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The Sociology of Celebrity

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Abstract

The sociology of celebrity (and its cousin, fame) is a relatively young field, despite having identifiable classical roots. While the topic was ignored by sociologists for many years, it has recently been taken up by both theorists and empirical researchers in sociology and a variety of related fields. In this article, I evaluate the current state of the field, and identify two major themes – celebrity as pathology and celebrity as commodity – that currently dominate the literature. In addition, I suggest additional research directions that I believe will help the field develop and mature; in particular, empirically grounded and meaning-oriented research that reflects the lived experiences of those who swim in the sea of celebrity culture everyday. What does celebrity mean to the people who produce it, consume it, engage with it and live it? To the extent that researchers take up these questions, the sociology of celebrity will continue to be a vibrant and vigorous area of study.

In a series of recent 'articles', scientist Eric Schulman wrestles with some of the tough questions in the study of contemporary fame. He identifies a unit of measurement for quantifying fame: the 'Lewinsky' unit or *Lw*, where 1 *Lw* equals the number of web-pages on the Internet that mention the infamous presidential intern Monica Lewinsky (Schulman 1999). Other celebrities are then assigned a certain number of *Lw* units based on their web presence: Jesus Christ, for example, comes in at 7.6 *Lw*, while actress Marisa Tomei rates only 80 µ*Lw*, or micro-Lewinskys. Schulman also establishes Google as the search engine of choice for taking these measurements (Schulman and Boissier 2001), and develops a logarithm that determines a celebrity's position on the A-List (or B-, C-, D-, E-, F-, G- or H-List) in the Hollywood hierarchy (Schulman 2006).

These articles are, of course, meant to be humorous. Schulman is actually an astronomer, and has drolly extended his study of the 'stars' beyond outer space and into the realm of contemporary celebrity. He writes for the *Annals of Improbable Research*, the people responsible for the annual IgNoble Prize awards for absurdity in scientific achievement. The *Annals* regularly publishes humorous send-ups of scientific papers, on topics that appear ludicrous by the standards of 'serious' research (titles include ‘Apples and Oranges – A Comparison’, ‘The Need for Double-Strength Placebos’ and ‘Scheduled Earthquakes’). Schulman’s attempts to quantify fame, then, must be seen through this lens: a set of inane exercises that make a mockery of ‘real’ scientific research, and are done only in jest.

Until very recently, this perspective on the study of celebrity was widely held in ‘serious’ academic circles as well. Fame and celebrity were seen as trivial topics, unimportant to a comprehensive understanding of the social world. Despite voracious public interest in celebrity, sociology stubbornly ignored it. Only in the last 15–20 years has sociology taken seriously the idea that celebrity was worthy of study. This is painfully ironic, since sociologists are the original theorists of inequality, and fame and celebrity are themselves hierarchical systems – something that even Schulman’s parodies recognize.[1] The concerns of prominent sociologists such as Max Weber and C. Wright Mills suggest a sociology of fame and celebrity long before any of their fellows took up the gauntlet. Ultimately, it was trends in other disciplines such as literature, cultural and media studies and even psychology that finally spurred sociologists to begin considering this most ubiquitous of modern status phenomena.

In this essay I take for granted the notion that celebrity is an appropriate object of study for sociology. No defense of the topic will be mounted here. Instead I will offer a survey of the growing field of the sociology of celebrity. My review of the field will be broad but not necessarily exhaustive, and while some selectivity is necessary, I will not limit my choices of literature to work done solely by credentialed sociologists. This field is necessarily interdisciplinary, including the work of historians, psychologists, anthropologists, economists, folklorists, legal scholars, cultural critics and even theologians – one does not have to be a certified sociologist to produce work of sociological interest. After a brief historical foray, I will identify current trends in the field and attempt to characterize the developing literature in ways that will be useful to interested scholars: specifically, I will argue that the field is split between those who frame celebrity as a pathology, and those who frame it as a commodity. Finally, I will suggest some new directions for scholars working in the field, with the well-founded hope that the sociology of celebrity is an area that will continue to grow in both magnitude and vigor in the coming years.

Sociology on celebrity

Despite sociology’s long disregard of celebrity, there are seeds of interest planted in several classical texts. Weber’s concepts of class, status and party (1966), as well as his consideration of personal charisma as a source of power (1968, 215), all beg contemporary application to the question of celebrity. Celebrity is the site of a surplus of contemporary society’s charisma – by its very nature it involves individuals with special qualities. From the truly gifted actor or athlete to the exquisitely beautiful supermodel to the simply photogenic 'celebutante', celebrities are people who are charismatic and appealing, qualities Weber recognizes as being possible sources of power over others (1968, 241). This is visible in the presentation of celebrities (especially athletes) as role models (Lines 2001; Kellner 2001; Fraser and Brown 2002) and as figureheads in movements for social change (Meyer and Gamson 1995).

In addition, while Weber himself did not (and surely could not) foresee today's version of celebrity, he did hold out the prospect that modern capitalism could generate new forms of status, even beyond what he had theorized or anticipated (1966, 27). Of course, just because celebrity is a product of capitalism does not make it a status group of the Weberian type. But celebrity does have features that suggest a parallel to Weber's model. One is its flexible association with wealth – celebrities are not necessarily recognized because they are wealthy, but rather vice versa. This corresponds with Weber's observation that charismatic and economic power don't necessarily overlap (1968, 244). In addition, celebrity exerts social influence over its audience in unorthodox and artful ways – using what Weber calls both 'coarse [and] subtle means' (1966, 27). Finally, as with other forms of charismatic clout, celebrity does not usually last very long (Weber 1968, 246).

Other early theorists who turned their attention to issues such as recognition, success or heroism, also helped lay the groundwork for later considerations of fame and celebrity (Schneider 1935; Klapp 1949; Mills 1956). Schneider equates fame with material success (1935, 356), and Mills acknowledges that fame and success often overlap, making celebrity the 'American form of public honor' (1956, 71). But Mills also recognizes that not all successes are equal, identifying a class of what he calls 'professional celebrities', whose mere visibility is the key to their fame – and this visibility serves to distract an eager public while the more accomplished economic, political and military elites 'really run things' (1956, 93). Klapp takes the separation of fame and true merit even further, noting the dangers of awarding 'great man' or 'popular hero' status to those whose accomplishments in areas like sports or entertainment are 'trivial' (1949, 53).

From Weber to Klapp and Mills, a pattern seems to be developing: in slightly different ways, they each contemplate the instability, inadequacy, or transience of charisma-based social influence, and ponder whether shared celebrity is distinction enough around which to construct a status group of sorts. And while these tidbits of theoretical insight have lain mostly undisturbed for decades, they serve as grounds both for sociology's long disregard of fame as a suitable topic (because it is ephemeral, unstable or invalid) and for the discipline's critical approach to the topic once it did enter the arena of topics appropriate to study.

Celebrity as pathology

Fama, the Roman goddess of fame and rumor, is described by the poet Virgil as being 'an evil, and no plague is swifter than she' (Berlin 1996, 27). In the *Aeneid*, she is a monstrous spreader of news, using her feathered wings and multiple mouths to tell all across heaven and earth. This early depiction of fame as wicked and indiscriminate persists today, and is reflected in much of the scholarly literature on the subject. One of the most prevalent themes in sociological and other social science work on fame and celebrity is that of pathology. Researchers, theorists and social critics tend to proceed from the assumption that fame and celebrity, in all their manifestations, are evil, corrupt, or otherwise contemptible; given these assumptions, it should not be surprising that their resulting findings support the idea of celebrity as pathological.

Much social scientific writing on celebrity is partially or entirely theoretical, attempting to conceptualize the phenomenon by relying on abstractions rather than empirical data. These theoretical writings are useful in that they problematize fame and celebrity as concepts. However, the authors often use personal impressions and observations to support their theoretical claims, and these observations are likely to be selective and unsystematic. Such selectivity may facilitate the pathologizing of celebrity in theoretical works.

Some of this pathologizing comes in the form of overt criticism; authors disparage the social and cultural systems which create celebrity (Postman 1984), or trash celebrity itself as an empty, valueless concept (Gitlin 1998). For example, Neal Gabler (1999) is among many who question the connection between contemporary fame and true achievement. According to these theorists, to be a celebrity in contemporary society does not necessarily mean that one possesses more talent, skill, intelligence or other gifts than the average person – it merely means that one has been more successfully packaged, promoted, and thrust upon the hungry masses (Boorstin 1961; Lowenthal 1961; Monaco 1978; Braudy 1986/1997). This air of disapproval extends to other conceptual approaches to fame and celebrity as well.

Halpern (2007) laments the dangerous and costly extremes to which people are willing to go in order to become famous or to know celebrities. Braudy describes our contemporary obsession with celebrity as a kind of compensation for a lack of 'personal honor and responsibility' (1986/1997, 618). Kaminer (2005) complains that celebrity culture diminishes our uniqueness and 'impoverishes [our] imaginations' (58). West (2005) dubs the advent of celebrity politics a threat to democracy. Schickel (1986) warns that celebrity and our obsession with it creates big-name killers like Mark David Chapman and John Hinckley, Jr. If social theorists and critics are to be believed, celebrity is the greatest threat to civilization since the flood of Noah. Better keep those starlets from boarding the ark!

Not all who deal with celebrity in the abstract pathologize it, however. Milner (2005) considers the ways in which celebrity compares to other status systems. While there are many similarities (including a desire for knowledge of or intimacy with those at the top of the hierarchy and solidarity among those occupying lower rungs), there are also significant differences, including the role of visual media technologies and increased mobility and instability compared to traditional status systems. He insists that scholars and cultural critics must grapple with and understand the new celebrity status system, rather than dismiss it as a pathological variant of traditional systems. 'The question is not whether we can restore the old system, but whether we can create new understandings of the good, the true and the beautiful that enhance rather than degrade human experience' (Milner 2005, 77). This imperative awaits response.

Empirically grounded studies generally cut much smaller slices out of the phenomenon of celebrity than do theoretical treatises. This means that any pathologizing of the phenomenon will look different as well. For example, in what may be the only piece of published empirical research that uses data gathered from actual celebrities, Young and Pinsky (2006) gave questionnaires to 200 celebrity guests of Pinsky's nationally syndicated radio show, Loveline. These questionnaires included a personality scale designed to measure levels of narcissism among the celebrity respondents, with Young and Pinsky hypothesizing that celebrities are more narcissistic than the general population. Indeed, their findings indicate that, on a variety of different dimensions, celebrities are exceptionally narcissistic – moreso than other professional groups or the population at large.

Why include a study like this in the 'celebrity as pathology' category? It is one of a number of social psychological analyses that link celebrity (or interest in celebrity) to unflattering personality traits. While the authors note that narcissism can be associated with positive traits (such as extroversion and likeability), in general usage the term is associated only with its pathological qualities (such as self-centeredness, lack of empathy, and manipulative behavior). That this is the first question asked by researchers when given the opportunity to survey real celebrity respondents is telling indeed, and the assumption that celebrity is associated with negative personality traits drives the work of other researchers as well.

The work of Lynn McCutcheon and her associates (Ashe and McCutcheon 2001; McCutcheon 2002; Maltby and McCutcheon 2001; McCutcheon and Maltby 2002; McCutcheon et al. 2002; McCutcheon et al. 2003) includes a series of articles in which 'celebrity worship' on the part of fans is linked with a host of negative, deviant and pathologized traits. Almost every hypothesis in this research series proceeds from the assumption that interest in celebrities is an indicator of substandard mental health. Qualities such as dependency and 'game-playing' in romantic relationships, shyness, loneliness, authoritarianism and even 'Machiavellianism' are investigated as correlates of celebrity worship. Interestingly, their findings rarely reveal strong relationships between these dismal personality traits and celebrity worship ... but their choice of topics and construction of hypotheses assume the worst: that celebrity is dangerous and fans are damaged by their contact with it.

I myself am guilty of what I accuse others of doing. In my research on fan-celebrity encounters (Ferris 2001), I raise the 'specter of stalking' as I try to distinguish the dangerous fans from the merely dedicated. I even chose an ominous-sounding title for the article. Associating fanship with the sensationalized social problem of celebrity stalking, I invite a reverse version of McCutcheon's conclusions: *fans* are dangerous and *the famous* are damaged by their contact with them. Indeed, others have used my findings to make even stronger points about the dangers of fans' interest in celebrities, as did Halpern in *Fame Junkies* (2007, 178): '... once an ardent fan meets his or her idol, the chances of stalking increase,' he writes, citing my study as backup. This tidbit was later reprinted in a *People* magazine review of Halpern's book, with 'rabid' replacing 'ardent', and *voila*: my research is now implicated in the widespread assumption that active fans are crazy, dangerous 'junkies' (*People* 2007).

Celebrity as commodity

'As soon as I went to number one, everything went mad. I went from a person to a product – bam!' When rock star Sinead O'Connor made this complaint in a 1991 interview with *The Guardian* (quoted in Giles 2000, 85), she was certainly not the first celebrity to notice that she was being commodified. This theme – 'celebrity as commodity' – is another common theme in the sociology of celebrity. But despite the fact that celebrities themselves talk about it, the theme rarely appears in empirically grounded research, and is usually present in more abstract or theoretical pieces.

Since the 'celebrity as commodity' argument is usually contextualized by a broader critique of capitalism, there is often some overlap between this perspective and the 'celebrity as pathology' point of view as well. Some version of the Frankfurt school's 'desublimation' hypothesis is often cited in support of the link between commodification and pathology: when citizens give themselves up to the easy pleasures of capitalism (mass media, consumerism), they are more readily controlled by tyrants (King 1992; Marcuse 1964/1991). For this reason, capitalism's commodification of the individual, including the celebrity, is consistently pathologized by writers in this field.

Among those who advance the idea of celebrities as commodities is P. David Marshall (1997), who contends that the conspicuous commodification of celebrity is just an indication of capitalism's broader power to commodify all persons. Celebrities therefore embody two of the dominant ideologies of contemporary Western culture: individualism and market capitalism, and they serve as signs through which these ideological discourses get passed on to the population-as-audience. That makes the celebrity powerful both as an example and as a tool of Frankfurt-esque 'mass deception' (Marshall 1997, 10). Rojek (2001) also argues for celebrity as commodity – in his analysis, celebrities are the perfect products of capitalist markets, as well as contemporary replacements for both god and monarch.

Cashmore (2006) joins the refrain, presenting evidence for all of the above (celebrity as replacement god, as opiate of the masses, and as carrier of ideology) before rolling it all into an argument about celebrity as commodity. In addition to being the most glittering product of consumer culture, celebrities are its biggest boosters – in Cashmore's view, celebrities both sell and are sold. Moeran (2003) observes this as well. Celebrities are both objects and vehicles of consumption, encouraging and validating consumer culture through product endorsements even as they are conveyed by it (Cashmore 2006, 269).

Richard Dyer's early writings foreshadow these perspectives: his *Stars* (1979) are both products of capitalism and an essential embodiment of its ideologies. Dyer also acknowledges the consumption inherent in commodification, recognizing that while the Hollywood machine produces stars as commodities, it is audiences who consume them. Audiences contribute to the production of celebrity by responding to the stars' embodiment of their dreams and needs – stars emerge from an economic 'election' that is organized by producers and voted in by audiences (1979, 19). Later, in *Heavenly Bodies* (Dyer 1986), he notes that stars are perceived differently by audiences than by Marxist social theorists: in other words, the culture industry does not completely control the construction and interpretation of celebrity. Audiences have an active role in that construction, and not just as falsely conscious consumers of pop-culture pabulum. They recognize the tension between the commodified public product of celebrity and the private selves of stars, and eagerly seek out what is authentic and identifiable about particular stars and/or their roles (Dyer 1986, 4–5). Considering the consumers' side of the commodification argument paves the way for the 'active audience' research of the 1990s (such as Jenkins 1992 and Bacon-Smith 1992).

Tyler Cowen (2000) is willing to consider the possible advantages of a society in which celebrity is a commodity and fame is separate from merit: in an 'economy of fame', some qualities that are necessary to court fans (like being crude, rebellious or outrageous) may 'run counter to merit' (23). To Cowen, this separation is not necessarily a problem: '[f]ans choose the separation of fame from merit, in large part, because they benefit from it... [with] a greater quantity and diversity of fame' (36). For Cowen, a fame-driven economy can encourage creativity and achievement, since the prospect of fame as a valuable good can mobilize individuals.

Finally, Rosemary Coombe (1992) takes on the legal questions associated with the commodification of celebrity: who owns celebrity? Who is its author? Who can rightfully possess and control it? Because of the multiple actors involved in the production of celebrity, and because alternative and even subversive readings and rewritings of celebrity are possible (think fan-fiction or celebrity impersonation), she believes that celebrities should not be granted exclusive legal rights to their own images. Coombe's perspective recognizes celebrity as a commodity – and a highly profitable one at that. When the law protects celebrity rights to this lucrative commodity, any borrowing can be called 'theft'; but borrowers may call it 'free expression', which is also protected by law. Coombe argues that this contradiction is a problem of modern laws operating in a postmodern world – the distinction between public interest in free speech and private property interests breaks down in a mass-mediated culture, where commodified celebrity texts become resources accessible to all.

What next?

Despite my critiques of the above perspectives, there's nothing really wrong with them – there will be plenty of room for each in a fully developed sociology of celebrity. But until the field is fully developed, these perspectives serve to distort the phenomenon by focusing on particular issues at the expense of others. Therefore, what needs to be done in order to approach a fully developed sociology of celebrity?

A focus on meaning, and on indigenous practices of meaning-making around the topic of celebrity, is needed. Instead of assuming or insinuating the worst through choice of topic or construction of hypotheses, research on celebrity should assume and insinuate as little as possible. An exploratory spirit and a focus on questions of meaning are necessary to reach a more authentic understanding of the nature of celebrity. The opinions of a relatively small group of social scientists and critics do not necessarily reflect the lived experiences of the millions who swim in the sea of celebrity culture everyday. What does celebrity mean to the people who produce it, consume it, engage with it and live it? A focus on appreciating the diversity and complexity of the meanings constructed by these participants may be the key to studying the phenomenon of celebrity without pathologizing, romanticizing, or oversimplifying it (à la Matza 1969).

Joshua Gamson provides a model for coming to an appreciative grasp of contemporary celebrity culture in his *Claims to Fame* (1994). He avoids the assumption that celebrity culture is debased or shallow by turning it into a question rather than relying on it as the answer. Furthermore, his question is not 'is celebrity pathological?' – rather, it is 'what does celebrity mean?' This becomes an issue to investigate rather than an assumption to leave unexamined. His methodological strategy focuses on the interaction between the celebrity text, its producers, and its readers/consumers, and the meanings that are constructed in those interactions. His use of multiple data-gathering strategies as part of a grounded theory approach allows him to discuss a variety of issues from an empirical foundation, without seeming to take an a priori position on them. Finally, he admits to being just as fascinated by celebrities as anyone else, something to which few of the other authors cited above would ever confess. This fascination means he does not sit above his respondents, but rather with them as they work to make celebrity meaningful.

Gamson's work also investigates celebrity as a commodity from the perspective of its meaning-making audiences. '[C]elebrity is certainly industrialized,' he allows, and 'people are certainly commodified' (Gamson 1994, 78). But the actual consumption of celebrity commodities is far more complex than Adorno and Horkheimer's (1993) 'mass deception' model allows. Most audiences recognize the degree to which celebrity is a commercial construct, a recognition which does not seem to interfere much with their ability to enjoy consuming it (Gamson 1994, 148). Their understandings of the constructed nature of celebrity-as-product are woven into their meaning-making processes, and become part of what is pleasurable about consuming celebrity (156). He finds that, '[a]rmed with knowledge about the process, the audience doesn't need to believe or disbelieve the hype, just enjoy it' (Gamson 1992, 17). Gamson is one of the few researchers who, while acknowledging the commodification of celebrity, does not also pathologize it; I attribute this to the fact that he seeks the insights of actual audiences and uses this data to ground his conclusions.

Other meaning-oriented approaches to celebrity also manage to avoid some of the problems of assumption and insinuation noted above. For example, Timothy Dugdale (2000) reveals the range of emotions felt by fans toward celebrities, especially when those celebrities encounter difficulty or tragedy in their everyday lives. Fans make meaningful connections between their own lives and those of the stars, creating relationships of sorts despite the remoteness of the celebrity (Dugdale draws on Morin, 1960, to make this argument). Fraser and Brown (2002) use interviews with Elvis fans and impersonators to tease out the ways in which individuals idealize and identify with famous others. Vannini (2004) examines the ways in which fans construct and deliver interpretations of pop star Avril Lavigne that confound and oppose any hegemonic meanings she embodies. And my own work (Ferris 2004) attempts a meaning-oriented, empirically grounded approach to celebrity as well, analyzing the emotional and interactional norms at play in face-to-face encounters between celebrities and ordinary folk.

Patricia and Peter Adler (1989) take a grounded approach to the development of a 'gloried self' by high profile college athletes. As the basketball players experience fame and interact with those who see them that way, their own sense of identity changes, and they come to realize the consequences, positive and negative, of celebrity for the self. Even psychologist

David Giles (2000) argues that fame should be conceptualized as a dynamic process rather than an unvarying state – he grasps the notion that fame and celebrity develop relationally, and that the advent of fame and celebrity into the life of an individual transforms self as well as relationships to others.

While none of these works argue against celebrity as pathology or commodity, neither do they assume the preexisting presence of either of these features in their data. Instead, they allow the meaning of celebrity to emerge from their immersion in data and focus on members' interactional practices. Both celebrity and its indulgent parent, capitalism, might still be bad news in the end – but starting out with either of these assumptions can blind researchers to other meanings of the phenomena. Hence, it is not that a meaning-centered approach to understanding celebrity is 'better' – it is simply a necessary part of the full development and maturity of the field.

In addition to a broad focus on meaning, there are two other, more specific deficits in the current literature on celebrity. The first involves the segregation of different types of celebrity within the field. Scholars seem to either confine themselves to one particular celebrity system (such as sports, music or even literary celebrity), or to speak of celebrity as a general system in which all types of celebrities are included. Indeed, this very article takes the latter perspective, treating all types of celebrity within one loosely defined category. Both of these strategies avoid the important question of how different systems of celebrity are related. Is sports celebrity different than television celebrity? If so, how? And what do they have in common? Similarly, there may be subsystems within a larger system of celebrity, such as rock, jazz or country genres within the music business. What are the similarities and differences between these subtypes of celebrity? A systematic comparison of these different celebrity systems is one of the missing pieces in the field as it currently stands.

The other important gap in the scholarly literature on celebrity is in the area of research involving celebrity subjects/respondents. Of course, there is a reason for this gap, and that is the access issues involved. Celebrities and their handlers work hard to create barriers between the stars and those who want contact with them (Ferris 2005); access can be earned only through official gatekeepers, such as agents, managers, or security personnel, and then only if the purpose of the contact is deemed legitimate by those gatekeepers. Celebrities may be leery of participating in research as subjects/respondents because of privacy protection issues – even with scholarly promises of confidentiality, the risk of information release may seem too high.

Legitimate access to celebrities seems to be limited to those involved in their work lives (producers, directors, costars, staff), and to journalists who go through the proper channels for approved interviews. Researchers are generally not on the list, and may avoid even attempting access because the problems of ‘studying up’ seem too great (Lofland and Lofland 1995; Ostrander 1993). This is a shame, because the potential rewards of seeking such access are particularly juicy. They include the prospect of answering questions about the experiential aspects of becoming and being a celebrity, and about the processes involved in maintaining celebrity status, something no one has yet been able to do. Perhaps someday there will be sociologist who possesses the ‘unique adequacy requirement’ (Garfinkel and Weider, 1992) to study celebrities in this way.

So far, Young and Pinsky (2006) are the only researchers to successfully utilize celebrities as research subjects, with Pinsky’s Loveline gig providing extraordinary access that is not available to most researchers. Young and Pinsky utilized the strategy of seeking only verbal consent from their subjects – in order to avoid creating any written record of their participation, no consent forms were signed. In addition, the researchers allowed the subjects to place their completed surveys in a pile of other completed surveys that was then shuffled and examined by the celebrities to confirm that there were no identifying marks (2006, 466). These methodological precautions, along with the rare level of celebrity access afforded by Pinsky’s position as both a radio host and a research physician, make this an uncommon piece of research. I can only hope that other researchers, with different research questions and hypotheses, will someday also be able to access celebrity respondents in order to fill this important gap in the literature. Meaning-making occurs on both sides of the celebrity-audience divide, and researchers ought not to neglect celebrity subjects/respondents merely because they are difficult to access.

Conclusion

The sociology of fame and celebrity is a growing, vibrant field. As with any developing area of study, there are noticeable trends as well as conspicuous absences. As the field matures, the deficits will be filled, and the field will also diversify, turning the current trends into two strands of many in the comprehensive exploration of a fascinating social phenomenon. Celebrity was once a topic sociologists paid little heed to, seeing it as too frivolous and unsavory for our attentions. Even now that it has shown up on our scholarly radar, our perspectives on it tend to reflect that initial disapproval of the topic: celebrity is either pathological in itself, or the product of a flawed system (capitalism). But celebrity can be problematized without being pathologized, as some contemporary scholars have clearly been able to do. In particular, a focus on systematic, empirically grounded, meaning-oriented studies of fame and celebrity will help fill out the field in a way that allows it to expand and mature as a serious area of sociological inquiry. In that vein, I would like to encourage young researchers to pursue their interests in this area without trepidation. When I was a graduate student there was a vague, unspoken sense that I might be signing my professional death warrant by choosing a pop-culture topic such as fame or celebrity; today, that is no longer the case. And as every sociologist knows, there is strength in numbers – so come join us.

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Short biography

Kerry Ferris sees fame as an underexamined system of social power in contemporary society; she works toward a sociology of fame using ethnographic methods and a symbolic interactionist approach. Her past studies have included analyses of fan-celebrity relations, celebrity sightings and celebrity stalking. Her current project examines the work lives of professional celebrity impersonators. She is the author, with Jill Stein, of "The Real World: An Introduction to Sociology", forthcoming from W. W. Norton and Company in January 2008. Ferris presently teaches at Northern Illinois University, where she throws legendary end-of-semester parties. She earned her BA in Sociology from Pomona College, and her MA and PhD in Sociology from University of California, Los Angeles.

Notes

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[1] I will use fame and celebrity somewhat interchangeably in this article, mostly because there are so many different usages of each term in the literature I am reviewing here. Different studies include many different categories of people under the heading of celebrity – rock stars, movie actors, athletes, supermodels, politicians, literary and religious icons all get the celebrity treatment from scholars. However, many researchers do attempt to 'operationalize' their usages of these terms and to distinguish them from one another in some way. The consensus distinction seems to be both temporal and substantive: fame is seen as the more enduring quality, while celebrity might just be a flash in the pan – 'fame without history', Braudy calls it (1986/1997, 599). And fame endures because of its greater substance – it is likely to be based in *bona fide* achievement of some sort, while celebrities are merely 'well known for [their] well-knownness' (Boorstin 1961, 57). Though the meanings may differ, together fame and celebrity constitute a unified field of inquiry.

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