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Expanding celebrity studies' research agenda: Theoretical opportunities and methodological challenges in interviewing celebrities

Following up on Turner's argument on the dominance of textual and discursive analyses in celebrity studies, this article argues for more focus on celebrity culture's agents and their social practices, particularly by conducting interviews with celebrities, which is rare in literature. While this opens up several theoretical opportunities, it also raises methodological challenges, especially regarding access and data quality. Access to celebrities is limited because they are already 'over-interviewed' by journalists, and thus might not be motivated to engage in academic studies. This article suggests ways to deal with or even surpass cultural intermediaries, such as managers, who control the celebrity's agenda. Regarding data quality, it also discusses ways for interviewers to get beyond the sound bite and generate in-depth understanding, while also trying to manage or recognise which celebrity persona is speaking. While these methodological considerations apply to celebrity, they might also be relevant for elite studies more generally.

Keywords: research agenda, methodology, interview, access, epistemology

Introduction

This article proceeds mainly from Turner's (2010) critical discussion on the dominance of textual analysis in celebrity studies because I think his observation is correct but at the same time has some limitations when offering alternatives. In contrast with Turner, this article wants to stress another possibility to expand celebrity studies' research agenda. Instead of focusing on the production and consumption of celebrity, which is often still oriented toward the celebrity as a text, it suggests that the perspective of the active agents in celebrity culture should be included as well. Focusing on the agents, meaning both celebrities and celebrity industry employees, might considerably improve our understanding of the genesis of celebrity. It can also give us insight into the ways celebrities experience and evaluate their fame and celebrity status, manage their privacy boundaries, negotiate with managers and the

celebrity industry, and deal with fans and the media.

Extending the analytical scope of celebrity studies goes hand in hand with the use of particular methods. While ethnography more generally is valuable to study celebrity culture from the inside, this article will focus on one particular method, the interview. Until today, the interview has hardly been used to study individual celebrities. This is due not only to the dominance of textual analysis, but also to the challenges posed by celebrities as a research population. The celebrity interview can be seen as a specific kind of elite interview, although the term 'elite' should be used with caution and in reference to the relative possession of cultural, economic, social, or symbolic capital instead of absolute power.

Drawing from elite studies literature and from other researchers' and my own experiences with interviewing celebrities, the first challenge I will discuss is how to gain access to celebrities. Celebrities, in particular widely acclaimed ones, are often overwhelmed by interview requests from the media, which makes it difficult to engage them in research. In addition, it is difficult for researchers to deal with gatekeepers such as managers and press officers who strongly limit the access to their protégés. Because of the rich interview experience of famous people, the second main challenge when studying celebrities through interviews is what Borer (2006) called 'getting beyond the sound bite.' This relates to the epistemology of the collected data, whether we interview the celebrity as a public or a private persona, and how to possibly manage this.

By combining a discussion on the theoretical scope of celebrity studies with methodological and more practical issues related to interviewing celebrities, this article aims to contribute to the research agenda and practice of celebrity studies—and eventually to elite studies more broadly. It aims to encourage other researchers to 'study up' using the interview and to analyse the life worlds, practices, and experiences of celebrities as active agents within celebrity culture.

Trends and Challenges in Celebrity Studies Research

Recently, two scholars presented their reflective accounts on the literature, research, and methods used within celebrity studies as an entry point to highlight research topics or approaches that need more attention. The first is Kerry Ferris (2007), an American sociologist who specialises in ethnographic research on celebrity, including local celebrities (Ferris 2004, 2010). She observed two dominant strands within the literature on celebrity: celebrity and celebrity worship as a pathology (e.g., McCutcheon et al. 2002) and critical thinking on celebrity as a cultural commodity (King 2010, Marshall 1997). Although the dominance of these two angles is debatable and it is possible for them to be complemented or replaced by effect studies on celebrity endorsement (e.g., Erdogan 1999) or the subfield of celebrity politics (e.g., Street 2004), few would disagree that the approach of celebrity as a commodity is central in the literature. Yet, as Ferris (2007) rightly pointed out, these critical analyses are mainly theoretical and should also be studied more empirically.

The second is Graeme Turner (2010), an Australian scholar in media and cultural studies and one of the leading authors in celebrity studies. He offered a different overview and accurately observed that celebrity studies have been dominated by textual analysis, and to a lesser extent, discursive analysis:

> Overwhelmingly, however, the field is populated with analyses of individual celebrities either as media texts interesting in their own right or as pointers to broader cultural formations or political issues; in either case, the focus of analysis is upon the details of their representation through the media. (p. 13)

Turner (2010) explained this narrow focus in empirical analysis by pointing out the enormous

volume and textual richness offered by celebrity culture. He added that it is also partly due to celebrity studies' ancestry in cultural studies, where one can find an abundance of textual and discursive analyses as well. Moreover, he suspected that some scholars in media and cultural studies seized the opportunity to find a new terrain of textual analysis when their original one had lost attraction or attention. Another possible explanation is that celebrity studies' 'uncle,' star studies, which has inspired many authors studying celebrity, is a field with a strong preference for textual and discursive analyses (Dyer 1979/2007, Holmes 2005b).

According to Turner (2010, p. 15), this preference for textual analysis in celebrity studies raises at least two problems. First, it provides too small a basis for the multidisciplinary and wide-ranging research field that celebrity studies could and even should be. Second, textual analysis often fails to distinguish itself sufficiently from the kind of descriptions and accounts that journalists and the media provide their readers with. Turner (2010, p. 15) explained that this entails the following danger:

> Ironically, too, as the feature articles so often demonstrate, there is a potentially circular, and certainly reciprocal, relationship between the academy and the media around this subject matter. Both sectors feed off each other: the media quote us in order to legitimise their stories, while we mine them for empirical or textual evidence for ours.

Next to conducting textual analysis, which remains relevant (Geraghty 2012), Turner (2010) suggested two ways to expand the research agenda of celebrity studies, or what he called 'difficult questions for celebrity studies' (p. 15). He argued that celebrity is not only a text or discursive effect, but also a commodity and cultural formation with social consequences. First, related to celebrity as a commodity (see also above, Ferris 2007), Turner (2010) deemed it worthwhile to examine more closely the celebrity industry, or celebrity's industrial production, of which many examples can be found in star studies (e.g., Austin and Barker

2003, McDonald 2000). He singled out two possible approaches for this. One approach looks at 'the structural effect of celebrity upon production in the globalising media and entertainment industries' (Turner 2010, p. 15). This approach focuses on transnational organisations, including the promotions and advertising industries. It revolves around questions on ownership and control, regulation, concentration, and cross-media ownership—questions central to the traditions of political economy and international communication. The other approach looks at management in the celebrity industry, or how celebrity is manufactured as a commodity in certain markets and how this intermeshes with questions on regulation, distribution, and consumption, amongst others. It is also related to the aim of comprehending organisations' functioning and how professionals' practices influence this.

Second, Turner (2010) suggested that scholars should shift their focus to the social and cultural impact of celebrity culture and study the effects of celebrity. Scholars could examine the ways that audiences consume celebrity and the changes involved in this consumption in the short and long term. A possible reference in star studies is Richard Dyer's (1986/2004) seminal work on the ideological aspects of stars.

The problem of Turner's (2010) suggestions is that he is merely promoting a shift in attention away from texts and representation toward the other elements of du Gay et al.'s (1997) circuit of culture: production, regulation, consumption, and identity. One study that looked at production, representation, and consumption at the same time is Joshua Gamson's (1994) *Claims to Fame*, one of the first rigorous empirical analyses of celebrity. It is interesting that Gamson did not just conduct his analysis on the three separate levels, but also actively combined them in the discussion of his book by examining their interactions. Notwithstanding its clear merits, this analytic approach implies two significant limitations.

First, by strictly keeping the media text and its meanings at the centre of the cultural process, this kind of analytic approach overlooks the wider consequences of media

communicative processes. This point can be clarified by referring to Martín-Barbero (1993) who stepped away from media communication as a transmission of information and ideology. Instead, he concentrated on mediations, which foreground the lived social environment and the cultural expressions of media, including power issues. In that sense, media communication is not seen as a linear process of meaning production, transmission, reception, and possible effects, but as a much more complex process involving interactions and mutual interrelationships (see also Hepp 2012, pp. 34-37). Turner (2010, p. 17) gave a good example of this approach in relation to celebrity by reflecting on the possibility that feelings of subjectivity and identity performances are now also partly based on notions of media visibility, and that being in or out of the media could influence people's self-esteem (see also Couldry 2003).

Second, both Turner's and Gamson's approach are based on the premise that media texts can have direct effects, which is problematic regardless of how broadly these effects are defined. In the words of Couldry (2012, p. 36):

> How can we ever know that a particular media text changed the behaviour of audiences in particular ways? . . . [W]hy treat a media text as your primary research focus unless you know its details make a difference to wider social processes? But it is exactly this that is normally difficult to show.

Couldry (2012, p. 37; emphasis removed) invited us to start from people's practices instead, an approach known as practice theory: 'It asks quite simply: what are people (individuals, groups, institutions) doing in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts? How is people's media-related practice related, in turn, to their wider agency?' Applied to celebrity, possible questions include the following: What are the practices of people who aim to get as close as possible to celebrity, for instance by meeting or seeing

celebrities in real life? By contrast, what practices do people develop to ignore and avoid celebrity in their daily lives? What communicative and representational practices by politicians and the media contribute to the celebrity appeal of politicians and the wider celebritisation of politics? What communicative or non-communicative practices do celebrities explore and maintain in setting their privacy boundaries? The list of possible questions is endless, but these are the kinds of questions that practice theory and an open approach to celebrity away from text-oriented analysis opens up.

Following practice theory, this article promotes to study the agents in celebrity culture, or micro-level analyses of the practices and experiences of individuals involved in celebrity culture. This includes participatory observations with managers, paparazzi photographers, bloggers and journalists, studies on non-famous individuals in different social fields (e.g., politics, catering, and journalism) discussing the power dynamics in their field given the celebrity of some of their colleagues, and interviews with celebrities themselves. This last possibility has already been promoted by Ferris (2007). She argued that it would enable the study of 'the experiential aspects of becoming and being a celebrity, and . . . the processes involved in maintaining celebrity status, something no one has yet been able to do' (p. 10). A few years earlier, media psychologist David Giles (2000, p. 157) launched a similar call: '[I]t is crucial that we gain access to celebrities in order to obtain first-hand accounts of their experiences of fame, and particularly where they might feel they would benefit from the application of psychology.' In the next section, this method will be discussed in more detail and in the context of social sciences in general.

Interviewing Celebrities

We need to begin by qualifying Ferris' (2007) claim that researchers have yet to study

celebrities through in-depth interviews. This was probably correct at the time of her writing, but by now a few examples can already be found. One is the study focusing on American celebrities conducted by Michael Ian Borer (2006), an urban sociologist who studied the meaning of Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox baseball team. His data gathering methods included observations and interviews with baseball players, owners, fans, and people living in the neighbourhood. Part of his project was a methodological paper on interviewing the famous baseball players.

Another example is the extensive research by French sociologist Violaine Roussel (2007, Roussel and Lechaux 2010) on the US anti-war movement that involved several famous artists and mainstream celebrities, such as Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn, who initiated or supported the protest against the war in Iraq. Roussel analysed the mobilisation of Hollywood and other celebrities through 80 interviews, most conducted in-person and a few via telephone.

Another study that used interviews with celebrities was completed by psychologists Donna Rockwell and David Giles (2009). Drawing on 15 interviews with American celebrities from television news, entertainment, film, sports, and music, as well as government, business, law and publishing, Rockwell and Giles explored the phenomenology of fame. Some of their findings were related to the loss of privacy experienced by celebrities and the different temporal phases they encounter when becoming famous.

Finally, my own empirical work involved in-depth interviews with Flemish celebrities (celebrities in the northern region of Belgium). The data included 29 interviews with famous musicians, television and radio presenters, actors, movie directors, sports people and artists who have been involved in social and/or political causes. Several of these actors and musicians are well-known abroad as well, especially in the Netherlands and in case in Germany as well. The sample also includes a former Olympic and world champion and then

several celebrities with mere regional but still considerable fame. The research project included an analysis of one celebrity's protest tactic of 'media provocation' (Driessens 2013c) and a study on celebrities' labelling as 'famous Flemings' and their appreciation of this label (Driessens 2013a).

In sum, the interview as a method to study celebrities has rarely been used thus far and a large set of untouched research questions is still available for the community of celebrity studies scholars. The lack of this kind of research is due to several reasons. A crucial reason is the perceived difficulty of obtaining access to celebrities, which will be discussed in more detail below. Next, as mentioned earlier, the continuous stream of the production of celebrity texts has been very attractive to many researchers and has consequently received ample attention (Turner 2010). In addition, the strong tradition of effect studies in marketing research, mass communication and political communication has resulted in a rich body of celebrity endorsement studies that use experiments. Taken together, the directions chosen in most of the research on celebrity have contributed to the large neglect of celebrities as respondents. Another reason refers back to the ancestry of celebrity studies in cultural studies. As Couldry (1999, p. 59) observed, cultural studies have given only marginal attention to the practices of people rich in economic and cultural capital, compared with the abundance of material on the cultural and media-related practices of the working class. Thus, instead of studying celebrities as agents and respondents, most research efforts have examined fans' consumption of celebrity (e.g., Gray et al. 2007) or the effects of celebrity (e.g., Elliott 2011, Treme 2010).

An explanation for this might lie in the fact that scholars 'have traditionally identified with the disenfranchised, believing that to understand them and expose their plight will also eventually empower them' (Hertz and Imber 1993, p. 3). However, this reasoning can also be turned around by arguing that studying those in power, which anthropologist Laura Nader

(1972) called 'studying up,' can help us challenge their status by demystifying their position and the tenets of their power (Ostrander 1993, p. 7)—a mission journalists have pursued much more than academics (Kezar 2003, p. 397). Indeed, studying those with large amounts of capital can give us a better understanding of the reach of their power by exposing it (Hertz and Imber 1993, p. 3).

Studying up is central in the research domain of elite studies, which counts many methodological contributions on issues related to interviewing different elites, especially questions of access and building rapport (Kezar 2003, Lilleker 2003, Odendahl and Shaw 2002). The most important difference between non-elites and elites is that the latter usually possess expert knowledge on one or more topics and have institutional or non-institutional and symbolic power (Littig 2008). However, the literature features different stances whether interviewing elites actually differs from interviewing other populations. On the one hand, Cormode and Hughes (1999, p. 299) represent a large group of scholars who believe that '[r]esearching "the powerful" presents very different methodological and ethical challenges from studying "down."' Interviewing elites is considered different at every stage of the research, including planning, getting access (Leech 2002), data collection and coding (Aberbach and Rockman 2002), dissemination (Sabot 1999), and even the ethical aspects (Lilleker 2003).

On the other hand, geographer Katherine Smith (2006) was more sceptical: she questioned whether elite interviews differ significantly from non-elite interviews. Although she recognised that gaining access to elites can be very difficult, she did not consider this difficulty unique to this group. For instance, recruiting respondents from the population of working-class lesbians or gay soccer players is not easy either. Moreover, Smith (2006) was critical about the use and definition of 'elite' in many of the works mentioned earlier. Drawing on poststructuralist theories of power, she pointed out that power cannot be

possessed but is circulating and diffuse. Hence, she dismissed the strict binary classification of elites and non-elites; instead, she argued that the powerful are also influenced and are given orders by other powerful forces and that elites change over time.

Acknowledging this point, it could easily be argued that celebrities are a kind of elite: the capital that celebrities possess in large quantities is media visibility and attention (or 'celebrity capital', see Driessens 2013d), which potentially gives them a certain amount of symbolic power and recognition by others. This definition does not exclude that celebrities potentially have large amounts of other sorts of capital, as the examples of celebrity CEOs (economic capital) or academostars (cultural capital) make clear.

There are different accounts on the question whether or to what extent celebrities as an elite exert influence or power. Sociologist Alberoni (1962/2006) represents those who disagree that celebrities have real power. He called them a 'powerless elite.' He explained that they are an elite 'whose institutional power is very limited or non-existent, but whose doings and way of life arouse a considerable and sometimes even maximum degree of interest' (p. 108).

Meanwhile, as early as 1956, Wright Mills (1956/2000, p. 71) supported the idea widely shared today that the concept of celebrity should not be limited to the cohort of film stars, entertainment, and sports personalities (as Alberoni did), but should also include politicians, business people, religious leaders, and academics, among others. This idea is captured in the celebritisation thesis, which holds that one of the characteristics of celebrity is its diversification. This means that several fields outside entertainment and sports also produce their own celebrities (see Driessens 2013b). Thus, in that sense, it would be a mistake to generalise that celebrities lack institutional power, or that celebrities from media and entertainment cannot gain institutional power (as illustrated by Ronald Reagan becoming US-president and Arnold Schwarzenegger becoming governor in California). Consequently,

it is self-evident that studying celebrities through interviews (considered in this study as a kind of 'elite'-interview) can contribute to our understanding of the operations of the celebrity industry, celebrities' practices, the power that comes with celebrity status and its interweaving with other status systems and power dynamics—all topics insufficiently understood thus far.

The remainder of this article focuses on the key methodological challenges in interviewing celebrities and on possible strategies to overcome these difficulties. Two aspects that are particularly important when conducting research on celebrities will be analysed in detail: issues of gaining access and issues of data quality, each composed of several subtopics.

Methodological Challenges

Gaining Access to Celebrities

As with other elite interviews, gaining access to celebrities might require special efforts and involve potential problems. This article focuses on two major difficulties related to gaining access. First, celebrities are generally 'over-interviewed.' Second, gatekeepers such as managers or public relations (PR) officers often strictly control the agenda and the access to celebrities.

The issue of over-interviewed celebrities

Because celebrities have already granted countless interviews to journalists, and several of them receive additional requests for interviews almost daily, we could say that they are 'over-interviewed.' I derive this concept from Clark's (2008) work on being 'over-researched,' a

problem traditionally faced by many qualitative studies in the social sciences. This means that respondents or participants demonstrate research fatigue and drop out of ongoing research or refuse new research engagements. This occurs especially among populations that receive many invitations for participation in research and in long-running research projects (Clark 2008, p. 956). In addition, when respondents participate in research but do not experience any of the changes that they expected after their participation, research fatigue is likely to settle in (Clark 2008).

Celebrities are not over-researched; quite the opposite is true. It could be argued, however, that because of their large investment of time and energy in giving interviews to the press, their motivation to engage in academic research on top of that is, in most cases, rather low. Moreover, this engagement usually does not offer them any direct return in terms of increased media visibility, commercial value, or public attention. Being the subject of critical research might be conceived as a threat to their public and carefully crafted images, even though this is not necessarily the case, as the data can be anonymous when reporting about the study. Therefore, when inviting celebrities to participate in research directly or indirectly through their management, it might be helpful to follow some of the following strategies.

A crucial guiding principle is to stress the different nature of the academic interview compared with the journalistic interview, in terms of its content and form. Many if not all celebrities have an 'ambiguous relation to the press and the media' (Roussel and Lechaux 2010, p. 7). They are largely dependent on the media for coverage and publicity, but at the same time they barely exert control on what is being written or said about them, which is often not what they expect or desire. Journalists aim to produce newsworthy stories and sensational revelations; scholars, by contrast, aim to contribute to theory and to explain empirical observations. It is therefore important to stress the goal and the value of the interview (and possibly of the research) in the invitations to celebrity respondents (see also

Lilleker 2003). It can also be beneficial to explain how and why they were selected for the interview, so they know it is not because of an event in their private lives, but based on theoretical grounds or on their relation to the research topic.

This can be illustrated by referring to my own research, for which I interviewed a number of Flemish celebrities. At the end of the interview, when I asked them to compare their experience with the academic interview and the journalistic one, a crucial difference that several celebrities identified was that they did not get repeated questions about details of their private lives that are not yet known to the public. They stated that they did not have to remain cautious about a slip of the tongue or about a moment of inattentiveness that would lead to a privacy breach. In addition, most respondents explained that it was a relief for them to speak more freely for once. The interview was more in-depth and asked for a higher level of reflexivity. It delved into a larger set of topics, and they had the opportunity to give elaborate answers without being interrupted constantly by the interviewer.

Gilding (2010) referred to these last aspects as the 'therapeutic template' that can explain elites' motivation to participate in social scientific studies. For these elite members, the interview is inward-looking, an opportunity to reflect on their lives and relations. Confidence is crucial in this kind of interview, whereas press interviews are more of 'an institutionalised form of confession framed by specific norms, routines and rules' (Roussel and Lechaux 2010, p. 7). However, this outward-looking template is also possible in sociological interviews, when elite respondents draw upon the 'media template' as a motivation to engage in research (Gilding 2010). In this case, the interview is used for public relations ends and for legitimising their position or actions. For instance, Roussel and Lechaux (2010) noted that several of the interviewed artists that protested against the war in Iraq seized the sociological interview as an opportunity to counter prejudices or stereotypes in the press. They contested the idea that they are politically unknowledgeable or disloyal to

their country because of their anti-war protest. In other words, some respondents participate in research to defend and support their legitimacy and position as an agent in a certain field.

The issue of gatekeepers

Aside from the problem of over-interviewed celebrities, researchers must also deal with the gatekeepers that limit the access to celebrities. Similar to other elites, celebrities are often assisted by one or more people who manage their agenda and public relations (Gamson 1994). The degree of professionalism of these cultural intermediaries varies, with large artist bureaus topping the pyramid. Based on my experience, the roles these cultural intermediaries perform can vary significantly: some keep a low profile, acting as a mere in-between for the celebrity who still makes all the decisions, whereas others are much more controlling.

In most cases, it is impossible to go beyond these cultural intermediaries. One can rarely find contact details of celebrities online or in directories; usually, access can only be gained by contacting the artist bureau or their employer (e.g., the broadcaster in the case of television and radio presenters, or the production company in the case of directors). Therefore, it is important to make invitations for interviews appealing not only to celebrities but also to their management. It is imperative to stress the confidentiality of the inquiry and the option for anonymity in research reports, especially when it is clear that the study wants to reveal practices from behind the scenes or when it deals with sensitive information such as religious, ethical, or political views (see also Ferris 2007, p. 10). Adding some credentials to the invitations can also be beneficial. For example, using the official letterhead of the university has proven to be very effective (Odendahl and Shaw 2002, p. 308). Generally, it is also best to be flexible regarding the time and place of the interview. For instance, even when you get only half an hour instead of the requested one and a half hours, it could still be useful

and could be extended if the respondent enjoys the interview, which has happened more than once in my research.

I encountered three possible strategies to gain access to celebrities without having to go through cultural intermediaries. First, I used my social network by contacting a number of journalists and employees at television production companies, who gave me the mobile numbers and/or email addresses of the celebrities. Second, sometimes it is also possible to contact celebrities directly on Facebook by sending them a message. Third, as in other elite studies, snowball sampling is highly recommended. All three strategies have the advantage of allowing the researcher to approach the celebrity directly, which can save time by not having to negotiate with managers. They can give you access also when it is not immediately clear who the celebrity's manager is or how they can be contacted. The last strategy of snowball sampling has the additional advantage of adding trust and an implicit recommendation by a previously contacted interviewee, which increases the chance of participation (see Clark 2008, p. 955).

Finally, Ferris (2010) suggested another approach to enhance the likelihood of gaining access to celebrity respondents. Instead of conducting research on the so-called A-list celebrities with international allure, she focused on local celebrities such as anchors of local TV news stations. Although this is certainly a relevant population to study, it should not reduce the ambition to examine celebrity culture through the top tier of celebrities. The research by Roussel (2007) demonstrated that it is possible for academics to interview American A-list celebrities. Next to studying international and local celebrities, also minor celebrities and former celebrities can teach us a lot about the workings of celebrity culture.

Getting Beyond the Sound Bite

Next to gaining access to celebrities, the second central issue that researchers face when addressing celebrities as respondents is 'getting beyond the sound bite' (Borer 2006). The sound bite generally refers to a fragment of a longer conversation or statement in the media that has been selected and edited by journalists. Studies have reported that the length of sound bites has decreased over time (e.g., Hallin 1992), and politicians adapt their communication style to this sound bite culture by reducing the complexity and length of their statements. Researchers interviewing elites such as politicians or celebrities are usually not primarily interested in these sound bites, but they aim to retrieve more in-depth data that explain more than what is published in the media and that enable the critical assessment of the practices of those involved in celebrity culture. In other words, the question here is how to avoid receiving superficial and prefabricated responses by celebrities, and instead record genuine answers. This question is problematic, however, and it brings our attention to the next two broad issues: epistemology and celebrity persona.

Epistemology

The first issue concerns the epistemology of academic celebrity interviews. What are genuine or real answers? Are manufactured responses by celebrities necessarily without value for researchers? How could we possibly assess the veracity or authenticity of data generated through in-depth interviews with celebrities? These questions are not easy to answer, because the status and use of the data depend on the research goal (or the extent to which one needs to get behind the scenes) and it is difficult to determine the degree of authenticity versus prefabrication of celebrities' answers. Moreover, it could even be argued that the veracity or authenticity of celebrities' responses is not what matters most, but is only secondary to the

fact that, through the interview, we achieve an inside look into celebrity culture and learn how celebrities subjectively experience their social worlds. In this respect, interviewing celebrities is not that different from interviewing any other population, as they can all easily avoid speaking the truth (see Potter and Hepburn 2005). The only difference is that celebrities are usually well trained in delivering interviews, and they are more conscious of their self-presentation (Borer 2006, p. 3).

As Borer (2006, p. 3) explained, the term 'interview' activates certain frames and repertoires among celebrities and other elites who are regularly interviewed. As social scientists, it is therefore crucial to explain that the nature, the kinds of questions, and the possible and expected answers of an academic interview are different from those of a journalistic interview. For this reason, I started my own interviews with open and broad questions that enabled them to reflect on their position and status as a celebrity. For instance, I asked the celebrities to describe their current activities, how they became famous, what they did before they were 'celebrified,' and how they experience their fame. Discussing the topics in depth can contribute to clarifying that the setting and the method of conducting a social scientific interview are markedly different from media interviews, making it more likely for the researcher to get genuine answers. However, when this does not immediately help, it is possible to use the interview technique of repeated questions (Borer 2006, p. 10).

Borer (2006, p. 4) advised researchers to compare the interview data with what is publicly known about celebrities and what has been published in the media. This data triangulation can demonstrate differences, yet it does not necessarily guarantee any 'truth claims' about the research data or the media interviews. Nevertheless, being aware of these differences and reporting them adds value and transparency to the research. As Borer (2006, p. 14) explained, 'As such, getting beyond the sound bite is more than just a goal. It is a methodological necessity'.

Celebrity persona

The second issue is identifying which persona(s) is/are speaking during the interview. Three personas of the celebrity can be discerned: the public persona, the constructed private persona, and the 'real' private persona (Dyer 1986/2004, Holmes 2005a, Van den Bulck and Tambuyzer 2008). The public persona is, as the name suggests, the celebrity as he or she is known in the public sphere. In the case of an actress, this is a combination of her 'reel life' on the screen and her activities as an ambassador for a good cause or her appearances at premieres. The 'real life' of the celebrity is two-sided. On the one hand is the constructed private persona, or the 'private' persona as the celebrities and their entourage want us to see them, within the limits of manageability. On the other hand, the 'real' private persona can be found backstage, in private settings, but is sometimes brought front stage by paparazzi and journalists who breach privacy boundaries. To a certain extent celebrities do this themselves as well, such as when they participate in reality TV shows. The duality and possible intermeshing of celebrity personas is illustrated by Molly Dineen, who concluded her documentary *Geri* with the words: 'There is something very fake about Geri Halliwell in the way that there is something very sincere about Ginger Spice' (Goode 2008, p. 180).

It also depends on the research goals which persona(s) the researcher aims to address. The 'real' private persona is the most delicate one, not only in terms of finding strategies to reach this persona, but also in terms of judging whether or when this persona is speaking during the interview. The introductory and reflective questions mentioned earlier, such as how they became famous and what they did before they were celebrified, might be helpful. These questions attempt to release the 'real' private persona to speak about their public and

constructed private personas. Regardless of the persona that is speaking, the starting point and recurring theme of the interview is the person as a celebrity.

Role-taking is also important in the management of the different celebrity personas. The interviewer has to show the celebrities that he or she is in control, which is not always easy given their celebrity status and interview experience, which applies to elites in general as well (Mikecz 2012). Celebrities and other elites may cause the interviewer to be 'too deferential and overly concerned about establishing positive rapport' (Ostrander 1993, p. 19). A researcher does not even have to be a fan or an admirer of the interviewed celebrities to feel the impact of their fame on the interview situation and on the interviewer's behaviour (Powers 2002, p. 3). For instance, when interviewing a celebrity in a public space such as a restaurant, it is hard to ignore the attention from other people in the room. I experienced some cases where the interview was interrupted by people coming to say something to the celebrity respondent. Thus, the location of the interview is critical (Elwood and Martin 2000), especially if the interview aims to discover the 'real' private persona, because it is important to keep the celebrities in that role and not have them use their public persona when fans interrupt the interview. Interviewing the celebrity at home, as I occasionally did in my research, is productive in revealing the 'real' private persona. This finding might indicate a difference with interviewing other elites, such as business elites, who generally prefer interviews in (semi-)public spaces such as their offices.

Conclusion

Proceeding from overviews by Ferris (2007) and Turner (2010) on the academic study of celebrity, this article took as a starting point the dominance of textual and discursive analyses in celebrity studies. It elaborated on a suggestion given by Ferris to engage celebrities in

research not as textual or discursive study objects, but as participants in interviews and observations. This type of research is rare, although its merits are numerous and straightforward. For instance, it enables an inside view into celebrity culture and its production, which can improve our understanding of the power dynamics between the celebrity and the celebrity industry, a topic which has remained underexposed in the literature. Furthermore, interviewing local as well as international celebrities can expand our knowledge on the experiential side of celebrity and fame, celebrities' motivations for certain social practices, their relations with other elites, and their strategies when performing as a celebrity in relation to different groups (e.g., the media, the public) and in different contexts. These questions expand the research agenda beyond the strict production and consumption of celebrity, as Turner (2010) suggested in response to the dominance of textual and discursive analyses within celebrity studies, and call for studies on ethnographic and interview methods.

Both the celebrity interview and elite interview more generally face the challenge of gaining access, since it is not always easy to contact these elites, let alone convince them to participate in research. A peculiarity that has been found regarding celebrity interviews is that celebrities are generally over-interviewed. Their high involvement in media interviews is likely to produce a rather low motivation to engage in academic interviews because the benefits of doing so might not be immediately clear to them. This article identified a number of possible strategies to convince celebrities to participate and to increase the chances of gaining access to celebrities by convincing or going beyond gatekeepers such as managers.

Aside from gaining access, the second methodological topic that received special attention in this article was the issue of getting beyond the sound bite. This issue foregrounds the epistemology of the celebrity interview, which is related to the question of which celebrity persona is actually speaking to us. Although it is possible to manipulate this to the advantage of the interviewer, it remains difficult to control and to judge whether or to what

extent the celebrity respondent is testifying as the public persona, the constructed private persona, or the 'real' private persona. This is a topic worthy of further academic scrutiny because it applies to interviews not only with celebrities but also with other elites. It may also considerably affect our research and our interpretation of the data.

Finally, although the issues of access and data quality are among the most important methodological challenges based on the literature and on my own empirical research, they are not the only ones. Also in the other research stages, it is important to take into account the peculiarities of having celebrities as interviewees. For example, although respondents can be anonymous in research, they might be easily identifiable for certain readers simply because most of us know quite a lot of details about many celebrities. The consequences of this might even be bigger if the media access these research reports, which is not unlikely given the media's keen interest in the lives of celebrities. Researchers have to find ways to deal with these and other issues, which can be the subject of future studies.

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