



The Fluctuating Image of the 20th Century American Father

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## The Fluctuating Image of the 20th Century American Father

*A sample of 223 family cartoons published in the Saturday Evening Post from 1924 to 1944 were analyzed for the extent to which the father figures and mother figures in the cartoons were depicted as "incompetent." The rationale behind the study, following Day and Mackey (1986), was to see whether the image of the American father had changed significantly in the early part of the 20th century. Day and Mackey's findings led them to conclude that the 1970s marked an unprecedented shift in the "paradigm through which fathers were viewed." This study, however, indicates that a similar shift had occurred in the 1930s and early 1940s, and proposes that the image of the 20th century American father has changed not once but at least twice, and that the pattern of change is not linear, as is commonly held, but one of fluctuation.*

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### THE NEED FOR HISTORICAL STUDIES OF FATHERHOOD

The Industrial Revolution, the development of mass transportation, and the creation of the ideology of two separate spheres (public/occupational world vs. private/family world) often are credited with bringing about, in the 1800s and early 1900s, both the glorification of motherhood and the diminution of fatherhood (Filene, 1986; Mintz and Kellogg, 1988). As to why this occurred, the argument generally advanced is that mothers increasingly were removed from income-producing activities and given primary responsibility for their children's welfare, while fathers were removed from childrearing activities and given primary responsibility for the financial support of the family.

This shift in the division of labor is believed to be both a consequence and a cause of changes taking place in popular culture. In people's minds, not only did the greater contact that mothers had with their children, compared to fathers, make them better-skilled parents, but more important, women's alleged innate emotionality and tenderness made them uniquely equipped for parent-

hood. Similarly, the fact that fathers spent so little time with their children, compared to mothers, lent an element of awkwardness to father-child relations, but what really made the difference, according to conventional wisdom, was that men's innate lack of emotionality and hard-as-nails approach to life made them *incompetent* when it came to parenthood.

Much has been written on the glorification of motherhood in 20th century America (see, for example, Bernard, 1974; Friedan, 1963; Margolis, 1984). Little, however, has been penned on the diminution of fatherhood. Consequently, while we have a fairly good understanding of the ebb and flow of the social value of motherhood since the early 1900s, we have only "informed guesses" of how the popular image of fathers changed (or did not change) in the wake of the major historical events of the day (Demos, 1982; LaRossa, 1988; Pleck, 1987; Rotundo, 1985). This article is intended, in part, to help remedy this imbalance.

#### THE DAY AND MACKEY THESIS

While our interest in the history of fatherhood certainly was an important factor, it was not the only motivation behind the present inquiry. Rather, the main goal of the current investigation was to replicate a study that we found compelling and, at the same time, puzzling.

In their study of the changing "role image of the American father," Randal Day and Wade Mackey (1986) analyzed the content of family cartoons published in the *Saturday Evening Post* from 1922 to 1968 and from 1971 to 1978. They found that, in the earlier time period, father figures were *more likely than* mother figures to be depicted as incompetent but that, in the later time period, father figures were *as likely as* mother figures to be depicted as incompetent. The authors explain their findings by contending that three factors—namely, (a) the rapid increase in the percentage of mothers of young children into the labor force, (b) the decline of birth rates, and (c) the increased advocacy of egalitarianism vis-à-vis gender roles during the 1970s (Cherlin, 1981; U.S. Bureau of Census, 1982)—recast "the father-status-role complex into a template equated with a mother-status-role complex," such that men increasingly were seen as "coequal" child rearers (Day and Mackey, 1986: 384, 385). In the wake of the egalitarian ethic, cartoonists of the 1970s were

placed in "a double avoidance conflict": depicting fathers as competent would go against tradition, but portraying fathers as incompetent would be out of synchrony with emerging expectations. In order to resolve the conflict, cartoonists apparently deleted fathers and substituted "other, less ambivalent topics" (Day and Mackey, 1986: 385).

Stated simply, Day and Mackey, using cartoons as an indicator of how Americans perceived fathers, contended that the 1970s were a significant benchmark in the history of fatherhood, a point at which "a shift occurred in the paradigm through which fathers were viewed" (Day and Mackey, 1986: 372). The implication was that the shift was peculiar to the 1970s (and presumably the 1980s), that up to 1971 a different paradigm had prevailed.

Day and Mackey's (1986) decision to focus on the question of "incompetence" to plot trends in how American fathers have been viewed was, we felt, a good one. Although it could be faulted for not being comprehensive enough (certainly there are other paternal traits in people's consciousness), the image of the father as incompetent often has been advanced as the modal view of the American father. For example, in his essay on the history of fatherhood, John Demos (1982: 442) argued that at the end of the 19th century and during much of the 20th, fathers in popular culture

... bumbled and bumbled, and occasionally made fools of themselves. They were cajoled, humored, and implicitly patronized by long-suffering wives and clever children. Dagwood Bumstead (of the "Blondie" comic strip), Ozzie Nelson (of the popular radio show "Ozzie and Harriet"), and the faintly ridiculous hero of Clarence Day's Broadway play *Life with Father* made well-known variants of the general type (*father as incompetent*).

Day and Mackey's (1986) decision to rely on cartoons also had merit. Again, while it could be faulted for not being comprehensive enough (what about other media?), cartoons reflect a powerful "vernacular record of the social and political history of that people" (Murrell, 1933: 9). Few cultural artifacts capture, so succinctly and so strongly, popular stereotypes as much as cartoons do, which is why the social scientific study of the cartoon has had such a long and distinguished history (Harrison, 1981). Moreover,

the fact that Day and Mackey (1986) were interested specifically in the image of the father as incompetent also made the humorous cartoon a natural choice. The cartoonist's tendency to present people and issues in an unflattering way made it likely that they would come across a sufficient number of "subjects" (i.e., cartoons) to test their hypothesis.

Finally, Day and Mackey's (1986) decision to examine cartoons in the *Saturday Evening Post*, versus another magazine, was a sound one, in our opinion. For a good part of the 20th century, the *Saturday Evening Post* was the premier middle-class (or, more accurately, *white* middle-class) family magazine in America. A very traditional magazine, often with a racist and sexist bias, the *Post*, for a significant number of Americans, "created the world they lived in" (Cohn, 1989; see also Holder, 1973). The fact that the *Post* tended to support a particular viewpoint meant that the images published in its pages did not always represent the attitudes of the community at large. What magazine would? On the other hand, the fact that the *Post*'s viewpoint was decidedly traditional, and "male-stream," seemed to us to provide a certain methodological advantage. If one's purpose is to see whether the image of fathers became less traditional and if one discovers that a conservative magazine like the *Post* at some point began to depict fathers in a less traditional way, one could be more confident that, on the level of popular culture, a shift away from the more traditional paradigm had, in fact, occurred.

The major drawback to the Day and Mackey (1986) study, in our opinion, was their decision to cover over 50 years of history with a relatively small sample of cartoons. This decision apparently forced them to treat the period from 1922 to 1968 as a homogenous historical era (see p. 376)—a risky proposition, given how much we know of the changes in American society during this time. Thus, to us, their findings left open the possibility that the "paradigmatic shift" which they argued was peculiar to the 1970s might actually have occurred at least once before. If such a shift did occur previously, its existence would raise questions about the uniqueness of the so-called revolution in men's roles in the 1970s and 1980s. Knowing whether "we've been here before" would give current scholars and activists a much-needed historical perspective and perhaps also suggest a

precedent for current changes.

On a very basic level, we felt that the Day and Mackey thesis was too tidy. What especially struck us was how chronocentric the thesis was, in that it suggested that people in the 1970s were able to see what previous generations apparently were too blind to see, namely, that fathers can and should be competent parents. Our sense is that history rarely is this neat. Thus, while we were intrigued by the issues that Day and Mackey raised, we could not help but wonder whether they had presented too simple a picture, and we set out to design a study that would build on their work and yet refine it.

Like Day and Mackey (1986), we reviewed a sample of humorous family cartoons published in the *Saturday Evening Post* and coded the extent to which the father figures and mother figures in the cartoons were depicted as "incompetent." However, instead of trying to cover almost the entire 20th century, we chose to concentrate on the period from 1924 to 1944. We focused on this period because, besides including some of the major historical events in America (i.e., the "Roaring Twenties," the Great Depression, and World War II), the period is unequalled in 20th century history in terms of the contradictory changes that took place (Sales, 1973). We concentrated on this period also because the three factors that, according to Day and Mackey, contributed to the 1970s shift also were present in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Beginning soon after the end of the First World War, the labor force participation rates of mothers increased and birth rates both declined (1918-1936) and increased (1937-1943) (Smith and Ward, 1984; Wandersee, 1981). And 1920, the year in which the 19th Amendment to the Constitution giving women the right to vote was passed, generally is defined as the "beginning of modernity" in the history of gender stratification (Filene, 1986).

One could argue that, ideally, we should have included family cartoons prior to 1920. But family cartoons did not appear in the *Saturday Evening Post* (or other magazines) on a regular basis until the 1920s. Up to then, political cartoons were the mode.

Finally, it is worth noting that the historical study of fatherhood—indeed, the historical study of anything—is served just as much by investigations that examine relatively circumscribed time periods as by those that have a broader scope.

While the latter offer valuable overviews, the former often provide the kind of data needed to "contextualize" continuity and change (McKee and O'Brien, 1982). As we will demonstrate, one strength of the current investigation is its ability to detect short-term changes.

To summarize, the object of our study was to flesh out our understanding of the ideology of fatherhood in earlier decades and, at the same time, test (and ultimately refine) Day and Mackey's (1986) thesis that the "role image of the American father" has undergone a significant change in the 20th century.

#### METHODOLOGY

Every single-panel family cartoon published in the *Saturday Evening Post* during the years 1924, 1928, 1932, 1936, 1940, and 1944 was photocopied and made available for analysis. Altogether, 349 cartoons were examined. A "family cartoon" was one that had a family theme (vs., say, a political theme).<sup>1</sup>

Given that the principal impetus behind our study was to replicate Day and Mackey's (1986) findings, when it came time to operationalize "incompetence," we turned first to their coding scheme. In the end, however, we decided to modify their scheme.

Day and Mackey's coders were told to examine the cartoons for the following examples of incompetent behavior: "bumbling, did something wrong, inept, blundered, made a mistake, was awkward, unhandy, gawky, stumbling, not handling problem, improper role model" (Day and Mackey, 1986: 375). This list was assembled with the aid of a thesaurus (Day, 1989) and, apparently, is not limited to first-order synonyms. A first-order synonym is one that a thesaurus includes in its primary list of synonyms. A second-order synonym is a synonym for one of the words on the primary list. For example, WordPerfect 5.0, the word processing program, includes the word "inept" on its primary list of synonyms for "incompetent," but "awkward," one of Day and Mackey's synonyms, is not on this initial list. "Awkward" is, however, a primary synonym for "inept." Thus, "awkward" is a synonym for "incompetent," but it is a second-order rather than a first-order synonym.

Not every thesaurus is the same; a first-order synonym for one may be a second-order synonym

for another. We discovered, nonetheless, that we could achieve more reliability and not suffer a serious loss in validity if we limited our examples of incompetent behavior to the first-order synonyms for "incompetence" and "incompetent." We chose the thesaurus in WordPerfect 5.0 because of its ready availability not only to us but presumably also to others. Thus, in our scheme, the coders were told to examine the cartoons for the following examples of incompetent behavior: ignorant, inadequate, incapable, ineffectual, inefficient, inept, stupid, unable, unfit, and weak. More specifically, when it came to assessing incompetence in the cartoons, the coders were asked to answer two questions:

*Father Incompetent Question.* Is the father in this family (whether he is pictured in the cartoon or not) being depicted as incompetent ["incompetent" having been defined by the list of words above]? (0) Not applicable (father is not in cartoon and no reference is made to him or about him). (1) Father is in cartoon or is referenced in the cartoon, but he is not depicted as incompetent. (2) Father is in cartoon or is referenced in the cartoon and he is depicted as incompetent.

*Mother Incompetent Question.* Is the mother in this family (whether she is pictured in the cartoon or not) being depicted as incompetent ["incompetent" having been defined by the list of words above]? (0) Not applicable (mother is not in cartoon and no reference is made to her or about her). (1) Mother is in cartoon or is referenced in the cartoon, but she is not depicted as incompetent. (2) Mother is in cartoon or is referenced in the cartoon and she is depicted as incompetent.

Note that we included cartoons in which a father or mother figure was either *pictured* or *referenced* in the cartoon. This is in contrast to Day and Mackey, who included only cartoons that contained "a father figure or mother figure in the presence of one or more children" (Day and Mackey, 1986: 375). We chose the more inclusive strategy because, during our pretest, we discovered that a father figure or mother figure could be depicted as incompetent even though he or she might not be pictured in the cartoon. If we were going to be sensitive to the "message" of the cartoons, we felt we had to recognize that characters "off stage" often were central to both the cartoonist's intent and the audience's reception. Also, in contrast to Day and Mackey, we included family cartoons in which there was no child pic-

tured in the cartoon. Again, our pretest uncovered a number of instances in which a father figure or mother figure would be depicted as incompetent in the absence of children.

Two of the authors (RJW and AB) served as coders. However, while they were coding, they were not privy to the goals of the research. They also were not told where or when the cartoons were published. This was done to minimize any possible effect that foreknowledge might have on their ratings. Once the two finished their coding, they became full-fledged members of the team.

It was decided that the coders for the project should be a male and female and that their ages should not be the same (at the time they were coding, RJW was 27 years old and AB was 54 years old). The rationale behind this decision is that we wanted ultimately to limit our analysis to those cartoons that had a reasonably unambiguous message. If two people with very different backgrounds could agree on the message in a cartoon, it is more likely that there was a consensus on the cartoon's meaning when it was published.

The cartoons used in the following analysis are only those cartoons for which there was perfect agreement on *both* the "Father Incompetent Question" and the "Mother Incompetent Question." This was a relatively stringent criterion for inclusion, again motivated by our desire to focus only on those cartoons that had an unambiguous message. Of the 349 cartoons in the original sample, 223 cartoons (or 64%) met the criterion.<sup>2</sup>

To check for coder consistency over time, a random sample of 36 cartoons from the original 349 were coded again one month later. On the incompetence variable, test-retest reliability was 93%.

Day and Mackey (1986) did not address the question, "Incompetent at what?" That is, they did not examine the content of the cartoons to see what the father figures and mother figures were *doing* when depicted as incompetent. On the advice of an anonymous reviewer, however, we did review the content of the 223 cartoons for which there was a perfect agreement to see if there were significant gender or period effects. The coding for this phase of the study proceeded in two stages (not including category construction or coder training). First, one of the original coders (AB) made an effort to determine the primary area in which the father and/or mother (or nonparent in the no one/other category) was showing in-

competence. Areas of incompetence included: custodial activity, teaching/disciplining/socializing child(ren), leisure/recreational activity, economic support of the family and other financial matters, household chores, interaction with spouse, interaction with other people (e.g., sons-in-law and boyfriends), and trying to prevent or cope with having too many children. (These categories reflected, in part, our efforts to capture the distinctions between "custodial" and "interactive" activities and between "work" and "play," noted by others, such as Lamb, 1987; Robinson, 1977.) The coder was encouraged *not* to force cartoons into one category or another but to "flag" cartoons that proved too difficult to code. Of the 223 cartoons, 69 (or 31%) could not be easily coded. In the second stage of coding, these 69 cartoons were examined by a three-person team (RL, AB, and CJ) and, through discussion, were placed into one of the categories listed above.

## FINDINGS

### *The Question of Incompetence*

Table 1 and Figure 1 show how often father figures and mother figures were depicted as incompetent in the 223 cartoons of the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s. Like Day and Mackey (1986), we found that, on the average, father figures were more likely than mother figures to be depicted as incompetent. Unlike Day and Mackey, however, we did not find the differences to be great: our data indicate that, overall, 53% of the father figures versus 44% of the mother figures were incompetent (a significant difference at the .05 level), whereas Day and Mackey report 73% versus 27%, respectively.

This discrepancy in the magnitude of the gender differences in incompetence found in both studies may be the result of two factors. The first is the different operational definitions of incompetence that were employed. If the synonyms that Day and Mackey used are more likely, on the level of popular culture, to be associated with masculine deficiencies—"unhandy" and "stumbling" are two possible candidates and both are on their list but not ours—then this might account for their finding more dramatic differences. Correspondingly, if the synonyms we used are more likely, on the level of popular culture, to be associated with feminine deficien-

TABLE 1. PERCENTAGE OF FAMILY THEME CARTOONS IN WHICH PARENTAL FIGURES ARE DEPICTED AS INCOMPETENT, 1920S THROUGH EARLY 1940S

Who is depicted as incompetent?	1920s	1930s	1940s	Whole Period
1. Father only	56.3%	42.6%	30.5%*	38.6%
2. Mother only	22.9	31.9	31.3	29.6
3. Father and mother	12.5	14.9	14.8	14.3
4. No one/other	8.3	10.6	23.4*	17.5
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
<i>n</i>	48	47	128	223

Note: An asterisk indicates that the difference between the 1920s and early 1940s incompetence percentage is statistically significant at or below the .05 level, on the basis of a *t* test for differences between proportions (see Bohrnstedt and Knoke, 1988). Also, for 1924, 1928, 1932, 1936, 1940, and 1944, respectively, the total numbers of cartoons published in the *Saturday Evening Post* were 267, 409, 279, 453, 625, and 1,256 (i.e., a total of 3,289 for the years surveyed). For 1924, 1928, 1932, 1936, 1940, and 1944, respectively, the percentages of family cartoons published were 8.2, 11.4, 13.9, 8.1, 11.0, and 10.7 (i.e., on the average, 10.6% of the cartoons published during these years were family cartoons).

cies—"ignorant" and "weak" are two possible candidates and both are on our list but not on theirs—then this might account for our finding less dramatic differences.

A second and probably more important factor that can account for the different findings is that our study focused on the period from 1924 to 1944, whereas Day and Mackey's study focused on the periods 1922–1968 and 1971–1978. It is the 1922–1968 period for which Day and Mackey found father figures more likely to be depicted as incompetent. If our different findings result from this factor, it would mean that from 1945 to 1968 the extent to which fathers were depicted as incompetent would have had to increase significantly. We have no cartoon data that would allow us to test empirically whether this did, in fact, occur. Historians, however, have suggested that the 1950s ushered in a period during which the image of the father as incompetent increased (see Filene, 1986; Mintz and Kellogg, 1988).

Our most important finding is apparent when we compare the patterns of parental incompetence depicted in the cartoons of each of the three decades (see Table 1 and Figure 1). Between the 1920s and early 1940s there was a striking *convergence* in the depiction of fathers and mothers as incompetent. In the 1920s father figures were depicted as incompetent in 69% of the *Saturday Evening Post's* cartoons with family themes, while mother figures were so depicted only 35% of the time (significant at the .01 level). In the 1930s this gap grew smaller, as fathers were a little less likely to be portrayed as incompetent (58% of the time), and the tendency to draw incompetent mothers rose (up to 47%), a gender

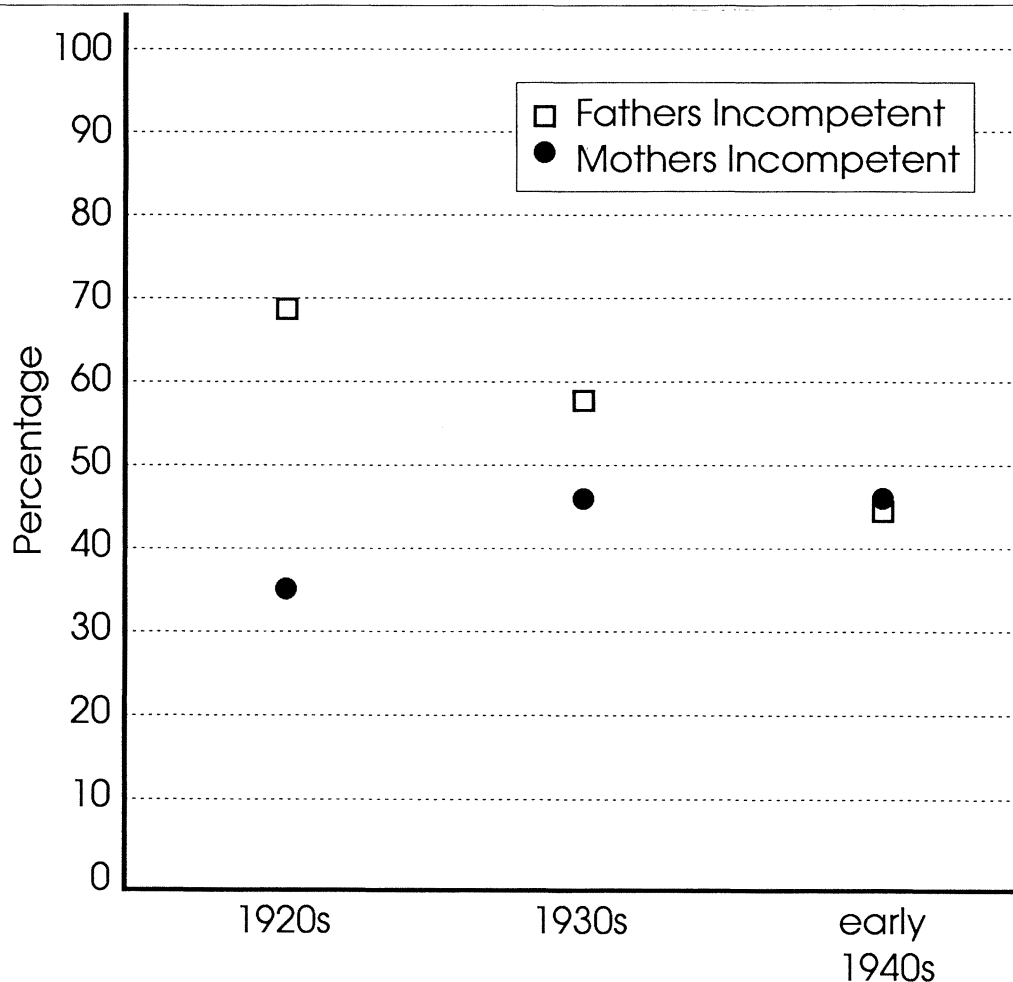
difference that is *not* statistically significant at the .05 level. During the early 1940s there was literally a complete convergence in this magazine's presentation of incompetent fathers and mothers. Fathers were shown as incompetent in 45% of the cartoons, compared to mothers' 46%. Thus, from the 1920s through the early 1940s, the portrayal of incompetent fathers dropped from 69% to 45% (significant at the .01 level), while the prevalence of incompetent mother figures underwent no statistically significant rise.

Finally, Day and Mackey (1986) suggested that in the 1970s cartoonists tried to deal with a "double avoidance conflict" when it came to fathers by substituting other topics (or targets) for fathers in their cartoons. Similarly, we found that the percentage of no one/other targets increased significantly from 8.3% in the 1920s to 23.4% in the early 1940s (significant at the .05 level).

Day and Mackey (1986) use evidence of convergence in their family cartoon data to argue that in the 1970s there was a shift in the paradigm through which fathers were viewed. Using the same logic, we would argue that a similar shift had occurred in the 1930s and early 1940s.

How is it possible that Day and Mackey missed the convergence that apparently occurred in the 1930s and 1940s? The most plausible explanation, suggested above, is that the period from 1945 to 1968 witnessed a return to a 1920s-like portrayal of sharp gender differences in parental incompetence, with fathers much more likely than mothers to be depicted as incompetent. Since Day and Mackey treated the period from 1922 to 1968 as a single unit of time, the convergence of the 1930s and 1940s was "buried" by the divergence of the

FIGURE 1. PERCENTAGE OF FAMILY THEME CARTOONS IN WHICH MOTHERS AND FATHERS ARE DEPICTED AS INCOMPETENT, 1920s THROUGH EARLY 1940s



Note: Percentages represent the sum of Table 1 lines. Lines 1 and 3 yield the total percentage of father figures depicted as incompetent. Lines 2 and 3 yield the total percentage of mother figures depicted as incompetent.

other decades. In other words, the modal pattern of divergence overshadowed the convergence of the 1930s and 1940s, and it is the modal pattern that served as Day and Mackey's baseline for their comparison with the 1970s.

There is nothing basically wrong with saying that divergence is the mode for the 20th century. The problem comes when it is suggested that there were no significant anomalies to the general pattern prior to 1970s. The current study indicates that the 1970s decade was not the first time that a shift in perceptions occurred, and the two studies, taken together, suggest that, contrary to what

Day and Mackey proposed, the image of the 20th century American father has changed not once but at least twice. In other words, the image of the American father has not shifted gradually "for the better," as is often assumed. Rather, it has fluctuated in a roller-coaster-like pattern, characteristic of changes that have occurred in other elements of American culture.

#### *Incompetent at What?*

As we noted earlier, Day and Mackey (1986) did not address the issue of what the fathers and



mothers were doing when depicted as incompetent, so initially we, too, did not attempt to answer this question. However, later we were encouraged to go back and examine the 223 cartoons again with this issue in mind.

The answer to the question, "Incompetent at what?," is that parental figures most frequently were shown acting incompetent in the areas of child socialization and discipline. In the 1920s, 42% of the family cartoons showed, in a humorous way, one or both parents as having failed to teach or instill proper behavior in the child, as unable to control the child's behavior, or as doing something likely to have a negative effect on the child's self-concept. In none of these cartoons from the 1920s was a father or mother depicted in a competent manner in this area. In subsequent decades, the same pattern existed; the single largest category of parental incompetence was disciplining and socializing children (51% of the 1930s cartoons and 44% of the 1940s cartoons).

The next most common area of parental incompetence was basic custodial care of the child; in all three decades about 12% of the cartoon parents showed varying degrees of ineptitude at cleaning, feeding, dressing, protecting, transporting, or putting kids to bed. Almost as common was parental incompetence in interacting with persons other than family members (e.g., their children's boyfriends, girlfriends, suitors, or other adults).

We were surprised at how few times parents were portrayed as incompetent in some other areas: doing common household chores, playing with children, economic matters, or interacting with each other or with relatives. In none of the decades studied did any of these categories account for more than 9% of the cartoons depicting parental incompetence.

As for gender and period effects, the main gender difference was in the degree to which fatherly and motherly incompetence was concentrated in the two primary categories (child socialization/discipline and custodial care). Mothers' incompetence was almost always conveyed with allusions to just those two areas. This was the case in the 1920s, and it became even more extreme in the 1930s and 1940s. Specifically, child socialization/discipline and custodial care accounted for 71% of the incompetent mothers during the 1920s, 86% in the 1930s, and 88% in the 1940s. In contrast, fathers who were acting in-

competently were seen in these two categories about 60% of the time in all three decades. Thus, by the 1940s, when fathers and mothers were equally likely to be shown as incompetent, there was a significant difference in the way they were so presented (significant at the .01 level). When depicted as incompetent, mothers were nearly always shown as having failed in raising or taking care of their children, whereas fathers—although also typically shown as having failed in the socialization/discipline area—were likely to be presented as inept in other areas, too (e.g., interacting with adults).

## DISCUSSION

Conventional wisdom has it that America is in the midst of an unprecedented revolution in men's paternal role expectations—that popular attitudes about what fathers can and should do are changing in ways not dreamed of before. Conventional wisdom also tends to conceptualize this revolution in linear terms; ever so gradually attitudes have been shifting, and as luck would have it, those of us alive today are able to see everything come to fruition.

The current study, coupled with Day and Mackey's (1986) study, suggests a different picture of social change. If the cartoons are to be believed, the image of the American father has shifted not once but at least twice during the 20th century. Hence, changes thought to be unique to the 1970s, 1980s, and now 1990s—while perhaps significant in their own right—may have some precedent in the 1930s and 1940s. The fluctuating image of the 20th century American father, indicated in the data, should cause us to be suspicious of polar comparisons between fatherhood "then" and fatherhood "now," for while these comparisons are intuitively appealing and can sometimes be heuristically valuable, they also tend to oversimplify historical change.

Day and Mackey (1986) contended that in patriarchal childrearing cultures (with mothers viewed as the primary caregivers), cartoonists would be more likely to *maximize* differences between fathers and mothers, and portray fathers as significantly less competent in family situations; and that in egalitarian childrearing cultures (with mothers and fathers viewed as coequal caregivers), cartoonists would be more likely to *minimize* differences between parents, and por-

tray fathers and mothers as equally competent or incompetent. Thus, they argued that in the 1970s there was a shift toward an egalitarian (or, more accurately, less patriarchal) childrearing culture, and that this shift was reflected in the cartoons they studied.

We agree with Day and Mackey (1986) that cartoons can serve as barometers of social change and that shifts from a more patriarchal to a less patriarchal childrearing culture would make it more likely for gender differences to be minimized (or at least less maximized). The social scientific study of humor would seem to support this argument. The content and form of humor in a society cannot be understood without having some understanding of the society itself, for the ability to see something as humorous—the ability to “get” the joke—requires some familiarity with the multiple realities embodied in the joke. Thus, for example, a cartoonist who intends to make fun of fathers’ diaper-changing efforts must presume that the audience knows the “conventional reality” (what generally is the case) so that he or she can juxtapose this reality with the “unconventional reality” for comic effect (Macionis, 1989). As for the social functions of humor, “though jokes feed on subversive thought, on deviations from the normal and expected, they reinforce established views of the world” (Wilson, 1979: 228; see also Mulkay, 1988). Thus, one would expect that racist societies would generate racist jokes (Davies, 1990) and that patriarchal cultures would generate sexist cartoons (e.g., women being made fun of in the occupational world, men being made fun of in the family world). In both cases what is being reinforced is the established view that people need to “know their place.”

How do we account for the fluctuating image of the 20th century American father? The factors that Day and Mackey (1986) identified as the reasons behind the gender shift of the 1970s (the rising labor force participation rates of mothers, the decline in the birth rate, and the increased advocacy of egalitarianism) were also present during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s and probably explain, in part, the shift of the earlier period as well. Also, the fact that the 1950s witnessed a reversal or at least a suspension of some of these trends probably explains why there would be the hypothesized turnaround during the Cold War Era (see May, 1988).

But while there are similarities, demographi-

cally speaking, between the early 20th century and the present, there also are important differences that cannot be ignored. Yes, birth rates declined dramatically during the 1920s and early 1930s, but during the early 1940s, when in the *Saturday Evening Post* images of fathers and mothers as incompetent were the most convergent, birth rates went up (Smith and Ward, 1984).

We also cannot overlook the Great Depression, an economic downturn unparalleled in the 20th century. When scholars have written about the Depression and American fatherhood they typically have argued that, on the aggregate level, the Depression had either a negative impact on men’s standing in the family or no impact at all (see Filene, 1986; Mintz and Kellogg, 1988; Wandersee, 1981). That the Depression may also have had a positive impact on how the public—or at least cartoonists—viewed the American father is a question that has rarely been asked, much less answered.

The 1940s also ushered in World War II. Warfare generally has a paradoxical effect on gender definitions. If a war results in a higher percentage of women in the labor force, gender definitions tend to become less traditional. At the same time, warfare can enhance men’s traditionally held prestige and perquisites because, more than likely, men are the ones involved in the struggle (Chafetz, 1990). Thus, the fact that there would be such a dramatic shift toward a less patriarchal view of fathers both before the war (1940) and during (1944) is perplexing.

It seems clear that the shift in the image of the American father in the 1930s and early 1940s hinges, in part, on factors other than those normally advanced to explain changes in gender definitions. But what might these factors be? The history of fatherhood has received much less attention than the history of motherhood—and we should not assume in cavalier fashion that the theories that apply to the latter equally apply to the former. Thus, at this stage of our knowledge, we are forced to speculate more than we would like about why the image of the American father changed the way it did.

One thing that may be helpful is recognizing that the shift evidenced in the cartoons is but one element in a series of changes taking place in the early 1900s. In a related study (LaRossa, 1989), for example, we found that between 1920 and 1929, popular magazine articles devoted to fathers

constituted 29% of the articles published on fathers and mothers; but that between 1940 and 1949, popular magazine articles devoted to fathers constituted 45% of the articles published on fathers and mothers. Thus, the ratio of popular magazine articles devoted to fathers and mothers exhibited a convergence similar to that of the cartoons, with the 1940s being the point at which there were about as many articles published on fathers as were published on mothers. The aforementioned study has resulted also in the discovery that the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s marked a significant change in the presence of fathers in childrearing books; virtually ignored in the 1920s, fathers increasingly were included in the prescriptive infant care literature of the 1930s and 1940s (though they still were treated as "second class" parents by the authors of the books).

Typically, changes in gender definitions are tied directly to changes in the economy (e.g., the labor force participation rates of mothers) and other structural conditions. However, cultural factors also can play a part in the social construction of reality. A prime example is how the "sacralization" of children's lives in the 1800s and early 1900s resulted in children being removed from the "cash nexus" of the family (Zelizer, 1985). The 1920s and 1930s were a time when a "new ideal of the family" emerged—the "companionate family." Orchestrated in large part by the childrearing "intelligentsia" (i.e., psychologists, educators, social service professionals, and legal scholars), the new conception of family life emphasized that husbands and wives should be "friends and lovers" and that parents and children should be "pals" (Mintz and Kellogg, 1988: 113). Thus, one explanation for the shift in how fathers were viewed may be that the "sacralization" of family life in the 1920s and 1930s, like the "sacralization" of children's lives at the turn of the century, broadened people's sense of the proper role of fathers to include not only providing financially for their children but providing emotional support as well. This change in the cultural climate may have placed cartoonists of the 1930s and 1940s in the same "double avoidance conflict" that their counterparts of the 1970s apparently experienced, where depicting fathers as competent would violate what they were used to doing, while depicting fathers as incompetent would violate the new ideal.

Another possibility, related to the above, is

that changing childrearing expectations, with the 1920s being a decade in which scheduling was emphasized and the 1930s being more "permissive" (Margolis, 1984), helped move the ideology of fatherhood away from traditional notions of what fathers can and should do, which, in turn, helped to shape cartoonists' renderings. In other words, the fact that parents in the 1930s and 1940s were being told to adapt to their children rather than vice versa may have "softened" father-child relations in the minds of the public—and the cartoonists.

A third, more conflict-theoretical explanation for the convergence is that, although fathers were the parents being depicted as incompetent in the cartoons of the 1920s, the real targets of the cartoonists may have been the social movements of the 1920s, and in particular the women's movement. Since the publisher of the cartoons was the conservative *Saturday Evening Post* and the cartoonists were almost always—if not always—men, the intent may have been to poke fun at a society which, in their opinion, had lost its gender compass. If, through the cartoons, people could be made to see how foolish fathers and husbands had become under the new system, perhaps everyone "would come to their senses" and "return to their proper place." As for the shift of the 1930s and 1940s, it generally is recognized that the Great Depression and World War II temporarily put the brakes on the women's movement of the 1920s and before (see Filene, 1986; Wandersee, 1981). Thus, the perceived need to defend traditional norms and values may have dissipated during this time, so that some cartoonists and editors put down their "swords."

The bottom line is that, because we really do not know enough at present about the forces that have shaped American fatherhood, our speculations as to why the image of the 20th century American father changed must be seen for what they are—hypotheses in need of testing. The evidence does seem clear, however, that the contours of 20th century American fatherhood are more complex than previously supposed and that the challenge facing future researchers is to try to understand not only "why" but also "how" fatherhood has changed. What Day and Mackey (1986) started, we have tried to continue. But for historians of fatherhood there is still much work to be done.

## NOTES

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1. If the object of the cartoon was clearly political (e.g., if the figures in the cartoon represented politicians, political parties, or countries), the cartoon was not included in the sample. Cartoons that were deemed to have a "family theme" pictured one or more family members doing or saying something family-related (e.g., a mother taking her son to the grocery store would qualify, while two children swimming who make no reference to family members would not). In a few cases, animals were used to represent family members. If these cartoons were deemed to have a "family theme," they, too, were included.
2. The percentage of cartoons in which the coders agreed on both the "father incompetent" and "mother incompetent" question did not vary much over the three time periods studied. Coders' judgments were in agreement on 70% of the cartoons from the 1920s, 62% for the cartoons of the 1930s, and 63% of the 1940s cartoons.

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