

“Imaginary Relationships:”
An Exploratory Investigation of Relationships With Celebrity Idols
And a Call for Further Research

Susan D. Boon and Christine D. Lomore
University of Calgary

Author Note

Susan D. Boon, Department of Psychology; Christine D. Lomore, Department of Psychology.

The research presented in this paper is based on the second author’s undergraduate honors thesis, which was supported in part by a research grant from the University of Calgary. Portions of this paper were presented at the 1997 meeting of the International Network on Personal Relationships in Oxford, Ohio. A much more detailed discussion of some of the data presented here—and of additional data concerning other research questions—can be found in Boon & Lomore (in press). Christine Lomore is now a Doctoral candidate at the University of Waterloo.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Susan D. Boon at the Department of Psychology, University of Calgary, 2500 University Dr. NW, Calgary, AB, T2N 1N4, Canada. Electronic mail may be directed to SDBOON@UCALGARY.CA.

Abstract

With this paper, we hope to draw attention to an entire class of potentially important social relationships that has largely escaped relationship researchers’ notice to date, namely imaginary relationships between admirers and their celebrity idols. We present arguments to suggest that relationship scholars’ disregard of these social relations may be an important oversight and discuss several benefits that might follow from systematic efforts at theoretical and empirical investigation of people’s relationships with celebrities and other members of their artificial social worlds (i.e., God and other supernatural beings). We also present selected findings from a series of two exploratory studies of celebrity-admirer relationships as a means of (a) supporting the various claims we advance in this paper concerning the nature of these relationships and (b) persuading the reader of the value in studying imaginary relationships of this sort. We conclude with a brief sketch of some of the directions future research in this area might take.

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It is...taken for granted that “social relationships” means

actual social relations between real people

Caughey, 1984, p. 17 (emphasis in the original)

We have deliberately taken an unorthodox approach in writing this paper. Rather than aiming solely to showcase the results of our research, our primary goal is to challenge conventional thinking about the kinds of social relations that constitute a relationship and, thereby, to broaden relationship scholars' perspectives concerning the kinds of relationships that merit our attention. We will present data from a series of two exploratory investigations of celebrity-admirer relationships to illustrate some of the points we wish to make. However, our more immediate concern is with demonstrating that there is an entire class of potentially important social relationships that has largely escaped relationship researchers' notice, namely imaginary relationships with beings who inhabit people's artificial social worlds.

The ideas we present in this paper are not new. As early as 1955, an ethnographer named A. I. Hallowell criticized traditional approaches to ethnography for their failure to consider the fact that people in other cultures routinely engage in "social" relations with others with whom they do not actually—that is, literally—interact (cited in Caughey, 1984). Essentially, Hallowell argued that ethnographic investigations that took as their subject matter only those interactions involving real people could not begin to accommodate the wealth of people's subjective social experiences in other cultures. More recently, Caughey (1984) has demonstrated that Hallowell's criticism applies to the study of social experience among individuals in Western cultures, as well. The arguments we present below borrow heavily from his work (Caughey, 1978; 1984).

"Real" Versus "Artificial" Worlds in Western Cultures

Caughey (1984) describes an individual's "real" social world in terms of the network of persons (e.g., kin, friends, acquaintances, co-workers) with whom the individual engages in actual interaction. The individual's "artificial" social world, he contends, is much broader, peopled by beings (i.e., real or fictitious, human or other-than-human) with whom the individual is familiar—that is, beings known to him or her—but with whom opportunities for real interaction do not exist. In non-Western cultures, these others typically take the form of spirits (e.g., ancestors, saints, gods, and the like); for Westerners, they are more likely figures from the popular media—motley collections of actors, writers, musicians, athletes, politicians, and newscasters, for example, as well as characters from books, film, television, and cartoons (we do not mean to imply here that individuals in Western societies do not also experience social relationships with God, gods, or other spirits, only that relationships with media figures are likely to be relatively more common in Western societies than relationships with spirit beings).

Some readers may be tempted to dismiss the possibility that relationships (such as those between celebrities and their fans) which do not lend themselves to opportunities for actual reciprocal interaction could be significant in the lives of individuals—or, at least, "normal" individuals—in modern societies. We would like to argue that such thinking is misguided. Contrary to the belief that the average person views such "parasocial relationships" (Horton & Wohl, 1956) as trivial or inconsequential in nature, a number of investigations have demonstrated that people often speak of celebrities and other personalities in the media as though they were involved in "real" relationships with them (e.g., Alperstein, 1991; Caughey, 1984; Levy, 1979). In fact, it is not uncommon for fans to describe public figures whom they have never met yet to whom they feel strongly attached in the same terms they use to describe persons with whom they are involved in actual social relationships (i.e., as "friends," "lovers," "father figures," "mentors," and so on; see Caughey, 1984). At a more basic level, there is clear evidence that people take considerable pleasure in staying on top of events in the lives of media personalities who interest them (e.g., Leets, de Becker, & Giles, 1995). Indeed, anyone who has ever stood in the check-out

line of their local supermarket can attest to the proliferation of popular magazines and newspapers that cater to people's thirst for information about celebrities and other figures who catch the public's eye.

There is also a growing body of evidence to suggest that pseudo-interactions with media figures can influence people's lives in broad and enduring ways. The results of several investigations indicate that media figures serve as effective role models whose speech and actions can promote changes in attitudes, values, behavior, and so forth (Boon & Lomore, in press; Brown & Basil, 1995; Brown & Cody, 1991; Caughey, 1984). For theoretical discussion of such influence, see Horton & Wohl, 1956, and Pratkanis & Aronson, 1992). In short, as concerned parents, educators, and clinicians have long testified (fearing that youths who identify strongly with media personalities may emulate the self-destructive actions of their celebrity idols), media figures can exert powerful and pervasive influence on people's actual social conduct.

Caughey estimates that the average American's real social world ranges in size, averaging somewhere between 200 and 300 individuals. His best estimate of the number of individuals in the average person's artificial social world, in contrast, is several times higher—exceeding 1000 persons (Caughey, 1984). He further argues (for example, given data concerning rates of television viewing) that it is likely that most people spend more time in interaction with members of their artificial social worlds (e.g., watching television, reading books, listening to music, daydreaming or fantasizing about a favorite celebrity or media icon) than in interaction with members of their real counterparts (Caughey, 1978). Taken together, these two propositions suggest that we as relationship researchers ignore people's artificial social worlds at our own peril: If Caughey's claims about the size and practical significance of people's artificial social worlds are correct, any comprehensive understanding of people's social relations must necessarily consider their imaginary relationships with beings from their artificial social worlds as well. Although it is obvious that individuals will experience a special bond or feelings of closeness with only one or perhaps a small number of these beings (if with any at all), the current disregard of the very possibility that social relations with such beings may be worthy of our theoretical consideration and empirical attention seems imprudent.

Why then, is there so little discussion of imaginary relationships—whether involving celebrities or other beings—in the mainstream relationships literature? According to Caughey (1984), Hallowell viewed ethnography's narrow-minded focus on actual interactions between real people as emblematic of certain restrictive assumptions that social scientists hold concerning the nature of relationships and the kinds of "persons" who can be parties to such relationships. We contend that, as social scientists, relationship researchers have tended to operate under these same assumptions and, therefore, hold views just as narrow as those Hallowell condemned. The result has been a rather singular focus in the relationships literature on relationships between two or more real partners (for example, lovers, spouses, parents, siblings, children, friends) who engage in at least occasional episodes of actual and reciprocal interaction or have the possibility of doing so. By and large, relationships which do not conform to this implicit conceptualization have simply failed to capture relationship researchers' attention.

Why Study Imaginary Relationships?

The main thrust of the introduction thus far is that, for the most part, relationship researchers have neglected an entire class of potentially important social relationships, relationships which constitute, in Caughey's words, a "complex, pervasive, and significant dimension of American social life" (1984, p. 23). Thus, one notable justification for issuing a call for further scholarly

examination of imaginary relationships is the dearth of research addressing what are likely meaningful and compelling relational experiences in many people's lives.

Importantly, however, there are at least three other, more theoretically-oriented reasons for believing that the field of relationship research might benefit from a careful consideration of imaginary relationships and, among the more prominent Western examples of these, celebrity-admirer relationships. First, imaginary relationships might prove fertile ground for testing the generality of many of the theoretical frameworks relationship researchers hold nearest and dearest to their hearts. Simply put, if it is indeed reasonable to assume that people experience their attachments to celebrities as relationships, then theories that have been constructed to describe general relationship processes and/or phenomena ought to extend to such artificial or imaginary relationships, as well. Accordingly, investigations that explore celebrity-admirer (or other imaginary) relationships may serve as useful means of delineating the boundary conditions under which certain theories—or hypotheses derived from these theories—apply.

The results of Caughey's (1984) extensive ethnographic analysis of celebrity attraction provide an apt example. Based on several hundred in-depth interviews with fans, his findings clearly indicate that people invest in their relationships with their favorite media personalities in much the same way as they invest in relationships with partners in their "real" relationships and, in spite of the lack of opportunities for actual interaction, often experience a sense of emotional closeness to their idols that parallels affective experiences common to their other relationships. Recent research by Boon and Lomore (in press) corroborates these general conclusions. Investigations of celebrity-admirer relationships may thus be germane to tests of theories concerning the development of intimacy in relationships (e.g., Reis & Shaver, 1988), as well as to tests of hypotheses derived from social exchange models (e.g., Rusbult's, 1980, investment model). It is also worth noting that both uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) and attachment theory (e.g., Bowlby, 1969) have already been used to frame research on celebrities (see Rubin & McHugh, 1987, on uncertainty reduction; Cohen, 1997, and Cole & Leets, 1999, on attachment).

More focused examination of imaginary relationships may also provide the impetus for open discussion and debate concerning the definition of the term "relationship," including the explicit specification of the minimal conditions that must be satisfied to justify the designation. Is it necessary that all partners in a relationship be real? Must the possibility for real and mutual interaction exist, even if the opportunities for such interaction are never realized? In short, are there some forms of social contact/connection that we are simply unwilling to acknowledge as the basis of a relationship? And if so, do our decisions in this regard reflect ethnocentrism or are they grounded in reasoned arguments based on a dispassionate consideration of the full range of social experiences that occur in cultures across the globe? In our experience, questions such as these have rarely been posed.

Finally, although a review of the contents of mainstream relationship journals suggests that investigations of imaginary relationships are rarely published in such outlets, this should not be taken as evidence that such investigations are themselves rare. Horton and Wohl (1956) were the first to recognize that the modern mass media promote an illusion of face-to-face contact with media personalities that fosters in audience members a sense of intimacy or connection with these personalities. Since then, a number of theorists and researchers have compared the attachments that individuals form with celebrities to the relationships that they develop with those real others (e.g., peers, siblings) with whom they have reciprocal contact (e.g., Adams-Price & Greene, 1990;

Alperstein, 1991; Balswick & Ingoldsby, 1982; Caughey, 1984; Cohen, 1997; Erikson, 1968; Greene & Adams-Price, 1990; Leets et al., 1995; Levy, 1979). It is important to note, however, that reports of this work have generally not been published in journals aimed specifically at those who study relationships. Accordingly, we believe it likely that a majority of relationship researchers have never been exposed to the ideas presented in this body of scholarship. If our assumption in this regard is correct or even largely so, there remain significant opportunities for theoretical cross-fertilization. On the one hand, relationship scholars can bring to the study of imaginary relationships a wealth of accumulated theory and knowledge concerning relevant processes, structures, and variables pivotal to the understanding of relationships, broadly defined. On the other hand, scholars in other areas who are already involved in the investigation of imaginary relationships can contribute their own, alternative viewpoints on these relationships as well as their unique insights and ideas concerning the research questions which, given their broader knowledge of the phenomenon, are most interesting and important to examine.

An Illustrative Example of Research on Imaginary Relationships:

Celebrity-Admirer Relationships in a University Sample

The research discussed below was designed as an exploratory investigation of celebrity attraction among young adults (see Boon & Lomore, in press, for a more detailed discussion). We present selected findings here first to support the various claims we made above regarding the nature of celebrity-admirer relationships and, second and more generally, to persuade the reader of the value in studying imaginary relationships of this sort.

Research Questions

If Caughey and others (e.g., Horton & Wohl, 1956) are correct in their contentions that artificial social relations with celebrities constitute important and meaningful social experiences, then our reading of the relevant literature suggests that celebrity-admirer relationships should be (a) common (Caughey, 1984), (b) important to people (Caughey, 1984; Levy, 1979; Rubin & McHugh, 1987), (c) characterized by a sense of connection with or closeness to the idol (i.e., the experience of a shared emotional bond; see Alperstein, 1991; Caughey, 1984; Horton & Wohl, 1956), (d) influential in people's lives (Brown & Basil, 1995; Brown & Cody, 1991; Caughey, 1984; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Pratkanis & Aronson, 1992), and (e) developed and maintained through media consumption as well as symbolic or "pseudo" interactions involving, for example, joining fan clubs, writing letters, and making other attempts to contact or meet the idol (Caughey, 1984). We will thus use data from the two studies we report below to provide tentative answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: How common are celebrity-admirer relationships in a university sample?

RQ2: How important are such relationships in admirers' lives?

RQ3: To what extent do admirers believe they share an emotional connection or special bond with their favorite celebrity idols?

RQ4: To what extent are relationships with celebrity idols influential forces in admirers' lives?

RQ5: What kinds of "interactions" do admirers engage in with their idols?

Our sixth research question concerns a somewhat darker aspects of these relationships. In some respects, North American society appears to take a rather dim view of "fantasy" relationships of the sort discussed in this paper, as well as of the individuals who experience these relationships. Caughey (1984, p. 65) makes this point clear when he writes that "those who have been through intense media relationships often recall them with embarrassment, and those outside them often respond with derision." Indeed, as the public's response to certain extreme and highly publicized

cases attests, intense relationships with media figures are often viewed as abnormal—even pathological—and the fan as disturbed and mentally ill (Caughey, 1984). These considerations suggest that others may often respond negatively to knowledge of people’s involvement in intense celebrity-admirer relationships. If so, understanding admirers’ experiences in these relationships may require investigating their responses to other’s negative reactions to their celebrity-admirer relationships. The final research question we will examine in this paper is thus:

RQ6: What are others’ reactions to an individual’s attachment to a celebrity idol and how do these reactions make admirers feel?

Overview

The research described below was executed in two phases. In the first phase, we conducted a short screening survey that allowed us to identify a pool of individuals who felt moderately to strongly attracted to celebrities whom they viewed as idols in their lives. In the second phase, we recruited interested individuals from this pool to participate in a second, larger study concerning their relationships with their idols. The latter study, then, focused exclusively on the reports of individuals who experienced strong feelings of attraction to one or more media personalities—specifically, persons who identified one or more celebrity figures as idols in their lives.

Restricting our sample in this way obviously limits the extent to which the present findings can be generalized to people who do not feel strongly connected to celebrity idols. Our decision to engage in such selective sampling reflects our belief that strength of attraction serves as a boundary condition that limits the extent to which individuals will in fact form attachments to their favorite media figures. Although research supports the view that most people enjoy keeping up with the events that happen in the lives of those in the media spotlight (Leets et al., 1995), it may be considerably less common for people to experience the deeper, more intense kinds of feelings toward celebrities that Caughey describes in his research. In fact, below some minimum threshold it might be more appropriate to describe an individual as “attracted” to a media figure rather than “attached” to this figure. If so, it may be only when strength of attraction exceeds this minimum threshold that the admirer comes to see the celebrity in the light of idol or hero or mentor or role model (cf. Caughey, 1984) and, consequently, that he or she is motivated to engage in the kind of conduct likely to establish a degree of personal and emotional involvement with the celebrity.

Study 1

Participants and Procedure

As part of a class exercise, 213 undergraduate psychology students (72 males and 141 females, mean age 23.3 years) at a large university in western Canada completed a brief screening questionnaire designed to identify individuals with celebrity idols. After reporting their age and sex, participants were asked “At any point in your life, have you had or do you continue to have an attraction to or an admiration for a famous person or an “idol” (for example, a musician, movie star, television star, athlete, model, politician, religious figure and so on)?” Those who responded in the affirmative were asked to provide additional information about themselves and their idol, including whether or not they were still attracted to their idol(s), and the sex and occupation or profession of their favorite idol (as the latter information is not relevant to our research questions, we will not discuss it further in this paper). Finally, they rated the strength of their attraction to their favorite idol on a five-point scale (endpoints labeled 1 “weak” and 5 “strong”) with higher numbers reflecting greater attraction. Those who were interested in the study were also told that they could list their first name and phone number to find out more about future research opportunities on the topic of celebrity attraction.

Results and Discussion

In addition to identifying a pool of individuals who felt strongly attracted to celebrity idols and who might be willing to participate in Study 2, Study 1 provided important data concerning the prevalence of celebrity attachments (see RQ1). Over 90% ($N = 194$) of respondents who completed the screening survey indicated that they had been attracted to one or more celebrity idols at some time or other in their lives. Indeed, roughly three-quarters of our sample reported that they had experienced strong attachments to more than one celebrity. Somewhat fewer ($N = 149$ or 70%) reported that they had a celebrity idol at the time of the study.

It seems clear from these data that experiences of celebrity attraction are not uncommon among college-aged young adults, at least in our North American sample. The vast majority of our respondents could relate personally to the phenomenon in which we were interested, either because they were currently attracted to one or more well-known media figures or because they had been in the past. Incidentally, the mean strength of participants' attraction to their favorite idols was quite high. Collapsing across individuals whose attractions were current and those whose attractions had faded by the time of the study, the mean attraction strength rating was 3.87 on a 5-point scale ($SD = 0.84$; $M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.79$ among the subset of the sample who reported that they had a celebrity idol at the time they completed the survey).

Study 2

Participants and Procedure

In phase two of this research, individuals completed a detailed questionnaire about their relationships with their favorite celebrity idols. Participants for this study were recruited from the pool of respondents in Study 1 who expressed interest in learning more about future research on the topic of celebrity attraction (i.e., those who provided their name and phone number at the back of the screening instrument as described above). Each also met the following two eligibility criteria: (a) a score of three or greater on the measure of attraction strength (medium attraction), (b) 10 years or less difference between his or her age at the time of the study and his or her age when feelings of attraction to the favorite idol first began (this criterion led to the exclusion of 15 individuals who were otherwise eligible to participate). Implementation of these criteria helped us ensure both that participants in Study 2 were genuinely attracted to their idols and that they could recall the details of their relationships with these idols with as much accuracy as possible. We decided not to restrict our recruitment efforts to individuals who were currently attracted to their idols as doing so would have automatically eliminated from consideration 45 individuals who otherwise might have met eligibility criteria. The second author contacted eligible individuals by telephone and asked them if they would be willing to complete a detailed questionnaire about the nature of their attraction to their favorite celebrity idol. Participants completed the questionnaire individually or in groups of two to three. On average, the questionnaire took about 30 minutes to complete.

Altogether, 79 individuals (40 females, 39 males) participated in Study 2. However, two females and one male were dropped from the sample prior to data analysis because they identified non-celebrities (e.g., teachers) as their idols (the initial screening questionnaire did not request information concerning the identities of participants' idols that would allow us to confirm at the time of screening that these idols were, in fact, celebrities. It was only when these individuals participated in the Study 2, where we requested such information, that we discovered that their idols were non-celebrities). One additional male was dropped from the sample because he listed three idols rather than one when asked to specify the identity of his favorite celebrity idol (it was thus impossible to determine which of these figures he used as the referent in his responses to the questionnaire). The remaining 75 participants (38 females and 37 males) in the final sample ranged in age from 17 to 35, with a mean age of 21.8 years ($SD = 3.1$). All but six reported that they were currently attracted to their idols. The results do not change if we exclude these participants' data from the analyses we report below.

Questionnaire

Individuals who did not have a current idol when they returned to the lab for Study 2 were

asked to answer the questionnaire with respect to an idol important to them in the past. All others were asked to use their current idol as the basis of their responses.

Participants reported their sex, the identity of their idol, and the idol's sex and occupation or profession. Their ages and attraction strength scores were obtained by referring back to their responses on the screening instrument they completed in phase one of this research. Data concerning the identity, sex and occupation of the sample of favorite idols are reported elsewhere (Boon & Lomore, in press) and thus will not be discussed here.

Importance of the attraction. Participants completed a single-item importance measure phrased as follows, "How important has this attraction been in your life?" Responses were indicated on a 5-point scale with endpoints labeled 1 "of little importance" and 5 "very important."

Perceived intimacy with the idol. Participants completed a pictorial measure of perceived closeness (the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale, or IOS) adapted from the work of Aron, Aron, and Smollan (1992) which enabled us to assess the extent to which they felt they shared an emotional connection or bond with their favorite idols. For this measure, we presented respondents with a set of seven diagrams representing the intersection of two circles labeled "self" and "other," respectively. In the first diagram the two circles touched but did not overlap (indicating very little closeness); in each succeeding diagram, the degree of overlap increased until in diagram 7 the circles overlapped almost completely (indicating very great closeness). These and other intimacy data (i.e., ratings concerning how well participants believed they knew their idols) are discussed in greater detail in Boon and Lomore (in press).

The idol's influence. Four items tapped participants' efforts to emulate their idols. Each of these items was framed as a dichotomous forced-choice question that required participants to respond with either a "yes" or a "no" answer. Three items asked participants whether they had ever tried to change aspects of their personality, their physical appearance, or their attitudes and personal values in an attempt to be more similar to their idols (e.g., "Have you ever tried to change aspects of your personality in order to be more like your idol?"). The fourth item asked participants to indicate whether their idol's lifestyle had ever inspired them to pursue a particular hobby, career, or other activity. Participants who responded in the affirmative were asked to describe the nature of the pursuit the idol had inspired them to undertake. These and other influence data (i.e., concerning the idol's influence on identity, self-esteem, and specific personal values) are discussed in more detail in Boon and Lomore (in press).

Interaction with the idol. Two checklist measures assessed the extent to which participants invested in various forms of contact or interaction with their favorite idols. To gauge their consumption of mass media related to their idols, participants were asked to indicate which of 14 different sources they used to obtain information about their idols. The options in this list included tabloids (such as the National Enquirer), magazines and newspapers specifically about celebrities (e.g., People), television shows, concerts in which the idol performed, speeches the idol made, books written by or about the idol, and radio interviews (see Table 1 for the complete list of sources). We also provided space in which participants could add any other media not included in the prepared checklist.

A second checklist examined respondents' involvement in symbolic (or actual) forms of contact with their idols. We asked participants to indicate whether or not they had ever made efforts to contact their idols and, if so, to check which of five types of activities they had engaged in in these attempts at making contact. The options they could choose from included writing letters, joining clubs or associations related to the idol, phoning the idol, visiting the idol's home or

workplace, and arranging to meet the idol through the use of backstage passes or similar arrangements. Again, we included an “other” category in which participants could list other means of contact not included in the checklist.

Others’ reactions to the attraction. Participants indicated whether or not they had ever told others about their attraction to their favorite celebrity idol. If they had, they were asked to indicate their relationship(s) to the person(s) they had told (using the categories “friends,” “family members,” “acquaintances,” “strangers” or “other.” Participants who checked the latter category were asked to specify the nature of their relationship to the target(s)). Next, we asked them to complete two open-ended items which asked them to describe, first, how the other(s) had reacted to the news and, second, how this reaction had made them feel (i.e., the nature of their own emotional response to the other’s reaction).

Results and Discussion

The results of our first study suggest that celebrity-admirer relationships are reasonably common among university students. Study 2 expands on this finding by providing data regarding the importance, the power, and the place of these relationships in the lives of a sample of admirers who reported strong attractions to celebrity idols.

On the importance of relationships with celebrity idols. Although Caughey may be the most outspoken proponent of the viewpoint that relationships with celebrities are significant forms of social connection in people’s lives, the notion that individuals often attach considerable importance to their involvements with figures from the media is a central if somewhat implicit assumption in much of the work on celebrity attraction (e.g., Brown & Basil, 1995; Greene & Adams-Price, 1990; Levy, 1979; Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Nevertheless, few researchers have directly tested this assumption by asking participants, themselves, to judge the importance of their attachments to celebrity idols. In fact, to our knowledge, the present study is unique in having posed the question of importance to participants—that is, in seeking to put to the test the assumption that admirers perceive relationships with their idols as important in their lives (see RQ2).

Contrary to what we might have expected on the basis of the considerable strength of their reported feelings of attraction to their idols ($M = 3.96$ on a 5-point scale, $SD = .76$), participants’ responses to the importance item in our questionnaire suggest that they did not perceive their relationships with their favorite idols as particularly important in their lives. The mean importance rating was just 2.37 ($SD = 1.21$), falling well below the scale midpoint of 3 (labeled “of moderate importance”). Importance ratings increased commensurate with attraction strength scores (importance ratings were significantly and positively correlated with attraction strength, $r(117) = .40$, $p < .001$), but on average were much lower than might have been expected given the purposive nature of our recruitment efforts (which resulted in a select sample of individuals who felt strongly attached to celebrities they viewed as idols in their lives) and Caughey’s claims about the importance of imaginary relationships in the fabric of North American social experience.

How do we reconcile this contradiction between the present findings and the results of Caughey’s ethnographic investigations? We can think of two possible answers to this question. First, there is reason to suspect that our participants may have deliberately underestimated how extensive and significant a role their relationships with their idols occupy in their lives. As we discussed previously, popular stereotypes cast people who indulge in intense fantasy relationships with celebrities in a rather disparaging light. To the extent that they were aware of such prejudicial attitudes, participants might have thought it best to respond to the importance item in a way that would allow them to appear “normal,” that is, as relatively uninvested in their attachments to their

favorite celebrity idols. Should such self-presentational concerns have dominated participants' thinking as they made their importance ratings, the discrepancy between our findings and the results of Caughey's research may be more apparent than real.

A second possible explanation points to the absence of comparative data that would allow us to determine how importance ratings for relationships with celebrity idols might have stacked up against importance ratings for other relationships in which our participants may have been involved. It is entirely possible, for example, that respondents might have rated their relationships with their celebrity idols less important than their relationships with parents, romantic partners, and close friends, but—despite the “artificial” or imaginary nature of the idol-devotee bond—as more important than the majority of their “real” relationships with acquaintances, co-workers, classmates, and so on. In other words, however low the mean importance rating we obtained may appear in an absolute sense, additional data assessing the importance of other types of common social connections might have shown it to compare favorably to mean importance ratings for other relationships in which people commonly engage.

Fortunately, (some) comparative data of this sort are available for RQ3. RQ3 asked whether admirers believe they share an emotional connection or special bond with their favorite celebrity idols. The mean closeness score on the adapted IOS scale we used was 2.65 ($SD = 1.66$) out of a possible 7, representing at most one-eighth to one-quarter overlap between the representations of self and idol, or a rather distant relationship. In contrast, in two previous studies reported in Aron et al. (1992), mean scores on the IOS were 4.74 and 4.45, respectively, indicating approximately 1/3 to 1/2 overlap. Clearly, participants in the present study viewed their relationships with their idols in substantially less close terms than the participants in these previous investigations viewed their relationships. To place the latter data in their proper context, however, participants in the Aron et al. studies were asked to complete the IOS to reflect how close they felt to their partners in their closest relationships (which were primarily romantic relationships, friendships, and family relationships). Few theorists would argue that attachments to celebrities supercede attachments to the closest others in people's lives (except, perhaps, under exceptional circumstances). Indeed, Adams-Price and Greene (1990) refer to relationships with celebrities as “secondary” attachments, their use of the qualifier secondary clearly implying that, at least in their view, relationships with celebrities are less central to people's lives than relationships with certain kinds of others.

In sum, the need for further research in this area is clear. Still wanting, at the very least, are comparative data that would provide a clear view as to where—on significant dimensions such as importance and closeness—people's relationships with celebrity idols fall in relation to relationships with members of their real social worlds. Without such data, it is difficult to assess whether Caughey's conclusions regarding celebrity attachments overstate—or the present findings understate—the importance of celebrity attachments in people's lives.

On the power of relationships with celebrity idols. RQ4 was concerned with determining whether relationships with celebrity idols are influential forces in admirers' lives. Both research and theory support the view that celebrities have pervasive and enduring effects on their fans (Boon & Lomore, in press; Brown & Basil, 1995; Brown & Cody, 1991; Caughey, 1984; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Pratkanis & Aronson, 1992). According to this perspective, media figures serve as role models and mentors—as idealized images who offer to their admirers visions of what is possible, what is desirable, and what is worthwhile, as well as proof of the rewards associated with success.

In the present study, we asked participants to indicate for each of four different life domains

whether or not they had engaged in behaviors designed to imitate or emulate their idols. Relatively few (14.7%) reported that they had altered their physical appearance to look more like their idols (that this percentage is low is in large part attributable to the fact that participants with opposite-sex idols, all but two of whom were female, were unlikely to make such changes to their appearance:

$\chi^2(1, N = 74) = 5.71, p < .05, \phi = .28$, opposite-sex idols 3.2% vs. same-sex idols 23.3%).

However, a full one-quarter of our sample indicated that they had intentionally changed aspects of their personality to bring it more in line with that of their favorite idol and almost 60% reported that their idols had influenced their attitudes and personal values. The data concerning changes in lifestyle are similarly impressive: Nearly half of the young adults in this study reported that their favorite idol had inspired them to pursue one or more particular activities or pastimes (generally those in which their idols engaged). A reflection of the types of idols our participants chose, the most popular of these were acting and other theater-related endeavors (16.7%), but activities involving music were cited rather frequently as well (13.9%). Participants also reported that their idols had motivated them to increase their involvement in sports or community work, to educate themselves in the idol's field of expertise, or to undertake pursuits such as creative writing, a vegetarian lifestyle, and smoking marijuana.

Notably, these influence data stand in marked contrast to the findings reported above concerning perceived importance and closeness. Whereas we found little evidence either that our participants perceived their relationships with their idols as important in their lives or that they believed that they and their idols shared a special emotional connection or closeness, we found considerable evidence that they thought their idols had influenced important aspects of their lives. This pattern of results suggests that peoples' attitudes, values, personalities, choices of activities, and so on may be shaped in important ways by their attractions to celebrities without them either recognizing the extent and significance of the role their idols have played in their lives or experiencing a strong sense of connection to their idols. This again underscores the interpretive complexity surrounding efforts to draw conclusions concerning the importance of celebrity attachments in people's lives. If an idol's influence can be observed in a person's life (and he or she acknowledges this influence) yet he or she ascribes little importance to the relationship with the idol and/or reports little closeness to the idol, do we conclude that the celebrity-admirer relationship has been important or unimportant in the person's life?

On the place of relationships with celebrities in admirers' lives. Our fifth research question concerned the kinds of "interactions" admirers engage in with their idols. The data in Table 1 provide a partial answer to this query.

Table 1 presents the proportion of respondents in our sample who engaged in various kinds of mass media consumption related to their favorite idols. For a number of reasons (not the least of which is the fact that the sources to which admirers turn for information about/exposure to their idols naturally vary with the idol's occupation or profession), we do not wish to make too much of the percentages reported in this table. Instead, we wish to highlight just one of several conclusions that might be drawn from these data. In particular, we contend that—despite the obvious one-way nature of their relationships with their idols—participants in our study sought ways of maintaining and/or extending points of contact with their favorite media figures. That is, even though real, personal, face-to-face contact was out of the question for the majority of the individuals in our sample, our participants nevertheless reported having engaged in a variety of behaviors (e.g., reading books and magazine articles about their idol, watching television specials about their idol, listening to their idol's audio recordings) that permitted opportunities for parasocial or imaginary

interaction.

It is important to note that this general pattern of results corroborates findings Caughey (1984) reports in his ethnographic analysis of celebrity attraction. Taken together, both data sets emphasize the active means by which admirers construct their relationships with celebrity idols. Admirers often seek active ways to develop and maintain their relationships with their favorite media personalities: ways to discover their idols' hopes and wishes and dreams, ways to revel in and perhaps learn from their idols' talents, skills, abilities, or other accomplishments, ways to feel closer to or connected with their idols, and ways to imagine "being" or perhaps "being with" their idols. In line with the main thrust of this paper, the data in Table 1 also show—as does Caughey's research—that a relationship can be meaningful to people (i.e., influential in their lives) even in the absence of significant opportunities for actual two-way interaction.

In addition to surveying their consumption of mass media products related to their idols, we also asked participants to indicate whether or not they had ever tried to contact their idols. Eighteen participants (nearly one-quarter of our sample) responded in the affirmative. When further asked to check which of five different strategies they had used in their efforts to establish such contact, six participants reported that they had written letters to their favorite idol, two had joined a fan club, three had placed telephone calls to their idols, three had visited their idol's homes or workplaces, three had made use of backstage passes or other similar arrangements at the idol's concerts or other stage performances, and six had implemented other strategies including communication via electronic mail, sneaking backstage, and attending "in store" appearances.

As these data illustrate, attempts to contact the idol were rather uncommon in this study. This suggests that most individuals do not make efforts to secure personal contact with celebrities, even celebrities to whom they feel strongly attached. Nevertheless, a small but noteworthy minority of our participants engaged in behaviors that represent moves away from rather indirect substitutes for genuine interaction (such as reading about the idol in a tabloid or celebrity magazine) to efforts aimed at more direct and concrete forms of interaction (such as calling the idol on the telephone) that might enable face-to-face or other forms of actual contact.

We think the fact that a substantial minority of our participants reported having engaged in tactics designed to bring about actual contact with their idols is a testimony to the importance that idols play in some admirer's lives. Whatever we may conclude about the overall level of importance our participants ascribed to their relationships with their favorite celebrity idols, we think the efforts of those who pursued opportunities for reciprocal contact with their idols demonstrate that some admirers do, indeed, take these relationships quite seriously. So seriously, in fact, that for them the typical substitutes for genuine interaction simply will not do.

Others' reactions to admirer-idol relationships. With our final research question (RQ6), we shifted our attention from participants' own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors concerning their favorite idols to others' reactions to their relationships with these idols. First we asked participants to indicate their relationship to the person or persons to whom they disclosed their attraction. Next we asked them to answer two open-ended questions in which they described first how the other(s) reacted to the news and second how this reaction made them feel.

The vast majority of participants ($N = 72$ or 96%) reported that they had told others about their relationships with their favorite idols. For these respondents, friends were the most common targets of such disclosure (97.2%), followed in descending order of frequency by family members (68.1%), acquaintances (41.7%), strangers (19.4%) and others (13.9%).

More interesting than a simple tally of the different class(es) of person(s) participants told,

however, are their responses to the open-ended questions concerning their audience's reaction to the news and their own emotional response (or counter-response) to this reaction. Some interesting themes emerged in analysis of the content of these brief accounts. First, with a small number of exceptions, others' reactions to the disclosure can be roughly classified into one of just two basic categories: positive and indifferent/neutral. Such a simple classification scheme necessarily glosses over differences in the nature of positive reactions (e.g., accepting vs. interested vs. excited); importantly, however, it results in little loss in the overall richness of the data. Instances in which the target(s) responded to participants' disclosure with derision, rejection, or disapproval were very rare in comparison to instances in which the target's response was either positive or indifferent.

Note that this somewhat surprising pattern of results casts some doubt on our earlier speculation that participants' importance ratings may have been deliberate underestimates of the degree of importance they actually attach to their relationships with these idols. We argued that participants might have been motivated to under-report how important their idols had been in their lives because they were concerned with appearing "normal" and hence avoiding the disparaging stereotypes thought to be associated with persons who idolize celebrities. In actuality, participants accounts of others' reactions to their disclosure offer little reason to believe that participants shared such concerns. In fact, the single participant who hinted at the risks associated with disclosure (e.g., "Some people look at this as being a negative thing") was substantially outnumbered by participants who stated simply that they were "indifferent" to others' reactions ($n = 6$), who reported that they felt "fine," "neutral" or "nothing" in response to others' reactions ($n = 17$), or who declared in clear and explicit terms that they did not care what other's thought about their feelings for their idols were ($n = 5$; e.g., "I could care less about how people react to the people I consider to be influential in the formation of my personal self-image," "I didn't really care if they liked it or not..." and "It didn't matter what their reaction was. I'm comfortable with whom I like"). We suppose it is possible that these latter participants' protests that they "do not care" how others' respond to news of their idol-admirer relationships may reflect a kind of defensive posturing which, in fact, indicates that they do experience significant concerns that disclosure might result in stigma, prejudice, or some other form of deprecatory response. In our view, however, the most straightforward interpretation of their claims is that they truly do not care what others' think because they do not expect to encounter responses of this nature.

More generally, the content of participants' accounts stands in apparent contradiction to the assumption that North American society views people who engage in intense relationships with media figures in a pejorative fashion. If this assumption were true, we would have expected, first of all, that fewer participants would have been willing to share with others the fact of their celebrity attachment (for fear of being stigmatized) and, second, that others' reactions would have tended to fall largely toward the negative pole of the favorable-unfavorable continuum. As indicated above, the pattern of results we obtained is inconsistent with both of these expectations.

Unfortunately, we cannot know from the present study what processes of selection participants may have used in deciding with whom they would discuss their relationship with their idol. It could be that the targets' responses appear so favorable in large part because participants were careful in choosing the audiences to whom they were willing to disclose (i.e., they anticipated the target's response and selected for disclosure only those targets from whom they expected either a neutral or positive response). There is, in fact, some evidence to support this hypothesis. As part of their answer to the second open-ended question concerning how others' reactions made them

feel, a number of participants ($n = 9$) indicated that the people with whom they spoke of their celebrity-admirer relationship were, themselves, fans of the same idol (e.g., "My friends also admire him." "They shared the same idols." "Usually the others have the same admiration for the idol"). An additional participant described the selection criterion she used in determining whom she would tell about his idol this way: "typically, the people...I tell know what Dolly [Parton] stands for..." If comments such as these are at all representative of the processes by which the majority of our sample determined to whom they would disclose, it seems reasonable to conclude that the distribution of others' reactions is skewed in the positive direction at least in part because people tend to be discriminating in their decisions regarding the persons with whom they will share the news of their celebrity attachments. There is a clear need for further research to determine what the prevailing attitude toward celebrity attraction is in North American society.

What else can we learn from participants' accounts of how others' reactions to their disclosure made them feel? In addition to the observation that few participants seemed concerned with the possibility that disclosure might result in censure or reproach, it was also clear from their description of their emotional responses to their audiences' reactions that, for a substantial minority of participants ($n = 15$ or nearly 21% of those who had told others about their idol), the disclosure experience was an important source of validation concerning their feelings for their idols. Consider the following excerpts from participants' accounts, each of which conveys the sense that the target audience's reaction helped the respondent feel as though his or her feelings of attraction or admiration were accepted, justified, and understood: "[it] feels good to know that others are encouraged by her too," "[it made me feel] like I'm not silly or crazy for feeling certain things," "[I felt] understood, relieved. Like I'd told a secret about something I'd done and they said 'that's great.'" "[I felt like] I'm not that stupid (innocent) because there are lots of people out there who admire him." Such sentiments contrast sharply, on the other hand, with the sense of alienation evident in the words of a participant who was plainly disappointed by her audience's lack of understanding: "I felt weird, like I was in a different category or grouping than my friends or family because they did not understand my feelings."

Finally, notwithstanding our comments above arguing that respondents were generally unconcerned about the prospect that others might disapprove of their attraction to a celebrity idol, the present data suggest that, after the fact, a small number of respondents had misgivings about having disclosed on this topic. For example, one participant noted that "[disclosing] made me realize how silly it is to 'be in love' with a celebrity." Another indicated that she felt "kind of silly admitting that I have a crush on an actor." Feelings of self-recrimination were also evident in a third participant's statement that "I do not like to view myself as a person that goes gaga over movie stars" as well as in the even more pointed comment offered by another participant who wrote, "I should have kept it to myself." Considered against the backdrop of the much larger number of responses which indicated that participants did not regret having shared the news of their celebrity attachment with others (indeed, that many were thrilled with the target audience's reactions to the news), these few exceptions to the rule seem to pale in comparison. Nevertheless, they suggest that, as with any personal disclosure, there are costs to be reckoned with in opting to tell others about one's attachment to a celebrity idol. The fact that the substantial majority of our sample did not experience these costs does not diminish the fact that they exist.

General Discussion

In a series of recent papers (e.g., Kirkpatrick, 1998; Kirkpatrick, 1999; Kirkpatrick, Shillito, & Kellas, 1999), Kirkpatrick has examined the role that supernatural figures (such as the Judeo-

Christian God) play in the social networks of people in Western societies. As we have done here for artificial social beings more generally and for celebrities more specifically, Kirkpatrick argues that, as possible relational partners, God and other supernatural beings deserve more theoretical consideration and more research attention than they have attracted to date. He also argues that the investigation of relationships with God may offer unique insights into the process of attachment during adulthood. We share his sentiments in this regard, but contend that relationships with supernatural figures are not the only “artificial” or “imaginary” relationships capable of providing a unique perspective and that attachment processes are not the only relational phenomena such a perspective might illuminate. Our main goal in writing this paper has been to draw to the reader’s attention the fact that an entire class of potentially important social relationships has largely escaped relationship researchers’ notice (we should note that we have used the terms “attached” and “attachment” in a much looser sense than Kirkpatrick has. He would almost certainly disagree that celebrity idols could serve as attachment figures. See Kirkpatrick, 1999, p. 803). As Hallowell and Caughey have cogently argued before us, Western social scientists have demonstrated a longstanding tendency to disregard the imaginary relationships people have with beings who inhabit their artificial social worlds. We hope that the arguments and data we presented in this paper are sufficiently compelling to alert the reader to the need to reverse this trend.

Directions for Future Research

The results of the exploratory research we report here suggest that, in ignoring celebrities as possible relational partners, relationship researchers overlook social relations that are both common and influential. They also corroborate other findings which indicate that individuals take an active approach to constructing and maintaining such relations. The present data are less clear, however, concerning the importance that people ascribe to their relationships with media figures and the degree to which they perceive such relationships as close or intimate. Both of these latter issues warrant further investigation.

For example, Caughey (1984) has written at length concerning the reasons why imaginary relationships are important social connections for many people. Regardless of the degree to which the participants in our study acknowledged or perceived their relationships with their media idols to be of value in their lives, there is a need for further research to follow up on many of Caughey’s ideas by articulating, for instance, the various needs that such relationships may fulfill (e.g., the need for belonging, for romance, for a “hero” or role model or mentor, etc.), the goals that people pursue within these relationships (e.g., to become like the idol, to pursue a fantasy romance, to test out different identities, etc.), and how people accommodate their experiences in these imaginary relationships with experiences in their real relationships.

Our research also raises important questions concerning the nature of people’s attitudes toward celebrity attractions and the role that these attitudes play in peoples’ experiences in their celebrity-admirer relationships. Are such attitudes generally positive, generally negative, or mixed? To what extent do they vary by type of idol or the reason (or reasons) by which the individual explains his or her feelings of attraction? Do admirers consider these attitudes in selecting to whom they will disclose their relationships? Our participants’ responses to the open-ended questions concerning others’ reactions to disclosure suggest that people’s attitudes toward intense relationships with celebrities may not be as disparaging as was previously supposed. We have no way of knowing, however, how and the extent to which our results may have been influenced by participants’ tendency to choose carefully the targets of their disclosures.

Recent advances in computer technology and wide-scale growth in access to the internet are

also likely to have affected the nature of individuals' admirer-celebrity relationships. The research we report here was conducted in the early days of internet expansion, when opportunities for communication and dissemination of information over the internet were quite limited. It would be interesting to examine whether and how the internet has facilitated/changed admirers' efforts at constructing and maintaining relationships with their favorite media figures.

More generally, it will be important to study idol-admirer relationships and, indeed, relationships with other members of people's artificial social worlds, with more diverse samples. A small number of studies have explored celebrity relationships among school-aged children (e.g., Baldswick & Ingoldsby, 1982), older adults (e.g., Levy, 1979), and members of non-North American cultures (Brown & Cody, 1991), but the bulk of the existing literature on celebrity-admirer relationships involves North American university students as the primary participant base. Many important questions remain that cannot be answered (or at least answered well) until researchers broaden their focus beyond the typical university student. For example, does the nature, quality or perhaps the importance of parasocial interaction change with age or across developmental stage? Do relationships with media figures or other artificial social beings fulfill different needs for people of different ages or from different cultures?

Conclusion

For many of his admirers, rock singer Kurt Cobain's sudden and untimely death provoked profound feelings of alienation and despair. In the days that followed news of his suicide (on April 4, 1994), crisis lines were flooded with calls from distraught fans who contemplated following in his footsteps by taking their own lives (Strauss, 1994b). Unfortunately, at least some of these individuals acted on their feelings: Almost right away there were reports of young adults who died—just as Cobain had—as a result of self-inflicted injuries from shotgun blasts to the head (McDowell, 1994; Strauss, 1994a, 1994b). Even months later, long after the publicity surrounding Cobain's death had subsided, reports of this kind continued to surface (e.g., McDowell, 1994).

"Copycat suicides" (Phillips, 1985) like these serve as poignant if patently unsettling reminders of the influence that celebrities sometimes have on their admirers' lives. Fortunately, most fans do not carry their efforts to emulate their idols to such extreme lengths. Nevertheless, the fact that individuals are sometimes moved to such acts of imitation highlights the need for research aimed at exploring pseudo-social interactions between admirers and their celebrity idols, research that takes seriously the notion that relationships involving media figures may be just as "real" in people's minds as relationships involving those others with whom they have opportunities for actual interaction.

We began this paper with a quotation from Caughey's seminal book on imaginary relationships. It seems appropriate to end the paper with a second quotation from this book, where Caughey writes, "pseudo-social relationships constitute a pervasive and powerfully significant influence. Any approach to...society that ignores these relationships is seriously incomplete" (p. 69, 1984). We echo his sentiments and hope, most fervently, that this paper and the research we briefly reviewed within it will inspire others to take heed of Caughey's warning and thus to consider the role that artificial social relationships play in people's lives.

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Table 1

Percentage of Sample Engaging in Various Kinds of Mass Media Consumption (N = 75)

Type of Media/Source of Exposure	Percent (%)
Tabloids	9.3
Celebrity magazines	41.3
Other magazines	76
Television interviews with the idol	45.3
Television specials about the idol	30.7
Television shows starring the idol	22.7
Motion pictures starring the idol	46.7
Music videos starring the idol	21.3
Concerts performed by the idol	18.7
Records/Compact Discs/Audiotapes	26.7
Radio interviews with the idol	24
Speeches given by the idol	16
Books by the idol	18.7
Books about the idol	16