Parents or movie stars?
Who is the real moral educator of today's youth in Romania?

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Abstract
The moral and life values of the youth of the community are a very important aspect for the future of any society. The passing on of important standards of behavior within a community has been the primary task of parents and other persons within the family of origin of the individual. In today’s society however, due to various reasons, young people are left to be educated by other people that appear on diverse mediums such as television and the internet. The importance of adequate role models has been suggested by several studies over the years, furthermore it has been shown that role models within the family have the most valuable influence on children. In the present study we aimed at identifying the person of most influence for the Romanian youth (ages 14 to 26), whether it was a person from the family or someone else (ether a real person or a character from a movie or book). Also, we investigated the hierarchy of moral and life values of the youths. A total sample of 372 participants was used in our study, aged between 14 and 26. The results clearly show that the Romanian youths consider their family to be most important to them. Thus, family members were considered the persons of most influence, family members were trusted the most and family in general was considered the most important aspect of their lives. The most important values for the Romanian youths were: security, work, fairness, conformity and tradition. The results indicate that young Romanians are strongly oriented towards family norms. These findings also indicate that adults need to be made aware of their strong impact on their children who will end up imitating them.

Keywords: family, life values, moral values, role models, youth
Introduction

A role model can be defined as a person who molds someone else’s attitudes, values and behavior. Humans and especially youngsters tend to reproduce what other people do, not necessarily what they say.

In 1977, Bandura developed the Social Learning Theory which is based on the idea that people learn from the interaction with others in a social context. We observe each other’s behavior and we assimilate that behavior, especially when we see that that behavior is rewarded or seen as positive.

There are three general principles for learning according to this theory: observation, imitation and modeling. In this process of social learning, Bandura identified three basic models of observational learning: “a live model – which involves an actual individual demonstrating or acting out a behavior; a verbal instructional model – which involves descriptions and explanations of a behavior; a symbolic model – which involves real or fictional characters displaying behaviors in books, films, television programs, or online media” (Nabavi, 2014).

The modeling process needs four conditions for it to take place. A person has to pay attention to the model and after that to remember the behavior that has been observed so he or she can reproduce it. All this in turn needs proper motivation. The models that are the most effective in raising awareness are perceived by others as having high status, power and prestige.

Role models can influence people both in a positive and a negative way. In the Kauai longitudinal study it was found that youth with positive role models could overcome adversity and had better resilience in high-risk behavior. Also, it was observed that resilient individuals tended to have same sex role models, for example females saw a powerful model in their constantly employed mothers (Hurd, Wittrup, Zimmerman, 2011).

Bryant and Zimmerman (2003) found a correlation between female’s psychological well-being and having a mother as a role model and also that male adolescences that had fathers as a role model presented better school outcomes. Furthermore, it was shown that positive role models within one`s family protect adolescents from negative psychological risks (Hurd, Wittrup, Zimmerman, 2011).
Several studies showed that adolescents with role models have higher grades, higher self-esteem stronger ethic identity, fewer aggressive behavior and fewer anxiety and depressive symptoms (Yancey, Siegel, McDaniel, 2002). Also role models protect youths against the use of alcohol and drugs, involvement in sexual intercourse and participating in violence (Hurd, Zimmerman, Xue, 2009).

If a model has a negative behavior however, this will also have a negative influence on the observer. For example, if the observed model has an anti-social behavior it will be related directly and indirectly to participation in violent acts of the observer (Hurd, Zimmerman, Reinschl, 2010). In spite of the fact that having no role model is bad, having a celebrity or an inaccessible adult as a role model can also lead to harm (Hurd, Wittrup, Zimmerman, 2011). Scales et al. (2001) discovered that one in four adolescents that have a positive role model while many others have a negative one or none at all.

The characteristics of the role model are relevant for both selecting the role model and the level of influence it has over the individual. People tend to choose those who are perceived as being similar to themselves (racially, ethically, by gender), helping them to discover their identity and role in society, to develop and establish future goals (Hurd, Wittrup, Zimmerman, 2011).

Our study aims to identify the extent to which Romanian youths have role models from within their own families or rather they choose role models from different sources. We were interested to discover which role model has the most influence on the values and morals of these youths. Also, we investigated which values and morals are most important to the youth of Romania.

**Methodology**

**Sample**

Our research employed two samples. The first was comprised of 54 young Romanians with the age between 14 and 26. There were 44 females (81.48%) and 10 males (18.52%). The mean age for this sample was 21.31 with a standard deviation of 2.78. The second sample was a group of 318 Romanians with the age between 14 and 26 extracted from the World Value Survey, wave 6 (Inglehart, Haerpfer, Moreno, Welzel, Kizilova, Diez-Medrano, Lagos, Norris, Ponarin, Puranen et al. 2014).
These participants were 183 (57.55%) females and 135 (42.45%) males. The mean age for the females was 19.85 (sd. 3.60) and for the males was 20.27 (sd. 3.53).

**Instruments**

The Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham, Nosek, Haidt, Iyer, Koleva and Ditto, 2011) describes how people make moral decisions. The questionnaire has 32 questions and it takes about 5 minutes to be completed. The results provide information about how moral decisions can be divided across five different concerns: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, purity/sanctity. This questionnaire only measures and describes the normal range of moral concerns and therefore the results are not of clinical relevance.

The Schwartz Values Survey was developed by Schwartz in 1994 to identify common values that acted as ‘guiding principles for one’s life’. Ten ‘value types’ are identified that gather multiple values into a single category (self-direction, power, security, hedonism, benevolence, achievement, stimulation, conformity, universalism, tradition). Participants are asked to rate how important each value is for them as a guiding principle in their life. Using the rating scale: 0 – means the value is not at all important, it is not relevant as a guiding principle for them; 3 – means the value is important; 6 – means the value is very important; 7 is for rating a value of supreme importance as a guiding principle in their life; (ordinarily there are no more than two such values). The higher the number (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6), the more important the value is as a guiding principle in someone’s life. There are two lists of values and a total of 57 items.

In order to obtain information about how important is the influence of a person in one’s life we created a set of questions in which every category of persons has to receive a grade on a scale from 1 (not important) to 9 (very important). Those categories were the following: family, internet person (influencer/vloger), TV public person, bible character, sports person, art person, movie character, TV series character.

**Procedure**

The 54 participants from our own sample voluntary filled out a questionnaire, consisting of two parts: the first part illustrated their values...
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(a Romanian version of the The Moral Foundations Questionnaire; Graham, Nosek, Haidt, Iyer, Koleva and Ditto, 2011); the second part indicated the person they considered to be a role model for them (by ordering the listed persons of influence from most important to least important on a nine level scale). The questionnaire was shared on social networking platform, Facebook. The target sample was made up of young people, with age between 14 and 28 years old.

The other 318 participants responded to the World Value Survey, wave 6 in accordance with the methodology presented at: http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org.

**Results**

In the present research we investigated whether youths look up more to their parents or other people such as famous personalities or even fictional characters as models for values. Our survey of 55 Romanian youths indicated that the most important persons of influence for them are within their own family (table 1). It seems that when it comes to values the family is still the most important source of education. Most participants rated their family as most important (61.11%) and very few rated it on the last place (1.85%). All other categories of persons of influence rated much lower than the family category and no clear second place was established.

**Table 1.**
Percentage of participants who attributed the respective rank for each category of person of influence.

| Place in hierarchy | Family member | Internet person | TV public person | Bible person | Sports person | Art person | Movie character | TV series character | Book character |
|-------------------|---------------|-----------------|------------------|--------------|--------------|------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| least important   | 1.85          | 47.17           | 62.26            | 41.51        | 56.6         | 35.85      | 32.08          | 33.96             | 26.92          |
| 2nd               | 1.85          | 7.55            | 9.43             | 7.55         | 13.21        | 15.09      | 11.32          | 7.55              | 1.92           |
| 3rd               | 1.85          | 7.55            | 7.55             | 5.66         | 11.32        | 7.55       | 13.21          | 13.21             | 9.62           |
| 4th               | 1.85          | 9.43            | 7.55             | 7.55         | 7.55         | 11.32      | 9.43           | 7.55              | 9.62           |
| 5th               | 1.85          | 7.55            | 5.66             | 11.32        | 3.77         | 1.89       | 15.09          | 1.89              | 7.69           |
In order to show a clearer picture of the ratings in table 1 we condensed the highest three places into a *most important* category and the lowest three places into a *least important* category. The results are shown in figure 1. The family is clearly in the lead with the most influence exercised on the youths’ value system. The second most important source of influence seems to be a book character and the third is a character from the bible. These two categories however have also been ranked least important by a large number of participants so their level of influence is rather mixed. This is true especially for characters in the bible which have been ranked as least important by 54.72% of the participants.

![Figure 1: Percentage of participants who consider the specific category of person of influence to be important.](image)

Our results show that all other influencers have a very low impact on the youths’ value system. Among the least important categories are sports persons (81.13%), tv public persons (79.24%) and internet personalities (62.27%).
Coleman and Hendry (1990) indicate that parents are the most commonly used persons as role models by adolescents and youths. Furthermore, they observe that since the youths spend much of their time around their family members and most of all around their parents they are more exposed and thus influenced by their values, attitudes, and behaviors.

The idea that the family is a very important aspect of the Romanian youths’ lives is also sustained by the results obtained from the Word Value Survey sample of Romanian participants. It is clearly observable that the family is the most important aspect of their lives (table 2).

| Aspect of the youths’ life | Very important % | Rather important % | Not very important % | Not at all important % |
|---------------------------|------------------|--------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| family                    | 94.34            | 5.35               | 0                    | 0.31                   |
| friends                   | 20.44            | 55.03              | 21.7                 | 2.83                   |
| leisure                   | 37.34            | 45.25              | 14.87                | 2.53                   |
| politics                  | 2.87             | 10.51              | 44.59                | 42.04                  |
| religion                  | 48.58            | 37.22              | 12.3                 | 1.89                   |
| work                      | 61.2             | 35.33              | 2.84                 | 0.63                   |

In figure 2 we condensed the four categories into two by summing the closest categories. Thus the *low importance* category is made up by the sum of the *not very important* and the *not at all important* categories and the *high importance* category of the sum of *very important* and *rather important* categories.
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Our results also indicate that work is a very important aspect (96.53%). It closely follows the importance of family (99.69%). Religion, leisure and friends are also important for the Romanian youths. Politics however, is the least important aspects of their lives (86.63% of participants ranked it as low importance).

This result might be explained by the fact that politicians are generally perceived as least trustworthy individuals by the general population, while family members are constantly reminding their children that they have the best intentions and only want what is best for them.

As for religion, this might be an important aspect for the youth due to the fact that in Romania the bible and bible characters are used as models for indicating desirable (“good”) and undesirable (“bad”) behavior in society. A rather strong tendency for religion at least for some of the youth is indicated by the fact that 54.72% of the participants choose bible persons as important influencers.

Another finding that supports the assumption that the Romanian youth is highly oriented towards their families and is highly influenced by them is the fact that they endow their families with the most trust (table 3). They seem to trust their families much more than any other people.
Table 3.
Percentage of people in each category for trust

| Category of people             | Trust completely % | Trust somewhat % | Do not trust very much % | Do not trust at all % |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| family                        | 82.33              | 16.09            | 0.95                     | 0.63                 |
| people from the neighborhood  | 4.78               | 30.25            | 48.41                    | 16.56                |
| people known personally      | 7.99               | 47.6             | 35.46                    | 8.95                 |
| people met for the first time| 0                  | 2.61             | 48.37                    | 49.02                |

In figure 3 we condensed the categories of responses in order to better summarize the results. We summed up the trust completely and trust somewhat categories into the high level category and the do not trust very much and do not trust at all into the low level category.

![Figure 3: Percentage of participants who consider the specific category of people to be of high or low lever trust.](image-url)

It seems that the Romanian youths have a very high level of mistrust for the people they meet for the first time and only half of them highly trust people they know personally. Also, only approximately a third of the youths highly trust people from their neighborhood while about two thirds of them highly mistrust them.

This finding might be explained by the fact that Romanian children are thought from an early age not to trust others outside the family, especially strangers, because they might be dangerous. Another possible
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An explanation might be that since children tend to imitate their adult family members they will imitate the untrusting attitude towards others that the adults might display. Thus if the adults are untrusting towards others the children will also be untrusting and will develop into untrusting adults themselves.

As we have observed before, work is a very important aspect of the youths’ lives. A further investigation of the values of the Romanian youths revealed that the most important value for them is security, followed by conformity and tradition (table 4).

| Value         | Very much like me % | Like me % | Somewhat like me % | A little like me % | Not like me % | Not at all like me % |
|---------------|---------------------|-----------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------|---------------------|
| self direction| 22.73               | 21.43     | 28.57              | 20.78             | 5.19         | 1.3                 |
| power         | 2.93                | 7.49      | 12.38              | 36.48             | 16.94        | 23.78               |
| security      | 30.23               | 29.9      | 22.19              | 11.25             | 4.18         | 2.25                |
| hedonism      | 10.26               | 9.62      | 20.83              | 31.41             | 14.1         | 13.78               |
| benevolence   | 23.47               | 22.19     | 31.19              | 16.08             | 5.14         | 1.93                |
| achievement   | 21.36               | 19.74     | 29.45              | 19.42             | 6.15         | 3.88                |
| stimulation   | 6.21                | 8.5       | 16.99              | 25.16             | 16.99        | 26.14               |
| conformity    | 30.1                | 27.18     | 27.83              | 9.71              | 3.24         | 1.94                |
| universalism  | 27.1                | 26.45     | 31.94              | 9.68              | 2.9          | 1.94                |
| tradition     | 29.49               | 26.92     | 27.24              | 9.94              | 4.17         | 2.24                |

In order to ease the reading of the results of the investigation of values we condensed the very much like me and the like me categories into a high importance category by summing up the former two. Also, we created a low importance category by adding the not like me and not at all like me categories together. The somewhat like me and a little like me categories were not included since these indicate an unclear middle ground with regard to the investigated value.
Even if work was considered an essential aspect of their lives, achievement was ranked as a high importance value only by 41.1% of the participants. Power was ranked as a high importance value only by 10.42% of participants, whereas 40.72% of them ranked it as low importance.

An interesting phenomenon is observed by comparing the value of self-direction to the values of conformity and tradition. It would seem that the youths do want to be independent to some degree, however they feel responsible to conform and act according to tradition. This result might be explained by the importance and trust that the Romanian youths attribute to their families.

Taking into account the high need for security which the youths have shown, it could be argued that the desire for self-direction is only a manifestation of an illusion of control. The term illusion is used since the youths seem to gravitate more towards security, conformity and tradition but at the same time express their desire for self-direction and achievement. The constant clash between the desire for control and the fear of failure creates a cognitive dissonance which may be resolved by taking shelter in tradition and conformity which offers some degree of security.
In the last step of our analysis we investigated the moral values of the youths. Our results indicate that the most important moral values for them are *fairness/reciprocity* and *harm/care* (table 5). The other three categories of moral values seem to be equally important to them. These results are in accordance with the previous findings in which security was the most important life value of the youths.

Table 5.
Descriptive statistics of youth’s moral values.

|                  | mean | standard deviation | skewness | kurtosis |
|------------------|------|--------------------|----------|----------|
| fairness/reciprocity | 3.79 | 0.55               | -0.54    | 0.57     |
| harm/care        | 3.64 | 0.83               | -0.97    | 1.62     |
| authority/respect | 2.7  | 0.86               | -0.15    | -0.79    |
| in-group/loyalty  | 2.69 | 0.83               | -0.51    | -0.02    |
| purity/sanctity  | 2.68 | 1                  | -0.17    | -0.54    |

Romanian youths seem to be almost entirely influenced by their own family members. Mass-media persons or characters from movies or books seem to have little impact on their moral values. This could be explained by the fact that the youths mostly identify with their family members and not others because they don’t know as many details about the other people’s lives as they do about their own family. Also, they spend much more time with family members than with other persons. Several studies show that the level of influence correlates with the level of identification with the influencer (Zirkel, 2017). Youths need models who would inspire them and who they can identify with.

**Conclusions**

Our research was aimed at identifying the life values and moral values of the Romanian youths. Also we were interested in uncovering which person from the youths’ lives was most influential in determining their values.

The obtained results suggested that the most important persons of influence as far as values are concerned are the youths’ own family members. This indicates a strong need for parents and other family members to realize how important their impact on their children is and
act accordingly. Family members are responsible for modeling the life and moral values of the young individual.

Young Romanians tend to trust their family members very much and consider the family to be one of the most important aspects of their lives. They also seem to be very much oriented towards tradition and conformity and less towards achievement and power. The youths declare that they want to be self-directed however their high need for security tends to overshadow the former.

It would seem that the Romanian youth of today are very much under the influence of their families who orient them towards older ways of thinking and behaving, perhaps a reminiscent of the old socialist ways. These influences seem to promote dependency on one’s family rather than independence.

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