

A Clinical Interpretation of Attitudes and Behaviors Associated with Celebrity Worship

JOHN MALTBY, PH.D.,¹ JAMES HOURAN, M.A.^{2,3} and LYNN E. MCCUTCHEON, ED.D.⁴

The phenomenon of celebrity worship is currently conceptualized as an abnormal type of parasocial relationship, driven by absorption and addictive elements and which potentially has significant clinical sequelae. The authors hypothesize that the three increasingly extreme sets of attitudes and behaviors associated with celebrity worship also partly reflect the three domains of personality discussed in Eysenckian theory. Specifically, celebrity worship for entertainment-social reasons may reflect extraversion personality traits; intense-personal attitudes and behaviors toward celebrities may reflect neuroticism traits; and celebrity worship of a borderline-pathological nature may reflect psychoticism traits. To test this idea, the authors administered the Celebrity Attitude Scale and the Abbreviated Form of the Revised Eysenck Personality Questionnaire to large convenience samples of students ($N = 317$) and community ($N = 290$) respondents. Results indicate that celebrity worship is not an uncommon phenomenon. Further, correlational analyses supported predictions and suggest that Eysenckian domains of personality may promote or hinder a person's progression along the continuum of behaviors associated with celebrity worship.

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The adoration of celebrities as idols or models is a normal part of identity development in childhood and adolescence (Greene and Adams-Price, 1990; Raviv et al., 1996; Yue and Cheung, 2000), but beyond this form of parasocial interaction is the seemingly abnormal phenomenon whereby persons with assumed intact identities become virtually obsessed with one or more celebrities—similar to an erotomanic type of delusional disorder. This type of obsessive-like behavior is known as celebrity worship. Prevalence rates are not known, but celebrity worship is at least visible enough that the popular media have taken notice. The stalking of celebrities is perhaps the most dramatic and widely reported expression of this phenomenon (for a review see *e.g.*, Melton, 2000), but celebrity worship can also affect on a private level the person with the fixation. For instance, in a recent issue of a teen fashion magazine a 16-year-old girl told of her self-described obsession with a musician and her reaction to the news of the musician's marriage engagement. According to

Haynes and Rich (2002), the adolescent was hospitalized because in response to hearing this information she reportedly ran a hot bath and cut herself on her neck, arms, and legs. Thoughts in her mind during this disturbing event included, "She's going to change him if he gets married. . . I'm not going to live with that" (p 198). Even on recovery from her injuries, there was continued evidence of obsessional-like ideations: "I don't care who he dates, sleeps with, marries. . . I realized I wanted him to be happy, and that that would make me happy. . . He's the only person I connect with" (Haynes and Rich, 2002, p 198).

McCutcheon et al. (2002) proposed an Absorption-Addiction model to explain such cases of celebrity worship. According to this model, a compromised identity structure in some persons facilitates psychological absorption with a celebrity in an attempt to establish an identity and a sense of fulfillment. The dynamics of the motivational forces driving this absorption may in turn take on an addictive component, leading to more extreme (and perhaps delusional) behaviors to sustain the person's satisfaction with the parasocial relationship. Several studies based on the Celebrity Attitude Scale (Maltby et al., 2001; Maltby et al., 2002; McCutcheon et al., 2002) are consistent with this proposed model and suggest that there are three increasingly more extreme sets of attitudes and behaviors associated with celebrity worship.

¹ School of Psychology, University of Leicester, Leicester, United Kingdom.

² Department of Psychiatry, Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, 901 West Jefferson, P.O. Box 19642, Springfield, Illinois 62794-9642. Send reprint requests to J. Houran.

³ Department of Psychology, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, South Australia.

⁴ Department of General Education, DeVry University, Orlando, Florida.

Low levels of celebrity worship have entertainment-social value and comprise attitudes and behaviors like “My friends and I like to discuss what my favorite celebrity has done,” and “Learning the life story of my favorite celebrity is a lot of fun.” This stage reflects social aspects to celebrity worship and is consistent with Stever’s (1991) observation that fans are attracted to a favorite celebrity because of their perceived ability to entertain and capture our attention. Intermediate levels of celebrity worship, by contrast, are characterized by more intense-personal feelings, defined by items like “I consider my favorite celebrity to be my soul mate,” and “I have frequent thoughts about my celebrity, even when I don’t want to.” This stage arguably reflects persons’ intensive and compulsive feelings around the celebrity, akin to the obsessional tendencies of fans often referred to in the literature (Dietz et al., 1991; Giles, 2000). The most extreme expression of celebrity worship is labeled borderline-pathological, as exemplified by items like “If someone gave me several thousand dollars to do with as I please, I would consider spending it on a personal possession (like a napkin or paper plate) once used by my favorite celebrity,” and “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.” This factor is thought to reflect a person’s social-pathological attitudes and behaviors that are held as a result of worshipping a celebrity.

Sociological factors like mass media and communication may buttress all of these behaviors (*e.g.*, Giles, 2000; Showalter, 1997), but a number of psychological risk factors also influence a person’s progression along the continuum of celebrity worship. In particular, we know that celebrity worshipers exhibit poorer psychological functioning than non-worshippers (Maltby et al., 2001; McCutcheon et al., *in press*); the phenomenon occurs more in adolescents or young adults than older persons (Ashe and McCutcheon, 2001; Giles, *in press*);⁵ and celebrity worshipers are more likely than nonworshippers to value a “game-playing” love style (McCutcheon, 2002). However, celebrity worship does not appear to be related to authoritarianism (Maltby et al., 2001) and at best is only very weakly associated with shyness or loneliness (Ashe and McCutcheon, 2001).

Moreover, we speculate that different dimensions of personality in part promote susceptibility to increasingly more extreme levels of celebrity worship. For instance, the three stages discussed above

strongly parallel the three dimensions of Eysenckian personality theory (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1985): extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism. That is, the entertainment-social factor of the Celebrity Attitude Scale reflects some of the extraversion personality traits (sociable, lively, active, venturesome); the intense-personal factor of the Celebrity Attitude Scale reflects some of the neuroticism traits (tense, emotional, moody); and some of the acts described in the borderline-pathological subscale of the Celebrity Attitude Scale seem to reflect some of the psychoticism traits (impulsive, antisocial, egocentric). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to test these predictions by examining the correlations between the three levels of celebrity worship and the three dimensions of Eysenck’s personality theory.

Methods

Respondents

Data were collected from two samples in the United Kingdom. The first sample consisted of 164 male and 153 female full-time university students (mean age = 20.4 years, SD = 2.6, range = 18 to 29 years). The sample was predominantly composed of single ($N = 290$) white persons ($N = 211$) who were currently employed in some type of part-time work ($N = 163$). The other sample was a convenience sample of 127 male and 163 female respondents (mean age = 34.3 years, SD = 8.1, range = 22 to 60 years) from a number of workplaces and community groups. This sample was predominantly composed of married ($N = 144$) white persons ($N = 208$) who were employed ($N = 197$), and most ($N = 87$) had the equivalent of at least one “O” level/GCSE education.

Materials

Materials included the a) Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS; McCutcheon et al., 2002). This is a 34-item Likert-type scale with “strongly agree” equal to 5 and “strongly disagree” equal to 1. From analysis reported in Maltby et al. (2002), three subscales were formed from 23 of the items: entertainment-social, intense-personal, and borderline-pathological. Additionally, the b) Abbreviated Form of the Revised Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQR-A; Francis et al., 1992), which contains 6-item measures of extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism, and lie scores, was used. Responses are scores on a “yes”–“no” response format.

Within Eysenckian theory, extraversion traits comprise sociable, carefree, optimistic traits (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1975). A person scoring high on extraversion is likely to have many friends, take chances, and crave

⁵ Giles DC, Maltby J (submitted) The role of media in adolescent development: Relations between autonomy, attachment, and interest in celebrities.

TABLE 1
Mean Scores (SD) by Sex and Alpha Coefficients of All the Scales by Both Samples

	Students (<i>n</i> = 317)				Older Adults (<i>n</i> = 290)			
	α	Males	Females	<i>t</i> (315)	α	Males	Females	<i>t</i> (288)
CAS-ES ^a	.84	19.13 (8.2)	19.93 (9.7)	-.79	.90	16.73 (7.6)	16.79 (8.3)	-.06
CAS-IP ^b	.82	22.54 (7.2)	23.26 (7.9)	-.84	.88	20.76 (8.0)	21.13 (7.7)	-.39
CAS-Pathology ^c	.70	03.66 (2.4)	03.97 (2.5)	-1.14	.70	03.42 (2.2)	03.53 (2.3)	-.41
Extraversion	.80	03.81 (2.4)	03.47 (2.3)	1.63	.85	03.36 (2.4)	03.12 (2.4)	.85
Neuroticism	.78	03.08 (2.4)	03.87 (2.4)	-2.64*	.75	02.93 (2.5)	03.68 (2.4)	-2.57*
Psychoticism	.68	02.75 (2.5)	02.76 (2.2)	-.03	.66	02.81 (2.5)	02.72 (2.4)	.32
Lie scores	.81	02.14 (2.4)	02.11 (2.3)	.11	.72	01.96 (2.2)	01.98 (2.3)	-.08

^a CAS-ES: Celebrity Attitude Scale – Entertainment-Social.

^b CAS-IP: Celebrity Attitude Scale – Intense Personal.

^c CAS-Pathology: Celebrity Attitude Scale – Borderline-Pathological.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (statistically significant after .05 Bonferroni correction for multiple observations).

excitement (Eysenck et al., 2000). Second, a person scoring high in neuroticism is anxious, moody, and frequently depressed, likely to suffer from psychosomatic disorders, preoccupied with things that may go wrong, and is overly emotional (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1975; Eysenck et al., 2000). Third, psychoticism comprises solitary, troublesome, cruel, inhumane, aggressive, and insensitive traits (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1975; Eysenck et al., 2000). Psychiatric terms associated with psychoticism subsume “schizoid,” “psychopathic,” and “behavioral disorders;” however, within Eysenckian theory, these are only correlates of extreme scores on the scale (Eysenck et al., 2000). Last, the questionnaire also contains a measure of lie scores, to take account of persons producing responses that are socially desirable.

We emphasize that these three dimensions of personality are not mutually exclusive; people have these three traits to different degrees to the extent that Eysenck et al. (2000) suggested that sometimes personality traits are mixed. Those authors gave the example that a person who scores high in neuroticism and extraversion will likely to be touchy, restless, and easily excitable. Moreover, the scale has been subject to exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses that suggest the unidimensionality of the four EPQR-A subscales of Extraversion, Neuroticism, Psychoticism, and the Lie Scale (Forrest et al., 2000). This is consistent with the popular notion of a continuum within the general population, along which ordinary and pathological forms of thought and perception may be mapped (*e.g.*, Claridge, 1990, 1997; Posey and Losch, 1983–1984; Prentky, 1989).

Construct validity has been found for the subscales in terms of predicted relationships with psychological well-being, affect, religiosity, cognitive tasks, and sex roles (Chang, 1997; Cooper and Taylor, 1999; Francis and Bolger, 1997; Lewis and Maltby, 1995; Shevlin et al., 2002).

Results

Table 1 shows the mean score and standard deviation for each measure. There were no statistically significant gender differences for any of the scales, except that in both samples, the women scored significantly higher than the men on neuroticism. However, an alpha correction for multiple observations indicates this effect is not robust. Table 1 gives the Cronbach alphas for all the scales for the university and older adult samples. The reliability statistic for the 4-item CAS borderline-pathological subscale in both samples was, on first analysis, very low (student sample, $\alpha = .55$; older adult, $\alpha = .52$). On examining item-to-total correlations, removal of the item “News about my favorite celebrity is a pleasant break from the harsh world” (item 32) increased the reliability statistic to satisfactory level for each sample (Table 1). Given that Maltby et al. (2002) have commented on the unusualness of this item in the borderline-pathological scale, it was removed, and scores for a 3-item measure of CAS borderline-pathological subscale were computed. Therefore, present findings suggest that all the scales show satisfactory internal reliability, with the exception of psychoticism, which falls slightly below Kline’s (1986) criterion of .70.

Contrary to the idea that celebrity worship is an uncommon phenomenon, Table 2 shows that approximately 36% of our combined sample scored at or above the theoretical midpoints on the three subscales of the CAS. Interestingly, about 27% of the combined sample scored highly on the intense-personal and borderline-pathological subscales. Our sampling procedure does not allow us to generalize, but these findings suggest the possibility that many persons do not engage in celebrity worship for mere entertainment. Rather, there appears to be a clear clinical component to attitudes and behaviors associated with celebrity worshipping.

TABLE 2
Distribution of Respondents who Scored at or above Theoretical Midpoints on the Three Subscales of the Celebrity Attitude Scale

Adult Sample (<i>n</i> = 290)			
Subscale	Total Sample	Men	Women
Entertainment-Social	18	7	11
Intense-Personal	61	26	35
Borderline-Pathological	5	2	3
Student Sample (<i>n</i> = 317)			
Subscale	Total Sample	Men	Women
Entertainment-Social	36	16	20
Intense-Personal	88	42	46
Borderline-Pathological	8	4	4

Entertainment-Social [10 items] = 30; Intense-Personal [9 items] = 27; Borderline-Pathological [3 items] = 3

Table 3 gives the Pearson correlations between all the variables for the two samples. Consistent with predictions and replicating well across both samples, celebrity worship for entertainment-social reasons shared a significantly positive relationship with extraversion; celebrity worship for intense-personal reasons shared a significantly positive correlation with neuroticism; and celebrity worship reflecting pathological tendencies shared a significantly positive relationship with psychoticism.

Discussion

The present findings suggest that, among UK samples, celebrity worship is not an uncommon phenomenon and its expression may be explained in part within wider personality theory. That is, celebrity worship for entertainment-social reasons is associated with extraversion; celebrity worship for intense-personal reasons is associated with neuroticism; and celebrity worship reflecting pathological thoughts and behaviors is related to psychoticism, all defined in Eysenckian terms. The effect sizes are

at best modest (all *r* values < .31); however, they are robust given a Bonferroni correction (.05) for multiple observations. Moreover, the findings are consistent with predictions that derived from descriptions of celebrity worship and Eysenck's personality dimensions.

Accordingly, Eysenckian personality theory provides a theoretical and empirical context for previous and future findings using the CAS and can be seen as an important supplement to McCutcheon et al.'s (2002) Absorption-Addiction model of celebrity worship. In this respect, dimensions of personality could help promote or hinder progressively more extreme behaviors described by this model. That is, the addictive component to McCutcheon et al.'s (2002) Absorption-Addiction model may be mediated partly by personality traits. For instance, we would not expect persons who score high on the measure of extraversion and score low on the measures of neuroticism and psychoticism to be prone to exhibit dysfunctional expressions of celebrity worship. By contrast, previous studies have found celebrity worship for intense personal reasons to be related to depression and anxiety (Maltby et al., 2001). The present findings suggest that this aspect of celebrity worship is positively associated with neuroticism, and since neuroticism is clearly related to anxiety and depression (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1975; Gaynes et al., 1997; Maltby et al., 1998), the neuroticism factor provides a useful understanding of why these higher levels of celebrity worship are related to poorer mental health. It may also be the case that Eysenckian personality dimensions regulate the degree to which celebrity worshipers are uninhibited in behaviors related to their fixation.

Additionally, the findings suggest that future research may find some use in using Eysenck's personality theory as a basis to interpret and conceptualize correlates of celebrity worship. The celebrity

TABLE 3
Pearson Correlations Between All the Scales

	Students Above the Diagonal (<i>n</i> = 317)						
	CAS-ES	CAS-IP	CAS-Path	E	N	P	L
CAS-ES ^a	1.00	.164**	.181**	.300**	.101	.033	-.037
CAS-IP ^b	.153**	1.00	.131**	-.059	.306***	.082	.002
CAS-Pathology ^c	.193**	.215**	1.00	.018	-.002	.171**	.016
Extraversion	.297***	-.011	.076	1.00	-.033	.047	-.085
Neuroticism	.098	.267***	.024	.079	1.00	.117*	.012
Psychoticism	-.010	.046	.208***	-.027	.086	1.00	-.060
Lie scores	-.041	.070	.061	-.046	.009	-.051	1.00
Adults Below the Diagonal (<i>n</i> = 290)							

^a CAS-ES: Celebrity Attitude Scale – Entertainment-Social.

^b CAS-IP: Celebrity Attitude Scale – Intense Personal

^c CAS-Pathology: Celebrity Attitude Scale – Borderline-Pathological.

p* < .05; *p* < .01; ****p* < .001 (statistically significant after .05 Bonferroni correction for multiple observations).

worship borderline-pathological subscale was positively related to psychoticism, and psychoticism has been thought to be important to distinguishing between tender-minded and tough-minded attitudes (Eysenck, 1975). Therefore, future research may examine the relationship between tough-mindedness, as measured by Hartmann's (1991) Boundary Questionnaire or Lange et al.'s (2000) Revised Transliminality Scale, and borderline-pathological celebrity worship to extend the understanding of this most extreme level of celebrity worship. We predict that significant ego-boundary deficits are operating at this stage of celebrity worship. Accordingly, the Absorption-Addiction model augmented by Eysenck's personality theory implies that at this stage the expression of celebrity worship is firmly rooted in pathology and thus may become a serious clinical issue. The case of the female adolescent who was willing to self-mutilate over her parasocial relationship with a popular musician subsequently might serve as an illustrative example.

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