

The Interface



“I’m Your Number One Fan”— A Clinical Look at Celebrity Worship

by Randy A. Sansone, MD, and Lori A. Sansone, MD

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This ongoing column is dedicated to the challenging clinical interface between psychiatry and primary care—two fields that are inexorably linked.

ABSTRACT

Celebrity worship—is it more than just being a casual fan? To explore this question, a number of scales have been developed to assess celebrity adulation. The most prevalent scale of this type in the literature is the Celebrity Attitudes Scale. Using these types of scales, investigators have examined various college-student and community samples. Findings reveal that individuals with high scores on

celebrity-worship scales tend to display a number of psychosocial characteristics. For example, these individuals may harbor concerns about body image (particularly young adolescents), be more prone to cosmetic surgery, and have a personality style characterized by sensation-seeking, cognitive rigidity, identity diffusion, and poor interpersonal boundaries. Likewise, celebrity worshippers may exhibit narcissistic features, dissociation,

addictive tendencies, stalking behavior, and compulsive buying. Studies also indicate that individuals with high levels of celebrity worship are more likely to have poorer mental health as well as clinical symptoms of depression, anxiety, and social dysfunction. Of note, no study to date has examined celebrity worshippers for bona fide Axis I and II psychiatric disorders. However, given that celebrity worship exists along a continuum, it appears that being on the high end of this continuum is likely to be associated with a number of potential psychological maladies.

KEY WORDS

Celebrity worship, Celebrity Attitudes Scale, fan, fanatic

INTRODUCTION

In the 2002 film *Swimfan*, the star swimmer/celebrity of the high-school team, Ben, unexpectedly encounters blonde-haired and beautiful Madison. From that meeting point, Madison begins to obsessively strategize a relationship with Ben, who already has a girlfriend. In the process, the couple has a one-night stand. In the aftermath, Madison bombards Ben with e-mails and instant messages, dates his rival teammate to anger him, arranges for steroids to show up in his urine screen so that he is disqualified from the team, builds a shrine to him, kills his swimming rival, and attempts to kill his girlfriend. Suspiciously, Madison’s previous boyfriend remains unconscious in an extended care facility. Obsessive love? Fanaticism? Celebrity worship?

In this edition of *The Interface*, we review the empirical data on celebrity worship. While not an uncommon phenomenon, the definitions of celebrity worship vary

somewhat.¹ At one end of the spectrum, celebrity worship is likely akin to being a passionate fan. A fan is an individual who is enthusiastically devoted to something, such as a media personality, sports figure, or a singer. The word *fan* is derived from the Latin word *fanaticus*, meaning “insanely but divinely inspired.” At the other end of the spectrum, celebrity worship appears to touch the borders of the psychopathological. Indeed, Maltby, Houran, and McCutcheon¹ conceptualize celebrity worship as an abnormal type of parasocial relationship that is driven by absorption and addictive elements. However, celebrity worship is probably best perceived as a continuum phenomenon, ranging from normal admiration to the psychopathological.² We will examine celebrity worship from a broad perspective, examining both psychological as well as pathological aspects.

THE ASSESSMENT OF CELEBRITY WORSHIP

Despite being a relatively new phenomenon for empirical investigation, several scales have been developed to detect both mild and pathological forms of celebrity worship. Three well-published examples follow.

The Celebrity Worship Scale. The Celebrity Worship Scale was introduced by McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran in 2002.² This scale was initially developed from items contained in several pre-existing scales of celebrity worship. Subsequent analyses indicated that 17 items were fundamental to the scale. The Celebrity Worship Scale shows no bias with regard to age or gender, and the measure applies to various types of celebrities, including

actors, musicians, and sports figures. According to Rasch modeling, this scale detects celebrity worship at three different stages. In the first stage (low worship), respondents are content with individualistic behaviors, such as watching and reading about a celebrity. Individuals in this initial stage are motivated by sensation-seeking and entertainment. In the next stage (intermediate celebrity worship), celebrity worship takes on a broader social character. In the third stage (high celebrity worship), individuals display excessive empathy with the celebrity’s successes and failures, over-identify with a celebrity, and obsessively follow the details of a celebrity’s life. From experience with this scale, the authors have proposed a model of celebrity worship based upon psychological absorption and addiction (i.e., the need for increased involvement with the celebrity to feel connected).

The Celebrity Attitudes Scale. It appears that the Celebrity Worship Scale underwent a psychometric metamorphosis into the Celebrity Attitudes Scale.³ This scale identifies individuals who are overly absorbed or addicted to their interest in a celebrity.⁴ The Celebrity Attitudes Scale is available in a 22-item, 23-item, and 34-item version, each of which explores respondents’ attitudes toward their favorite celebrity. The measure has a Likert-style response format, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”).

The scale detects three domains of celebrity worship, from normative to the more pathological, which is reflected in three specific subscales. These subscales are 1) the entertainment-social subscale, 2) the intense-personal subscale, and 3) the borderline-pathological subscale. The entertainment-social subscale

comprises 10 items and indicates that a celebrity is viewed as entertaining and/or captures the respondent’s attention (e.g., item 15, “Learning the life story of my favorite celebrity is a lot of fun”). The intense-personal subscale comprises nine items and indicates that the respondent has intense and obsessive attitudes toward a celebrity with compulsive elements (e.g., item 10, “I consider my favorite celebrity to be my soul mate”). The borderline-pathological subscale comprises three items and indicates that the respondent exhibits pathological attitudes and behaviors as a result of celebrity worship (e.g., “If I were lucky enough to meet my favorite celebrity, and he/she asked me to do something illegal as a favor, I would probably do it”).⁵ The Celebrity Attitudes Scale is the most common scale in the extant empirical literature.

The Public Figure and Preoccupation Inventory. The Public Figure and Preoccupation Inventory was introduced to the literature in 2006 by Sheridan, Maltby, and Gillett.⁶ This 50-item inventory assesses attitudes and behaviors toward a celebrity or other public figure, and is designed to separate commonplace celebrity worship from unhealthy preoccupation.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CELEBRITY WORSHIPPERS

Various studies have explored specific psychological features of celebrity worshippers. For example, McCutcheon and Maltby examined over 200 adults, both in the United States and the United Kingdom (UK), with regard to their attitudes toward celebrity worshippers.³ Using the Celebrity Attitudes Scale, the researchers found that participants perceived celebrity worshippers as

more likely to be foolish, persistent, irresponsible, submissive, and less honest.

Celebrity worship has also been examined in relationship to body image. In this regard, Maltby et al⁷ examined three separate samples, totaling 701 male and female undergraduate students in the United Kingdom. Findings indicated that moderate levels of celebrity worship (i.e., intense-personal scale elevation), as assessed by the Celebrity Attitudes Scale, were associated with body-image concerns among participants ages 14 to 16 years, but dissipated among participants in older age groups.

Two studies have examined relationships between celebrity worship and cosmetic surgery. In the first, Swami, Taylor, and Carvalho⁸ examined 401 female undergraduates in the United Kingdom with regard to celebrity worship and the acceptability of cosmetic surgery. In this study, researchers found through multivariate analyses that moderate levels of celebrity worship (i.e., intense-personal scale elevation) were the strongest predictors of the acceptance of undergoing cosmetic surgery. In a second study of cosmetic surgery, Maltby and Day⁹ prospectively examined 137 young adults in the United Kingdom. Attitudes toward celebrities and cosmetic surgery were examined at Time 1, and the incidence of cosmetic surgery among participants was assessed at Time 2 (8 months later). As expected, celebrity worship predicted the likelihood of undergoing cosmetic surgery, which most often consisted of Botox[™] treatment, soft tissue fillers, breast augmentation, breast lift, laser skin resurfacing, and rhinoplasty.

In another study by Maltby et al,¹⁰ researchers used the Celebrity

Attitudes Scale to assess relationships between celebrity worship and religiosity. In this study of 307 participants in the United Kingdom, findings indicated that as religiosity increased, the tendency to worship celebrities decreased—a finding that was evident for both men and women.

Investigators have also examined relationships between celebrity worship and cognitive abilities. While one study found lower scores on cognitive abilities in relationship to higher scores on the Celebrity Attitudes Scale, a second study confirmed normal cognitive abilities among celebrity worshippers.^{11,12}

Finally, in a Korean study of 106 male and female adolescents,¹³ digit ratios were positively correlated with the Celebrity Attitudes Scale. The significance of this finding is unclear.

PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS AND CELEBRITY WORSHIP

Some findings suggest that individuals who engage in celebrity worship have certain personality characteristics. For example, using the Celebrity Attitudes Scale and Hartmann's Boundary Questionnaire, which assesses 12 types of boundaries, Houran, Navik, and Zerrusen¹⁴ examined 140 non-traditional college students in the United States. In this study, low scores, medium scores, and high scores on the Celebrity Attitudes Scale were associated with sensation-seeking and cognitive rigidity, identity diffusion, and poor interpersonal boundaries, respectively.

In a study of 343 adults from the United States and the United Kingdom, Ashe, Maltby, and McCutcheon¹⁵ examined narcissistic personality features in relationship to celebrity worship, using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. In

this study, four out of five scales on the inventory for narcissism correlated positively with at least one subscale score on the Celebrity Attitudes Scale, supporting the concept of narcissistic features among celebrity worshippers.

CELEBRITY WORSHIP AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

Is there any evidence for overt psychopathology among celebrity worshippers? The following studies suggest the possible presence of clinical psychiatric syndromes, but it is important to emphasize that no study to date has systematically examined specific Axis I or II psychiatric disorders in celebrity worshippers.

Dissociation. With regard to celebrity worship and a proneness to fantasy and dissociation, Maltby et al¹⁶ examined 1,942 male and female subjects in the United Kingdom who were recruited from schools, worksites, and community groups. The researchers found that low levels of celebrity worship were not associated with either fantasy proneness or dissociation. However, medium levels of celebrity worship were associated with fantasy proneness, and high levels of celebrity worship were associated with both fantasy proneness and dissociation.

Sheridan, Maltby, and Gillett¹⁷ examined 215 adults in the United Kingdom with the Public Figure Preoccupation Inventory to assess celebrity worship and the features of dissociation and absorption. In this study, dissociation was related to establishing contact with a celebrity (i.e., attempting to contact a favorite celebrity through telephone calls, letters, and e-mails—largely based upon fantasy and inaccurate beliefs), whereas absorption was related to having sexual thoughts and feelings

toward a favorite celebrity as well as stalking them.

Tendencies toward addiction. Sheridan et al¹⁸ examined 1,152 individuals from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia for relationships between celebrity worship and addiction, using the Celebrity Attitude Scale and the 32-item Addiction Scale from the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire-Revised. In this study, researchers found positive statistical associations between the two phenomena.

Criminality. In a sample of 1,845 participants from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, Sheridan et al¹⁸ examined relationships between celebrity worship, using the Celebrity Attitudes Scale, and tendencies toward criminal behavior, using the Criminality Scale of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire-Revised. In this study, researchers found positive statistical associations between these two phenomena.

Stalking behavior. In a study of 299 undergraduate students in the United States, McCutcheon et al¹⁹ examined relationships between insecure attachments to parents, and the condoning of behaviors by participants that were indicative of celebrity stalking. Researchers statistically confirmed associations between these two phenomena.

Compulsive buying. Reeves, Baker, and Truluck²⁰ examined 171 undergraduate students in United States with regard to celebrity worship, using the Celebrity Attitudes Scale, and materialism and compulsive buying. In this study, both materialism and compulsive buying were associated with celebrity worship.

Depression and anxiety. Maltby et al²¹ examined 307 men and women in the United Kingdom for

relationships between celebrity worship, as assessed with the Celebrity Attitudes Scale, and scores on the General Health Questionnaire, which assesses for general depressive, anxiety, and somatic symptoms as well as social dysfunction. In this study, all three subscales of the Celebrity Attitudes Scale demonstrated statistically significant relationships with depression and anxiety, and moderate levels of celebrity worship correlated with somatic symptoms.

In another study by Maltby et al,²² researchers examined 372 participants in the United Kingdom, who were recruited from various worksites and community groups, with regard to relationships between celebrity worship, as assessed with the Celebrity Attitudes Scale, and general mental health, as assessed by a number of scales. Researchers found that higher levels of celebrity worship were associated with overall poorer mental health. Specifically, respondents with higher levels of celebrity worship had higher levels of anxiety, depression, somatic symptoms, and social dysfunction as well as lower levels of life satisfaction and less positive affect. These various symptoms were mediated by neuroticism.

CONCLUSION

In the field of celebrity worship, the Celebrity Attitudes Scale appears to be the most widely researched scale. Findings generally indicate that higher scores on the Celebrity Attitudes Scale, which indicates a greater preoccupation with a celebrity, are associated with a number of potential emotional and psychological difficulties. These difficulties may include concerns about body image (particularly among young adolescents), greater proneness to cosmetic surgery,

sensation-seeking, cognitive rigidity, identity diffusion, and poor interpersonal boundaries. Additional psychological and interpersonal difficulties may include narcissistic personality features, dissociation, addictive tendencies, criminal tendencies, stalking behavior, compulsive buying, depression, anxiety, and general social dysfunction. According to research findings, these difficulties are more likely to be present with high levels of celebrity worship. However, there does not appear to be any existing literature on the relationship between celebrity worship and bona fide Axis I or Axis II psychiatric diagnoses. This is clearly a field that is ripe for research, given the prevalence and commonality of celebrity worship.

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AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS: R. Sansone is a professor in the Departments of Psychiatry and Internal Medicine at Wright State University School of Medicine in Dayton, OH, and Director of Psychiatry Education at Kettering Medical Center in Kettering, OH. L. Sansone is a civilian family medicine physician and Medical Director of the Family Health Clinic at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base Medical Center in WPAFB, OH. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force, Department of Defense, or United States Government.

ADDRESS CORRESPONDENCE TO:

Randy A. Sansone, MD, Sycamore Primary Care Center, 2115 Leiter Road, Miamisburg, OH 45342; E-mail: randy.sansone@khnetwork.org. ■