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The Changing Culture of Fatherhood in Comic-Strip Families: A Six-Decade Analysis

A content analysis of 490 Father's Day and Mother's Day comic strips published from 1940 to 1999 indicates that the culture of fatherhood has fluctuated since World War II. "Incompetent" fathers appeared frequently in the late 1940s, early 1950s, and late 1960s but were rarer in the late 1950s, early and late 1970s, early 1980s, and early 1990s. Fathers who were mocked were especially common in the early and late 1960s and early 1980s but were less common in the late 1940s, early and late 1950s, and early and late 1970s. Fathers who were nurturant and supportive toward children were most evident in the late 1940s, early 1950s, and early and late 1990s, with the longitudinal pattern resembling a U-shaped curve. Differences between fathers and mothers also oscillated from one decade to the next.

How do popular portrayals of fathers in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s compare with popular portrayals

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of fathers in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s? Have the portrayals improved? Have they gotten worse? Is there any variation at all?

The issue here is not whether the conduct of fatherhood has shifted, but whether the culture of fatherhood has changed (LaRossa, 1988). When it comes to conduct, studies have shown that with the increase in the number of dual-earner families, more fathers are spending large blocks of "quality time" with their children, although men still lag behind women in this regard (Pleck, 1997). On the other hand, because of the long-term escalation in divorce, many nonresident fathers have only minimal contact with their daughters and sons. The behavioral picture of the contemporary male parent thus can be said to have both a good side and a bad side (Furstenberg, 1988).

What about the culture of fatherhood (i.e., the norms, values, beliefs, and expressive symbols pertaining to fatherhood)? How much change can be discerned here? Scholars may be better equipped today to answer this question than they were 15 years ago, but a careful examination of the four studies that have directly tested "the changing-culture-of-fatherhood hypothesis" (Day & Mackey, 1986; LaRossa, Gordon, Wilson, Bairan, & Jaret, 1991; Atkinson & Blackwelder, 1993; Coltrane & Allan, 1994) indicates that much still remains unknown.

In the first effort to systematically tackle the question, Day and Mackey (1986) compared single-panel family cartoons published in the *Saturday Evening Post* between 1922 and 1968 with similar kinds of cartoons published between 1971 and 1978 to see whether "the role image of the American father" in popular culture had been transformed. They found that up to the late 1960s, fathers were significantly more likely than were mothers to be characterized as incompetent (e.g., as "awkward," "unhandy," or "gawky"), but in the 1970s, the incidence of incompetence for men and women was statistically similar. Because of the convergence in how cartoons portrayed fathers and mothers during the second period in contrast to the disparity of their portrayals in the first, Day and Mackey concluded that the 1970s marked a paradigmatic shift in the culture of fatherhood. As they saw it, the percentage of mothers in the labor force, the decline in birth rates, and the fervent advocacy of gender equality in the 1970s (brought on by the feminist movement) had prompted the traditionally minded *Saturday Evening Post* cartoonists to reduce their satirical attacks on fathers. A new, improved version of fatherhood had come on the scene.

Social scientists have long recognized that humor can reveal patterns of stratification (e.g., see Mulkay, 1988; Wilson, 1979), hence the premise that the incompetence level of cartoon characters could be used as a barometer of social trends does have validity. Nonetheless, were Day and Mackey (1986) correct about the 1970s? Had the image of the American father basically been consistent until then?

In a follow-up study, LaRossa et al. (1991) examined the same kinds of *Saturday Evening Post* cartoons that Day and Mackey (1986) had, but focused more closely on the years 1924, 1928, 1932, 1936, 1940, and 1944, when historical conditions were analogous to those in the 1970s (i.e., the labor force participation rate of mothers had increased, birth rates had alternated, and the first wave of the 20th century women's movement was reverberating). LaRossa et al. discovered that whereas fathers were significantly more likely than were mothers to be depicted as incompetent in the 1920s, the disparity with respect to incompetence had disappeared in the 1930s and especially the early 1940s. If gender parity in cartoon humor is a sign of "role image" change, as Day and Mackey suggested, then it would seem that the 1970s were not the first time fathers were taken seriously. The paradigmatic shift that Day and

Mackey had assumed was peculiar to the 1970s also may have occurred in the 1930s and 1940s. Synthesizing the findings from the two studies, LaRossa et al. inferred that a fluctuating pattern was a more accurate model of how the culture of fatherhood had changed over the course of the 20th century.

Next, in another study that relied on print media but not on cartoons, Atkinson and Blackwelder (1993) examined popular magazine articles published in the middle years of every decade from the early 1900s to the 1980s to see what had happened to "fathering role definitions" in the interim. Calculating the ratio of articles accentuating "nurturant fathering" to articles accentuating "providing fathering," they found that in the 1920s and 1930s, the emphasis on "providing fathering" was predominant, but that from the 1940s through the 1980s "nurturant fathering" was the more common theme. They also noted that for the latter part of the 20th century, the ratios moved up and down, reporting scores of 2.5, 1.3, 1.4, 3.3, and 2.8 for the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, respectively (i.e., fathers were 2.5 times more likely in the 1940s to be defined as "nurturing," and so on.). These figures suggest that traditional gender roles were more likely to be endorsed in the 1950s and 1960s and that the concept of the "New Father" (i.e., the more involved father) was strongest in the 1970s. The pattern would appear to support both Day and Mackey's (1986) claim that the 1970s were a high water mark for nurturant fathering and LaRossa and colleagues' (1991) contention that the culture of fatherhood had fluctuated. Left unanswered, however, was why there would be a lower ratio in the 1980s than there was in the 1970s. Interesting, too, was the similarity between the 1950s and 1960s. Did the feminist movement of the 1960s have no immediate effect on definitions of fatherhood?

In the most recent study, based on electronic rather than print media, Coltrane and Allan (1994) compared representations of fatherhood and motherhood in television advertising in the 1980s with representations in the 1950s. Characters appearing in "classic" and award-winning commercials were judged on a variety of criteria, including whether they were parents or paid workers and whether they were nurturant and supportive when performing the parental role. On the first measure, Coltrane and Allan found that in the 1950s, men were six times more likely to be shown as workers than as parents, whereas women were twice as

likely to be shown as parents than as workers. In the 1980s, the portrayal of men had changed only slightly, whereas the portrayal of women had become more similar to that of the men; three decades later, men were almost four times as likely, and women were twice as likely, to be shown as workers than as parents. The convergence in the portrayal of men and women as workers indicated that some change had occurred, but Coltrane and Allan pointed out that gender differences continued to be visible in that "men were still more likely to be pictured in occupational roles than were women" (p. 51).

Coltrane and Allan's (1994) study revealed little change on the issue of whether men and women were depicted as nurturant and supportive. In the 1950s, 75% of the fathers and 89% of the mothers displayed nurturant and supportive behaviors; in the 1980s, 71% of the fathers and 78% of the mothers displayed nurturant and supportive behaviors. In other words, most of the advertisements tended to present fathers and mothers as "warm and fuzzy," but there was no greater tendency to do so in the 1980s, which is unexpected if one were looking for evidence of an increase in the concept of the "New Father." Coltrane and Allan concluded that previous research had probably overestimated the extent of change: "Our findings must be considered tentative because of sampling limitations [e.g., only four men and nine women were pictured as parents in the 1950s], but we challenge the common perception that the popular culture of fathering was transformed in fundamental ways during the 1980s" (p. 61).

Taking the studies together, what can be said about the culture of fatherhood in late-20th-century America? First, it appears the researchers agree that change has occurred but disagree on the magnitude of change. Whereas Day and Mackey (1986) described a "paradigmatic" shift in the "role image of the American father," and Atkinson and Blackwelder (1993) referred to the amount of change in "the popular conceptualization of parenthood" as "remarkable" and "important," Coltrane and Allan (1994) were of the opinion that the change in "fatherhood imagery" was minimal at best and largely overstated. Second, there is an absence of consensus among the researchers on the timing and duration of change. Day and Mackey and Atkinson and Blackwelder offered evidence that the 1970s were critical years in the cultural history of fatherhood, but if Coltrane and Allan were correct, the moment must have been short lived. The downturn that Atkin-

son and Blackwelder reported for the 1980s also would suggest a dampening effect. Third, there is a lack of clarity on the shape of change. Is there a fluctuating pattern, as LaRossa et al. (1991) and Atkinson and Blackwelder believe? If so, how do we make sense of Coltrane and Allan's findings, which imply that the 1950s and 1980s were similar?

OBJECTIVE

The goal of this article is try to answer the above questions and, in so doing, reduce some of the confusion that now exists. Drawing on a six-decade content analysis of 490 comic strips published on Father's Day and Mother's Day, we endeavor to determine whether and how the culture of fatherhood has changed since World War II.

Why comic strips? More than 100 million people read comic strips every day (Wood, 1987, p. 186), and, as with television sitcoms, they occupy a central place in American society. A study of comic strips thus has the potential to tap into a nation's collective consciousness. Also, because comics have been around for more than a century (Inge, 1979, 1990), they lend themselves to the investigation of long-term cultural trends (Harrison, 1981; Kasen, 1979, 1980). Given how often they revolve around domestic situations, they have proven an especially valuable index of family ideologies and gender stereotypes (e.g., see Brabant, 1976; Brabant & Mooney, 1986, 1997).

Interestingly enough, despite the role that political cartoons have played in exposing the foibles of the powerful, comic strips often perpetuate rather than challenge gender stereotypes (Chavez, 1985; Mooney & Brabant, 1987, 1990). Choosing comic strips for our database thus made it more likely that we would not find any historical differences. With comic strips as our criterion, the changing-culture-of-fatherhood hypothesis faced a stiffer challenge.

As for deciding to examine comic strips published on Father's Day and Mother's Day, this carried with it several advantages. First, we felt that chronological comparisons would be more meaningful if we focused on comics published on the same day from one year to the next. Second, Father's Day and Mother's Day are public rites or ceremonies that cryptically symbolize the social value of fatherhood and motherhood in America. Third, content analyzing comic strips on Father's Day and Mother's Day allowed each holiday to serve as a point of reference for the other.

One may ask the question, what connection do comic strips have to public attitudes and behaviors? One answer is they have no connection at all. That is, some may say that comic strips are too oblique and too divorced from everyday life to have any relationship to what is "really going on." But then why are they funny? Humor essentially entails a paradoxical juxtaposition of two realities, conventional and unconventional (Macionis, 1989). Thus, it could be argued that a father making a mess of the kitchen while preparing a Mother's Day breakfast was a recurring theme in the comics we studied because of both its familiarity and its absurdity (the gift, sincerely offered, backfires). The fact that, in contrast, there was not a single comic that had a mother mismanaging a Father's Day breakfast—and that if there were, it probably would seem odd (unless it were ingeniously crafted)—says something about how fathers and mothers are portrayed in American culture and about how they think and act. The many published studies that have shown empirically how comic strips reflect gender, race, and class divisions, among other realities, also make a strong case for taking them seriously in social science.

To say that there is a connection between comic strips and everyday life is not to say that the connection is simple. Internalizing culture, of which comic strips are a part, is not akin to downloading software on a computer. Rather, the socialization process is more selective and more interactive. Culture basically operates as a framing device—channeling, not determining, attitudes and behaviors (W. Griswold, 1994; Zerubavel, 1991, 1997). Culture, therefore, is "more a 'tool kit' or repertoire" from which people choose assorted "pieces" to construct "strategies of action" (Swidler, 1986, p. 277). One could say that comic strips are part of a society's cultural supermarket. A strip's presence "on the shelves" makes its stories and vocabularies (e.g., "Good grief!" from *Peanuts*) available for selection and incorporation into the amalgam of norms, values, beliefs, and expressive symbols that influence people's perceptions and behaviors.

METHOD

Comics and Characters

We carefully reviewed the humorous comics (i.e., the funnies as opposed to the dramatic serials) published in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*

on Father's Day and Mother's Day from 1940 to 1999 and marked for coding those comics that (a) explicitly mentioned or implicitly alluded to Father's Day or Mother's Day or (b) had fatherhood, motherhood, or parenthood as a theme. We limited the study to humorous comics because when we first scanned the comic-strip pages, it appeared to us that humorous comics were more likely to present the kinds of stories that would reveal attitudes toward fatherhood and motherhood. When we completed the review, 216 Father's Day and 274 Mother's Day comics were found to fall into one category or the other. These 490 comics were then individually photocopied, making them black and white, and randomly numbered so as to disguise their publication dates.

In our analysis, we focused on the designated Father's Day or Mother's Day parents; if the comic did not explicitly mention or implicitly allude to one of the holidays, we focused on the parents who were the most central (if identifiable). The focus also could be a grandparent or stepparent or, in a few cases, a father or mother figure. Fathers and mothers could be humans, animals (e.g., ants), or even machines (e.g., robots). Among the 490 comics, there were 357 fathers and 389 mothers who were singled out for "observation."

Because the comics analyzed in this study included every comic in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* published on Father's Day and Mother's Day that mentioned or alluded to the holiday or that focused on fatherhood, motherhood, or parenthood, we had the entire population of relevant comics, rather than only a sample of them. Our comparisons of the Father's Day and Mother's Day comics thus do not require significance tests because the percentages derived are not subject to sampling error.

Although we relied on a single newspaper, the fact that Sunday comics are syndicated meant that many of the comics appeared in hundreds, if not thousands, of newspapers nationwide. The recognizability and range of the comics also are indicative of a set that is more representative than idiosyncratic. Some of the comics selected were: *B.C.*, *Blondie*, *Bloom County*, *Cathy*, *Dennis the Menace*, *The Family Circus*, *For Better or Worse*, *Garfield*, *Gasoline Alley*, *Hagar the Horrible*, *Hi and Lois*, *Little Orphan Annie*, *Peanuts*, *Pogo*, *The Wizard of Id*, and *Ziggy*, (among others). The oldest syndicated comic in the grouping was *Gasoline Alley*, first published in 1919. The second oldest was *Blondie*, first published in 1930 (Gou-

lart, 1995, pp. 96, 125; Kinnaird, 1963, pp. 92–93).

Men penned the majority of comics under investigation, reflecting the patriarchal culture of the newspaper industry. Women drew some of the newer comics, however (e.g., *Cathy*, *For Better or Worse*, and *Stone Soup*), suggesting movement toward gender equality, albeit slight. Also, until recently, all the comic-strip characters appear to be White. Only in the 1990s, with the addition of comics such as *Curtis*, *Jumpstart*, and *The Boondocks*, have we seen more frequent representations of people of color. In total, 5.1% of the 490 comics in our sample feature an African American parental figure. Finally, we had hoped to determine whether socioeconomic status might be a factor but soon discovered that almost all the comic-strip families were middle class (based on the quality of the furnishings inside the home, among other indicators). The typical Sunday comic strip thus resembles the typical popular magazine article or television show in at least one respect: Each tends to offer a homogenized portrait of social life.

Coding

What messages, relevant to the culture of fatherhood, can be found in a comic strip? First of all, it is important to recognize that there are no messages “in” a comic. Rather, there are various meanings that the reader may give to the pictures and words on the page. To the cartoonist, a particular comic may symbolize one thing. To the publisher, it may symbolize something else. Among the audience, multiple readings may exist. As with any text (whether it be a painting, a poem, or a historical or legal document), a comic can be subject to a variety of interpretations (Mukerji and Schudson, 1991).

We take the issue of multiple messages in texts seriously. Nonetheless, we also believe that, with care, it is possible for someone immersed in a culture to reliably and validly ascertain (i.e., code) the mutually understood and shared definitions of a comedic situation that are held by many, if not most, of the inhabitants of that culture. Indeed, we would contend that the ability to accomplish this feat is what makes a successful cartoonist.

With an awareness of the challenges involved, coding was a multistep process. First, MG and GRW would independently code the comics. Then, the four of us would meet to discuss the comics and reconcile any discrepancies that had emerged in the first round. These group sessions

provided a forum where we would toss back and forth how best to approach some of the more subtle comics.

Although RL and CJ were aware of the goals of the project from the beginning, MG and GRW were deliberately not told what the study was about while they were coding, and they were asked not to read any of the previously published literature on the subject. Because of the nuances in comic-strip humor and the complexity of the codes employed, coding took longer than was originally planned. Contemplating how to “speed things up,” we considered bringing in another coder to serve as a tiebreaker. After a while, however, we came to realize that our team approach and in-depth familiarity with the comics greatly enhanced the reliability and validity of the coding process. Our different disciplinary ties and diversity in gender, age, and national and regional background also contributed positively to the content analysis. (Note: The set of comics published in 1999 were a late addition to our sample and were coded by RL and CJ. The rules that had become institutionalized in the group sessions were applied to the 1999 set.)

Measures

Attention Given to Father's Day and Mother's Day. How much attention was given to Father's Day and Mother's Day from 1940 to 1999? To address this question, we counted for each year the number of comic strips that explicitly mentioned or implicitly alluded to Father's Day or Mother's Day. More often than not, if Father's Day were mentioned or alluded to at all, it was in a comic published on Father's Day; and more often than not, if Mother's Day were mentioned or alluded to at all, it was in a comic published on Mother's Day. But there were instances where an acknowledgment of Father's Day would appear on Mother's Day, or an acknowledgment of Mother's Day would appear on Father's Day. (Sometimes a single comic would give attention to both, for example.) We also included these crossovers in our counts.

Incompetence. To measure the level of incompetence exhibited by the fathers and mothers in the strips, we built upon the coding scheme that LaRossa et al. (1991) used. In that study, coders were asked: “Is the father in this family (whether he is pictured in the cartoon or not) being depicted as incompetent?” Each cartoon was given one of

the following codes: 0 *Not applicable* (Father is not in the cartoon, and no reference is made to him or about him); 1 *Not incompetent* (Father is in cartoon or is referenced in the cartoon, but he is not depicted as incompetent); or 2 *Incompetent* (Father is in cartoon or is referenced in the cartoon, and he is depicted as incompetent). The question was then repeated so that it applied to the mother. To be "incompetent," the father or mother would have to behave in a way that could be classified as ignorant, inadequate, incapable, ineffectual, inefficient, inept, stupid, unable, unfit, or weak (first-order synonyms for incompetence in the Wordperfect thesaurus).

In this study, coders reviewed 27 activities that fathers and mothers could enact and made the following judgment: "Is the Father's Day (FD) Father/Grandfather or the male spouse of the Mother's Day (MD) Mother/Grandmother in this comic (whether he is pictured in the comic or not) enacting any of the following activities; if so, is he depicted as incompetent in the activity?" Each cartoon was given one of the following codes: 0 *Not applicable* (FD/MD father is not in comic and no reference is made to him or about him); 1 *Activity not enacted* (FD/MD father is in comic or referenced in comic, but is not involved in the activity); 2 *Incompetent* (FD/MD father is in comic or is referenced in comic, and he is depicted as incompetent on this particular issue); or 3 *Activity enacted competently or enacted in such a way that competence or incompetence is not an issue* (FD/MD father is in comic or referenced in comic, is involved in the activity, and is competent in his performance, or the question of competence or incompetence is not relevant on this particular activity). The question was then repeated so that it would apply to the mother. The synonyms for "incompetence" used in the LaRossa et al. (1991) study also were used in this study. The list of activities included not only child-care activities (e.g., verbally or physically expresses affection toward children), but also marital activities (e.g., engages in negative emotional interaction with spouse), household activities (e.g., does traditionally feminine household chores), employment-related activities (e.g., performs paid work), gender-socializing activities (e.g., shows a child what it means to "be a man"), and activities related to Father's Day or Mother's Day (e.g., gives or is about to give Father's Day or Mother's Day gift).

Mocked. Recognizing that it is possible for a parent to be made to look foolish even though he or

she is not acting foolishly, we decided to ask more globally, and without focusing on any specific activities: "Does this comic make a deliberate point to mock anyone in particular or in general?" Children and others were sometimes mocked in the comics, but for this analysis, we will report only the numbers for fathers and mothers.

Nurturant and Supportive Parenting Behaviors I. Coltrane and Allan (1994) operationalized nurturant and supportive parenting behaviors as verbally or physically expressing affection toward a child, serving or caring for a child, verbally encouraging a child, or comforting a child or inquiring about the child's feelings and thoughts. To compare what Coltrane and Allan found when they looked at television ads with what we might find when we looked at comic strips, we included their four examples of nurturant and supportive behaviors in our list of 27 activities.

Nurturant and Supportive Parenting Behaviors II. While pretesting our coding instrument, we discovered that comic-strip fathers and mothers also could be nurturant and supportive by praising a child for a completed task or activity or for a job well done, listening to a child's problem, or purposefully teaching a child. We thus added these three nurturant and supportive behaviors to Coltrane and Allan's (1994) four nurturant and supportive behaviors to construct a seven-item composite measure, Nurturant and Supportive Parenting Behaviors II. For this measure, as well as the previous measure, verbally encouraging a child meant explicitly "during a task or activity," so as to distinguish it from praising a child "for a completed task or activity."

RESULTS

Attention Given to Father's Day and Mother's Day

Table 1 reports the number of comics by half decade that explicitly mentioned or implicitly alluded to Father's Day or Mother's Day. (We opted for half-decade cutting points because of significant intradecade variations uncovered in our analysis.) Several trends are revealed, the most important of which are: (a) the shift from the 1940–1944 period when there were no comics that acknowledged Father's Day or Mother's Day to the 1945 and after period when there were many that did, (b) the general rise over time in the number

TABLE 1. NUMBER OF COMICS THAT EXPLICITLY MENTIONED OR IMPLICITLY ALLUDED TO FATHER'S DAY OR MOTHER'S DAY, 1940-1999

	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64	65-69	70-74	75-79	80-84	85-89	90-94	95-99	Totals
Father's Day	0	6	5	8	14	9	14	17	20	28	37	35	193
Mother's Day	0	8	7	8	15	16	19	19	22	35	40	56	245
Difference	0	-2	-2	0	-1	-7	-5	-2	-2	-7	-3	-21	-52

of comics that acknowledged the holidays, (c) the greater attention given to Mother's Day compared with Father's Day overall (for every 10 acknowledgments of Mother's Day, there were about 8 acknowledgments of Father's Day), and (d) the much greater attention given to Mother's Day compared with Father's Day from 1995 to 1999 (the difference in the late 1990s accounts for almost half of the difference in the totals).

Incompetence

Table 2 reports how the fathers and mothers in the entire sample were portrayed (i.e., among the 357 fathers and 389 mothers pictured or referenced in the 490 comics that explicitly mentioned or implicitly alluded to Father's Day or Mother's Day, or had fatherhood, motherhood, or parenthood as a theme).

The first-row totals indicate that over all the years, 10.9% of the fathers and 5.7% of the mothers in the comics were depicted as incompetent. These percentages are fairly small and mean that the parents in the Father's Day and Mother's Day comics were much more often than not depicted as capable, efficient, and so forth, or they were shown performing activities in which competence or incompetence was not an issue. Given the higher scores for father and mother incompetence in studies of single-panel *Saturday Evening Post* cartoons (Day & Mackey, 1986; LaRossa et al., 1991), we surmise that the cartoonists were less inclined to portray parents as incompetent on holidays intended to honor them.

The reluctance to disparage parents on Father's Day and Mother's Day makes the difference between fathers and mothers in the comics all the more relevant. Over time, the tendency to depict mothers as incompetent generally remained at a stable low, whereas the tendency to depict fathers as incompetent fluctuated. Note the large gender difference in the early 1950s and late 1960s and the near convergence in the early 1970s and early 1980s, all due largely to changes in how the fathers were portrayed. The fact that mothers were

depicted as more incompetent than were fathers in the late 1940s, late 1950s, and early 1990s is also interesting.

Fathers and mothers also diverged in the kinds of activities that, when performed, had higher rates of incompetence. For fathers, these activities included showing a child what it means to "be a man," doing feminine household chores, nonphysically disciplining a child, and playing sports. For mothers, these activities included physically or nonphysically disciplining a child, giving a Father's Day gift, and comforting a child.

Mocked

The second-row totals in Table 2 indicate that 18.8% of the fathers and 6.0% of the mothers were mocked. These totals corroborate the cartoonists' tendency not to make fun of parents on Father's Day and Mother's Day, but they also demonstrate, from another vantage point, that if any parent were to be targeted on the holidays, it was likely the father and that the propensity to disparage men fluctuated. Note the large gender difference in the 1960s and 1980s, compared to the 1950s, 1970s, and 1990s. Note, too, that mothers were mocked more than fathers were in the late 1940s.

Nurturant and Supportive Parenting Behaviors I

The third row in Table 2 reports the results for our first measure of nurturant and supportive parenting behaviors. Overall, 23.0% of the fathers and 31.6% of the mothers were shown verbally or physically expressing affection toward a child, serving or caring for a child, verbally encouraging a child, or comforting a child or inquiring about the child's feelings and thoughts. The half-decade percentages for the fathers exhibited a U-shaped pattern, whereas the percentages for the mothers spiked in the late 1950s and late 1970s.

TABLE 2. PERCENTAGE OF FATHERS AND MOTHERS DEPICTED AS INCOMPETENT, MOCKED, OR SHOWN TO BE NURTURANT AND SUPPORTIVE PARENTS IN COMICS EXPLICITLY MENTIONING OR IMPLICITLY ALLUDING TO FATHER'S DAY OR MOTHER'S DAY, OR HAVING FATHERHOOD, MOTHERHOOD, OR PARENTHOOD AS A THEME, 1940-1999

	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64	65-69	70-74	75-79	80-84	85-89	90-94	95-99	Totals
Incompetent													
Fathers	—	21.4	33.3	0.0	14.3	21.1	8.3	8.0	3.6	14.9	5.4	12.3	10.9
Mothers	—	28.6	0.0	7.1	5.0	4.5	6.7	0.0	3.0	4.0	9.2	3.2	5.7
Difference	—	-7.2	33.0	-7.1	9.3	16.6	1.6	8.0	0.6	10.9	-3.8	9.1	5.2
Mocked													
Fathers	—	14.3	11.1	13.3	33.3	31.6	12.5	12.0	25.0	19.1	18.9	19.8	18.8
Mothers	—	21.4	0.0	7.1	5.0	4.5	0.0	0.0	3.0	4.0	10.5	8.4	6.0
Difference	—	-7.1	11.1	6.2	28.3	27.1	12.5	12.0	22.0	15.1	8.4	11.4	12.8
Nurturant and Supportive Parenting Behaviors I													
Fathers	—	35.7	33.3	6.7	19.0	15.8	12.5	12.0	14.3	17.0	23.0	38.3	23.0
Mothers	—	28.6	20.0	42.9	20.0	18.2	16.7	44.0	12.1	36.0	39.5	36.8	31.6
Difference	—	7.1	13.3	-36.2	-1.0	-2.4	-4.2	-32.0	2.2	-19.0	-16.5	1.5	-8.6
Nurturant and Supportive Parenting Behaviors II													
Fathers	—	42.9	55.6	20.0	28.6	31.6	20.8	16.0	28.6	36.2	36.5	53.1	36.4
Mothers	—	42.9	50.0	64.3	30.0	22.7	23.3	48.0	21.2	48.0	48.7	51.6	42.9
Difference	—	0.0	5.6	-44.3	-1.4	8.9	-2.5	-32.0	7.4	-11.8	-12.2	1.5	-6.5
ns													
Fathers Pic/Ref	—	14	9	15	21	19	24	25	28	47	74	81	357
Mothers Pic/Ref	—	14	10	14	20	22	30	25	33	50	76	95	389
Difference	—	0	-1	1	1	-3	-6	0	-5	-3	-2	-14	-32

Nurturant and Supportive Parenting Behaviors II

The fourth row in Table 2 reports the results for our second measure of nurturant and supportive parenting behaviors. When we added to the activities listed above the additional activities of praising a child for a completed task, activity, or a job well done; listening to a child's problem; and purposefully teaching a child, the percentages increased across the board: 36.4% of the fathers and 42.9% of the mothers were shown to be nurturant and supportive. The longitudinal pattern of the first measure was repeated, however. The percentages for the fathers looked more-or-less U-shaped, and the percentages for the mothers spiked in the late 1950s and late 1970s. Significant is the fact that this parenting measure showed fathers increasing in nurturance and support beginning in the 1980s and continuing through the 1990s.

DISCUSSION

Has the culture of fatherhood changed over the past six decades? Viewed through the prism of Father's Day and Mother's Day comic strips, it would appear that it has, but not in a linear or simple way.

Changes in Attention Given to Father's Day and Mother's Day

When we looked at the amount of attention given to Father's Day and Mother's Day, we found that Father's Day was generally acknowledged less frequently. In this respect, the comics parallel other indicators of "popularity": regardless of how the holidays are compared (by number of phone calls made, cards sent, meals eaten out, or cartoonists' recognition) Father's Day comes up short (see Ward, 1993).

When we looked at the amount of attention given to Father's Day and Mother's Day over time, we found the amount of attention generally going up. This increase, we learned, was not because the number of comics published in a given year had risen but because family-oriented comics had come to dominate the comic-strip page. Publishers may have decided that readers prefer these kinds of comics to the more serious strips (e.g., *Brenda Starr* or *Mary Worth*) or adventure strips (*Tarzan* or *Steve Canyon*).

We did wonder whether the amount of atten-

tion given to Father's Day would increase in the 1970s, given that 1972 marks the year President Richard Nixon signed Father's Day into law. (Previously, Father's Day was on the calendar, and presidential proclamations acknowledging the holiday were a matter of routine, but it was not until 1972 that Father's Day was made "legal." Mother's Day was certified a federal holiday in 1914.) The data do show that the amount of attention given to Father's Day started to climb in the 1970s, but we would be hard pressed to say that the upward movement had anything to do with the government's actions. We do know that none of the comics parodied the signing.

The large difference in the amount of attention given to Father's Day, compared with Mother's Day, in the late 1990s is puzzling, given the higher level of nurturant and supportive parenting behaviors exhibited by fathers in this period. The reason for the gap is that the number of comics that explicitly mentioned or implicitly alluded to Father's Day leveled off (from 37 to 35), whereas the number of comics that explicitly mentioned or implicitly alluded to Mother's Day continued to rise (from 40 to 56). Something else happened as well, something that is not apparent from the tables. Even though the number of comics acknowledging both Father's Day and Mother's Day was fairly high in the 1990s, the comic strips referring to these parental holidays actually constituted a smaller share of the family-oriented comics overall. That is, the proportion of comics that did not acknowledge Father's Day or Mother's Day but did have fatherhood, motherhood, or parenthood as a theme mushroomed, from only a minute fraction in the years before to nearly 25% overall in the 1990s. Also, the proportions differed for Father's Day and Mother's Day and for the first and second half of the decade. For Father's Day, the proportions were 22% in the early 1990s and 34% in the late 1990s. For Mother's Day, the proportions were 25% in the early 1990s and 19% in the late 1990s. In other words, cartoonists were more likely in the 1990s than they were in decades before to craft stories about parenthood without mentioning or alluding to either holiday, and they were more likely in the late 1990s than they were just a few years before to craft stories about fatherhood without mentioning or alluding to Father's Day.

One possible explanation is that cartoonists in the 1990s were more adept at communicating their viewpoints without framing the comic as a holiday message. Another possibility is that the fragility

of family ties in the 1990s made the acknowledgment of both Father's Day and Mother's Day problematic. Because it could be awkward for children and others who are separated or estranged from their fathers or mothers to be reminded of Father's Day and Mother's Day, some cartoonists may have tried to display sensitivity by not bringing attention to the holidays. Still a third possibility, not exclusive of the others, is that cartoonists in the late 1990s had difficulty reconciling the concept of the "New Father" with its opposite, the nonresident "Absentee Dad," a manifestation of both the good and bad sides of male parenthood in the late 20th century (Furstenberg, 1988). Some attitudinal shift, whatever the cause, does seem to be at work because the changes in the scores cannot be attributed to changes in the composition of comic-strip families. There was, for example, no increase in single-mother characters.

Changes in the Portrayal of Fathers and Mothers

Regardless of whether the comics are about Father's Day, Mother's Day, or family life in general, one thing is clear. In recent years, there have been many more comic-strip characters who are parents and thus many more opportunities for readers to view fictitious fathers and mothers engaged in child-care activities. This expansion is important. If, hypothetically speaking, the number of fathers in a set of comics were to increase significantly from one decade to the next, while the percentage of nurturant and supportive fathering behaviors were to remain the same, there would still be more nurturant, supportive fathers in the comics for readers to observe. This, in turn, could affect the social reality of fatherhood because observing more male comic-strip characters acting fatherly could lead people to assume that the same kind of activity was occurring among their neighbors and friends. (These assumptions need not be correct. What people believe fathers do and what fathers actually do is the difference between the culture and conduct of fatherhood; LaRossa, 1988.)

Similarly, Coltrane and Allan (1994) made the point that "[t]he salience of a few men cuddling babies . . . [can] create the impression that things have changed dramatically," even if "quantitative findings indicate that viewers continue to be bombarded with even more images of men as heroes, lovers, and loners" (p. 55). Coltrane and Allan reported that although the percentage of fathers in television ads who were nurturant and supportive

did not increase between the 1950s and 1980s, the percentage of parents who were fathers did: in the 1950s, men accounted for 31% of all parents pictured in ads, but in the 1980s, they accounted for 71% of all parents pictured in ads. The 1980s profile could have inflated viewers' estimates of the prevalence of the "New Father," despite the fact that the more standard comparison (percentage of nurturant, supportive fathers then and now) suggested no change.

When we looked at how often fathers and mothers in the comics were portrayed as incompetent, we found that incompetence was not a usual theme, indicating a reluctance on the part of cartoonists to lampoon parents on Father's Day and Mother's Day. The few cases there were, however, were not randomly distributed across the decades. Consider the small difference between the portrayal of fathers and mothers in the 1970s. Day and Mackey (1986) found that fathers were no more likely than were mothers to be depicted as incompetent in the 1970s. We found this, too, but we also found additional support for the proposition that the portrayal of fathers has wavered over time. If we place chronologically the results from LaRossa and colleagues' (1991) study of the early 20th century alongside the results of this study of the late 20th century, we can see that the relative gender parity in the 1930s and early 1940s (compared with the 1920s) reported in the first study, coupled with the relative gender parity in the 1970s (compared with the 1960s) reported in the current study, makes for a fluctuating pattern in the culture of fatherhood.

A picture of fluctuation also emerged when we looked at how frequently comic strips mocked fathers and mothers. With the single-item mocking question, which is more sensitive than is the incompetence measure to satirical nuance, the shift upward from the 1940s–1950s to the 1960s and the shift downward from the 1960s to the 1970s are unmistakable. With this variable, it also appears that the fluctuating pattern continued after the 1970s. Fathers were more likely to be mocked in the 1980s and 1990s than they were in the 1970s. Both Day and Mackey (1986) and Atkinson and Blackwelder (1993) offered evidence to suggest that the 1970s were a time when fatherhood was more likely to be culturally validated. If the extent to which fathers are mocked is a guide, our results reinforce their rendition of this decade.

With regard to nurturance and support, Coltrane and Allan (1994) found continuity when they ex-

amined the nurturant, supportive behaviors of fathers and mothers in television advertising in the 1950s and 1980s. Using their operational definition of nurturant, supportive behavior, we also found some degree of continuity when we aggregated the two decades and compared them. We do not infer from this, however, that no transformation in fatherhood imagery has occurred. For one thing, the continuity between the 1950s and 1980s on this particular measure belies the discontinuity between other decades on the same measure. Second, the half-decade analysis indicates that the fathers' up-down pattern for the early and late 1950s was not the same as the fathers' relatively stable pattern for the early and late 1980s. Third, a modified version of the Coltrane and Allan measure, what we called Nurturant and Supportive Parenting Behaviors II because of the addition of three child rearing activities, yielded results that showed sharper differences between the 1950s and 1980s, especially when we employed a half-decade analysis.

Critical, too, was the dramatic increase in paternal nurturance and support beginning in the 1980s and continuing through the 1990s. Although the gender disparities did not vanish—for the most part, mothers were depicted as more nurturant and supportive than were fathers—the concept of the “New Father” did seem to gain ground, even though it did so, ironically, at the same time that the attention given to Father's Day was becoming more ambiguous.

Equally interesting was the high level of maternal nurturance and support in the late 1980s and early and late 1990s. The cartoonists may have tried to acknowledge the concept of the “New Father,” but they did not do so at the expense of motherhood. Indeed, if anything, they seemed to pay homage to both fatherhood and motherhood at the end of the millennium. Keep in mind, however, that the families in the comics were mainly White, middle class, and nuclear in structure. Single fathers and mothers, among others, were largely absent and not praised.

Knowing that we would also be making comparisons with the 1950s, as well as with the late 1940s, and because we were familiar with how scholars and popular writers have characterized the post-World War II era (sometimes called the Cold War or Baby Boom era), we fully expected that the comics published in these years would offer unequivocal displays of paternal buffoonery and maternal domesticity. However, our results turned out to be more complex. First, we found

differences between the late 1940s and early and late 1950s. In the immediate postwar period, fathers were less likely than were mothers to be depicted as incompetent (by one character) and less likely to be mocked (by one character), but they were also more likely, or as likely, to be nurturant and supportive (depending on whether Nurturing and Supportive Parenting Behaviors I or II is used). We suspect men's relatively positive portrayals in the late 1940s, were a continuation of the development of the concept of the “New Father” that accelerated in the 1920s and 1930s and that was at full throttle in the early 1940s, helped by a war accentuating men's role as the defenders of the nation (LaRossa, 1997). Women's less positive portrayals were another matter. In the 1940s, childrearing experts were disparaging mothers for being overprotective and for stifling independence. Philip Wylie, in *Generation of Vipers* (1942), coined the term “momism” to denote “the [smother] mother problem” (p. 196). Edward A. Strecker, in *Their Mothers' Sons* (1946), charged that women had turned millions of men into “sissies” unfit for combat. Cartoonists may have been swayed by the negative propaganda.

Then, there were the contrasts between the 1950s and 1960s. Although fathers during the 1950s were more likely to be mocked than were mothers of the day, the disparity between fathers and mothers in the 1950s was actually smaller than it was in the 1960s. The changes in the level of nurturant and supportive behaviors, considered in conjunction with the changes in the extent to which fathers were mocked, highlights the significance of this decade in the cultural history of fatherhood. As it turns out, the 1960s were a time when fathers were as likely as mothers to be depicted as nurturant and supportive, but they were also more likely to be mocked. When we look at the change in percentages, we see that the convergence in nurturant and supportive parenting behaviors was not because the fathers in the comics increased their “warm and fuzzy” quotient between the 1950s and 1960s, but because the mothers decreased theirs. Nonetheless, it was the fathers, not the mothers, whom the cartoonists ostensibly targeted in the 1960s.

In this regard, the parallels between the 1920s and the 1960s are striking. In the 1920s, there was much talk not only about the “New Father,” who was supposed to become more involved with his children, but also about the “New Woman,” who was perceived as having less to do with hers; simultaneously, there were more jokes manifestly at

men's expense (LaRossa et al., 1991). However, things are not always what they seem. In a society in which motherhood is the more sacred and fatherhood is the more profane and in which attitudes toward fathers and mothers are so intertwined, satire manifestly aimed at one quarry can be implicitly aimed at another. Hence, the real targets of the almost exclusively male cartoonists in the 1920s—and the 1960s—may not have been men or fathers per se, but the “battle of sexes,” that, to some pundits, epitomized the two decades.

In general, our study supports the conclusions of Atkinson and Blackwelder (1993) and LaRossa et al. (1991) more than it supports the conclusions of Coltrane and Allan (1994) and Day and Mackey (1986): Fluctuation is the mode. Apart from the different data sets employed, the conflict in views may come down to the fact that Coltrane and Allan and Day and Mackey used a binary historical approach, examining only two points in time (the 1950s vs. the 1980s in the first case, 1922–1968 vs. 1971–1978 in the second), whereas Atkinson and Blackwelder, LaRossa et al., and the current study used a multiple-points-in-time approach. Two waves of data may be said to provide some information about social change and, strictly speaking, “constitute a longitudinal study,” but such designs have serious methodological limitations (Rogosa, 1995). Multiwave studies are more sensitive to the complexities of cultural history.

Why the fluctuation? There are so many contradictory economic and political factors that have contributed to the ebb and flow of fatherhood in the late 20th century, it would be difficult to imagine events moving in a straight line (see Coltrane, 1996; R. Griswold, 1993). The changes that we uncovered, however, were not entirely the result of materialist conditions. Ours is a study of comic strips, of authored texts. Comics and other cultural objects are created by people and do not appear out of the blue (W. Griswold, 1994). Thus, another question to ask is, was there anything about comic strips as a genre or about the comic-strip artists that might explain the fluctuation? One thing we discovered is that two comic strips dating back to the 1950s—*Dennis the Menace* and *The Family Circle*—wavered hardly at all from one decade to the next. The consistency of these strips prompted us to reflect on the fact that comic strips are similar to soap operas in which stories are dictated by the characters' personalities and the fictitious families' routines. Even minor modifications can alter

the flow of a successful comic and mean audience disapproval and cancellation.

If, indeed, some principle of inertia and caution prevents long-running strips from altering their narratives in response to structural trends, then the historical changes that we report would have to be a partial function of different comics with different authors entering and leaving the comic-strip section of the newspaper. The changes in the 1990s, for one, may have mirrored the changing gender and age composition of the cartoonists themselves. As more women and more artists from different age cohorts broke into the comic-strip trade, the tableaux of fatherhood and motherhood in the comics were literally and figuratively redrawn and “updated.”

The lesson to derive from this is that studies of the culture of fatherhood must focus more on how the various norms, values, beliefs, and expressive symbols pertaining to fatherhood are manufactured. It is not just a question of “what” is produced about fatherhood, but also a question of “who” produces it (LaRossa, 1997). What would we have learned had we interviewed the cartoonists about their work? What were the cartoonists contemplating when, pen in hand, they sat at their drawing tables preparing the comics that would be published on Father's Day and Mother's Day? Studies of the culture of fatherhood also must focus more on how the various norms, values, beliefs, and expressive symbols pertaining to fatherhood are read and interpreted. Virtually every day, the populace is bombarded with “information” about fathers, some of it comedic. How much is known about what goes on in people's minds when they see this material? (Two excellent examples of cultural studies, although not of fatherhood, that look at these issues are Radway, 1984, and Simonds, 1992.)

Ultimately, researchers must not lose sight of the relationship between the “objectivation” of fatherhood and the “externalization-internalization” of fatherhood (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Whereas the former refers to a cultural product, the latter refers to a process through which that product is constructed and incorporated into people's consciousness on an ongoing basis. Fully comprehending the first will require detailed studies of the second.

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