

Celebrity Worship Syndrome Abounds

Is America's Obsession With Stardom Becoming Unhealthy?

by Keturah Gray

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Feeling a little let down now that Ben and Jen's wedding is on hold? Don't worry — you're not alone.

In fact, a lot of people who would have never made it past security at the reception are fretting over the couple's future — not to mention all those presents that have to be returned.

"We as a society are becoming overly preoccupied with celebrities and the fantasy images it evokes," says James Houran, a psychologist with the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine.

After surveying more than 600 people, Houran's team of researchers from universities in the United States and Britain recently identified a psychiatric condition they have dubbed "celebrity worship syndrome." It's an unhealthy interest in the lives of the rich and fabulous. According to the researchers, about a third of us have it to some degree.

To measure people's interest in celebrities, the group devised the celebrity worship scale. The three levels move from:

Entertainment social: This is casual stargazing. The level of celebrity worship here is really quite mild: "My friends and I like to discuss how Ben could have moved from Gwyneth to J.Lo."

Intense personal: The person seems to feel a connection with the star: "I consider Halle Berry to be my soul mate."

Borderline pathological: Here, admiration has gone stalker-esque: "When he reads my love letters, Brad Pitt will leave Jennifer Aniston and live happily ever after with me."

"Celebrity worship has probably existed as long as there have been famous people," says Horan. "But it has probably only become as intense as it is given the technological advances that allow us to create societies, market them to a worldwide audience, and share information about them."

Pure Escapism

Today's culture, with its proliferation of celebrity news magazines such as *Us*, *People* and *In Touch*, and television shows like *Entertainment Tonight* and the all-celeb, all-the-time E! network, undoubtedly abet celebrity worship. But can you blame Americans for going a little overboard in their interest in Britney/Madonna kiss or the May-December romance of Ashton and Demi?

With the repercussions of 9/11, the ailing economy, and the war in Iraq, following the glamorous lives of these celebrities offers a diversion in the same way that Golden Age movie stars like Jean Harlow, Clark Gable, and Bette Davis did during the Great Depression.

"Any magazine editor will tell you, Colin Farrell still sells better than Colin Powell," says William Bastone, founder and editor of the popular Internet site www.smokinggun.com.

Simon Dumenco, a columnist for *Folio*:, a magazine about the magazine industry, goes further, remarking that gossip pages are "the magazine equivalent of crack. "

"These magazines are proliferating for the same reason prescriptions of antidepressants and other psychotropic drugs are proliferating," he says. "They dull our emotional pain."

False Idols

In discussing celebrity worship syndrome, Houran is careful to add that a certain degree of star admiration is normal. "Celebrities can inspire people of all ages to be better than they are," he says.

Evolutionary biologists, say, in fact, that identifying with a famous person is a natural part of human development, and it's understandable to want to emulate celebrities.

"Humans, unlike other species, obtain most of their information about the world from other humans," says anthropologist Francisco Gil-White from the University of Pennsylvania. "We were selected not only to rank successful individuals highly and to prefer them as models, but also to kiss up to them in order to make them prefer us as interactional partners."

As the new season of reality television begins, and society is bombarded with instant celebrities from the latest cast of *Survivor*, perhaps Americans should take a closer look at their idols and whether they deserve all the adoration.

"Celebrities are no longer people who have special talents and attributes," says Houran. "Many celebrities are simply marketing products."