

## THE ATTRACTION OF CELEBRITY, INCLUDING SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EVOLUTIONARY EXPLANATIONS

Famous people are famous because they have done something worthy of individual recognition. 'Celebrity' is a twentieth century invention, and a product of the media (the word comes from the French word 'celebre', meaning 'well known' or 'public'). Of course, some people can be both famous and a celebrity. However, a person can be a celebrity without being famous, that is, a person can be well known for nothing in particular (e.g. Jade Goody). Television programmes like *Big Brother* have allowed 'ordinary people' to become celebrities and earn fortunes. In today's world, virtually anyone, regardless of talent, can be a celebrity...



### SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS

Several social psychological explanations of the attraction of celebrity have been proposed.

#### Social Learning Theory ("I want to be like you")

Social learning Theory (SLT) says we are attracted to celebrities because we **aspire** to the lifestyle we see them living (e.g. being idolised, attending parties, having attractive partners, and so on). Celebrities function as the 'new' **role model**, replacing pre-media role models like parents, teachers or nurses. Why aspire to be a teacher when you can aspire to be a Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie?



SLT says that we learn by **observing** the behaviour of others. We observe other people's behaviour and we copy what makes them successful. This can even involve such minor behaviours as copying their current haircut and even buying the products we think they consume (through their advertising of them). **Imitating** behaviour that we see being rewarded is called **vicarious reinforcement**.

In his research with children, Bandura found that they were more likely to copy the behaviour of higher-status individuals. This, of course, would include celebrities and the famous. **De Backer et al (2007)** found that just as SLT predicts, the younger a person is the more they 'learn' from a celebrity.

### Parasocial relationships ("I've seen all your films")

Media coverage of celebrities has, for many people, replaced that of 'legitimate' news. According to **Ashe & McCutcheon (2001)**: *"By design, television news has increasingly come to resemble celebrity gossip. Intimate details of celebrities become the subject of mass mediated knowledge, thus encouraging feelings of knowing the media figures as if they were in our own circle."*



For some people, celebrities play an important part in their lives. However, our relationship with celebrities is **parasocial**: celebrities can address us as though they are talking to us personally and privately.

*However*, unlike normal relationships we cannot respond - we know a lot about them, but they know nothing about us.

Parasocial interaction was not really investigated until **McQuail et al (1972)** revealed that it occurred in soap opera audiences, with viewers empathising with the plights of characters. A more recent example of a parasocial relationship is that between the audience and the contestants on *Big Brother*. The revolutionary concept in television was 'narrowcasting' their whole day on a digital channel. This allowed intimate observation of their lives, with the added spice of some very provocative interactions.

Parasocial relationships are appealing because unlike real relationships they make few demands of us. Additionally, we do not run the risk of criticism or rejection as we do in real relationships. It has been argued that this form of 'interaction' is used by people for either companionship and/or personal identity purposes (although this view has been challenged: see below).

We do not just form parasocial relationships with any celebrity. **Schiappa et al. (2007)** found that the following factors are most important in the formation of a parasocial relationship:

- (1) **Attractiveness** of the character (36% of the total variance)
- (2) Perception of **similarity** with the character (23%)
- (3) Perception of the character as **real** (23%)

So, attractive characters who are similar to the viewer are likely to be the objects of a parasocial relationship. Additionally, they must be perceived to be real, meaning that however unlikely a fictional setting, a parasocial relationship is more likely if a character reacts in a believable way. Moreover, as a character begins to reveal credible information about him/herself, this disclosure encourages a feeling of intimacy with him or her. Interestingly, age is *not* a predictor, despite some psychologists' belief that parasocial relationships are primarily an adolescent phenomenon.

Although we have never met these celebrities, we may feel that we know a great deal about their lives. Incredibly, **Aron, et al. (1991)** found that when participants were asked to generate visual images of particular people, they produced more vivid images of the singer Cher than they did of their own mothers.

It is commonly believed that parasocial relationships with celebrities are dysfunctional and, as noted above, formed on the basis of loneliness. However, Schiappa et al's research found that loneliness is not a significant predictor of the formation of a parasocial relationship. In fact, **Sood & Rogers (2000)** found that it is people who are socially active and socially motivated that are more likely to engage in such relationships.

It seems that parasocial relationships actually offer many benefits. They provide models of social behaviour (e.g. intimacy and generosity) and an opportunity to learn cultural values (such as the importance of marriage). **Perse & Rubin (1989)** found that because people are exposed to soap opera characters repeatedly, one benefit of parasocial interaction is a perceived reduction in uncertainty about social relationships.

### The 'Mere Exposure Effect' ("The more I see you, the more I like you")

According to **Zajonc (1968)**: "*Repeated exposure of a person to a stimulus is a sufficient condition for the enhancement of his/her attitude toward it.*" The stimulus can be an object, a place, a person, and so on. It is argued that the more we see someone and become familiar with them, the more comforting and trusting we are of them. So, the more we see Jamie Oliver, the more we like him.



The mere exposure effect appears to work even if we aren't consciously aware of perceiving it. This might explain why certain celebrities seem to be on every possible form of the media. By repeated exposure to a particular celebrity, viewers start to associate a positive attitude with them, without knowing much about them.

However, some researchers argue that the 'mere exposure effect' applies only to stimuli that are inherently viewed as positive (or at least neutral). If people view a celebrity as having widely conflicting interests, personalities or opinions to their own, they may dislike them even more as a result of repeated exposure to them.

## EVOLUTIONARY EXPLANATIONS

As with social psychological explanations, several evolutionary explanations of why we are attracted to celebrity have been proposed. Evolutionary explanations propose that behaviours we show today exist because they gave survival advantages to our prehistoric ancestors.

### Attraction to creative individuals (The neophilia hypothesis)

Both non-humans and humans are **neophilic**, that is, they prefer novelty. **Darwin (1859)** believed that neophilia was an important factor in the diversification and rapid evolution of bird song, and that females were attracted to males who displayed the most complex and novel songs. Among people, neophilia is especially strong, with boredom often being cited as a reason for terminating romantic relationships.

Before the arrival of TV, prehistoric people would have had to amuse each other increasingly creative ways in order to attract a mate. Potential partners who offered more cognitive variety and creativity in their relationships may have had longer and more reproductively successful relationships. Although natural selection favours the development of behaviours that enhance survival, **sexual selection** might favour creativity and fantasy, because of our neophilia. (This may explain why most people favour fiction to non-fiction and myth to scientific evidence).

Since celebrities represent fantasy, we would be attracted to them because of their association with it. This explanation is supported by the finding that people who produce one particular version of an enzyme called MAOA score significantly higher on measures of novelty-seeking, suggesting that there might be a genetic origin for neophilia and our attraction to creative people.

However, whilst sexual selection *might* favour creativity and fantasy, evolutionary psychologists do not say *why* particular traits such as music, art, and humour would have been attractive to ancestral members of the opposite sex (apart from saying they are attractive, which isn't an explanation).

### The human need to exchange information (The Gossip hypothesis)

Exchanging information was essential in prehistoric times, since it helped to find food, a mate, enable us to compete with others, and so on.

Exchanging information without necessarily knowing that it is true is called **gossip**. In prehistoric times, we lived in small social groups, and gossiping about others could help us to form and maintain alliances, manipulate relationships (especially those of our rivals), and exchange information about potential mates (such as their current sexual behaviour). Keeping up with other peoples' lives would help us survive, because it increased our knowledge about the social world.



Evolution has not prepared us for the bombardment of images from the entertainment industry. However, because of our *familiarity* with celebrities, they trigger the same gossip mechanisms that evolved to keep us informed about other people in our in-group. After all, anyone seen as often as celebrities are *must* be important to us.

Gossiping about celebrities works well because:

(1) It's safer - they won't find out about any false rumours we spread

(2) It helps us cement relationships with those we talk to about a particular celebrity. This is why fan clubs form, and why we are interested in which celebrity is pregnant, who is getting married, who is having an affair, and so on.

Celebrity magazines are therefore fulfilling our Stone Age need for gossip!



## Evaluating evolutionary explanations

Evolutionary theory explains why celebrities are often blonde females. This is because blonde hair is associated with youth, and youth with fertility. It also explains why such females typically have firm breasts and flat tummies. This is because these are visual evidence that a woman is not pregnant.

Evolutionary theory can also explain why people would want to become celebrities. Being a celebrity brings us into contact with lots of potential mates, which would enable us to reproduce and get our genes into the next generation. Being a celebrity also enables us to overcome any biological shortcomings we may have. However lacking in height you are, you have the advantage of celebrity...



A very tall woman with a man of average height

However, evolutionary theory has difficulty in explaining why lots of celebrities simply *are* attractive. If you are already attractive, you don't need to be a celebrity. Almost all celebrities are attractive one way or another, so they can't be doing it just to attract a mate.

Evolutionary theory also has difficulty in explaining why women are more obsessed with celebrity than men. Research shows that around two-thirds of readers of celebrity magazines are women. This would suggest that gossip (in the form of alliances within a group) served a reproductive advantage for women, but not for men. This seems unlikely - knowledge is power irrespective of your sex. Gossip may, however, allow women to

identify socially desirable men and compare notes on which men are better than others to help them select a mate.



A further problem for evolutionary theory is that some celebrities are homosexual. Homosexuality is simply not a way to get your genes into the next generation. Evolutionary psychologists argue that being a celebrity is a way of passing on something about our self to future generations without using children as a way of doing this. Homosexuals therefore desire celebrity as a mark of *posterity*. Because of modern media, we can now preserve ourselves through films, newspapers, and YouTube. Our presence will live on long after our funerals. Celebrity and fame are a way of preserving our identity for future generations. As **Giles (2000)** notes: *"Being a celebrity means we can leave our mark long after we are dead. We defy death and can remain immortal in a real sense."*

Although celebrity is desired by some people, other people have unwanted celebrity status. For example, the McCanns might be seen as 'celebrities', but this is unwanted and the result of unfortunate circumstances. Their desire to be in the public eye is just to promote public awareness of their missing daughter.