

## Being a Celebrity: A Phenomenology of Fame

**Donna Rockwell**

*Michigan School of Professional Psychology*

**David C. Giles**

*University of Winchester*

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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

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

sophisticated art forms as cinema and pop music (Gamson, 1994). Boorstin (1961) is succinct in his definition: “The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness” (p. 57).

The two phenomena—fame as a condition “of being glorified” and celebrity as a process of media exposure—coincide in contemporary culture, so that a local television personality is accorded the same kind of fame bestowed on Shakespeare. Fame may be experienced in various ways according to its domain. The experiences of a star athlete, for example, may be very different from those of a pop star, whose “greatness” is reliant on fast-changing aesthetic and cultural values. The focus of this investigation is on the lived-experience of celebrities from diverse walks of American life as they move through the world of fame.

### *Methodological Issues*

The data were collected and analyzed according to the phenomenological approach outlined by Moustakas (1994). This method reveals “the rhythm and relationship between phenomena and self” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90), the defining characteristics of one’s being-in-the-world. In part, it derives from the work of Husserl (1913/1963, p. 39), who developed methods for grasping essences through the eidetic analysis of empirical examples. It is not the individual’s account of phenomena that is the object of inquiry, but rather the essential meanings of the phenomena that the account describes. The researcher’s role, then, is to understand the invariant intentions and meanings that constitute the phenomena.

In accordance with phenomenological principles, scientific investigation is valid when the knowledge sought is arrived at through descriptions that make possible an understanding of the meanings and essences of experience... (T)he filling in or completion of the nature and meaning of the experience becomes the challenge. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84/ 90)

Each interview (or “narrative”) is organized by means of *textural themes*—broadly similar to the superordinate themes in Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2004) which are grasped through the sample as an overarching set common to the individuals in the study and freely imagined variants. These themes are further interrogated in accordance with the seven universal phenomenological givens or structures (Moustakas,

1994): temporality, spatiality, bodyhood, causality, materiality, relationship to self, and relationship to other. The researcher thereby develops *universal structural descriptions*, which are integrated into an overall unified narrative that captures the experience under investigation. The goal of this study was to present an authentic account of *what it is like* to be famous.

## Method

### *Participants*

Interviews were conducted with 15 adults who have at some stage in their lives attained celebrity status in the United States. The sample consisted of 11 males and four females between the ages of 35 and 86. Of the two selection criteria, the main one was public recognition—that the individual was readily identifiable when in the “public eye.” As pointed out by Mitchell & Cronson (1987), celebrity families “live under a distinct set of rules dictated by their social status and high public visibility” (p. 236). This visibility involves face recognition and name recall. The second criterion was that the individual had been written about in the public press, which contributed to his or her garnering attention.

We selected celebrities from a spectrum of categories that reflect American culture: government, law, business, publishing, sports, music, film, television news and entertainment (including morning, daytime, primetime, and late night television personalities). The pool of participants included national and local celebrities. Age and gender were not factors in our selection process. Participants included a TV star, a TV news personality, a state governor, a Hollywood actor, a local TV sportscaster, NHL hockey and NBA basketball athletes, a famous CEO, a celebrity lawyer, a former Rhythm & Blues superstar, and a former child star. Face-to-face interviews lasted from 1 to 1½ hours. Two of the 15 interviews were conducted by telephone due to geographic considerations. A letter of intent was mailed to potential participants, explaining the nature, questions, and aims of the research. A participation-release agreement was signed. Participants’ names and identifying information were changed (replacement text in brackets) in order to maintain confidentiality.

Five core questions were used to guide the open-ended interviews: 1) When considering celebrity and your being-in-the-world, what is the

experience of being famous? 2) What is your first memory of being famous? 3) Have you lost or gained anything as a result of being famous? 4) What was your life like before and then after you became famous? 5) Do you have anything else you would like to add?

### *Analytic Procedure*

Through the epoché, the researcher attempted to suspend a priori beliefs that relate to the experience being investigated. Through descriptions offered in non-directive interviews with research participants, the researcher senses the essential color, the bouquet, the sound, the feel, the flavor, and the unique meanings of experience. Empathic presence allowed the researcher to take in the words and the silences, the intensified gazes and eyes that drift to nearby windows, the movement of body and posture shifts that indicate nuances of the narrative that do not find expression in spoken language. Intuitive awareness was gained through felt sense. The job of the researcher was to enter that personal domain through the content of the interview as well as through tacit understanding of its processes. The essence of experience is a Gestalt whose moments point to an integrated existential portrait. Qualitative scientists attempt to elucidate the essential themes and meanings of intentional experience by studying the reports of participants' lived worlds. Without analysis and abstaining from what Moustakas (1994) calls "the natural attitude" (p. 58) but instead with "open viewings, of returning to things and being with them" (p. 58), the data tells a story. Moustakas (1994) explains:

Phenomenology is committed to descriptions of experiences, not explanations or analyses. Descriptions retain, as close as possible, the original texture of things, the phenomenal qualities and material properties. Descriptions keep a phenomenon alive, illuminate its presence, accentuate its underlying meanings, enable the phenomenon to linger, retain its spirit, as near to its actual nature as possible. (pp. 58–59)

Moustakas (1994) describes the role of the qualitative researcher:

And so it is "I," the person among other persons, alone yet inseparable from the community of others, who sees as if for the first time and who reflectively comes to know the meanings that awaken in my consciousness. (p. 58)

Such an amplification of experience is accomplished through examining the textural content and structural processes of the celebrity's encounter with self and world. Being a celebrity necessitates navigating the encounter with fame much as a foreign resident comes to know the roads and byways of a new land. Life, as one knew it pre-fame, is changed, as the world responds to the celebrity in novel and unexpected ways.

The process of data reduction followed the guidelines described by Moustakas (1994):

- regard every statement as having equal value (Horizontalization)
- eliminate repetitive text and highlight qualities of the experience that stand out (Delimiting Horizons or Meanings)
- cluster similar text into themes (Invariant Qualities and Themes)
- write an integration of the individual research participant's *being-in-the-world* based on his or her textural descriptions (Individual Textural Descriptions)
- write a composite textural description integrating the experiences of all research participants into a unified narrative (Composite Textural Description)
- write an integration of the individual research participant's *being-in-the-world* based on his or her structural descriptions (Individual Structural Descriptions)
- write a composite structural description integrating the experiences of all research participants into a unified narrative (Composite Structural Description)
- write a composite Textural-Structural Description

From this procedure we were able to produce a comprehensive description of the fame process as experienced by the individuals in the study. The results of this study are presented through textural and structural themes, in the form of a Composite Textural Description and Two Individual Structural Descriptions, highlighting essential elements that may help to define the unique as well as universal nature of fame.

## Findings

### *Fame as Four-Phase Temporal Design*

It is important to look at the way fame is experienced by the celebrity over time. Within the structural theme of temporality, a developmental design emerged from the data showing that fame was generally experienced as a progression through four phases: a period of *love/hate* towards the experience; an *addiction* phase where behavior is directed solely towards the goal of remaining famous; an *acceptance* phase, requiring a permanent change in everyday life routines; and finally an *adaptation* phase, where new behaviors are developed in response to life changes involved in being famous. Participants described this temporal aspect as unfolding from the first moment of being famous throughout the rest of the lifespan.

Love/Hate. Relationship-to-world themes are revealed as participants seek effective ways of acclimating to being a famous person. At first, the experience of becoming famous provides much ego stroking. Newly famous people find themselves warmly embraced. There is a guilty pleasure associated with the thrill of being admired in that participants both love the attention and adoration while they question the gratification they experience from fame. “I enjoy parts of it, but I hate parts of it, too,” was a generally reported theme.

Addiction. The lure of adoration is attractive, and it becomes difficult for the person to imagine living without fame. One participant said, “It is somewhat of a high,” and another, “I kind of get off on it.” One said, “I’ve been addicted to almost every substance known to man at one point or another, and the most addicting of them all is *fame*.” Where does the celebrity go when fame passes; having become dependent on fame, how does one adjust to being less famous over time? “As the sun sets on my fame,” one celebrity said, “I’m going to have to learn how to put it in its proper place.” The adjustment can be a difficult one.

Acceptance. As the attention becomes overwhelming and expectations, temptations, mistrust, and familial concerns come to the fore, the celebrity resolves to accept fame, including its threatening phenomenal aspects. “You learn to accept it,” one celebrity said. After a while, celebrities report that they come to see that fame is “just so much the will-o’-the-wisp, and you just can’t build a house on that kind of stuff.”

Adaptation. Only after accepting that “it comes with the territory” can the celebrity adaptively navigate fame’s choppy waters. “Once you’re famous,” a participant said, “you don’t make eye contact or you keep walking . . . and you just don’t hear [people calling your name].” Adaptive patterns can include reclusiveness, which gives rise in turn to mistrust and isolation. “I don’t want to go out if I don’t feel good about looking forward to meeting anybody or just being nice to people,” another celebrity reported.

### *The Experience of Being Famous: A Composite Textual Description*

The experience of being famous is something for which no one is prepared. It is a world described as bizarre, surreal, scary, lonely, creepy, daunting, embarrassing, confusing, and invasive. The celebrity life is also described as providing flattery, warmth, ego gratification, adoration, unlimited access, enormous wealth, and membership in an exclusive club in which one is surrounded by other famous people.

Loss of privacy and Entitization. Many celebrities reported finding themselves ill-equipped for and struggling with the deluge of attention that comes with fame.

*Fame 101* is needed to teach people what’s coming: the swell of people, the requests, the letters, the e-mails, the greetings on the street, the people in cars, the honking of the horns, the screaming of your name. A whole world comes to you that you have *no* idea is there. It just comes from nowhere. And it starts to build and build like a small tornado, and it’s coming at you, and coming at you, and by the time it gets to you, it’s huge and can sweep you off your feet and take you away and put you in a world that has no reality whatsoever because all the people are judging you on what you do for a living, not for who you are.

The individual is left to find his or her way through an unfamiliar labyrinth-like world. From an initial desire to become successful, the celebrity experiences personal confusion and a loss of ownership of life in a depersonalizing “entitization” process, in which participants reported feeling like a thing rather than a person of unique character. Immediately upon entering the sphere of fame, relationships with “self” and “other” are profoundly affected. The public wants a piece of them, to touch them, to get an autograph, to have their picture taken with the star. All the while hearing one’s name screamed out, the famous person feels as if he or she is



not even there. Participants find themselves at a loss when members of the public can “hardly contain themselves” at the sight of them and “make you larger than life.” It *is* lonely at the top for persons who find themselves alone and isolated on an island of recognition, where “there’s a loneliness that happens because you are separate.”

For the former child star at the age of ten, the experience of going from a “neighborhood kid” to a famous TV personality overnight was life-altering. Cast on a hit TV series, he recalls the reaction after the show’s debut. “When I went outside the next day, my life was different . . . And the first thing that I knew, ‘Holy Toledo, I’m famous!’” The experience of being recognized comes with a person’s celebritization. Celebrities become accustomed to looking into a crowd and seeing the adoration “in their eyes.” “You know they know who you are.” The right to be anonymous is exchanged for all that fame has to offer. The famous person feels exposed, with very few places to experience privacy. There is a tendency to get “peeled out” when approached by those who engage the celebrity “24/7.” There is a feeling that “I can’t be left alone,” with a lingering fear of tabloid paparazzi around any corner. It can be “a drag,” and “a pain in the butt to have to worry about that.” Moments of anonymity are relished, moments with family, “with good friends who I knew before I was famous.” Privacy becomes a coveted luxury. If the celebrity is not feeling “100%” on a particular day, staying home may be preferable to facing the crowd. If “I’m not feeling all that sociable, I have to put that aside.”

This public visibility engenders the celebrity’s sense that, “I become a target.” When walking down the street, dining at a restaurant, or “sitting alone in a highly public place in America, someone will eventually come up and say, ‘Aren’t you . . .?’” The famous person’s being-in-the-world is impinged on, in that he or she “can’t just go anywhere.” The celebrity suffers a loss of personal freedom in relation to the world and develops a heightened capacity to scan his or her environment in a state of alerted attention in order to assess the possibilities of advance or the need to retreat. The experience of being a celebrity compromises the individual’s personal space, which was taken for granted before fame hit.

It changes my whole persona and way of being when I am out in public . . . when I am walking into the building, into my office, people are like, “Oh my God! There’s Patty!” I used to want to turn and wave and say ‘hi’ to people, but now sometimes it gets too much, and intrusive.

I've had guys coming up to me while I was using the restroom, standing there wanting to shake my hand. "Could you wait a minute? Could you please wait?" Just the crudeness. Completely impolite.

Mistrust. Eventually, the very others who adore the celebrity evoke mistrust. "There is always a part of you that wonders why they are becoming friendly with you." In an everyday environment, the celebrity wonders, "Do people like me because of who I am or because of what I do? You find out there are millions of people who like you for what you do. They couldn't care less who you are." With the development of this operating belief system, the conditions are set for grave mistrust and problems in interpersonal relating. "In the process of losing trust, I've lost some of the innocence I've had about life, about the world and about people..." The famous person seeks to discern the *true* intentions of others. "I just think with time and a trained eye, for the most part, I've learned about certain parasites who want to take advantage of me for whatever reason, whether it's money or simply the association of hanging out with somebody who's... famous." The difficulties of such discernment may leave the celebrity feeling confused and alienated. He or she may then seek refuge in physical and/or emotional isolation by becoming more detached.

That trust thing is important. I don't think you trust anybody the same way when you become well-known, because you don't trust being well-known. It is an intrinsically untrustworthy dance partner—it could leave you at any time... so it's a very mysterious thing. Anyone who comes through that dance partner to you is also mysterious. Why? Why do they want me? Why are they interested in me? Are they laughing at my jokes because they think I am funny or because it is me saying them? And you start double guessing yourself. I find I put up a kind of a wall around me, and I just deal with people up to that wall but not inside of it.

Demanding expectations. The celebrity must renegotiate his or her relationship-to-world in order to carve out a new operative awareness and set of strategies for living in the spotlight's penetrating glare. The celebrity copes with intense public scrutiny through character-splitting. He or she divides into two identities by contriving a celebrity entity, a new self-presentation in the "public sphere." This "individuating construction of the public personality" (Marshall, 1997, pp. 70–71) allows the famous

person to hold his or her more personal “true self” in abeyance, sequestered from all but a trusted inner circle of confidants. “The only way I think you can really handle it is to say, ‘That’s not really me... it’s this working part of me, or the celebrity part of me.’... So, I am a toy in a shop window.”

Participants report that being a famous person “is a full time job.” Living up to others’ expectations becomes a vicious cycle, in which the celebrity, like a hamster on a wheel, works to satisfy a hungry and demanding public. The famous person feels the need to always “be on.” “There’s no going out in sweats and sunglasses and a baseball cap and expecting I’ll get out and not have to see anybody or say anything, ’cause that usually doesn’t happen anymore.” There is an obligation to be “nice to everyone, and that becomes exhausting.” Famous people worry, while playing the celebrity role, “I’m probably going to disappoint them,” so celebrities have “two different dialogues—the one that I’m thinking and the one I’m saying,” so one is “not necessarily as authentic as I’d like to be.” There is not enough time to “show my true self.”

The celebrity experiences being put on a pedestal, “and there are people who love to knock us off the pedestal.” Paradoxically, along with all the adulation—gratuitous and genuine, no matter what the celebrity does, someone, somewhere, will be disappointed. In order to create a balanced life, famous persons struggle to maintain their *own* perspective.

[Fame makes you] extremely vulnerable. And you can really take it to heart and get your feelings tremendously hurt. I stopped reading e-mail very quickly because I couldn’t take some of the negative stuff. I wanted to write and say, “You don’t know who I am. Why are you doing this?” And it was all about who they thought I was... You have to be very thick-skinned.

Gratification and loss. Celebrities, as they take in the adoration, say that they are “aware of how dangerous it can be” to witness themselves “through the eyes of many watchers.” “I mean, the more famous you get in Hollywood, the more close you get to Caligula or Nero.”

You try to put [fame] in its place because otherwise it will swallow up everything else. It will be totally out of control. It could destroy everything you have or it could make you into a monster. We’ve all heard, and I’ve seen, people who believe that they are better or bigger or more important than the

person next to them . . . There are famous people who believe: “Do you know who I am? You are treating me this way, and do you *know* who I am?”

While public admiration is an apparent validation of personal worth, it can evoke self-consciousness and engender a self-serving way of life. “A lot now I am focused on the other peoples’ reaction, rather than my reaction to the world. . . I think a lot of my attention is focused on myself.” “This whole fame stuff is fraught with problems and pitfalls and I can easily lose perspective on myself, and that’s very scary. You can buy into it and think, ‘I really am the best thing since sliced bread. . . .’” One celebrity describes the tight wire act of balancing narcissistic gratification with interest in and empathy for others.

My life is different in that people kiss my ass, and that’s not always a good thing because then you start believing that your ass is worthy of being kissed. You have to constantly stay on guard for that. And I think it’s very hard. There are times when I exploit that. I take advantage of people sucking up to me, or the power that I wield.

In a world where the celebrity is hardly ever told “no,” a predominantly self-centered orientation can occur. This kind of self-absorbed posture is underwritten by positive feedback from the world. The new relational patterns of fame have the potential to unsteady even the most grounded individuals. Isolation and false entitlement make it easier for the celebrity to start rationalizing choices he or she makes. After all, fame changes the way the world responds to the celebrity, who is no longer hearing intimately related others’ honest appraisals “because whether you want to be or not—and there are those who very much want to be, you are larger than life.” Flying high on the rush of celebrity, some participants reported that, blinded by fame’s sudden flash, they lost sight of “the truly important things.”

I began to forget my family, I began to forget my children, I began to forget my wife. I knew it was me, and it was just bad and I didn’t care, and however I needed to comfort myself I was going to comfort myself. I was going to get there and I was going to get it done: the fame, the work, the TV station.

The biggest problem was that I had forgotten those who were the closest to me. So I had to bring them back into the fold, reattach, and have a better understanding of what they went through. And then I had to build myself up

again, but, in conjunction with all of them, not in spite of all of them. For me it was a harsh lesson and a tough lesson.

Symbolic immortality. Those participants who fare best in the world of celebrity assume their position as an opportunity to “give back,” “inspire,” “role model,” or “make a difference” in the lives of others. “You’ve got to realize that you’re just wearing the suit, that someone else wore it before you, that someone will wear it behind you, and that it’s only a suit.” “If you really think about fame, it should be less about what you get as opposed to what you give.”

Whether you’ve earned it or not earned it, I think that you have an obligation to use it wisely, to give back, to not have it be just one more situation of take, take, take, take, take, which I think a lot of famous people do. But there are just as many who use it for good and see it as a way to make a difference. So it’s weird. [Fame] can fuck you up or it can elevate you, or a little bit of both, depending on your own perspective. And I think you constantly have to reassess who you are, take [the fame] off of you and make sure that you are centered as a person.

This orientation of “giving back,” making a lasting mark on humanity, can entail a symbolic meaning of immortality. Most research participants pointed to such in, for instance, the roles they played and in the creative expressions of their professional work, as noted by Loy—“symbolic immortality through reputation” (2002, p. 220). This symbolic sense of self as larger than life was emphasized over and above their interpersonal roles as mother, father, husband, wife, daughter or son. As such ordinary family-oriented roles went unmentioned, the celebrity-self was described as a luminous figure against the ground of “everyman.” One way that famous people see themselves making a lasting mark after “the mortal shell is husked” is by effecting change in the world that continues after their death. Although aspiring to immortality appears to rob death anxiety of some of its power, it is experienced as relatively difficult and tenuous.

Fame while you’re alive will probably get you good seats at restaurants. But the only possible way to make your life significantly meaningful is—there are two ways: to positively affect the people around you with love and caring, and to effectuate some change that lives on after you, which is very difficult. Very few people do that.

... Fame is... one of the mechanisms by which you can obtain immortality, not by virtue of the fame, but by virtue of the achievement.

Wealth. Wealth, as a by-product of fame, provides immediate, tangible evidence of celebrity's distinction and staying power. Fame's windfall goes a long way in lifting financial burdens, opening the celebrity to experiences that are special. Money is no longer a "worry," and provides "the glory side, the financial side of being famous." Some celebrities go from "not being able to afford a home," to multi-million dollar contracts. "They are our royalty." Famous people model conspicuous consumption for an attentive public. "I've gained so many material things. I could look around and start naming stuff, 'Ooh. A video camera, a bunch of cars,' but they all fall under the umbrella of money." "Having that extra money enabled me to dabble in real estate. So it enabled me to pursue other business ventures. That's exciting to me." Money may also buy the privacy famous people need, as some celebrities reported choosing to rent houses rather than stay at hotels and secure their homes with iron gates.

Access. Although famous people try to keep the public out of their personal domain, they are invited freely and openly into an exclusive social world of celebrity. "The fabulous people," as a New York doorman recently referred to celebrities, are ushered into rarefied air where Dustin Hoffman is on the phone, George Steinbrenner is taking the call, or Warren Beatty is free for dinner. Fame is a private club, and famous people are automatic members. "The access is unbelievable." "Suddenly, you're worth something. You're important." In the world of ordinary people, it becomes commonplace for famous people to receive preferential treatment from almost everyone with whom they interact.

When I get stopped by the police, if I am going too fast, I roll the window down. I give them my license. They say, "Oh. Could you give me an autograph for my son?" I say, "Absolutely," sign the autograph, they just say, "Be careful," and I go on my way.

"You can drop the name and get the table at the restaurant. You can get seats at the sporting event." One research participant noted that, "when you reach a stage financially when you don't need freebies, that's when freebies are thrown to you." Famous people grow accustomed to the privileged world of celebrity.

Temptations. The lure of life's temptations may be the most secret side of celebrity experience, introduced by only a few participants as an unexpected side benefit and also a danger in the world of fame. "We live faster . . . The involvement with different things . . . I know it has to do with fame." Being famous opens up a larger than life world for the larger than life celebrity. Tempting opportunities materialize in the wake left by fame.

I live in Hollywood and I'm a middle-aged man, and Miss September keeps throwing herself at me. That wouldn't happen if I wasn't famous. Believe me . . . The average guy turning down Miss September is a tough day. That would show intestinal fortitude that I don't know that I have. I've been to that Playboy Mansion. . . You'd have to be a fairly strong man to not let that kind of thing interfere with your life . . . you could let it abuse your family.

A star athlete describes the off-court world:

I've seen too many guys outside of fame willing to sacrifice and do anything to be a part of it. I've seen too many girls disrespect themselves to be a part of it. I've seen too many celebrities completely abuse it, use it, and abuse anybody in their path.

Concerns about family impact. The situations conjured by celebrity life become grist for additional concerns about how fame affects the celebrity's family. Can the celebrity protect his or her spouse and children from the darker side of the celebrity experience? For example, anti-abortion demonstrators make the governor "want to move everybody to the back of the house. . . I want to shield my child's eyes from some of the horrible and violent imagery that is presented." Several research participants bemoaned the fate, beyond their control, of family members living in the shadow of fame. One research participant tearfully gazed out a Manhattan window, concerned with the legacy of his fame on his 15-year-old son.

I worry about my son, because I don't want him to think of me, because I'm famous, as being any more special than he is. And I wonder sometimes if he's going to confuse fame with worthiness or value as a person, that if he doesn't grow up to be someone who has celebrity or fame, he is somehow not recognized or not worthy of people's respect or admiration. I think a lot of people confuse it. In our whole culture, people confuse it. To be rich and famous—

the two words go together. There are a lot of challenges; the family dynamic is complicated by fame.

Celebrity families often cannot go out together in public and enjoy uninterrupted time without strangers entering the family circle. The famous person's child, baffled by the celebrity social world, may begin to feel anger, guilt, and resentment.

I think he . . . doesn't like sharing me in public and feeling like other people know me and can come up and talk to me. I think he kind of wanted me for himself and for Mommy. You're ours. You're not the public's.

Whether it is a fan's friendly slap on the child's back, a question asking a son if he is planning on following in his father's footsteps, or a daughter's concern that she will never equal her mother's achievements, fame's impact on children worries celebrity parents. However, there is only so much that parents can do to protect their children from these inevitabilities.

This is what happens when I go out: I am scanning, I'm looking, I'm trying to evaluate what kind of place this is, what's going on. I am trying to laugh and talk with my daughter and my son, but I am looking the whole time, too. Because too many times I have gone out and it has become something that it shouldn't for my kids and my wife, the intrusion upon them.

"I think that can eat children up . . . I try to keep the family separate [from fame] as much as I can. I want to share it and keep it separate. Sometimes those lines are unfair."

The experience of being famous comes with wealth, unlimited access, and gratifying opportunities to contribute something lasting to the world. Learning to contend with being "entitized," a loss of privacy, unrealistic expectations, temptations, mistrust toward others, a falsely inflated self, and impact on the celebrity's family delineates the great challenges in the experience of being famous. The celebrity encounters a world forever changed and must navigate a new course through the unforeseen realities of a famous life.



*The Experience of Being Famous: Individual Structural Descriptions*

The following Individual Structural Descriptions are presented as case studies. They highlight the temporality, spatiality, relationship to self, and relationship to other in the lives of two persons. Although these two vignettes cannot be generalized to all celebrity experience, they dramatically illustrate the general findings elaborated above.

*Richard: Stage and Screen Star*

*Spatiality: Isolation*

Richard, an A-list actor, remembers the moment he knew he was famous. He was in an off-Broadway show, playing the gay lover of the lead character. The play was in the sixth month of its run when a group of gay men started waiting at the stage door. One night, as he left the theater, Richard asked them, “Did you see the show?” “For the sixth time!” one excitedly shouted back. “Terrific,” Richard laughed to himself. These were his first fans. When it strikes, the effect of becoming famous is immediate and pervasive:

The first thing that happens is that everything and everybody around you changes... And you can feel it filter down to whatever your inner circle of friends is... For someone like me who doesn't want to be larger than life, who just was given this gift, who can do this thing that I do called acting—I've chased it up the ladder of levels, and now I'm at the highest level. But in doing that comes this adoration you can see in [everyone's] eyes.

Ultimate stardom came after the huge success of a \$120 million motion picture in which Richard starred. His celebrity reached global proportions, making him recognized almost everywhere. “No matter where I go, certainly in the States and maybe most of Europe, they know my name.” Celebrity alters a person's way of life, affecting the interpersonal space in which the famous person lives, works, and plays. The celebrity starts to lose the important boundary of personal privacy.

You are an animal in a cage. If you're sitting at a sporting event in a seat and you're on the aisle... all of a sudden you have someone on your left arm kneeling in the aisle. [He or she asks,] “What's [another actor] like?” And you

want to push them down the stairs. There are many people who know what's appropriate and what isn't, but there are some that want their piece of you.

Richard's way of coping with this invasion is through behavioral adaptations in which he shuts out others and retreats as much as possible from public spaces. This choice shrinks his world and his ability to move freely. "You can't just go anywhere... You walk into [a place], and somebody slapped a sign on your back [that says], 'I'm famous.' That's what it's like."

The constant recognition from a glaring public can become tiring. In the hope of avoiding interaction, Richard adjusts by acting like "a busy guy on his way somewhere."

One of the first things you learn once you're famous is that you don't make eye contact and you keep walking. Whether you're down a street or down a hallway, you can feel the heads [turn]... so you just don't make eye contact. You steal from [President] Reagan. You suddenly become deaf. You isolate yourself. The more obvious [fans yell things like]: "Oh my God! Who's that?" when you're just three feet away. Those are the ones you literally go, "Fuck! Okay, keep going. Just keep going."

When in public, he feels like a sitting duck. Constant recognition becomes a barrier to being able to enjoy the normal events in everyday life.

The goal of [acting career success] reached also includes the guy that's going to lean across you at a [hockey] game, drunk, with your 8-year-old boy there, and say, "I hate the fuckin' [hockey team]" into your kid's face, because he wants you—and this is where you get smart—he wants you to shove him or push him so that he can fall down the stairs and call his lawyer... I can't go into bars, because [someone] will pick a fight with me, and they've got a witness that'll back them up. I can go to court, or I can settle. Did I have anything to do with the fight? No. But to make it go away, here's \$100,000, here's \$50,000. I'll go to a game... but once I'm recognized... it bursts the bubble of the experience of just trying to see the game with your family or friends.

Richard can never escape fame completely. In this inner conflict of wanting fame while longing for anonymity, Richard creates a new, second identity—his "celebrity self." He protects his authentic self by what he calls "putting up the vibe."

It's the look . . . the look I give [the public] that says, "Not now." And I get in trouble with [my wife] a little bit sometimes, but I don't care. . . . You try to do the best you can, being nice to people when they approach you, but sometimes it's, "No! Not right now," and the wall goes up.

*Temporality: Fame, a life changing moment*

Fame is Hollywood's currency, where people make "firestorms around themselves that translate into power and money and importance and fame." This shifts the balance of power in all the celebrity's interactions, personal as well as professional, and over time fame fundamentally changes the celebrity's relationships with friends, family, and business associates. The experience of living life as "the star," separates one from the norm, and begins to weigh on these relationship bonds. This difference from others insinuates emotional distance and contributes to isolation. Fame becomes "baggage." When he is socializing with friends, Richard's celebrity lies between them, "like a bloated cod, just sitting there." Fame chases old friends away at the same time that strangers are flocking toward him.

Over the years, fame itself informs all the celebrity's encounters; being "a celebrity" comes to define much of the person's identity, sometimes more significant than the particular talent, artistry or craft for which he or she became famous. Richard's larger-than-life persona interferes with the development of desirable relationships.

Some friends can handle [my fame], and I've lost friends because of it . . . just by all this adoration that comes whenever you're in public, they feel less. They feel inferior . . . You're special and they aren't. You're extraordinary and they're ordinary. All of a sudden, they aren't calling you back and they aren't around. And the next thing you know, they'd really rather not have anything to do with you. And you understand them. You have to.

There is a tendency for famous people to see themselves as celebrities first and authentic selves second. The person adapts to fame by crafting, servicing, and protecting the celebrity self. Every move must be considered. A duality between the celebrity's public persona and private self is experienced as a necessary adaptation. While welcoming its monetary riches, Richard rejects fame's more negative trappings. His trust diminishes, his private space shrinks, character-splitting increases, and resentment of personal losses intensifies.

The irreversible life-alterations of fame are experienced as an existential transformation, “probably a lot like death.” The comparison of fame’s spotlight and the proverbial bright white light of death highlights the existential metaphor representing fame in Richard’s life. Once a person has transitioned into fame, as in death, there is no turning back. Celebrity becomes sackcloth that is never shed, a suit of clothing worn at all times. Richard tolerates the glare of fame by returning to his comfort zone, his acting. Work is a refuge where his celebrity status recedes, and he regains a sense of agency in his life. “The only thing I can control is what happens between action and cut. That’s what I’ve been taught. That’s the school I went to, the school of acting. I didn’t go to star school.”

*Relationship to self and other: Fame, the sequel*

Fame does not last; it is temporary, ephemeral. Fame is fleeting. Richard knows that celebrity is a “flavor of the minute today, not week or month. Look at Bennifer. You look at those guys and you just go, ‘The clock’s ticking.’” Richard tries not to think of himself as a celebrity in order to protect himself from being entirely consumed by fame. “I’m guilty of trying to lead an ordinary life and think of myself as ordinary—simple. Not famous.”

In order to put fame in its proper place, Richard has decided to use his fame and wealth for “good works” and community-based causes, creating something that will live on beyond him. In the small town where he and his family live, Richard has paid for the building of high school sports stadiums that are “premiere facilities.” These fields exist “because I’m famous,” he says. He also supports a local music school. “We can . . . leave the place better than we found it . . . It’s a great use of the fame. It’s like turning a negative into a positive, I guess.” Turning the negative of fame into a positive allows Richard to tolerate the loss of privacy and isolation he faces as a result of being a celebrity.

*Sophia: Former Rhythm & Blues Superstar*

*Temporality: Mistrust*

Sophia is a former Rhythm & Blues superstar whose name is known around the world. Her story is told to showcase fame’s impact on an individual after the spotlight has dimmed. When a person becomes a celebrity, he or she is famous for life, for even when celebrity subsides, the individual

remains someone who “used to be famous.” Transitioning from white-hot stardom to a “has-been,” however, can be a source of great stress.

A beautiful voice and an ambitious mother destined Sophia to be a star from an early age.

I actually knew at the age of three, when my mom was so elated that I remembered the words she taught me, when I sang with my two brothers... She made me dresses on the little Singer sewing machine, and she made me real pretty. She was so proud. She would take me to other people’s houses, put me on the table and tell me to sing songs. My mom made me famous.

Some years later, when Sophia was singing in a high school concert, she had a defining moment that set in motion an expectation of fame that would forever shape Sophia’s world. “When I heard 4,500 people applaud, I guess I was turned out. I guess that psyched me.” Sophia went on to become an international sensation, a front-line member of one of the greatest singing groups of her time. Having come from meagre beginnings, in her heyday Sophia relished fame’s trappings of wealth and privilege. “I remember having furriers come to the house and show me furs as opposed to going into a store and not being given credit.”

Jetting off with her singing group to perform in concerts all over the world and living the life of a celebrity separated Sophia from those most important to her. She decided to sign guardianship of her infant son over to her mother in order to focus on her career.

I think the hardest thing in my life has been leaving my son [now in his 30s]. It left scars in my heart as well as his when I had to leave him at two months old and go way across the water, the Atlantic Ocean, and perform in England. I cried every night, my breasts still needing my baby. I’m sure he needed my milk as well.

In fanning the flames of her new life, Sophia “put all of my thoughts and dreams of a personal life on the back burner. I said, ‘One day, I could be happy with personal things. Right now, show business is the thing.’ And I lived for it.”

Living in the limelight became the primary lure for Sophia. “When you’re actually being flattered by the world, your ego is all out of proportion.” Lacking intimate fulfilment with those closest to her, Sophia started

treating her fans like friends and family members. Amidst the world of fame, she saw the love she longed for in her fans' eyes.

It makes you feel real good. It's like seeing relatives. It's like getting a letter from home. They're coming to show you that they still love you. They send you birthday cards. I've had some fans I've had for 40 years. I even had a fan change his name to [my last name]. They love you so much . . . The fans make the difference. The fans keep you alive.

However, while experiencing a pseudo-intimacy with her fans, an insidious mistrust in others took hold. Sophia realized that many people sought her out with the sole interest of being close to fame, which made them famous, too. Themes of exploitation and examples of being used and taken advantage of, are evident from Sophia's data.

You have to be careful with the ones who come just because they know you're famous. I married two guys, two gigolos that were trying to marry [my group] and found out it was just me, and [they both] didn't last very long before annulments.

Fame negatively affects not only the celebrity but close ones, who often pay a hefty price for their relative's public recognition. Sophia's son was not able to "have any peace" during his childhood. Sophia also lost two brothers to "substances." Being a "celebrity's brother" led them "to do certain things . . . Everybody's lost a loved one or a son or a cousin or something because they live too fast a life." Fame's rarefied air enables excess, which in the case of Sophia's brothers became a lethal combination. One of fame's untold stories is the deadly consequences it can have on family members who live in the sphere of "celebrity life."

Having basked in public acclaim from an early age, treating fans as her friends and family, and engaging with men who used her to enjoy the benefit of her fame, Sophia soon found herself drowning in the heady world. Unfairly remunerated by the music industry, suffering from broken relationships, and being left unable to adequately care for herself in middle age, the best things in life seem to have passed Sophia by. Her deepest disappointment is with the music industry itself, which she feels neglected her personal interests while exploiting her talent and taking her money. She idealistically followed the dictates of others to the detriment of her

own long-term financial security. Although her name is known around the world even today, Sophia struggles to survive. “If you could actually be compensated for your fame or the work that it takes to become famous, it would be an easier place to be. . . . It’s not good to be in a position where you can’t accommodate the Internal Revenue or make ends meet. That’s been a big problem.”

Embittered in her sixties, Sophia feels like a forgotten star.

I discovered that I’d been shown the apple, but I wasn’t allowed to taste it or touch it or bite it. It was just about being famous but not being compensated, and it continues. . . . I never thought it would be like this. I always thought that there would be an abundance.

Sophia regrets her earlier naiveté:

When you’re known all over the world and you have [songs] that are played all over the world every day, you feel that there should be some kind of stability there, but there is none. . . . Stability should be [considered] when making a person famous. That was not even mentioned. It was all about “Go here and do this;” “Put your name here;” and “Show up there.”

*Relationship to self and other: Fame, the sequel*

As Sophia’s material wealth has diminished over the years, her conviction that fame itself was the cause of her troubles has grown. Sophia cried during the interview when she delved into her memory and rediscovered some thoughts she “had kept hidden.”

People don’t realize that [fame is] a difficult hat to wear. Fame is good. It’s happy. But all your life, you’ll be famous. If you do something wrong, you really get in the paper. . . . I mean, there’s vicious people out there.

Sophia experiences herself as a victim of fame. However, her deep belief in God and her born-again evangelism counter her despair. “Even when things look dark and gray, there’s always hope, and that’s what I have to dwell on now—hope and faith, which is my password in my computer.” After years of disorientation in the vacuum left by her stardom, Sophia discovered a much-needed lifeline.

The voice of God came through my meditation and said, “You don’t have to go around the corner to get to me. Come directly to me. You don’t have to speak in any other language because I’m here with you all the time. I’ve always been with you and I will never leave you.” So, after that happened, I was straight onto the rebirth, straight onto the prayer retreat . . . straight onto my bible study, reading my bible every day and constantly praying and trying to keep the gospel in my mouth, keep His promises in my mouth, and that’s how I’m living. And that’s what keeps me—I’m able to handle the fame, the famine, the depression that comes.

Sophia’s reliance on religion has helped her through the more difficult manifestations of fame and its aftermath, including her escape into drugs. “There was a time I didn’t really like me, and I almost self-destructed . . . I won’t say that I abused drugs. I could say that drugs abused me.” Unwilling to bear responsibility for her choices, Sophia blames fame. “It’s a happy place to be when you’re in the midst of the crowd and a very lonely place to be when the lights are out and you’re left on your own.”

Despite the litany of problems that Sophia has experienced as a result of being famous, and even as she witnesses the waning of her celebrity, she nonetheless expresses an undeniable, deep-seated pride in her accomplishments. Sophia has left behind a fitting and substantial legacy. “If you go within yourself, you’ve got dreams and aspirations,” Sophia says. “I’ve satisfied a lot of things and made a lot of good. I’ve gotten several awards, been commended for a lot of things, and find a reason to wake up tomorrow.”

Even as she leaves her glory days behind, Sophia aims to use her fame for a greater good. By honing new, young talent, she is passing something meaningful onto the next generation. She works one-on-one with aspiring singers, is very active in her city’s cultural scene, and is helping build a local music school. Though financially uncompensated for these efforts, Sophia finds meaning in nurturing up-and-coming stars. “I’m a good role model. I encourage other girls, especially if they think they’ve got something going . . . I really encourage them. I inspire them, and I like that position.” Re-envisioning her purpose in life as someone who inspires others, Sophia also looks backward to recapture times gone by, sifting through the sands of a past era seeking a more palatable version of a self with whom she can identify. Sophia consoles herself now with memories of the pop diva she



used to be. “I actually ask for some pity, some help and some grace for our divas, because we have a hard way to go.”

## **Discussion**

The findings in this study confirm many of the results found in the psychological literature on fame and celebrity, such as the “entitizing” of the famous person and the significant loss of personal privacy and anonymity. Marshall (1997) points out that being famous comes with a not altogether pleasant connotation of being “thronged” by society (p. 6). This claustrophobic sense of being-in-the-world was confirmed by this research. As our participants waded through a “sea of eyes,” they felt “swarmed” and “locked in a bubble,” through which they were constantly watched. Brady (1997) warns of the “contract of eyes and attention” (p. 18) for which few are adequately prepared.

The transition from a taken for granted belonging and solidarity with others to being separated as famous is an experiential turning point in the self.

Each person experiences a number of critical turning points that move the person increasingly toward a unique and incomparable selfhood. Turning points are often times of crisis and challenge, times of upheaval that significantly alter the world in which the person lives. (Moustakas, 1977, p. 3)

After fame, life is never the same. The celebrity’s private world is sacrificed as a rush of new acquaintances enters the stream of daily life. Overnight, the celebrity is introduced to a different world, where people express a “faux intimacy” (Gitlin, 1998, pp. 81–83), a “pseudo intimacy” (P. A. Adler & P. Adler, 1989, pp. 299–300), which research participants say breeds “inappropriate closeness.” Celebrities admit that much of this aspect of fame feels “fake.” Some report worrying about never feeling completely secure in public again. With Celebrity Worship Syndrome affecting  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the population (Maltby, Houran & McCutcheon, 2003), and parasocial relationships developing with members of the public, maintaining a private life becomes virtually impossible and requires a certain surrender. Many famous people take some comfort in the notion that it comes with the territory.

In order to deal with the intense attention, many celebrities report creating two selves, one an image to offer to the public and the other reserved for moments of privacy and intimacy. Goldsmith (1983) calls it, “public posture as distinguished from... private person” (p. 80). Gertrude Stein pointed to “the disparity between... internal and external selves... the public identity [that] does not accurately represent the inner ‘I’” (Curnutt, 1999/2000, p. 5). The present study similarly found that while attempting to hold back the more authentic “I,” the famous person creates a “celebrity self,” an “other self,” to emotionally survive the experience of being famous. The celebrity, left to reconcile self as “image” and self as “person,” finds that being-in-the-world is an existential juggling act.

Celebrity adulation can lead to depersonalization, and famous people may seek protection by isolating themselves from the world. Many reported a sense of loneliness at the center of the fanfare of fame. Some reported putting up a wall beyond which others are not welcome. P. A. Adler & P. Adler (1989) point out that celebrities, as a result of “the conception of their selves held by others” and the reflection of their image as a “glorified self,” begin “objectifying their selves to themselves” (pp. 299–300). Since the image is the gateway through which the public voyeuristically enters the celebrity domain, it is a fait accompli that the image will be devoured by a hungry public. At the moment they are famous, celebrities have become a commodity, and their job it is now to sell their “image” to contemporary, celebrity-making media outlets. They are left alone to sort out the difference between image and self, between media creation and authentic being.

Celebrities report they turn inward and adopt avoidant behaviors in order to protect themselves in the public sphere from the unavoidable deluge of attention. Some celebrities avoid eye contact, send the vibe, use body language, or play deaf. Celebrities emotionally prepare to go out in public, scan the environment once there, and retreat if not sufficiently comfortable interacting with people. In the moment, the “cognitive stressors associated with distinctiveness” (Schaller, 1997, p. 292) feel like a life-long complication. Image, after all, supersedes reality (Goldsmith, 1983, p. 120). The celebrity, as one participant put it, “is sort of helpless, surrenders, and becomes this other being that people perceive; You no longer control it.” Celebrities feel as though they have lost the exclusive rights to their own face. Research participants report that they feel *owned by the public*, for the public pays the bills, and the public is the boss.

As the confrontation between “image” and “self” becomes a daily battle, the situation is established for what Millman (2003) calls Acquired Situational Narcissism (ASN), a tendency to focus inordinately on the self. Millman says that those around the celebrity, and the public, are complicit in the celebrity’s self-absorption. This can pose a problem for adult development, dependent as it is on honest appraisals, critical feedback from understanding others. Bruce Springsteen (2002) professes to know how important it is for celebrities to monitor the “big ego... and self-involvement.” Research participants were equally aware that fame can “swallow up everything else” and become a narcissistic way of living. As movie star Gwyneth Paltrow admits, without the usual obstacles that most people face, famous people “don’t have real perspective” on the issues in their lives (Shales & Miller, 2002, p. 519). Research participants described being famous as feeling like “everyday is your wedding day; everyday is your prom.” Celebrities say it is easy to start thinking “you are the greatest thing in the world,” and continuously seek “private justification through public acclaim” (Braudy, 1997, p. 13). One may enter a cycle of addiction; happiness becomes synonymous with celebrity, and one incessantly strives to remain the center of adoring attention.

Another aspect of fame is contending with its temptations. Although some celebrities boast that fame garners sexual conquests, others say that fame has destroyed their families. Leading to clouded vision, the intoxication of fame can have catastrophic results, as spouses and children take a back seat to the famous person’s desires. In Kaslow’s (1992) study of political families, she identifies threats to marital fidelity and feelings of being “expendable” and “not a high priority” by family members as a by-product of being in the public eye (pp. 106–107).

Questions of inauthenticity arise, as the celebrity tries to regain a sense of what Bugental (1987) calls a relationship to “our true being” (p. 246). Research participants say it is challenging to maintain an awareness of one’s “true self” and to work on “getting back to who you really are” in the sycophantic environment of fame. One participant offered that, “You constantly have to reassess who you are, take [the fame] off of you and make sure that you are centered as a person.”

One result of this study that is not adequately reflected in the literature review is the grave mistrust of others that takes root in the consciousness of the celebrity. Questions arise as to what people really want. When “many

acquaintances seemed interested primarily in celebrity by association” (Collins, 1985, p. C14), the others’ intentions are no longer trusted. This shift is responsible for fundamental changes from a general sense of others’ trustworthiness until proven otherwise to a mistrust of affections. Fame itself is considered untrustworthy, and thus anything associated with fame may be equally distrusted. This can lead to emotional isolation.

Heightened expectations leave the celebrity feeling like a marketing product who is responsible for symbolic shaping of the “public sphere” (Marshall, 1997, p. 7). Research participants describe this pressure as overwhelming, as they try to “play the person people expect to see” and “be everything they think I am.”

Closely related to freedom and individuality is the value of authenticity. A person is either present... or is role-playing and engaging in stereotyped modes of behaving. Nobody is more aware of this than the person who suddenly realizes that the activities and actions of everyday living have no real meaning when they are based on others’ preferences, expectations, and standards. (Moustakas, 1977, p. 91)

The public demands that celebrities live up to their own images and satisfy “star watchers” who expect stars to be “20–feet high” (Baker, 1982, p. 10). Celebrity has come to represent the power of “the individual” and the heart of capitalist culture as a money generator. Celebrity has become “a metaphor for value in modern society” (Marshall, 1997, p. 7).

Wealth, access, and acclaim make the experience of fame alluring and promise “liberation from powerless anonymity” (Braudy, 1997, p. 7). Research participants report that not only are they rich, but doors are opened to them and access is virtually unlimited. Although celebrities mourn the loss of anonymity, they cherish the power fame brings. Politicians rely on this kind of name-recognition for press attention and trade personal and familial privacy for the wide platform offered by being famous.

The achievement of fame may also involve an attempt to quash underlying death-anxiety engendered by a burgeoning awareness of life’s impermanent nature. Loy (2002) refers to “a morbid craving for fame.”

The desire to be famous is a good example of how something repressed (such as death-terror) reappears in consciousness in distorted form (the passion for

symbolic immortality), which is therefore a symptom of our problem (if what I really want is personal immortality, no amount of fame will ever be enough—but that is usually experienced as “I am not yet famous enough”). (p. 220)

By “attaining some symbolic immortality through reputation” (Loy, 2002, p. 220), the celebrity leaves a mark, albeit symbolic, cheating death by creating an image that lives on. For example, Marilyn Monroe may have died on August 5, 1962, but her image is still very much alive today. Because the celebrities have “entered the language of the culture” (Marshall, 1997, p. 17), they have the opportunity to create something that will outlive them. The research data reveal that some celebrities feel comforted by this lasting quality of fame and undertake philanthropic projects which promise a less self-serving symbolic immortality. Thus, fame can be a way to express generativity. As one research participant suggested:

[Fame] potentiates effect—it exponentiates effect actually. The greater the fame, the greater the chance of... having an effect. But the fame has to go along with something inside. The fame is just the shell. It's ephemeral. It's meaningless in and of itself, unless there's substance... The fame is simply a method to package, hopefully, what would be an important effect that continues to have an affect on people after. That would be the only way you obtain immortality.

## Conclusions

Celebrity experience is the object of much public fascination and fantasy ideation. The ideal of becoming rich and famous has become intricately woven into the cultural tapestry of not only the United States, but also most of the Western world. Celebrities come to represent the hopes and dreams of the average citizen. Therefore, the study of the world of fame, its social relevance, and the role it plays in American culture helps define us as a people. From reality TV, to MTV, to movie star governors and celebrity presidents, America is fascinated with fame. According to *American Idol* host, Simon Cowell (2003), “There is a fame epidemic!” If our culture is in the midst of an epidemic of fame and a quest to celebrity, as Cowell claims, it behoves the psychological establishment to research the actual lived-experience of the celebrity to assess the emotional impact of

fame upon an individual. Most reality shows now routinely offer an option of psychological counseling or psychological referrals to their contestants in an attempt to mitigate the mental health risk of becoming a reality TV star.

The data collected in this study have given us insight into the experience of fame through the eyes of celebrities themselves. The set of textural themes indicates that although fame is experienced as providing wealth, access to a privileged world, gratification and symbolic immortality, it also robs the celebrity of privacy; leads to isolation; engenders mistrust of others; introduces temptations; can lead to creating a character-split between the “celebrity entity” and the “private self;” and heightens concern about risks to other family members.

Perhaps some findings of this study could have the unintended effect of encouraging fame-seekers. All research participants claimed that despite its negative elements, fame is worth it after all and they would not trade it back. The material rewards of fame confirm the celebrity’s being-in-the-world such that neither character-spitting, isolation, mistrust, nor fame’s impact on family members, led to celebrity regret over becoming famous. At the heart of the fame experience lies an intrinsic affirmation of individual uniqueness and “specialness” that spurs those who seek celebrity status. Participants distinguished the self-affirmative trajectory of fame from the aspiration to make a difference and leave a mark on history that benefits others, goals often cited by famous people like actor Paul Newman and rock star, Bono, who have used their celebrity for philanthropic or altruistic ends. However, inasmuch as fame itself makes possible such impressive altruism, self-expansion and serving others are ambiguously intertwined in the consequent symbolic immortality.

### *Applications of Research*

This research has applications for counselors, psychotherapists and other mental health professionals as well as teachers, managers, agents, administrators, coaches and others who work with and have a stake in the well being of celebrities, celebrity family members, and others who find themselves in the intense scrutiny of the public eye (from actors to trial lawyers to chief-surgeons at a local hospital). The findings of this study can also be used to improve rapport and increase empathic understanding of the celebrity condition. Of prime importance is the finding of “emotional

agoraphobia” that isolates celebrities and their families from the world. Also of practical note, in the face of fame’s confusing existential paradoxes, is the importance of maintaining an authentically-centered self and of discerning the opportunities for creating a lasting, generative legacy. Last but not least, understanding the experiential world of celebrities and the challenges of fame can help those who themselves seek leadership positions in politics, media, sports, law, or business, among other areas, prepare to confront the overwhelming sensation of recognition in “the sea of eyes.”

#### *Limitations and Implications of Research*

This study is limited by the degree to which participants felt free to self-disclose to the researcher. With a deeply imbedded mistrust, there may be yet deeper layers of celebrity being-in-the-world that were not revealed in this study. As one of the first research studies of its kind, there is ample room for further scientific investigation of celebrity experience. The results of this study are also limited by the lack of attention to specific details of participants’ childhoods and the role of past experience in participants’ vulnerabilities and resources in coming to terms with the difficulties of fame. Finally, although the present research was able to shed light on numerous general disturbances in the psychological lives of celebrities, it did not assess ASN or the psychopathological processes involved.

This study into the psychology of fame and the affective and behavioral responses to it is a beginning of what could be a larger body of research on the subject. Although the celebrity structure that is so distinctive of our society affects its leaders and populace profoundly, there are few studies on record that discern the personal and social meanings and ramifications of this phenomenon. Amidst all the adulation, the psychological health issues related to fame and celebrity have been relatively ignored. Additional studies are required in order to explore therapeutic interventions that would be helpful to this population whose vulnerabilities have been sorely overlooked. If our society is bent on using the celebrity to affirm and guide itself, not only the psychopathology, but issues of the potential wellness and self actualization of the celebrity requires further knowledge, in order to offer practical guidance. The great difficulty in following up this kind of research lies in the fact that famous individuals are so difficult to recruit for research purposes. It may be that research on the psychology of fame and

the experience of celebrity, certainly from an experiential viewpoint, are necessarily restricted to the occasional snapshot, provided by studies like this one.

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