

Fame Is the Name of the Game

October 16, 2020

Fame Is the Name of the Game

A Meditation on Why So Many People Dream of Being (or Even Just Meeting) Celebrities

By Alfie Kohn

“The question I get asked more than any other question: ‘If you had it to do again, would you have done it?’” Trump said of running for president. “The answer is, yeah, I think so. Because here’s the way I look at it. I have so many rich friends and nobody knows who they are.” He then went on to talk about how much easier his life would have been had he not run. Yet there it was: Reflecting on the meaning of having been president of the United States, his first impulse was not to mention public service, or what he felt he’d accomplished, only that it appeared to be a vehicle for fame, and that many experiences were only worth having if someone else envied them.

Maggie Haberman, “Three Conversations with Donald Trump”

If the meaning of life has become doubtful, if

one's relations to others and to oneself do not offer security, then fame is one means to silence one's doubts.

– Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*

Most people will never be famous, not even for fifteen minutes. Nevertheless, thanks largely to social media, the possibility of fame seems tantalizingly within reach to more folks today than ever before. What is largely taken for granted, however, is the fact that so many people find this daydream tantalizing. What exactly is the appeal of being well known?

Wanting to be a celebrity is not the same thing as wanting to be good at something – having a pleasing singing voice, reliably hitting a small white ball with a large tapered stick, or even acquiring expertise in a field outside of entertainment. To many people, the point isn't really being proficient; it's the acclaim one receives (from vast numbers of strangers) for that proficiency. It's not the home run or the high C in itself; these are just means to the end of being cheered by crowds and recognized on the street. That's why so many people, including children, scramble for visibility on YouTube or TikTok regardless of whether they've done anything particularly notable.¹

Starting in the early 1990s, Tim Kasser, now professor emeritus at Knox College, conducted a series of studies about people's values and life goals. He and his colleagues – and, later, other social scientists all over the world – have consistently found that anyone whose priority is to be rich, famous, or attractive is disproportionately likely to be anxious or depressed; to have unsatisfying relationships; to smoke, drink, and watch TV a lot; and in general to report a

lower level of well-being. Interestingly, what predicts this diminished quality of life isn't how rich, famous, or attractive one *is*; it's how much one desires these things.²

Most of the research has addressed the *effect* of these desires, but Kasser and his crew have also investigated their cause. For example, one study found that 18-year-olds with a very strong desire to be wealthy were likely to have parents who were not very nurturing. When parents are "cold and controlling," the researchers wrote, "their children apparently focus on attaining security and a sense of worth through external sources."

The trouble is that even in the unlikely event one attains great wealth or celebrity status, it's unlikely to provide meaningful satisfaction. Being valued for these distinctions just accentuates the emptiness, insecurity, or self-doubt that pushed one to achieve them. Unhappiness is both the cause and the effect – much as thirst is to drinking salt water for a desperate sailor.³ Yet judging by what they are willing to sacrifice in time, effort, and dignity to get on a reality TV show, rack up YouTube views, or become an Instagram influencer, some people want to be famous (whether or not it makes them rich) with an intensity that is both poignant and psychologically fascinating.

Fame, more than wealth, is about social validation, and that fact underscores the sad irony that people who crave it are likely to feel isolated and alienated from others. Like a performer's hunger for applause, the self-worth of a fame-seeker depends on how he or she is seen by others. The difference is that, with fame, there's a need to be seen by millions of others. The point isn't just to be well-liked but well-known – and, Andy Warhol's ironic prediction notwithstanding, to achieve a level of celebrity known to very few. Indeed, the scarcity of that status is part of the point.

Self-image and social image are closely related. Someone who feels inadequate may nurture a defiant fantasy of triumphant validation: "I'll show 'em all when I become a household name." And it's true that becoming famous might well show 'em all – in the sense that others who value fame will be impressed. But that just sets the question back a step: Why do so many people find that status impressive if not irresistible? If you're rich, you can buy things in the (probably false) hope that doing so will make you happy and lead others to envy you (which, even if true, will poison your relationships). If you're good-looking, you'll be desired (albeit mostly just because of your appearance). But what exactly is the appeal of being recognized by people you don't know?

Perhaps the hunt for a single, satisfying answer to that question is misconceived, particularly since there may well be multiple possible motives. In some cases, the quest for fame probably is symptomatic of narcissistic personality disorder, but it appears that isn't true for all fame-seekers⁴ – and in any case we're still left wondering why narcissists have this need.

One possible explanation emerges from a branch of psychology called terror management theory (TMT), which holds that much of our behavior can be understood as a reaction to our mortality. Hundreds of studies have shown that when we are reminded of death, we feel a more pressing need to bolster our self-esteem and also to cling to cultural "institutions and rituals to buttress our view of human life as uniquely significant and eternal."⁵ Thus, the idea of being famous may provide a kind of existential reassurance – the promise of symbolic immortality that offers consolation as we watch our actual lives TikTok away. "Remember my name," Irene Cara commanded in the song "Fame," a top-40 hit from the 1980 movie of the same name. If enough people do that, she sang, "I'm gonna live forever."

*

Not everyone wants – or at least badly wants – to be famous. But there is a vicarious version of fame that also attests to its powerful pull: the kind of celebrity worship that consists of worshiping celebrity itself. This helps to explain why famous people’s memoirs sell so well, their minute doings are recorded in tabloids and on TMZ, their discarded artifacts fetch absurd prices at auctions. We regale friends with breathless accounts of a movie star we saw in a restaurant; we proudly mention a distant relative whose name everyone recognizes. Famous people occupy a rarefied realm, and if we can’t be one of them we yearn for a little of their glitter to rub off on us and enliven our comparatively dreary lives. Again, though, what needs to be explained is why that excitement is generated merely because the person in question is known by so many others.

Robert Cialdini, a social psychologist, and his colleagues coined the acronym BIRG, for “basking in reflected glory.” They couldn’t help noticing, for example, that sports fans, despite having never “caught a ball or thrown a block in support of their team’s success...claim for themselves part of the team’s glory” as they chant, “‘We’re number one’ rather than ‘They’re number one.’” (One of their studies found that “we” is more commonly used after the team in question has been victorious.)

BIRG also might be applied to parents who derive vicarious vindication from the success of their children, managing to let you know immediately that their kid is in the gifted program, or made the All-State tennis team, or got into Stanford (early decision, no less).⁶ Now obviously there’s nothing wrong with being proud of one’s offspring. But sometimes the bragging suggests that the parent’s identity is a little too wrapped up in the child’s accomplishments – for example, when the boasts sound more triumphant than loving,

the point being that their child is more impressive than everyone else's. Apart from the damage this BIRG dynamic is likely to do to the child (partly because of its message of conditional acceptance), one study finds that it doesn't bode well for the parent's mental health either.⁷

But I digress. Cialdini and his associates also saw the relevance of BIRG to "people who delight in recounting the time they were in the same theater, airplane, or restroom with a famous movie star." And they discovered that a focus on fame may be more intense after one has failed at a task. This supports the idea that a need for validation (presumably intensified by failure) may drive not only a desire to be well-known, as I argued earlier, but a quest for reflected glory.⁸

Something else that people are particularly drawn to do when they're not feeling great about themselves is spend time on Facebook. Social media may not just be a potential route to becoming famous but a parallel way of seeking emotional validation and reassurance.⁹ Consider a version of BIRG that earlier social scientists dubbed "parasocial interaction." This refers to developing a kind of unilateral intimacy with famous people. They don't know you, but you come to see them as your friends. Of course, this phenomenon increased exponentially with the creation of social media, as the possibility of being followed, or having a post liked or retweeted, by a celebrity creates the promise (or illusion) of a connection with someone who is well known. The more you're thrilled by fame, the more exciting that's likely to be. And preliminary evidence suggests that people with a strong need for social acceptance (and anxiety about real-life intimacy) are particularly inclined to create these parasocial relationships as well as to rely on social media.

It appears, then, that the quest for actual fame and for the secondhand BIRG variety are both heightened by insecurity.

Perhaps they also share roots in our mortality. TMT researchers discovered that when people were led to think about death, they were more likely to prefer works of art created by celebrities rather than by unknown artists. And, in another experiment, subjects actually believed that a plane was less likely to crash if a famous person was on board.¹⁰

In the end, I'm still puzzling over why so many people attribute extraordinary capabilities to (and swoon at the prospect of meeting) someone who is well known – or dream of achieving that status themselves. After all, we are just who we are whether or not strangers recognize us.

NOTES

1. Fame, like wealth, is described by psychologists as an “extrinsic” goal because it stands outside of the activity that’s used to produce it. This mirrors the broader distinction between extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation (valuing an activity in its own right). A substantial body of research, as I’ve explained elsewhere, shows that extrinsic motivators such as receiving a reward or winning a contest aren’t just different from intrinsic motivation; they tend to deplete it.

2. I wrote about Kasser’s early studies in an article for the *New York Times*; Kasser himself described more of his research a few years later in a short book called *The High Price of Materialism*; even more studies have been published since then and summarized in metaanalyses like this one.

3. In Kasser’s words, yearning to be rich, famous, or beautiful is “both a symptom of underlying insecurity and a coping strategy (albeit a relatively ineffective one) some people use in an attempt to alleviate their anxieties” (*The High Price of Materialism*, op. cit., p. 29). Of course, it’s

also true that fame, like money, can create new problems if it is acquired – celebrities forego privacy and may become targets for haters and stalkers – but I'm more interested in the psychological effects.

4. One possible way to identify the subset of fame seekers who are narcissistic is to watch what happens when they fail to become famous. We would expect narcissists to grow furious and perhaps to blame and lash out at others for their failure and to disparage those who *are* famous.

5. Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (New York: Random House, 2015), p. 9. Moreover, “subtle, and even subliminal, reminders of death” – much more than reminders of other unpleasant things – “amplify our disdain toward people who do not share our beliefs...[and] drive us to compulsively smoke, drink, eat, and shop...[while magnifying] our phobias, obsessions, and social anxieties” (pp. 211-12).

6. I used to parody this posture by announcing to my friends that I was terribly worried because my daughter still moved her lips while she was reading even though she was already two years old.

7. Missa Murry Eaton and Eva M. Pomerantz, “When Parents' Self-Worth Is Contingent on Children's Performance: Implications for Parents' Mental Health.” Presentation at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Atlanta, GA, April 2005.

8. Some years later, another pair of researchers found that when law and business students were reminded of their failings, they became more focused on the prestige of the place where they planned to spend an upcoming vacation.

9. The two are also correlated. People attracted to “the recognition and admiration that fame confers appear to use social media [more often and] in ways that may ostensibly

increase their own potential to be seen and admired” (Dara N. Greenwood, “Fame, Facebook, and Twitter: How Attitudes About Fame Predict Frequency and Nature of Social Media Use,” *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 2 [2013], p. 234).

10. The second study is described in Solomon et al., op. cit., p. 107.

To be notified whenever a new article or blog is posted on this site, please enter your e-mail address at www.alfiekohn.org/sign-up .