

Ageing in American Comic Strips: 1972–1992

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ABSTRACT

A comparison between humour and ageing from the 1970s to the 1990s and findings from a historical study of how American artists portray older adults showed what appears to be little change in stereotypical representations of older people in one of the most widely read forms of humour in American popular culture, the comic strip. Variables were age, gender, and roles of people 56 years and over in strips published in the *Washington Post* during April of 1972, 1977, 1982, 1987, and 1992.

The number of older characters in American comic strips declined in the last ten years of the study. Men were more frequently represented than women. Women were almost equal to men in strong, positive roles despite the fact that they were represented 870 times and men 1511 times. Most women were portrayed in either positive or negative roles while a quarter of men were portrayed in indeterminate roles. The negative roles of women were double those of positive or strong roles, while the number of negative roles for men was three times the number of positive roles.

KEY WORDS – Humour, stereotypes, popular media

Introduction

Humour has been shown to be a constant part of life (Frechnall 1994) and to enhance enjoyment of life experiences (Martin *et al.* 1993). There is a significant relationship between the use of humour, high personal morale and a positive perceived health status (Simon 1990). A similar finding has been found between humour and generativity (Hampes 1993). It is also thought that humour serves as a mechanism to reduce anxiety and tension about emotional topics as well as subjects related to prejudice, reference groups, and social background (Johnson 1990).

When looking at comics, however, some researchers see a different

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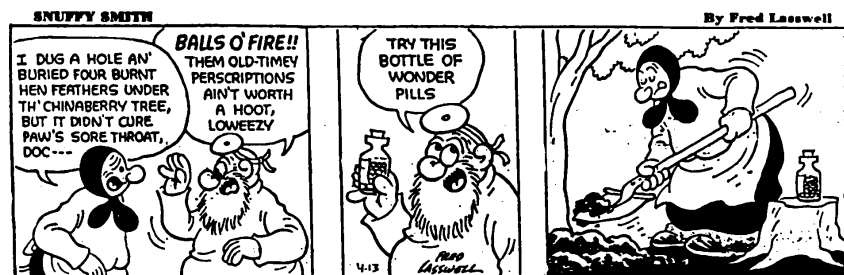


Figure 1. Comic strip. Fred Lasswell, Artist. 4-13-1972. *Snuffy Smith* reprinted by permission of King Features Syndicate.

message in the humour, especially when studying older people. Palmore, for instance, believes that the evidence of widespread ageism in our culture is abundant, including negative stereotypes and attitudes in cartoon art. He cited research which concluded that the infrequency of older people 'in cartoons and the tendency toward a negative view of elders... provided further documentation of the pervasive ageism in our society' (Palmore 1971:110).

Since comics in America are a major communication device for popular humour, how often are older people actually portrayed in this medium? If humour has both positive and negative effects, how do comic strip images reflect the experiences and lives of older persons or act as a reflection of ageism? First, a look at common terminology and its implications.

Ageism is generally defined as a dislike of ageing and older people based on the belief that ageing makes people unattractive, unintelligent, asexual, unemployable and senile (Atchley 1991). Such beliefs are probably not widespread on an individual basis, but many American adults hold some degree of prejudice based on these mistaken ideas. The tendency to treat older people as if they were dependent children, the practice of infantilisation, is held to be common and can be met by either resistance or acceptance by older people (Hepworth 1996). Both the beliefs and the practices become harmful, as people tend to act on the prejudices which then lead to discrimination against older people. Age discrimination can be seen in areas such as employment practices, unequal treatment by public agencies, and unequal opportunities in organisations.

Ageism is illustrated through the portrayal of older people as unattractive, asexual, or in failing mental or physical health. Those subscribing to such stereotypes are most likely to perceive older persons as helpless and needing multiple support services, even if these services

reduce the participant's freedom to make their own decisions (Kalish 1979). Ageist stereotypes are spread through our language, public media, and public policy.

Figure 1 contains three of the basic stereotypes readers often take for granted when characters are older. Here, the artist, Fred Lasswell, enjoyed poking fun at folk medicine while visually depicting Loweezy and Doc as unattractive, out-of-touch, and most likely not very intelligent rural folk. Loweezy, the woman who seems to be not as old as Doc, is particularly frumpy. The joke implies that she is so stupid that she thinks Doc has instructed her to bury the bottle of wonder pills. She is representative of many other unattractive older female characters.

Review of the literature

A number of studies describing attitudes toward ageing as portrayed in humour were reported in the 1970s. Palmore (1986), Richman (1977), and Davies (1977) did content analyses of jokes. The findings in each instance revealed a negative view of older people, with the view of women being more negative than that of men. Smith's (1979) analysis of cartoons revealed the under-representation of older individuals. However, in the majority of cartoons analysed, older individuals were neither praised nor slighted, but rather were portrayed in neutral roles. In analyses of birthday cards, Dillon and Jones (1981) reported that 27 per cent of the cards analysed had an ageing theme. The majority of the themes focused on losses such as failing senses. The researchers stated that most cards were bought by individuals in their twenties and thirties and speculated that this was because they were starting to have thoughts about their own ageing. In a similar study, Demos and Jache (1981) reported a slightly higher percentage (39 per cent) of birthday cards having an ageing theme. They found that the vast majority (129 cards of a total of 195) of birthday cards having ageing themes were judged as portraying mixed messages that had either ambiguous elements of positive and negative, or clearly neutral, messages.

While Figure 2 is one of Jim Berry's gentle drawings of older people in relatively realistic roles, Fred Lasswell, in Figure 3, continues the popular Snuffy Smith characterisation as an older, lazy, alcoholic, and generally no-good husband. In this strip, published only one day before Figure 1, Loweezy is not quite as frumpy, and Lem, the near-sighted neighbour and abused husband, looks fit and healthy by Lasswell's standards.

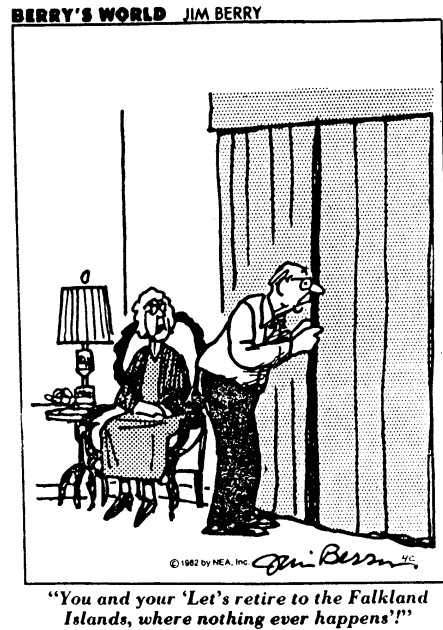


Figure 2. Cartoon panel. Jim Berry, Artist. 4-23-1982. *Berry's World* reprinted by permission of Newspaper Enterprise Association, Inc.



Figure 3. Comic strip. Fred Lasswell, Artist. 4-12-1972. *Snuffy Smith* reprinted by permission of King Features Syndicate.

Challenging the underlying assumption of previous studies that humour is an indication of ageist attitudes were studies by Sheppard (1981) and Kelly *et al.* (1987). In these studies, cartoons and humorous birthday cards of older individuals were analysed for their psychological responses. In both studies, no significant correlations were found between ageist humour and attitudes on the one hand and perceptions of older individuals on the other.

Methodology

Sample and background

This study identified characters and animals drawn by comic strip artists in the *Washington Post's* daily and Sunday comic strips for the month of April every five years from 1972 to 1992 with $n = 24,437$ when all five samples were tallied and combined. The *Post* was selected because of its geographical location in a major governmental centre and its wide ethnic and social range of readers. This newspaper has a long and prestigious history in the world of comic strip humour and is linked to a comic strip syndicate, the Washington Post Writers' Group.

The study was designed using current vocabulary and query methods with the intention of monitoring changes in American society over time as depicted in comic strips.¹

Procedure

The data were compiled, analysed, and evaluated by independent judges who were asked to place the images into four categories: ethnicity, age, gender, and role. When unable to identify a specific variable, the raters placed that image in a category called 'other'. When identifying comic strip characters by societal roles, three categories were used. If the person was in a leadership or dominant position during the 30-day period studied, that character was identified with a + sign for a positive, strong role. If rated with a – sign, the character's role was judged to be negative or weak. When the raters could not determine a specific role or the character demonstrated mixed role models, the symbol assigned the character was an o for indeterminate.

Although the raters of the study changed over the years, they were all college-educated in the field of visual arts and received the same instructions for evaluation throughout the twenty-year period. Rater groups were consistently in agreement except for the last collection period, when the definition of female/male roles became more difficult to define.

Significance

Comic strips are a valid focus of study because: (1) they have appeared in publications and have been read by a huge audience since the early 1900s; and (2) they provide a medium which can unintentionally reflect a particular social group's place in society and culture.

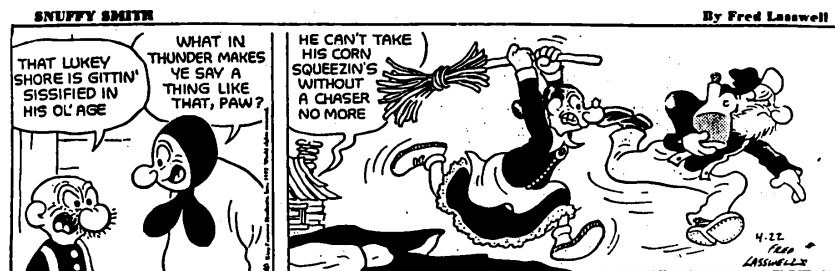


Figure 4. Comic strip. Fred Lasswell, Artist. 4-22-1972. *Snuffy Smith* reprinted by permission of King Features Syndicate.



Figure 5. Cartoon panel. Jim Berry, Artist. 4-6-1982. *Berry's World* reprinted by permission of Newspaper Enterprise Association, Inc.

While not evident at the inception of the study, there now appear to be distinctly different interpretations among researchers of the representation of older people in popular culture illustrations and specifically in comic strips. This difference in perceptions is represented by two groups of researchers, the first of whom have been publishing their findings since the late 1970s. This first group cited instances of older people being represented in negative, demeaning, and violent roles and situations (Richman 1977; Davies 1977; Smith 1979;

Burnside 1988). An example of domestic violence in the comic strips can be seen in Figure 4. Corn squeezings and their repercussions are a common theme in the Lasswell strip, but it is not usually women who enact the violence. This 1972 comic strip is mild compared with examples of violence drawn more recently. One particularly negative depiction of women as ugly and violent can be seen in the *Ernie* strips by artist Bud Grace. Other current examples of women in these roles can be seen in *The Wizard of Id* by Brant Parker and Johnny Hart and *Blondie* by Dean Young and Stan Drake.

Conclusions about the impact of this type of negative communication through the imagery in comics do not agree with those of a second, more recent group of researchers. Frechnall and Simon (1990, 1994), for instance, see comic strip messages to be a healthy, positive and common part of everyday life for older people. While it is not clear if the development of these two distinctly different perceptions is important to future research in the field, further study is indicated.

Results and discussion

Frequencies of appearance

Isolating gender data about older adults from the larger data pool created by the study produced the following results. First, Table 1 identifies the frequency of appearance of older adults by gender and supports Smith's (1979) findings.

In 1977, the year in which the greatest number of characters over 56 years of age were drawn, older adults accounted for 11.2 per cent of the total of characters identified by the judges (Table 2). This figure corresponds with the percentage of the population aged over 65 (9.8) at that time. However, as the older population rose to 12.7 per cent in 1990, the frequency in cartoons dropped to 8.5 per cent (Burnside 1988). While, according to these figures, the frequency of appearances of older adults in comic strip art has decreased, awareness of the significance of ageism in America is evident in reports about writers and cartoonists currently working in the media. In 1988, John Baron, formerly a city editor for the *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver), in addressing members of the American Editorial Cartoonists Association said: 'I think the aging of America is the largest single news story you're going to be concerned about in your careers' (Astor 1988: 36). He cited major newspapers and magazines which were devoting significant space to age-related topics, stating: 'Coverage [of the ageing of America] used to be nonexistent or sporadic [but the importance of

TABLE 1. *Depiction of older characters in cartoon strips by gender*

	Older female	Older male	Others	Total
Per cent	3.5	6.4	90.2	100.0
Total	845	1,557	22,035	24,437

TABLE 2. *Age of characters by year, compared with the general population*

Year	Total N of characters	N of older characters	Per cent	Per cent of general population aged 65+
1972	5829	633	10.9	9.8 (1970)
1977	6921	775	11.2	
1982	3745	408	10.9	11.3 (1980)
1987	3804	234	6.2	
1992	4138	352	8.5	12.7 (1990)



Figure 6. Comic strip. Allan Saunders and Bill Ziegler, Artists. 4-28-29-1992. *Mary Worth* reprinted by permission of King Features Syndicate.

TABLE 3. *Comic strips in which more than 10 per cent of characters are older*

Strip	Years	Older characters		Total N of characters
		%	N	
Archie	1992, 1977	10.9	23	211
Berry's World	1982	30.6	15	49
Bloom County	1982, 1987	20.8	21	101
Broom Hilda	all	19.2	81	411
Casey	1977	12.1	16	132
Dennis the Menace	all	14.4	66	457
Ernie	1992	31.5	34	108
Far Side	1982, 1987, 1992	19.7	39	198
Ferdinand	1972	22.2	4	18
Goosemyer	1982	55.6	25	45
Grin and Bear It	1972, 1977, 1982, 1987	26.0	245	944
Herman	1982, 1987, 1992	47.6	98	206
Kudzu	1982, 1987, 1992	11.4	24	210
Little Abner	1972	19.6	63	322
Mark Trail	all	12.2	55	452
Mary Worth	all	32.1	204	635
Momma	all	27.9	135	484
Moon Mullins	1972, 1977	40.8	156	382
Mother Goose and Grimm	1987, 1992	33.3	20	60
Muppets	1982	10.4	8	77
Non Sequitor	1982	13.0	8	77
Outland	1992	33.3	1	3
Ripley's Believe It or Not	1972, 1977, 1982, 1987	12.5	15	120
Sesame Street	1972	46.7	7	15
Snuffy Smith	all	40.3	222	551
Wizzard of Id	1982, 1987, 1992	12.3	27	219
Wordsmith	1977	21.4	45	210

this 'shift' is starting to get through to the 'baby boomers' who are 'the gatekeepers of the media.'" (Astor 1988: 36).

Comic strip artists who regularly feature older adult characters

For those interested in the study of comics as an art form, there are some American comic strip artists who draw older adults more frequently than their colleagues. Of the eighty-eight comic strips studied in this twenty-year period, twenty-seven artists were found to include older adults in 10 per cent or more of all characters (Table 3). Figure 6, a two-day example of *Mary Worth* by Saunders and Ziegler, is one of the longest, female-titled American comic strips still being produced. The other is *Blondie*. Over the years, both women have often taken a back seat to men in the characterisation, while always maintaining positive roles. Interestingly, this 1992 example of *Mary*

TABLE 4. *Societal roles by gender and year*

Year	Female				Male			
	–	o	+	N	–	o	+	N
1972	218	10	66	294	193	60	40	293
1977	282	2	66	350	343	82	45	470
1982	11	16	50	77	107	122	82	311
1987	10	12	27	49	92	48	36	176
1992	26	29	45	100	118	83	60	261
N	547	69	254	870	953	395	263	1511
Per cent	62.9	7.9	29.2	100.0	56.6	26.1	17.4	100.0

illustrates a strong, verbal, older woman acting out a strong role in the plot to correct the young man's behaviour. Mary's eternal character as counsellor, listener and friend is her trademark, just as housekeeping and shopping are key aspects of the younger Blondie character.

Nineteen out of eighty-eight strips were found to have no characters in the older adult category represented during the periods studied.

Societal roles by gender and type

Table 4 is a report of the findings of societal roles by gender drawn for the older adults studied.

Throughout the twenty-year study, men were more frequently represented than women. There was an almost equal number of women represented in strong, positive roles as men, though proportionately almost twice as many women as men were represented in strong roles. Most women were portrayed in either positive or negative roles, while a much higher proportion of men – over a quarter – were portrayed in indeterminate roles. The proportion of negative roles for women was double that of positive or strong roles. However, the number of negative roles for men was three times the number of positive roles.

Conclusions

The large numbers of negative portrayals of older men and women in comic strips and the almost dichotomous portrayal of older women in either positive or negative roles lend support to the thesis that this form

of communication supports ageism and has the potential to promote stereotypes of ageing. However, this has been partially offset in recent years, by the increasing number of positive roles portraying older women and the decreasing number of negative roles portraying men. In addition, American comic strip drawings of older people have declined in the final ten years (1982–1992) of the study. This last finding was unexpected; one would assume that both public concern about the ageing of the population and the increase in population of older adults through this period, especially in the 1990s, would be reflected in current popular art forms. Why this decline in representation has occurred is not clear in the literature reviewed.

Researchers believe humour to be a positive coping mechanism to deal with life stressors and to relieve anxiety and tension (Simon 1990; Johnson 1990). Those with greater levels of humour have a more positive affect in response to both positive and negative life events (Martin *et al.* 1993). People tend to joke about those issues which are feared or unpleasant in order to help gain control over the fear while providing a safe outlet (Stevenson 1993). In these cases, laughter provides a distancing, a release of tension, and relief (Johnson 1990). Humour acts as a safety valve to release hostility and anger in a socially acceptable manner (Simon 1990) and permits vocalisation of difficult ideas and emotions such as thoughts of growing old (Johnson 1990).

However, a decreasing depiction of older people in comic strips could be an indication that society is changing its views toward ageing. On the one hand it is possible that ageing is less frequently seen as a life occurrence or transition to be feared or avoided. The very use of humour, such as in comic strips, may have made the reality more palatable. On the other hand, the decline of older characters in comic drawings may also have something to do with editorial policy and a desire not to offend a growing proportion of the readership, older readers. This, together with increasing awareness of ageism among those who draw, produce and edit cartoon drawings, may have strengthened the hand of those who wish to avoid the humorous treatment of ‘sensitive’ subjects in the popular media.

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NOTE

- 1 Early categories or terms such as race, white, black, and Oriental were changed to ethnicity, Caucasian, African-American, and Asian-Hispanic, for instance, and the term sex was changed to gender. While causing minor problems with final totals in ethnic categories, the researchers believe that the sum of the frequencies in these groups where Asians, Orientals, and Hispanics were tallied together to be so low as not to be significant enough to alter the findings.