Sex Role Stereotyping in the Sunday Comics

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The present paper analyzes the contents of four family-oriented comics appearing in the Sunday comic section of a local newspaper for a period of six months. In two, the female characters overtly dominate the male; in two, the females play a passive, subordinate role. This study illustrates that even when overt signs of female dominance are found, traditional sex-role stereotyping persists.

The importance of learned association in the development of sex-role typing and identity has been well established (Maccoby, 1966), and a number of factors influencing sex-role development have been proposed. For example, Kagan (1964) suggests parental role model as a decisive influence, Sears (1965) proposes parental expectations and severity of socialization as crucial factors, and Hartley (1966) indicates handling behaviors and symbol manipulation as possibilities.

More recently, researchers have focused on sex-role stereotyping in literature as an important factor in sex-role socialization. For example, Weitzman, Eiffer, Kokada, and Ross (1972) examined picture books for preschool children and the Central New Jersey Task Force of the National Organization for Women (1972) reviewed sex stereotyping in children's texts. Both studies found rigid sex-role definitions; e.g., males appeared in instrumental roles, females in expressive ones. The present study concentrates on yet another medium, the Sunday comics, and more specifically, those related to marriage and the family. Although a relatively neglected area of study, this particular art form enjoys widespread popularity and warrants serious study (Berger, 1973), particularly with respect to its possible impact on sex-role socialization.
RATIONALE

The nature of the relationship between life as depicted in comics that focus on family situations and life in the real culture is debatable. Saenger (1963) suggests that although the domestically oriented comics depict men, women, and children in family life situations, they present a distorted view of American family life. He writes (p. 221):

The husband deviates from the ideal image of the strong, self-assertive, intelligent man, and assumes the character traits the culture ascribes to women. . . . Likewise the wife departs from the cultural ideal of the weak and more submissive sex.

Thus, in the “comic” culture, males appear weak and immature; females appear aggressive and masterful. Males are often confused; females manifest logic and intelligence.

In contrast, Berger sees the comics as “social records of sorts” (1973, p. 7). Dagwood Bumstead, for example, is not a distortion of the American family man, but “an important archetype . . . the irrelevant male” (p. 103).

Whether they view the comics as a distortion or as a reflection of American culture, both Saenger and Berger agree that the adult female in the Sunday comics plays the dominant role. If this is true, it should follow that traditional sex-role stereotyping would be less apparent or even reversed in the comics. The purpose of the present paper is to illustrate that regardless of overt signs of female dominance, traditional sex-role stereotyping remains in evidence.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Saenger (1963, p. 222) classifies all comics into three major categories: (1) domestic comics, which focus on family relations in a home setting; (2) adventure comics, which center on a hero engaged in an activity such as crime detection or travel; and (3) comedy comics, which include animal cartoons and comics with grossly caricatured humans. Only the first category, domestic comics, was considered pertinent to the present study.

A review of the comics appearing in the local Sunday newspaper revealed twenty cartoons: five domestic, five adventure, and ten comedy. Of the five domestic cartoons, one, “Our Boarding House” by Les Carroll, was eliminated because of its specific orientation to a family-owned boarding house rather than to a nuclear family. The remaining four domestic comics were retained for analysis: “Blondie” by Chic Young, “The Born Loser” by Art Sansom, “Dennis the Menace” by Hank Ketcham, and “Priscilla’s Pop” by Al Vermeer. Each centers on father, mother, and child or children; each presents one situation per strip, i.e., a new situation each Sunday.