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Being a Celebrity: A Phenomenology of Fame

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Abstract
The experience of being famous was investigated through interviews with 15 well-known American celebrities. The interviews detail the existential parameters of being famous in contemporary culture. Research participants were celebrities in various societal categories: government, law, business, publishing, sports, music, film, television news and entertainment. Phenomenological analysis was used to examine textural and structural relationship-to-world themes of fame and celebrity. The study found that in relation to self, being famous leads to loss of privacy, entitization, demanding expectations, gratification of ego needs, and symbolic immortality. In relation to other, or world, being famous leads to wealth, access, temptations, and concerns about family impact. Areas of psychological concern for celebrity mental health include character-splitting, mistrust, isolation, and an unwillingness to give up fame. Being-in-the-world of celebrity is a process involving four temporal phases: love/hate, addiction, acceptance, and adaptation. Findings are presented in the form of a Composite Textural Description and two Individual Structural Descriptions.

Keywords
fame, celebrity, media psychology, pop culture, phenomenology

> Most everybody secretly imagines themselves in show business and everyday on their way to work, they're a little bit depressed because they're not… People are sad they're not famous in America. (Waters, 2004)

Movie producer John Waters's quotation may not only apply to the United States. Over the last century the mass media have glorified the exploits of famous people to all corners of the globe, so that being recognized and

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talked about by millions of people has become a desirable goal for many individuals in contemporary society. But what of the lucky few who actually attain that goal? In this paper we describe the experience of fame for those who have achieved it at some point in their lifetime.

The psychology of fame and celebrity has been a very restricted academic field thus far. Apart from a small body of largely speculative work (e.g., Evans & Wilson, 1999; Giles, 2000; Griffiths & Joinson, 1998) and a handful of studies examining popularity (Adler & Adler, 1989; Schaller, 1997), contemporary psychologists have preferred to study audience relationships with celebrities under the banners of "parasocial interaction" (Giles, 2002) and "celebrity worship" (Maltby, Giles, Barber & McCutcheon, 2005; Maltby, Houran & McCutcheon, 2003; McCutcheon, Lange, & Houran, 2002).

The strongest academic research on fame and celebrity has been conducted largely in sociology and the humanities (e.g., Braudy, 1997; Gamson, 1994; Holmes & Redmond, 2006; Marshall, 1997). Although this work is illuminating from a theoretical perspective, it lacks an empirical contribution, largely because famous individuals are difficult to recruit as research participants. The study reported in this paper involved conducting in-depth interviews with a number of individuals who have attained some degree of celebrity in the United States.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the experience of fame, effectively asking the question: what is it *like* to be famous? What means of coping do individuals adopt for such situations? Are paparazzi and fan encounters experienced as problematic for famous people? Are the benefits of the celebrity experience worth the loss of privacy and anonymity, meeting cherished expectations of "the big time?" Throughout, it must be borne in mind that retrospective accounts bear a gloss that may reflect a reconfiguring of the life narrative (Bruner, 2002), but within this confine, this study captures the experience of being famous as told to the researcher by contemporary American celebrities.

A distinction between fame and celebrity is made by a number of authors (e.g., Braudy, 1997; Gamson, 1994). Fame is considered a long-standing phenomenon largely deriving from mass society, typically urban, in which individuals are glorified for their deeds. Braudy (1997) traces this process to Alexander the Great and the Roman Empire. Celebrity, in contrast, is viewed as a modern phenomenon related to mass media, brought about by newspaper, magazine, television, the Internet, and such technologically