

My Psychological Theory About SpongeBob SquarePants

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"Who lives in a pineapple under the sea?"

Most people easily pick up on the importance of television programming like *Sesame Street* and other educational shows for young children. Shows like these embed lessons about letters, manners, multiculturalism and more into their content. For adults, the lessons seem obvious, so we feel good about allowing our children to watch and learn from this kind of television show.

But other shows seem to hold zero promise of learning. One example might be *SpongeBob SquarePants*, an extremely popular cartoon on the Nickelodeon cable channel. Children, including my 4-year old son, were enthralled with this bizarre show about a sponge and his life under the sea. SpongeBob lives in a pineapple next door to a squid that plays the clarinet. He works for a crab that runs the [Krusty Krab,] and his best friend is a starfish. Besides perhaps fostering an interest in marine biology, it's hard to understand the show's ability to fascinate, let alone teach.

Yet after many years of watching this show with my son, I have come to believe that *SpongeBob SquarePants* teaches children fundamental lessons about basic human values in a non-preachy manner through the authentic actions of its characters. First, a two-second primer on values...

Some psychologists believe that human values are a dominating force in life, as values are thought to motivate human behavior and attitudes. The construct [theory] was defined and redefined by many famous psychological scientists from Lewin to Rokeach to Schwartz and Kasser. As the study of values advance, the values construct [theory] becomes more precise, and a basic list of values with a set of corresponding attitudes and behavior are generally agreed upon. Each theorist may define the overarching categories differently (i.e. intrinsic versus extrinsic, individualistic versus collectivistic, etc), but the specific value types, and their corresponding behaviors, by and large correspond across the theories. Some examples of a value and its corresponding behavior include the value of power -- people who value power seek to command others or to lead. Others may value tradition and work towards honoring customs that their parents and grandparents taught them.

The list of universal value types tested by the theorist Schwartz includes **power** [wanting to be in charge or wanting money], **achievement** [trying hard to do great things-being famous], **hedonism** [living for the moment and for fun], **stimulation** [wanting to be famous], **self-**

direction [being independent], **universalism** [religion], **benevolence** [being good to others], **tradition** [of family and culture], **conformity** [doing as you're taught], and **security** [being safe]....

It is these kinds of value types that are enthusiastically embraced by the characters in *SpongeBob Square Pants*, and this simple typology may be one of the reasons the show is still popular after ten years. My theory is that each character symbolizes one value type and behaves according to that value in the extreme. Thus, Mr. Crabs, the owner of the [Krusty Krab], cares only about money; his every act in the show is motivated by his pursuit of his financial interests. Meanwhile, Squidward, SpongeBob's neighbor, loves social status and prestige; he wants to be famous and could care less about anything in the small hick town of Bikini Bottom. Patrick Star, SpongeBob's lovable best friend, exemplifies hedonism. He loves to eat, sleep and in general satisfy the most basic bodily desires. Sandy Cheeks, a squirrel who lives in an upside down glass bowl under the ocean, pursues intellectual achievement. She is the smartest character in the town and she also enjoys excelling at karate. Finally, Plankton, the tiny creature that owns a diner next door to the [Krusty Krab], values power; he craves the satisfaction of control or dominance.

Each of these characters wrestle with the conflicts that naturally arise as they act according to their values, and while their basic value system usually wins out, the audience witnesses the choices they make in pursuit of these values and the disappointments that arise. For example, in one episode, Mr. Crabs sells SpongeBob to an evil, ghostly pirate for forty-nine cents. As he realizes he gave up his best worker and moreover, sacrificed him for a measly bit of cash, Mr. Crabs grudgingly learns that perhaps his choice was short-sighted. In the process of watching this kind of episode, children may actually absorb the intrinsic lessons in the storytelling.

So in our household, we wholeheartedly embraced this television show and its wacky characters and story lines. When watching with my son, I celebrated the mini lessons about values (whether intended or not by the show's creator), and underscored the values that resonated with mine as the characters lived, learned and modeled behavior that illustrate through simple storytelling how humans behave.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/yalda-t-uhls/spongebob-squarepants_b_1500534.html

Name: _____

Spongebob Squarepants Questions

Questions:

1. According to the author, what does Squidward represent?
2. The author says that Sandy Cheeks represents achievement. What else might she represent? Why? (Back it up with explanation.)
3. Using the list of universal value types developed by Schwartz, what value(s) does Spongebob Squarepants represent? Why? Use examples from the show to back up your opinion in a strong (about eight sentences) **paragraph**.