

Running head: MR. ROGERS' NEIGHBORHOOD

A Uses & Gratification Study of Viewers of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*

Shane Tilton

Ohio University of Zanesville
1425 Newark Road
Zanesville, OH 43701
(740) 453-0762
tiltons@ohio.edu

for consideration of the

2006 BEA Conference in the Debut Category

in the Interest Division of Research

This presentation requires a computer hooked up to a projector.

Abstract

Fred Rogers was "America's Neighbor." Since his humble start as an unseen puppeteer for the "The Children's Corner" show in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, he has always had an interest in children and teaching them how to be good neighbors. Everyday for the past three decades, millions of school age children rode the trolley to the Land of Make-Believe to visit the Kingdom of Friday the XIII. He always talked to the children on their level. As the voice of reason and calm, he causally removed his outside shoes and coat to put on a comfy sweater and sneakers when he entered his television home. His quiet interaction with children is in direct contrast with other children's programming to the fast-paced action that accompanied other programming designed for children.

When Mr. Rogers died last year, millions of his loyal viewers were saddened. He left a rich legacy of programming that may never be duplicated. Yet, with all of his influence on children, there has been remarkably little academic research done on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. This article will attempt to seek an understanding of Mr. Rogers' influence through uses and gratification study on viewers in creating an analysis of what impact Mr. Rogers has had on these children.

A Uses & Gratification Study of Viewers of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood

Fred Rogers was more than just a children's television host. To many children growing up in the wasteland that television has become, he was an oasis of normalcy. Much of his current appeal is not from his nostalgic approach to addressing his television audience, it comes from his ability to speak the truth in such a way that a child can understand it but at the same time an adult can appreciate the simple language and manner with which he conducts himself. This simplicity is the center of most of the parodies of Mister Rogers. It is also through the tone the children can feel life is uncomplicated. If one follows easy rules of how to treat one's neighbor, it will make the world a better place. He was teaching the Golden Rule.

From this effortless manner, children also felt that they could talk to him on a level that they normally would not address another adult. Proof of this idea is in the book *Dear Mister Rogers, Does it Ever Rain in Your Neighborhood?* In this book, Mr. Rogers shares some of the letters that he has received over the years. The first series of questions dealt with the concept of reality. From the letters that are presented in the book, children were having a tough time accepting that he was real because he was on television. In the letters that Mr. Rogers wrote back to the children, he suggested that they talk to their parents about what television is and what is real (Rogers, 1996, 12-13). In this sense, he wanted the children to develop media literacy.

In contrast, Mr. Rogers had this almost unnatural ability to remove any barriers in order to be a reflection of his audience. Part of Mr. Rogers' charm was his ability to be himself no matter what outside influences may be around him. Interviewers were always frustrated that they could never reveal the "true Mr. Rogers" (Collins & Kimmel, 1997, 33). Perhaps the interviewers never realize that the person on television was the real Mr. Rogers. All of the interviewers have focused less on Mr. Rogers and more on the interviewer. Mr. Rogers possessed an insight on how to draw out another person. By this, he understood how to bring out the best qualities of people. So in reality, the true Mr. Rogers is the one that people see on television.

Mr. Rogers treated his television show as if it was his pulpit. His training as a Presbyterian minister allowed him to choose his words and messages carefully. It was during the Gulf War that his training came to be challenged. He was a committed pacifist. However, PBS needed him to do a series of public service announcements on training parents on how to reassure children that everything would be okay. He told parents to let their children know they weren't in danger, limit the child's television viewing, and listen to their child (tvacres.com). He never let his personal beliefs affect the way he addressed children.

With all of the books that Mr. Rogers has written, it is easy to understand what message he wants the kids to listen to. However, a few questions that have not been answered. The first question is how do children read *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*? It would be wonderful to assume that children view Mr. Rogers as a good role model and would choose to follow his example. But, the reality is that children have more choices in terms of children's media than at any other time in history. One could assume that the message that Mr. Rogers is trying to deliver could be drowned out by the loud noises and sounds of animation or live-action violence of wrestling, Power Rangers and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

Another question that would come to mind is can Mr. Rogers become too visually outdated? In the transportation model of communication, there is the concept of static (Carey, 1989, pp. 16-18). Static or interference can come in many forms. One of these forms is the inability of the receiver to overlook the age of the programming. The viewer could look at the clothing and immediately reject the program as not being relevant to him or her in this day and age. *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* produced 900 episodes over its thirty year run on public broadcasting (WQED-TV). If the child is visually withdrawn from the program, the message would be lost.

The final question that has come up in discussions about the show is "are the issues that he presents during the show still relevant to today's children"? With the vast catalog of subjects that Mr. Rogers has addressed over the years, the fear has been that the issues being presented will not make sense to the younger viewers. Maybe the question could be expanded to ask, will

there be a point in time where *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* will not make sense to the children viewing the program?

In order to try to answer all of these questions, this study will conduct a series of interviews with a group of college students to observe what they remember about *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. The purpose of the interviews will be to note if any of the pro-social messages that Mr. Rogers used in his program were observed and used by the viewers. If the student only viewed Mr. Rogers without understanding the message behind the show, then the show would not be effective.

Method

The theoretical perspective that will be used for this study is Katz and Blumler's "Uses and Gratification" model of communication. The reason that this viewpoint was chosen was because of the flexible nature of the model. It is considered flexible because it is a conditional effects paradigm. To understand if *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* still applies to the modern world, one should study if the previous viewers of the show can still find relevance in the subject matter that Mr. Rogers discussed in his show. It would seem from the letters that were written to Mr. Rogers that some children use the show as another form of positive reinforcement (Rogers, 1996, 24-30). Mr. Rogers does not judge children; he likes them "just the way they are." Other letters seem to view him as a good male role model that teaches the child how to interact socially. Yet others may enjoy the trip that he takes through Picture Picture, the movie window, providing a sense of escapism and being informed. One of the major research questions that are posed in this study is that children can still watch *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, still be entertained, and find some use to the programming.

This paper will focus on college students who may or may not have been avid viewers of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. There were several reasons that college students were chosen.

First, I was allowed access to the students. This ease of access allowed me to ask questions that involved a higher level of thinking and analysis. There were questions in the interview and focus group that could not be asked to younger children. The second reason was with this pool of subjects, I had a diverse pool of interviewees to achieve varied results in my interviews. This wide variety of view points allowed me to have a broad spectrum of data to analyze. Finally, I chose college students because their level of education allowed the subjects to understand the influence of Mister Rogers.

This research is presented in two parts. The first section of the research is an interview. The first part of the interview is designed to determine how much the subject has viewed *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. There are three levels of viewership that were measured: casual viewers, avid viewers and current viewers. The casual and avid viewers only refer to the subject's viewing habit while growing up. The current viewers are the viewers who still watch *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* after all these years. The second section of the interview deals with perceptions of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*—specifically how the subject views Mister Rogers. This section is designed to evaluate how the subject perceives Mister Rogers and judges his ability to relate to children. The third section of the interview is designed to evaluate the production elements of the show. In this section, the subjects are asked to talk about who their favorite puppet was and why. The final section of the interview is the most important. It deals with themes presented in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. This section is designed to determine if the subjects took the pro-social messages in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* and applied them to their everyday live. The subjects also judge if *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* could still be relevant to children today.

The second part of the study consisted of a focus group. Six participants from the original interviewed group were selected to participate in a focus group. The purpose of the

focus group is to give the researcher more information on the viewing habits of the subjects when they were children. It will also determine what, if any, pro-social messages they received from *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* and if they were carried over into real life. Finally, the researcher will determine from the responses if Mister Rogers' messages can stand the test of time.

Results

There were 18 interviewees. Out of those 18, 13 were given to undergraduate students. The remaining five were given to graduate students. Six of the interviewees were female. Seven of the interviewees were over the age of twenty-five. Two of the interviewees were from outside the United States. Four were from states outside of Ohio. Three were African-American. One was Asian.

Five of the interviewees interviewed never watched *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Seven of the interviewees would be described as “causal viewers”. Four of the interviewees (22%) were “avid viewers” of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. The two remaining interviewees currently watch *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. For the rest of the paper, I will talk about the two groups. The first group is all for the interviewees, all 18 of them. The second group is the group that has viewed *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, 13 of the 18 respondents fit into this group. The purpose of this split is to make the results as accurate as possible. By removing the people who have not watched *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* the questions that deal with content, the result would be closer to the populace who watched or currently watches the show. The interview is Appendix A of this paper.

Interview Group

The one most notable trend in the interview is about respondents who believed that Mr. Rogers seems outdated now. Two-thirds of the respondents (12) believe this. The two respondents who currently watch the show did not feel the show was outdated. Yet, most than half of the people interviewed answer that Mr. Rogers' was "cool".

In terms of uses, five of the eighteen interviewed felt that *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* relaxed them when they were younger, so this could be interpreted as the children could find Mr. Rogers' as a positive male role model. This indication could be reinforced by the fact that seven of the respondents felt that Mr. Rogers was a comfort when they were younger. Lee & Brown noted in their study that children, especially African-American children, could use male characters on television as role models as long as there is some level of identification and awareness of the characters' role and actions (1981, 6-7).

Another key element in the show was the music. John Costa, a classical trained jazz musician, used music as an internal part of the show. The music in the show is not designed to entertain children as its place in the show is meant to expose children to music and create an appreciation for all different types of music (Collins, 1997, 79-81). The music was also use to teach children the different social messages that Mr. Rogers presented during the show. Mr. Rogers has reinforced message presented in the show with the lyrics in the music. One example is "There are Many Ways" which talks about how to express feeling (<http://pbskids.org/rogers/songlist>). Out of the thirteen subjects that watched the show, seven could still sing one of the songs for the show. Educators have longed believe that lessons are best remember if they are placed in a song or in music (Heward, 1996, 135-139). Maybe as a most important result from the interviews was the fact that ten of the thirteen loved the music in

Mister Rogers Neighborhood. By having a connection to the music, the children could better repeat the lyrics. Repeating the lyric reinforces the message of the lyrics. Music will always play a strong role in educating children and Mr. Rogers used it in the show to create another bridge for children to latch onto the messages of the show.

Mr. Rogers was an early promoter of media literacy. He not only discussed with education professional on how to best educate the children but also how to train children to watch television with a deeper understanding of the medium (Collins, 1997, 51-53). To better train the child, he created three distant “regions” in his television world; the neighborhood, his television house and the “Land of Make-Believe”. In those three separate places, there were really three sets of rules that existed in those environments. The real neighborhood dealt with real people and real interactions with others. The television house was where he created an “interactive environment” with the children so he could address the issues of the day and explain to the children about what was happening. The Land of Make-Believe was a way of bringing the puppets that he used into the show without confusing the child. There was a clear transition between the “real world” and the Land of Make-Believe. Twelve of the thirteen interviewees knew that the castle was make-believe and eleven knew that the television home was a separate place (i.e. part of the “real world”).

Another point of static was exposed when they were asked if their own neighborhoods were like *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Of the thirteen that watched the show, eleven stated that their neighborhood were not like the show. Out of those eleven, six commented that his neighborhood was bigger than theirs or they lived in the country where they didn't have a formal “neighborhood”. Two remarked that they lived in an urban area and their neighborhoods looked more like the one on “Sesame Street”. Only one wrote that the people in their neighborhood were

not as nice as the neighbors on television and not everybody wanted to be a good neighbor. The other two didn't remark. This could be perceived as static because if the child felt that the home was too unrealistic, they may dismiss this as an unreal lifestyle. However, because eleven of the thirteen also felt that the show existed in the "real world", the children could accept the house and possibly justify its existence by assuming that it was just outside their community.

Mr. Rogers also wanted to create a community not just between himself and his television audience. He wanted the community to extend to all of the communities and neighborhoods in the United States and throughout the world (<http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/R/htmlR/rogersfred/rogersfred.htm>). His approach was to show children how to treat your neighbors and how to be a good citizen in the community. Seven of the thirteen respondents felt the show helped them become a better neighbor. The repeated reason that the interviewees gave for this belief was that Mr. Rogers taught them about how to love one another and show compassion to their fellow person. He repeated many pro-social messages in his show and taught children no matter what a person looks like on the outside, they are still a person on the inside.

The final two questions from the interview tries to answer the third question that was posed in the introduction to this paper: "are the issues that he presents during the show still relevant to today's children?" The first of the two questions asked the interviewee if the issues presented in Mister Rogers' Neighborhood seem relevant today as when they were first shown. Nine of the eighteen total interviewee felt that the issues that are addressed in the show are still relevant to today's children. Four of the nine who believe this commented that the show could still teach children how to be good citizens in the community. Two noted individual theme that were presented during one of the shows (how to tie your shoes and the differences between big

and small) and one remarked about subjects that Mr. Rogers never covered. The other half of the interviewees noted two key points of why they felt Mr. Rogers' was outdated. The first reason was the visual static that was mentioned earlier in this paper. Some of the respondents felt that his methods of presenting information to the children might either bore them or lose the children. Some of the respondents also felt that other children's programming was covering the material well enough.

The final question of the interview asked if the interviewee felt that Mister Rogers' Neighborhood should be the part of any school's curriculum. Thirteen of the eighteen felt that it should not. Six of the thirteen felt that the age of the show combined with the slow-going approach that Mr. Rogers' uses to address children would lose the children's interest and would not be effective. Two others felt that there would be a generational gap between Mr. Rogers and the new viewers.

Focus Group

The second part of the research was the focus group. The researcher placed the names of all of the people that participated in the interview into a box and pulled six names from the box. This was done as opposed to taking volunteers because I want to have a level of randomness in the research. The randomness should prevent "predictable results", e.g. only nice responses about Mr. Rogers. The focus group consisted of four males and two females. There was one graduate student in the group. The six of them and the researcher met for two hours to discuss the program (Appendix B). The first section of the focus group dealt with the group's viewing habits when they were children. Most of the shows mentioned were cartoons. Most of the cartoons mentioned by the focus group were action cartoons. *G.I. Joe*, *Transformers*, *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* were all discussed in detail. In terms of preschool programming, the group mentioned

Captain Kangaroo, *Romper Room* and *Great Space Coaster*. The common theme of all of these is the constant motion that the shows use to keep the interest of the child. Another repeated theme about the shows was that they were mostly male. Even the two females remember watching *G.I. Joe*, *Captain Power*, and *Captain Kangaroo*. The group then turned its attention to Mister Rogers' Neighborhood.

The second segment of the focus group dealt with the lessons that Mr. Rogers presented and if the focus group took away any of lessons from the show. One of the most repeated lessons that came from the group was the idea of "just being yourself". The general consentience from the group was they learned if Mr. Rogers liked them for just being themselves, then they could be themselves and people could learn to like them. Another important lesson that the group took away from the show was treating your neighbor, as they would want to be treated. It would seem to a causal observer that many of Mr. Rogers' messages have a Christian influence (Rogers, 2003, pp. 187-189). Most of the discussion from the third question, "Is there any messages that came from those shows that you use today?" seemed similar to the answers given to the second prompt. One could argue that they focus group tried to reflect the example that Mr. Rogers gave. It is also possible that religion as some influence of the value that the people chose to follow.

The final segment of the focus group dealt with whether or not the messages that Mr. Rogers presented could stand the "test of time". Four members of the group believed strongly that it could. The unified reasoning for this statement was that certain social conditions would always exist. Mr. Rogers seemed to bridge the gaps presented over his thirty years on public television to reach his core audience; school-age children. The two others noted that the show would lose children even if the message could still be relevant. The messages may still be relevant but could be lost to the age of the show.

Discussion

The most notable problem with this study is the “memory issue”. All of the interviewees had to remember what it was like to be a child watching the show. They would then have the “filter” of an adult being a child. This definitely affects the answers given by the respondents. This leads to the second problem, a small interview pool. Even with the wide and diverse background as many of the students have on both the Athens and Zanesville campuses, the discussion is still limited to a certain age range. The first change that I would make to this study is to follow the original proposal. The information given by the school age children would be more relevant to the questions posed in the introduction of the paper.

Another issue that was presented during the focus group is the influence of religion on the viewer. It would seem that one of Mr. Rogers’ major influences in his life was the training that he received when he went to the seminary. The Christian value system would seem to fit in with the Western set of ideals that Mr. Rogers’ promotes. It would be an interesting study to see how children from other parts of the world read Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.

In terms of answering the three questions posed in the introduction to the paper, it was hard to see if children today would read Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood the same way that their collegiate counterparts would. The first question, how do children read Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood, could not be answered for the school aged children. However, from the responses of the college students, the former viewers of Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood seem to read the text looking for the pro-social messages that Mr. Rogers put in the show. The second question of can Mr. Rogers become too visually outdated seemed to be a mixed response. Some of the interviewees did notice that the show did not age well in terms of some of the tools used to

present information. In addition, some of the places that Mr. Rogers' visited in the older shows would confuse some the newer viewers of the show. Mr. Rogers once showed how a record was produced. Many younger kids have never seen a record before. However, most of the respondents would agree that the social messages that Mr. Rogers presented in his show would never be outdated because we still have racism and violence. By training children that no matter how a person looks, a person is still a person, society can have fewer problems with anti-social behaviors.

Conclusion

George Gerbner, the dean emeritus of the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, once noted that the real value of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood was its ability to tell stories. Telling stories, according to Gerber, is what makes our species different from all of the others. The stories that we produce add to the overall experience that is humanity. The media is the primary teller of stories to children. This great change has occurred over the last century. Before the advent of the modern electronic media, the institution of society did most of the story telling; the families, the schools, the church, all played a part in tell the stories to children. The children related the stories to how the real world actually works.

The point is that Gerbner makes in his article is the diminished role of the storyteller. As the power of the media increased, the storyteller lost their ability to keep the trust of the audience. With the media, the audience could choose to believe the message or not. The audience can get its information from many sources. The media can take the power away from the local storyteller and "pervert" it to sell products (Collins, 1997, 3-13). This is what makes Mr. Rogers different from all of the other children's programming that is available. His non-commercial,

calm, pro-social message that he delivered on his show is in direct contrast to the commercialized, loud, violent screams heard all across the chasm that is children's television. As long as his voice of reason can be heard on television, he should always have a place as "America's Neighbor."

References

- Brown, J. A. (1998). Media Literacy Perspective. *Journal of Communication*, 48(1), 44-58.
- Cantor, J. R., Sparks, G. G., & Hoffner, C. (1988). Calming Children's Fears: Mr. Rogers vs. The Incredible Hulk. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 32(3), 271-288.
- Carey, J. (1989). *Communication as Culture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989.
- Christ, W. G., & Potter, W. J. (1998). Media Literacy, Media Education, and the Academic. *Journal of Communication*, 48(1), 5-13.
- CNN. (2003, February 27). 'Mister Rogers' dies at age 74. Retrieved April 25, 2004, from <http://www.cnn.com/2003/SHOWBIZ/TV/02/27/rogers.obit/>
- Cohen, A. A., & Levy, M. R. (1988). Children's Uses and Gratifications of Home VCRs: Evolution or Revolution. *Communication Research*, 15(6), 772-781.
- Collins, M (1997) *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television and Fred Rogers*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press
- Gunter, B. & McAleer, J. (1997) *Children and Television*. NY, NY: Routledge
- Heward, W.L. (1996) *Exceptional Children: An Introduction of Special Education*. Columbus, OH: Prentice Hall
- Katz, E., & Blumler, J. G. (1974). *The Uses of Mass Communication: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Lee, E., & Browne, L. A. (1981). Television Uses and Gratifications Among Black Children, Teenagers and Adults. *Journal of Broadcasting*, 25(Spring).
- Perse, E. (1994) Gratifications Sought and Obtained Scales. *Communication Research Measures: A Sourcebook*. New York: Guilford Press 173-177
- Rogers, F (1996) *Dear Mister Rogers, Does it Ever Rain in Your Neighborhood?* New York City, NY: Penguin Books.
- Rogers, F (2003) *The World According to Mister Rogers*. Sunnydale, CA: Hyperion
- Schmitt, K. L., Duyck, K., & Anderson, D. R. (2003). Viewing the Viewers: Viewing Behaviors by Children and Adults During Television Programs and Commercials. *Journal of Communication*, 53(2), 265-282.

TV Acres. (N.D.). *Children's Show Hosts – Fred Rogers (Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood)* Retrieved April 25, 2004, from http://www.tvacres.com/child_mrrogers.htm

WQED-TV (1990) *Our Friends: Mr. Rogers*. Broadcasted March 1990 on PBS.

Appendix A:
The Interview

Mr. Rogers' Interview

Many students watched children's television programming. One such program was "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood". This survey is design to find out what messages you may have taken from the show.

Circle the answer

1. I watched children's programming. Yes / No
- 2a. Growing up, I watched "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" Yes/No
- 2b. Growing up, I considered myself an avid "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" viewer. Yes/No
- 2c. I currently watch "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" Yes/No
3. Growing up, "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" was cool. Yes/No
4. "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" is still cool. Yes/ No
5. "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" seems outdated now. Yes/No
6. "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" helped me relax when I was younger. Yes/No
7. "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" was a comfort when I was younger. Yes/No
8. Growing up, I loved the music in "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood". Yes/No
9. I can still sing one of the songs from "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood". Yes/No
10. Growing up, I knew the castle was make-believe. Yes/No
11. Growing up, I knew the home was "real". Yes/No
12. My favorite puppet from "Make-Believe Land" was....
13. My neighborhood was like "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" Yes/No

If yes, Why? If no, why not?

14. "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" helped me prepare for my first day of school. Y/N

15. "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" helped me explore places that I've never been. Y/N

16. I learned from watching the picture window in "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" Y/N

17a. "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" helped me become a better neighbor Y/N

17b. If yes, how did the show help you become a better neighbor?

18a. The themes from "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" seem relevant today as when they were first shown. Yes/No

18b. What is the one message that Mr. Rogers' could teach the children of today?

19a. "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" should be the part of any school curriculum Yes/No

19b. If yes, why should it be a part of the curriculum? If no, why shouldn't it be a part of the curriculum?

Appendix B:
The Focus Group Questions

Starting Statement: “This focus group will be confidential. You will only be identified as A, B, C, D, E & F in the notation of the focus group. The only recording of this focus group will be the audio tape recording. The purpose of this focus group is to find out what you remember about Mr. Rogers and *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*. Are there any questions before we begin?”

The four focal questions:

1. What do you remember watching when...
 - a. you were growing up?
 - b. Do you remember any preschool programming?
 - c. What do you remember about Mr. Rogers?
2. Mr. Rogers always has some social messages embedded in his program. What are some of the lesson you remember from Mr. Rogers?
3. Is there any messages that came from those shows that you use today?
4. Do you think his messages stand the test of time?
 - a. Why or Why not?