

Look at Me!: The Fame Motive from Childhood to Death
Orville Gilbert Brim
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Q&A with Orville Gilbert Brim, author of *Look at Me!: The Fame Motive from Childhood to Death*

Four million adults in the United States say that becoming famous is the most important goal in their lives. What motivates those who set fame as their priority, where did the desire come from, how does the pursuit of fame influence their lives, and how is it expressed?

Based on the research of Dr. Orville Gilbert Brim, award-winning scholar in the field of child and human development, *Look at Me!* answers those questions.

Dr. Brim has had a long and distinguished career. He is the former director of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Midlife Development, former president of the Foundation for Child Development, former president of the Russell Sage Foundation, and author and coauthor of more than a dozen books about human development, intelligence, ambition, and personality.



The University of Michigan Press: How big a motivator for people is fame?

Orville Gilbert Brim: National surveys over 40 years show consistently that 2% of respondents say “fame” is their number one desire. (The surveys are from Roper, Peter Hart, LA Times, etc.) So we have four million adults in the United States with fame as their primary motive. Thus, two out of every 100 have this passion for fame. The rest are indifferent, it doesn’t matter to them. Even though they may say they dream about it now and then, it’s not something that is turned on as a primary interest. Which is a good thing, I think, because out of the four million fame seekers, if you look at the Halls of Fame and biographies around the world, there are perhaps only 30,000 entries and of those, perhaps 10,000 are dead. So this leaves about 20,000 slots for four million fame seekers, which is going to leave 3,980,000 people with no openings where they can be famous.

UMP: What types of fame do people seek?

OGB: There are of course many ways to become famous, but I like to think of them as being grouped into four paths or ways to fame. The most familiar one is what we can call honorable fame where achievements greatly valued in our society are rewarded by bestowing fame. There is also fame by associations with families and acquaintances and who you know. One of my favorite association stories is when John Kennedy Jr. moved to New York City many people wanted to get to know him and one woman said: “I don’t know him but my dog knows his dog,” which of course is a real stretch to become famous by association.

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More in the news these days is what I call “calls for attention.” Celebrity comes from the Latin noun meaning “fame and renown,” but these days, it has a new meaning, which designates someone who has become a public figure through seeking media exposure. These persons, which seem to be increasing in number, have done nothing that deserves to be publically praised as an achievement. They’re simply calling attention to themselves. And of course the fourth path is well-known. It’s an act that in the eyes of society is injurious or even evil, but in the general public it brings extraordinary attention. We can call this type of fame, of course, infamy. There are plenty of times when the infamous act is not done on purpose, it’s an accident, but there’s still many times when it’s sought. A recent example is the “balloon boy” where the father was seeking fame through this infamous act of pretending the boy was in the balloon in order to gain attention.

UMP: What rewards does it offer them?

OGB: The fame seeker, the person with the primary desire to be famous is rewarded, of course, by becoming famous. Fame is the goal and when it is achieved one is rewarded. But in thinking about this, there is often some confusion. The three familiar motives, such as money, power, and fame are often lumped together in people’s thinking. We need to keep a distinction between fame and the other two motives in mind so we can think about a type 1 fame motive which is when fame is the end itself and money or power may be sought along the way but only as a means to bring fame to the person – not to get the money or the power. And a type 2 of the fame motive is the opposite: people seeking money and or power see that achieving fame can be a means to these ends. In this case, fame itself is not the end it is simply a way to achieve these other rewards.

UMP: Why, in your opinion, do people want to be famous?

OGB: These millions of people who are so strongly motivated for fame are obviously different from the rest of the population. And what has happened is the fame motive has come out of the basic human need for acceptance and approval and when this need is not fulfilled because of rejection by parents, or adolescent peer groups, or others, a basic insecurity develops and emerges as the fame motive.

Well, it turns out that fame is not the answer for the need for love and acceptance. The desire is never fulfilled. The search for fame remains, driven by that basic need.

UMP: How does the desire for fame affect their lives?

OGB: The fundamental truth about the fame motive is that it’s never satisfied and people have to live with it all their lives. However hard they try to become famous, they’ll fail to get what they’re after. This brings many defeats into their lives and later in life, when this final reality sets in, the realization that one’s never going to become famous, the person must take steps to protect the self from this feeling of

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failure. Some interesting psychological processes occur, what I call “cognitive strategies” such as blaming someone else for one’s failure, finding new people to compare yourself to who are even less successful, or to the devaluation of others who may have become famous.

As you get into dealing with this final reality, these processes also interfere and spoil your relationships with other people because you start treating them in unfavorable ways. And when you couple that with the fact that most of society views the desire for fame as a negative thought, it’s not a desirable motive to have, that this person has to deal with this negative self-image that they can’t get rid of. And furthermore, when this final reality of failure sets in, then an interesting process happens: people may shift to seeking posthumous fame. Rousseau, later in his life, believed that he would finally triumph over his critics after death, because of his reputation. Freud early in his life believed science would take no notice of him during his lifetime but was content with the thought that decades later his work would be recognized and bring him posthumous honor.

It’s surprising to me how many persons believe they will become famous after death. A study some time ago found that, out of a sample of 10,000 sociologists, 2,000 said they would be remembered after death as among the 200 most famous sociologists of all.

UMP: Do you feel more people are now seeking fame?

OGB: Even though it appears that there are more people seeking fame, the surveys remain in showing no changes over time. I think what has happened is that there are many more new kinds of opportunities to become noted especially in the path to fame that simply calls for attention and that our wired world allows persistent need for fame in the population to become evident.

I see more spots along the celebrity path, calling “look at me,” but no more exceptional achievements of any value. In the “reality” shows we can see ordinary people become briefly famous just by showing off. The ordinary observer may decide “I can do this.”

To read more about *Look at Me! The Fame Motive from Childhood to Death*, visit the University of Michigan Press website at: <http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=872207>

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