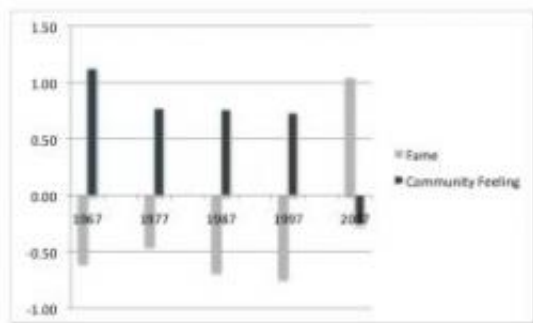


# Popular TV shows teach children fame is most important value, psychologists report

July 12 2011, By Stuart Wolpert

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TV programs have emphasized fame and de-emphasized community involvement. As TV programs have emphasized fame, they have de-emphasized community involvement. (Credit: Yalda T. Uhls & Patricia M. Greenfield/UCLA)

*"Don't you know who I am? Remember my name. Fame! I'm gonna live forever." -- Irene Cara, "Fame"*

Fame is the No. 1 value emphasized by television shows popular with 9- to 11-year-olds, a dramatic change over the past 10 years, UCLA psychologists report in a new study.

On a list of 16 values, [fame](#) jumped from the 15th spot, where it was in both 1987 and 1997, to the first spot in 2007. From 1997 to 2007, benevolence (being kind and helping others) fell from second to 13th,

and tradition dropped from fourth to 15th.

The study assessed the values of characters in popular television shows in each decade from 1967 to 2007, with two shows per decade evaluated, including "Andy Griffith" and "The Lucy Show" in 1967, "Laverne & Shirley" and "Happy Days" in 1977, and "American Idol" and "Hannah Montana" in 2007.

"I was shocked, especially by the dramatic changes in the last 10 years," said Yalda T. Uhls, a UCLA doctoral student in developmental psychology and the lead author of the study. "I thought fame would be important but did not expect this drastic an increase or such a dramatic decrease in other values, such as community feeling. If you believe that television reflects the culture, as I do, then American culture has changed drastically."

Community feeling (being part of a group) was the No. 1 value in 1967, 1977 and 1997, and it was the No. 2 value in 1987, the study found. By 2007, however, it had fallen out of the top 10, to 11th.

"The rise of fame in preteen television may be one influence in the documented rise of narcissism in our culture," said the study's senior author, Patricia M. Greenfield, a UCLA distinguished professor of psychology and director of the Children's Digital Media Center @ Los Angeles. "Popular television shows are part of the environment that causes the increased narcissism, but they also reflect the culture. They both reflect it and serve as a powerful socialization force for the next generation."

The top five values in 2007 were fame, achievement, popularity, image and financial success. In 1997, the top five were community feeling, benevolence (being kind and helping others), image, tradition and self-acceptance. In 2007, benevolence dropped to the 12th spot and

community feeling fell to 11th. Financial success went from 12th in 1967 and 1997 to fifth in 2007.

The two least emphasized values in 2007 were spiritualism (16th) and tradition (15th); tradition had been ranked fourth in 1997.

The study is published in the July issue of *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, a peer-reviewed journal featuring psychosocial research on the impact of the Internet on people and society.

Uhls and Greenfield analyzed Nielsen demographic data to determine the most popular shows with 9- to 11-year-olds and then conducted a survey of 60 participants, aged 18 to 59, to determine how important each value was in episodes of the various shows.

"The biggest change occurred from 1997 to 2007, when YouTube, Facebook and Twitter exploded in popularity," Uhls said. "Their growth parallels the rise in narcissism and the drop in empathy among college students in the United States, as other research has shown. We don't think this is a coincidence. Changes we have seen in narcissism and empathy are being reflected on television. In the past, children had their home, community and school; now they have thousands of 'friends' who look at their photos and their posts and comment on them. The growth of social media gives children access to an audience beyond the school grounds."

"If you have 400 or more Facebook friends, which many high school and college students do, you are on stage," Greenfield said. "It's intrinsically narcissistic."

Quite a few television shows that are popular with "tweens" depict young people achieving great fame despite little hard work, Uhls said. Such

shows, including "Hannah Montana," which portrays the life of girl who is a high school student by day and rock star by night, do not convey how rare such success is or the sacrifices that are required to achieve it, according to Uhls, who formerly worked as a movie studio executive. She is disturbed by the messages that [television shows](#) are conveying to children.

"Even when parents are an active presence in their children's lives, peers and media go hand in hand, and peers can be more influential than parents," said Uhls, who has an 11-year-old daughter. "Teens and tweens have the ability to talk with their friends 24/7. The ability for an average person to access an audience is new. Technology has given kids pathways to reach an audience as never before, and they are able to use the technology at a young age.

"Preteens are at an age when they want to be popular, just like the famous teenagers they see on TV and the Internet," she said. "With Internet celebrities and reality TV stars everywhere, the pathway for nearly anyone to become famous, without a connection to hard work and skill, may seem easier than ever. When being famous and rich is much more important than being kind to others, what will happen to kids as they form their values and their identities?"

In a second study, not yet published, Uhls and Greenfield interviewed 20 children (fourth, fifth and sixth graders) and found the children are learning the values television teaches. Fame seems to be a goal of many children, and they are keenly aware of the size of their social network.

"Parents' influence on their children has been diminished," Greenfield said. "Kids are living so much of their lives online."

Parents should talk with their children about the shows they watch, Greenfield and Uhls advise, "but it's impossible for most parents to

consume the amount of media their children consume," Uhls said.

**More information:** [www.cyberpsychology.eu/view.ph ...  
2011061601&article=1](http://www.cyberpsychology.eu/view.php...2011061601&article=1)

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