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EXPLORING *CALVIN AND HOBBS*: COMIC STRIP ILLUMINATES  
ISSUES SURROUNDING FAMILY RECREATION

by

Christijan D. Draper

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

Department of Recreation Management and Youth Leadership

Brigham Young University

August 2009



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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Christijan D. Draper

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Christijan D. Draper in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## ABSTRACT

### EXPLORING *CALVIN AND HOBBS*: COMIC STRIP ILLUMINATES ISSUES SURROUNDING FAMILY RECREATION

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Master of Science

The purpose of this study was to inductively examine the content of the popular comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes* by analyzing its latent and subjective meaning to discover basic social psychological issues associated with family recreation. The entire collection of 1,360 *Calvin and Hobbes* strips was evaluated using Grounded Theory techniques influenced by the art scholarship evaluation tool iconography. Review of the strip suggests one way to assess the meaning associated with time use is through preemptive retrospection by which a person looks at current experiences through the lens of an anticipated future to estimate how meaningful that time will be. Overall, *Calvin and Hobbes* suggests that meaningful time use is a key attribute of a life well lived. One key element of meaningful time use is time spent with family. The strip also helps us see the value in continuing to seek that meaning with family despite apparent setbacks. This analysis brought to light issues associated with gathering meaning from comic strips, which are also discussed. Recommendations are made for future research in the field.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Exploring *Calvin and Hobbes*: Comic Strip Illuminates

Issues Surrounding Family Recreation

Christijan D. Draper

## 2 Calvin and Hobbes

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to inductively examine the content of the popular comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes* by analyzing its latent and subjective meaning to discover basic social psychological issues associated with family recreation. The entire collection of 1,360 *Calvin and Hobbes* strips was evaluated using Grounded Theory techniques influenced by the art scholarship evaluation tool iconography. Review of the strip suggests one way to assess the meaning associated with time use is through preemptive retrospection by which a person looks at current experiences through the lens of an anticipated future to estimate how meaningful that time will be. Overall, *Calvin and Hobbes* suggests that meaningful time use is a key attribute of a life well lived. One key element of meaningful time use is time spent with family. The strip also helps us see the value in continuing to seek that meaning with family despite apparent setbacks. This analysis brought to light issues associated with gathering meaning from comic strips, which are also discussed. Recommendations are made for future research in the field.

Key Words: Grounded theory, iconography, comic strip, Bill Watterson, family recreation, time use

## Introduction

In concluding his assessment of the state of family recreation research, John Kelly (1997) urged family recreation researchers to pay attention to the seemingly mundane aspects of family recreation.

Life is not composed of theme parks and cruises. It is composed of dinnertable talk, vacations together, getting the home and yard in shape, kidding around, caring for each other, goofing off, dreaming, and all the minutiae of the day and the hour. That is the real life in real conditions that is important to us all. (p. 134)

Researchers have been exploring these concepts as they relate to the family since the early 20th Century (Hawks, 1991); yet, some scholars suggest there still remains much to be understood about the problems and issues surrounding family recreation (Hawks; Orthner & Mancini, 1991).

For decades, researchers have addressed many facets of family recreation and in myriad ways. Hawks (1991) reviewed literature of major, systematic studies on family recreation issues from the 1930s to the late 1980s. His review included many studies suggesting positive relationships between recreation and marital satisfaction and family cohesiveness and stability. Similarly, Orthner and Mancini (1991) assessed the findings of recent family recreation research and categorized some of the general trends, including studies that supported the relationship between recreation and positive family outcomes. There has long been an assumption of the importance of recreation for families with some empirical data to support it.

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Despite this, Hawks (1991) and Orthner and Mancini (1991) suggested that the relationship was not without its ambiguities. Orthner and Mancini stated that “much more work is needed to clarify the benefits that leisure experiences have for family bonds” (p. 297). Among other things, the authors of both articles called for additional qualitative analyses to bolster family recreation research. Orthner and Mancini said such qualitative studies would help lead to additional theoretical work in the family recreation research arena. More recently, Henderson, Presley, and Bialeschki (2004) assessed the theoretical contributions to the general body of recreation research in the late 1990s. They noted an increase in theoretically based studies, but still called for additional theory development and use by recreation scholars.

As noted above, qualitative studies offer a stepping stone toward theory development; yet, such studies are often difficult to conduct, especially when the concept in question “cannot be adequately understood outside of its natural setting” (Orthner & Mancini, 1991, p. 297). Observational studies in a recreation setting can be time consuming and fraught with complexities and logistical concerns.

One source of data that has not been used by recreation scholars, but which can illuminate our understanding of the workings of a family is comic strips. In some ways, many comic strip artists approach their work very similarly to a qualitative researcher. They observe life going on around them, in some cases “exploiting every waking moment for strip ideas” (Watterson, 1995, p. 208). They systematically observe and record their observations, seeking to distill some element that will ring true, or at least funny, as they translate their observations into words and pictures for thousands of readers every day. As

a result, comics contain depictions of life that offer insights into the way humans operate and interact with each other.

Perhaps recognizing this, scholars have used comics in social research. Some of the topics researchers have studied using newspaper comics include the depictions of fathers (LaRossa, Gordon, Wilson, Bairan, & Jaret, 1991; LaRossa, Jaret, Gadgil, & Wynn, 2000), health-related content (Gower, 1995), race and social status (Brabant & Mooney, 1999), sex-roles (Brabant, 1976), and religion (Lindsey & Heeren, 1992).

In addition to the above topics, numerous comic strips depict families and their interactions as the focus of the strip. For example, *Calvin and Hobbes*, one of the most popular comic strips in recent years (Astor, 1995), is centered around a family consisting of a little boy, with an imaginary tiger as a friend, and the boy's parents. Their interactions, including numerous references to family recreation, are playfully depicted by Bill Watterson, the author and artist behind *Calvin and Hobbes*, in a way that appealed to an enormous readership. Watterson's comic strip was syndicated in more than 2,400 newspapers around the world (Astor). Watterson's comic strip reached millions every day during its life span. More than 30 million of Watterson's books are in circulation. Though Watterson discontinued writing and drawing the strip in 1995, United Press Syndicate still sells *Calvin and Hobbes* to countries outside of North America and there it enjoys international circulation in 265 newspapers (K. Kerr, personal communication, July 24, 2008). His popularity as a syndicated comic strip artist suggests he was able to reflect, in a humorous manner, broadly held attitudes toward family life in the last few decades of the twentieth century.

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Although comic strips have been mined for insights into myriad social behaviors of humankind, no one has yet used comic strips to study the issues surrounding family recreation. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to inductively examine the content of the popular comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes* by analyzing its latent and subjective meaning to discover “core social psychological problems and processes” (Glaser, 1978, p. 16) associated with family recreation.

### Review of Literature

Glaser and Holton (2004) suggest that a literature review not be undertaken prior to conducting a grounded theory project in order to avoid a preconditioning effect on the researcher. Nevertheless, it seemed prudent to do at least a cursory review of family recreation literature to give a context for the value of this study. Additionally, a review was conducted to determine ways to approach research using comic strips as data. Lastly, evidence was gathered to support the oeuvre of Bill Watterson as good source material for this project.

### *Family Recreation Research*

The benefits of family recreation have been touted and studied since at least the 1930s (Hawks, 1991) with researchers’ interest primarily focusing on how and where families recreate (e.g. Burch, 1965; Burr, 1970; Kahn, 1997) as well as on the constraints to recreation faced by some families (e.g. Shaw, 1992, 1994; Shaw, Bonen, & McCabe, 1991). Furthermore, others have theorized on the benefits or effects of family recreation and have striven to test their theories (e.g. Orthner, 1975, 1976; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001). But, as in most social sciences, research in family recreation is not without

weaknesses (Hawks, 1991; Holman & Epperson, 1984; Orthner & Mancini, 1991). For instance, Holman and Epperson (1984) decried a dearth of theoretically based research and called for more systematic and stringent research methodologies. Kelly (1997) suggested there was room for expanded research beyond single issues because “nothing – not even sexuality, gender, class, or ethnicity – accounts for everything significant” (p. 134). Additionally, Orthner and Mancini (1991) called for more qualitative studies of family recreation to help discover the “meaning that is attached to spending time with one’s family” (p. 298).

There have been a few recent family recreation studies that have approached family recreation qualitatively; yet, most seemed to be very focused on single issues as mentioned by Kelly (1997). Some have focused on certain kinds of families. Mactavish and Schleien (2000, 2004), for instance, used mixed methods to determine what sort of activities were most popular among families with a child with a disability and to “explore the nature and benefits of, and constraints to” (2004, p. 123) those families’ participation in the activities. Other researchers have explored the meaning of family recreation for various individuals within the family unit. Shaw and Dawson (2001) explored the attitudes of *parents* toward recreation. Their research led them to coin the term “purposive leisure” (p. 228), which they said cast doubt on the concept of family recreation as being (a) freely chosen or (b) intrinsically motivated. Another group studied individually married women. Freeman, Palmer, and Baker (2006), for instance, examined the recreation perspectives of married, stay-at-home mothers who were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and found that these



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women's leisure perceptions ran counter to the prevailing image of wives and mothers who are constrained in their leisure. Other studies have looked at families in certain specific situations. For example, Palmer, Freeman, and Zabriskie (2007), recently developed a concept called "family deepening" (p. 2) through examining families that spent time in voluntary service expeditions. Another study (DeVault, 2000) consisted of the observation of families at the zoo. In that study, the researchers explored the nature of family "outings" (p. 488) and how they contribute to and illustrate parenting and the behaviors parents engage in to manage those activities.

These studies have provided valuable insight and, in some cases, have likely advanced family recreation theory; but, there has still been a lack of qualitative studies that address family recreation in a more general way and in view of the family as a whole. Holman and Epperson (1984) suggest that research that is not "a clear step to creating testable, theoretical propositions is of negligible value" (p. 291). This study has the potential to be a building block in the pursuit of family recreation theory.

### *Generating Theory*

It is important to understand why theory development is important for recreation research and to acknowledge how this project can contribute in that regard. Henderson et al. (2004) said that "theory is critical for an evolving body of knowledge" (p. 412). They also suggested that, while theory is a difficult term to define, it is generally developed systematically from evidence and observation as a way to explain human behaviors. Henderson et al. also described theory as being extant in different scopes, from grand theories of big ideas to theories that are focused on a very narrow concept. They said

most theories used in the recreation field are “middle range theories” (p. 412) of modest scope. They suggest that acknowledging there may not be one grand, overarching theory could lead to unique approaches to research that will lead to “deeper social analyses” (p. 422), which could “open the door for greater exploration of the many building blocks of theory” (p. 422).

One approach to theory development suggested by Henderson et al. (2004) as being useful for understanding the context of recreation in research is *grounded theory*. Glaser (1978), a co-founder of the grounded theory process, suggests that theory should develop as a researcher collects and constantly compares data. The process uses coding as a way to give the researcher a more abstract view of the data. The data are further conceptualized using theoretical codes that give “integrative scope, broad pictures, and a new perspective” to the data (Glaser & Holton, 2004, p. 12). As codes emerge from the data regarding “core social psychological problems” (Glaser, p. 16), additional data are sought out based on those codes in a process called *theoretical sampling*. In theoretical sampling, the researcher will seek out data based on the concepts emerging from the data he or she has been reviewing. The researcher continues constant comparison between the original data and the theoretically sampled data. Glaser says that researchers continue this process until a state of saturation develops where the constant comparison between original and theoretically sampled data begins to yield diminishing returns. At this point, memos taken all along the coding process are sorted into theoretical frameworks (based on the theoretical codes), which are like outlines for the thematic explanations associated with the overarching social psychological problem or process being explicated. This

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process produces additional memos to be added to the sorting (Glaser, p. 16). The end result of this data-collection, analysis, and sorting process is a theory that is grounded in data or that emerges from the data.

### *Comics as Data*

Popular culture has long been a window through which human beings have been able to observe truths about themselves. Art, music, film, and literature have all been studied extensively to help build the understanding of humanity and culture. Giarelli and Tulman (2003) call comic strips an important part of this social discourse (p. 954). Comics, though sometimes viewed as trite and silly, are “as legitimate a part of the culture of this country as the poetry, paintings, novels, and plays by Americans that brought the nation the respect of the world in the first half of [the 20th] century” (Waugh, 1947, p. xiii). While seemingly simple, the text, characters, and images of a comic strip “can combine in complex ways, as atoms become molecules and molecules become life ....great power is locked in these few simple lines” (McCloud, 1994, p. 45.)

Watterson (1995) suggests that the comic strip art form has the potential to lead us to a sort of broad introspection:

The best comics expose human nature and help us laugh at our own stupidity and hypocrisy. They indulge in exaggeration and absurdity, helping us to see the world with fresh eyes and reminding us how important it is to play and be silly. Comics depict the ordinary, mundane events of our lives and help us remember the importance of tiny moments. They cleverly sum up our unexpressed thoughts and emotions. Sometimes they show the world from the perspective of children and

animals, encouraging us to be innocent for a moment. The best comics, that is to say, are fun house mirrors that distort appearances only to help us recognize, and laugh at, our essential characteristics. (p. 207)

Although the comics may be viewed as a powerful form of communication and an important facet of human culture, they also may be considered a valuable source of information for social scientists. Harrison (1981) suggests that cartoonists create a comfortable environment, “a world of fantasy” (p. 67) where readers go to be amused and find companionship. But in addition to the comfort and familiarity of the cartoon, Harrison argues that the cartoons of lasting value offer insight into the human life. While it is an art form not intended to necessarily depict reality, it is an art form that caricatures reality and by so doing distills for us the essence of what we are or what we do. Giarelli and Tulman (2003) concur that comics “can reveal common assumptions, dominant public values, and general public expectations” (p. 947).

Indeed scholars have acknowledged the power of the comic strip as a data source (Giarelli & Tulman, 2003; Kemnitz, 1973). Whereas, to date, it appears that no recreation researchers have utilized comic strips in any significant way as a source of data, comic strips have been used effectively in other social research. They have been utilized in researching issues such as gender and racial stereotypes (Glascock & Preston-Schreck, 2004; White & Fuentez, 1997), social influences (Banning, 1955), materialism (Belk, 1987), sex-roles (Brabant, 1976; Brabant & Mooney, 1997; LaRossa, Jaret, Gadgil, & Wynn, 2001), aging (Hanlon, Farnsworth, & Murray, 1997), health (Gower, 1995), and the “social construction of family life” (Brabant & Mooney, 1999, title). Methodological

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issues are even addressed by one author, who offers suggestions for the best use of comics as data (Giarelli & Tulman, 2003). The use of comics as research data may be sparse and developing, but it can certainly be considered a legitimate – even valuable – method of helping us understand human behavior. Comic strips show promise as founts of information that can potentially deepen and broaden our understanding of the complexities of family recreation.

### *The Potential Influence of Calvin and Hobbes*

Through newspaper syndication, some comics have the power to reach millions of readers every day with whatever topic seems important – or amusing – to their authors. Very few comic strip artists have reached as large a daily newspaper audience as Bill Watterson. Watterson retired from his comic strip on December 31, 1995, as one of the most popular daily comics authors of all time (Barnes & Noble, n.d.). He had spent ten years in syndication during which he published 3,160 *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strips. At the height of Watterson's career, *Calvin and Hobbes* was syndicated in more than 2,400 daily and Sunday newspapers (K. Kerr, personal communication, July 18, 2008). In addition, the 17 published book collections of *Calvin and Hobbes* comics have sold more than 30 million copies (Barnes & Noble, n.d.). A three-volume, hard-bound collection of all *Calvin and Hobbes* comics, which was published in 2005, was a *New York Times* best seller. At \$150 for the collection, it became the most expensive book to ever make that list (Spiegelman, 2005).

Watterson's reach was not limited to the United States. The Universal Press Syndicate, which owns the copyright to *Calvin and Hobbes*, distributed it worldwide.

*Calvin and Hobbes* has been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, German, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Finnish, Russian, Polish, Hungarian, Slavic, Romanian, Bulgarian, Turkish, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Hindi, Hebrew, and Arabic (K. Kerr, Personal Communication, July 28, 2008). Through *Calvin and Hobbes*, Watterson somehow managed to resonate with a broad audience, both young and old and of a variety of cultures.

This popularity has not gone unnoticed in academic circles. Scholars have used *Calvin and Hobbes* in published and unpublished research covering a variety of topics. Bèda (1996) used *Calvin and Hobbes* as a basis for making an argument that comic art is a form of medicine that embraces its role as social commentary and as entertainment to combat a “secular, materialistic, and linear world image” (p. 9). Spicer (2000) explored theological issues using *Calvin and Hobbes* as a launching point for her consideration. In a related study, Coleman (2000) analyzed the strip to determine underlying messages about morality and the ethics of modern society. She concluded that Watterson used Calvin’s family to reflect culture, but also to “critique the culture by slyly undermining the accepted morality of that culture” (p. 27). Coleman also said that Watterson’s intelligent and creative use of the medium demonstrated the comic strip’s potential for engaging in sophisticated discussion of social issues. Similarly, Spitz (1993), in expounding on the “postmodern and psychoanalytic perspectives” (p. 55) of *Calvin and Hobbes*, suggested that comics can serve simultaneously as a window to current social mores and as “implicit and explicit platforms from which to critique them” (p. 55). In addition, Swanbom (2006) used *Calvin and Hobbes* to argue that comic strips are a

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powerful rhetorical medium. She argued that Watterson's work was a "pure example of how popular success and rhetorical seriousness may coexist" (p. vi) in a comic strip.

Although Watterson and comic strips in general have begun to garner scholarly support, perhaps Watterson's own view of the medium carries more weight for this examination. Watterson (1995) published many of his thoughts regarding cartooning in a book printed to mark the ten-year anniversary of *Calvin and Hobbes*' syndication. He suggested that the comic strip is a significant art form that has the power to "express truths – to reveal and help us understand our world" (p. 207). He further stated that "nothing depresses me like thinking I've become a joke factory to fill newspaper space. Whenever possible, I use the strip to talk about the things that are important to me" (p. 207). Through *Calvin and Hobbes*, Watterson addressed such topics as death, robbery, school, organized sports, bullying, family conflict, and family bonding.

Although Watterson had an apparent ability to tap into the zeitgeist, he actually showed dissident tendencies against mainstream pop culture and used his art to attack or satirize broad-reaching human tendencies. That being the case, it is valuable to consider Watterson's world view and belief system as much as is possible to gain an understanding of the origin of his messages in the strip.

Watterson valued his privacy and anonymity. When his strip began to grow in popularity, thus thrusting him in the public eye, Watterson moved with his wife to New Mexico from Ohio and got an unlisted number (Watterson, 2005). His reticence to participate in interviews for news or other organizations leaves us with only a little information by which to understand his views and personality. Yet, his writings,

published with a few of the book collections, serve to provide enough essentials to get a glimpse of the artist.

One of the first things to consider in this regard is Watterson's disregard for pop culture and its associated materialism. This is perhaps best illustrated by his view toward merchandising *Calvin and Hobbes*. To the syndicates, through which most newspaper comics are sold, a successful comic is one that leads to ever-increasing sales of merchandise based on the strip (Witek, 1992). The syndicate, as a business, tends to take little interest in artistic aesthetics or narrative (Witek). Watterson refused to license his creation for merchandizing (Watterson, 1995, 2005), effectively giving up "immense wealth" (2005, p. 14) in favor of having greater control over the strip. He said he felt the licensing would cheapen and weaken what he had to say through his strip and was prepared to quit over the issue five years into the strip's run (Watterson, 1995). Watterson described the fight as bitter and drawn-out. Eventually he won over the syndicate and prevented the development of merchandise based on *Calvin and Hobbes* (Watterson).

Witek (1992) echoes Watterson's opinion that licensing limits a comic strip's ability to communicate valuable truths. Witek suggests that for comics to be seen as a "medium of communication and expression" (p. 76), as opposed to a "juvenile and commercial genre" (p. 76), the creator must be able to "retain artistic and editorial freedom" (p. 76). Watterson was able to do so. Despite the dearth of marketing, *Calvin and Hobbes* grew in popularity, reach, and influence on the merits of the strip alone.

Some of Watterson's writing provides insight into his view of the value and meaning he places on things like recreation and family. For instance, speaking at a



commencement ceremony at his alma mater, Kenyon College, Watterson (1990) addressed how recreation and playfulness are an important part of what adds meaning to life. But, Watterson added an important caveat to the idea of finding meaning in recreation.

We're not really taught how to recreate constructively. We need to do more than find diversions; we need to restore and expand ourselves. Our idea of relaxing is all too often to plop down in front of the television set and let its pandering idiocy liquefy our brains. Shutting off the thought process is not rejuvenating; the mind is like a car battery—it recharges by running. (Watterson, n.p.)

Watterson suggests that play and rejuvenating recreation fall prey to a U.S. culture that “relentlessly promotes avarice and excess as the good life” (Watterson, 1990, n.p.). He says that in our capitalistic society the “desire for obscene profit mutes any discussion of conscience” (Watterson, n.p.). Materialism and commercialism can easily detract from meaning in life.

Watterson felt he could use his comic strip to “go beyond jokes and say something heartfelt, honest, or thoughtful” (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 1, p. 17-18). He borrowed from his childhood “sometimes straight out of the can, sometimes wildly fictionalized, and sometimes as a metaphor for my twenties and thirties” (p. 18) to flesh out the issues he cared about. Calvin’s and Hobbes’ “emotional centers” (Watterson, p. 13) reflected Watterson’s own, he said. “Hobbes got all my better qualities . . . , and Calvin got my ranting, escapist side” (Watterson, p. 13). Through the process, Watterson learned what

was important to him: “imagination, deep friendship, animals, family, the natural world, ideas, ideals ... and silliness” (p. 18).

### *About the Characters*

The title characters in the strip are Calvin, a six-year-old boy with tousled hair, and Hobbes, Calvin’s stuffed tiger. To Calvin, Hobbes is a living tiger who can walk and talk and play with him and who is his best friend. To the rest of the world, Hobbes appears inanimate, just an ordinary stuffed animal. Watterson goes out of his way to avoid addressing Hobbes’ dual nature in the strip. He simply operates under the premise that, to Calvin, Hobbes is really alive and to others he is really not. Calvin seems to be held up, in many instances, as a product of a modern culture Watterson seems to detest. His depiction of Calvin is often a satire on that society and most of the other characters in the strip serve to undermine that cultural depiction. They help the reader see the folly of Calvin’s behavior through the satire.

Calvin’s parents are depicted regularly in the strip, but are not named. They are “important only as Calvin’s mom and dad” (Watterson, 1995, p. 23). We predominately see Mom and Dad as they react to Calvin and his antics. In that respect, Watterson says, we don’t always see them at their best.

But, we do get to see occasional glimpses at the personalities and interests of Calvin’s parents. Dad is a patent attorney and is shown a number of times at work, preparing to go to work, or just arriving home. In addition, he is an avid cyclist and Watterson uses that hobby as a way to explore pastimes in general. Mom is a stay-at-home mother. In one strip, Calvin asks his dad why Mom doesn’t go to work. Dad says

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she used to go to work but that her job “had a lot of stress and aggravation,” to which Calvin replies, “and she wanted to quit?” Dad responds, “No, she’d gotten used to it, so we figured she should be the one to [stay home with Calvin]” (Vol. 2, p. 351). While she is shown dealing with the stresses and aggravation of staying home with Calvin, Mom also is shown participating in a variety of other activities that seem to flesh out her personality. She types, writes, reads, gardens, fixes up the house, sews, and prepares meals.

The family also appears to be white, middle-class, and living in the suburbs of a large midwestern city. While this family in some respects reflects the notion of a nuclear family, with both parents in the home, it should be noted that it is not meant to be depicted as an idyllic or perfect family. Watterson said that, early on, he received a lot of criticism for the sarcasm and conflict he depicted between his characters. The family members are flawed and imperfect. We see the parents frequently frustrated and impatient. But we also see evidence of love and mutual respect among the characters.

Most, if not all, of the characters shown in the strip are Caucasian. Some of the regularly appearing characters in the strip that concern us here are Susie, a neighbor girl who is in Calvin’s school class; Rosalyn, the only person willing to babysit Calvin; Max, Calvin’s uncle; and Miss Wormwood, Calvin’s first-grade teacher.

According to Watterson (1995), Calvin is not meant to be a literal six year old. He is a comic character that Watterson uses to explore life and its vicissitudes. At times Calvin speaks with a mind-boggling vocabulary (e.g. “inscrutable exhortations” (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 3, p. 353) “ontological quandary” (Watterson, p. 418)). At other

times he is depicted with a churlish, adolescent contempt for others much beyond the scope of what one would expect from the psyche of a typical six year old. Still other times, Calvin is shown as simple and vulnerable, a literal child facing a complex world.

Over the 10 years of the strip, none of the characters age. Observing a literal family over such time, one would expect to see individual growth and social development. But Calvin's family is trapped by this inability to learn from and adapt to past experiences. Calvin does not learn from his mistakes. He remains perpetually puerile and his parents are perennially afflicted by his penchant for making problems.

On the other hand, Watterson as artist and author exhibits growth as the strip progresses. The stories generally become more nuanced; the punch lines seem less glib; and Watterson appears to tackle more sensitive and meaningful topics as he becomes more comfortable with the characters and the medium. The pictures also become more grand and engaging.

One last thought to note in considering the results of this analysis is something Watterson brought attention to in a strip steeped in irony (Figure 1). Calvin is depicted reading a newspaper, which he brings to his father. He complains of the poor-quality people in the "funnies" (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 3, p. 344). "What kind of insidious social programming *is* this?! No wonder the world's such a mess! I demand politically correct, morally uplifting role models in the funnies!" His dad responds, "Yes, we all know how funny good role models are." Comics are a medium meant primarily to amuse and, that being so, artists must find the absurd or the ironic, or must exaggerate truths to highlight the incongruencies inherent in daily life in order to bring a smile or a laugh to their

reader. Yet, these comic strips still point to these truths and can help illuminate our society and our world.

Exploring those aspects of life is something Watterson excelled at. More than just words written in balloons and silly gags, his comics contain messages that attempt to reflect the reality of what it means to be human. Like Harrison (1981) suggests about the best comics, *Calvin and Hobbes* is “an integrated gestalt, where the whole is more than the sum of the verbal and nonverbal parts” (p. 85). By examining this gestaltic work, recreation scholarship will benefit from the seasoned and insightful observations of an artist devoted to the honest depiction of the human experience. This analysis showed that there is “treasure everywhere” (Watterson, 1996, p. 3), even if the treasure might seem to some to be “dirty rocks, a weird root, and some disgusting grubs” (Watterson, p. 3).

### Methods

In order to ensure that this project was rooted in the data, grounded theory methods of constant comparison and theoretical coding as described by Glaser and Holton (2004) were used on all the *Calvin and Hobbes* strips. Irrelevant strips were gradually weeded out, while the rest were re-evaluated as warranted by the process. This operation was guided by the concepts espoused by the art scholarship tool of iconography as explained below.

*Iconography.* Iconography relies on the layering of pictorial information (Leeuwen, 2001). Evaluation of artwork through iconography utilizes three aspects of the artwork to extract information, namely (1) representational meaning, (2) iconographical symbolism, and (3) iconological symbolism (Giarelli & Tulman, 2003). The first,

representational meaning, describes the primary subject matter – what is represented, what is going on, etc. The second layer of pictorial information, iconographical symbolism, looks for the ideas or concepts, attached to the representation (Giarelli & Tulman). For example, an image of a blindfolded woman holding scales represents justice, while wings attached to feet or shoes represents the god Mercury or speed. On the other hand, iconological symbolism, the final layer in iconography, focuses on the underlying principles that reveal the attitudes of a nation, period of history, class of people, religion, or philosophical persuasion (Giarelli & Tulman, 2003; Leeuwen, 2001). Leeuwen suggests that this third layer moves beyond the symbolic meanings and “accepted conventions” (p. 101) of which the artist might be aware and into the contextual aspects of his or her time, culture, and circumstances. It requires the researcher to analyze not only the artwork, but the context in which the image was created and/or published. With this third level of meaning in mind, the written words and depicted images were not the only source of data for the memos and codes. Watterson’s essays were consulted for additional insight to the meaning contained in the strips. In addition, current events or social trends were sought out and taken into consideration when evaluating the strips. Essentially, these three layers of iconographic meaning within the artwork became a guiding framework when coding and memoing the contents of *Calvin and Hobbes*.

#### *Procedure for Coding Comics*

Each of the 3,160 *Calvin and Hobbes* comics was read and numbered and entered into a database through a Web interface created for this project. Page numbers where the

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strip could be found in both the soft-cover collections and the three-volume complete set were also included in the database. As each strip was read, the depicted characters were entered into the database along with any codes that the researcher felt represented the concepts depicted or alluded to in the strip. Codes ranged from objects or locations (such as a *baseball* or *school*) to concepts or ideas (such as *boredom* or *building character*). Memos were written throughout the process, as recommended by Glaser and Holton (2004) to add depth to the analysis. The memos contained notes about the content of the data, conceptual ideas or insights, or suggestions of relationships to other concepts or strips. The memos provided a means for clarifying and organizing the complex ideas emerging from the comic strips. These memos were also entered into the database and tagged to mark their relationship to specific comics as necessary.

Each time a strip was read, it was marked for additional review if it met the criteria for relevance in this study. Relevant comics were predominately those that showed two or more family members engaged in activities that could be defined as meant for enjoyment of free time for at least one of the characters in Calvin's fictitious family. Since recreation and leisure time do not exist in isolation, comics that touched on recreation tangentially or antithetically were also marked for additional review. After two full cycles of reviewing all the strips, subsequent reviews concentrated on just those marked as relevant in the initial rounds. To facilitate continued constant comparison of the data, another Web-based program was written at this point to facilitate easier access to comics that had been coded with the same code. The program allowed the researcher to select any of the codes and view in succession all relevant strips that had been marked

with that code. Memos were continually added through this process.

After this review process seemed to reveal no additional substantive codes, constant comparison was used to abstract and fracture the data into more conceptual codes as suggested by Glaser and Holton (2004). The process resulted in a core concept, *preemptive retrospection*, which emerged as a key framework for understanding how meaning in life can be optimized and enhanced. The existing memos and codes were sorted and organized into a structure that helped clarify and explain the emergent concepts and how they related to preemptive retrospection as discussed below.

## Results

### *Comic Characteristics*

Before embarking on a more in-depth discussion of the findings mentioned above, a descriptive categorization of these codes is useful for sensing the number of strips Watterson drew that relate to recreation and family. For instance, 1,200 of the total 3,160 strips depict Calvin engaged in various types of active play either alone or with Hobbes or Susie (examples include: imagination/daydream play, destructive play, disruptive play, and creative play). There were 577 of these strips showing Calvin outside for all or part of the strip. A total of 105 strips show Calvin playing or commenting on organized sports or games. About 264 strips portray one or both parents doing activities that could be considered leisure (e.g. reading, needlework, cycling) and 89 strips addressed either directly or obliquely the nature of fun. No less than 205 strips either show television watching or make commentary about television or other media.



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From the perspective of family interaction, 107 strips depict Calvin and his family on vacation or on other sorts of outings, such as going to the zoo, to the beach, on a walk, etc. The family is also shown together at dinner or another meal in 72 strips, which is also the number of strips that addressed the time Calvin was being babysat while his parents went out together. At least 226 strips show rituals with at least two members of the family participating, including bedtime routines and holiday traditions. Lastly, 211 strips show all family members in the strip.

Out of the 3,160 strips, there were 1,952 that were coded with the criteria that were lumped into the above categories. Of those strips, 880 seemed to the researcher to be related to family recreation. It is from these strips that the following concepts emerged.

### *Preemptive Retrospection*

Through *Calvin and Hobbes*, Watterson emphasized that time is a limited resource and there are certain activities or ways of spending that time that increase its value. In one comic, Calvin's dad talks to himself while shaving, saying, "Another day, another dollar, another irreplaceable chunk out of a finite and rapidly passing lifetime." This attention to the speedy and indefatigable march of time suggests that how one uses one's time is related to one's quality of life. It suggests that a person could shape his or her quality of life through striving to more deliberately spend time in ways that will increase the meaning of that time for the individual. Through his strip, Watterson seems to say: Time is precious, don't squander it.

Numerous *Calvin and Hobbes* strips seem to point to the desirability of finding meaning in one's time use despite how difficult it might be. The comic strips suggest one method by which one can anticipate the meaning or value of time use, a concept I have chosen to call *preemptive retrospection*. This concept consists of how a person assesses an activity based on the importance he or she might place on that activity if he or she were looking back at it from the later years of his or her life.

Preemptive retrospection is perhaps best illustrated through a strip in which Watterson suggests that TV is the new "opiate of the masses," referencing a famous quote by Karl Marx. The strip depicts Calvin watching TV and complaining to Hobbes that the content he is watching is "garbage" (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 1, p. 48). Hobbes asks Calvin why he keeps watching and Calvin responds that there is nothing else to do. Hobbes offers numerous suggestions: "You could read a book! Or write a letter! Or take a walk!" Then adds, "When you're old, you'll wish you had more than memories of this tripe to look back on" (p. 48).

As the above comic suggests, when one nears the end of one's life, reviewing the past allows one to assign a level of value to past experiences. Positive, meaningful experiences will resonate and bring feelings of contentment and happiness; conversely, negative or meaningless time spent – time wasted – may induce a sense of regret. If a person could assess *now* what activities will be rife with meaning in later-life assessment, he or she could better choose how to spend time and avoid lingering regret later.

In addition to the concept of preemptive retrospection, Watterson alludes to a number of qualitative attributes of time use that will either add to or detract from the

meaning in any situation. Specifically, Watterson decried the wasting of time and suggested ways time could be spent by which it could be made more valuable and meaningful. Much of that meaning can be tied to relationships, both friendship and family. Additionally, Watterson implies the importance of pursuing activities and relationships that will add meaning in spite of perceived difficulties. Using preemptive retrospection, one can attempt to guide one's time use toward more meaningful activities by anticipating these qualities, which are discussed more in depth below.

*TV as Symbol of How Wasting Time Devalues Its Meaning*

Watterson frequently depicted Calvin sitting in front of the TV to illustrate the wasting of time (Figure 2). In one strip, Calvin is shown with Hobbes pouring cereal for breakfast. Calvin says, "Saturday is the best day of the week. No demands at all! Perfect freedom! The whole day stretches before us with unlimited opportunity! And what better way to appreciate that opportunity than by squandering it watching cartoons all day!" (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 1, p. 413). In another strip, Calvin, lounging in front of the TV, tells Hobbes, "I'm killing time while I wait for life to shower me with meaning and happiness" (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 3, p. 125). To which Hobbes replies: "I hope you're comfy."

A thorough reading of *Calvin and Hobbes* suggests that spending a lot of time watching TV detracts from meaning in life on two levels. First, it is a "forfeiture of experience" (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 2, p. 444) and second, television programming consists of "bilge," "half-hour ads for toys," or the "insidious manipulation of human desires for commercial purposes" (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 3, p. 51).

The latter idea stems into other media besides television. One strip alludes to this tendency by businesses to use media – like TV and film – to make money while neglecting higher virtues. Calvin, justifying his TV watching, tells Hobbes that “Movies, records, and TV shows reflect the reality of our times. Artists depict hatred and violence because that’s what they see.” Hobbes asks, “Why don’t they see things of beauty and value?” to which Calvin replies, “Because boring stuff doesn’t sell.” Hobbes rolls his eyes with this poignant quip: “Such vision and integrity” (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 3, p. 412).

The former idea regarding time wasted through TV, the “forfeiture of experience,” suggests that excessive use of TV can detract from meaning because its use can be seen as an indulgence in vicarious experience. Calvin’s dad laments that “It’s going to be a grim day when the world is run by a generation that doesn’t know anything but what it’s seen on TV!” (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 1, p. 247). In another strip, Dad complains to Calvin, who is watching TV, that “We have more leisure than man has ever had. And what do we do with this leisure? Educate ourselves? Take up new interests? Explore? Invent? Create?” To which Calvin replies: “Dad, I can’t hear this commercial” (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 3, p. 291). For Dad, it is more important for children to “run around in the fresh air! Have some fun! Get some exercise!” (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 1, p. 247). Although Calvin is frequently depicted in front of the TV, those depictions are almost always a message, steeped in irony, of the problems inherent in watching excessive TV. It appears that activities, in which humans passively allow their basic senses to be overwhelmed or manipulated, score low on the time-use value scale.

Preemptive retrospection could become a tool for actively assessing the value an activity, such as watching television, and may provide impetus to avoid the activity if it fell into the realms of detracting from a meaningful experience.

*Passive Use of Time is Not Inherently Meaningless*

All this is not to suggest that passive use of time is all bad. In a strip that juxtaposes nicely to the concept of passive television use (Figure 3), Calvin is shown with Hobbes on the front porch of their home eating corn on the cob. Calvin turns to Hobbes and says, “Summer is butter on your chin and corn mush between every tooth.” (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 3, p. 422).

The sensory response to a moment like this dwarfs any feeling obtained from TV or movies in terms of lasting impact and an overall sense of contentment and/or happiness. This doesn't point necessarily to the power of corn on the cob, per se, but rather those moments that define one's *summer* or the *idyllic* seasons of life. The strip evokes the warmth of the sun in the evening, the smell of cut grass, the sound of children at play, the taste of the sweet corn and butter, and memories of a day spent playing in the yard. It could be that this transcendent sensory experience, coupled with a lack of fear or trepidation for the future, makes an event such as this stand out as meaningful.

Calvin's dad in particular seems to savor quiet moments spent simply reflecting on life and his experiences and the beauty of earth. He is often shown sitting on his porch or front steps with a book or a drink. In one strip Dad is relaxing on the porch waiting for his charcoal to get hot so he can grill some hamburgers. Calvin comes to him, impatient for the food to be done. Dad says, “You know, Calvin, sometimes the anticipation of

something is more fun than the thing itself once you get it. Here we are, it's a beautiful evening. It's nice to just sit here and look at the trees while we wait for the coals to get hot. ... These summer days go by so quickly. It's good that every now and then we have to wait for something" (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 1, page 306). Watterson indicates here that the accomplishment of some great task or even doing anything specific are not necessary for the meaningful use of time. Part of valuing time is being able to spend it in ways that allow for connection to the broad world of human habitation.

*Placing Human Life in Broader Context Opens Door to Enhancing Meaningful Time Use*

A few strips allude to the grandeur of the world as being important to understanding one's place in the universe. For example, Calvin is depicted with Hobbes gazing at stars at night. Calvin says, "If people sat outside and looked at the stars each night, I'll bet they'd live life a lot differently. ... when you look into infinity, you realize that there are more important things than what people do all day" (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 3, p. 35). In another strip, Calvin and Hobbes stare into the immensity of the night sky and Hobbes says, "It kind of makes you wonder why man considers himself such a big screaming deal" (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 3, p. 370). Acknowledging one's relationship with the elements seems to be a concept that helps one find meaningful ways to spend time.

Calvin's parents seem to encourage this attachment with nature and its humbling influence. In particular, Calvin's parents took him camping a number of times in the strip. They also took him to the zoo and on hikes in the woods. They seemed to use these opportunities as a way to connect with nature, with each other, and to transfer their values about what is important in life – or, what things Calvin could look back on as carrying

meaning. Presumably, their objective was to provide for Calvin experiences that evoked the sensory response that would lodge the experience in Calvin's brain as a positive moment that will be remembered and cherished in time to come.

These experiences, along with the numerous instances where Calvin is encouraged or permitted to play both inside and out and to use his imagination, seem to demonstrate the importance of experiential learning and living rather than vicarious observation of others' lives. As Calvin's dad says to Calvin in another strip, "now you'll have memories of something real you *did* instead of something fake you just *watched*" (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 2, p. 303).

#### *Relationships Can Add Meaning to Otherwise Meaningless Activities*

Relationship development is another area the characters seemed to deem important and which can be seen as a way to add meaning to time that might otherwise not be meaningful. Dad tells Calvin at the conclusion of one camping trip that "these little outings are valuable experiences. They give us a chance to be together as a family and learn about ourselves" (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 1, p. 450). Dad suggests that relationship building is the family's objective when spending time together around the dinner table. The family members are depicted regularly eating dinner together (Figure 4). In one series of strips, Calvin asks to leave the table in order to watch television. Mom tells him that his show "isn't as important as spending some time together as a family" (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 2, p. 302). Dad elaborates in a subsequent strip: "Dinner is the one time during the day that we set aside to be together and talk. There's more to being a family than just

living in the same house. We need to interact once in a while” (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 2, p. 302).

*Spousal Relationships.* With that in mind, the parents also set aside time for each other with Calvin not present. A running dilemma through the entire canon of the strip is the struggle Calvin’s parents have in finding a babysitter and the havoc Calvin wreaks while they are away from the house. They find one girl, Rosalyn, who battles Calvin as babysitter each time Mom and Dad go out to eat or to a movie or a play. Calvin always puts up a stink about being left at home with Rosalyn, but his parents don’t even hesitate. Dad holds Mom by the arm in one strip while Calvin gripes about being left at home and says, “Gosh, a dinner with real pauses in the conversation. Can you imagine?”

(Watterson, 2005, Vol. 2, p. 67). In another strip, Mom and Dad are seated at a table for two at a restaurant. Dad’s hand is resting on Mom’s as she looks at her husband and says, “Isn’t it great to get out of the house alone together for a change?” (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 2, p. 182). In addition to formal dates, Mom and Dad are also shown taking walks together through their neighborhood. All these moments suggest that the parents find meaning in their relationship as a couple and that is reinforced to Calvin by their attempting to spend time together over any obstacle and in spite of his objections.

*Friendship and Family.* Calvin’s relationship with Hobbes is also used metaphorically to represent close relationships of many kinds. One conversation Calvin has with Hobbes as they walk through the woods is particularly salient to an examination of how spending time with a loved one qualitatively changes the nature of that time.



Calvin tells Hobbes about being punched by the school bully and then says: “I wish I had more friends, but people are such jerks. If you can get most people to ignore you and leave you alone you’re doing good. If you can find one person you really like, you’re lucky. And if that person can also stand *you*, you’re *really* lucky” (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 2, p. 185).

Hobbes responds, “What if you find someone you can talk to while you eat apples on a bright fall morning?” To which Calvin responds, “Well, yeah ... I suppose there’s no point in getting greedy, is there?”

This Sunday strip, longer than the daily strips and printed in full color, evokes a sort of melancholy, a yearning for friendship. Hobbes represents the sort of relationship that Calvin, and presumably, most people yearn for and value highly when they have one. In many ways, Hobbes’ depiction is like that of a sibling. He is always ready to engage with Calvin in a game or an adventure. But, he is also not afraid to give Calvin constructive criticism – rather bluntly at times. Though in some ways imaginary, Hobbes plays a very real sibling-like role in Calvin’s life.

Watterson addresses the nature of sibling relationships versus friendship very poignantly when Calvin’s uncle Max comes to visit (Figure 5). Max, who is Calvin’s dad’s brother, helps Mom in the kitchen with the dishes and asks her if she worries about Calvin having Hobbes as his only friend. Mom replies that she doesn’t worry and asks, “Didn’t you have an imaginary friend?” Max says, “Sometimes I think all my friends have been imaginary” (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 1, p. 380).

Although Max may have felt his friends illusive, he had his brother, Calvin's dad, as an anchor of sorts – a place he knew he could turn for friendship and camaraderie. In the strip, friendship and the family relationship both appeared to represent, not necessarily an idyllic hugs-and-kisses-all-the-time scenario, but rather one where fights occurred, frustrations mounted, and ambiguity blushed at times. Yet, through it all the depicted relationships demonstrated understanding, forgiveness, and a depth and continuity that emerged triumphant above the fray. That sort of resiliency added depth to the characters' interactions and demonstrated that spending time with a loved one will generally increase the value of an activity simply by the fact that it is communal time. As Calvin tells Hobbes after they watched a bug eat another bug: "Great experiences are even better when they're shared" (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 3, p. 319).

*Relationships Do Not Monopolize Meaningful Time Use*

But shared time certainly doesn't monopolize meaningful time. Individual time is depicted in *Calvin and Hobbes* as important and valued. Calvin's Dad rides his bicycle alone for enjoyment and exercise. Mom and Dad are each frequently depicted reading. Mom is shown sewing and doing needle point, gardening, and caring for indoor plants. She is shown writing and typing. Dad is shown writing as well.

Individual pursuits, while important, are also lampooned by the strip as often being undertaken in excess. For example in one strip Dad walks past Mom and tells her he's about to start with spring cleaning, but, to Mom's bemusement, he's talking about cleaning his bike rather than the house. Calvin also subscribes to *Chewing Magazine*, which Watterson uses to lampoon the industries built around hobbies. In one issue, an

article is shown comparing gum brands for “flavor retention, elasticity, bubble capacity and chewing rebound” and “compensating for various saliva acidities” (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 3, p. 12). Calvin says, “It lets you quantify your enjoyment!” Hobbes replies that he “thought fun was supposed to be *fun*” To which Calvin replies, “Well, I prefer to trust the experts” (Watterson, Vol. 3, p. 12).

In a strange dichotomy, Watterson seems to suggest that time spent in recreation can become less meaningful as more attention is paid to it to the neglect of more important things. In essence, it could be construed to mean that, while individual pursuits are important and valuable, there may be a threshold beyond which such activities lose their value and actually impede quality of life. Taking a preemptive retrospective view of such pursuits, one might be able to see how such activities are edging out more meaningful activities or relationships simply by the amount of time and attention they require.

#### *Trouble with Making Time Meaningful*

These concepts suggest there are many ways to find meaning through recreation and that family interaction plays a powerful role in that process. They suggest an ideal for which to strive; however, another contribution *Calvin and Hobbes* makes to our understanding of time use is that striving to make time meaningful is fraught with pitfalls. Watterson depicted how difficult reaching for the ideal can be. Calvin embodies the foibles associated with the ignorance of childhood as well as the spoiled brat each of us has the tendency to be. Additionally, Calvin’s parents are not shown as perfect, but rather as flawed and impatient, but always wanting to improve and be good parents. That is,

they want Calvin to grow up healthy and happy and as a contributing member of society.

In many of the scenarios described above, the family has lofty objectives for time spent together, but through circumstances or personality traits the events become riddled with difficulties. For instance, rain plagues one camping outing that spanned several days. Most of the depictions of both Calvin and his mom in this series show their frustration at being trapped in tents during the deluge. Throughout this series, Dad tries to maintain optimism saying things like, “It hasn’t been very buggy this week, has it?” (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 1, p. 313) and “Boy, this sure beats sitting in an office all day!” (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 1, p. 312). But, though the family had intended to spend a pleasant trip camping, it ended with no one very happy. This irony is illustrated well in another series of family camping strips. Dad is shown trying to get the family to join him in swimming, but both Mom and Calvin refuse. The last panel shows Dad swimming alone and saying to himself, “I think what I like best about vacations is the family togetherness.” (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 2, p. 149). In a similar strip where Calvin refuses to get up early to go fishing with his dad, Dad comments as he fishes alone, “Another thing I like about vacations is the sharing of special moments” (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 2, p. 149). The objective is clearly stated, but the reality doesn’t quite reach it.

One of the pertinent, but underlying, messages emerging from *Calvin and Hobbes* is not only the importance of trying to create meaningful time, but the importance of continuing to try in spite of obstacles. Dad feels these trips are an important source of character and memories for Calvin – memories he will look back on and value later in

life. Dad could simply abandon his family and go camping by himself, but rather he and presumably his wife deem it time that needs to be spent in this fashion.

This brings to light the question of why these events are so fraught with conflict. Largely, it seems to stem from a very different perception of the events. Recreation pursuits for adults are qualitatively and fundamentally different from those of children (Figure 6) and even from one adult to another. For instance, Calvin appears to think only of the here and now as opposed to the big picture. He tells his dad he doesn't want to remember the camping trip. "I've been trying to forget it ever since we got here!" he shouts (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 2, p. 151). He is frequently obsessed with personal comfort. Calvin's parents (particularly Dad) are frustrated by this quality in their son. Occasionally, Dad might erupt with his frustration. He did so when Calvin got back into the car during a trip to the beach after feeling the sand was too hot and the water too cold: "Don't tell me we drove an hour and a half for *this!*" (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 1, p. 121) he shouted to his wife. But, generally both parents try to help contextualize the situation for Calvin, to help him see the value in the moment that they see, as when Dad tells Calvin that "numb toes build character" (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 2, p. 235).

One senses that Dad suffers from not understanding how Calvin plays. Calvin will act impulsively, doing something repetitively or doing something strange and Dad expresses frustration or impatience. He quips occasionally, when Calvin is at his most difficult, that he would rather be at the office. Calvin demonstrates an attribute likely common to children – namely that they have a natural and almost incessant curiosity. Calvin is fascinated by the malleability of his world and his ability to manipulate things.

In one strip, he experiments with a tool by hammering nails into the family's coffee table. Mom rushes in, exasperated, and asks him what he is doing. He looks down and asks, "Is this some sort of trick question, or what?" (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 1, p. 38). To him it is apparent what he is doing. He is unaware of the nature of his behavior and the connection *things* have to money and adults' sense of quality of life and self-image. To Mom he is ruining the table. To him, he witnesses his power to manipulate tools and objects.

Humans crave this sort of power over the elements, but to function in society as a whole, certain guidelines have to be set and adhered to. Mom and Dad make it their role to ensure Calvin begins to understand those rules. While he is in the process of learning, he makes misjudgments. Those miscalculations are a source of consternation for his parents. Yet, they try to allow for these mistakes and to guide his play in a safe environment where he won't do too much damage either to himself or his surroundings.

Through his work, Watterson suggests some of the qualities of experiences that would render them meaningful and some qualities that reduce meaning. Additionally, he demonstrates some important pitfalls to attaining that meaning. Of greatest importance to this study is the role one's family plays in shaping time use. Since knowing how one will feel during a death-bed life-assessment can only happen on one's death bed, the process of preemptive retrospection must be guided by the best available knowledge in the form of both direct and vicarious experience. Calvin's behavior suggests that children in particular are lacking in experiences on which to assign value to important or meaningful events in life. Their limited past experience makes them vulnerable to whatever circumstances they are subjected. A child's understanding gap is quickly filled by what

they experience in those circumstances, whether guided or unguided by a caregiver.

It is filled constantly, no matter how the child's time is engaged. Family members (parents particularly) are in a position to help clarify for one another how to meaningfully use time.

### Discussion and Implications

This study is but a preliminary step to understanding the perceptions of family time with relation to quality of life and use of time in general. It provides a stepping stone that can lead to additional theoretical understanding of the use of time by families. It also provides insight into a new source of data and into the methodology associated with evaluating those data.

Some of the concepts discussed are not necessarily new. For instance, Shaw and Dawson (2001) have suggested that parents and children view family recreation very differently. This is demonstrated a number of times in *Calvin and Hobbes* as discussed above. Shaw's and Dawson's concept of *purposive leisure* is also reflected in Watterson's depictions of Calvin's parents choosing to do certain activities with the intention of shaping Calvin's growth and development. Much of the discourse quoted by Shaw and Dawson (p. 222) echoes Calvin's parents discussion of the value of spending time as a family. Calvin's family's commitment to continued interaction and shared leisure is also representative of sentiments shared by participants in the Shaw and Dawson study. Their discussion suggested that parents continued to participate in family leisure in spite of "difficulties and frustrations of family participation" (p. 227).

Similarly, television and other media have seen a great deal of attention as to their merits (or lack thereof). Csikszentmihalyi (1997) has suggested that “as it is much easier to produce [TV] programs that titillate rather than elevate the viewer, what most people watch is unlikely to help in developing the self” (p. 12). Taylor (2003) cites statistics about childhood media use showing that “machines are changing the nature of childhood itself” (p. 50). Both scholars suggest there is a need for play and additional activities that bring children away from this forfeiture of experience into optimal activities that promote growth and happiness. Brock (2007) says TV viewing cuts in to time spent in family interaction along with “an endless number of opportunities for good leisure that are lost to television” (p. 93). She goes on to list many alternatives in a list very similar to that given to Calvin by Hobbes mentioned above, suggesting the value of taking a more proactive approach to deciding how to spend one’s time.

Among the alternatives suggested by Taylor (2003) is outside play (see Figure 7). The value of outdoor play for children has received national attention recently with the bestselling book *Last Child in the Woods* (Louv, 2007). Louv asserts that outside play shouldn’t be considered leisure, but rather “an essential investment in our children’s health (and also, by the way, in our own)” (p. 120). Calvin’s dad echoes the sentiment when he suggests children should run and play and get some exercise. And Calvin’s observation that the “world isn’t so bad if you can just get out in it” (Watterson, 2005, Vol. 3, p. 448) supports Hartig, Mang, and Evans’ (1991) assertion that nature has a restorative effect on both mood and the ability to concentrate.



These concepts and others discussed above suggest there are values associated with time use. These values represent varying levels of quality that can be associated with a variety of activities. Preemptive retrospection becomes a way for individuals to take a fresh look at activities from an advanced perspective, one that is informed by past experiences and also the experiences of others who have gone before. Parents in particular can use this conceptual framework as a way to teach children appropriate ways to spend their time. Indeed, it is incumbent upon parents to shape their children's understanding to optimize their quality of life – putting off instant gratification, for instance, in favor of that which will carry more meaning with it into later life. This process encourages greater attention to the moment-by-moment living, rather than promoting any grand or momentous change. By attending to life with a broadened focus on the long-term and the bigger picture, one can proactively guide one's life or that of children to a more meaningful life.

### *Implications*

This study used grounded theory as its chief method for finding material concepts in *Calvin and Hobbes*. The review of this comic revealed a few concepts that are not fully fleshed out. The grounded theory process suggests additional theoretical sampling to further clarify the concepts. For instance, it would be prudent, in light of the conclusions drawn in this study, to seek out families to interview regarding the way they assess activities. It would be useful to know if additional interviews indicate that parents think of time use in a retrospective manner as suggested by the core variable emerging from this analysis. It would also be valuable to ask seniors who could be considered to be

approaching the end of their lives to determine the attributes of the activities they recall as meaningful in their lives. As they look back on their life, do they find family time to be meaningful? Do they have regrets associated with those memories? How do the difficulties associated with family recreation affect their perception of the meaning that family activities engenders in their minds?

The examination of the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes* provided unique and valuable information about family time use. It might be useful to consider other comic strips for evaluation as well. Several strips are currently in circulation that could add insight to family recreation. Some comic strip families have older children. Some have multiple children. Some strips are in single-panel format others are in multi-panel format. Each of these comic strips has a unique sensibility and could add another dimension to the conflicts and values families associate with their time spent together.

Grounded theory is an appropriate method for this sort of analysis. Iconography can inform the evaluation process. Iconography calls attention to the need to pay attention to the art content of the message in addition to the latent, literal meaning of the words of the strip. Facial expressions and body position can emphasize irony or exaggeration that will temper the meaning of the words themselves. Content analysis can add a dimension to the research by quantifying the frequency of coded depictions. But, to determine the essence of key variables affecting family recreation, it is helpful to have a system of analysis that allows for an open-minded approach that mines the information thoroughly and allows the important, key concepts to emerge in the process. Grounded theory offers that methodology.

### Conclusion

This study opens the door to using comic strips as data through a methodology to date not used for comic strip research in the social sciences. Comic strips and their artists have broad influence and can be seen as reflecting and possibly influencing public opinion. Grounded theory and iconography provide a multifaceted approach to gleaning valuable social meaning from this unique visual medium. The method has demonstrated that relevant social issues can be discovered through the grounded theory evaluation of a comic strip.

As mentioned previously, much of what has been discussed here is not new. Research is rife with evidence for spending time wisely. What this research project provides through its analysis of *Calvin and Hobbes*, however, is a framework or method for assessing the relative value of any given activity at any given time, viz. preemptive retrospection. Implicit in this framework is a suggestion that individuals should take a more proactive role in shaping quality of life through actively seeking to do those things that will bring the most meaning. It calls for “seizing the day” – not in a self-serving way, but rather with attention to relationships and the natural world that may not seem as valuable when seen from one’s current point of view.

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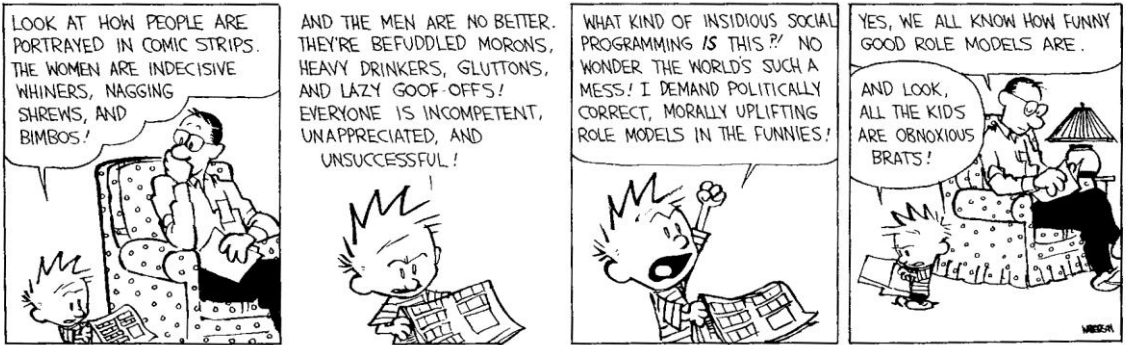
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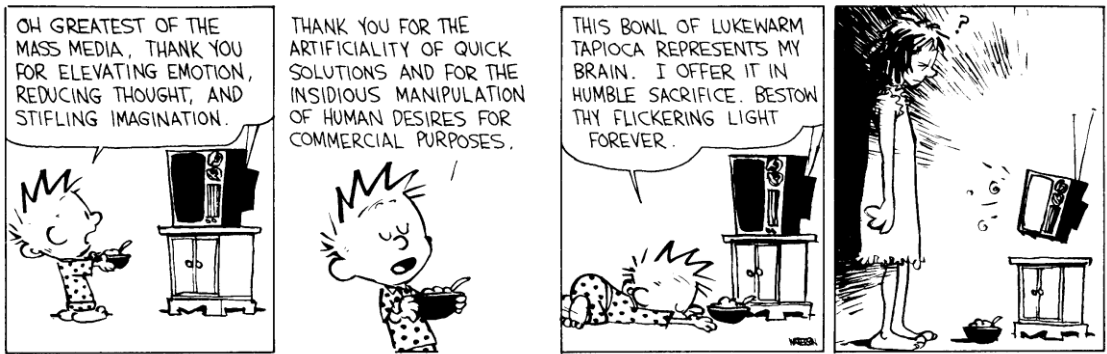
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Figure 1. "Insidious social programming."



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Figure 2. "Bowl of lukewarm tapioca."



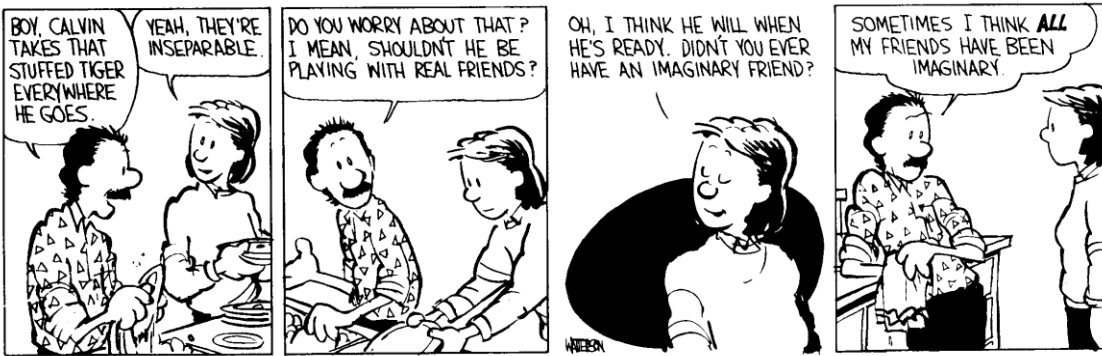
CALVIN AND HOBBS © (1995) Watterson. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE. All rights reserved.

Figure 3. "Corn mush between every tooth."



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Figure 4. "Still eating dinner."



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Figure 5. “All my friends have been imaginary.”



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Figure 6. “Isn’t this the life?”



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Figure 7. “Consider this day seized.”



Appendix A

Prospectus



## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In concluding his assessment of the state of family recreation research, John Kelly (1997) urged family recreation researchers to pay attention to the seemingly mundane aspects of family recreation.

Life is not composed of theme parks and cruises. It is composed of dinnertable talk, vacations together, getting the home and yard in shape, kidding around, caring for each other, goofing off, dreaming, and all the minutiae of the day and the hour. That is the real life in real conditions that is important to us all. (p. 134)

Perhaps Kelly's (1997) statement points to the essence of the family recreation research agenda: We want to know *why* these seemingly mundane things are important. We want to explain how they affect us individually and as families. And, most of all, we seek to know how we can use this information to increase or maintain our quality of life.

Researchers have been exploring these concepts as they relate to the family since the early twentieth century (Hawks, 1991); yet, some scholars suggest there still remains much to be understood about the problems and issues surrounding family recreation (Hawks; Orthner & Mancini, 1991). These researchers have called for more qualitative work focusing on family recreation that can be developed into testable theory.

Qualitative studies that examine an entire family in their recreational context can be time consuming and logistically difficult. There is, however, a source of data that has not been used by recreation scholars, but which can illuminate our understanding of the workings of a family: comic strips. Artists of daily comic strips about families distill

essential characteristics and social patterns into easily digestible nuggets. Bill Watterson, one of the most popular comic strip artists in recent years, addressed family recreation regularly in his strip *Calvin and Hobbes*. Watterson's popularity as a syndicated comic strip artist suggests he was able to reflect, in a humorous manner, broadly held attitudes toward family life in the last few decades of the twentieth century. By evaluating the interactions of the fictitious family in *Calvin and Hobbes*, we may begin to see patterns or themes emerge that reflect the pervasive societal values or norms of the time the comic was in syndication. This evaluation can help explain or highlight the problems and issues associated with family recreation in the recent past. It can inform current understanding of family recreation and can also suggest further research that could be pursued.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

The purpose of this study is to inductively examine the family recreation content of the popular comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes* by analyzing its depicted, symbolic, and contextual meaning to discover "core social psychological problems and processes" (Glaser, 1978, p. 16).

#### *Significance of the Study*

For decades, researchers have addressed many facets of family recreation and in myriad ways. Hawks (1991) reviewed literature of major, systematic studies on family recreation issues up to the late 1980s. His search took him back to the 1930s. Hawks noted that anecdotal articles touting the importance of family recreation were in circulation even earlier. His review included many studies suggesting positive relationships between recreation and marital satisfaction and family cohesiveness and

stability. Similarly, Orthner and Mancini (1991) assessed the findings of recent family recreation research and categorized some of the general trends, including studies that supported the relationship between recreation and positive family outcomes. Clearly there has long been an assumption of the importance of recreation for families with some empirical data to support it.

Yet, Hawks (1991) and Orthner and Mancini (1991) suggested that the relationship was not without its ambiguities. Orthner and Mancini stated that “much more work is needed to clarify the benefits that leisure experiences have for family bonds” (p. 297). Among other things, the authors of both articles called for additional qualitative analyses to bolster family recreation research. Orthner and Mancini said such qualitative studies would help lead to additional theoretical work in the family recreation research arena. More recently, Henderson, Presley, and Bialeschki (2004) assessed the theoretical contributions to the general body of recreation research in the late 1990s. They noted an increase in theoretically based studies, but still called for additional theory development and use by recreation scholars.

Qualitative studies offer a stepping stone toward theory development; yet, such studies are often difficult to conduct, especially when the concept in question “cannot be adequately understood outside of its natural setting” (Orthner & Mancini, 1991, p. 297). Observational studies in a recreation setting can be time consuming and fraught with complexities and logistical concerns. It would be nice if there was a way to observe families without feeling like an intruder and to be able to review what was going on – to have instant replay, so to speak – without missing any further action. While such a

scenario is virtually impossible, there is a set of extant qualitative data that might serve as fodder for understanding family recreation in a similar way: daily comic strips.

*Comic Strips as Data.* Comic strips are not taboo to serious social scholarship. In some ways, many comic strip artists approach their work very similarly to a qualitative researcher. They observe life going on around them, in some cases “exploiting every waking moment for strip ideas” (Watterson, 1995, p. 208). They systematically observe and record their observations, seeking to distill some element that will ring true, or at least funny, as they translate their observations into words and pictures for thousands of readers every day. As a result, comics contain depictions of life that offer insights into the way humans operate and interact with each other. Perhaps recognizing this, scholars have used comics in social research. Some of the topics researchers have studied using newspaper comics include the depictions of fathers (LaRossa, Gordon, Wilson, Bairan, & Jaret, 1991; LaRossa, Jaret, Gadgil, & Wynn, 2000), health-related content (Gower, 1995), race and social status (Brabant & Mooney, 1999), sex-roles (Brabant, 1976), and religion (Lindsey & Heeren, 1992). But, to this point, no one has studied the depiction of recreation in the comics.

*Calvin and Hobbes as Source.* This study aims to launch the study of family recreation in the comics pages by focusing on a single artist (Bill Watterson) and his entire canon. Three main considerations prompt the study of Watterson individually. First, Watterson is arguably one of the most popular comic strip artists of all time with circulation in around 2,400 newspapers at the peak of his career as a comic strip artist (Astor, 1995). Watterson’s comic strip reached millions every day during its life span.

More than 30 million of Watterson's books are in circulation. Though Watterson discontinued writing and drawing the strip in 1995, United Press Syndicate still sells *Calvin and Hobbes* to countries outside of North America and there it enjoys international circulation in 265 newspapers (K. Kerr, personal communication, July 24, 2008). The high circulation is evidence of *Calvin and Hobbes*' popularity and it suggests he was hitting a common nerve throughout the nation and world.

Second, Watterson, probably one of the best writers in the industry, approached his medium with the intent to not only entertain but also communicate significant ideas (Watterson, 1995). Watterson has written a number of essays that have been published with the book collections of his strips. The essays exude powerful writing and reveal his thoughtful approach to comic artistry. Noted alternative *comix* artist Art Spiegelman, in his introduction to the collected works of *Calvin and Hobbes*, said Watterson "marched directly into the wasteland and made the comatose syndicated strip form kick up its heels and dance" (Spiegelman, 2005). There is also strong evidence that Watterson put a great deal of thought into his strips, especially considering his statement that he deliberately addressed issues he deemed important (Watterson). Family recreation appears to be something Watterson addressed frequently. A pilot study of more than 730 *Calvin and Hobbes* comics indicated that almost one in five strips addressed recreational themes in some respect. Such frequent address of recreation suggests it has particular meaning for Watterson. Using his skills as a writer and artist, Watterson has provided a potential source of information that can contribute to the general body of knowledge about family recreation.

Third, studying an individual artist of such influence provides an opportunity to set a standard by which future studies can be guided. As inductive reasoning benefits by the observations of a small core source of data, the study of recreation in the comics can be guided by the systematic inquiry and investigation of Watterson's relatively small body of work. By examining Watterson's work, themes of family recreation will emerge that could illuminate current perceptions of family recreation. Emergent themes could also be used in future studies of other comics as contrast or comparison. Establishing a benchmark for investigating recreation in the comics will allow for expanding knowledge that builds on extant research. An inductive approach to this research will be appropriate to set that benchmark.

*Contribution to recreation research.* This study can add depth to the recreation research arena through a systematic evaluation of the material produced by someone whose art and writing seemed to connect with many millions of people and continues to do so more than a decade after the last *Calvin and Hobbes* strip was printed in a newspaper. The analysis will open the door for future study of comic strips as a legitimate source of data and may illuminate understudied areas of family recreation. It might also lend supporting evidence to research that has already been undertaken. By evaluating *Calvin and Hobbes* through analyzing its depicted, symbolic, and contextual meaning, themes and messages can emerge from the data that will illuminate the artists' views of family recreation and, by extrapolation, the views and opinions that seemed to resonate with readers. By studying the strips also within the context of recreation research, we can

deepen our understanding of the issues surrounding family recreation that Watterson raises in the comic strip.

### Delimitations

The entire canon of Bill Watterson's 3,160 *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strips will be evaluated for this study. The evaluations will be delimited as follows:

1. Each of the strips will be read to determine if it deals with family recreation either literally, implicitly, or antithetically.
2. The resulting family recreation strips will be examined for thematic elements and categorized according to those emerging themes. (Based on the results from a pilot study, the researcher anticipates approximately 600 strips.)
3. To keep the time-frame and scope of this project commensurate with the expectations of a master's thesis, approximately 10% of the strips from each emergent theme will be analyzed using the established method of iconography.

### Limitations

The research is inductive in nature and is subject to the weaknesses inherent in all inductive research. Specifically, the results of this study could be potentially limited by the following factors:

1. Calvin's comic strip family is not a literal family and, as such, cannot be construed to necessarily represent the needs, actions, or dynamics of a literal family.
2. The depicted family is also not representative of any particular race or ethnicity; in form, it also consists of the traditional two-parent family.
3. Likewise, there is no universal view of what family is or should be like

and, therefore, the observations made by this study certainly cannot be applied to every family.

4. The researcher's obvious appreciation of this comic strip could taint his objectivity.

#### *Definitions of terms*

*Family recreation.* For this study, the term recreation will be used in reference to activities done by participants during their free time. The family component will be based on whether the recreation involves more than one member of the family. This definition is subject to equivocation and the ambiguities of human sociality; therefore, it is incumbent upon the researcher to explain his reasoning behind selecting particular comics as pertinent to this investigation.

Recreation is not defined simply by its state of being but, also, by its antithesis: obligation. Thus, recreation cannot be understood in isolation. Indeed, an understanding of many obligations can contribute to an understanding of recreation. Consequently, for this analysis, recreation time or recreation will not be the only topics of interest. The researcher will be looking for words or images that discuss or depict recreation literally but also for concepts that address recreation in less obvious ways. For instance, Calvin's father is sometimes depicted at work thinking about doing something rather than work. Such a depiction warrants further analysis in light of its antithetical relationship to recreation. Similarly, understanding Calvin's parents' recreation, one can evaluate what is happening to Calvin while they are away from him. Additionally, the activities Calvin's



parents participate in for recreation may not seem like recreation to Calvin though he must be along for the ride.

This being the case, the researcher in this project will use his subjective judgment to determine if each comic addresses a topic relevant to the concept of family recreation. The researcher will delineate the reason any comic is selected for analysis, whether for direct discussion or portrayal of family recreation, implicit recreation themes, or antithetical themes or depictions.

## Chapter 2

### Review of Literature

The purpose of this study is to inductively examine the family recreation content of the popular comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes* by analyzing its depicted, symbolic, and contextual meaning to discover “core social psychological problems and processes” (Glaser, 1978, p. 16). The iconographic evaluation of author and artist Bill Watterson’s observations in *Calvin and Hobbes* can illuminate the artist’s views of family recreation and, by extrapolation, the views and opinions that seemed to resonate with readers. It will contribute to the understanding of recreation in the family.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of family recreation research and provides evidence establishing a need for further qualitative research of family recreation. Secondly, it reviews literature that bolsters a case for using comic strips as data for scholarly inquiry. Lastly, it will make a case for the oeuvre of Bill Watterson as good source material for this evaluation in particular.

#### *Family Recreation Research*

The benefits of family recreation have been touted and studied since at least the 1930s (Hawks, 1991) with researchers’ interest primarily focusing on how and where families recreate (e.g. Burch, 1965; Burr, 1970; Kahn, 1997) as well as on the constraints to recreation faced by some families (e.g. Shaw, 1992, 1994; Shaw, Bonen, & McCabe, 1991). Furthermore, others have theorized on the benefits or effects of family recreation and have striven to test their theories (e.g. Orthner, 1975, 1976; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001). But, as in most social sciences, research in family recreation is not without

weaknesses (Hawks; Holman & Epperson, 1984; Orthner & Mancini, 1991). For instance, Holman and Epperson decried a dearth of theoretically based research and called for more systematic and stringent research methodologies. Kelly (1997) suggested there was room for expanded research beyond single issues because “nothing – not even sexuality, gender, class, or ethnicity – accounts for everything significant” (p. 134). Additionally, Orthner and Mancini called for more qualitative studies of family recreation to help discover the “meaning that is attached to spending time with one’s family” (p. 298).

There have been a few recent family recreation studies that have approached family recreation qualitatively; yet, most seemed to be very focused on single issues as mentioned by Kelly (1997). Some have focused on certain kinds of families. Mactavish and Schleien (2000, 2004), for instance, used mixed methods to determine what sort of activities were most popular among families with a child with a disability and to “explore the nature and benefits of, and constraints to” (2004, p. 123) those families’ participation in the activities. Other researchers have explored the meaning of family recreation for various individuals within the family unit. Shaw and Dawson (2001) explored the attitudes of *parents* toward recreation. Their research led them to coin the term “purposive leisure” (p. 228), which they said cast doubt on the concept of family recreation as being (a) freely chosen or (b) intrinsically motivated. Another group studied individually married women. Freeman, Palmer, and Baker (2006), for instance, examined the recreation perspectives of married, stay-at-home mothers who were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and found that these

women's leisure perceptions ran counter to the prevailing image of wives and mothers who are constrained in their leisure. Other studies have looked at families in certain specific situations. For example, Palmer, Freeman, and Zabriskie (2007) recently developed a concept called "family deepening" (p. 2) through examining families that spent time in voluntary service expeditions. Another study (DeVault, 2000) consisted of the observation of families at the zoo. In that study, the researchers explored the nature of family "outings" (p. 488) and how they contribute to and illustrate parenting and the behaviors parents engage in to manage those activities.

These studies have provided valuable insight and, in some cases, have likely advanced family recreation theory; but, there has still been a lack of qualitative studies that address family recreation in a more general way and in view of the family as a whole. Holman and Epperson (1984) suggest that research that is not "a clear step to creating testable, theoretical propositions is of negligible value" (p. 291). This study has the potential to be a building block in the pursuit of family recreation theory.

### *Generating Theory*

It is important to understand why theory development is important for recreation research and to acknowledge how this project can contribute in that regard. Henderson et al. (2004) said that "theory is critical for an evolving body of knowledge" (p. 412). They also suggested that, while theory is a difficult term to define, it is generally developed systematically from evidence and observation as a way to explain human behaviors. Henderson et al. also described theory as being extant in different scopes, from grand theories of big ideas to theories focused on a very narrow concept. They said most

theories used in the recreation field are “middle range theories” (p. 412) of modest scope. They suggest that acknowledging that there may not be one grand, overarching theory could lead to unique approaches to research that will lead to “deeper social analyses” (p. 422), which could “open the door for greater exploration of the many building blocks of theory” (p. 422).

One approach to theory development suggested by Henderson et al. as being useful for understanding the context of recreation in research is *grounded theory*. Glaser (1978), a co-founder of the grounded theory method, suggests that theory should develop as a researcher collects and constantly compares data. As themes emerge from data regarding “core social psychological problems” (p. 16), additional data are sought out based on those themes in a process called *theoretical sampling*. In theoretical sampling, the researcher will seek out data based on the themes emerging from the data he or she has been reviewing. The researcher continues constant comparison between the original data and the theoretically sampled data. Glaser says that researchers continue this process until a state of saturation develops where the constant comparison between original and theoretically sampled data begins to yield diminishing returns. At this point, memos taken all along the coding process are sorted into theoretical frameworks, which are like outlines for the thematic explanations associated with the overarching social psychological problem or process being explicated. This process produces additional memos to be added to the sorting (Glaser, p. 16). The end result of this data-collection, analysis, and sorting process is a theory that is grounded in data or that emerges from the data.

*Comics as Data*

Popular culture has long been a window through which human beings have been able to observe truths about themselves. Art, music, film, and literature have all been studied extensively to help build the understanding of humanity and culture. Giarelli and Tulman (2003) call comics an important part of this social discourse (p. 954). Comics, though sometimes viewed as trite and silly, are “as legitimate a part of the culture of this country as the poetry, paintings, novels, and plays by Americans that brought the nation the respect of the world in the first half of [the twentieth] century” (Waugh, 1947, p. xiii). While seemingly simple, the text, characters, and images of a comic strip “can combine in complex ways, as atoms become molecules and molecules become life .... great power is locked in these few simple lines” (McCloud, 1994, p. 45.)

Newspaper comics pages were originally created during the New York newspaper wars between Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer in the age of *Yellow Journalism* (Waugh, 1947). The newspaper publishers created multiple-page sections of full-page cartoons in order to draw readership. Cartoonists were bought out from competing newspapers as each publisher sought out the most popular features to boost their circulation (Waugh). While such fierce competition between daily newspapers is almost unheard of in modern cities, the power of the comics is still evident. Comics are not merely a window dressing for the news; rather, they are an integral and oft-read part of what readers expect from their daily newspaper. They are still a major selling point for the industry. With world-wide readership in the millions, comic strips have informed, amused, and reflected the practices of the current generation of adults.

One of the reasons comics might be so popular is that they provide a safe and familiar environment to deal with the quirks of life. Cartoonist and author Scott McCloud (1994) argues that the cartoon style, which is generally characterized by simplified line drawings, lends itself to universal identification among humans. He suggests that when looking at the simplified renderings of human faces we do not see another human being but, rather, we see ourselves. “The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled ... an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don’t just observe the cartoon, we become it” (McCloud, p. 36). Similarly, Watterson (1995) suggests that the comic strip art form has the potential to lead us to a sort of broad introspection:

The best comics expose human nature and help us laugh at our own stupidity and hypocrisy. They indulge in exaggeration and absurdity, helping us to see the world with fresh eyes and reminding us how important it is to play and be silly. Comics depict the ordinary, mundane events of our lives and help us remember the importance of tiny moments. They cleverly sum up our unexpressed thoughts and emotions. Sometimes they show the world from the perspective of children and animals, encouraging us to be innocent for a moment. The best comics, that is to say, are fun house mirrors that distort appearances only to help us recognize, and laugh at, our essential characteristics. (p. 207)

Comic strips use humor and satire to create this window into the human psyche through varying degrees of distortion – from the direct observational reflection of everyday life to the subversive distortions that exaggerate human characteristics in order

to draw attention to them for comedic effect. All along this spectrum of comedic distortion, comic strip artists and writers can connect to their readers and communicate to them ideas about humanity and the human condition.

Because comic strips may be viewed as a powerful form of communication and an important facet of human culture, they also may be considered a valuable source of information for social scientists. Harrison (1981) suggests that cartoonists create a comfortable environment where readers go to be amused and find companionship. But, in addition to the comfort and familiarity of the cartoon, Harrison argues that the cartoons of lasting value offer insight into the human life. While it is an art form not intended to necessarily depict reality, it is an art form that caricatures reality and by so doing distills for us the essence of what we are or what we do. "The 'ho-ho' joke is still important," Harrison says, "but there is also a frequent 'ah-ha!' -- a psychological insight about our society or about the human condition" (p. 85). Giarelli and Tullman (2003) concur that comics "can reveal common assumptions, dominant public values, and general public expectations" (p. 947).

Indeed scholars have acknowledged the power of the comic strip as a data source (Giarelli & Tulman, 2003; Kemnitz, 1973). Whereas, to date, it appears that no recreation researchers have utilized comic strips in any significant way as a source of data, comic strips have been used effectively in other social research. They have been utilized in researching issues such as gender and racial stereotypes (Glascock & Preston-Schreck, 2004; White & Fuentez, 1997), social influences (Banning, 1955), materialism (Belk, 1987), sex-roles (Brabant, 1976; Brabant & Mooney, 1997; LaRossa, Jaret, Gadgil, &



Wynn, 2001), aging (Hanlon, Farnsworth, & Murray, 1997), health (Gower, 1995), and the “social construction of family life” (Brabant & Mooney, 1999, p. 113).

Methodological issues are even addressed by one set of authors, who offer suggestions for the best use of comics as data (Giarelli & Tulman). The use of comics as research data may be sparse and developing, but it can certainly be considered a legitimate – even valuable – method of helping us understand human behavior. Comic strips show promise as founts of information that can potentially deepen and broaden our understanding of the complexities of family recreation.

### *Influence of Comics*

As mentioned above, some comics have the power to reach millions of readers every day with whatever topic seems important – or amusing – to their authors. Since a strip’s circulation can only increase when it is popular, it seems comics with such an expansive readership reflect the tenor and timbre of public opinion. Comics that go against the collective grain of society will likely only find a niche audience and circulation will stagnate. When tackling potentially sensitive issues, authors who approach the subject with subtlety and tact will likely offend and alienate fewer people. It is also quite possible that comics artists have a unique power to influence public opinion through the subtleties of the medium.

With such broad potential for influence, some comics artists regularly address social issues through satire. Garry Trudeau, the creator of *Doonsbury*; Berkley Breathed, the author of *Bloom County* and *Opus*; and Aaron McGruder the author of *Boondocks*, to name a few, tackle hot-button topics with fervor, humor, and vitriol (Garry Trudeau,

2001). Other artists are more benign. Watterson, for instance, tackled such issues as pollution, global warming, death, and the relative merits of TV, but did so with less hyperbole and finger pointing. Acknowledging the “overt commentary” (Watterson, 1995, p. 170) he was putting into his strip, Watterson said, “I always try to keep the strip funny and true to the characters, because preachy cartoons get tiresome quickly” (p. 170). While some of the more politically laced comics land on the editorial pages of newspapers, the majority stay on the comics page where they reach a larger audience.

#### *Influence of Calvin and Hobbes*

Very few comic strip artists have reached as large a daily newspaper audience as Bill Watterson. Watterson retired from his comic strip on December 31, 1995, as one of the most popular daily comics authors of all time (Barnes & Noble, n.d.). He had spent 10 years in syndication during which he drew 3,160 *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strips. According to a syndicate representative, at the height of Watterson’s career, *Calvin and Hobbes* was syndicated in more than 2,400 daily and Sunday newspapers (K. Kerr, personal communication, July 18, 2008). Syndicated comic strips are considered extremely successful if they reach syndication in 1,000 papers (Kerr). Only a few remarkable comic strips, including *Peanuts*, *Garfield*, and *The Far Side*, have neared *Calvin and Hobbes*’s popularity in terms of syndication (Sedge, 2000). In addition, the 17 published book collections of *Calvin and Hobbes* comics have sold more than 30 million copies (Barnes & Noble, n.d.). A three-volume, hard-bound collection of all *Calvin and Hobbes* comics, which was published in 2005, was a *New York Times* best

seller. At \$150 for the collection, it became the most expensive book to ever make that list (Spiegelman, 2005).

Watterson's reach was not limited to the United States. The Universal Press Syndicate (UPS), which owns the copyright to *Calvin and Hobbes*, distributed it worldwide. According to Kathie Kerr (Personal Communication, July 28, 2008), a spokesperson for UPS, *Calvin and Hobbes* has been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, German, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Finnish, Russian, Polish, Hungarian, Slavic, Romanian, Bulgarian, Turkish, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Hindi, Hebrew, and Arabic. Kerr said the syndicate is still selling the comic strip to newspapers outside of North America for today's readership. It is seen daily by thousands of newspaper readers outside of North America (Kerr). It seems Watterson had a knack for reflecting the zeitgeist with a timeless quality of *cosmic satire* (see Tilton, 1977). Through *Calvin and Hobbes*, Watterson somehow managed to capture a broad audience, both young and old and of a variety of cultures.

With a readership of millions, a comic strip artist like Watterson has a unique position to be able to talk about issues he or she deems important; however, the syndicate system under which most newspaper comics exist tends to take little interest in artistic aesthetics or narrative (Witek, 1992). The syndicates usually own the copyright to the strips, rendering the artist but a tool in their trade. If an artist dies or decides not to continue drawing the strip, the syndicate can replace the creator with hired artists and writers (e.g., *Sally Forth*, *Blondie*, *Frank and Ernest*, and *Garfield* are currently drawn or written by artists who were not the original creators of the strips). To the syndicate, a

successful comic is one that leads to ever-increasing sales of merchandise based on the strip (Witek).

Watterson (1995) refused to license his creation for merchandising. He said he felt the licensing would cheapen and weaken what he had to say through his strip and was prepared to quit over the issue five years into the strip's run (Watterson). Watterson described the fight as bitter and drawn-out. Eventually he won over the syndicate and prevented the development of merchandise based on *Calvin and Hobbes* (Watterson). Humanities researcher Joseph Witek (1992) echoes Watterson's opinion that licensing limits a comic strip's ability to communicate valuable truths. Witek suggests that for comics to be seen as a "medium of communication and expression" (p. 76), as opposed to a "juvenile and commercial genre" (p. 76), the creator must be able to "retain artistic and editorial freedom" (p. 76). Watterson was able to do so. Despite the dearth of marketing that strips like *Garfield* have benefited from through merchandise sales, *Calvin and Hobbes* grew in popularity, reach, and influence on the merits of the strip alone.

This popularity has not gone unnoticed in academic circles. Scholars have used *Calvin and Hobbes* in published and unpublished research covering a variety of topics. Beda (1996) used *Calvin and Hobbes* as a basis for making an argument that comic art is a form of medicine that embraces its role as social commentary and as entertainment to combat a "secular, materialistic, and linear world image" (p. 9). Spicer (2000) explored theological issues using *Calvin and Hobbes* as a launching point for her consideration. In a related study, Coleman (2000) analyzed the strip to determine underlying messages about morality and the ethics of modern society. She concluded that Watterson used

Calvin's family to reflect culture, but also to "critique the culture by slyly undermining the accepted morality of that culture" (p. 27). Coleman also said that Watterson's intelligent and creative use of the medium demonstrated the comic strip's potential for engaging in sophisticated discussion of social issues. Similarly, Spitz (1993), in expounding on the "postmodern and psychoanalytic perspectives" (p. 55) of *Calvin and Hobbes*, suggested that comics can serve simultaneously as a window to current social mores and as "implicit and explicit platforms from which to critique them" (p. 55). In addition, Swanbom (2006) used *Calvin and Hobbes* to argue that comic strips are a powerful rhetorical medium. She argued that Watterson's work was a "pure example of how popular success and rhetorical seriousness may coexist" (p. vi) in a comic strip.

While Watterson and comic strips in general have begun to garner scholarly support, perhaps Watterson's own view of the medium carries more weight for this examination. Watterson (1995) published many of his thoughts regarding cartooning in a book printed to mark the ten-year anniversary of *Calvin and Hobbes*' syndication. He suggested that the comic strip is a significant art form that has the power to "express truths -- to reveal and help us understand our world" (Watterson, p. 207). He further stated that "nothing depresses me like thinking I've become a joke factory to fill newspaper space. Whenever possible, I use the strip to talk about the things that are important to me" (Watterson, p. 207). Through *Calvin and Hobbes*, Watterson addressed such topics as death, robbery, school, organized sports, and bullying.

#### *Family Recreation in Calvin and Hobbes*

It seems only natural that, among the other topics, the subject of family recreation

would come up often in *Calvin and Hobbes*, which depicts the life experiences of a little boy and his parents; for, what setting lends itself better to the uninhibited interaction of family members than their recreation together? As Kelly (1997) said, “I am not sure that what people mean by ‘leisure’ or ‘family’ is very important. I am sure, however, that what people do together is central to life” (p. 134). This centrality of human interaction appears to have been utilized by Watterson in his work. He drew Calvin’s family at the beach, on camping trips, on car trips, and hiking and walking together. He drew Calvin’s parents attempting to go out on dates together. He showed Calvin’s father’s inner debates about staying home from work on a sunny day. He drew Calvin’s dad riding his mountain bike and jogging. At first glance it appears that recreation was a mainstay of material for Watterson as he wrote and drew *Calvin and Hobbes*.

Deeper investigation into the content of the comic shows a definite trend. A pilot study of two years’ worth of *Calvin and Hobbes* strips revealed that 18% of the comics reviewed contained a direct reference to recreation as they pertain to the family. To make the determination, I read 730 *Calvin and Hobbes* strips and noted whether the characters were engaged in or were discussing recreational activities. I used the concept of free time as a criterion for determining whether the strip depicted or addressed recreation. If the activities the characters engaged in appeared to be done as a freely chosen activity, without constraint or other coercive impetus, I labeled them as having a recreation theme. If the characters’ activities either directly involved or affected more than one character in Calvin’s family, I considered it to be of a family recreation theme. While 18% of the strips addressed family recreation, even more of the strips touched on recreation for

individual characters (e.g. Calvin's frequent depiction on a sled or making snowmen) and many addressed recreation tangentially, where the characters actions could be considered recreation, but the content of the strip was largely unrelated to their activity (e.g. Calvin's parents going for a walk by themselves and commenting on some of Calvin's wildly anti-social snowmen as they go).

The pilot study showed a frequency of nearly one family recreation-themed comic for every five strips Watterson drew. If such a high level of interest in family recreation were sustained across all of Watterson's work, nearly 900 comics would address this topic, averaging out to at least one comic per week of published comics. Even more would address recreation without the family component.

### *Conclusion*

It seems evident that there is great potential for gleaning useful data from Watterson's work. Each day during *Calvin and Hobbes*' run in daily newspapers, Watterson had the potential for huge social influence while amusing and engaging his audience. More than just words written in balloons and silly gags, his comics contain messages that attempt to reflect the reality of what it means to be human (Watterson, 1995). Like Harrison (1981) suggests about the best comics, *Calvin and Hobbes* is "an integrated gestalt, where the whole is more than the sum of the verbal and nonverbal parts" (p. 85). By examining this gestaltic work, recreation scholarship will benefit from the seasoned and insightful observations of an artist devoted to the honest, though sometimes satirical and distorted, depiction of the human experience.

## Chapter 3

### Methods

The purpose of this study is to inductively examine the family-recreation content of the popular comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes* by analyzing its depicted, symbolic, and contextual meaning to discover “core social psychological problems and processes” (Glaser, 1978, p. 16). The analysis will be conducted through the method of iconography, which allows for the interpretation of comics in the context of contemporary leisure research, the social climate at the time of its circulation, the personal history and commentary of the comic’s author and artist, Bill Watterson, as well as the degree of comic distortion exhibited by the comic strips. The iconographic evaluation of Watterson’s observations in *Calvin and Hobbes* can contribute to the understanding of recreation in the family.

*Calvin and Hobbes* was a daily comic strip that depicted the interactions of a fictitious, nameless family from 1985-1995. It enjoyed enormous popularity, with syndication in nearly 2,400 newspapers (Astor, 1995). Such popularity suggests that analyzing Watterson’s insights and observations has the potential to add a dimension to the area of family recreation studies. This section gives a rationale for how the study sample will be generated, evaluated, and analyzed.

#### *Methodological Rationale*

Some prior researchers studying comic strips have done content analyses of strips, coding their concepts of interest and looking for evidence of those concepts within the strips (e.g. Brabant, 1976; Brabant & Mooney, 1999; Gower, 1995; LaRossa, et al., 1991; LaRossa et



al., 2000; Spiggle, 1986). In order to facilitate research of this nature, scholars have randomly or systematically selected a certain number of strips (usually in the hundreds) from all comic strips published in certain publications within a specific time frame. These samples were then examined and coded based on the established codes for the concepts of interest. For example, Brabant (1976) looked for activities each of the characters were doing: home care, child care, career, personal grooming, leisure, helping spouse, passive. These depictions were counted and recorded. Similarly, in Larossa et al. (1991), the researchers were looking for signs of incompetence in mother and father characters in single-panel comics. They established the criteria for determining whether or not a character was depicted as incompetent by using thesaurus synonym entries to the word *incompetent* as their guideline. Based on the established definition, researchers coded the comic panels according to whether or not the comic depicted the father or mother as incompetent. In both of these examples (Brabant, 1976; LaRossa et al., 1991), after examining each of the sampled strips, the researchers calculated the total number of each code and the quantified data were then analyzed and compared between time periods or publication type or were compared among various comic strip characters.

While content analyses of this sort can give a picture of the change in representational images over time as well as a snapshot of broad trends in strips, the method does not give a very strong understanding of the messages being promulgated by individual artists. It also fails to give a very deep analysis of individual meaning contained within individual strips. Two alternative methods of analysis that have been used to evaluate comic strips – semiotics and iconography – have been borrowed from

visual art scholarship (Coleman, 2000; Giarelli & Tulman, 2003; Leeuwen, 2001).

*Semiotics.* The method of semiotics examines images based on two layers of meaning: the obvious message (manifest content or denotation) and the latent meaning (connotation) (Giarelli & Tulman, 2003). Leeuwen (2001) describes the denotation process as being fairly straightforward. The researcher merely describes what the picture depicts. Leeuwen cites the father of visual semiotics, Roland Barthes, as having described the denotation of an image as the “literal” (p. 94) description of the artwork rather than the “symbolic” (p. 94) meaning of the image.

The connotation of an image, on the other hand, is made up of “very broad and diffuse concepts” and “ideological meanings” (Leeuwen, 2001, p. 97). Leeuwen suggests that the latter are aimed at justifying the status quo of the power that is behind the image. Elements within an image, such as posture and objects, contain inherent connotative meanings that carry distinctive messages to the viewer (Leeuwen).

*Iconography.* Iconography, like semiotics, relies on the layering of pictorial information but uses three layers compared to the two layers of semiotics (Leeuwen, 2001). The three layers are (1) representational meaning, (2) iconographical symbolism, and (3) iconological symbolism (Giarelli & Tulman, 2003). The first, representational meaning, is similar to the denotative meaning of semiotics (Leeuwen). It describes the primary subject matter, what is represented, what is going on, etc. The second layer of pictorial information, iconographical symbolism, looks for the ideas or concepts, attached to the representation (Giarelli & Tulman). For example, an image of a blindfolded woman holding scales represents justice, while wings attached to feet or shoes represents the god

Mercury or speed. On the other hand, iconological symbolism, the final layer in iconography, focuses on the underlying principles that reveal the attitudes of a nation, period of history, class of people, religion, or philosophical persuasion (Giarelli & Tulman, 2003; Leeuwen, 2001). Leeuwen suggests that this third layer moves beyond what symbolic meaning and “accepted conventions” (p. 101) of which the artist might be aware and into the contextual aspects of his or her time, culture, and circumstances. It requires the researcher to analyze not only the artwork, but the context in which the image was created and/or published.

While content analysis and semiotics have their place, it seems iconography is a more promising method for this particular research project. Content analysis requires the use of established codes or themes for determining their relative frequency within the content of the data being studied. Semiotics offers a more inductive approach, but is limited by its focus on visual symbols to the neglect of context. Iconography offers an additional contextual level of analysis that can help place family recreation and leisure depictions within the context of current research.

Iconography is admittedly a subjective method of analysis that does not lend itself to easy replication of a study. However, Giarelli (2003) suggests it is a viable method of evaluation of social phenomena in cartoon images. “(T)he uncovering of multiple interpretations creates rich data that might be essential to understanding the phenomenon of interest” (p. 952). The potential insight to be gained through the study of these individual comics warrants the inductive analysis that the iconographic method offers. While reproducibility of the study might be diminished, the nuance of image and artist

will be given a deeper consideration that will potentially expand the general understanding of the way recreation impacts families and how families approach their recreation. Because of the time-consuming nature of iconographic interpretation of images, the following considerations will be given to the sampling procedures.

*Procedure for Selecting and Categorizing Comics for Further Evaluation*

Over the ten years *Calvin and Hobbes* was in syndication, Watterson drew 3,160 strips. The sheer quantity of strips makes an iconographic approach seem daunting. In order to make the research more manageable, the researcher will, with the help of a research assistant, read and number each of the published *Calvin and Hobbes* comics to determine whether its content deals with family recreation. Family-recreation-themed strips will be grouped thematically and then evaluated using iconography.

Based on the pilot study, it is anticipated that approximately 630 strips will deal with family recreation either ostensibly or in essence. To make the determination, the researcher will look for comics that show two or more family members engaged in activities that could be defined as meant for enjoyment of free time for at least one of the characters in Calvin's fictitious family. LaRossa et al. (2000) used a similar selection technique to find strips that dealt with fatherhood and motherhood. Since recreation and leisure time do not exist in isolation, comics that touch on recreation as the antithesis will also be selected. For example, some strips portray Calvin interacting with a babysitter while his parents are on a date. Similarly, some strips explore the ambivalence Calvin's father feels for going to his office to work on a sunny day. Such strips can help expand the understanding of leisure's place within a familial context and so will also be evaluated

in this analysis. If the number of garnered strips exceeds 630, the researcher will consider taking a random sample of the collected strips for further analysis in order to complete the iconographic analyses within a reasonable time frame.

The collection of family-recreation-themed comics resulting from the previous filtering will be read and analyzed by the researcher and categorized by emerging themes. This filtering will continue until the researcher feels he has reached a saturation point where no further themes are emerging. Some comics may fall into more than one thematic category.

The researcher will select approximately 10% of the comics from each thematic category that seem to best represent the essence of the theme for iconographic analysis. This selection process will yield roughly 60 comic strips. Each of these strips will then be evaluated using iconographic techniques as delineated below.

#### *Iconographic Analysis of Comic Strips*

The analysis of each strip will undergo three stages. First, the researcher will describe the physical, pictorial content of each strip. Second, the researcher will analyze the imagery for symbolic content that might add a layer of meaning. Such symbols could be in the form of character posture, actual symbolic images, or other images that have a conventional, accepted meaning. The last step will be to evaluate the work based on cultural trends, the artist's commentary, and recreation research.

This last point is key to the success of this study. It will be important, as each of the strips is analyzed, to consider the artist's commentary and history to the extent possible. It is also essential to consider the research that surrounds the issue being

depicted or discussed in the comic. As a result, the researcher will review additional literature based on the categories of recreation represented by the sample. This review will increase the researcher's ability to make educated commentary on the comic strips and their place with regard to scholarly inquiry of the past.

Additionally, the researcher will assess the level of comedic distortion associated with each strip. The nature of comic strips is such that there is an element of non-literariness that allows it to distill essential meanings and call attention to less-obvious elements of social interaction (McCloud, 1994). Watterson may depict family literally and address recreation themes in a straightforward manner. But, he also may depict them with a heavy dose of distortion in order to focus on certain themes in his work. These satirical distortions will be taken into consideration when analyzing the comic strips for this study.

### *Data Management*

The nature of this project requires data to be managed in numerous forms, from the comic strips themselves to the commentary being created by the researcher. In order to maintain some semblance of organization, the data will be dealt with as follows.

All 3,160 *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strips will be purchased in the paperback book collections. The comics strips in each book will be numbered in chronological order based on the order found in the *Complete Calvin and Hobbes*, which is a three-volume compilation of all of the strips. Each of the strips will be read and evaluated to determine if it should be included in this research study. As the strips are read and evaluated, notes will be taken in a database on a personal computer. Each comic strip will have an entry

and memos will be taken that associate with the comic in the database. Memos about the comics and emerging themes and concepts will be also kept in the database and associated with any applicable comic strips.

Once the approximately 630 strips to be analyzed in this study have been selected, each of the strips will be read again. Each new strip will be constantly compared to previously read strips. This process will result in emergent themes from which the researcher will develop codes, which will be associated with each strip in the database. When the strips have been thoroughly read and compared to the point of saturation, the researcher will use the themes and codes recorded in the database to form collections of strips that represent each theme. Approximately 10% of the comics from each theme's collection will be scanned into a computer system, enlarged, and printed. The prints will then be evaluated using iconographic techniques as described above. Each level of analysis in the iconographic interpretation will be stored in the database and connected with the strip being analyzed.

Throughout this process, the researcher will be constantly comparing the additional data from the iconographic analysis to the data already explored. The constant comparison will potentially reveal additional emerging codes and themes that help clarify the concepts hinted at in the comics and other data. Memos taken along the way and recorded in the database will provide additional source material for the final analysis and writeup for this study.

#### *Triangulatory Validity Check*

In order to establish the validity and objectivity of this study, the results of the

analysis will receive review at two additional levels. Throughout the process, the three members of the researcher's graduate committee will continually be involved in discussing the emergent themes and concepts. Beginning with the initial selection of family-recreation comic strips and continuing on through the final iconographic analysis of selected strips, the committee will review the researcher's work and provide feedback to help keep the process relatively objective. In addition, a few of the final iconographic analyses will be presented to three readers not associated with the study who will comment on the researcher's assessment of the strips and their associated themes. This will allow the researcher an opportunity to ensure that the analysis is in line with the views of independent individuals.

### Conclusion

While the scope of this study is not likely sufficient to reach the saturation point necessary for a full-fledged grounded theory, it will certainly be a solid step along the way. As the researcher uses iconography to evaluate comic strips, themes will be emerging that can lead the researcher to theoretically sample data from a variety of places to give context to the comics. It will lead to memos and codes and themes that will suggest further theoretical sampling. When the *Calvin and Hobbes* comics supply has been exhausted, if saturation has not been reached, there at least will be emergent themes and suggestions for further theoretical sampling to deepen the understanding of the problems and processes associated with family recreation. At best, this data analysis will result in a valid, testable theory of family recreation, which is grounded in the data and not forced upon it.



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