

Mr. Rogers and the Psychology of Neighborly Love

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Created May 29 2012 - 10:41am



Mr. Rogers is undoubtedly one of the most beloved cultural icons in American history. His TV show, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, ran for more than thirty years and inspired many generations of young viewers. Admittedly, I remember sometimes finding the show a little cheesy and slow-paced (I wanted to be watching *Saved By The Bell* instead). But there was also something comforting about Mr. Rogers' kind, gentle demeanor. When he looked at me and said, "I like you just the way you are," I felt like he really meant it, even though he didn't actually know me. Mr. Rogers' message of unconditional acceptance is a simple one, but from a social psychological perspective it's more complicated than it might seem. As much as we extoll Mr. Rogers, most of us do little more than pay lip service to his ideals, despite our best intentions. So what's getting in the way?

1. The problem of deservingness. It's easy to accept people who are clearly good people, but what about those who behave in cruel and heartless ways, or who hurt us beyond repair? There are times when we simply cannot muster compassion or forgiveness for someone, no matter how hard we try. Researchers believe that we evolved an ability to discriminate between those who deserve compassion (e.g., those who are vulnerable or blameless) and those who do not (e.g., those who dig their own graves), so that we can reserve our resources for those who need them most and protect ourselves from exploitation. Mr. Rogers was not unconcerned with deservingness, however, and he certainly seemed to feel that some behaviors were unacceptable, especially those that involved demeaning and disrespecting others. His call for unconditional acceptance was more about appreciation for a person's basic humanity, no matter how bad their crimes, and a willingness to try to understand rather than simply judge. This also applies to self-treatment. Self-forgiveness without remorse and accountability is not true self-forgiveness, and "You are special" does not mean that you are more special than others or

entitled to special treatment, though some have (mis)interpreted it that way.



2. The acceptance paradox. The idea that humans have a need to belong to social groups is so fundamental in psychology that one of the seminal papers on this topic has been cited 2572 times since its publication in 1995. Belonging doesn't just feel good — it's often essential for our very survival, even in modern times. Mr. Rogers recognized the importance of this need and sought to make children feel a sense of belonging in his inclusive "neighborhood." The problem, however, is that in the real world many of the groups we belong to are defined by their boundaries. Groucho Marx famously said that he wouldn't want to belong to a club that would accept someone like him as a member — it's a joke, but it may be true that acceptance feels (and sometimes is) more valuable when not just anyone can attain it. Researchers have argued that people strive not only to be distinct from other groups, but to feel *positively* distinct. In other words, the paradox of social acceptance is that it can't exist without some degree of social exclusion, and exclusion is the breeding ground for the types of problems that Mr. Rogers (who was himself bullied as a child) sought to remedy. The ideal seems to be to preserve the beneficial aspects of group distinctions, such as the support of a community, while bypassing the dark sides, but the line between ingroup loyalty and outgroup derogation can be a slippery slope.

3. The invisibility of altruism. Acts of cruelty tend to get more attention than acts of kindness, perhaps because, psychologically speaking, bad is stronger than good. Some psychologists don't even believe that true altruism exists, arguing that what appears to benefit others is actually driven by selfish goals (such as gaining praise or group status) or selfish genes (e.g., kin selection). In this climate, it's easy to be cynical about human nature. But Mr. Rogers took a different approach. When, as a young boy, he was disturbed by the horrors he saw on the news, his mother told him to "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." He then went on to become one of them, and to see that potential in others.

Unconditional acceptance may be a lofty task given the many psychological obstacles that stand in our way, but as Mr. Rogers showed through his unwavering example, it's not an impossible one.

For more on Mr. Rogers, see the new documentary, Mr. Rogers and Me, and Davy Rothbart's This American Life segment.

References:

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