture, but factor analysis has suggested three different aspects to celebrity worship (Maltby *et al.*, 2002; Maltby *et al.*, 2005; Maltby *et al.*, 2001). A recent study among 1723 UK respondents (781 males, 942 females) aged between 14 and 62 years suggests that, when the items of the CAS are subjected to principal components analysis, three dimensions to celebrity worship emerge. These can be described as:

- *Entertainment-social.* Fans are attracted to a favourite celebrity because of their perceived ability to entertain and to become a source of social interaction and gossip. Items include 'My friends and I like to discuss what my favourite celebrity has done' and 'Learning the life story of my favourite celebrity is a lot of fun'.
- *Intense-personal.* The intense-personal aspect of celebrity worship reflects intensive and compulsive feelings about the celebrity, akin to the obsessional tendencies of fans often referred to in the literature. Items include 'My favourite celebrity is practically perfect in every way' and 'I consider my favourite celebrity to be my soul mate'.
- *Borderline-pathological.* This dimension is typified by uncontrollable behaviours and fantasies about their celebrities. Items include 'I would gladly die in order to save the life of my favourite celebrity' and 'If I walked through the door of my favourite celebrity's house she or he would be happy to see me'.

These different aspects of celebrity worship vary in terms of the parasocial interaction between fans and celebrities, particularly between the intense-personal and borderline-pathological dimensions. From the fan's viewpoint, intense-personal aspects of celebrity worship are associated with passive parasocial relationships (e.g. 'When something bad happens to my favourite celebrity I feel like it happened to me'). With borderline-pathological aspects, the parasocial relationships involve

individuals imagining themselves in a special relationship with the celebrity.

Other work at the University of Leicester looking at extreme levels of celebrity worship (Sheridan *et al.*, 2005) has suggested that these elements of parasocial interaction may be extended to include dimensions that cover active attempts to contact the celebrity, by letter and e-mail, and an overwhelming belief by the person that there is a real relationship between the celebrity and themselves and that they are destined to be together at the exclusion of all others. In this way the relationship goes beyond the parasocial. Once a fan begins to 'stalk' a celebrity, and actual contact is made, the relationship enters a very real dimension, much to the distress of the recipient.

Personality correlates

What other aspects of behaviour might celebrity worship be related to? In terms of personality, it didn't take a great leap of the imagination to see that the three-dimension model of celebrity worship, to a large extent, paralleled the three dimensions of Eysenckian personality theory (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985): extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism. Specifically, the entertainment-social factor of the Celebrity Attitude Scale reflects some of the extraversion personality traits (sociable, lively, active, venturesome), the intense-personal factor of the CAS reflects some of the neuroticism traits (tense, emotional, moody), and some of the acts described in the borderline-pathological subscale of the CAS seem to reflect some of the psychoticism traits (impulsive, antisocial, egocentric).

Consequently Maltby *et al.* (2003) found a significant positive correlation between the corresponding pairs of dimensions (although the effect was very small for psychoticism/borderline-pathological pairing). Maltby *et al.* (2004a) found that intense-personal aspects of celebrity worship were associated with poorer mental health and that this relationship can be understood within the dimensions of neuroticism and a coping style that suggests disengagement and failure to acknowledge (let alone deal with) stressful events.

Cognitive correlates

Research has also explored cognitive aspects that may be associated with celebrity worship. McCutcheon *et al.*

(2003) examined the relationship between celebrity worship and six cognitive measures comprising creativity (verbal), crystallised intelligence, critical thinking, spatial ability, and need for cognition. High scores on the CAS consistently showed negative correlations with these measures of cognitive ability. The only exception to this trend was a small but significant contribution of scores on creativity in predicting scores on the borderline-pathological subscale.

Two other studies have looked at celebrity worship and cognitive flexibility, which refers to a person's (a) awareness that in any given situation there are options and alternatives available, (b) willingness to be flexible and adapt to the situation,

and (c) self-efficacy in being flexible. Martin *et al.* (2003) and Maltby *et al.* (2004b) examined the relationship between celebrity worship and cognitive flexibility among USA and UK samples respectively. Both studies found negative associations between intense-personal celebrity worship and cognitive flexibility, suggesting individuals who engage in celebrity worship for intense-personal reasons are unable to consider options or to implement alternatives to problems.

By implication then, when it comes to stressful situations of daily life, those who are intense-personal in their celebrity worship may be 'locked' into a way of viewing the world, and are therefore unable to deal with novel or unusual situations.

Such conclusions are consistent with descriptions of the obsessive or intense-personal celebrity worshipper as someone who is unable to deal with the real world, and can perceive little value in anything other than their favourite celebrity.

Social and developmental aspects of celebrity worship

Finally, some social and developmental aspects of celebrity worship have been explored among UK samples, and in particular children and adolescents. In a first study we (Giles & Maltby, 2004) examined the parasocial relationships that adolescents form with favourite celebrities as secondary attachments. We hypothesised that celebrity attachments would reflect the transition from parental attachment to peer attachments as a function of increasing emotional autonomy. We found that, after controlling for age-related effects, high emotional autonomy was a significant predictor of celebrity worship, and that entertainment-social aspects were related to high attachment to peers and low attachment to parents.

These findings indicate that the main function of celebrity attachments in adolescence may be as an extended social network – a group of 'pseudo-friends' who form the subject of peer gossip and discussion. An intense-personal interest in celebrities was best predicted by low levels of security and closeness with parents. This function of celebrity attachment seems to reflect a more problematic aspect of the transition towards emotional autonomy. It seems that celebrities provide adolescents with a secondary group of pseudo-friends during a time of increasing autonomy from parents, but intense focus on a single celebrity may result from difficulties in making this transition.

Another more specific focus for these attachments in adolescents was reported by Maltby *et al.* (2005), who examined the role of celebrity interest in shaping body-image cognitions. Among three separate UK samples (adolescents, students and adults), respondents selected a celebrity of their own sex whose body/figure they liked and admired, and then completed the CAS and two measures of body image. Significant relationships were found between attitudes toward celebrities and body image among female adolescents only.

It appears that, in female adolescence, there is an association between intense-

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personal celebrity worship and body image between the ages of 14 and 16 years, and some tentative evidence is found to suggest that this relationship disappears at the onset of adulthood (17 to 20 years). These results are consistent with those authors who stress the importance of the formation of parasocial relationships with media figures, and suggest that parasocial relationships with celebrities perceived as having a good body shape may lead to a poor body image in female adolescents.

Conclusions

While the media frequently debate whether or not celebrity worship is a good thing for society (an issue bound up with ideology, morality, and the responsibilities of the media themselves), at an individual level it is more a case of keeping things in perspective. It appears that entertainment-social aspects of celebrity worship (e.g. discussing celebrities with friends) form an unavoidable part of the adolescent transition to adulthood, but intense-personal factors (e.g. private fantasies

about celebrities) may lead to inappropriate attachment behaviour in extreme cases.

Presently we know very little about these extreme cases. Large-sample psychometric research has played an important role in establishing celebrity worship as a phenomenon amenable to quantitative psychological research, but it has left large gaps in our understanding of the actual processes involved. For a start, how does celebrity worship develop in childhood? How might an intense-personal celebrity worshipper turn into a potentially homicidal stalker? What role do celebrities play in meaning construction for children, adolescents and specific clinical populations?

There is a fear on behalf of some media and communication scholars that even concepts like parasocial interaction are in danger of pathologising audiences. They shouldn't be. There is no excuse for lazy attributions about the effects of the media. A more fully integrated psychology of the media would form the basis for serious consideration of phenomena like celebrity

DISCUSS AND DEBATE

Are celebrities good for us?

What possible roles do celebrities play in our lives?

Are celebrities different from heroes?

How does our interaction with celebrities differ from that with other media figures?

Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. E-mail letters on psychologist@bps.org.uk or post on our forum at www.thepsychologist.org.uk.

worship; and would enable parents, clinicians and other professionals to treat media use itself as largely unproblematic, but to identify critical moments when ordinary 'worship' can develop into something more troubling.

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