Mark D. Griffiths Ph.D.
In Excess

Why We Seek the High of Stardom

But once we achieve it, the trouble really begins.

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Posted Mar 24, 2014

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Back in the mid-1990s, I started doing some research on the psychology of fame with Dr. Adam Joinson. One of the first things we did after setting up our website (the not-so-originally titled 'The Psychology of Fame Project') was go and interview British PR guru and 'fame-maker' Max Clifford. We enjoyed our interview and published it in an issue of the British magazine *Psychology Post*. One of the more interesting claims made by Max Clifford was his assertion that fame is addictive. He said:

"The sad part about [fame] is people that desperately need to become famous. It's like a drug...and there's so many people that come up and then they go, and when you meet them they are desperate, desperate for it. I mean, they are living 10, 15, 20 years ago when they were famous, they can't accept they are no longer famous. It is an addiction. It's a craving. It varies from individual to individual but it's the same as drugs or alcohol or anything else. At it's worst – and I've known a lot of the worst – it totally takes over your life, your philosophy, your outlook on everyday life. It's tragic. The way it normally works is that somebody becomes famous so they follow the natural path. In other words, the bigger house, the bigger car, the bigger everything. They tend to isolate themselves from people that actually know them and possibly care about them because they aren't there any more.

They then become surrounded by people who live off them, pick off them...who say what the person wants to hear all the time. They become wrapped up in fame and get a totally jaundiced picture of life and reality. Life becomes emptier and emptier and then when the fame's gone, they can't handle it. There's so many people who would do anything, anything to be famous. It's more important almost than life itself. It's sad, it's shocking, and it's frightening. Not everybody, but there seems to be more and more and more. Maybe just more and more of them are making their way to my door. I don't know. Fame is becoming a bigger drug than ever."

Can fame really be an addiction? There are certainly those in both the academic and medical community who think that it can, although empirical evidence is hard to come by. In a 2011 interview with the US newspaper Palm Beach Post about his conference paper "Power, Fame, and Recovery," the US psychiatrist Reef Karim said, "Little kids today don't want to be doctors or lawyers. They just want to be famous."

As I have noted in my own research, fame used to only be a by-product of a person's talent in another field (acting, singing, sport, politics, etc.). However, we now live in a culture where some people are just "famous for being famous."

Karim said he has been treating people for "fame addiction" for a number of years and claims it is inextricably linked to the rise of television and the internet. (The rise of reality TV shows play a role in fueling the desire to become famous.) Karim says there is a need to be validated and be adored externally.

In an article about the obsession with fame on MSNBC.com, Beverly Hills psychologist Bethany Marshall said, "A lot of our youth, their parents don't love them unconditionally for who they are—the fantasy of being loved just for who you are without having to do anything."

In the same article, anthropologist David Sloan Wilson said, "Our minds are adapted for a small-scale society and what's happening today is an out-of-control version of that. The lust for fame has taken on this pathological form that is, much like our eating habits, making us obese."

And Dr. Robi Ludwig commented, "Fame is so fleeting. People who achieve it, there's no guarantee that they'll maintain it. So, therein lies sort of the addictive loop. One of the concerns with celebrities who have made it is that they will lose it. There is this need for more and more. And just like with any addiction, it has less to do with actually the item that you're seeing, so the fame is actually used as a mood enhancer. Fame helps a person to feel important, invaluable – that they matter."

As noted above, empirical evidence on fame being addictive is lacking. Jake Halpern, author of the book *Fame Junkies,* carried out a study with Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Public Communications in which 650 children from New York were surveyed about their attitudes toward fame and pop culture. Given the option to become stronger, smarter, famous, or more beautiful, boys chose fame almost as often as they chose intelligence; girls chose it more often.

Psychologists Donna Rockwell and David Giles carried published a qualitative interview study in the *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* with 15 well-known American celebrities from the fields of politics, law, business, writing, sports, music, film, TV news and entertainment. The study found that those interviewed felt that being famous had led to a loss of privacy, demanding expectations, gratification of ego needs, and symbolic immortality. Areas of psychological concern for celebrity mental health included isolation, and an unwillingness to give up fame. Based on their data, Rockwell and Giles argued that celebrity is a process involving four temporal phases:

1. a period of love/hate towards the experience;
2. an addiction phase where behavior is directed solely towards the goal of remaining famous;
3. an acceptance phase, requiring a permanent change in everyday life routines;
4. an adaptation phase, where new behaviors are developed in response to life changes involved in being famous.

The authors noted: "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."

There is also research on the question of whether those who are famous are more susceptible to developing other types of addiction. In an article in the magazine *The Fix*, Dr. Dale Archer said: "Fame and addiction are definitely related. Those who are prone to addiction get a much higher high from things — whether it's food, shopping, gambling or fame — which means [the behavior or situation] will trigger cravings. When we get an addictive rush, we are getting a dopamine spike. If you talk to anyone who performs at all, they will talk about the 'high' of performing. And many people who experience that high report that when they're not performing, they don't feel as well. All of which is a good setup for addiction. People also get high from all the trappings that come with fame. The special treatment, the publicity, the ego. Fame has the potential to be incredibly addicting."

I suspect it will be a long time — if ever — before fame is described as a genuine addiction, mainly because there is the question of what such people are actually addicted *to* — a point I have made in other papers in relation to "internet addiction." Are they addicted to the adoration and praise of their fans? Greater access to sexual partners? Money? The buzz of performing? All of the above?

The bottom line is that "fame" is not an activity like gambling, sex, or exercise that have definitional boundaries. The object of addiction and the rewards gained may come from many different forms of reinforcement.

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