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**Celebrity Studies \*\*\***

## **On the epistemology and operationalisation of celebrity**

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This piece addresses the crucial but often overlooked issue of operationalising celebrity. If we study celebrity empirically, what exactly are we looking at and how can we grasp this? These epistemological questions get messy when we consider celebrity's fleeting, unstable and particular nature. For example, what level of recognisability or visibility should one attain to categorise as celebrity? How long should one maintain this celebrity status? Do we, as scholars, fall prey to universalistic claims by labelling persons as celebrities without providing sufficient cultural or demographic contextualisation? In other words, *to whom* is one (not) a celebrity? Giving conclusive answers to these questions is beyond the scope of this paper – in fact one-size-fits-all solutions would be undesirable. The aim is rather (1) to provoke scholars to reflect more on the difficulty of operationalising and 'measuring' celebrity, (2) to encourage scholars to make their operationalisation more explicit, and (3) to suggest one possible way forward to approach this problem more effectively.

A useful starting point to think about the problems with operationalising celebrity is to see it as an example of what John Law (2004, p. 2) called 'mess':

Parts of the world are caught in our ethnographies, our histories and our statistics. But other parts are not, or if they are then this is because they have been distorted into clarity. (...) If much of the world is vague, diffuse or unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct, changes like a kaleidoscope, or doesn't really have much of a pattern at all, then where does this leave social science? How might we catch some of the realities we are currently missing? Can we know them well?

What Law signalled is that our research methods do not just *register* social realities, but in many cases also actively *create* them. By studying certain individuals as celebrities, we reify what is perhaps to many people merely ambiguous or even non-existent.

This difficulty in capturing what is often fuzzy and highly contextual has been famously highlighted by Herbert Blumer (1954) when he argued that concepts in social sciences are usually sensitising rather than definitive. Definitive concepts provide clear specifications of attributes or benchmarks to identify phenomena. In contrast, sensitising concepts 'merely suggest directions along which to look' (Blumer 1954, p. 7). Sensitising concepts capture the commonalities of phenomena that are each time expressed distinctively in their particular contexts. The danger then is to take sensitising concepts for granted instead of trying to incrementally refine them through careful empirical studies in different contexts.

This is exactly the problem I want to raise. In most of the literature, celebrity is taken for granted. How exactly it has been 'measured' or approached is often left implicit and the goal is mostly not to refine its definition through empirical analysis. These are admittedly bold statements that deserve nuance. Several authors have indeed tried to *conceptualise* celebrity

in ways meant to refine our observations. For instance, Monaco (1978, pp. 8-9) distinguished heroes, stars who perform a persona, and ‘quasars’, or people who are unintentionally celebrified. One example of the latter might be ‘celetoids’ (Rojek 2001), people who suddenly rise to fame, but return to oblivion soon after. Turner (2004) suggested that one is a celebrity when media and audiences pay more attention to their private than their public lives. Ferris (2010, p. 393) postulated that a celebrity is ‘recognised by far more people than one can recognise back’. While these suggestions raise particular problems (Driessens 2013), they deserve praise for at least trying to demarcate the conceptual boundaries of celebrity more specifically.

Other authors, particularly those doing experiments or content, discourse and framing analyses very often use formal cues to determine what celebrity is, typically lists such as the *Forbes Celebrity 100* or *Time Person of the Year*. Also Google rankings (such as *Zeitgeist* or more generally the number of search hits) have been used as indicators. Apart from their arbitrariness, these lists and rankings are highly contextually specific (usually US-centred) and sometimes limited in the range of professional categories that are considered for inclusion. Typically media, entertainment and sports are core, with politics, business, arts and other fields dependent upon the arbitrary discretion of the editors. Finally, scholars rely on contextual proxies such as celebrity and gossip blogs or sections in newspapers to categorise celebrities, and in doing so refrain from the task of critically discussing their epistemological assumptions. However, as the following two typical examples will demonstrate, there are fundamental problems with letting the medium or a sample of material define what celebrity is.

The first example is a study by Bonner, Hugon and Walther (2007) on the effects of sell-side analysts' celebrity status on investor reactions. Celebrity is measured as the number of appearances in financial newspapers, magazines, radio and television between 1997 and 1999. While a secondary problem is that merely counting appearances leaves out meaningful dimensions such as the length of appearance in these outlets or the prominence within them (front-page article versus small column at the end, for example), two more serious risks can be identified: causal fallacy and amnesia. The former implies that the number of appearances is wrongly equated with level of celebrity (see also van de Rijt *et al.* 2013). With amnesia I mean that a particular media sample excludes individuals who are for some reasons momentarily less frequently mentioned in the media, but who would still be labelled as celebrities by a significant population (e.g., posthumous celebrity (Bode 2014)). In the above case, it is not unlikely that the authors' study ignored or underestimated certain highly-regarded sell-side analysts' impact on investor reactions.

The second example is Thrall *et al.*'s (2008) study on celebrity advocacy. They sampled from *Celebopedia*, an online list of 'current' celebrities, and *Forbes Celebrity 100*, but without critically reflecting upon the composition and nature of these lists. Moreover, their categorisation of very, somewhat and not very famous celebrities is arbitrary. We could also question their narrow definition of celebrity when they explained that Al Gore had been excluded from their analysis because he 'is typically not identified as a celebrity' (p. 384).

So how can we avoid apparent mediacentrism and better acknowledge the complex and variable nature of celebrity in empirical analyses? My suggestion is that one crucial incremental refinement of celebrity as a sensitising concept can be made by starting from memory. Let me briefly explain in two steps and by giving an example. First, we have seen

that situating celebrity only in media is not satisfactory: it ignores the circulation and retention of a wider variety of individuals who are considered famous among certain audiences and in other spaces. Hence we need both dimensions: celebrity is accumulated media visibility but embedded in specific contexts and shared among particular groups (Driessens 2013). Second, a broad notion of memory can easily comprise both these dimensions: memory includes media content, public representations (e.g., billboards), material artefacts (e.g., merchandising), archives, as well as oral memories, individual recollections and memories about celebrities. The dynamics of remembering and forgetting celebrity can go back as far in time as cultural memory (Assmann 1995), but also be contemporary, such as what I have called ‘cultural working memory’ (Driessens 2014).

Although not perfect, an example of how this could be put into practice is Perryman’s (2008) doctoral research on the effects of CEO celebrity on firm performance. She analysed CEO celebrity as a combination of their media pervasiveness – measured as article frequency counts (but see criticisms above) – and the public’s awareness and response towards CEOs and firms. In my view, this combination offers a useful way forward. What is open for discussion and contingent upon the nature of particular research projects are the questions (a) how broadly we demarcate celebrity’s representations in media and in other cultural artefacts and (b) how we measure their consumption and/or retention in certain celebrity or media cultures in space and time. Yet accounting for both basic dimensions through the notion of memory might help us to gradually refine celebrity as a sensitising concept – not by cleaning up the mess, but by dealing with it in better and more transparent ways.

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