

Women stay in fringes of most popular comic strips, study finds

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The portrayal of women in comic strips is no laughing matter, according to a new University of Florida study, which finds that females are rarely the jokester and often not even part of the humorous exchange.

An analysis of six of the most popular nationally syndicated comic strips over the course of a year shows that women appeared less than half the time and when they did the gag was on them, said Daniel Fernandez-Baca, a UF graduate student in sociology. He presented his paper at a meeting of the American Sociological Association this week.

“When they do appear, for the most part, women don’t say anything funny or act humorously, but merely set up the joke and allow men to create the humor,” he said.

Other than being a straight man or foil to the laugh-inspiring male character, women were used mostly to reinforce certain humorous stereotypes, such as the harried or henpecking housewife, Fernandez-Baca said.

“Other research on comic strips typically looks at where women are portrayed - in the kitchen, in the work force, inside the home or out in the world at large,” he said. “This study goes a step further by asking why women are in comics in the first place and how they contribute to the humor of the situation.”

The subject is important because comic strips, like other forms of mass

media, can encourage incorrect or misleading perceptions of people, especially among impressionable children and adolescents, Fernandez-Baca said. “If comics perpetuate stereotypes of how men and women are supposed to act and what is appropriate to make fun of about them, that is the way children will learn to behave,” he said.

For his study, Fernandez-Baca analyzed the top syndicated comic strips in 2008, which appeared in a minimum of 1,500 newspapers, magazines and other media outlets. These were “Blondie,” “Beetle Bailey,” “Family Circus,” “Hagar,” “Garfield” and “Dilbert.” “Peanuts” and “For Better or For Worse” also fit into this category but were not included because they no longer publish new material.

He also tallied how often female characters appeared. Because it was a leap year, this resulted in 366 observations a comic strip and 2,196 total observations. Except for “Blondie” and “The Family Circus,” women showed up in less than half of the comic strips, he said.

Women’s primary role of feeding the antics of other characters in the strip rather than instigating the humor themselves may relate to society’s attitudes about their proper place, he said.

“Because we tend to view women as nurturing and supportive, making fun of a person or situation is not the type of role we like to see for our wives and mothers,” Fernandez-Baca said. Some of these comic strips may cling to traditional values because they are older; “Blondie” started in 1930, “Beetle Bailey” in 1950 and “The Family Circus” in 1960, he said.

Compared with the shifts that have occurred in cultural perceptions about sex roles, women in these strips have changed very little, Fernandez-Baca. When they are funny, the humor follows predictable assumptions once commonly held about women’s lives, he said.

Young female characters pine for the day they can be in a romantic relationship, Fernandez-Baca said. Dolly, the girl in “The Family Circus,” for example, expresses recurring fears of how she would someday find Prince Charming when all boys are “icky,” he said.

While single women are portrayed as desperate to marry, once married they are often depicted as nagging housewives who berate their husbands, he said.

“Marriage is simultaneously the goal and curse of women in these comic strips,” he said. “They do most of the work in the home, while repeated requests that their spouses help out are often met with humorous consequences.”

Wives are often materialistic, perpetuating the idea that men make the money and women spend it, Fernandez-Baca said. In one comic strip about a shopping trip, Dagwood is shown carrying some 50 packages for Blondie, all of which are intended for her, he said.

The one place where women consistently create their own humor and actively participate in jokes is the place they have fought for years to enter: the workplace, Fernandez-Baca said. But despite being competent and useful, [women](#) are never placed in positions of power and therefore suffer at the mercy of their bumbling male superiors, he said.

While humor is generally considered positive and even therapeutic, as in the expression “laughter is the best medicine,” it also has a more serious side, even in the comics, Fernandez-Baca said.

More information: www.asanet.org/index.cfm

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