

Title:

Addiction to Fame and Celebrity

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Summary:

As far as their fans are concerned, celebrities fulfil two emotional functions: they provide a mythical narrative (a story that the fan can follow and identify with) and they function as blank screens onto which the fans project their dreams, hopes, fears, plans, values, and desires (wish fulfilment).

Keywords:

Article Body:

Question:

Are Narcissists addicted to being famous?

Answer:

You bet. This, by far, is their predominant drive. Being famous encompasses a few important functions: it endows the narcissist with power, provides him with a constant Source of Narcissistic Supply (admiration, adoration, approval, awe), and fulfils important Ego functions.

The image that the narcissist projects is hurled back at him, reflected by those exposed to his celebrity or fame. This way he feels alive, his very existence is affirmed and he acquires a sensation of clear boundaries (where the narcissist ends and the world begins).

There is a set of narcissistic behaviours typical to the pursuit of celebrity. There is almost nothing that the narcissist refrains from doing, almost no borders that he hesitates to cross to achieve renown. To him, there is no such thing as "bad publicity" - what matters is to be in the public eye.

Because the narcissist equally enjoys all types of attention and likes as much to be feared as to be loved, for instance - he doesn't mind if what is published about him is wrong ("as long as they spell my name correctly"). The narcissist's only bad emotional stretches are during periods of lack of attention, publicity,

or exposure.

The narcissist then feels empty, hollowed out, negligible, humiliated, wrathful, discriminated against, deprived, neglected, treated unjustly and so on. At first, he tries to obtain attention from ever narrowing groups of reference ("supply scale down"). But the feeling that he is compromising gnaws at his anyhow fragile self-esteem.

Sooner or later, the spring bursts. The narcissist plots, contrives, plans, conspires, thinks, analyses, synthesises and does whatever else is necessary to regain the lost exposure in the public eye. The more he fails to secure the attention of the target group (always the largest) - the more daring, eccentric and outlandish he becomes. Firm decision to become known is transformed into resolute action and then to a panicky pattern of attention seeking behaviours.

The narcissist is not really interested in publicity per se. Narcissists are misleading. The narcissist appears to love himself - and, really, he abhors himself. Similarly, he appears to be interested in becoming a celebrity - and, in reality, he is concerned with the REACTIONS to his fame: people watch him, notice him, talk about him, debate his actions - therefore he exists.

The narcissist goes around "hunting and collecting" the way the expressions on people's faces change when they notice him. He places himself at the centre of attention, or even as a figure of controversy. He constantly and recurrently pesters those nearest and dearest to him in a bid to reassure himself that he is not losing his fame, his magic touch, the attention of his social milieu.

Truly, the narcissist is not choosy. If he can become famous as a writer - he writes, if as a businessman - he conducts business. He switches from one field to the other with ease and without remorse because in all of them he is present without conviction, bar the conviction that he must (and deserves to) get famous.

He grades activities, hobbies and people not according to the pleasure that they give him - but according to their utility: can they or can't they make him known and, if so, to what extent. The narcissist is one-track minded (not to say obsessive). His is a world of black (being unknown and deprived of attention) and white (being famous and celebrated).

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Mistreating Celebrities - An Interview

Granted to Superinteressante Magazine in Brazil

Q. Fame and TV shows about celebrities usually have a huge audience. This is understandable: people like to see other successful people. But why people like to see celebrities being humiliated?

A. As far as their fans are concerned, celebrities fulfil two emotional functions: they provide a mythical narrative (a story that the fan can follow and identify with) and they function as blank screens onto which the fans project their dreams, hopes, fears, plans, values, and desires (wish fulfilment). The slightest deviation from these prescribed roles provokes enormous rage and makes us want to punish (humiliate) the "deviant" celebrities.

But why?

When the human foibles, vulnerabilities, and frailties of a celebrity are revealed, the fan feels humiliated, "cheated", hopeless, and "empty". To reassert his self-worth, the fan must establish his or her moral superiority over the erring and "sinful" celebrity. The fan must "teach the celebrity a lesson" and show the celebrity "who's boss". It is a primitive defense mechanism - narcissistic grandiosity. It puts the fan on equal footing with the exposed and "naked" celebrity.

Q. This taste for watching a person being humiliated has something to do with the attraction to catastrophes and tragedies?

A. There is always a sadistic pleasure and a morbid fascination in vicarious suffering. Being spared the pains and tribulations others go through makes the observer feel "chosen", secure, and virtuous. The higher celebrities rise, the harder they fall. There is something gratifying in hubris defied and punished.

Q. Do you believe the audience put themselves in the place of the reporter (when he asks something embarrassing to a celebrity) and become in some way revenged?

A. The reporter "represents" the "bloodthirsty" public. Belittling celebrities or watching their comeuppance is the modern equivalent of the gladiator rink. Gossip used to fulfil the same function and now the mass media broadcast live the slaughtering of fallen gods. There is no question of revenge here - just Schadenfreude, the guilty joy of witnessing your superiors penalized and "cut down to size".

Q. In your country, who are the celebrities people love to hate?

A. Israelis like to watch politicians and wealthy businessmen reduced, demeaned, and slighted. In Macedonia, where I live, all famous people, regardless of their vocation, are subject to intense, proactive, and destructive envy. This love-hate relationship with their idols, this ambivalence, is attributed by psychodynamic theories of personal development to the child's emotions towards his parents. Indeed, we transfer and displace many negative emotions we harbor onto celebrities.

Q. I would never dare asking some questions the reporters from Panico ask the celebrities. What are the characteristics of people like these reporters?

A. Sadistic, ambitious, narcissistic, lacking empathy, self-righteous, pathologically and destructively envious, with a fluctuating sense of self-worth (possibly an inferiority complex).

6. Do you believe the actors and reporters want themselves to be as famous as the celebrities they tease? Because I think this is almost happening...

A. The line is very thin. Newsmakers and newsmen and women are celebrities merely because they are public figures and regardless of their true accomplishments. A celebrity is famous for being famous. Of course, such journalists will likely to fall prey to up and coming colleagues in an endless and self-perpetuating food chain...

7. I think that the fan-celebrity relationship gratifies both sides. What are the advantages the fans get and what are the advantages the celebrities get?

A. There is an implicit contract between a celebrity and his fans. The celebrity is obliged to "act the part", to fulfil the expectations of his admirers, not to deviate from the roles that they impose and he or she accepts. In return the fans shower the celebrity with adulation. They idolize him or her and make him or her feel omnipotent, immortal, "larger than life", omniscient, superior, and sui generis (unique).

What are the fans getting for their trouble?

Above all, the ability to vicariously share the celebrity's fabulous (and, usually, partly confabulated) existence. The celebrity becomes their "representative" in fantasyland, their extension and proxy, the reification and embodiment of their deepest desires and most secret and guilty dreams. Many celebrities are also role models or father/mother figures. Celebrities are proof that there is more to life than drab and routine. That beautiful - nay, perfect

- people do exist and that they do lead charmed lives. There's hope yet - this is the celebrity's message to his fans.

The celebrity's inevitable downfall and corruption is the modern-day equivalent of the medieval morality play. This trajectory - from rags to riches and fame and back to rags or worse - proves that order and justice do prevail, that hubris invariably gets punished, and that the celebrity is no better, neither is he superior, to his fans.

8. Why are celebrities narcissists? How is this disorder born?

No one knows if pathological narcissism is the outcome of inherited traits, the sad result of abusive and traumatizing upbringing, or the confluence of both. Often, in the same family, with the same set of parents and an identical emotional environment - some siblings grow to be malignant narcissists, while others are perfectly "normal". Surely, this indicates a genetic predisposition of some people to develop narcissism.

It would seem reasonable to assume - though, at this stage, there is not a shred of proof - that the narcissist is born with a propensity to develop narcissistic defenses. These are triggered by abuse or trauma during the formative years in infancy or during early adolescence. By "abuse" I am referring to a spectrum of behaviors which objectify the child and treat it as an extension of the caregiver (parent) or as a mere instrument of gratification. Dotting and smothering are as abusive as beating and starving. And abuse can be dished out by peers as well as by parents, or by adult role models.

Not all celebrities are narcissists. Still, some of them surely are.

We all search for positive cues from people around us. These cues reinforce in us certain behaviour patterns. There is nothing special in the fact that the narcissist-celebrity does the same. However there are two major differences between the narcissistic and the normal personality.

The first is quantitative. The normal person is likely to welcome a moderate amount of attention - verbal and non-verbal - in the form of affirmation, approval, or admiration. Too much attention, though, is perceived as onerous and is avoided. Destructive and negative criticism is avoided altogether.

The narcissist, in contrast, is the mental equivalent of an alcoholic. He is insatiable. He directs his whole behaviour, in fact his life, to obtain these pleasurable titbits of attention. He embeds them in a coherent, completely biased, picture of himself. He uses them to regulate his labile (fluctuating)

sense of self-worth and self-esteem.

To elicit constant interest, the narcissist projects on to others a confabulated, fictitious version of himself, known as the False Self. The False Self is everything the narcissist is not: omniscient, omnipotent, charming, intelligent, rich, or well-connected.

The narcissist then proceeds to harvest reactions to this projected image from family members, friends, co-workers, neighbours, business partners and from colleagues. If these - the adulation, admiration, attention, fear, respect, applause, affirmation - are not forthcoming, the narcissist demands them, or extorts them. Money, compliments, a favourable critique, an appearance in the media, a sexual conquest are all converted into the same currency in the narcissist's mind, into "narcissistic supply".

So, the narcissist is not really interested in publicity per se or in being famous. Truly he is concerned with the REACTIONS to his fame: how people watch him, notice him, talk about him, debate his actions. It "proves" to him that he exists.

The narcissist goes around "hunting and collecting" the way the expressions on people's faces change when they notice him. He places himself at the centre of attention, or even as a figure of controversy. He constantly and recurrently pesters those nearest and dearest to him in a bid to reassure himself that he is not losing his fame, his magic touch, the attention of his social milieu.