

Is Celebrity a New Kind of Status System?

Murray Milner Jr.

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Abstract A number of previous writings on celebrity have suggested that it is a qualitatively different phenomenon from previous kinds of status systems. Hence, theoretical arguments that have been used to explain more traditional status systems are seen as inadequate to explain and understand the behaviors that are associated with celebrities. This article argues that the differences in traditional and contemporary status systems have been exaggerated. To demonstrate this it takes a theory of status relations that was initially developed to explain the Indian caste system and shows how it can explain much of the behavior associated with celebrities and their fans.

Keywords Celebrity · Celebrities · Status · Status group · Status system · Visibility · Theory of status relations

Celebrities have ceased to be the province of only tabloids, but are frequently discussed in publications such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Harpers*, and *Atlantic*, and in academic journals. (A search for “celebrity or celebrities” in Lexis/Nexus Academic produces 988 different articles during the last 10 years. A search of Sociological Abstracts for the same period finds 597 articles with such references.) In much of this scholarly literature writers refer not simply to “celebrities” but to the phenomenon of “celebrity” and to a process called “celebrification” (e.g., Rojek 2001). There are many approaches to analyzing celebrities, but this article will focus on celebrity as a status system.

Much of previous writing suggests that celebrity is a qualitatively different kind of status system than earlier forms of status (e.g. Boorstein 1971). As Ferris (2007) indicates, two central themes run through many of these discussions and critiques. First, it is claimed that in the past status and fame were based on performance and accomplishment, whereas, “The celebrity is a person who is known for his well knowness” (Boorstein 1971: 57), often unaccompanied by any real accomplishment. Second, it is emphasized that celebrity is a manufactured product produced by movie studios, media companies, and public relations experts and used primarily to promote some special interests such as selling commodities or influencing political decisions (Gamson 1994).

On a more theoretical level an article by Kurzman et al in *Sociological Theory* (2007) criticize not the nature and consequences of celebrity, but social science’s understanding of this phenomenon, and more specifically the usefulness of Max Weber’s notions of status and status groups as a foundation for understanding celebrity. They begin with a fairly standard exposition of Weber’s notions about status and status groups. Then they claim that the phenomenon of celebrity not only call into question the relevance of Weber’s notions, but a foundational notion of modern social science.

Our contribution to [the scholarly literature on celebrity] is to highlight the effect of celebrity status on academics. By this we mean not just that academics can be as star-struck as anybody else Rather, we mean that the rise of celebrity challenges a core tenet of modern social science, namely, the decline of status systems. If celebrity is indeed a status group, then the theory of status has been wrong for a century. (362)

In their conclusions, Kurzman et al. (2007:362–3) claim that more contemporary theories of status systems, includ-

M. Milner Jr. (✉)
Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia,
3 University Circle, Watson Manor, P.O. Box 400816,
Charlottesville, VA 22904-4816, USA
e-mail: mm5k@virginia.edu

ing my own writings on this subject (Milner 2005), are no different in their arguments and assumptions than those of Weber:

Since Weber's time, status groups have continued to be treated primarily as modern hangovers from premodern times, remnants of aristocratic, patriarchal, racial, or other forms of status that have been reduced in importance in recent generations but still ensure some measure of privilege. Disconfirmations of this approach—the emergence of new status-like groups that have no roots in the premodern period—are usually analyzed by way of analogy with old-status groups... 'Celebrity status systems are much less stable than more traditional status systems,' Milner (2005:75) writes, but his theory of status relations, developed from the study of the traditional caste system in India, 'helps us to understand why.' Contemporary status groups, in this view, do not undermine but rather corroborate the analysis of premodern status groups.

This article proposes, by contrast, that celebrity status fundamentally contradicts Weber's analysis of status, in two ways. First, it contradicts the downward trajectory of status groups that Weber projected into the future. Second, it contradicts the genealogy of status groups that Weber projected into the past, the slow inbreeding of honor over multiple generations.

A key thesis of this article is that these claims significantly exaggerate the differences between contemporary status systems and traditional ones. This is not to say that there are no differences, but rather that exaggerating these differences makes us less able to understand and explain the behaviors associated with celebrity.

Let's begin with the common claim that in the past fame was due to real and sustained accomplishments, but that this is no longer true (e.g. Boorstein 1971). Surely this is overstates the matter. Throughout most of the historical period the primary determinants of individual status were age, gender, your parent's status, ethnicity, and luck. More often than not the famous have been from privileged backgrounds. Kings and queens have typically been the most famous members of their generation, and usually they inherited these positions. Let us briefly consider three famous ancients. Alexander the Great, who Braudy claims is the first celebrity (1997:29–51), was the son of a king and the student of Aristotle. During the period he reigned he was undoubtedly a great military leader, but his career was even shorter than most Hollywood movie stars. It seems highly unlikely that someone with the same talents, but a less privileged background could have succeeded as he did. Julius Caesar was a patrician, and whatever his real accomplishments, much of his subsequent fame was due to

the efforts of his adopted son and heir, Octavian, to deify Caesar and, hence, to make himself "the son of god." With respect to Cicero, Braudy quotes Ronald Syme, "Posterity, generous in oblivion, regards with indulgence . . . the political orator who fomented civil war . . . The reason for such exceptional favour may be largely assigned to one thing—the influence of literature when studied in isolation from history." Braudy continues, "Cicero is the self promoting entrepreneur whose lengthy shadow stands behind every media politician" (Braudy 1997: 71). In short, fame has usually been due to a combination of privilege, accomplishment and public relations.

The more serious question is the one raised by Kurzman et al: whether traditional status systems operate so differently from celebrity that the theories that have been used to explain the former are incapable of explaining the latter. To answer this question I will first discuss some key terms. Then I will outline a theory of status relations that I developed to explain the patterns of behavior associated with the Indian caste system. According to Weber the Indian caste system was the most fully developed example of status group formation, and Kurzman et al clearly identify it as a "traditional" status system. Then I will suggest how the theory is useful in explaining the patterns the Kurzman et al assert are fundamentally different from traditional ones.

Celebrities, Fame, Status Groups and Status Systems

Celebrity and Fame Probably all scholars would agree that there have long been famous people, that is, those who were widely known beyond their own social networks. Is there a difference between being famous and being a celebrity? Not according to dictionary definitions: "fame" is defined as "public estimation, reputation, popular acclaim" and "celebrity" is defined as the state of being celebrated, fame, a famous or celebrated person" (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 5-21-10). So the "official" meaning of these words do not distinguish between old forms of status systems and a new celebrity system—as Kurzman et al claim.

Of course, dictionary definitions may not reflect contemporary social realities. If contemporary lists of "famous people" are compared to lists of "celebrities" it is true that the latter contain mainly the names of well-known entertainers and sports stars, while the former also have people who have distinguished themselves in politics, literature, religion, and other areas of life as well as famous entertainers. Hence, lists of "famous people" include Elvis Presley and John F. Kennedy, John Lennon and Albert Einstein. In popular contemporary usage "celebrity" is a subcategory of famous people, referring mainly to enter-

tainers and sports stars—but not a separate phenomenon. Therefore we should expect celebrity status systems to have much in common with those of famous people, both past and present.

Status Groups and Status Systems Kurzman et al's arguments do not make clear the relationship between the concepts of status groups and status systems. A status group is an ideal-type model of a status system in its more intense form. It usually exists within a larger status system; for example, Brahmins are a status group within the status system of Indian castes. Ideal-type models are used in many disciplines. The notions of a “perfectly competitive market” or a “perfect vacuum” are ideal-types; actual markets or vacuums approximate these ideal-types in various degrees. When Kurzman et al talk about traditional status groups they seem to assume that all of these approximate ideal-type status groups. While it is certainly true that status groups in the Weberian sense were more common in the premodern world, this does not mean that all ancient status systems were closed status groups that had evolved slowly over generations. The most obvious example is Greek drama in which playwrights were famous—including Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides—and publicly competed with one another for prizes at periodic festivals in open theatres that held thousands of people. Perhaps an even better example is the fame and status system associated with Greek athletes, especially those who won in the Olympics. Some were immortalized not only in texts but by ancient sculptures—not unlike the contemporary statues of Michael Jordon (Chicago), Babe Ruth (Baltimore) and Jim Thorpe (Canton). Note that like modern celebrity these two ancient systems focus on entertainment and sports. The key point is that there have long been status systems of the famous. These are not reducible to status groups based on “slow inbreeding of honor over multiple generations” (Kurzman et al: 363). They were much more similar to modern celebrity than to Indian castes.

So with these definitions in mind I will now summarize the theory of status relations. My claim is that it is useful in understanding an array of status systems and the similarities and differences between these.

The Theory of Status Relations—An Overview

Status is the accumulated approvals and disapprovals that people express toward an individual, a collectivity, or an object. One assumption of the theory is that visibility is a prerequisite to status; the fabulous baritone who croons only in the shower will not become a famous singer. If the means and forms of social visibility change, the nature and

criteria of status are likely to change. A second key assumption is that the effects predicted by the theory will be strongest when there is a significant degree of insulation between status and economic and political power. If status is simply a reflection of economic (or political) power, then a separate theory of status relations is not required. This assumption of insulation is analogous to the assumption that the Newtonian predictions about falling bodies operate most fully in a perfect vacuum. There is no assumption that this condition will be fully met in the empirical world, but only that, to the degree it is not met, the observed behavior is likely to depart from the ideal-type situation. Such assumptions are a strategy for explaining outcomes under variable conditions, in this case, why Indian castes closely approximate Weberian status groups and why celebrity status systems approximate such status groups in a few respects but differ in other respects. We will return to the significance of this point shortly, but first I will outline the four key elements of the theory of status relations.

In contrast to political and economic capital, status is a relatively *inalienable* resource that emerges from the opinions of others. One cannot readily appropriate or discard social status precisely because such status derives from the honor or recognition bestowed by *others*. Bishop Tutu is not famous and respected because he is rich. The local drug dealer may have the “bling” and the local bully may instill fear, but neither enjoys a high degree of status in broader society. Accordingly, those who acquire wealth and political power, sensing the relatively unstable nature of these resources, often attempt to convert such resources into status, which tends to contribute to both the legitimacy and stability of their ranking. The more deeply held and universal the opinions of others are about the status of someone or something, the more inalienable is that status. Conversely, the less consensus and the more ambivalence there is, the less inalienable that status, and the more likely it is to change rather quickly.

Second, status is relatively *inexpansible*. There are many ways of expanding economic power and wealth (e.g., new technology, better training of workers, more efficient forms of organization), just as there are many ways to expand political power (e.g., recruiting more supporters or acquiring more weapons). In contrast, status cannot be expanded in similar fashion, mainly because it is primarily a relative ranking. If one ascends in rank, then others must eventually descend. For example, most educational institutions graduate only one valedictorian, which confers special recognition or status to the individual thus honored. If everyone received the same honor, it would be meaningless.

How, then, does one acquire status? There are two primary methods. First, one can gain status through *conformity to collective norms*. Of course groups have varying norms. The student who completes work correctly

and on time, follows the classroom protocols, and constructively contributes to classroom discussion is likely to have a high status among teachers and “brains.” In contrast, however, the handsome, athletic, life-of-the-party may have higher status among jocks and preps. Somewhat less obvious, those with higher status tend to elaborate and complicate the norms to make it harder for outsiders and upstarts to conform. Accent, demeanor, vocabulary, body language, and notions of taste and style are hard for outsiders to copy and hence are often used as membership criteria. Clothing and similar commodities are much easier to copy and those with high status both create more elaborate “high fashions” and keep “ahead” by constantly changing the norms about what is “in-hence, the preoccupation with fashions.

The other key source of status stems from *social associations*. If you associate with those of higher status your status *increases*, whereas if you associate with those of lower status your status *decreases*. Social associations are relevant only if there is public awareness of one’s relationships with other high-status (or low-status) individuals. Moreover, such associations have a much more positive effect on one’s status if they involve implicit exchange rather than explicit exchange; openly paying higher status people to associate with you lowers both parties’ status. Intimate expressive relationships are especially important. Sex and eating are classic symbols of expressive intimacy. Brahmins practice endogamy and commensality; teenagers talk about who is going with whom and who eats with whom in the lunchroom. This is not to say that people are completely indifferent about more instrumental relationships. Established movie stars are usually reluctant to work with inexperienced actors and an unknown director; established Ivy League scholars seldom move to a Podunk College, even if they are offered a substantial raise.

Why Celebrity Differs from Earlier Status Systems

Drawing on the theory, I will now suggest why celebrity systems are in some respects different from earlier status systems.

Visibility and Status As I have indicated social visibility is a prerequisite to status. Variations in the availability and type of visibility that are important should then change the nature of a status system. Modern means of communication have significantly changed the patterns of day to day social interaction and the sources of our information and knowledge. Contemporary Americans spend more and more of their time in front of televisions, computer screens, or on phones. Consequently, the status systems that are relevant to them are increasingly those mediated by these

media; it is more impressive to be seen on TV regularly than to have one’s name in the newspaper or be well-known in the neighborhood. The culture in general seems to be adopting the Hollywood press agent’s maxim, “There is no such thing as bad publicity.” This is hyperbole, but it points to a real trend in which the line between infamy and fame is increasingly ambiguous. Reality TV “stars” and notoriety via murder (e.g. Charles Manson) are only two extreme examples. This is not to claim that status and visibility are identical, but rather to point out that because of the nature of contemporary media and social networks, visibility is more problematic. In a small rural community where most information is gained through interpersonal interaction being visible and known is virtually automatic. In a small town many people were at some point mentioned in the local newspaper. In a postmodern urban setting in which much of the information and communication is gained via global mass media, most people will never appear in these media. Hence they have no visibility and no status in these broad networks that are increasingly central to their lives. Hence visibility is more crucial to these status systems than was the case for Weberian status groups. (It is likely that the popularity of the new social network media such as Facebook is in part due to the scarcity of visibility in the mass media. This may eventually reduce the value of visibility in the mass media, but this has not yet happened.)

Images and Appearance A corollary of the above is that images have increased in importance relative to text or speech. It is much easier to communicate good looks and sexiness through images than it is character or intellectual sophistication. Moreover, the standards of beauty have become both more standardized and more demanding as people now compare one another not to the best looking man or woman in town, but literally the most beautiful supermodels in the worlds. Hence the relative importance of appearance and beauty has increased. An implication of this is that as celebrities age their status is likely to decline. These tendencies are stronger for women than men, but it affects both. Consequently, ordinary people spend more on clothing, cosmetics, hairstyling, and plastic surgery than ever before. So not only has visibility become more problematic, the kind of visibility that is important has changed. One result is that dating websites, often with flattering air brushed photos, are becoming increasingly central to initiating romantic relationships.

Implicit and Explicit Exchange The theory argues that in status systems social exchange tends to be implicit rather than explicit. The more a status system approximates a classic status group, the more this will be the case. In contrast, celebrity status is much more openly linked to economic and political power and explicit exchange. It is

well known that networks, studios, and celebrities themselves spend vast sums on advertising and press agents to praise their accomplishments. Moreover, fans must usually pay for access to celebrities by purchasing tickets, CDs, and memorabilia such as autographed baseballs. A great many celebrities sell their status to promote commercial products. Consequently, fans are much more ambivalent, cynical, and fickle in their attitudes toward celebrities and teams. Hence, celebrity status is much less stable; when a multi-million dollar athlete's performance declines significantly he is likely to lose his fans and his contract. This increased commercialization of sports has reduced the loyalty of athletes to teams and of teams to their locality; athletes move from team to team for financial gain; franchises move from city to city for higher revenues. The original meaning of "sport" was "play, game, recreations, amusement, amorous play" (OED); increasingly it is simply "big business"—and as the theory would predict loyalties are weaker and status relations are much less stable.

Virtual Intimacy and Influence According to the theory intimate associations have more effect on status than instrumental relations. The increased availability of the mass media has led to new forms of intimacy. Although most members of the general public do not *personally* know celebrities, many of the intimate details (or pseudo details) of celebrity lives are available to fans via the media (such as the tabloids, TV paparazzi, YouTube and Facebook). That is fans have a form of virtual intimacy with celebrities. Moreover, celebrities who have published their words or music often achieve an even more intense degree of intimacy with their audiences. For example, the family of the recently deceased singer-songwriter Dan Fogelberg has received thousands of condolences through an internet website, such as the following: "When I read today of his passing I was heart struck. I'm a grown man, but I cried like a baby. I feel a part of me has died... I feel old, and devastated, as if one of my lifelong friends has died..." Keep in mind that by most criteria Fogelberg was a relatively minor celebrity. The key point is that these new forms of intimacy create conditions favorable to celebrities having greater influence since members of the public "know" and "trust" these individuals with whom they have bonded over the years. As we shall see later, however, too much intimacy of the wrong kind can reduce the status of a celebrity or at the very least make it more ambiguous.

Visibility plus increased virtual intimacy accentuates celebrities' ability to influence others. Often they become the key pitch men and women for commercial products. Michael Jordan for Nike and Brooke Shield for Calvin Klein Jeans are two of many well-known examples. Celebrities do not use their fame solely for commercial endorsements. Jerry Lewis earned his celebrity status as a comedian on television and in the movies, though he likely

will be remembered as much for his annual telethons on behalf of muscular dystrophy. Often celebrities' personal experiences determine the charitable work they chose to support, especially where diseases befalls them or someone close to them. Some well-known examples include Yul Brynner, who died of lung cancer, taping commercials warning of the dangers of smoking, and the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research.

Fashion and Stability As stated above where others can easily copy superiors, notions of fashion frequently emerge. Such systems of status symbols are, however, inherently unstable; the more people that have acquired a status symbol the less distinctive it is and the less status it confers on its holder. Contemporary women's fashions are an obvious example; what is in style this year is out of style in a year or two. An extreme version of this is the teenagers' expression, "That's so yesterday." Fashion affects not just clothing, but a wide array of phenomena, including the kinds of people that are admired, and hence who is likely to become a celebrity. An as with other status symbols, if a celebrity becomes too visible—that is if they become "over exposed"—their status may well erode. They are like the item that was "hot" last year, but that everybody has now seen ad nauseam. The erosion of status is even more likely if the celebrity's performance declines or fails to reach new heights. Decline is also made likely because many other talented or beautiful people are eager to replace established celebrities. The process is further accentuated by the desire of those who train, promote, and sponsor celebrities to attract audiences by bringing out "new models." The predictable result is that celebrity status is likely to be less stable than many more traditional forms of status.

The key point is that these special characteristics of celebrity systems are more likely to be understood if they are theorized in relationship to more traditional systems of status relations.

Explaining Kurzman et al.'s Data

Kurzman et al. (2007) organize most of their substantive points, which are primarily descriptive rather than explanatory under the topics of interactional privilege, normative privilege, economic privilege, and legal privilege. The vast majority of their observations can be parsimoniously explained with the theory of status relations. This will be illustrated by analyzing a few key examples.

Interactional Privilege Most of their discussion of interactional privileges describes the way people are excited and

interested when they come into the presence of celebrities. Their “pulses pound” and celebrities are seen as “infinitely superior.” On the other hand, they note that celebrities “socialize only with fellow elites.” In other words, celebrity systems generate both attempts by ordinary folks to have contact with celebrities and the attempt of celebrities to restrict such associations to a few limited arenas and occasions—and to spend much of their time associating with people similar to them.

Intense interest and excitement are hardly unique features of modern celebrity systems. Royalty and nobility were often seen as superior persons. Norbert Elias’s description of Louis XIV relationship with his court has many parallels with celebrity:

[The king] occupied the royal position . . . that allowed him to express his desire for *reputation* and *glorie* to an extraordinary degree . . . [the members of the court] identified themselves with the splendour that his reign spread about it [and] felt their prestige increased by his (Elias 1983: 134–135). . . . The greater his sphere of power. . . the greater was the number of people who sought to approach him . . . [T]his congestion of people . . . glorified his existence . . . Each gesture, utterance and step he made was for the supplicants of utmost importance in terms of prestige (Elias 1983: 137).

About a century later Jane Austen describes status relations in England in *Pride and Prejudice*: the Rev. Mr. Collins is exceedingly obsequious toward his patroness Lady Catherine de Bourg, deferring to her opinions on nearly any subject and taking delight in associating with her. Austen’s caricature is funny only because it exaggerates a familiar phenomenon. Even in the supposedly modern and rational environs of contemporary Oxbridge, faculty with the titles of “Sir,” “Dame,” “Lord,” and “Lady” are treated with considerable deference and their presence often creates special interest and even excitement among students and faculty. As discussed above, a more extreme example involves the numerous cases of the deification and worship of political rulers in cultures as diverse as imperial Rome and medieval India. Even more obvious is the deification of charismatic religious leaders such as Jesus and Buddha. In short, most of these behaviors have been observed throughout history and are explained by the eagerness of those of lower status to associate with those of higher status in order to improve their own status.

Toward the end of this section of their article, Kurzman et al. (2007) discuss the “drawbacks” of status, such as “intrusive companionship of photographers” and the need for bodyguards. Kings may not have had to deal with photographers, but they were usually hounded by various petitioners. In this regard Elias quotes La Bruyere, “A king

lacks nothing except the sweetness of a private life” (Elias 1983: 138). The problem was not restricted to political elites. The Bible makes it obvious that Jesus frequently had great difficulty gaining any privacy and that “crowd control” was a recurring problem.

All of the above phenomena (and others) are parsimoniously explained by the notion that while status concerns influence people to associate with superiors and limit contact with inferiors, the collective outcome is the strong structural tendency to associate with those of similar status (Milner 1994: 36–37, 146–49). Hence, when opportunities arise to be in the presence of royalty, presidents, popes, and celebrities, it is experienced as a special and memorable experience and people engage in worship-like behaviors in which they do not normally engage. At the same time, to the degree that these encounters require explicit exchanges—such as buying tickets—then people are often ambivalent: delighted to come into contact with such noteworthy individuals and yet cynical or resentful about the terms of the exchange.

There are differences in our interactions with rulers, prelates, and rock stars, but most of these differences are explained by the factors which make modern status systems distinctive, which were discussed above. For example, constant *visibility* is much more crucial for rock stars than popes. In contrast to Hollywood publicists, the Vatican certainly recognizes that there *is* such a thing as bad publicity—with the recent exposes of priests sexually abusing youth being only the most obvious example. The kinds of *appearances* that are important for popes are rooted in the symbols of the long-routinized charisma of an office, not in personal beauty, sexiness, or extraordinary levels of talent and performance. Usually hearing a rock star in person or on a recording involves a quite explicit *exchange*: tickets or CD’s must be purchased. An audience with the pope may involve implicit exchange, but you cannot simply buy tickets. Celebrities often endorse commercial products for pay, but popes do not. In short, while there are differences in modern and premodern forms of interactional privilege, this does not mean that contemporary celebrity systems are a wholly new or unique phenomenon. In fact, most of these differences can be systematically explained by drawing on the theory of status relations.

Normative Privilege Under this topic Kurzman et al. (2007) begin by noting the tendency of people to copy the lifestyles of celebrities, including such things as clothing, hairstyle, dieting, cars, speech, cosmetic surgery, and even suicide. There is no question that such imitation often occurs, but this has long been the case. Srinivas (1962) coined the term “sanskritization” for the tendency of Indian lower and middle castes to copy upper castes in their

lifestyles and rituals—hardly a new phenomenon. Aristocracies created sumptuary laws precisely because inferiors were trying to copy their symbols and behavior. As Braudy indicates a number of ancient military leaders explicitly copied Alexander the Great in looks and style as well as in military technique (1997: 55–89). In terms of the theory of status relations, this is a matter of adopting the norms of higher status groups in the hopes of raising their own status. When prohibitions against imitating and copying are abandoned or are ineffective, the alternative strategy of those with high status is to constantly change the norms so that those with lower status never quite catch up with the latest fashion. Though an interest in fashion among the upper classes is quite old, it was probably not until the nineteenth century that fashion became a commercialized process of concern to large numbers of people (Braudy 1997: 479–481).

Kurzman et al. (2007) argue that another normative privilege of celebrities is that they are often treated as authorities on a wide variety of subjects for which they have no special knowledge or expertise. Angelina Jolie serves as Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; Richard Dreyfus tours college campuses warning students about the erosion of free speech and individual rights; Robert Redford publicly supports various environmental organizations and rights for Native Americans. Admittedly for the most part they initially had no special qualifications for these roles other than their public visibility and popularity.

The more general phenomenon is that of people deferring to the opinions of high status people—even when their opinions are ridiculous opinions. Such behavior is much older than modern celebrities. This deference to the opinions of superiors is illustrated by the well-known Hans Christian Anderson story of the Emperor's New Clothes. The story hinges on the fact that all of the adults act as if they believe the naked Emperor's claims about the beauty of his new clothes—but only because he is the king. In a similar vein is the adage, “A rich man's joke is always funny” (sometimes attributed to the poet Thomas Edward Brown). As such tales and adages indicate, the tendency for status and power originating in one arena to be carried over into other arenas is not a new phenomenon. Bishops became feudal rulers; the sons of nobles were made bishops. Many military heroes have converted their status into other forms of power and privilege. Often they have had few qualifications for their new responsibilities, with the result that they have been less than distinguished in their new roles. Ulysses S. Grant and Franklin Pierce are notable examples in U.S. history. Since the thirteenth century the chancellors of Oxford and Cambridge Universities have typically been bishops and dukes or other members of aristocracy, including princes and consorts of

the royal family. Few of these have been professional scholars or even noted for their intellectual or administrative prowess. Rather they were the celebrities of their age. Like the celebrities of today they contributed their “name” to causes and institutions quite distinct from the source of their renown; in turn, they were treated with deference and given additional honors and privileges. Oliver Cromwell became Chancellor of the University of Cambridge and the Duke of Wellington became the Chancellor of Oxford University long before there were movie stars. Prince Philip is the current Chancellor of Cambridge. It is not self evident that they were any more qualified for these positions than Angelina Jolie is qualified to be a spokesperson for the U.N.'s refugee efforts.

The theory of status relations shows that the same basic status processes are involved in traditional and contemporary systems. High levels of conformity, performance, or visibility in one area of endeavor make an individual famous in that particular status arena. Others then attempt to improve their own status (or the status of some organization or cause they support) by associating with such a high status celebrity. This association may, in turn, improve the status of the celebrity.

Toward the end of their discussion of normative privileges Kurzman et al note that fans often feel ambivalent and cynical about the celebrities they follow. As was pointed out when implicit and explicit exchange were discussed above, this is what the theory of status relations would predict: strong status relationships are rooted in intimate implicit exchange and the more impersonal explicit exchange are substituted for these the more ambivalent people will be about such relationships.

Economic and Legal Privileges In this part of their discussion Kurzman et al point out that the fame of celebrities often give them economic benefits. They begin by noting that at various award events celebrities are often given elaborate “swag” bags containing a wide array of expensive products and various kinds of complimentary (i.e. free) services. (Often such gifts are motivated by the desire that the marketers of these products to associate them with famous celebrities.) Much more significant are the very high salaries that top movie and sports stars receive. They also discuss the special privileges for investment that may be offered celebrities.

But again, little of this is completely new. Those who pleased the rich and powerful, including performers, have frequently been given gifts and patronage. In Elizabethan England dramatists and actors were disreputable occupations. Despite this the key celebrities of the theatre, such as William Shakespeare and actors Richard Burbage and William Kempe became famous and relatively wealthy. During the Jacobean period they were even patronized by

the king himself and their acting company was renamed “The King’s Men.” Nor are privileged investment opportunities new. It is not accidental that many of the counties in Virginia bear the names of English lords of the seventeenth century: Prince William, Fairfax, Albemarle, Bedford, Winchester, and Culpeper—as well as the capital city of Richmond. Most of these were grants or investment opportunities made by the crown to the famous and favorites of the period.

Kurzman et al also suggests that celebrities are being given certain legal privileges such as the right to control the use of their images and to demand payment when such images are used for commercial purposes. While it is true that this legal development benefits primarily celebrities, the same law also applies to those of us who are not famous; Calvin Klein or General Motors cannot use my picture for commercial purposes without my permission. Such attempts to protect privilege are not new; the creation of sumptuary laws is a clear example of elaborating norms and laws to protect the status a particular category of people. Such legal elaboration is not limited to status concerns; it operates in the economic and political realms too. This development is often due to the increased importance of a new kind of capital and its conversion into private property. In the 14th and 15th centuries the high price of wool in led local English elites to enclose what had traditionally been public land for sheep farming; the commons were converted to private property. Similar issues are emerging about new forms of life created by genetic engineering and about the ownership of recovered ancient treasures.

There is, however, something that is both old and new about celebrity income. Those of extraordinary accomplishment, from the winning athletes in Greece to Charles Lindbergh, have often been given gifts and privileges not available to most people. On the other hand, it is true that as the audience of contemporary celebrities have become larger due to the mass media, the economic and political value of famous people has become greater. This is another aspect of the increased importance of visibility discussed earlier. Hence, it is true that those who can gain high visibility can command unprecedented economic rewards. But this is what the theory would predict: if visibility is a prerequisite to status and social networks and audiences become larger and hence social visibility more problematic, then those who can command visibility will gain more status, power and privilege.

Explaining Paris Hilton

According to Kuzman et al explanations that explain traditional status groups are unable to explain celebrity

because the two types of status systems are so different. To further demonstrate that this assertion is incorrect, I will use the theory of status relations to explain the celebrity of someone who it is generally agreed has little talent, but is undoubtedly a top pseudo-celebrity. Paris Hilton seems to be the epitome of this category. The 2007 Guinness World Records lists her as the world’s “Most Overrated Celebrity.” An Associated Press and AOL poll reports that she was rated as the second “Worst Celebrity Role Model of 2006.” In 2005 she was named “Worst Supporting Actress” at the 2005 Golden Raspberry Awards. Most of the films she has appeared in have gone directly to DVDs rather than being released in theatres—usually a clear indication that media companies have little hope for their artistic or commercial success. Despite this she is one of the best-known contemporary celebrities. A Google search for “Paris Hilton” produced 33,800,000 results. This compares to 6,300,000 for Julia Roberts, 5,040,000 for Keira Knightley, and 4,280,000 for Meryl Streep, all accomplished and beautiful actresses. Hilton seems to be surpassed only by Britney Spears with 52,300,000 and Barrack Obama with 58,700,000.

How is this to be accounted for? Keep in mind that high visibility, high conformity, and intimacy with superiors all tend to contribute to having a high status. The first source of her visibility is her name and her association with a famous family; she is the great-granddaughter of Conrad Hilton, founder of Hilton Hotels. While she did not inherit the bulk of the Hilton fortune, she was wealthy enough to be seen as a “socialite.” Second, she is thought to be a sexy and beautiful woman. As a comment on a website noted, “She may be a terrible actress, but she’s got a great body.” She seems to use this to accentuate the attention she gets by frequently wearing revealing clothes; she maximizes her social visibility by maximizing her bodily visibility. In addition to increasing visibility, being beautiful and attractive is generally thought to be a positive attribute, and hence is a type of conformity. Third, she has engaged in various forms of what most people think of as deviant behavior. Once a person is public figure certain forms of deviant behavior tend to make one even better known. (If some unknown teenager is arrested for shop lifting it is not likely to be reported, but if a Clinton or a Bush daughter had been arrested for this it would have been all over the media.) Hilton first became well-known when a video of her having sex with a boy friend was made publicly available. She claims this was against her wishes, but it had the effect of making her famous overnight in the tabloids and in video clips on the Internet. Only a few years later she was arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol. She then violated her parole twice, acted like she was being persecuted during court proceedings, and eventually spent 45 days in jail. She has had on and off romances and engagements. The initial visibility she gained due to the

above factors led to her being a guest on numerous celebrity interview shows, and for five seasons she was a member of the cast of a reality TV show. Toward the end of this series she had a public squabble with her co-star, Nicole Richie, who had been a friend since childhood. (Richie, like Hilton, was born famous. She is the daughter of 1980s megastar singer Lionel Richie.) Hilton has also appeared in advertisements and commercial promotions that were considered risqué or controversial. This included selling her name to a chain of night clubs. She has also published four books and a number of music albums.

As the theory would predict she has a status that is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, she is well-known and generally acknowledged to be sexy, but on the other hand she is not well respected. She seems to have a considerable talent for making herself socially visible, for associating with other celebrities, and conforming to many of the contemporary norms about beauty and sexiness. On the other hand, her acting and musical talents seem at best limited. Moreover, her case shows the complexities of the effect of intimacy on status relations. Intimate associations with those of high status improve one's status; but frequent intimacy with those of low status lowers one's status. If a person is intimate with many, especially if it is for commercial reasons, the intimacy becomes cheapened and degrading. Prostitution is the ideal-typical case. Hence, on the one hand, having many male fans that view one's cheesecake photos contribute to visibility and increase Hilton's status as sexy, attractive woman, but it decrease her status because she is too "easy" at least figuratively. Respected actresses may be beautiful and sexy, but they generally do not pose near nude or in suggestive positions, unless it is part of a "serious" role. This tendency of "over exposure" to lower status is further accentuated by publicly displaying one's love and sex life. Hilton's rather blatant explicit exchange of her status as a sex goddess for economic gain creates further ambivalence about her overall status as a public figure. If Keira Knightly or Julia Roberts had allowed their names to be used to label and promote a string of night clubs, it would almost certainly reduce their status, though it would probably increase their notoriety. Stated in the terms of the theory, because of fans' ambivalence, Hilton's status is relatively alienable and is likely to decline. Finally, the inexpansibility of status makes it predictable that Hilton would have a falling out with a co-host who seemed to be similarly ambitious, but possessed even less talent. (Other examples include splits in singing groups where one or more of the members are no longer content to share the spotlight with the others, for example Diana Ross's split with the Supremes, Beyonce from Destiny's Child, and perhaps the Beatles.)

The point of this section is not to provide a full analysis of Paris Hilton or pseudo celebrities, but to demonstrate the usefulness of the theory in explaining status relations in situations that are quite different from traditional status groups.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been threefold. First, I want to call into question assertions that celebrity is necessarily a cheapened and degraded form of fame, which in the past was supposedly based on virtue and merit. I have argued that like celebrity, fame has always been due to a combination of social background, performance, PR and luck. Second, I want to call into question the empirical assertion that modern celebrity systems are so new and different that they cannot be meaningfully compared to more traditional status systems. I have argued that while celebrity status systems are much more fluid and unstable than traditional status groups, they are in some respects similar to other quite old status systems including those associated with the Greek Olympics and Elizabethan drama. Third, I have tried to show that the theory of status relations that was initially developed to analyze Indian castes is also useful in analyzing more fluid status systems such as contemporary celebrity. While it is certainly true that we must be aware of and take into account the significant changes that have been produced by new forms of media, this does not mean we should ignore what we know about older forms of status or abandon efforts to develop theories that are useful in explaining the operations of both old and new status systems.

Further Reading

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Murray Milner Jr. is Senior Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia. He is author, among other works, of *Status and Sacredness: A General Theory of Status Relations and an Analysis of Indian Culture*. His most recent book is *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption*, which applies the theory of status relationships that was developed in *Status and Sacredness* to the behavior of adolescents.