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## “Enthusiastic Admiration Is the First Principle of Knowledge and Its Last”: A Qualitative Study of Admiration for the Famous

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# “Enthusiastic Admiration Is the First Principle of Knowledge and Its Last”: A Qualitative Study of Admiration for the Famous

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## Abstract

The concept of fame has been associated with celebrities, wealth, attractiveness, and social recognition. Nevertheless, people have admiration for the famous who may not be celebrities. Admiration is regarded as one of the emotions of appreciation, or moral emotions, triggered by positive appraisals of excellence. It is present when seeing extraordinary displays of skills talent or achievement. However, theoretical and empirical research on admiration and its psychological effects on people are scarce. In this article, we discuss a qualitative study that explores a collection of experiences of admiration for the famous. Based on 26 in-depth interviews with residents in southern England, we explored why people admire famous individuals and how the experience may produce positive attitudes and behaviors. We found that through admiring famous individuals who are perceived to share similar interests and attributes, people may develop positive thinking about their own lives and may be more active in seeking new opportunities or engaging in self-growth. We also discuss the potential problems of admiration. This exploratory research contributes to the literature of positive psychology and has implications for furthering the understanding of people's well-being.

## Keywords

admiration, positive emotions, personal fulfillment, social learning, interpretative phenomenological analysis

## Introduction

*Enthusiastic admiration is the first principle of knowledge and its last.*

—William Blake (1757–1827)

Increasingly today, the famous have become more vivid to us through their presence on social media, making them more omnipresent and complementing the parasocial aspect of their admiration. The rise of supersystems (Kinder, 1991) extending across multiple online and offline media potentially enables anyone to become famous. For example, there is a growing desire for fame in TV programming for the tween audience of ages 9 to 11 (Uhls et al., 2014; Uhls & Greenfield, 2011). Yalda Uhls and Patricia Greenfield (2012) define fame as “the idea of being known by large numbers of people who are not perceptually present to any given individual” (p. 2). To understand the abstract concept of fame requires a societal perspective. Prior research has revealed that the desire to become famous is associated with individuals' self-esteem (Noser & Zeigler-Hill, 2014) and social self-concepts (the need to belong, narcissism,

and relatedness; Greenwood et al., 2013). In addition, fame has been associated with wealth, attractiveness, and social recognition (Gountas et al., 2012). Despite the findings of empirical research on fame regarding the extrinsic and intrinsic motivations for desiring fame, the concept of “famous” has been widely explored and examined as an interchangeable word for “celebrity.” Little research to date has explored the impact of the famous, who may not be celebrities, on their followers. Graeme Turner (2004) defines a celebrity as someone who is highly visible through the media and whose professional and private life attracts public interest. In this case, it is possible to become famous without personal achievements so long as one attracts

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public attention. For the purpose of this study, we focus on the famous who gained prominence through professional achievements and have become role models for their followers.

Etymologically, the word “admiration” has its root in the Latin word *mira*, meaning “wonder,” which is also the root word for “miracle” (Fisher, 2003). *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines admiration as “respect and warm approval.” It is an emotional response that involves feelings of appreciation, delight, esteem, reverence, and surprise (Ortony et al., 1988). Individuals today have a more direct path by which to follow the famous, making an analysis of the motivations and effects of admiring them both more possible to document and more relevant. Although admiration has been mentioned in the psychological literature for many years, the topic has received little sustained academic attention. It has only recently been studied empirically because it is representative of the many positive emotions that have become the focus of research in the area of positive psychology (e.g., Haidt, 2003). Recently, with the increasing number of studies of admiration, this period has even been called the “admiration moment” (Vaccarezza, 2019, p. 150). However, admiration has typically been conceptualized narrowly within specific contexts such as religion and popular culture (e.g., Haidt & Algoe, 2004). This exploratory investigation embraces a wider scope of the admiration concept and is informed by a variety of theories. Our research was initiated with two objectives: (a) to gain insights into why people admire famous individuals and (b) to explore how the experiences of admiration guide individuals’ attitudes and behaviors, and thus aims to establish the importance of admiration to positive psychology. Therefore, this research aims to contribute to scholarly knowledge through its investigation into the motivation for admiring the famous and how this admiration influences attitudes and behaviors.

## Literature Review

### *Admiration as a Positive Emotion and Its Importance*

Admiration is considered an extension of the “basic” emotion family (Ekman & Davidson, 1994) and is categorized as one of the moral emotions (Haidt, 2003). Moral emotions are “those emotions that are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent” (Haidt, 2003, p. 853). In other words, the unique other-focusing characteristics of moral emotions determine their important role in eliciting prosocial or goal-directed behaviors that have potential benefits to others.

The majority of research on emotions has focused on the negative ones, even though people experience positive emotions more frequently than negative emotions in their daily lives (Fredrickson & Cohn, 2008; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). In the field of positive emotion research, admiration has been described as a type of “appreciation emotion” (Ortony et al., 1988), triggered by positive appraisals of

excellence. Admiration is the emotional response when seeing extraordinary displays of skills, talents, or achievements (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). It is included as one of the “other-praising” emotions that motivate self-improvement (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). These positive emotions (e.g., elevation, gratitude, and admiration) are theorized to influence behavior in a functional, adaptive manner and hence predict or contribute to people’s overall well-being or happiness (Condon et al., 2014).

Thus, admiration as one type of positive moral emotion relating to people’s responses to good deeds and moral exemplars (Haidt, 2003) motivates people to emulate the admired person in the relevant respect (Zagzebski, 2015). Admiration can be beneficial to individuals’ happiness perceptions through changing our cognitions and motivations (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Prior research indicates that acting on moral emotions with reference to virtues can promote happiness (Athota, 2013). The emotion of admiration can also facilitate the development of individuals’ personal relationships with others through increasing self–other overlap (Waugh & Fredrickson, 2006), that is, taking someone else’s perspective. In addition, having admiration for someone in common and sharing such experiences can increase the social and sociological relevance of communication flows through the creation of a good communication dialog and atmosphere (Giulianotti, 2002). A positive atmosphere of communication helps to strengthen personal connections, promote emotional ties, and enable a feeling of common concerns (Hraf, 2012). Hence, the positive emotion of admiration may help empower individuals to engage in social and cultural communications (KhosraviNik, 2018), not only within the fan communities but also a much wider context of multimedia culture. To sum up, it is important to capture personal experiences of how admiration for the famous affects people. Our research contributes to a better understanding of the complexity of the relationship between emotions and behavior (e.g., Malti et al., 2010) and ultimately contributes to the development of a more enduring positive state of well-being (Ouweneel et al., 2011).

### *Imitation, Social Learning, and Idol Influences*

The understanding of idol worship among the population at large could fulfill important functions for social learning at the individual level and for cultural transmission at the societal level (Onu et al., 2016). Nevertheless, to date, the psychological literature has mainly focused on the role of idol worship on adolescents’ growth and development. These studies only shed light on the behavioral consequences of the followers (such as acquiring new skills), and the emotional aspects remain under-researched.

Only very limited research on emotions has argued that adolescents may imitate their idols to affirm their self-value (Cheung & Yue, 2003), feelings of self-worth (Boon & Lomore, 2001), or body image (Maltby et al., 2005). Despite the lack of empirical research on the emotion of admiration,

Haidt and Seder's (2009) theoretical speculations provide an introduction to the origins and functions of admiration. The pioneering work of Henrich and Gil-White (2001) on the evolution of prestige has greatly informed admiration research. They suggest that, subject to the law of natural selection, it is beneficial for humans to learn by copying others, and more importantly, to find the most successful and skilled models to emulate to improve learning efficiencies. Archer (2019) suggests that a desire to emulate is one of several ways in which admiration typically motivates. Therefore, the status of those selected to be admired is important. From an evolutionary perspective, "status equals the amount of deference received" (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001, p. 177). Consistent with Henrich and Gil-White's theory, Bandura's (1977, 1986) social-cognitive theory (also called social-learning theory) suggests that both environmental and psychological factors influence behavior and people learn through imitating role models as a result of socialization. Recent research has investigated celebrities' influence on young adults' purchase intentions and behavior (Martin & Bush, 2000). Krnjaić and Ilić's (2017) study further revealed that a relationship exists between adolescents' hobbies and admiring particular idol types. However, it may be argued that the focus on young adults and the use of quantitative methods limits our understanding of the fundamentals of the follower-idol bonding relationship and the process by which this relationship is established.

Academic attention has been paid to the follower-idol relationship constituted within the notion of admiration. In particular, it has been argued that the follower-idol relationship is an asymmetric one, in that one party has a great amount of knowledge about the other, while the other does not. Furthermore, it often does not involve direct communication and interaction between the two parties. Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced the concept of "parasocial interactions" to describe this kind of non-direct and one-sided relationship. Historically, findings from research on parasocial interaction have been negative—It was suggested that this kind of interaction led to dysfunctional behavior, such as neuroticism, isolation, loneliness, limited social interaction, and reduction of interpersonal contact (e.g., Cohen, 1997; Sood & Rogers, 2000). However, the results are far from conclusive. Perse and Rubin's (1989) study indicates that parasocial interactions, like social relationships, resemble interpersonal friendships providing companionship and leading to the reduction of uncertainty.

To sum up, as a positive moral emotion, admiration has drawn little academic attention. Our study seeks to explore the formation of admiration for the famous and to understand how this emotion guides people's actions and behaviors by analyzing individuals' experiences with admiration.

## Method

As the present study seeks to understand how people experience admiration for the famous, the approach adopted here is

that of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which "aims to explore in detail participants' personal lived experience and how participants make sense of that personal experience" (Smith, 2004, p. 40). IPA was selected due to its ability to offer insights into how a person makes sense of a phenomenon in their particular context (Moriah, 2018). We argue that exploring this psychological approach is particularly appropriate in this study, as it allows us to understand the experiences and perspectives of individuals, how they ascribed meanings to admiration for famous individuals, and how these experiences shaped individuals' personal values and behaviors.

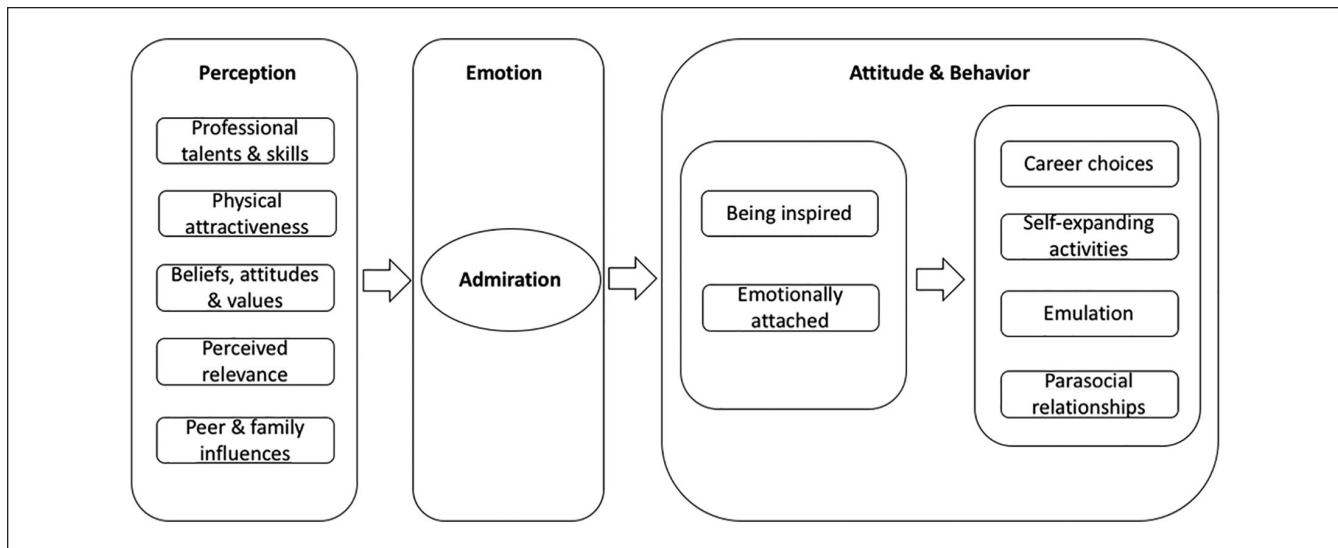
## Participants

To encourage authentic answers, we recruited participants from our personal connections (e.g., through work, family, and social settings). This is consistent with the findings of P. Banister et al. (1994), who suggested that prior relationships with participants help to facilitate greater disclosure and reflexive commentary. Consistent with an IPA approach, this study adopts a qualitative sample to enable an in-depth understanding of human life. We sought to include respondents who had experienced admiration for a famous individual at some point in their lives. Twenty-six respondents who lived in southern England were identified using this convenience sampling technique. Although respondents were not purposefully selected (i.e., according to theoretical criteria), the final sample covered a broad range in age, sex, educational background, and race. The sample consisted of 16 female and 10 male respondents, with ages ranging from 14 to 61 years, of whom 13 were British nationals and four were of other European nationalities; 11 had attained a university degree or higher qualification.

## Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Questions were open-ended and based around a broad set of topics covering, for example, who the participants admired, how the admiration was developed, what attributes of the admiree were found most attractive, the perceptions of a role model and their influences, and whether admiring a famous person changed the admirer's attitudes and actions in life. All interviews were conducted by the first author and a research assistant. Respondents were ensured confidentiality prior to each interview.

As data collection through IPA requires interviewees to access their memories and construct meaning from their past experiences (Willig, 2008), the researchers maintained a relaxed atmosphere, and respondents were made aware of privacy agreements. All interviews were conducted at times and places convenient to the respondents, in quiet and private surroundings. The interviews lasted from 60 to 100 min



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework of the admiration for the famous.

and were recorded with the respondents' approval and then transcribed.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was undertaken jointly by the first and second authors, following the four stages outlined by Willig (2008). In the first stage, the interview scripts were read and re-read by the authors to gain familiarity with the major themes. The second stage required the researchers to identify themes that characterized each section of the text. As recommended by Smith and Osborn (2003), one extensive script was selected for initial coding, which was carried out separately by the two authors. In Stage 3, the authors met to agree on the interpretation and the list of themes, which were then developed into a template. All scripts were then analyzed using this provisional template, but new themes were revealed and discussed. In Stage 4, the authors met to discuss the final themes from all scripts and produced an agreed-upon template that consisted of the cluster labels and subordinate theme labels. To protect their identities, the respondents were given pseudonyms. The final template includes both content themes (e.g., reasons for admiration, actions in life) and interpretative themes (e.g., developing hope, increased self-esteem, influence on career and influence on self-expansion, influence on well-being).

### Findings

Our data analysis revealed underlying connections between individuals' perceptions, emotions, and their attitudinal and behavioral consequences (see Figure 1). Our findings are consistent with previous literature that indicated that wide ranges of individuals' behaviors are shaped by their beliefs

and attitudes (e.g., Arvola et al., 2008; Hegner et al., 2017). In addition, empirical studies have confirmed that emotions have a direct impact on attitudes (e.g., Labroo & Ramanathan, 2007). Our findings provide further evidence illustrating that first, the positive emotion of admiration is shaped by a wide range of perceptions, including professional talents and skills, physical attractiveness, beliefs, attitudes, values, and perceived relevance, as well as peer and family influences. Second, our findings showed that the experience of admiration would lead to attitudinal consequences, including the feeling of being inspired and emotional attachment to the admirees. Finally, these positive attitudes may lead to a range of intentions and behaviors, such as choosing professional careers, engaging in self-expanding activities, developing self-image through emulation, and forming parasocial relationships. The following sections will further unpack our framework by providing key themes and supporting quotes emerged from our analysis.

### Whom Did Participants Admire?

Overall, 56 famous admirees were discussed in the interviews. Not surprisingly, these included many actors (e.g., Angelina Jolie), singers (e.g., Beyoncé Knowles-Carter), and athletes (e.g., Roger Federer). The participants also mentioned many other famous individuals who may not fall in the traditional celebrity category, such as political leaders (e.g., Mahatma Gandhi), writers (e.g., J. K. Rowling), and scholars (e.g., Alan Turing).

### Reason for Admiration

Participants provided various explanations with regard to the forming of their admiration. A number of perceptions emerged

from our interviews and are considered key factors contributing to the construction of admiration (see Figure 1). We will discuss each in turn.

Admiration can most usefully be understood as a pleasant (or perhaps a mixed-valence) emotion whose immediate target is another person and whose intentional object is that person's excellence, positively evaluated (Kristjánsson, 2017). According to our findings, being attracted to the admirees' *professional talents, knowledge, and skills* was the most reported reason for forming admiration, which would be closely linked to their own expectations and experiences. Becky, a 39-year-old housewife and mother of two young children, told the researcher her story regarding Russian violist Yuri Bashmet: "I liked him just because he was a really amazing viola player and he just made a great sound and could play really fast and had a good tone." She continued to explain her recognition of his talents, due to "the viola not being a particularly well-known instrument. There's not loads of people that are famous for playing the viola so it's rare to find somebody." Similarly, Anna (age: 38) admired British naturalist Sir David Attenborough for his knowledge in zoology and recalled how he inspired her to study science:

He was the person who opened up that world for me. He makes it accessible to people who aren't scientists and who aren't zoologists . . . He ran BBC2, he knows about his subject matter, he's just very knowledgeable.

Admiration as a result of someone's *physical attractiveness* was the second most discussed theme and emerged repeatedly across the interviews. Here, respondents' age appeared to have an impact. Many young respondents claimed they were attracted to an admiree's physical appearance and tried to imitate his or her clothing choices and style. For example, 14-year-old Laura described copying Stefani Germanotta's (Lady Gaga) dress and hairstyles. This finding is consistent with previous literature that indicates that adolescents are predominantly attracted by celebrity endorsers who are attractive (e.g., Chan et al., 2013). This may be because younger respondents are not at a developmental stage to understand other features of their admirees' in great depth. Therefore, attractive admirees are more appealing to younger respondents and are treated differently (Saxton et al., 2006). In addition, Richins (1991) argues that celebrities can serve as a source of cultural reference for consumers to pursue self-improvement. Onu et al. (2016) argue that the elicitation of admiration is dependent on the social identities involved. Our findings indicate that as famous people often represent an upward comparison, they may appeal to juveniles and young adults who are still in search of the "perfect self."

Some older respondents also admitted that they tried to be "like someone" in their adolescent years. Particular scenes and images from films, TV series, magazines, and advertisements appeared to trigger memories of these emotions. For example, Linda (age: 62) recalled a specific scene from a

1965 British drama film that stayed in her mind for nearly 50 years:

I used to really like Julie Christie, the actress, film star. I used to think it would be quite nice to be like her. There was a film called *Darling* that she was in, and she was walking down the street very casually swinging her handbag, and I used to think, yes, it'd be nice to be like that as well.

From our observations, appreciation and respect for the admiree's *beliefs, attitudes, and values* was also a cause for building admiration. Amy (age: 24) admired Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie because of their "other-serving" values:

I'm really fond of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie . . . primarily because of the fact that they've adopted kids from different countries, and countries which have had problems. Plus . . . they do a lot of charity work. So possibly half of the earnings that they made are contributed towards donations. So that's something I really look up to and I really like.

This conclusion is similar to the findings of Ang and Chan (2018), who find that adolescents devote much time and energy to their admired celebrities because of their good looks and attractive voices. Simultaneously, some psychological characteristics such as good attitudes and positive energy can further motivate the participants to admire them.

As admirees may be considered "competing representations of who we can be" (Shankar et al., 2009, p. 76), admirers may recognize those who appear to have similar attributes to themselves as able to enhance their self-identity. This was the case of Vicky (age: 24), who had read Madonna's biography and appreciated her attitudes and the high levels of motivation that had helped Madonna get through a difficult early life:

She [Madonna] went to New York and started to dance . . . her life was very, very difficult in the beginning. But because of her will, maybe that's why I admire her so much because she has a very strong will and she's very motivated, very ambitious, and she can do everything she wants. She shows that it doesn't matter where you come from or who your family is, you can do everything and you can succeed in everything, it only depends on you.

The above example shows that *perceived relevance* is an important element in the configuration of admiration. Other examples demonstrated that this may include demographic similarities such as age, gender, nationality, and ethnical group, as well as psychographic similarities such as personality. For example, 17-year-old Jackie associated herself with Rebecca Adlington in the aspects of personal traits, age, nationality, and interests:

Both of us have a passion for swimming and she is very competitive, I get the feeling for that, I'm quite competitive myself. She obviously works hard, I work hard, I think. I think

that's three pointers . . . We are both British, and she is of a similar age.

This finding is in line with the literature, which indicates that sports heroes and entertainment figures are often seen as comparative referents and may provide standards that individuals, who possess similar qualities and backgrounds, are able to achieve (Bearden & Etzel, 1982).

As observed through our interviews, *peer and family influences* could play a significant role in forming admiration. Anna's admiration for Michael Jackson and Adel's admiration for J. K. Rowling were both influenced by their peers. Shelly developed admiration for Princess Diana because her mother was an admirer:

I think I was in the fourth grade [when I started to like Diana], because my mum really loved her. She would see stuff on her, read books on her . . . then she would tell me about her so I started learning about her, and then I started following her and her lifestyle and what she's doing.

This finding supports the view that parents, teachers, and peers are information providers in one's socialization process and thus representative of normative referents who provide the individual with norms, attitudes, and values through direct interaction (Childers & Rao, 1992). In another example, which is more extreme, interviewee Linda had to give up her dream of becoming a composer or violinist because her parents' changed home, which eventually made her choose to quit school. Another interviewee, Laura (age: 14), who admires Lady Gaga very much, however, refused to take Gaga as role model because she felt that her parents did not want her to do so; "I guess they would want me to inspired by someone more serious, maybe like a proper fashion designer, I suppose."

### **How Did Admiration Change Participants' Attitudes and Behaviors?**

*Developing hope to get through difficult times in one's life.* Many of our respondents reported that admiring others who were outstanding motivated them to get out of difficult situations and stay positive. The feeling of *being inspired by* and *emotionally attached to* the admirees helped develop hope and internal drive for our respondents.

First, admiration for outstanding others can lead to inspiration in the followers, which can in turn transform into a motivational drive to encourage individuals pursuing personal goals in their lives. Linda's story demonstrates how Susan Tomes inspired her to keep pursuing her interests even at difficult times: As a single mother in the 1980s, Linda gave up her dream of obtaining a music degree to raise her two sons, and instead became a piano teacher to support her family. However, she then suffered an injury and found it difficult to play piano. She was frustrated and felt uncertain about her family's future:

I was feeling a bit fed up about everything, and not too sure what I wanted to do. I'd had tennis elbow and it was hurting when I played and I was feeling a little bit unsure about it all.

She described how a meeting with Susan Tomes had changed her attitudes about her career and family:

When I went to see her [Susan Tomes], I was so inspired by her playing. It made me want to start playing again . . . I hadn't felt very enthusiastic and then when I went to see her, I thought, yes, I really want to do it.

Linda completed her diploma in piano teaching and raised her children on her own.

The majority of our respondents had no direct interaction with their admirees. Inspiration was often triggered through the work of the admirees, such as a song or a book. From the age of 14, Tom started admiring John Lennon and Mahatma Gandhi, who advocated non-violence and the civil rights movements. Tom was impressed with their willingness to pursue great things regardless of the difficulty involved. At the age of 44, Tom lost his job at the local council because of the 2008 financial crisis and government spending cuts. At the same time, this father of two young children had just been through a divorce. He was not able to find a job for the following 2 years and was facing bankruptcy at one point.

I was feeling very down, constantly worrying about how I would pay for my bills. I was living on cereals for ages . . . not able to sleep . . . Then one day, I heard his voice over the radio: "Pools of sorrow, waves of joy . . . Nothing's gonna change my world . . ." I know this song by heart, and I can always remember the lyrics. Then I thought I would be fine . . . He [John Lennon] just did it because it's something he believed in. These kinds of thoughts also have kept me going.

During our conversation, Tom recalled many John Lennon quotes and lyrics. He mentioned that he could always find a connection with them. Tom believed that his admiree fought through similar tough times through positive thinking and believing in himself. Tom tried to follow John Lennon's spirit and has now started his own business.

Similarly, Niki (age: 27) hoped to one day become a business entrepreneur and claimed to be inspired by Donald Trump's success and his attitude while facing setbacks:

I like Donald Trump. I read his stories about how he has gone through bankruptcy a few times but he's still found a way to recover from that . . . I think he's trying to tell us how you can succeed in your life, how can you be happy . . . He is very positive and very inspiring, he gives me this kind of inspiration to think about something new, like when I wake up tomorrow morning I have something new on my mind.

Second, participants often describe how they are emotionally connected to their admirees and their work. This phenomenon

is particularly salient within the music domain, as more than half of the participants talked about their admiration for musicians and how music influenced them emotionally.

Natasha (age: 23) admires Beyoncé and described the singer as “open-minded, non-judgmental, down-to-earth, and family orientated.” She often feels connected to her songs.

I have songs she [Beyonce] sings and I'd say I relate to her. So you tend to feel sometimes, oh, my God, she sounds like me or she's going through the same things I'm going through or she sounds like someone I could be friends with, I could have a very good rapport with, something like.

Similarly, Tom can feel an emotional attachment with John Lennon and explained how that affected him:

I think through music you can sometimes feel close to somebody and I think perhaps in beliefs maybe what John Lennon believed in and was fighting for, I think sometimes I feel close to that . . . if you listen to some of John Lennon he had a way of expressing himself in a totally unusual way. He didn't put things in a simple way. Songs are often quite simple but he used words to give a feeling, so a word like “darkness” he would use instead of—I don't know, I can't really describe it. A good quote from one of his song is “pools of sorrow, waves of joy” and it just gives you an impression of something without actually saying this is sad or this is happy so it's interesting.

Our findings are in line with literature on the influence of music and musicians on listeners, which indicate that music evokes emotional responses (Lundqvist et al., 2009). Music listening is a common and effective means for mood regulation (North et al., 2000) and self-regulation (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007). These findings suggest that admiration is important in the construction of admirers' self-concept and self-identify, and that this is particularly salient among adolescents. To admirers at different ages in their life, musical role models and their music serve as a means for emotional expression and relaxation, reduce loneliness, provide experiences of company and understanding, activate pleasant feelings, and can provide motivation to make life more meaningful to individuals.

Like Linda, Tom, and Niki, many interviewees used their knowledge of their admirees' journeys to help regulate their own negative emotions. This finding illustrates that admiration may contribute to stress-coping through emotional processing and expression. This builds upon the findings of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and Staton et al. (2005), who found that positive emotions in general may facilitate this process. More specifically, admiration may contribute to the emotion-focused strategies involving active movement *toward* a stressful encounter, in that the experience of admiration may facilitate the feeling of being emotionally supported, and encourage one to look for active acceptance or positive reinterpretation of the situation, as with the COPE scales of Folkman et al. (1986) and the approach-oriented process of Staton et al. (2005).

*A drive of pursuing career progress and engaging in self-expanding activities.* As discussed earlier, many respondents reported developing admiration because of the admirees' achievements rather than their attributed status (Rojek, 2001). These respondents saw them as personal heroes (E. N. Banister & Cocker, 2014) in their chosen professions and were inspired to reach the same level. For a few interviewees, this idolization helped to reinforce their *career choice*. Alex (age: 34) admired the British mathematician Alan Turing and was determined to thrive in the same profession:

Alan Turing has obviously influenced my life because he defines the mathematical fact that I spend all my time studying. So he basically defined computability and I work on computability, and in a very direct way he's had a big influence on me.

For a few others, this idolization provided long-term career direction. Mike (age: 25) started to admire the computer programmer Bjarne Stroustrup, the original developer of the C++ programming language, when he was 15. He recalled how this admiration guided him to achieve his long-term career goal: “I actually started looking into programming when I started to read Bjarne Stroustrup's stuff. I was so impressed with his insane intelligence. He's an incredibly intelligent person.” After he graduated from university, Mike was offered a position in a large organization as a software developer. He recounted his excitement: “I passed their tests and got the job I once dreamed about. I wanted to tell everyone.” To pursue further career development in this direction, Mike later enrolled in a master's degree in computer science. “I want to preferably go into security consultation and do a Master's course to kick-start that.”

Steve, a 33-year-old violinist described his “crush” on German violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter between the ages of 8 and 15. This feeling then inspired him to pursue violin playing. “She was very attractive, physically attractive, but mainly just the fact that she was an amazing violinist and attractive as well because obviously to a young boy learning the violin that's quite a motivation.” Steve became a professional violinist after graduating from the Royal Academy of Music.

Some respondents reflected that they had taken up *self-expanding activities* as a result of admiration. For example, Tom had been a builder since he was 20. At the age of 35, Tom became a student at the London School of Economics, studying town planning. He explained this decision:

In a way John Lennon and Gandhi inspired me to try doing things and not think “I'm a builder and I'll just carry on building.” I thought that's not what I wanted to do. I wanted more satisfaction out of my life so I thought that would be more satisfying and in a way people like those inspire me.

Like Tom, many participants experienced an increase in self-esteem and self-expansion motivation (Aron et al., 1998) and felt, “if they can do it, I can do it too.” These data suggest that



admiration may help to develop a sense of self-belief, and that admiring a successful person could lead to positive emotions and facilitate goal striving, as it makes people focus on rewarding stimuli that in turn produce a narrowing of attentional focus that makes it easy to strive for the goal (Bargh et al., 2010). In this sense, having someone to admire may lead to optimism and more persistence in striving for one's goal.

Not all admiration is associated with the admirer's career and professional development; admiring famous people also played an important role in our participants' choice of leisure pursuits and hobby activities. Nine participants suggested that admiring an outstanding person helped them to maintain their leisure activities. Jackie, a 17-year-old, A-level student, was an admirer of British Olympic gold medal-winning swimmer Rebecca Adlington. She said,

Rebecca Adlington competes in the Olympics and she's a really fast swimmer, and she's won some gold medals for England . . . I just aspire to be like her swimming standard because one of my dreams would be to be in the Olympics swimming although I don't think that's going to happen.

While Jackie did not wish to pursue swimming as a career, she swam extensively in her leisure time and was a member of the lifeguarding club. We found that many of our respondents were able to commit to these activities as a result of having someone they admire. To give a few more examples, Tom had played guitar for over 30 years, owing to the influence of John Lennon; and Ross has played basketball for 22 years after he was motivated by Michael Jordan's success. These activities tend to be long-term pursuits among the admirers. Some other interviewees reported that they started new activities and learned new skills as a result of their admiration. For example, Kelly, a secondary school student, said that she took cooking classes after watching Jamie Oliver's TV programs.

Participants suggested that engaging in these kinds of self-expanding activities contributed to their physical and mental health. While most of them recognized that they might never achieve the same level as their admirees, they saw these activities as an enjoyable source of personal accomplishment in their daily routine.

Swimming makes me relax. I feel free in the water. It gives me time to think. I know I would never be a professional swimmer but it's just nice to do something you really like when you are not studying. (Jackie)

**Development of self-image through emulation.** Famous individuals can be considered "opinion leaders" (Rogers, 1995). Central to this diffusion process is "social imitation," whereby fans use celebrities as credible sources of information and role models (Erdogan, 1999). Findings from this section further support this point. Half of our interviewees stated that they imitated their admirees' appearance and tended to buy

the products associated with their admirees. For example, Alex had attempted to imitate Tom Cruise's classic image in the movie *Top Gun* by wearing a similar pair of sunglasses and aviator jacket: "You might watch a film and think, yes, that guy looks very cool in that particular jacket and with those sunglasses on, or whatever, and decide it's a nice idea to buy something like that."

Graham, a 31-year-old artist, recollected how he tried to emulate the English band Blur's appearance and attitudes at the age of 12. He now reflected that he might have been doing this to establish where he fitted in within his social group.

I mean the clothes you wore would be based on the clothes they [Blur] were wearing or you style yourself on them. As I said before, taking that attitude to life, that kind of stance—are you rebellious? Do you go with the system? Whatever, that whole viewpoint on your place in the world comes a bit from them.

As a teenager, Graham had just started to be concerned with his self-image and had a small group of friends who were all fans of Blur. He believed he developed his identity through copying Blur so that he could bond with his group.

I wanted to fit in with my group of friends, separate my little group from the rest. We were listening to Blur and other indie music. It was not only about dressing like them. It was also about having the similar attitudes. I mean, being rebellious, not doing something because you are told to.

Our findings showed that admiration for someone famous might facilitate the development of one's sense of group belonging (Kiesner et al., 2002). This may be beneficial to individuals, as the group membership literature suggests that closeness in peer relationships leads to popularity and good social reputation (Cauce, 1986), enhanced self-esteem (McGuire & Weisz, 1982), and positive psychosocial adjustment (Buhrmester, 1990).

**Formation of parasocial relationships.** Our participants indicated that they established long-term one-sided socioemotional bonds with their admirees. These enduring psychological bonds can be seen as parasocial relationships (Dibble et al., 2016) between the admirers and their admirees.

Adel (age: 14) admires J. K. Rowling and often talks about her books with friends at school.

I've read her (J. K. Rowling) books through several times and I've borrowed audio books from the library so I can listen to them. While reading and listening to her books, I felt as if we are not just friends but soulmates. Her words also speak about my feelings and make me feel comfortable.

Twenty-six-year-old Gemma is "in love" with the British actor Robert Pattinson because of the *Twilight* series.

Sometimes I was looking on the internet on Google about Robert Pattinson, what's going on and about the movies and especially *Twilight*. Not too much every day because I'm not privileged to have free time because of my Master. Before Master for sure I would spend more time in order to find something on him but now only a few minutes every day.

Gemma also talked about she would like to meet Robert Pattinson in person and she thinks Robert is "just like an old friend to me."

We talk about his [Robert Pattinson's] life, we talk about his music and we talk about my need to go to Notting Hill and just find him. I'm not going to talk to him, I want to see him, that he really exists. Even though most of my friends they mock me I don't care, I just express what I want.

As illustrated by Adel and Gemma's experiences, many of our interviewees formed a long-term association with their admirees. To understand why our interviewees established parasocial relationships requires talking multiple perspectives from psychology and communication (Schiappa et al., 2007). Some of our interviewees (e.g., Adel) mentioned that the shyness and loneliness may have created a motivation for this relationship, and others (e.g., Gemma) indicated that they enjoy watching TV and movies and were able to feel satisfied and close to their idols. These motivations all contribute to the formation of parasocial relationships. As a result, parasocial relationships may influence individuals' perception of body image (Young et al., 2013) and consumption behaviors (Yuan et al., 2016).

**Potential pitfalls of admiration.** While the majority of participants provided positive examples of how admiring a famous person inspired them to pursue a career or take up new skills, our data also revealed some behaviors that were less positive. One third of our participants reported that they spent a significant amount of funds and time on following their admirees' news or purchasing the products endorsed by their admirees. For those who did not meet the time and monetary demand to follow on a daily basis, it became some kind of "guilty pleasure." Aruguete et al. (2019) argued that celebrity admiration is associated with materialism, with many people desiring to possess the expensive clothes, houses, and vehicles that many celebrities own (Green et al., 2014). There is a dimension of fantasy in many of the described experiences. Some participants told us about their fantasies of connecting more deeply with the person they admired, for example, Laura (age: 14) dreamed of performing on stage with Lady Gaga. Two respondents also described being "in love" with their admiree and imagined a romantic relationship with him or her. Gemma developed a deep identification with Robert Pattinson and as a result, she imagined a relationship with him: "I wish I could meet someone like him [Robert Pattinson] in my life. He's sensitive, he's quiet, he doesn't create problems. He's not arrogant . . . I am trying to find him in

someone." Gemma, 26, told us that she had been on many dates, but had never had a long-term relationship, although she wanted to settle down. Gemma felt that her goal of finding someone just like Robert Pattinson may have limited her opportunities to find a partner.

A suggestion emerged from our findings that admiration might lead to unrealistic expectations about oneself and run the risk of creating a sense of pessimism if these expectations are not fulfilled. Oliver, aged 17, told us "it can be difficult to keep up with this, sometimes. You know, I felt that I can never be as good as them. It's frustrating sometimes." He told us that he became disappointed when comparing his own work with that of the composer John Williams. Our interviews indicated that individuals might become disillusioned once they realize that the gap between them and their admirees can never be closed. Rather than embracing their lives, the upward social comparison may make their own shortcomings more noticeable. This echoes Wheeler and Miyake's (1992) concern that upward social comparison could lead to negative mood and threaten self-devaluation.

## Discussion

As has been discussed, our participants admired famous individuals for various reasons. Some harbored admiration because of perceived "similarities," for example, shared backgrounds, values, or demographical characteristics. Others formed admiration because of the admirees' exceptional talents or physical attractiveness. Others still formed admiration as a result of peer and family influence.

Our participants tended to establish a kind of parasocial relationship with the famous people they admired. They consciously sought information about their admirees and felt emotionally attached to them. Sometimes admiration works as a means for emotional expression and relaxation, which may help to reduce loneliness and provide experiences of company and understanding, which in turn may create aspiration for the admirers to face adversity through positive coping strategies (Staton et al., 2005), help them to establish self-esteem, and facilitate goal striving. Through the successful stories of their admirees, our participants were able to achieve higher levels of optimism and motivation. These findings support Fredrickson's (1998) broaden-and-build theory, because admiration, as one of the positive emotions, acts to broaden an individual's momentary thought-action repertoire (e.g., by encouraging individuals to engage in self-expansion) as well as equip the individual with enduring personal resources (e.g., the development of hope to get through difficult times).

Our data suggest that some admiration experiences are more likely to provoke positive emotions and behaviors than others. If the admirers consider that their admirees share similar personal interests and values, or have gone through similar circumstances in life, this belief is likely to encourage admirers to seek new opportunities or self-growth (e.g.,

pursuing a career, registering for a course, and taking up new leisure activities). On the contrary, if admirers are only attracted to an admiree's physical appearance or admiration under the influence of others (peers or family), these experiences are less likely to induce positive thinking or behavior. For instance, some participants in the current study reported they simply imitated admirees' hair and dressing styles or imagined a romantic relationship with their admirees rather than engaging in activities that "facilitate optimal human functioning" (Donaldson et al., 2014).

We take a psychological constructionist perspective, which focuses on the heterogeneity of experience with regard to admiration. We argue that admiration as a positive emotion can influence behavior in various ways depending on the interpersonal context in which admiration occurs. The view of Condon et al. (2014) that emotions are situated conceptualizations explains how admiration can produce different impacts. These scholars suggest that "different situated conceptualizations underlie the variety of experiences within an emotion category, and therefore underlie different behavioral responses" (p. 12). Our findings suggest that depending on context and an individual's values and norms, different experiences of admiration may result in different perceptions and actions. For instance, the feelings and behavior that Alex experienced in his admiration for Alan Turing were different from Vicky's experience in admiring Madonna.

Nonetheless, we are mindful about the potential pitfalls of admiration. The admirees are removed from the present and made remote, yet with a power to bring substance to an individual's life through their own attributed status and media representation. As with other imaginary relationships, individuals "consume" famous individuals and the aura around them to access a fantasy world, to escape from daily routine, and to achieve an ideal state of being (McCracken, 1989). As revealed in the present study, if one starts to think that an admiree's media representation is a true reflection of that admiree, one may develop unrealistic expectations. In other words, an admirer may only see the achievements of the admirees while forgetting that success also requires hard work and some tolerance of failure.

The points here demonstrate the differing sides of admiration. Admiration may have beneficial outcomes for an individual, leading to a more positive mental state and greater personal fulfillment; however, it may also have less beneficial consequences and may create a barrier to achieving healthy goals. For example, it may lead to expectations that are unrealistic or beyond one's abilities to achieve. The differing consequences may come about as a result of not only the particular attributes admired but also the situation of the admiree. In our examples, Steve felt that his teenage "crush" on violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter had not had a detrimental effect on his personal well-being, but had facilitated an aspiration in achieving his goal of becoming a violinist. On the contrary, Gemma, who was at a stage in her life where she wished to find a stable relationship, felt that her strong admiration for

her male idol was causing a barrier to her ability to find a partner. These two examples demonstrate that no emotion should be considered in isolation from the context in which they occur, and that as depending upon this context, "whether admiration is all things considered appropriate depends also on the relevance of the ideal they approximate to our own projects" (Kauppinen, 2019), the results of admiration may differ in how they enable an individual to achieve personal fulfillment and well-being.

## Implications and Limitations

This study has two implications. First, it shows that the experience of admiration for the famous provokes positive emotion in individuals, and this emotion in turn changes their attitude and behaviors. These findings may help psychologists and psychiatrists to develop interventions that can develop individuals' mental health and well-being. Second, the research contributes to the conceptualization of admiration. It will help future research to develop measurement scales for this construct and test its influences.

We acknowledge that this study has a small sample size. Thus, our findings are tentative and no claims about generalizability can be made. Geographically, all participants were resident in southern England, which is a relatively stable area in political and economic terms. Moreover, as some participants were reflecting back on experiences that had happened years or even decades before, they might have forgotten the details of particular events, the rationales for their actions, or the emotions that they experienced at the time.

Longitudinal qualitative interviews may be adopted in future studies to explore how admiration may change over time and the factors associated with these changes. In addition, future research may look into how admiration is experienced with other positive emotions, including interest, awe, joy, recognition, reverence, appreciation, and love, and how these emotions collectively contribute to well-being.

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