MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY
AS PORTRAYED IN
CONTEMPORARY COMIC STRIPS

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> The common day-dreams of a culture are in part the sources, in part the products of its popular myths, stories, plays and films. Where these productions gain the sympathetic response of a wide audience, it is likely that their producers have tapped within themselves the resevoir of common day-dreams. Corresponding day dreams, imperfectly formed and only partially conscious, are evoked in the audience and given more definite shape. (Wolfenstein and Leites, 1950)

The pervasiveness of mass-mediated message systems in our modern society has inspired extensive literature. A variety of disciplines has attempted to understand the phenomenon and the effects it has had and will have on people and their culture.

Many aspects of the mass media have been studied. The effect of the medium on the message that it communicates has been examined by both Innis and McLuhan (Brucker, 1973). Gerbner (1969) has theorized about the establishment of a mass collective consciousness. Howe (1957) has examined audience response. Lazersfeld and Merton (1967) have discussed the social functions of the mass media and its use as propaganda, and both Gerbner (1969) and Lowenthal (1950) have reported on the media and its effect on popular culture.

There is no doubt that mass media are becoming more pervasive. By 1975, 66 million homes had at least one television set. Radio has changed its content since the advent of television, but it remains a popular alternative. In 1973 there were 354 million radio sets in use in the United States.

That is equivalent to a radio and a half for every man, woman, and child in this country. Both FM and AM radio stations have more than doubled in the period from 1953 to 1973 (Sandman, 1976).

The printed medium has remained an effective communicator while undergoing changes since the turn of the century. Magazines have become increasingly specialized. Newspapers have become more consolidated and the number of newspapers has dropped from 2,600 daily papers in 1910 (Sandman), to 1,762 papers in 1977 (Time, 1977).

The newspaper, like all mass media is concerned with information, influence, entertainment, and advertising (Hynds, 1975, p. 17). One section of the newspaper, especially, is concerned with all of these. Notwithstanding the changes in the newspaper over the past century, that section, the comic strip section, has thrived. As it has grown and established its own unique place in American culture; it has provided us with information; it has influenced our vocabulary, ideas, and culture; it has entertained us; and it has served as a source of advertising ideas. The funnies have been called the most enduring popular art form in America (White & Abel, 1963) and have been the subject of much review.

The comic pages become more interesting when they are seen in relation to the enormous size and unexpected composition of their audience. The comics have been very popular since their inception. A survey of 50,000 readers from 1939 to 1950 indicated that of all the newspaper feature items,

the comics ranked highest in readership (White & Abel). A recent survey by Editor and Publisher (Hynds) estimated that 140 million people read the comics daily. On the basis of that 1974 survey, Editor and Publisher found that the comics rank higher in readership than the news section for men and women, higher than the women's section among women, and equal to the sports section among men.

Studies investigating what kinds of people read the comics have shown that comic strip reading increases with education level (White & Abel; and Bogart, 1949). According to Robinson and White, (White & Abel) the peak years for comic reading were ages 30 to 39. A study done in 1971 by Metro Sunday newspapers reported that 60% of the Sunday comic strip readership were adults 18 years old and older (Hynds). This appears to contradict the widespread belief that the comics are principally read by children and people of low mentality.

The fact that the comic strip is so widely read and well-established in our culture justifies study of it. The comics are a medium and a message. They mold our culture by their very existence but they also convey potent images of American life. They have become a part of our folklore and have sprung from roots deep in our American psyche. They deserve careful consideration for they have a message and they are conveying that message daily.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

> Comics, together with the other mass media are a substitute for genuine folklore and culture and have developed into a self-perpetuating institution, an integral part of the American way of life. Of all the mass media, comics mirror the American collective subconscious most faithfully, and we know, without McLuhan having to tell us, that comics in turn manipulate and exploit the subconscious. (Reitberger & Fuchs, 1972)

History of Family-oriented Comic Strips

The comic strip as such began in 1897 with the first modern strip, "The Katzenjammer Kids." But well before "The Katzenjammer Kids" was conceived the American humor journals Puck in 1877, Judge in 1881, and Life in 1883, were laying the foundation. Caricaturists of the 18th and 19th century had already used the techniques of speech balloons and series of pictures, and in 1894 "The Origin of A New Species, or the Evolution of the Crocodile Explained" was run in the New York World. It consisted of a one-time gag of six colored pictures. Both Pulitizer's New York World and Hearst's New York Journal, in their fierce competition for readers, used comics. The term "yellow journalism" was coined when the New York World perfected the printing of yellow ink and began an early comic called the "Yellow Kid" (Reitberger & Fuchs).

The tradition of the daily strip began in 1907 with Mutt and Jeff. By 1912 the comics were popular enough to warrant the formation of comic strip syndicates. The syndicates were formed to make strips available to small newspapers and to make certain that no one newspaper would reap the benefit of a very popular strip. Today there are 12 large and 200 small

syndicates (Reitberger & Fuchs). Five of these have the major comic holdings (Hynds, 1975).

Throughout comic strip history the most successful strips have been family-oriented or domestic strips. With the introduction of "The Gumps" in 1917 by the New York News, the family strips grew in number and popularity. A content analysis of comic strips from 1900 to 1959 showed that series centered upon the family, children, and daily life have never represented less than 60% of all titles (Barcus, 1961). The growth of family strips is due partly to the newspaper syndicate distribution system. The syndicates encouraged specialization and channeled artists into certain areas. In the 1920's when the family strips began to flourish, the newspaper also was becoming a family institution. The family strips, in fact, were partly developed to attract a female readership (Horn, 1976).

Perhaps the first strip to use a family theme was "The Newlyweds" by McManus which began running as a Sunday feature in 1904. It was the story of a young couple and their insufferable child. Father is a laughably dressed, inept individual, and Mother is serenely elegant and stylish. Both are incapable of keeping their baby from crying. The strip's name was changed in 1912 to "Their Only Child" and discontinued in 1918 (Couperie, Horn, Destefanis, Francois, Moliterni, Gassiot-Talabot, 1968; and Horn, 1976).

"Bringing Up Father" began in 1913 in the dailies but had little visibility. As just one of several different ideas

it would sometimes be replaced for many weeks by other strips. It became firmly established as a daily in 1916 and a Sunday version followed in 1918 (Horn, 1976). "Bringing Up Father" stars Jiggs and Maggie, Irish immigrants, whose lives change overnight when they win the Irish Sweepstakes. Maggie, a one-time washerwoman, spends her time trying to climb the social ladder and Jiggs dreams of the days he used to spend eating corned beef and cabbage with his friends at Dinty Moore's tavern. The obvious moral lesson is that riches do not bring happiness. The reader is made to feel satisfied with his own simpler lifestyle (Reitberger & Fuchs, 1972). "Bringing Up Father" is one of the few strips in which all strata of society are represented. It was the first strip to achieve world fame and has been translated into most languages. The strip was continued by Kavanaugh, Fletcher, and Green in 1954 and by Camp in 1965. It is still quite popular (Horn).

"The Gumps" in 1917 was created by Patterson and drawn by Smith and was intended to be true to American life. Patterson's opinion of the common man was probably not very high for he named the strip after a word developed by his family meaning "nit-wit." Nevertheless, the strip was a huge success. Unlike most modern family strips, "The Gumps" was not a gag-a-day strip. It was a continuing story with very little action. The subject matter revolved around gossip, trivialities, and the problems of a poor but proud family. The style was in a slightly bitter, humorous vein. The strip literally built the Tribune-News Syndicate and Smith received the first

million dollar comic strip contract. After his untimely death in 1935 the strip declined until its drop in popularity forced it to close in 1959 (Reitberger & Fuchs; Becker, 1959; and Waugh, 1947).

"The Bungle Family" was begun by Tuthill in 1919. It was considered by some to be the finest, most imaginative and most socially critical of all the family strips. Originally entitled "Home, Sweet Home", the strip featured a quarrelling married couple, George and Mabel, later changed to George and Jo. The plot evolved around endless problems with landlords and neighbors. It had an urban setting. In 1924 the Bungles acquired a grown daughter, Peggy,and the highly imaginative narrative began to revolve around her. Much to its readers' sadness, the strip was stopped in 1942 at the retirement of its author. Once again the strip's title shows a disparaging view of the common man (Horn).

Another family strip, "Toots and Casper" by Murphy, was begun in 1919. It began as a simple domestic strip but changed to a semi-serious story line in the mid-1920's. It was considered to be one of the best of the humorous soap-opera strips. Many of its characters were patterned after the Gumps. Here again, as in "The Newlyweds," Casper, the male, was clumsy and unprepossessing. Toots, who later served as a model for Blondie, was lovely and charming. The daily strip was discontinued in 1951 and the Sunday in 1956 (Reitberger & Fuchs; and Horn).

"Mr. and Mrs.", a Sunday strip by Briggs, was also begun

in 1919. It was adamantly realistic and unadorned. It showed very little inventiveness nor was it particularly humorous. It featured the fights of a middle-class couple. It maintained a readership for 31 years, however (Horn, 1976).

One of the most interesting family strips also began in 1919. "Gasoline Alley," by King, began as a panel with a strict car and garage theme. After King was ordered to provide some interest for female readers, the plot was expanded. On Valentine's Day, 1921, Walt Wallet, garage owner, opened his door to find a baby on his doorstep, and the birth of a unique family comic strip took place. "Gasoline Alley" became a generations novel. King allowed his characters to age, marry, and have children. The strip encompassed all the relatives and their lives and became a slice of American life itself. With quiet, unobtrusive humor, "Gasoline Alley" readers are instructed how to live their lives with a bright smile (Reitberger & Fuchs). As such, "Gasoline Alley," provides an invaluable pictorial record of the American life style in our times. One small collection of excerpts from 1921 to 1955 gives some insights into topical subjects and attitudes toward them that are covered in the strip. Adoption, feelings toward adopted children and feelings toward biological children, middle-aged marriage, child-rearing, adjustment to parenthood, and breastfeeding are represented. Also a young boy's first love, adolescence, leaving the nest, entering the job market, going to war, feelings about having and being an absentee husband, coming back from war, taking over the family business,

elopement, young marriage while in school, and aging are other subjects covered (Galewitz, 1972).

Perhaps Americans like to think that the inhabitants of Gasoline Alley are real-life people just like the readers would be if they didn't have all the pressures of American life. In a content analysis of Gasoline Alley and a survey of comic strip readers, Bogart came up with some interesting conclusions. "Gasoline Alley" seems to have a dual appeal. Its readers identify with leading characters because the characters have been allowed to age. But the readers also tend to identify on a fantasy level because life in Gasoline Alley is more pleasant, easy-going and comfortable, and perhaps even at a higher social level than that of its readers. Its greatest fans are young, single, and occupationally downwardly mobile. Perhaps the strip's strong themes of social mobility and young, married life contribute to its popularity. Those who dislike the strip give evidence of anxiety and personal insecurity. They object to the strip's outlook and to its realism (Bogart, 1963).

A strip which now has a strong family orientation began in 1919 as "Barney Google" by DeBeck. Barney Google began comic strip life with a wife and a daughter. His wife evolved to three times his size and his daughter quickly disappeared. After some time Barney bought a race horse, Spark Plug, and set off to see the world, thereby losing his wife and his strip's status as a family strip. In 1934, Lasswell took over the strip and Snuffy Smith quickly became the major

character. Snuffy is a hill-billy whom Barney met while hiding out from gangsters. Barney is only infrequently seen in the strip today and in many papers the strip's title has been changed to "Snuffy Smith." Snuffy is married to Loweezie and has two children Jughaid and Tater. The strip revolves around these four characters (Horn, 1976).

"In presenting the Nebb family, I will try to portray from day to day, in a humorous way, the things that happen in everyday life." With this introduction in 1923, Hess and Carlson began "The Nebbs." Patterned after "The Gumps," the stories were continuous and not daily gags. The term "Nebb" came from the Jewish word "nebich" meaning "poor sap." Hess, like Patterson of "The Gumps", clearly expressed his opinion of the average man and his family (Becker, 1959). One place where the Nebb family was different from most comic strip families was in its portrayal of Rudy Nebb. Rudy was the head of the household and no one in the family ever disagreed. Rudy, however, was most often shown as an ineffectual dictator (Reitberger & Fuchs, 1972).

Also in 1923,"Moon Mullins" began. Drawn by Willard until 1957 and later by Johnson, "Moon Mullins" is the story of a group of loafers who inherit a house and lead a happy-go-lucky life. It is a bitter satire of family life and is considered among the best of our contemporary black comedies (Couperie, et. al., 1968). Its theme is the gap between aspiration and fulfillment. Its numerous, unrelated characters constitute an extended family of sorts and provide the reader

a chance to laugh and then to wonder why (Becker).

Two other family strips of this period deserve to be mentioned. "Clarence," drawn by Fogarty from 1924 until 1949, provided a humorous look at a happy couple, Clarence and Mary, who never disagreed. It was a comfortable suburban epic with a positive view (Waugh, 1947). The 1930's saw the introduction of "Cicero Sap" by Locher. Here, the perpetual contest between husband and wife was always at a draw (Waugh). It is interesting to note that once again the last name "Sap" denotes a "nit-wit" or a "sucker."

In 1930 Blondie Boop-a-doop and Dagwood Bumstead tied the knot. Their marriage caused Dagwood's disinheritance from his millionaire family and his loss of all traces of worth. Blondie, the former flapper typist, settled down to her role as a practical head of the household and Dagwood grew several feet taller and much sillier looking. In addition he became the classic irrelevant male (Reitberger & Fuchs). The comic strip-reading public found something about Blondie and Dagwood to be intriguing and "Blondie" eventually became the most widely circulated comic strip in the world with a circulation in 1,700 newspapers. With an international audience of hundreds of millions, "Blondie" inspired 28 movies as well as a television series and a novel. Originated by Young, the strip was taken over at his death by Raymond and Young. It maintained the number one spot in popularity for many years until it was edged out in the late 1960's by Schultz's "Peanuts" (Horn). The story-line of "Blondie" has

always been simple. It is a caricature of the typical American family. After the birth and growth to adolescence of two children, Alexander and Cookie (1934 and 1941), the characters in "Blondie" stopped aging. The story revolves around Dagwood's troubles with his boss at work, and his trouble with "intruders" at home who keep him from taking a bath, taking a nap, or playing poker with the boys. Another favorite theme is Blondie's weakness for buying clothing at sales. In the strip, Dagwood's defeats run 6 to 1, but the one time in six keeps his audience rooting for him (Becker, 1959). And once again the derogatory implications of the name "Bumstead" are clear.

No other family strip has been the target of so much analysis. An early analysis by Waugh tried to pinpoint "Blondie's" phenomenal success. Waugh felt it was due to five things:

1) Blondie is cuter than other comic strip heroines. She is also good.
2) Dagwood is young and romantic. His ineptness makes us feel better about ourselves.
3) The strip is romantic in comparison to other strips such as "The Gumps" or "Mr. and Mrs."
4) The strip has cute kids and dogs in it.
5) Dagwood and Blondie represent many other young Americans after the war.

Waugh tells us: "It's not a bad strip to have on display as the favorite. It shows that in their hearts people enshrine sweet and normal things: youth, romance, home, and babies yelling for milk." (Waugh, 1947, p. 105)

A very different position is taken by Berger. He sees Dagwood as an object of ridicule and a symbol of inadequacy.

His only source of satisfaction is eating and he is the stereotyped cuckolded male. The strip began in the depression when the nation's faith in businessmen was faltering and it served to fill the inspirational gap left by the decline of the Horatio Alger story. Berger says: "To the extent that he is an archetype for American men who find that many of the situations in the strip somehow 'strike a chord', it is a tragedy of the most profound dimensions" (Berger, 1973,p.110).

Another very popular strip that is more difficult to classify as a family strip is "L'il Abner". It was originated in 1934 by Capp and its theme is the activity of a hillbilly family. The strip is most often a societal or political satire and the domestic situations occur only rarely (Becker, 1959).

The '40's and 50's saw the formation of other domestic strips. "The Berrys" by Gruberts (1942); "The Flop Family" by Swanson (1944); "Hubert" by Wingert (1945)' and "Hi and Lois" by Walker and Browne (1954). "Hi and Lois" is now one of the most popular strips, currently running in 600 papers. The family has made no basic changes since its inception except to give more emphasis to their baby, Trixie. Hi and Lois are stereotyped suburbanites. Hi works at the Foofram offices and Lois shops or cleans. She is shown to be more of a real housewife than Blondie. They have four children: Chip, an early adolescent; Dot and Ditto, twin first graders; and Trixie, the baby. The settings are placed in Browne's own suburban Wilton, Connecticut (Horn, 1976). The title of this strip comments not on the ineptness of its male

character but rather on the highs or lows experienced in a family.

Another family strip that has attained great popularity is a product of Great Britain. "Andy Capp" by Smythe began in 1957 and soon travelled to 34 countries and was published in 13 languages (Horn, 1976). Very popular in the United States, Andy Capp was named by 29% of American syndicates, cartoonists and editors as the best new comic strip (Hynds, 1975).

A very recent arrival on the comic strip scene "Hagar, the Horrible" was begun in 1973 by Browne. Already quite popular, "Hagar" is a domestic strip in disguise. Instead of suburban America, the strip takes place in the Viking lands of long ago. Hagar is a typical hard-working barbarian who loots and sacks for a living. He has all the trappings of a husband in a domestic strip, however. He is married to a nagging wife who is a better warrior than he is. He has two rebellious children and many family problems (Robinson, 1974; and Horn, 1976).

The family strip has proved to be a popular medium. These strips and others not mentioned here have served as food for thought and laughter for over 60 years.

The Family in literature and other media

Research examining the family and its components as seen through various types of media has generally been sparse. The subject is usually approached in two different ways. One is in special collections of literature interspersed with commentary, and the other is in studies using content analysis

to determine how the family is portrayed in the media.

The idea of using literature to study human relations is an old one. Freud attested to the value of literature and claimed that the storyteller was far ahead of ordinary people in his insights because he drew from sources that were not yet accessible to science (Kiell, 1959). Literature can be used for teaching human relations in the classroom and also for elaborating the theoretical basis of the interdependence of fiction and social sciences. Psychologists have often used novels and plays as case studies and books are used in therapy to help patients work from fictional worlds toward reality (Somerville, 1964).

Fiction is effective in family study because it provides vicarious experiences. We are drawn into imaginary participation in family situations and we learn to become aware of the other characters in the story. The real, the imaginary, and the emotional are blended together.

There are a number of collections dealing with the family. Family life and the family life cycle are covered in two collections (Tavuchis, 1975;and Somerville, 1975). Another collection covers the same topics but uses science fiction as its focus. Here a sense of humor as a binding force in the family is stressed (Clear, 1976). A guide for teachers on using the short story to attain family insights is available (Somerville, 1964).

Three fairly recent journal articles deal with teaching family life education through the use of literature. One

article concentrates on a dialogue duo approach using novels to help understand family life (Channels, 1971). The second suggests using imaginative literature for insights into family crisis (Somerville, 1971). The third is a case study using popular magazines in the college classroom to study marriage (Smerdan, 1973).

An examination of the literature for studies using content analysis in the study of family relations in literature or other media reveals the lack of such research. One recent study looked at parent-daughter relationships in fiction (Hendrickson, 1975). Forty-two novels were surveyed using a direction sheet to guide the readers. Subjects such as family structure, conflicts, and rewards were studied. The authors concluded that there were few quality stories about intact, happy families. Another recent study used content analysis to discover what family images and approaches to problems were found in television's daytime dramas (Ramsdell, 1973). The soap opera was found to portray an insular, consumption-oriented family as its most acceptable model. The family with an aggressive, achieving husband and a work-at-home wife and mother was shown as the only desirable kind.

The radio serial drama "One Man's Family", a 27-year continuing saga of the generations, was found to convey the message that the family is the basic and fundamental unit and that Americans must keep it alive in order to preserve American ideals and American freedom of thought and action. This weekly serial was the only one expressly created to

convey a definite message (Sheppard, 1970).

The pre-industrial American family has been a subject for content analysis. Using colonial magazines from 1794-1825, researchers studied the topics of power patterns, types of attitudes between the sexes, attitudes toward pre-marital and extra-marital sex and motivations for marriage. The study was contrasted with a previous study of the 1741-91 period (Lantz, 1973).

Other studies of interest for family life educators have included examination of Top Songs in the 1960's for their themes and possible influence on the youth subculture (Cole, 1971); sexism in popular music (Wilkinson, 1976); love and courtship in popular magazines (England, 1960); analysis of letters to an advice columnist to determine problems and selected characteristics of the letter-writers (Hillman, 1954); investigation of sexual references in popular periodicals over three decades (Scott, 1973); feminine roles and social mobility in British women's weekly magazines (Owen, 1963); and parent education in the popular literature (Bigner, 1972). Two other studies took popular texts and analyzed them. One looked at 15 popular marriage manuals for information given (Brissett, 1970), and the other studied advice on when to have children as reported in marriage and family textbooks (Pohlman, 1968).

Content Analysis of the comic strip

The comic strip has only infrequently served as a subject for content analysis. Specific comic strips have occasionally

been examined. "Little Orphan Annie's" political bias has been observed by several authors (Abel, 1963; Auster, 1954; and Bogart, 1957). "Gasoline Alley," "Dick Tracy," and "Terry and the Pirates" have also been studied by Bogart (1957).

Several studies to determine what the world of the comic strip looks like have been done. Barcus (1961) looked at the evolution of comic strips from 1900 to 1959 in three leading Boston newspapers. He examined 778 different strips. The strips were classified into four types: traditional types of formulas, dominant themes of subject matter, principal characaters and continuity of story. Long term trends included the development of continuity; an increase in action and adventure types as well as love and romance, crime and adventure; and attention to inter-personal relations. Barcus found that short-term cycles related to the climate or tensions of the time. Examples of these were themes of business, war, and science and technology.

Another study by Barcus (1963) took a comic strip sampling in March 1943, 1948, 1953, and 1958. The study used three major Boston papers plus the bound files of "Puck: The Comic Weekly." Among his many findings Barcus reported that domestic relations were the dominant aspect of life emphasized in the comic strip and that humorous strips comprised the bulk of all strips. He also found that the most frequently held goals of comic strip major characters were those of pleasure, power, love, or friendship, and justice. A shift of goals is seen

with a change of marital status. The single person desires pleasure goals, justice, individualism, health, safety and self-preservation while the married person is less diverse. They sought love and companionship, financial security, and power goals. Married persons were more caricatured than single ones. They were fatter, balder, and generally less attractive. Males, both single and married,were fatter, uglier, and less well-dressed than their female counterparts. The married female was considerably taller than her husband. She also gained weight and became less attractive after marriage.

Male and female relations in the comic strip was the subject of another content analysis (Saenger, 1955). Using all the comic strips in nine New York city newspapers during October,1950, Saenger analyzed the interaction among the major characters to discover who initiated action, love, or conflict and who was the recipient. Saenger found that hostile action initiated by women is more frequent in domestic strips than in either the adventure or comedy. Husbands are the victims of hostility and attack in 63% of all conflict situations. Wives are under attack in 39% of all cases. Male aggression is more often displayed toward outsiders and children. Hostility in the home is expressed in verbal rather than physical action.

Among married couples Saenger found more intelligent wives than husbands. Married men in the comic strips are more irrational and more suggestible than their wives. The married man can only be counted on to do the wrong thing.

While married women usually accomplish what they set out to do, the married man is usually thwarted in the achievement of his goals. In the realm of the tender emotions, Saenger found that domestic men are more active in giving love than their female counterparts. By contrast, women in adventure strips give love and fail to receive it more often than men. Since love could lead to marriage, a decidedly emasculating situation in the comic strips, Saenger attributes this trend to an attempted preservation of male strength.

One other set of studies by Spiegelman (1952 and 1953) analyzed 52 strips. In an analysis of goals and means to goals, Spiegelman found that altruistic, group-oriented goals are highly prized for both sexes. Self-oriented goals are disapproved but equally as frequent as group-oriented goals.

The literature cited has dealt with popular culture and marriage and the family. Of particular interest has been history and content analysis of the American comic strip.

CHAPTER III

PROCEDURE

Subjects and collection of data

The purpose of this study was to investigate family relationships in the daily comic strips using content analysis. More specifically the goals of this analysis were to determine the composition of comic strip families, to examine parent-child relationships and relationships among siblings, and to examine husband-wife relationships for their content and quality. Sunday strips were not used and each strip was studied for two months. June,and August,1977 were chosen to help break up continuous stories and to obtain a better sample.

The subjects for the study were drawn from all newspapers available in the Meadville and Erie, Pennsylvania, public libraries. These papers were The Harrisburg Patriot, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Cleveland Plain Dealer, The Erie Morning News, The Erie Times, The Miami Herald, The Washington Post, The Chicago Tribune, The Meadville Tribune, The Buffalo Courier News, The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, and The Pittsburgh Press. Also included were three comic strips supplied directly by the King Features Syndicate and one comic strip supplied by United Feature Syndicate. These were strips that were known to be domestic strips but that were not available locally.

For the purposes of this study, it was necessary for each strip to contain a married couple as major characters during the two-month sample conducted. At least 50% of all

episodes during that period had to deal with husband-wife relationships, family life, or other domestic issues in order to qualify. Comic strips that featured married couples but did not meet these criteria were: "The Born Loser," "Citizen Kane," "Red Eye," "Gasoline Alley," "Mary Worth,""Buzz Sawyer" "Kerry Drake," "Brenda Starr," and "Motley's Crew." Some of these strips might have qualified if the sample had been taken during a different time period. Twenty-four strips that dealt with marriage and/or the family were examined and 15 were determined to be appropriate for analysis.

Development of categories for content analysis

Since category construction is widely regarded as the most crucial aspect of content analysis (Stone, 1966 and Berelson, 1952), special attention was given to category construction and development of category indicators.

In order to analyze the milieu of each comic strip categories and category indicators adapted from Spiegelman (1952) were used. Also included were categories for an analysis of the stage in the family life cycle of each comic strip family (Duvall, 1977).

No existing studies using content analysis provided categories for the analysis of family relationships. Instead, a new set of categories was developed. Each comic strip was first categorized by the types of interactions occuring (husband-wife, sibling-sibling, parent-child, or other). Then the parent-child and sibling categories were analyzed by a simple count of negative and positive interactions. A

negative interaction was defined as one that included physical fighting, insulting, arguing, or complaining. Any interaction initiated with verbal or non-verbal hostility or apparent tension was considered negative. If the interaction provoked hurt, anger, shock, or bewilderment it was also considered negative. A positive interaction was defined as a friendly or neutral one.

In addition, a simple count of all strips was done to determine how many times demonstrated physical affection and demonstrated physical abuse occurred between parent and child, and between siblings. It was necessary to examine each strip and not just certain interactions. Occasionally physical affection was present in strips where the main interactions were between other characters. The definition of demonstrated physical affection included kissing, hugging, hand-holding, sitting on lap, or touching in a loving way. Physical abuse included spanking, preparing to spank, or evidence of recent spanking. It also included any physical punishment, hitting, throwing things, or any attempt to hurt the other character.

In order to analyze the quality and content of comic strip marriages the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) was adapted for use in content analysis. The only items from the scale that were not used were those that were not quantifiable. Since the Dyadic Adjustment Scale is a self-inventory, only items that were readily identifiable by verbal or non-verbal behavior were able to be included. Questions such as number 22 "How often do you and your mate get on each other's nerves?" were inappropriate because no judgement could be made

(Appendix A).

Each husband-wife interaction was analyzed for the category it best fit and to determine if the interaction was positive, neutral, ambivalent, or negative. Positive and negative were defined using the same indicators as in the analysis of parent-child and sibling interactions except that neutral was assigned a separate category. Neutral was defined as an interaction that is approached and responded to with no perceptible emotion. Ambivalent was defined as any interaction that was not clearly negative, neutral, or positive. It was used any time a clear judgment could not be made.

In addition, six simple counts of items adapted from Spanier's scale were used. These were all behaviors that were easily observed and recorded.

First pre-test

A sample of 28 episodes of three different family strips from the month of July, 1977 was studied to determine how applicable the categories were, how easy they were to rate and what, if any, categories needed to be added.

The pre-test revealed a number of inadequacies in the categories for analysis of husband-wife interactions. During the pre-test six categories that had not been included were identified as significant for comic strip marriages. These were added to the category list. Several categories with the same subject were determined to be too difficult to choose between. They were combined. In addition, a "miscellaneous" category was needed for interactions that could not be defined

or were not applicable to any of the other categories. It was not unusual for the strips to show the husband and wife fighting or talking with no clear idea of what the subject of the fight or discussion was. Four other behaviors were identified and added to the simple count. The parent-child and sibling interactions proved to be easy to recognize and to code.

Second pre-test

A second pre-test was conducted to check the categories resulting from the first pre-test and to help test the reliability of the researcher's coding. An Allegheney College class, Junior Seminar in Mass Communications Research (45/48), consisting of 13 students and one professor, rated 23 comic strip episodes using the categories and criteria established. The samples were taken from extra releases supplied by King Features Syndicate. All samples of parent-child relationships (six) and all samples of sibling relationships (five) were used. The strips were alphabetized and organized by dates and then the first 12 examples of husband-wife relationships were used. The coders were given verbal instructions with some of the more detailed points in the directions written on the blackboard. Each coder was given a mimeographed sheet with a list of categories on it. The strips were displayed using an opaque projector. In addition, the dialogue was repeated verbally.

To help determine the reliability of the researcher's coding, her coding decisions and the coding decisions of the Allegheney College class were compared. There was an 80%

agreement on the parent-child interactions. Individual items ranged from 92.4% to 53.9%. Sibling interaction agreement was 93.8%. The range on these five items was between 100% and 69.3%.

Husband-wife interactions were scored separately for categories chosen and for quality rating (positive, neutral, ambivalent, or negative). There was a 64.8% agreement between researcher and class on categories chosen. The range on the twelve items was between 100% and 23.1%. A 64.1% agreement existed on rating of the quality of the interactions. The range here was from 92.4% to 23.1%.

An analysis of the students' answers provided several changes in the rating system of husband-wife relationships. The quality rating of "neutral" was abolished. The definition of "positive" was expanded to encompass neutral interactions as it did on parent-child and sibling relationships. This served to make the choice simpler but did not change the thrust of the analysis. An analysis of categories listed under miscellaneous showed no categories that were not represented already. Rather, there needed to be more specific instructions given so that miscellaneous would not be used unless the strip absolutely did not fit in any other category.

One important factor pointed out by this pre-test was the need to distinguish between the subject and the quality of the strip as a whole and the interaction within the strip. The student's ratings reflected this difference. Some strips featured only a limited interaction between spouses. In some

cases the strip and not the interaction was analyzed. This pointed out the need for a clearer definition of what was to be analyzed.

This pre-test was not meant to be a formal establishment of reliability. Berelson (1952) stated that reliability in content analysis is higher when the coders are experienced and well-trained and when the illustrations given them are lengthy and specific. The Allegheny class was neither well-trained nor experienced. Rather, they served to help the researcher become more experienced. In addition, the pre-test served to increase reliability by helping to simplify the categories and make the coding rules more precise and complete (Berelson).

Analysis procedure

Mimeographed forms were used to record the analysis of each comic strip series (Appendix B). Each series was read completely before decisions about the milieu were made. Each strip within the series was then categorized according to its main interaction. The interactions were then rated. Finally, each series was again read for each instance of parent-child affection or abuse, and for a simple count of listed behaviors between husband and wife. The results were then reported in tabular form.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to analyze marital and family relationships in the daily, family-oriented comic strips. Relationships among family members were studied to determine their quality and content. The construction and milieu of the family were also analyzed.

The milieu

The comic strip family is in several ways a reflection of its audience. Among the 15 family strips analyzed, 86% were set in the United States. Contemporary times were the setting for 93% of all the strips. Even though some strips had not changed the clothing or hair styles of their major characters since their inception 40 or 50 years ago, the use of contemporary slang language such as "rip-off" or "hippy" and the portrayal or discussion of modern themes helped determine the contemporary setting.

Generally the comic strip family is a stereotyped institution that does not reflect in a realistic manner the diversities in race, social class, or life styles within our culture. Over one-half of all the families analyzed were identified as members of the lower-middle class. Only one family, or 6.6% of all strips, was determined to be upper-middle class. Thirteen percent were upper-lower class and 27% were lower class. In addition, all families were white. The comic strip family lives primarily in a house in the suburbs with only 13% of its population living in a rural setting and 13% living

Table 1

Milieu of Family Comic Strip

(N = 15)

Categories for analysis	Number	Percent*
Settings		
United States	13	86
Other Country	2	13
Contemporary times	14	93
Historical	1	7
Urban	2	13
Rural	2	13
Suburban	11	73
Social Class		
Upper	0	0
Upper-middle	1	7
Lower-middle	8	53
Upper-lower	2	13
Lower	4	27
Occupation of Male		
Professional	2	13
White collar	7	47
Blue collar	1	7
House-husband	0	0
Unemployed	5	33
Occupation of Female		
Professional	0	0
White Collar	1	7
Blue Collar	1	7
Housewife	13	87
Unemployed	0	0

* Percentage computed to nearest whole number

Table 1 (cont.)

Categories for analysis	Number	Percent*
Stage in Family Life Cycle		
Married couple, no children	3	20
Childbearing	0	0
Family with pre-school children	0	0
Family with school children	6	40
Family with teenagers	4	27
Family launching young adults	1	7
Middle-aged parents	1	7
Aging family members	0	0
Drawing Style		
Caricature	14	93
Non-caricature	1	7
Continuity		
Continuous	0	0
Non-continuous	15	100

* Percentage computed to nearest whole number

in an urban setting. There were no apartment dwellers in the strips.

Comic strip husbands were primarily white collar workers or unemployed. Thirteen percent were professionals and 7% were blue collar workers. The comic strip wife is portrayed as a housewife 80% of the time. Only two out of 15 wives were employed, one as a domestic and one as a secretary. In both of these strips the husband was not employed and there were no children in the strips. A family with both husband and wife employed was not portrayed, and no strip featured a mother with an outside job.

Families were analyzed for their stage in the family life cycle (Duvall, 1977). Three stages (childbearing, families with pre-school children, and aging family members) were not portrayed. Families with school-age children accounted for 40% of the total. Middle-aged parents and families launching young adults each accounted for 7%. Families with teenagers were shown 27% of the time and 20% of the time there were no children discussed or visible in the strip at all. In all the strips where no children were portrayed the husband and wife were middle-aged or older. A few of the comic strips used children outside the immediate family as important characters in the strip. In both of these strips there were no children in the marriage who were living at home.

The typical comic strip family emerged as a contemporary unit living in the suburban United States. The family was white, and lower-middle class with indications of moderate

income and prestige. Father worked at a white collar job and mother stayed home and kept house. The family had several school-age children or perhaps teenagers.

Every strip that was judged to be appropriate for analysis was of the gag-a-day variety. Although several strips with continuous stories were investigated, none fit the criteria for analysis. This represents a new trend in comic strip history for many of the most famous family strips of the past, such as "The Gumps" and "The Nebbs", had continuous story-lines. In line with this, 93% of the strips' artists used caricature as their drawing style. In only one strip was a more realistic style attempted.

Types of interactions among family members

A total of 769 comic strips was analyzed. Within these strips husband-wife interactions account for 42% of all interactions. Since there were no strips featuring a single parent, every comic strip had a husband-wife relationship. Within the individual strips, husband-wife interactions ranged from 4% to 67% of the total. Parent-child interactions accounted for 17% of the total interactions analyzed. One-third of the comic strip families that were analyzed had no examples of parent-child interactions. Usually this was due to the fact that there were no children in the family. In one case, "Bringing Up Father," the child in the family had grown and left home. In another, "Blondie," the children were present only rarely and as a part of the scenery. In the individual strips where parent-child interactions occurred they ranged

from 6% to 83% of the total interactions analyzed. Those families with the most children had the greatest number of interactions.

Interactions among siblings accounted for only 3% of all interactions analyzed. Of these, one strip, "The Smith Family," accounted for almost one-half of all the sibling interactions recorded. There were no sibling interactions at all in 67% of the strips' families analyzed. Again, this was partly due to not having children in many strips. In addition, several strips had only one child in the family. Predictably, those strips with more than one sibling interaction were strips about families with many children. "The Smith Family" is composed of 11 children. "The Ryatts" and "Hi and Lois" each has four children. In the individual strips where sibling interactions occur, they range from 2% to 19% of all interactions recorded.

Other interactions accounted for the final 38% of all interactions analyzed. These included interactions between a family member and the comic strip audience; between a family member and a character outside the family; between a family member and a pet; between several characters outside the family; and strips where no interaction was predominant.

Quality of parent-child relationships

Parent-child relationships in the family comic strips are more often positive than negative. Positive interactions occurred as 61% of the total of parent-child interactions and negative interactions occurred as 39% of the total.

In only one comic strip was the balance substantially different. Seventy-five percent of the parent-child interactions in "The Smith Family" were judged to be negative.

Affection between parent and child was demonstrated in 11 segments. This is 1% of the total number of strips analyzed. "The Ryatts" and "The Dumplings" had the highest incidence of affectionate behavior. "The Ryatts" had 43 parent-child interactions with four incidents of affectionate behavior. "The Dumplings" had only three parent-child interactions with three incidents of affectionate behavior. Only one strip, "The Smith Family," had more incidents of abuse than affection. In that strip four incidents of abusive behavior and no incidents of affectionate behavior were recorded. These incidents included several spankings and the dumping of garbage over a child's head.

Parents in the comic strips, then,were shown to interact with their children less than one-half as often as they did with each other. This varied in different strips and to some extent depended on the number of children in the family. The interactions themselves were more positive than negative except in "The Smith Family." Comic strip families were not shown to be especially affectionate or abusive. When it was shown,however, affection was twice as predominant as abuse.

Quality of sibling relations

Sibling interaction in the family-oriented comic strips was sparse. When it did occur it was only slightly more positive than negative. In all the strips that were analyzed

there is only one example of abusive behavior between siblings. It occurred in "The Smith Family." There was more sibling interaction in that strip than in any other one. The strip's 10 interactions were divided evenly between positive and negative. This was in contrast to the 75% negative interactions between parent and child. None of the strips analyzed showed any affectionate behavior between siblings. In the world of the comic strip families studied, relationships between siblings did not appear to be considered important or humorous.

Husband-wife interactions

Husband-wife interactions accounted for 42% of all comic strip interactions analyzed. They ranged from 4% of the total in "The Ryatts" to 67% of the total in "Bringing Up Father."

An analysis of the interactions between husband and wife showed that use of leisure time was the subject most often dominant. Twenty-two percent of all husband-wife interactions dealt with leisure time. Household tasks, food or eating, family finances, in-laws or parents, dress, and physical conditions or health comprised the other major categories of interactions. These seven categories accounted for 68% of all interactions. Of lesser concern were miscellaneous interactions, pets, children, communications, career decisions, conventionality, demonstrations of affection, and friends or neighbors. Of least concern, each being 1% or less of the total, were sex relations, alcohol consumption, philosophy of life, religious matters, amount of time spent together,

Table 2

Husband-wife Interactions

(N = 323)

Content of Interaction	Number	Percent*
Leisure time	71	22
Household tasks	40	12
Food or Eating	29	9
Family Finances	26	8
In-laws or parents	18	6
Dress	18	6
Physical condition/Health	17	5
Miscellaneous	13	4
Pets	13	4
Children	12	4
Communication	12	4
Career decisions	10	3
Conventionality	10	3
Demonstrations of Affection	9	3
Friends or neighbors	9	3
Sex relations	4	1
Alcohol consumption	4	1
Philosophy of Life	3	1
Religious matters	1	0
Amount of time spent together	1	0
Making major decisions	1	0

* Percentage computed to nearest whole number

and making major decisions.

Individual strips generally followed the overall pattern of interactions with several exceptions. As would be expected, strips that featured children contained all the interactions about children. In some strips these were among the main interactions. One strip, "Hubert," had eight interactions about in-laws, tying for first place in that strip with household tasks. "Hubert" accounted for almost one-half of all in-law interactions recorded in all strips. One other strip, "The Dumplings," had pets, demonstrations of affections, sex relations, and leisure time as its major categories. This strip accounted for all interactions about sex relations recorded and one-half of all interactions about pets and demonstrations of affection.

Husband-wife interactions tended to be more negative than positive. Of the interactions that were analyzed, 59% were negative and 33% were positive. Eight percent were judged as ambivalent.

When the categories were organized by their predominant subject matter, each of the top seven categories had more negative than positive interactions. These ranged from 83% negative interactions about household tasks to 46% negative interactions about family finances. For all categories where the subject of the interaction was 3 or 4% of the total subject matter, all interactions were more negative than positive except for interactions about children which were 83% positive, and interactions about demonstrations of affection which were

Table 3
Husband-wife Interactions
(N = 323)

Quality of Interaction	N	Negative	Positive	Ambivalent
		Percents*		
Leisure time	71	62	28	10
Household tasks	40	83	13	4
Food or eating	29	62	34	4
Family finances	26	46	38	16
In-laws or Parents	18	72	17	11
Dress	18	50	39	11
Physical condition/ Health	17	59	41	0
Miscellaneous	13	46	38	16
Pets	13	62	23	15
Children	12	17	83	0
Communication	12	75	17	8
Career decisions	10	60	40	0
Conventionality	10	70	20	10
Demonstrations of affection	9	22	67	11
Friends or neighbors	9	44	23	33
Sex relations	4	0	100	0
Alcohol consumption	4	75	25	0
Philosophy of life	3	100	0	0
Religious matters	1	0	0	100
Amount of time spent together	1	0	100	0
Making major decisions	1	100	0	0

* Percentage computed to nearest whole number

67% positive. Comic strip couples, then, disagreed more often than they agreed on all subjects that they discussed often except for two : children and demonstrations of affection. Leisure time and how it should be spent was discussed most often, and more often disagreed on than agreed on. Discussions about household tasks occurred frequently and were overwhelmingly negative. Subjects which we might consider important to deal with in real-life marriages, such as who makes major decisions, sexual relationships, and religious matters, were rarely dealt with in the comic strips analyzed. A Harris survey, however (Bach & Wyden, 1968), asking the question "What is the biggest single source of friction between you and your spouse?" reported that, after money-spending and child-rearing as major issues, "a close third was a list of trivial sounding complaints such as 'too much petty criticism from wives' and 'sloppy husbands'." Bach hypothesized that trivial issues were decoys. "It is a kind of emotional shorthand that intimates develop in the course of thrashing out an enduring relationship." (p. 184)

Individual strips showed a wide range in quality of interactions. The highest percentage of positive interactions occurred in "Moose Miller" with 90% positive interactions followed by "The Dumplings" with 68% positive interactions. The strips containing the highest number of negative interactions were "The Flop Family" with 83% negative interactions and "Hagar, the Horrible" with 82%. Of the remaining strips, seven were more negative than positive, three were more positive

Table 4

Individual Interactions in the Strips

(N= 323)

Individual strips	N	Positive	Negative	Ambivalent
The Ryatts	2	1	1	0
Eb and Flo	33	10	22	1
Hi and Lois	14	7	5	2
Bringing Up Father	35	13	22	0
Snuffy Smith	19	10	9	0
Blondie	27	11	10	6
Andy Capp	30	6	22	2
Dumplings	28	19	7	2
Moon Mullins	22	5	16	1
Hagar, the Horrible	17	3	14	0
Hubert	23	3	18	2
The Smith Family	5	2	3	0
Professor Phumble	34	3	24	7
Moose Miller	11	10	0	1
The Flop Family	23	1	19	3

than negative and one was almost evenly divided in its negative and positive interactions.

In addition to judging the quality of interactions, certain negative and positive behaviors were counted to determine how often they occurred and how prevalent they were in comic strip marriages. As in parent-child and sibling interactions, few incidents of physical abuse occurred. There were six incidents of physical fighting between husband and wife in 769 strips analyzed. Each one of these incidents was initiated by the wife. "The Flop Family," with the most negative interactions, also contained three of the fights. "Andy Capp," "Hubert," and also "Bringing Up Father," contained the others. Insults between husband and wife occurred in 6% of all strips. This was by far the most commonly shown form of hostility. Eleven of the 15 strips analyzed contained one to 10 insults. Discussions, threat, or portrayal of divorce or separation occurred five times. Four of these were in "Andy Capp." Leaving the house after a fight was shown only three times. Two of these were in "Andy Capp." Portrayal of or implied extra-marital sexual relations occurred four times, once again only in "Andy Capp."

Affection was measured several ways. Physical affection occurred in 2% of all strips analyzed. Three of the series showed no physical affection. More prevalent was the use of pet names or endearments. These occurred in 6% of all the strips analyzed and in three-fifths of all the series analyzed. Compliments occurred infrequently. Only 1% of the combined

strips contained compliments and two-thirds of all the series had no examples of compliments. Pet names, although occurring frequently should not be considered as a reliable indication of the state of the marriage. Often, insults or negative interactions occurred on the same day as examples of pet names. "Andy Capp" alone had more than twice as many uses of pet names as any other strip.

Comic strip couples engaged in interests outside the home together in 4% of all strips. Two-thirds of all the series showed this occurring. "Andy Capp" had the largest number of occurrences or twice as many as any other strip. In "Andy Capp" the activities engaged in together were drinking in bars or attending rugby matches.

The strip with the most affectionate behaviors, "The Dumplings," was also one of the two strips with the highest percentage of positive interactions. "Moose Miller" and "Blondie" also displayed a number of affectionate behaviors. The strip with the most abusive behavior was "Andy Capp" followed closely by "The Flop Family." Each of these strips also was judged to contain considerably more negative than positive interactions.

The individual strips, then, differed considerably in their view of marital relationships within the family.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The mass media have been studied by many different disciplines as to their pervasiveness and effect on society. The newspaper has been an important medium which has been concerned with information, influence, entertainment and advertising. One of the most important sections in the newspaper has proved to be the comic strip section. An estimated 140 million people read the comic strips daily. Their very existence conveys potent images of American life and molds our culture.

The purpose of this study was to examine marriage and the family and how it is portrayed in the comic strips. A historical overview was done in order to highlight important strips and to determine how comic strips have portrayed marriage and family relations since their inception. In addition, a content analysis of contemporary family-oriented strips was done.

The content analysis was carried out on 15 comic strips that were obtained either from 12 major and minor newspapers or directly from the syndicated publishing them. All the comic strips used in the analysis had to focus on marriage and the family for at least 50% of their segments. A two-month sampling of each was examined. The strips were analyzed to determine the quality and quantity of parent-child, sibling, and husband-wife relationships. In addition, the strips were analyzed to determine how often demonstrated affection

and/or demonstrated abuse occurred. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale developed by Spanier (1976) was used to help provide categories for analysis. The comic family's milieu was also examined.

A large majority of the strips are set in the U.S. All took place in contemporary times. The comic strip family emerged as a stereotyped institution that did not reflect in an meaningful way the diversities within American culture. The typical comic strip family was white and lower-middle class with indications of moderate income and prestige. The father worked at a white-collar job and the mother was a housewife. The family included several school-aged or teen-aged children.

Husband-wife interactions accounted for the largest number (42%) of interactions in the 769 segments examined. Parent-child interactions accounted for less than one-fifth of all interactions and sibling interactions for only 3%.

The amount of interaction between parent and child depended to some extent on the number of children in the family. The interactions were judged to be more positive than negative with the exception of "The Smith Family" which was much more negative than positive. Demonstrated affection or abuse occurred infrequently with affection occurring twice as often as abuse.

Sibling interaction tended to be more positive than negative. There was no affection demonstrated and only one example of abuse.

Husband-wife interactions were more often negative (59%)

than positive (33%). Interactions about children and demonstrations of affection, however, tend to be more positive than negative. Within individual strips, ratios of positive and negative interactions varied widely although only two strips were clearly more positive than negative. Interactions about leisure time and its use occurred more often than any other subject. Household tasks, food or eating, family finances, in-laws or parents, dress, and physical condition or health comprised the other major categories of interactions. Religious matters, amount of time spent together and decision-making were of least importantce, quantitatively.

As in parent-child and sibling interactions, few incidents of physical abuse occurred between husband and wife. Each of the six incidents recorded was initiated by the wife. Insults by husband or wife were the most commonly shown form of hostility and occurred in 6% of all strips. "Andy Capp" contained the greatest number of negative behaviors such as threat of divorce or separation, leaving the house after a fight, and portrayal or implied extra-marital sexual relations.

Physical affection between husband and wife occurred in only 2% of all the strips that were analyzed. Pet names and endearments were used much more frequently (6%) than physical affection. Pet names, however, were often used in conjunction with insults, or they occurred in negative interactions. "The Dumplings" contained the greatest number of positive behaviors.

The picture that evolves of the comic strip family is one of superficial people involved in superficial relationships. Although children are present in many comic strip families, we see only a few examples of series where children play a significant role in the family life. The relationship between parent and child is a benign one, neither abusive, nor affectionate. The children, themselves, seldom relate to one another. In contrast, the marriage relationship, in the comic strips, presents an entirely different picture. Husband and wife are locked into the battle of the sexes and although their relationship is most often a negative one, it is truly a relationship, with numerous interactions about many different subjects.

Obviously, the comic strips are not meant to portray a realistic picture of marriage and family relations in the United States, today. Their tremendous popularity attests to the fact that they say something meaningful to their audience. When examining communication content, it is necessary to balance the communicator's intent, the audience's reaction, and the communicator's concept of the audience. With this in mind some inferences may be drawn.

The comic strip family, in some ways, presents a simple, uncomplicated picture of family life. The comic strip family is free of racial problems. There are only white families and they only live near white neighbors. There are no problems with male or female identity or roles. The comic strip female knows her place and the comic strip male knows his.

Although finances are often discussed, few families show any real problems meeting their basic needs. They live in nice neighborhoods with adequate housing and they wear good clothes. In subtle ways, this uncomplicated existence is re-inforced by the tendency of many strips to remind us of our past. Clothing and hairstyles are often those of a past decade. Wives wear aprons and bustle around the house doing chores that seem to be reminiscent of another era. The effect is to stimulate our nostalgia and make us vaguely yearn for a time when life was supposedly less complicated.

The comic strip child is often neither seen nor heard. There are few examples of the stresses that real-life parents feel when they are raising real-life children. Again, the comic strips present a picture of an idealized family. This probably reflects the stereotype of what a family should be and also perhaps reflects an unconscious desire to create just such a family in reality.

Although relationships between husband and wife are far from peaceful or ideal, they are secure and stable. Divorce and separation are not serious alternatives within the comic strip. Andy Capp may leave Flo Capp but it is no surprise when we read the next day's episode and find them back together. The comic strip couple may argue, insult, or fight with one another, but we have no fear that it is serious enough to damage a relationship that has existed perhaps for several decades. The negative interactions that occur may help to reassure real-life couples that their own marriages can survive.

Limitations and recommendations

The sample collected for this study included major comic strip families as well as minor ones. Although an attempt was made to collect and analyze every applicable comic strip by using a dozen U.S. newspapers and by contacting newspaper syndicates, no guarantee exists that every comic strip family in existence today was included in this analysis. The results of this study, therefore, can not be generalized to be applicable to the entire institution of comic strip families.

A historical picture of comic strip families was gathered from the numerous works available on general comic strip history. Future studies could focus on content analysis of previous comic strip families in order to compare the results with this contemporary analysis.

Pressure has been applied in other media to make the portrayal of individuals and families reflect some of the diversities in our society. Television families now reflect more of our culture's variations in race and life-style. Future content analysis of the comic strip could help determine if and when these changes will be reflected in that medium.

The picture of American marriage and families that is presented in the comic strips is not a realistic one. It is a distortion in the same way that a caricature is a distortion of a real picture. Like the caricature, however, the comic strip emphasizes aspects of our culture that are often central in our society and in our families. To study the comic strips

is to study a little of the American mass psyche. The comic strips are popular and pervasive. The images they project are part of our heritage, our contemporary life and in all probability our future. To understand them and the messages they convey is to understand ourselves a little better.

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Appendix A

DYADIC ADJUSTMENT SCALE

Most persons have disagreements in their relationships. Please indicate below the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your partner for each item on the following list.

	Always Agree	Almost Always Agree	Occasionally Disagree	Frequently Disagree	Almost Always Disagree	Always Disagree
* 1. Handling family finances	5	4	3	2	1	0
2. Matters of recreation	5	4	3	2	1	0
* 3. Religious matters	5	4	3	2	1	0
* 4. Demonstrations of affection	5	4	3	2	1	0
* 5. Friends	5	4	3	2	1	0
* 6. Sex relations	5	4	3	2	1	0
* 7. Conventionality (correct or proper behavior)	5	4	3	2	1	0
* 8. Philosophy of life	5	4	3	2	1	0
* 9. Ways of dealing with parents or in-laws	5	4	3	2	1	0
*10. Aims, goals, and things believed important	5	4	3	2	1	0
*11. Amount of time spent together	5	4	3	2	1	0
*12. Making major decisions	5	4	3	2	1	0
*13. Household tasks	5	4	3	2	1	0
*14. Leisure time interests and activities	5	4	3	2	1	0
*15. Career decisions	5	4	3	2	1	0

	All the time	Most of the time	More often than not	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
*16. How often do you discuss or have you considered divorce, separation, or terminating your relationship?	0	1	2	3	4	5
*17. How often do you or your mate leave the house after a fight?	0	1	2	3	4	5
18. In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?	5	4	3	2	1	0
19. Do you confide in your mate?	5	4	3	2	1	0
*20. Do you ever regret that you married? (*or lived together*)	0	1	2	3	4	5
21. How often do you and your partner quarrel?	0	1	2	3	4	5
22. How often do you and your mate "get on each other's nerves?"	0	1	2	3	4	5

	Every Day	Almost Every Day	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
*23. Do you kiss your mate?	4	3	2	1	0

	All of them	Most of them	Some of them	Very few of them	None of them
* 24. Do you and your mate engage in outside interests together?	4	3	2	1	0

How often would you say the following events occur between you and your mate?

	Never	Less than once a month	Once or twice a month	Once or twice a week	Once a day	More often
25. Have a stimulating exchange of ideas	0	1	2	3	4	5
*26. Laugh together	0	1	2	3	4	5
27. Calmly discuss something	0	1	2	3	4	5
*28. Work together on a project	0	1	2	3	4	5

These are some things about which couples sometimes agree and sometime disagree. Indicate if either item below caused differences of opinions or were problems in your relationship during the past few weeks. (Check yes or no)

	Yes	No	
29.	0	1	Being too tired for sex.
30.	0	1	Not showing love.

31. The dots on the following line represent different degrees of happiness in your relationship. The middle point, "happy," represents the degree of happiness of most relationships. Please circle the dot which best describes the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Extremely Unhappy	Fairly Unhappy	A Little Unhappy	Happy	Very Happy	Extremely Happy	Perfect

32. Which of the following statements best describes how you feel about the future of your relationship?

5 I want desperately for my relationship to succeed, and *would go to almost any length* to see that it does.
4 I want very much for my relationship to succeed, and *will do all I can* to see that it does.
3 I want very much for my relationship to succeed, and *will do my fair share* to see that it does.
2 It would be nice if my relationship succeeded, but *I can't do much more than I am doing* now to help it succeed.
1 It would be nice if it succeeded, but I *refuse to do any more than I am doing* now to keep the relationship going.
0 My relationship can never succeed, and *there is no more that I can do* to keep the relationship going.

* All items that were adapted for the final content analysis are marked.

Appendix B

Subjects for Content Analysis

Each comic strip was analyzed for the following data:

1) Title
2) Settings
   A. U.S. or Other Country
   B. Contemporary vs. Historical
   C. Urban, Rural, or Suburban
3) Social Class (Spiegelman, 1952)
   A. Upper Class
   B. Upper Middle Class
   C. Lower Middle Class
   D. Upper Lower Class
   E. Lower Class
4) Occupation or Profession of Main Characters (Husband and Wife)
   A. Professional
   B. White Collar Worker
   C. Blue Collar Worker
   D. Housewife or Househusband
   E. Unemployed
5) Stage in Family Life Cycle
6) Caricature vs. Non-caricature
7) Continuity vs. simple humor

Interactions were divided between:

Parent-Parent
Parent-Child
Child-Child (Siblings)
Character-Audience
Parent (In-law)- Husband or Wife
Character in family-Character outside family
Character-Animal
Character outside family-Character outside family

Interactions between siblings were analyzed:

Interaction favorable: Friendly or neutral emotion
Interaction unfavorable: Unfriendly, physical fighting, insulting, arguing, or one character showed anger, hurt or shock.

Interactions between parent and child were analyzed:

Interaction favorable: Friendly or neutral emotion
Interaction unfavorable: Unfriendly, physical fighting, insulting, arguing, or one character showed anger, hurt or shock.

A simple count of behaviors for both parent-child and sibling interactions was done. All strips were analyzed because the behaviors occurred in strips that were not strictly parent-child or sibling interactions:

Count the number of times that physical affection occurs. This includes touching affectionately, hugging, kissing etc.
Count the number of times that physical abuse occurs. This includes spanking, hitting, throwing things at each other, etc.

Interactions between husband and wife were analyzed:

Interaction favorable: Friendly or neutral emotion
Interaction unfavorable: Unfriendly, physical fighting, insulting, arguing, or one character showed anger, hurt or shock.

In addition, the subject of each interaction was determined:

1) Alcohol consumption
2) Food or eating
3) Family finances
4) Religious matters
5) Demonstrations of affection
6) Friends or neighbors
7) Sex relations
8) Conventionality - proper behavior
9) Philosophy of Life: Aims, goals, or things believed important
10) In-laws or parents
11) Children
12) Amount of time spent together
13) Making major decisions
14) Household tasks
15) Leisure time, interests, activities
16) Career decisions
17) Pets
18) Physical condition or health
19) Dress
20) Communication
21) Miscellaneous (Please list)

A simple count of behaviors by either husband or wife was done:

1) Discussion, threat or portrayal of divorce, separation, or termination of marriage.
2) Leaving the house after a fight
3) Expressed regrets that marriage took place
4) Insults: remarks that partner reacts to with anger, hurt, or shock etc.
5) Portrayal or implied extra-marital sexual relations
6) Kissing or close physical affection
7) Engaging in interests outside of family together

8) Laughing together
9) Complimenting one another
10) Use of pet names

The simple count was done for each strip since some of these behaviors occurred in strips that were not strictly husband-wife interactions.

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Marriage and the Family
as portrayed in
Contemporary Comic Strips

by

Emilie Richards McGee

(Abstract)

The mass media have been widely studied because of their pervasiveness and effect on society. The comic strips, as part of the newspaper, are widely read. By their very existence and pervasiveness they mold our culture. The purpose of this study was to examine marriage and the family and how it is portrayed in the comic strips.

A historical overview of significant family comic strips was done using comic strip texts. A content analysis of contemporary family strips was also done. The strips were analyzed to determine how often demonstrated affection and/or abuse occurred. In addition, the strips were analyzed to determine the quality and quantity of parent-child, sibling, and husband-wife relationships. Two month samples of 15 different comic strips were analyzed.

The comic strip family emerged as a stereotyped group that was white, lower-middle class, with a father who worked at a white collar job and a mother who was a housewife. The family included several school-aged or teen-aged children. Neither demonstrated affection nor abuse was found to occur often in comic strip families. Parent-child interactions and interactions among siblings were judged to be more positive

than negative. Husband-wife interactions were more often negative than positive, although there was a wide variance among individual strips. Interactions about leisure time and its use occurred more often than any other category. Household tasks, food, finances, in-laws or parents, dress and health comprised the other m ajor categories of interactions.