

RESEARCH INTO 'INTENSE FANDOM', INCLUDING CELEBRITY WORSHIP AND CELEBRITY STALKING

Celebrity worship

Broadly defined, celebrity worship is a preoccupation with a celebrity that affects the worshipper's life and could be described as *obsessional*. Research in this area is in its infancy, but a number of factors have been shown to be associated with celebrity worship.

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH CELEBRITY WORSHIP

Age: Celebrity worship peaks between 11 and 17 and declines slowly thereafter.

Education: Lower education levels are associated with celebrity worship. Presumably, intelligent people can see through the 'cult of personality'. Alternatively, intelligent people see celebrities as less intelligent than themselves, and therefore have less to admire in them.

Social skills: People with poor social skills may see celebrity worship as filling the void created by the absence of real relationships,

Gender: Men favour sporting celebrities, whilst women tend to favour celebrities from the world of entertainment. However, women are no more likely than men to label worship as 'intense'.

Race/ethnicity: Black Americans are more likely to select a black than white celebrity (81% versus 19%) whereas white Americans are more likely to select a white than black celebrity (73% versus 27%).

Research suggests that there are different degrees of celebrity worship. **McCutcheon et al (2000)** developed the **Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS)** to measure a person's intensity of celebrity worship. They identified 3 kinds of 'fandom':

(1) **Entertainment-Social:** These fans are attracted to a celebrity because they find him/her entertaining and a source of social interaction and gossip with others. **(15%)**

(2) **Intense-Personal:** These fans have a strongly personal aspect of attraction to a celebrity. For example, a person may feel that when something bad happens to a celebrity it is as though he or she was experiencing it personally. **(5%)**

(3) **Borderline-Pathological:** These fans are characterised by obsessional behaviour about a celebrity. For example, a person may feel that s/he has a special relationship with a celebrity and that if a celebrity asked them to do something illegal, they would do it. This is the most extreme form of celebrity worship. (1%)

It has been argued that celebrity worship is psychologically harmful. For example, research shows that celebrity worship is positively correlated with *poorer psychological well-being* (e.g. social dysfunction, depression, anxiety) as measured by the *General Health Questionnaire*. According to **Maltby et al (2003)**, this is a result of a person's failed attempts to escape from, cope with, or enhance their own daily life.

Research conducted by **Cheung & Yue (2003)** in China has shown that teenagers who worship idols from TV demonstrate the *lowest* levels of identity achievement. This finding might explain why some people confuse a celebrity's fictional role with their real life, and expect them to behave as their character in the real world.

Giles (2003) has identified a phenomenon called **parasocial bereavement**. This is the grief shown by some people when a celebrity dies. **Giles & Naylor (2003)** found that tributes left to Princess Diana and Jill Dando frequently made reference to how people had come to 'know' them, even though they had never met them. Tributes also often revealed how people reported being 'taken aback' by the strength of their own feelings following the celebrities' deaths.



Phillips (1974) found that high-profile celebrity suicides are often followed by increased numbers of suicide in the general population. Since pathological worshippers are often drawn to the more entertaining, even anti-social celebrities, there are clear implications of this.

However, it has also been argued that there are psychological *benefits* to be gained from worshipping celebrities, provided that a person is participating in a social network of fans. **Maltby et al (2001)** suggest that sharing information and experiences with friends might *promote* social relationships and serve as a *buffer* against everyday stressors.

This might explain why celebrity worship peaks between 11 and 17 (i.e. when the stresses of adolescence operate).

Other Chinese research conducted by **Cheung & Yue (2003)** has shown that teenagers who worship 'key' family members, teachers, or other people with whom they came into regular contact tend to show *higher* levels of self-esteem and educational achievement compared with worshippers of TV stars. This is understandable given that the admiration of those who are able to provide tangible benefits and inputs into adolescents' lives would be more likely to provide a greater positive impact than those celebrities with whom only a parasocial relationship is enjoyed.

So why do some people worship celebrities? At least six explanations have been proposed. However, the main two explanations are **personality theory** and **attachment theory**. Both of these can also be used to explain *celebrity stalking*.

Personality theory: Maltby et al (2003) found a correlation between the 3 kinds of fandom identified earlier and the types of personality identified by Hans Eysenck:

- **Entertainment-Social** correlates with aspects of **extroversion** (sociable, sensation-seeking, carefree and optimistic traits)
- **Intense-Personal** correlates with **neuroticism** (anxious, worrying, and moody traits)
- **Borderline-Pathological** correlates with **psychoticism** (solitary, troublesome, cruel and inhumane traits)

Maltby et al (2006) have also found that celebrity worship for intense-personal reasons is correlated with **fantasy proneness**, and worship for borderline-pathological reasons is correlated with both fantasy proneness and **dissociation** (a loss of the sense of self). **Evans & Claycomb (1999)** found that dissociation can lead to episodes of violence, and propose that this might explain why some fanatical celebrity worshippers become dangerous in relation to a particular celebrity.

Attachment theory: Because parasocial relationships are more common in adolescence than in later life, **Giles and Maltby (2004)** have proposed an

attachment theory of celebrity worship. As we know from Developmental Psychology, there is strong evidence that attachment in early childhood is a good predictor of later adult relationships.

People who have secure attachments with their parents tend to form secure attachments with their adult partners. However, people whose parents were inconsistent or rejecting tend to be less likely to be securely attached to their adult partners. Giles and Maltby argue that insecurely attached children form parasocial relationships with celebrities, as these do not involve risk of rejection or criticism *unless* contact is sought with the celebrity.

SOME OTHER EXPLANATIONS OF CELEBRITY WORSHIP

Evolutionary psychology: This suggests that it is natural for us to look up to those people who receive attention because they have been successful. In pre-historic times, this would have meant respecting good hunters. However, because hunting is no longer an essential skill, we may look to celebrities, whose fame and fortune we would like to emulate. It makes evolutionary sense to value people according to how successful they are, because whoever is getting more of what everybody wants is probably using above-average methods to get it, and would therefore serve as a valuable role model.

Verdict: Unfortunately, evolutionary explanations suffer from being non-falsifiable, and cannot be tested experimentally. Evolutionary psychology is like Freudian 'psychology'. It explains phenomena in sometimes very interesting ways, but unfortunately we cannot go back to pre-historic times to see whether evolutionary psychologists are correct about how our ancestors behaved.

Poor cognitive functioning: McCutcheon et al (2003) found that there are consistently high negative correlations between scores on the CAS and measures of crystallised intelligence, critical thinking, spatial ability, and enjoyment of cognitive challenges. This shows that intense fandom is associated with poor cognitive functioning.

Verdict: As with personality theory, the correlations are consistent and statistically significant. However, correlation does not imply causation, and even if it did, we would then be faced with the very difficult job of explaining *why* poor cognitive functioning would lead to intense fandom.

Continued overleaf

The Just World Hypothesis: According to this, intense fandom is a result of a particular way of perceiving the world. Some people see celebrities as deceptive and manipulating, whereas others take a more positive view that people 'get what they deserve'. These people think that celebrities have got where they are because they deserve to. Whilst the rest of us see celebrity as deceptive and manipulating, celebrity worshippers see truth and honesty.

Verdict: This is a cognitive approach to understanding intense fandom, which has yet to be subject to any kind of research. It is not difficult to imagine how research could be conducted: scores on questionnaires assessing how 'just' we see the world should be correlated with how intense our fandom is. This explanation may be one to keep an eye on in the future.

The Absorption-Addiction Hypothesis: We know that celebrity worship typically begins in adolescence. Talking about celebrities is a useful way of socialising with others during a stressful time of life. For most teenagers, celebrity worship remains at a harmless level. However, a small number go beyond the entertainment-social dimension and, for various reasons (e.g. difficulty with their own relationships) become '**absorbed**' in the life of their favourite celebrity.

According to **McCutcheon, et al (2002)**, this helps them to establish their own identity and achieve a sense of fulfilment. This heightened sense of reality leads them to believe they have a 'special' relationship with a celebrity. Once *absorption* has occurred a person might start to develop an unhealthy obsession with a celebrity's life. The relationship becomes '*addictive*' and people feel they need to become more and more involved with the celebrity in order to feel connected to them.

Verdict: This is another potentially interesting approach, which has yet to be subjected to any form of serious scientific research. However, becoming 'addicted' to a celebrity could lead to extreme behaviours such as seeking contact or *stalking* in order to raise their level of satisfaction with the parasocial relationship. If so, we would expect to find evidence of this in people convicted of celebrity stalking.

Celebrity stalking

'Stalking' is a word coined in the late 1980s. It is defined as "persistent attempts to impose on another person unwanted communication or contact, causing him or her fear of bodily injury". Stalking can take many forms, including telephone calls, letters, following, surveillance, sending unsolicited gifts, and ordering or cancelling services on the victim's behalf.

Celebrity stalkings constitute only about 1% of the total stalking cases, which therefore makes them very rare. We probably think they are more

common that they are because of their high profile media coverage. One well-known victim of stalking was Madonna. Robert Hoskins was sentenced to 10 years in prison for stalking and terrorising her. He had threatened to slash her throat if she did not agree to marry him. Jack Jordan, a 35-year-old former psychiatric patient was arrested in 2007 after camping outside Uma Thurman's house, trespassing on a movie set, and even drawing a bizarre cartoon of Thurman digging a grave for him. Jordan also sent Thurman a letter in which he threatened to kill himself if he ever saw her out with another man again.

Mark David Chapman flew from Hawaii to New York, where John Lennon was recording a new album. Having obtained Lennon's autograph earlier in the day, Chapman waited outside Lennon's apartment for the star to return from his recording session. Chapman fired several shots at Lennon, killing him almost instantly.



As with celebrity worship, several explanations of celebrity stalking been proposed. The two main explanations are **personality theory** and **attachment theory**.

Personality theory: According to this, stalking can be viewed as an extreme form of celebrity worship. Those who score highly on the borderline-pathological dimension of the CAS believe they have a special relationship with a celebrity. Since they do not, stalking may be an expression of a *delusional belief system*, that is, a **mental disorder**.

This is supported by **Stokes' et al (2007)** finding that stalking is more common in people with **autistic spectrum disorder**. People with this disorder have difficulty in forming social relationships with others, and so may be more likely to form the kind of parasocial relationship with a celebrity that could lead to stalking. Interestingly, **Mullen (2008)** found that in 20,000 cases of stalking the royal family, 80% involved people with serious mental disorders (e.g. schizophrenia).



Dr. Klaus Wagner was jailed in 1994 for stalking the royal family. He claimed that the Queen was a shape-shifting lizard

Attachment theory: This explanation proposes that celebrity stalking is an extreme manifestation of insecure attachments in infancy and childhood. Evidence supporting this explanation comes from a study conducted by **Tonin (2004)**. He measured stalkers' retrospective childhood attachment styles and their current attachment using two self-report measures. Compared with a control group of non-stalkers, Tonin found significantly more evidence of insecure adult attachment styles than in the control group.

McCutcheon et al (2006) hypothesised that if insecurely attached children are more likely to have relationship problems as adults, then they might be likely to form parasocial relationships. This is because parasocial relationships make few demands and, because there is no real relationship with the celebrity, there is no risk of criticism or rejection. **McCutcheon et al** found these people who were insecurely attached as children were more likely than those who were securely attached to *condone* behaviours associated with stalking.

According to **Kienlen (1998)**, adults who were classified as *anxious-ambivalent* in childhood tend to have a weak sense of self-worth and are anxious about rejection. This suggests they would be motivated to seek the *approval* of the person they are stalking. Those who were *anxious avoidant* try to maintain an emotional distance from others, and so might be expected to stalk a celebrity as a *retaliation* against a perceived wrongdoing.

This explanation has partial support. For example, **Roberts (2007)** found a significant positive correlation between scores on a scale measuring the frequency of self-reported attempts to contact a favourite celebrity and anxious-ambivalent insecurity. It can also be used to explain the very different behaviours of celebrity stalkers. Mark David Chapman came to see John Lennon as a 'phoney' and, at least in part, responsible for Chapman's lack of success in life. Because he perceived Lennon to have committed a wrongdoing against him, Chapman murdered him. John Hinckley Jnr stalked the actress Jodie Foster. His way of seeking her approval was to attempt to assassinate the President of the United States (at the time, this was Ronald Reagan).



John Hinckley Jnr

Interestingly, **Kienlen (1998)** also found that most of the stalkers she studied (80%) had experience some kind of *severe loss* in the seven months prior to the start of them stalking a victim. These losses included marriage break-up, potential custody losses, and potential loss of a seriously ill parent. Kienlen believes that stalkers try to compensate for their losses through the pursuit of their stalking victim. Stalking, therefore, is a way of *alleviating grief* and venting their anger onto the victim, who is blamed for their troubles. The victim's failure to respond to communication, and contact with the Police instead, leads to further

blame on the part of the stalker. This could also explain Mark David Chapman's murder of John Lennon

Ethical and methodological evaluation of research into celebrity stalking

Because of its socially sensitive nature, this area of research raises **ethical issues**, such as confidentiality and protecting the anonymity of the participants. It also raises several **methodological issues**. Most of the research uses questionnaires, and data may be invalid because (a) celebrity worshippers may not tell the truth, (b) stalkers might understate the frequency of their behaviour, and (c) intelligent people may not report celebrity worshipping because they are aware that it is generally viewed negatively by society.

Almost all of the research in this area is **correlational**. Although correlational studies tell us that the variables share a relationship, they do not enable conclusions to be drawn about cause and effect. A relationship between two variables may reflect an underlying relationship with a third, as yet unknown, variable.

That said, this new area of research is producing some interesting predictions, which have been supported by research. For example, the Christian religion forbids the worship of anyone other than God. It might, therefore, be predicted that there would be a negative correlation between celebrity worship and how religious a person is. **Maltby et al (2002)** tested this prediction by means of questionnaires, and found that as 'religiosity' increases, the tendency to worship celebrities decreased, and that this was true for both men and women.