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/SEX ROLES IN THE COMIC STRIPS:
A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE--1896-1979

by

MARIE SNIDER

B.A., Goshen College, 1949
M.R.E., Goshen College Biblical Seminary, 1957

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Major Professor

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

American comics are widely read; not only in America, but around the world. Two hundred million people in sixty countries regularly read American comics.¹

Blondie tells Dagwood to get off the sofa and mow the lawn in 33 languages and dialects, including Chinese, Icelandic, Afrikaans and Urdu; Mickey Mouse woos Minnie in pidgin English in Lae, New Guinea; Snoopy, the flying beagle of "Peanuts," talks to himself in fluent Greek as well as Arabic.²

The comics are more widely read than any other printed medium both in this country and abroad. They represent a level of public interest gained by few other forms of publication. For example, several years ago when Jiggs and Maggie from Bringing Up Father decided to take a trip around the world "officials abroad requested that the couple visit their countries as ambassadors of good will, and a United States senator (David Elkins of West Virginia) seconded the motion in Congress."³

The public not only reads the comics, but many readers develop dedication of almost fanatical proportions to both their favorite strips and their favorite characters.

In May of 1929 the first death in the comics occurred--beautiful young Mary Gold in The Gumps. The syndicate was flooded with thousands of letters and telephone calls, with some threatening "Bring Mary back or I'll cancel my subscription!" Mary never came back to life, however, but The Gumps did continue to ride the crest of popularity.⁴

Some years later Flattop, a dim-witted appealing little killer in Dick Tracy finally met his doom by drowning. The syndicate received several floral pieces and a stack of sympathy cards. A fan from Beaumont, Texas, wired, "PLEASE EXPRESS FLATTOP'S BODY COLLECT TO ME AS BEST FRIEND." And one Army private wrote a letter expressing his sense of personal loss. He wrote, "Two weeks ago my girl friend left me and married a sailor. I just about got over that and then Flattop died. That upset me more than losing my girl."⁵

In a study of why children read the comics done by Ruth Strang in 1942, Strang quotes one ninth-grade girl as saying, "I usually wake up on Sunday morning with something in the back of my mind that I'm looking forward to doing that day, but it's not until I'm fully awake that I remember it's reading the comics."⁶

This strong attachment to the comics began almost with the initial introduction of the comics and has continued to the present. For example, thirty-eight years ago during the 1942 paper strike in New York City, Mayor Fiorella La Guardia read the comics to the interested public on the radio. More recently, during the August 1978 pressman strike in New York City, Comedian Ann Meara read the comics on television to the waiting public. Clearly, Meara had the advantage as she could show the action in the strips, in addition to reading the captions and describing the action. But, significantly, the public interest in the comics had not waned.

William Laas in an article in Saturday Review of Literature has described the comic strip as "one of the liveliest cultural offshoots of our slam-bang civilizations."⁷ Jerry Robinson says, "America and the comic strip were made for each other,"⁸ and Heinz Politzer goes so far

as to say, "America without comics would not be America."⁹

One British anthropologist, Geoffrey Gorer, even sees the comics as a common link between the diverse regions and cultures of the United States.

With the notable exception of the New York Times almost every American newspaper carries comic strips, usually at least a page of them. They are one of the few important bonds (the films being another and the presidential elections a third) uniting nearly all Americans in a common experience.¹⁰

Commenting on this immense popularity of the comics with the public, Arthur Asa Berger, a scholar of the comics has said,

The fact that hundreds of millions of people read comics does not mean that they are automatically important--although I cannot help thinking that this is significant [underlining added]--but it does not mean that they are automatically unimportant.¹¹

And Berger goes on to lament that,

Graduate students go through our significant and less significant American writers and thinkers with fine-toothed combs, while the "junk" that hundreds of millions of people read is almost totally ignored.

This study is an attempt to look seriously at changing sex roles as reflected in the comics, that so-called "junk" that millions of Americans read daily.

Purpose of the Study

This study is an analysis of the portrayal of sex roles as they have changed over the decades on the comic pages of The Wichita Eagle and The Wichita Beacon and their combined issues.

Answers to several questions are sought in this study: (1) How has the comparative height of males and females changed over the decades? (2) How has the incidence of violence against males and females changed? (3) How has the incidence of need for rescue of males and females

changed? These questions were chosen on the basis of a preliminary study of the comics which suggested that these three variables--height, violence against males, and need of females for rescue--would provide some valuable clues to changing sex roles in American society and how those changes are reflected in the presentation of males and females in the comics.

Justification of the Study

Underlying this study are two assumptions: (1) that the comics do indeed reflect society accurately, including changing sex roles; and (2) that a widely-read mass medium like the comics wields a strong influence on society, particularly in relation to the young who are forming self-images.

In his volume Comic Art in America, Stephen Becker summarizes these two points,

All art says something about the society that produces it; and often cumulatively, over a period of years--the impress of art alters the face of its society.¹²

This perception of the comics as worthy of study has been a growing one in the American scholarly world. In 1944 John Bainbridge said,

Comic strips, so lightly regarded by the nation's thinkers, comprise the most significant body of literature in America today. This judgment might be challenged by a few intellectuals who wouldn't know Pruneface from Adam, but it is easily demonstrable.¹³

In the 1950's, Kenneth Eble identified a need for more serious study of the comics.

As factors in shaping a nation's emotional and intellectual responses, they deserve much more study than they have yet received.¹⁴

And in an article in Harper's in December 1955, Ignatius G. Mattingly

wrote,

Comic strips are a serious art demanding serious study. All the medium really needs now is a set of critics who will edit the classics, define the genres, catalogue the conceits, and elaborate the aesthetics. The time is not far hence when Professors of Comics will take their rightful place beside Professors of Literature. [Underlining added]¹⁵

It would be an overstatement to say that by 1980 "Professors of Comics" have taken their rightful place beside "Professors of Literature." However, there has without question been an enormous mushrooming of serious studies of the comics and communication in relation to those findings. In 1971 Gerald Clarke wrote,

One of the newest things about the new comics is that more than ever before they are being taken seriously as an art form by critics and as an authentic cultural expression by sociologists.¹⁶

And in 1975 Dr. Karen M. Walowit summarized the progress in this way,

Slowly, the comics are overcoming their shallow, kid-oriented image and appearing in college curriculums along with modern drama and Milton. Like films, fiction, or any other media, only about 15% of the comics are brilliant. At their best, they are as compelling and complex as classic literature.¹⁷

However, in all of this serious study of the comics very little work has been done in relation to changing sex roles in American society. In his book The Liberated Man, Warren Farrell points up the importance of the mass media in shaping sex roles,

Women and men want things the way they are--a perfect example of the self-fulfilling myth. We tell both sexes what they should be and imply they have made a choice when they tell us they want to be exactly what we said they should be.¹⁸

An article in the September 1979 issue of Press Woman comments further on the important role of the mass media in forming our perceptions of appropriate sex roles,

So powerful are the nation's mass media that their perceptions of women's roles are often taken as gospel by an image-conscious public regardless of accuracy or taste.¹⁹

In view of the enormous readership and the potential for influence of the comics, a study of the portrayal of sex roles in the comic strips is long overdue.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to sex roles as reflected on the comic strip pages of The Wichita Eagle and The Wichita Beacon by decades from 1896 to 1976, and 1979. Since this study is limited to The Wichita Eagle and The Wichita Beacon, overall conclusions must be limited to the particular combination of comic strips appearing on those pages.

Footnotes to Chapter I

¹George Perry and Alan Aldridge, The Penguin Book of Comics (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Press, 1967), p. 12.

²Fred Dickenson, "The Fascinating Funnies," Reader's Digest, November 1971, p. 202.

³David Manning White and Robert H. Abel, eds., The Funnies: An American Idiom (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), p. 5.

⁴Herb Galewitz, ed., The Gumps (New York: Charles Scribner, 1974), p. VII.

⁵John Bainbridge, "Chester Gould: The Harrowing Adventures of His Cartoon Hero, Dick Tracy, Give Vicarious Thrills to Millions," Life, August 14, 1944, p. 45.

⁶Ruth Strang, "Why Children Read the Comics," Elementary School Journal 43 (January 1943): 337.

⁷Jerry Robinson, The Comics (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1974), p. 11.

⁸Ibid.

⁹White and Abel, eds., The Funnies: An American Idiom, p. 8.

¹⁰Geoffrey Gorer, The American People: A Study in National Character (New York: Norton Publishing, 1948), p. 47.

¹¹Arthur Asa Berger, Li'l Abner, A Study in American Satire (New York: Twane Publishers, 1970), pp. 13, 14.

¹²Stephen Becker, Comic Art in America (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), pp. 4, 5.

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¹⁴Kenneth Eble, "Our Serious Comics," The American Scholar 28 (Winter 1958-59): 63.

¹⁵Ignatius G. Mattingly, "Some Cultural Aspects of Serial Cartoons," Harper's, December 1955, p. 39.

¹⁶Gerald Clarke, "The Comics on the Couch," Time, December 13, 1971, p. 70.

¹⁷"The Comic Strip and Pop Culture," Intellect, September-October 1975, p. 84.

¹⁸Warren Farrell, The Liberated Man (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 158.

¹⁹"Sexism Still Prevails on/in Television," Press Woman, September 1979, p. 6.

CHAPTER II

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN COMICS WITH ATTENTION TO CHANGING SEX ROLES

It all began in 1896.

There were two greats in the publishing world of the late 1890's--Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. The two owned competing newspapers in New York City--the New York World and the New York Journal. The two were highly competitive and attempted to build circulation through sensational news coverage or spicy features, bold headlines and extra editions for the latest news. Knowing that headlines would sell papers, the two not only reported news, but made news. Some historians have even gone so far as to accuse Hearst of encouraging the Spanish-American War to make news.

Into this competitive circulation battle, the New York World introduced color printing in 1893. While the colors were something less than brilliant, "red and blue seemed to fall naturally into the white of the American newspaper, but yellow remained elusive."¹ Eventually yellow was perfected by Charles A. Saalburgh, the World's engraving foreman, and on February 16, 1896, the color was tested on the nightshirt of a bald grinning kid in a Richard Outcault cartoon.

The cartoon was an instant smashing success, and the public named him "The Yellow Kid," hence the term "yellow journalism" which to this day denotes sensationalism in journalism.

The future of the comic strip was determined when the World discovered that color comics increased its paper's circulation. "The public had spoken; there would be no locking back."²

In an attempt to beat Pulitzer, Hearst bought Outcault and thus began a tug of war that resulted in two "yellow kids," the second one drawn by George Luks. Apparently lack of legal precedent concerning copyright made it possible for both competitors to feature the same character.

The Yellow Kid was set in the New York slums. At first, the public had been delighted and amused. But on closer examination they failed to see the humor in the slum conditions, and many of the "better people" regarded The Yellow Kid as a public disgrace. Outcault was sensitive to the criticism and discontinued the strip in 1898.

This rejection of The Yellow Kid by the public is the first illustration of the principle that while the comics do indeed reflect society, they can reflect successfully: (1) only what society recognizes as true, and (2) only what society is willing to see about itself. And the American public around the turn of the century did not want to see conditions in the New York slums.

The Yellow Kid was not a true comic strip, but was its immediate predecessor. By definition, a comic strip has three essential elements: (1) narrative by a sequence of pictures, (2) continuing characters from one sequence to the next, and (3) the inclusion of dialogue within the picture. The Yellow Kid had two of these requirements: (1) a continuing set of characters and (2) the inclusion of dialogue within the picture, although the dialogue was printed on the "kid's" nightshirt rather than in a balloon as in the later strips.

The comic strip as known today began with The Katzenjammer Kids introduced by Rudolph Dirks on December 12, 1897. Dirks for the first time used a sequence of panels consistently and stabilized the use of the balloon for speech.

According to Stephen Becker in Comic Art in America, The Katzenjammer Kids comic strip was

an instantaneous success, and the Slam-Bang-Pow school of comics was born. This was unabashed slapstick on the middle-class level.³

The Katzenjammer Kids like The Yellow Kid ran only in color and in the Sunday paper. The first daily strip, drawn in black and white by Bud Fischer, was A. Mutt, introduced in the San Francisco Chronicle in 1907. The daily strips like the Sunday strips continued to be a circulation booster, and the comics increased in importance.

By becoming daily, the American comic strip increased its range and influence tenfold, and increasingly acquired the appearance of a genuine social phenomenon.⁴

The Innocents

In the first decade of this century, comics were created by a handful of persons sometimes called the Old Masters. Some of the outstanding names of this era are Frederick Opper, creator of Happy Hooligan and Alphonse and Gaston; George Herriman, Krazy Kat; and Winsor McCay, Little Nemo. Of course, Dirks continued to draw The Katzenjammer Kids.

And Richard Outcault in 1902 launched a new strip called Buster Brown. This time Outcault was careful not to focus on the New York slums. He chose rather a middle class setting and a little boy, who though slightly mischievous, was generally well-behaved, and ended each

strip with a moral. Buster Brown was every mother's dream, and a whole generation of little boys were raised with bangs and big collars in imitation of Buster. In fact, there are so many Buster Brown products that there is a Buster Brown Museum in New York. Although the strip ended in 1920, some of the Buster Brown products still survive, including Buster Brown shoes. In contrast to The Yellow Kid, the American public liked what they saw mirrored in Buster Brown and the strip survived.

Women Enter the Comics

In the first decade of the century there were essentially no women in the comics. Those few women who did appear were like Mamma Katzenjammer, unappealing sexually. This all changed in the teens and twenties when women moved into a visible role in society and in the comics.

The domestic takeover of the comics began with Bringing Up Father by George McManus in 1913; followed by The Gumps by Sidney Smith, 1917; The Bungle Family by Harry Tuthill, 1918; Toots and Casper by Jimmy Murphy, 1919, and Gasoline Alley by Frank King, 1919.

Several milestones in the history of the comics occurred in this era--The Gumps was the first comic to use the continuity format as opposed to the once popular gag in each strip, and Gasoline Alley introduced the element time into the comics, with characters who age at approximately the same pace as the readers.

Coulton Waugh also believes that the success of The Gumpes was responsible for the advent of the syndication of comic strips and notes that it is syndication that gives comic strips a national character. Stephen Becker also says that with syndication the Golden Age of the

comics began, and

A comics character could be more than a funny fellow, and so could his creator; the one could become a national symbol, the other a national hero.⁵

Along with the family situation comics came the girl strips with a new view of women.

In 1912 Cliff Sterrett presented the generation of emancipated women who were to bob their hair, use lipstick, smoke cigarettes and win the vote in "Polly and Her Pals."⁶

Polly represented the new generation of women, emancipated, often criticized, but holding their own against the older generation and its stifling ideas.... Polly prepared the way for the next generation of independent-minded girls whose toils, troubles and romances found popular expression in the comics.⁷

In 1920 Winnie Winkle by Martin Branner appeared. Herb Galewitz calls Winnie the "first of the post-World War I 'liberated' women."

Other girl strips of this era are Tillie the Toiler by Russ Westover, 1921; Dumb Dora by Chic Young, 1924; Boots and Her Buddies by Edgar Martin, 1924; Etta Kett by Paul Robinson, 1925, and Fritzie Ritz by Erna Bushmiller, 1925.

And at the end of this era, in 1930, Chic Young first conceived of Blondie as the "new woman." It was not until Blondie and Dagwood were married and began coping with the everyday problems, however, that the strip really gained popularity.

The heroines of these strips were working women but always with an eye to fashion and good times. Lee Falk calls Boots and Her Buddies "the comic that set women's styles for many years."⁸ And much of the appeal of the popular Tillie the Toiler was in the fashions portrayed. Russ Westover, Tillie's creator, made it a point to subscribe to every fashion magazine in the western world.

Also, the women of this era were very often strikingly taller than the males in the strips. It appears that this difference in height was not by accident. For example, Barney Google started out tall and lean, but The World Encyclopedia of Comics reports,

Barney was carefully shortened by three feet over two years.... At the same time, his wife's stature increased, until by 1920 she was literally the "wife three times his size" of the Billy Rose "Barney Google" Song.⁹

Emergence of the Super Male

The late 1920's and the 1930's saw the beginning of the adventure comic strip and the emergence of the "Super Male." By a strange coincidence, the first two adventure strips appeared for the first time on the same day, January 7, 1929. The two were Tarzan of the Apes by Edgar Rice Burroughs and Buck Rogers adapted by Phil Nowlan from his own novel Armageddon 2419 A.D.

Due to the success of these two strips adventure strips became increasingly popular in the years that followed.... Within a decade adventure and melodrama had taken possession of half of the entire comics output.¹⁰

Outstanding among those adventure strips were Dick Tracy by Chester Gould in 1931; Flash Gordon by Alex Raymond, 1934; Alley Oop by Vincent T. Hamlin, 1934; Jungle Jim, also by Alex Raymond, 1934; and Prince Valiant by Hal Foster, 1937.

Superman, drawn by two seventeen-year-old boys from Cleveland, was a new kind of strip, a strip in which a "super hero" also had "super powers." Superman first appeared in comic book form in 1938. It was an immediate success and a series of imitators followed. By the end of the 1930's the adventure comics had taken over the comic strip pages, and

Adventure fans could count on comic heroes able to subdue villains in any environment, whether it was on earth, in space or in fantasy.¹¹

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Soon the "funny papers" were full of things that were anything but comical.¹²

While the 1930's are primarily known as the era of the adventure strip, it was also in this era that the "Kid Strips" were introduced, and a number of these were notably long-lived. Among them were Just Kids by Ad Carter; Reg'lar Fellers by Gene Byrnes; and His Friends by Merrill Blosser.

Until 1941 the super heroes were all male. However, in this year Dr. William Moulton Marston, a psychologist and the inventor of the lie detector test, came up with the idea of Wonder Woman.

Until that time women in comic books had either been spear-carriers for the super heroes, or that abomination, "girl friends." These were fragile creatures whose raisons d'etres^[sic] were screaming, fainting, being captured, and being rescued.¹³

Dr. Marston had worked with the comic industry as a consultant and won from the industry an opportunity to test out his proposed character for six months. Wonder Woman was designed to give young girls a different kind of role model. The initial success of the strip assured its survival. Unfortunately Dr. Marston's Wonder Woman was based on a strange kind of reverse sexism.

Both plot and characters were based on Marston's self-styled vision of feminist philosophy. "Women represent love; men represent force," he wrote. "Man's use of force without love brings evil and unhappiness. But Wonder Woman has force bound by love and, with her strength, represents what every woman should be and really is. She corrects evil and brings happiness. Wonder Woman proves that women are superior to men because they have love in addition to force."¹⁴

Soap Opera of the Comics

The 1940's saw the rise of the serious strip with soap opera overtones. From the beginning the comics had been designedly comic. Comic devices were varied, including slapstick, satire, caricature,

fantasy and coarse gags. But regardless of the device, the comics were designed to make readers laugh. Some of this comic element had been lost with the adventure strips of the 1930's; however, it was not until the soap operas of the 1940's that the so-called comics began to focus on deadly serious life situations for their continuing interest.

Many scholars of the comics lament this introduction of the deadly serious into the medium of the comic strip.

If comic strips have moved into the realm of soap opera and, for that matter, if they are no longer comic, what of it? My own distress is chiefly that of seeing the incitements to laughter decreased by one.¹⁵

The soap opera is as singularly solemn in the comic pages as on the radio. Occasionally, the cartoonist may manage a joke on Sunday, when he must break the continuity somewhat to hold both daily and Sunday readers. But for the most part, day after day, life's problems catch the characters in their grip, and such lives and such problems afford few laughs.¹⁶

Outstanding among the "soaps" are the strips written by Dr. Nicholas Dallis, a psychiatrist. Rex Morgan, M.D., begun in 1949, received an award for excellence from the American Medical Association in 1954. Other later strips by Dr. Dallis include Judge Parker introduced in 1951 and Apartment 3G, 1962.

One of the first of this genre was Brenda Starr begun in 1940. Brenda Starr is written by a woman, Dale Messick. Less than five per cent of comic strips are written by women, and Brenda Starr was the only longstanding successful strip by a woman until the introduction in the 1970's of Cathy, a self-portrait written by a young woman by the name of Cathy Guisewhite.

The Decline of the Comics

The 1950's are generally viewed as a period of decline of the

comics. And this is certainly true in quantity. However, the few strips to survive from this era are good ones, including Walt Kelly's Pogo and Charles Schulz's Peanuts.

With the possible exception of Doonesbury of the 1970's, Pogo is the outstanding example of social commentary in the comics. Pogo was written for two years by Walter Kelly's wife following his death in 1972. However, the strip was finally discontinued in 1974.

Peanuts, introduced in 1950, after six months was appearing in only a few newspapers and was netting \$90 a month. The strip was almost dropped, but a generous editor decided to give it a second chance. Today Peanuts, the biggest comics success story of all time, grosses \$50,000,000 a year.¹⁷

New Boom in the Comics

During the 1960's and 1970's a new boom in comic production occurred. In the strips of this era there is more social awareness and a move away from realism. The move is also toward strips which get laughs more from wit than from slapstick.

Comic strips introduced in the 1960's include The Wizard of Id by Johnny Hart in 1964; Eek and Meek by Howie Schneider in 1965; and the small society by Morrie Brickman in 1966.

Successful strips of the 1970's include Doonesbury by Garry Trudeau, Hagar the Horrible by Dik Browne and Cathy by Cathy Guisewhite.

There has also been during the 1960's and 1970's a dramatic increase in the number of persons studying the comics seriously. They are studied both as an art form and as social commentary. Today there are classes at many major universities in pop culture, often including

emphasis on the comics. There are national and international scholarly conferences dealing with the comics and a growing quantity of books and articles analyzing the comics.

Footnotes to Chapter II

¹Leslie Daniels, Comix: A History of Comic Books in America (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), p. 2.

²Ibid.

³Becker, Comic Art in America, p. 16.

⁴Pierre Couperie and Maurice C. Horn, A History of the Comic Strip (New York: Crown Publishers, 1968), p. 29.

⁵Becker, Comic Art in America, p. 22.

⁶Lee Falk, "A Short History of the Comic Strip" (New York: The Newspaper Comics Council, 1974), p. 2.

⁷"Cavalcade of American Comics" (New York: The Newspaper Comics Council, 1970), p. 5.

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¹⁰Reinhold C. Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs, Comics, Anatomy of a Mass Medium, p. 63.

¹¹"Cavalcade of American Comics," p. 8.

¹²John Adkins Richardson, The Complete Book of Cartooning (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1977), p. 169.

¹³Don Thompson and Dick Lupoff, eds., The Comic Book-Book (New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House, 1973), pp. 229-230.

¹⁴Joanne Edgar, "Wonder Woman Revisited," MS, July 1972, p. 53.

¹⁵Eble, "Our Serious Comics," p. 61.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁷Horn, The World Encyclopedia of Comics, p. 543.

CHAPTER III

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As a one-man task force into this area, I already have thought of enough questions to keep a research team busy for the next three years, learning why one hundred million people in sixty countries read American comic strips every day of the year.¹

Researchers first began to ask serious questions about the comics in the early 1940's. The research of this era focused on children as readers of the comics, dealing with such topics as patterns of reading the comics, vocabulary of the comics, and effects on children of reading the comics. Much of this early research was reported in articles such as the one by Harvey Zorbaugh entitled "The Comics! Good Influence or Bad?"² and was designed to deal with the issue of the potential of the comics for bad influence on the young.

These surveys indicated, as could be expected, that grade school children regardless of I.Q. or cultural background almost all read the comics. For example, the American Association of University Women in Gary, Indiana, conducted a survey in 1942 of 696 grade school pupils. They discovered to their dismay that these 696 pupils had a total of 2,370 comic magazines (about 34 per pupil) in their possession, and further that 35 per cent of the children had read nothing but comics in the week of the survey.³

Also in the early 1940's G. E. Hill did a series of studies on the comic strip.⁴ Reporting on these studies Hill says,

These studies all agree on a point with which most parents and teachers are already familiar; namely, that children are, with few exceptions, intensely interested in comic strips. Reading them is a type of leisure activity in which they frequently engage, from which they retain a good deal of information, for which they profess great interest, and which they prefer to many other attractive leisure pursuits.⁵

A similar study conducted in 1947 by Market Research Co. was also designed to assess readership, and stated its bias against the comics quite specifically.

The question of which age, sex and income groups are most addicted to the various forms of undesirable literature is a difficult one to answer.⁶

This study concluded that males read the comics slightly more often than females and that comic reading declines with age, again underscoring the recurrent fear of the 1940's that the comics were undermining the character of the young.

Other surveys dealt with adult readership of the comics. A Gallup Survey in 1938 indicated that 63 per cent of adults read the daily comics and 73 per cent of adults read the Sunday comics.⁷

Later studies indicated even higher levels of adult readership. The most comprehensive recent reader survey was conducted by Boston University's Communication Research Center in January 1962. The Boston researchers reported that more than 100,000,000 Americans read the comics on any Sunday or weekday in the year. Of these 90,000,000 consider themselves as regular readers, meaning they follow their favorite characters week in and out for years and even decades.⁸

Beginning in the 1950's research on the comics turned away from simple readership surveys and a trend toward study of the content of the comic strips began to emerge.

Three studies in particular focus on the area of sex roles as

portrayed in the comics.

A study entitled "Male and Female Relations in the American Comic Strip" by Gerhart Saenger appeared in 1955.⁹ Saenger's analysis was based on the comic strips appearing in the nine leading New York City newspapers during the month of October 1950. This study revealed several interesting things in relation to male and female roles in the comics. Saenger reported,

Women are more interested in love and, if married, in the home. In all types of comic strips, they are slightly more interested in romantic love.... Boys are interested in gaining male friends, girls in love. In common with American sex stereotypes, women are found to be more interested in social life, men more in business.¹⁰

Saenger was also the first to identify the "premarital" and "postmarital" personalities of both men and women that emerge in the comic strips. He found that while the male was traditionally the stronger sex, much more decisive, self-reliant and resourceful as long as he remained unmarried (and correspondingly aloof), it was the woman who held sway as soon as the matrimonial knot was tied.

Saenger points up this loss of power on the part of the male with,

While the unmarried adventurer lives up to the cultural ideal, is masterful, "up to all situations"--in the family strip the wife rather than the husband is able to cope with all situations. The man appears to have lost his power after marriage, since no such differences are apparent between male and female children.¹¹

Saenger further discovered that this shift in power was symbolically portrayed in the comics of the 1950's by height differences.

While 86 per cent of the single men in the adventure strips are taller than their female partners, only 50 per cent of the married men are bigger than their wives, and 42 per cent are shorter than their spouses. The same holds true for the

comedy strip, where 43 per cent of the males are shorter than the female characters.

Men lose strength as well as height after marriage. Most of the single men in the adventure strip are above average and sometimes of super-natural strength, while the proportion of strong men is much smaller among married men.¹²

The inevitable conclusion of this study is that,

Love is dangerous because it leads to marriage, a situation in which, as we have seen, men lose their strength. They can preserve their strength only by running away from women, who interfere with their real tasks in life, the seeking and pursuing of adventure.¹³

Saenger's findings were further reinforced in a study done by Francis E. Barcus in 1963. Barcus analyzed the Sunday comics appearing in Puck: The Comic Weekly and in three Boston newspapers for the years 1943, 1948, 1953, and 1958.

Barcus reported that

Men lose their ambitions after marriage while women, in contrast acquire (or further) a thirst for power once they get married. While single men tend to be tall and handsome, married men turn out to be short, portly and bald; married women are often taller than their husbands, but they are also fatter and uglier than their single sisters.¹⁴

In addition, Barcus reported an age difference in the men and women appearing in the comic strips he sampled,

Two thirds (72 per cent) of the humans in the strips are male. Males are much more often inclined to be older than females. Men are also more likely to be single than are women. Whereas males are almost equally distributed in the very young and very old age brackets, a much larger percentage of males (48 per cent) are "middle age" than are females (29 per cent).¹⁵

A more recent study relating to sex roles in the comics was conducted by Sara Brabant of the University of Southwestern Louisiana in 1976. This study focused on sex roles in four major "domestic strips" for a six-month period. The strips studied were Blondie, The Born Loser,

Dennis the Menace, and Priscilla's Pop. Brabant underscores the findings of Saenger and Barcus and portrays the married woman as powerful and domineering, although she makes the further observation that powerful as she is the married woman is firmly locked into an extremely limited role,

She nags, she henpecks and sometimes she even outsmarts her man; but domineering as she may be, she almost never gets out of the house and into a life of her own....¹⁶

She reports further on this limited role,

The little lady was a hard-working homebody with meals to cook, dishes to wash and furniture to dust. Meanwhile her husband was likely to be golfing, watching TV or heading for the beach--or reading.... While men were often shown with their noses in a book (or with reading materials in hand), there was no evidence that females ever read--not even cook-books. But the women did wear aprons at least a quarter of the time. Although (the female) may be bigger and/or smarter, the apron remains her trademark.¹⁷

In 1977 Maurice Horn, a scholar of the comics, published a book entitled Women in the Comics. While this book is not documented by research on sex roles in the comics, it is an excellent descriptive history of women in the comics, complete with generous use of illustrations.

With the exception of Horn's work little has been done to assess the changing role of women in the comics. What is clearly needed to round out our understanding of sex roles as reflected in the comics is some assessment of how those sex roles have changed over the decades. That assessment will be the purpose of this study.

Footnotes to Chapter III

¹David Manning White, "Comics and the American Image Abroad," in The Funnies: An American Idiom, edited by David Manning White and Robert H. Abel (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), p. 73.

²Harvey Zorbaugh, "The Comics! Good Influence or Bad," Read, September 1944, pp. 83-85.

³Margaret Franks, "Comics Are No Longer Comic," Christian Century, November 1942, pp. 1349-1351.

⁴G. E. Hill, "Taking the Comics Seriously," Childhood Education 17 (May 1941): 413-414; G. E. Hill, "Relation of Children's Interest in Comic Strips to the Vocabulary of These Comics," Journal of Educational Psychology 34 (January 1943): 48-54; G. E. Hill, "Vocabulary of Comic Strips," Journal of Educational Psychology 34 (February 1943): 77-87; G. E. Hill and M. E. Trent, "Children's Interest in Comic Strips," Journal of Educational Research 34 (September 1940): 30-36.

⁵Hill, "The Vocabulary of Comic Strips," p. 78.

⁶A. Bothwell, "Who Reads the Comics," Library Journal 72 (September 15, 1947): 1263.

⁷Herb Galewitz, Great Comics, p. vii.

⁸White and Abel, eds., The Funnies: An American Idiom, pp. 3-4.

⁹Gerhart Saenger, "Male and Female Relations in the American Comic Strip," in The Funnies: An American Idiom, edited by White and Abel, pp. 219-231.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 224.

¹¹Ibid., p. 225.

¹²Ibid., p. 226.

¹³Ibid., p. 231.

¹⁴Maurice Horn, Women in the Comics (New York: Chelsea House, 1977), p. 5.

¹⁵Francis E. Barcus, "The World of Sunday Comics," in The Funnies: An American Idiom, edited by White and Abel, p. 197.

¹⁶"The Comic-Strip Wife," Human Behavior, July 1977, p. 54.

¹⁷ibid.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

The Study Design

The method used in this study is content analysis. Content analysis is defined by Budd, Thorpe and Donohew as,

A systematic technique for analyzing message content and message handling--it is a tool for observing and analyzing the overt communication behavior of selected communicators.¹

Budd, Thorpe and Donohew go on to make the point that through content analysis a researcher in addition to giving a detailed account of the communication can also

make limited predictions about the source and perhaps about the receiver. He does this in much the same way that researchers make predictions about behavior based on more structured attitude-measurement devices.²

The usefulness of content analysis as a research tool for learning about a society is further underscored by Fred Kerlinger in his book Foundations of Behavioral Research.³ Kerlinger says,

Content analysis, while certainly a method of analysis, is more than that. It is...a method of observation. Instead of observing people's behavior directly, or asking them to respond to scales, or interviewing them, the investigator takes the communications that people have produced and asks questions of the communications.⁴

Content analysis becomes an extremely valuable tool precisely when it is used in this way, to further understanding of the society represented in the material being analyzed. Danielson underscores this by saying,

It is probably true that some content analysts working on some problems are interested solely in what happens in the content itself and have no interest in the source that produced it or the audience that received it. Such men and such problems are rare, however. Content analysis is ordinarily employed because the analyst is interested in drawing an inference about some state in the source which originated the content, or some state in the audience or person who received it, or some more global inference about several parts or all of the communication system involved.⁵

That is precisely the goal of this study, to make observations about the society that both produces the comics and reads the comics, in relation to sex roles within that society. Content analysis as a method for this type of research has the added benefit of not biasing the results by the presence of the researcher. Budd, Thorp and Donohew make reference to this advantage,

Content analysis allows the investigator to observe a communicator's messages at times and places of the investigator's own choosing. The procedure also allows him to carry out his observation without fear that the attention will bias the communicator, something that would be more difficult if the analyst were trying to watch at the scene.⁶

There appears to be no better way to make some assessment of changing sex roles in American society than by content analysis of a medium which clearly reflects that society's values and is read daily by millions of its citizens.

The Sample

The Wichita Eagle and The Wichita Beacon and their combined issues were chosen for this study for several reasons:

1. Accessibility--Microfilms of the paper from its beginning are readily available at local libraries. However, this is not a deciding factor as a number of other major papers from other geographical locations would also be available in the same way.
2. Exclusive selection of comics--Since the papers are without competition, they have access to a full selection of comics

and are not restricted because some competing paper is carrying a strip.

3. Midwestern location--Most research on the comics is carried on in coastal locations, particularly the East. The carrying out of this study in the Midwest would allow for future comparison to similar studies in an eastern metropolitan location.

The Wichita Eagle and The Wichita Beacon were examined by decades, beginning in 1896. This year was selected because it is the date when "The Yellow Kid" first appeared in American newspapers. To be sure the data are up to date 1979 was also included in the sample. The reason for sampling at fixed points within the decade as opposed to a small selection from each year, was to get a reading of changing trends at ten-year intervals.

Two blocks of papers, each consisting of eight days, were selected at six-month intervals from each decade. Each of the two blocks began and ended on a Sunday. These two blocks began on the first Sunday in March and the first Sunday in October. This produced a total sample of 304 papers, including copies of both The Wichita Eagle and The Wichita Beacon. All comic strips were included in the sample regardless of their location in the paper.

Variables

Three items were chosen to mirror changing trends. They were: relative height of males and females; incidence of violence toward males and toward females; and incidence of need for rescue of males and of females. These categories are coded as follows:

1. Height--All combinations of male and female appearing in strips were coded as to relative height with these categories--male taller, female taller, same height. In addition to adults, children were coded when they appeared in male-female combinations in strips without adults. The combinations were also coded by marital status to allow for further comparison.

2. Violence--All violence against both males and females was counted. Violence was described as physical assault in which a person is struck by someone or something. This can be either injury-producing assault or noninjury-producing assault. Noninjury producing assault is defined as being struck by something, such as a snowball or bucket of water, without potential to do serious physical harm.
3. Need for Rescue--Need for rescue was coded for both males and females. This category included both need for physical rescue and need for emotional rescue; e.g., crying in the presence of another adult and needing comforting.

Coding was done by this writer.

Units of Analysis

Units of analysis were all comic strips in each issue of The Wichita Eagle and The Wichita Beacon in the sample, regardless of their location in the newspaper.

Summary and Analysis of Data

Height will be reported in a simple comparative count of male-female pairs with male taller, female taller, same height.

Violence and need for rescue will be reported both in gross incidence and incidence per ten units of comic strips.

Footnotes to Chapter IV

¹Richard W. Budd, R. K. Thorp and L. Donohew, Content Analysis of Communication (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1967).

²Ibid., p. 3.

³Fred N. Kerling, Foundations of Behavioral Research (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

⁴Ibid., p. 544.

⁵Wayne Danielson, "Content Analysis in Communication Research," in Introduction to Mass Communications Research, edited by Ralph O. Nafziger and David Manning White (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963), p. 193.

⁶Budd, Thorp and Donohew, Content Analysis of Communication, p. 2.

CHAPTER V

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The comics in 304 newspapers were examined in this study. These newspapers contained a total of 2210 comic strips.

Comics were not introduced to The Wichita Eagle and The Wichita Beacon until 1906, with Sunday comics appearing first. Weekday comics were introduced in 1916. The number of comic strips grew consistently until 1956, with some leveling off at that point. The weekday comic strips were at first scattered throughout the newspaper, but were eventually collected into a "comic strip page" in 1956.

As recently as 1956, comic strip fans were unable to depend on their favorite strips appearing regularly in the daily paper, as strips did not appear with predictable regularity until 1966. There was, however, in the earlier years some attempt to please the readers as evidenced on October 10, 1946, when four days of Terry and the Pirates appeared with the explanation that the strips had been "lost in the mail." Since 1966, the comic strip pages have been stabilized both in format and in specific comic strips appearing.

Average number of strips appearing in each daily newspaper at the intervals over the decades is shown in Table 1.

Three variables were coded in this study: relative height of males and females, incidence of violence toward males and females, and incidence of need for rescue of males and females.

TABLE 1
FREQUENCY OF COMIC STRIPS PER SAMPLE BLOCK

	Sunday		Weekday	
	Frequency	Mean No. Strips Per Issue	Frequency	Mean No. Strips Per Issue
1896	0		0	
1906	18	2.3	0	
1916	15	1.9	19	.8
1926	54	6.8	58	2.4
1936	102	12.8	137	5.7
1946	146	18.3	175	7.3
1956	178	22.3	269	11.2
*1966	89	22.3	261	10.9
**1976	80	20.0	267	12.1
**1979	82	20.5	260	11.8

*Eagle and Beacon combined for Sunday edition.

**Eagle and Beacon combined for both Saturday and Sunday editions.

Relative Height of Males and Females

Table 2 indicates the relative height of males and females as traced by decades. This table is based on all male-female combinations appearing in a standing position, making it possible to assess relative height. This information is also reported in graph form in Figure 1.

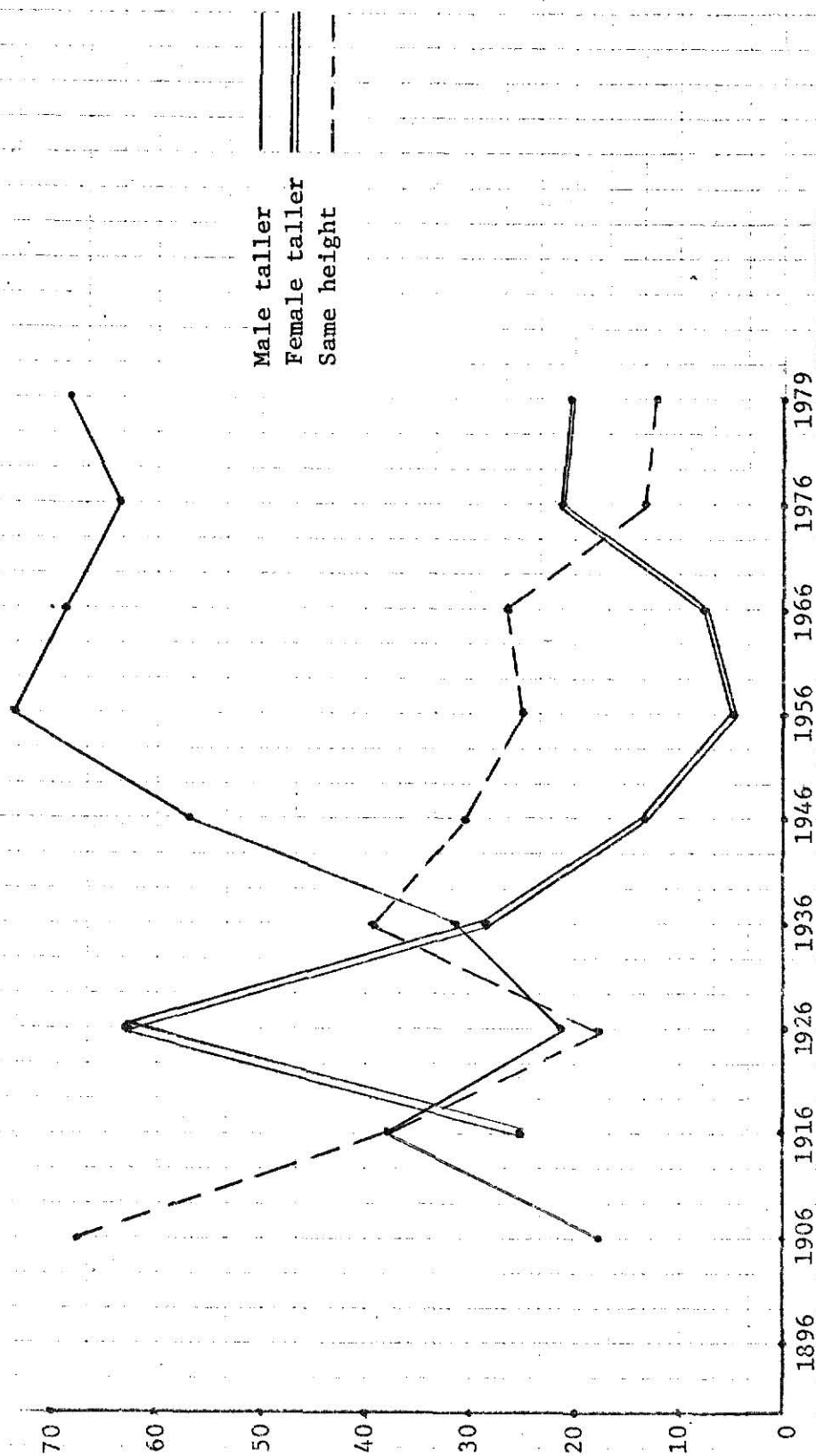
The data reported in Table 2 and Figure 1 indicate that there has been a great deal of fluctuation in relative height of males and

TABLE 2
PERCENTAGE AND FREQUENCY OF RELATIVE HEIGHT
OF MALES AND FEMALES

	1906	1916	1926	1936	1946	1956	1966	1976	1979
	% F N=6	% F N=8	% F N=32	% F N=74	% F N=103	% F N=113	% F N=95	% F N=76	% F N=69
Male									
Taller	16.6 (1)	37.5 (3)	21.8 (7)	32.4 (24)	56.3 (58)	69.9 (79)	66.3 (63)	63.1 (48)	65.2 (45)
Female									
Taller	16.6 (1)	25.0 (2)	62.5 (20)	28.4 (21)	13.6 (14)	4.4 (5)	7.4 (7)	21.0 (16)	18.8 (13)
Same									
Height	66.6 (4)	37.5 (3)	15.6 (5)	39.2 (29)	30.1 (31)	25.7 (29)	26.3 (25)	15.9 (12)	16.0 (11)
	100 (6)	100 (8)	99.9 (32)	100 (74)	100 (103)	100 (113)	100 (95)	100 (76)	100 (69)

FIGURE 1

PERCENTAGE OF RELATIVE HEIGHT OF MALES AND FEMALES



females over the decades, as was anticipated at the outset of this study.

Whereas in the few male-female combinations appearing in 1906 66.6 per cent were of the same height ($N = 6$), there has been since that time a more or less steady decline in pairs of same height, until in 1979 only 16 per cent of pairs were of the same height.

Along with this decline in same-height pairs, there occurred a sharp rise in 1926 to 62.5 per cent of couples in which the female was taller ($N = 32$). Following 1926, the number of female-taller pairs dropped rapidly, accompanied by a dramatic rise in the number of male-taller pairs to 69.9 per cent by 1956 ($N = 113$).

As indicated above, male-female combinations in which the female is taller showed a dramatic increase in 1926 (62.5 per cent). This jump stands in marked contrast to the decades preceding and following--1906 with 16.6 per cent and 1936 with 28.4 per cent. Since 1926, the percentage of pairs with female taller has steadily declined until in 1956 it was at an all-time low of 4.4 per cent. Since 1956, the percentage of pairs with female taller has again climbed steadily, reaching 21 per cent in 1976 and 18.8 per cent in 1979.

The percentage of pairs with male taller was 16.6 per cent in 1906. That percentage has increased fairly steadily until 1956 when 69.9 per cent of pairs were shown with males taller. Since then, there has been a slight decline of number of pairs with male taller, tapering off to 63.1 per cent in 1976 and rising slightly to 65.2 per cent in 1979. The exception to this steady rise in the percentage of males taller was in 1926, when the sharp rise occurred in females taller, and the percentage of pairs with male taller dropped to 21.8 per cent.

In coding the pairs for relative height all pairs were labeled

as married or unmarried. Table 3 and Figure 2 record the trends in relative height of married pairs only. In 1926, 66.7 per cent of married couples were portrayed with the female taller. That figure dropped off steadily until in the 1956 sample no married couples were portrayed with the female taller. Since 1956, the percentage of pairs with female taller has grown to reach a high of 57.1 per cent in 1979.

The percentage of same-height married couples has shown marked fluctuation in direct inverse ratio to the female-taller couples. In both 1926 and currently, a high percentage of female-taller couples is accompanied by a low percentage of same-height pairs.

In contrast, the percentage of males taller among married couples has remained low but relatively stable throughout the entire period, reaching a high of 40 per cent in 1956 and declining since then.

Table 4 and Figure 3 report the trends in relative height of unmarried pairs only. In 1926, 58.9 per cent of unmarried pairs were portrayed with females taller. That figure dropped off steadily until 1966 when 5.7 per cent of unmarried pairs were portrayed with female taller. That trend was reversed briefly in 1976 when 25.4 per cent of unmarried pairs were shown with female taller. However, that jump does not seem to signal a trend, since the percentage again dropped to 2 per cent in 1979.

The percentage of males-taller pairs has risen somewhat steadily from a low of 20 per cent in 1906 to a high of 85.5 per cent in 1979. There was, however, a slight drop in this rising trend in 1926 and again in 1976, the two decades in which female-taller pairs increased markedly.

Generally, in relation to the height variable males have been increasing in height, while females have been decreasing in height since

TABLE 3
PERCENTAGE AND FREQUENCY OF RELATIVE HEIGHT
OF MARRIED MALES AND FEMALES

	1906	1916	1926	1936	1946	1956	1966	1976	1979
	F % N=1	F % N=1	F % N=15	F % N=17	F % N=30	F % N=25	F % N=25	F % N=29	F % N=21
Male Taller			13.3 (2)	17.6 (3)	6.6 (2)	32.0 (8)	40.0 (10)	31.1 (9)	19.1 (4)
Female Taller			66.7 (10)	17.6 (3)	30.0 (9)	0.0 (0)	12.0 (3)	55.1 (16)	57.1 (12)
Same Height	100 (1)	100 (1)	20.0 (3)	64.8 (11)	63.4 (19)	68.0 (17)	48.0 (12)	13.8 (4)	23.8 (5)
	100 (1)	100 (1)	100 (15)	100 (17)	100 (30)	100 (25)	100 (25)	100 (29)	100 (21)

FIGURE 2
PERCENTAGE OF RELATIVE HEIGHT OF MARRIED MALES AND FEMALES

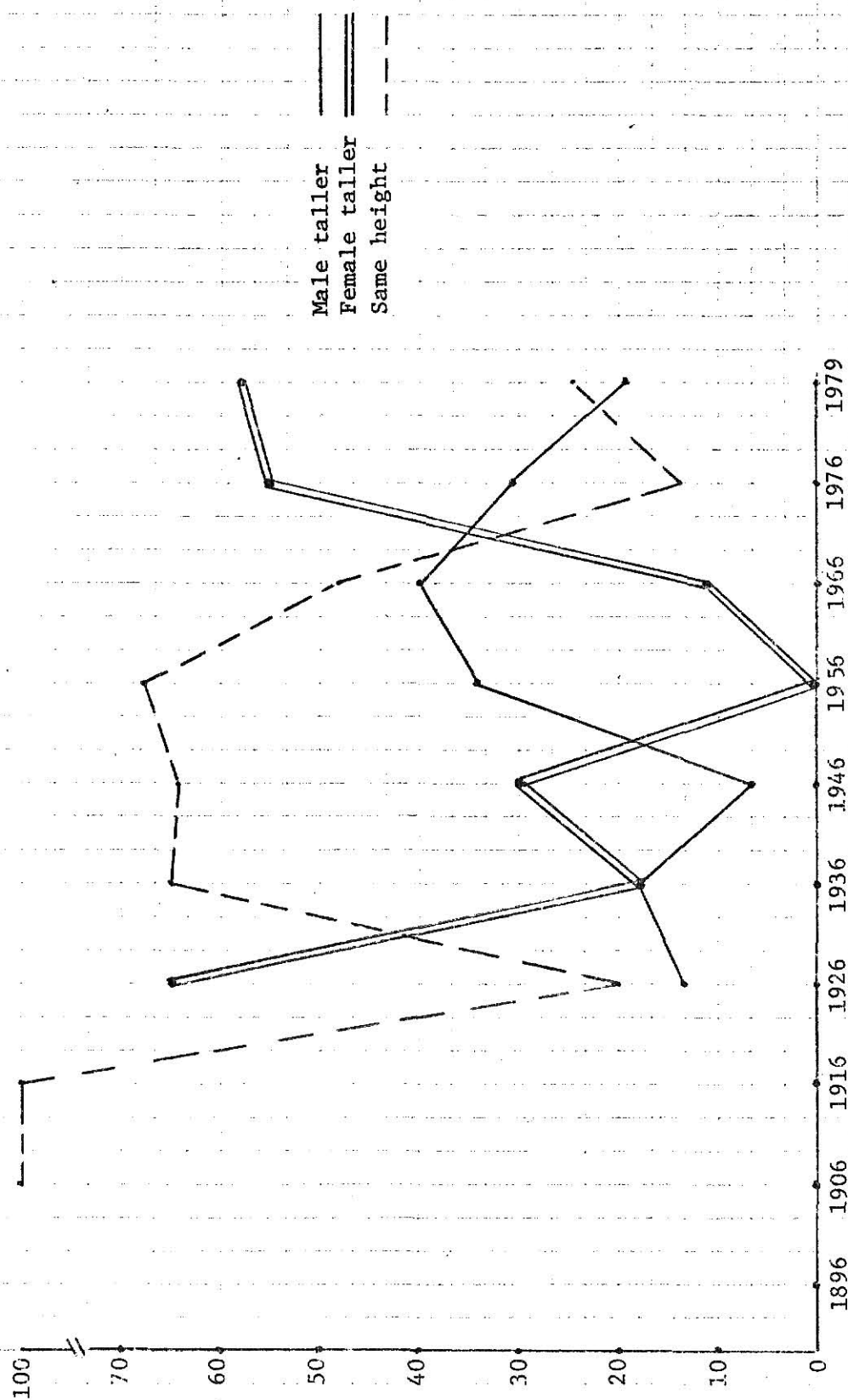
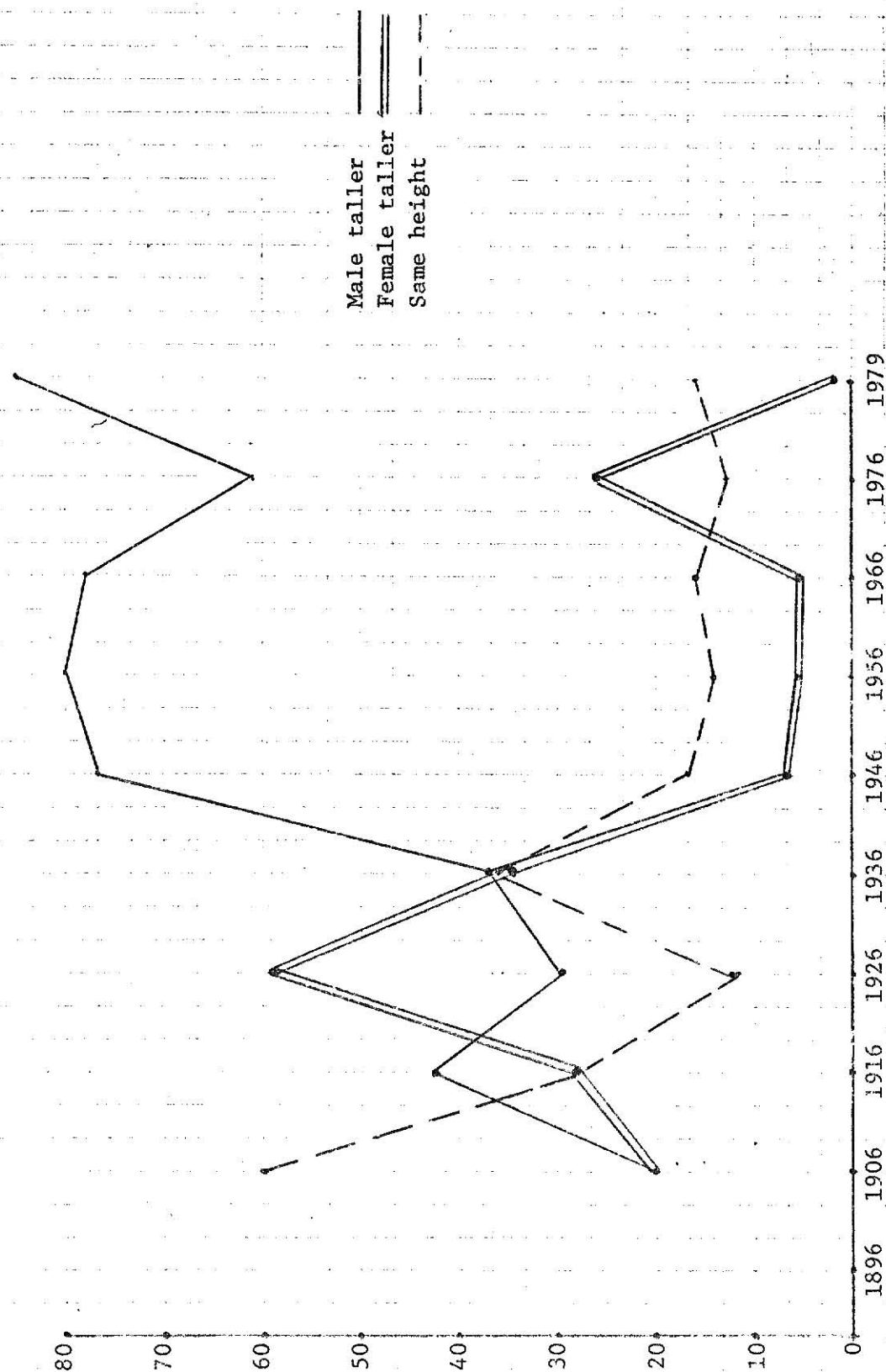


TABLE 4
PERCENTAGE AND FREQUENCY OF RELATIVE HEIGHT
OF UNMARRIED MALES AND FEMALES

	1906	1916	1926	1936	1946	1956	1966	1976	1979
	F % N=5	F % N=7	F % N=17	F % N=57	F % N=73	F % N=88	F % N=70	F % N=63	F % N=48
Male Taller	20.0 (1)	42.8 (3)	29.4 (5)	36.8 (21)	76.7 (56)	80.6 (71)	75.7 (53)	61.9 (39)	85.5 (41)
Female Taller	20.0 (1)	28.6 (2)	58.9 (10)	31.6 (18)	6.8 (5)	5.8 (5)	5.7 (4)	25.4 (16)	2.0 (1)
Same Height	60.0 (3)	28.6 (2)	11.7 (2)	31.6 (18)	16.5 (12)	13.6 (12)	18.6 (13)	12.7 (8)	12.5 (6)
	100 (5)	100 (7)	100 (17)	100 (57)	100 (73)	100 (88)	100 (70)	100 (63)	100 (48)

FIGURE 3

PERCENTAGE OF RELATIVE HEIGHT OF UNMARRIED MALES AND FEMALES



their dramatic jump in height in 1926.

Violence Against Males and Females

Table 5 and Figure 4 report the incidence of violence to both males and females, per ten units of comic strips. In the early years of the comic strips violence against males was high (1906--6.1 incidents per ten units of comic strips, 1916--6.76). Since 1916, there has been a steady decline in violence against males until in 1979 incidents of violence against males had dropped to a low of .41 per ten units of comic strips.

Violence against females, by contrast, has remained low over the decades, fluctuating only from 0 to .58 incidents per ten units of comic strips.

Violence against males and females nearly converges in 1979 when violence against males had dropped to .41 per ten units of comics and violence against females had risen to .38.

In summary, these results indicate very little occurrence of violence toward females across the decades and a declining amount of violence toward males.

Need for Rescue of Males and Females

Table 6 and Figure 5 report the incidence of need for rescue of both males and females per ten units of comic strips.

The need for rescue among females declined steadily from a high in 1926 (.45 incidents per ten units of comic strips) until 1979 when need for rescue again rose to .29 per ten units. Prior to 1936, males experienced no need for rescue. In 1936, incidents of need for rescue of males jumped to .37 per ten units of comic strips, dropping off to

TABLE 5
INCIDENCE OF VIOLENCE BY SEX

	1906	1916	1926	1936	1946	1956	1966	1976	1979
<u>Incidence of Violence Against Males</u>									
Number of Units	18	34	112	239	321	447	350	347	342
Number of Incidents	11	23	54	70	73	79	24	17	14
Number of Incidents Per 10 Units	6.1	6.76	4.82	2.92	2.27	1.76	.68	.49	.41
<u>Incidence of Violence Against Females</u>									
Number of Incidents	0	2	2	8	4	4	2	0	3
Number of Incidents Per 10 Units	0	.58	.08	.33	.12	.08	.05	0	.38

FIGURE 4
INCIDENCE OF VIOLENCE BY SEX PER TEN UNITS OF COMIC STRIPS

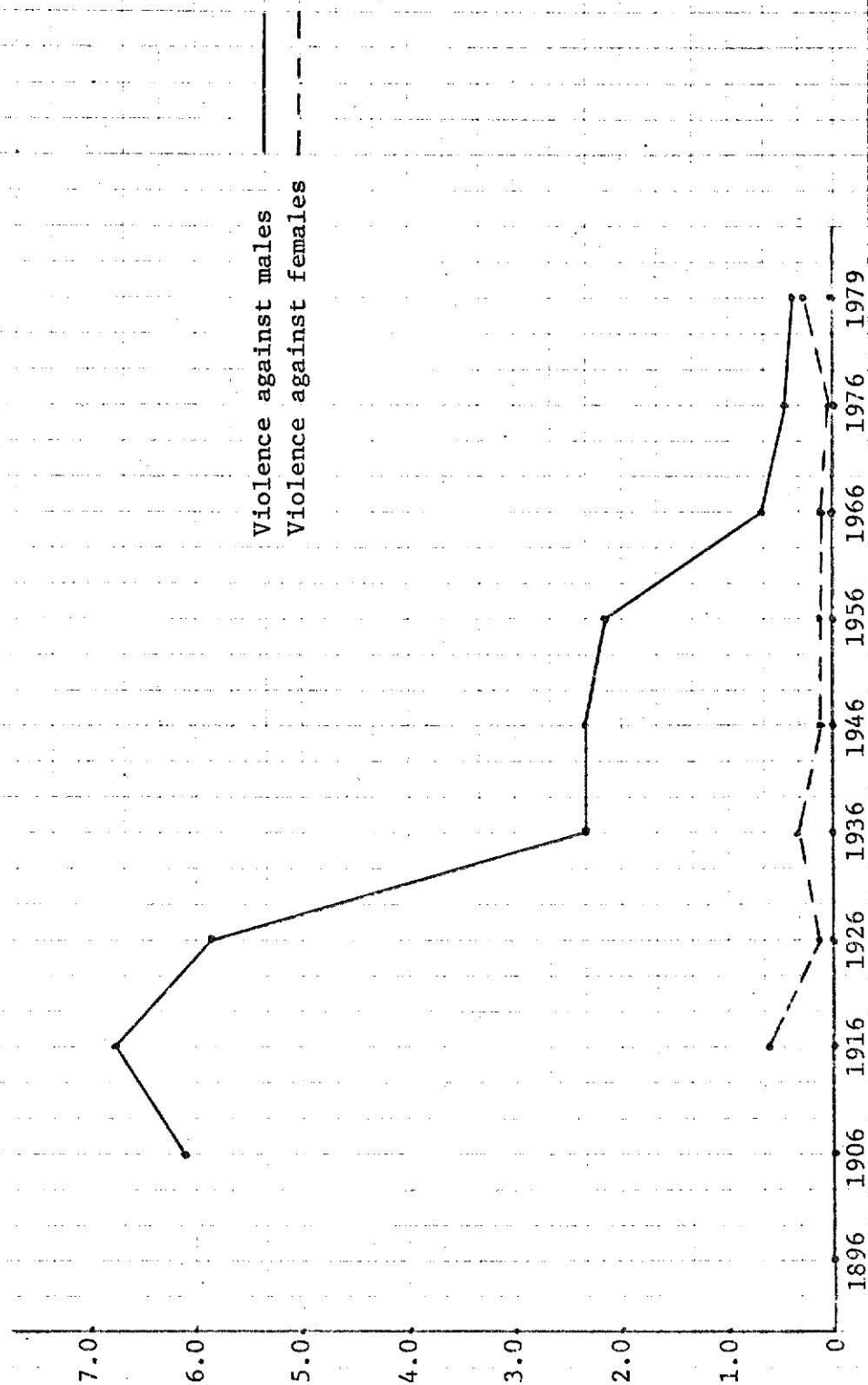
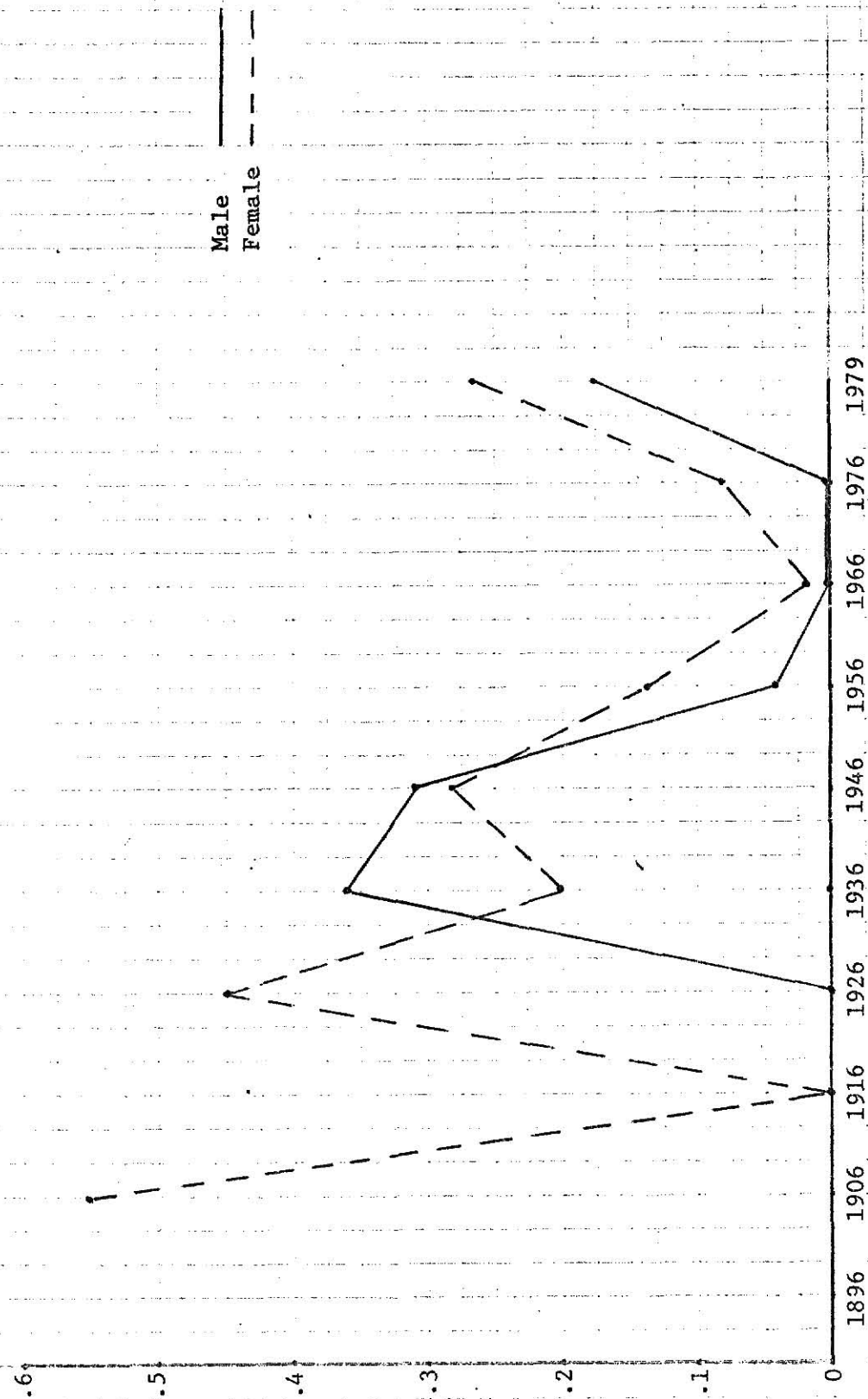


TABLE 6
INCIDENCE OF NEED FOR RESCUE BY SEX

	1906	1916	1926	1936	1946	1956	1966	1976	1979
<u>Gross Incidence</u>									
Male	0	0	0	9	10	2	0	0	6
Female	1	0	5	5	9	6	1	3	10
<u>Incidence Per 10 Units of Strips</u>									
Total Strips	18	34	112	239	321	447	350	347	342
Male	0	0	0	.37	.31	.04	0	0	.17
Female	.55	0	.45	.20	.28	.13	.02	.08	.29

FIGURE 5
INCIDENCE OF NEED FOR RESCUE BY SEX
PER TEN UNITS OF COMIC STRIPS



0 incidents by 1966. However 1979 again showed an increase of need for rescue by males (.17 per ten units). In general, since 1936, need for male and female rescue have followed roughly the same trend of incidence.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine how the portrayed roles of the sexes has changed in the comic strips over the decades of this century. Variables to be looked at included relative height of males and females, incidence of violence to males and females, and incidence of need for rescue of males and females. It is hoped that this study will further the understanding of sex roles as portrayed in the comic strips, by making it possible to make some comparisons by decades.

Summary of the Study

The data in this study suggest that there have been great changes in sex roles as portrayed in the comic strips of this century.

Three questions to be answered were posed in the Introduction. Based on the data presented in the previous chapter, the questions can be answered as follows:

1. How has the comparative height of males and females changed over the decades?

At the beginning of this century males and females in the comics tended to be of the same height. However, this was quickly changed when in 1926 women gained height in the comics. Since 1926, that trend has reversed and women as portrayed in the comics have become shorter and men taller.

2. How has the incidence of violence against males and females changed?

Throughout this century there has been very little violence toward females in the comic strips. Violence toward males was at a high point in 1916 and has been steadily declining since that point.

3. How has the incidence of need for rescue of males and females changed?

Prior to 1936, there was no incidence of males needing rescue, but a large incidence of females needing rescue. Since 1936, males and females needing rescue have followed roughly the same trend.

Further analysis of the data indicates that the decrease in violence toward males is directly related to the increase in height of males and the decrease in height among females.

One possible explanation is that height represents power. If this were true, then it would appear that for a brief time in 1926 women moved into a powerful position in the comic strips, and since that time men have been gaining power and women have been losing power. It would further appear that this shift in power back to males has been accompanied by a decrease of violence toward males.

Further Observations

The sharp drop in female taller pairs among married couples in 1956 does not match the findings of Saenger in his study carried out in October 1950, in which he reported that 42 per cent of married men were shorter than their wives. Saenger's study was carried out six years earlier; however, it would seem unlikely that such a drop would occur in that length of time. The most likely explanation is simply the particular comic strips appearing in The Wichita Eagle and The Wichita Beacon in the 1956 sample that by chance did not include female taller pairs among married couples. This finding needs to be further explored

with a larger sample.

The most impressive finding is the peak in female-taller pairs in 1926 with the sharp drop thereafter and conversely the rise in male-taller pairs in 1936 and following. Also of interest is the rise in female-taller pairs in 1976 and 1979.

These height patterns in male-female pairs appear to reflect quite remarkably the development of the women's movement as reported by historians. In the late 1800's and early 1900's the women's movement gained momentum in this country. For example, in the period from 1893 to 1917 membership in the National American Woman Suffrage Association grew from 13,150 to 2,000,000.¹ This momentum culminated in women gaining the right to vote in 1920. For a brief period women appeared to be emerging as a formidable political force. "Early data showed some evidence of political independence by women, enough to scare male politicians."² In fact in 1921, the National Women's party threatened to run as a third party, and as a result, "The male politicians caved in before this danger. The Democratic and Republican parties included most demands of organized women in their 1920 platforms."³

However, after this bright beginning, historians of the women's movement agree that the years following the 1920's were a disappointment to leaders of the movement. Barbara Sinclair Deckard includes a chapter in her book on the history of the women's movement entitled "Forty Years in the Desert: American Women, 1920-1960." She introduces this chapter with "Suffragist leaders entered the 1920's with bright hopes, but legal changes cannot alter attitudes overnight."⁴

Jo Freeman sums it up with, "Sometime during the 1920's, feminism died in the United States. It was a premature death--feminists had

just obtained the vote, with which they had hoped to make an equal place for women in this society."⁵ The prominence and strong political influence of women that emerged in the 1920's appears to be reflected in the large number of female-taller pairs appearing in 1926, and likewise the demise of the women's movement in the late 1920's is reflected in the sudden drop in female-taller pairs by 1936.

There was no significant women's liberation movement in this country from the mid-1920's to the mid-1960's, and while women made some gains in those years, in many respects they lost ground. For example, while the actual number of women gaining college degrees was rising, the percentage of all degrees being earned by women was dropping (from 40 per cent in 1930 to 35 per cent in 1960).⁶ And although women were entering the work world in large numbers, "The prestigious and remunerative positions in the professions and business were overwhelmingly held by men."⁷ And the earning gap between men and women actually widened in the 1950's and 1960's.⁸ This continued restriction of power and influence for women is again reflected in the continuing low percentage of female-taller pairs and the high percentage of male-taller pairs from 1946 through 1966.

By the 1960's, "The widening of the gap between ideology and reality had reached a critical point."⁹ And a new momentum for improvement of the position of women in society was generated. In 1961 President John Kennedy established a Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, and this Commission's report was made public in October of 1963. In 1966 the National Organization of Women (NOW) emerged and in 1972 the Equal Rights Amendment was passed, followed by a push to gain ratification by the states.

All of this activity of the late 1960's and early 1970's has led to an improved position for women in society, which appears to be reflected in the increased number of female-taller pairs in 1976 and 1979.

Areas for Further Research

More studies need to be done to further establish the trends particularly in relation to height and violence and to verify the correlation between the increase in height of men, and decrease in violence toward males. Such studies should be done on a sample from newspapers other than The Wichita Eagle and The Wichita Beacon to control for a possible bias in the selection of comic strips printed in The Wichita Eagle and The Wichita Beacon.

Further studies of this material against a background of the history of the women's movement would also be beneficial. Such studies should be designed to further establish social correlates with the appearance of female height and violence toward males in the comics.

A third area that would be worthy of research in relation to sex roles in the comics would be a historical analysis of changing occupational roles for both males and females.

Footnotes to Chapter VI

¹Barbara Sinclair Deckard, The Women's Movement: Political, Socioeconomic, and Psychological Issues (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 296.

²Ibid., p. 302.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 301.

⁵Jo Freeman, ed., Women: A Feminist Perspective (Palo Alto, California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1979), p. 557.

⁶Deckard, The Women's Movement, p. 339.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Evelyne Sullerot, Woman, Society and Change (Toronto: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1971), p. 122.

⁹Deckard, The Women's Movement, p. 341.

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COMIC STRIP CONTENT ANALYSIS FORM

2. Number of strips per page:

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SEX ROLES IN THE COMIC STRIPS:
A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE--1896-1979

by

MARIE SNIDER

B.A., Goshen College, 1949
M.R.E., Goshen College Biblical Seminary, 1957

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of Journalism and Mass Communication

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Manhattan, Kansas

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THE ABSTRACT

American comic strips have been increasingly studied in recent years as a reflection of the values of American society. This study, a content analysis of a sample of comic strips chosen by decades from The Wichita Eagle and The Wichita Beacon, examines sex roles as portrayed in the comics. It should be of value to researchers with a special interest in the changing role of women in our society.

Three variables were chosen to examine as indicators of changing positions of the sexes in American society: relative height of males and females, incidence of violence to males and females, and incidence of need for rescue of males and females.

A content analysis form was developed to record information on these three variables.

The study was carried out on a sample of newspapers, selected by decades from 1896 to 1976, with an additional sample from 1979. A total of 304 newspapers, including 2210 strips, were categorized in this study.

The study revealed that dramatic changes have occurred in the three variables as portrayed in the American comics over the decades.

The study indicated that most male-female combinations in the comics at the turn of the century were of the same height (66.6 per cent in 1906). However, since that time there has been a steady decline of same-height pairs, reaching a low of 16 per cent in 1979.

Male-female combinations in which the female is taller jumped to a high of 62.5 per cent of all male-female pairs in 1926, and that percentage of female-taller pairs has steadily declined since that time.

Inversely, the number of male-taller pairs has risen steadily since 1926, resulting in a reversal of ratio by 1979. In 1926 female-taller pairs accounted for 62.5 per cent of the total male-female pairs, and male-taller pairs for 21.8 per cent. By 1979 female-taller pairs accounted for 18.8 per cent of the total and male-taller pairs for 65.2 per cent.

The study indicated that violence against males peaked in 1916, reporting 6.76 incidents of violence per ten units of comic strips, and has declined steadily since that time, reaching a low of .41 incidents per ten units of comics in 1979. Violence against females remained low over the decades, fluctuating only from 0 to .58 incidents per ten units of comic strips.

The study noted that prior to 1936 there was no incidence of males needing rescue, but a large incidence of females needing rescue. Since 1936, males and females needing rescue have followed roughly the same trend.

It was further noted that the drop in incidents of violence against males of the comics correlated with the loss of height of females and increase in height of males. No such correlation was noted with the rescue variable.

It was suggested that one possible hypothesis is that height represents power. If this were true, then after a brief time in 1926 when women moved into a powerful position, men have been gaining power and women have been losing power in the comics.