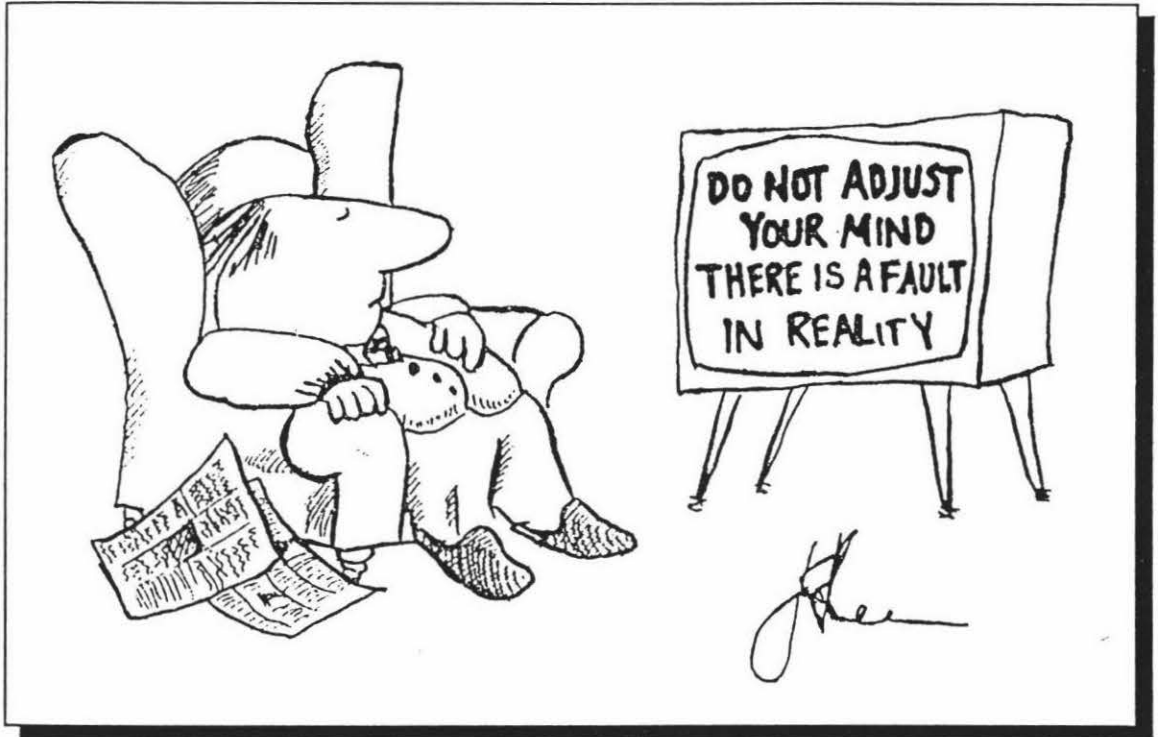


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THE DECODING OF THE EDITORIAL CARTOON

by

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requirements of the Degree of Master of Education

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ABSTRACT

The cartoon is increasingly becoming an educational tool. It is used extensively at School Certificate and University Entrance level in New Zealand secondary schools to not only communicate ideas, but also to analyse how those ideas are translated to the reader.

For this study I have concentrated on the use of the editorial cartoon for the fifth form English syllabus and, in particular, the interpretation of the *static image* in the School Certificate examination.

My research design is based on a similar study by Dr LeRoy Carl which he completed at Syracuse University's School of Journalism, and entitled *Meanings Evoked in Population Groups by Editorial Cartoons*.⁽¹⁾

Dr Carl's research concluded that very few readers of the cartoon actually understood the intended message. His study best sums up the *problem* of people misinterpreting the cartoon and its importance to this area of educational research. Dr Carl's 600 page thesis concludes that many forces are at work within individuals' *scrambling* of the messages, which may not always be clearly *sent* by the cartoonists in the first place.

The assumption has been made by many that editorial cartoons are easy to understand — easier than the written word. Some of the cartoonists quoted in Carl's study have indicated complete unawareness of the communication barriers between them and their public.

The interpretation of the cartoons used in the School Certificate examination and the resulting mark allocation are based on the Chief Examiner's *decoding*, (he also sets the questions). He and his panel do not contact the cartoonist for his or her *intended* meaning.

Therefore the basis for assessment may be found on *false* grounds. Considering Dr

Carl's study, it seems that misinterpretation of the cartoonist's intentions is a high possibility.

It would appear to me to be more appropriate to use the cartoonists' *intended message* as a basis for assessing the School Certificate paper, rather than the interpretation of *non-related* people. With this in mind, I have selected four editorial cartoons — each with a different style and context. Four fifth form classes at James Hargest High School in Invercargill were also selected as my sample group, which comprised of two *high band* groups and two *low band* groups (based on academic achievement).

One *high band* and one *low band* group were given a general lesson in *cartoon cognition* including ways of dissecting the cartoon in order to *decode* it. I used the bombing of the "Rainbow Warrior" in Auckland Harbour as a focus and then visually demonstrated how a number of New Zealand cartoonists interpreted that 1985 event.

A questionnaire was then completed by all four classes on each of the four cartoons and the answers were compared with those supplied by the cartoonists themselves.

My initial tentative theory was partly based on Dr Carl's conclusions to his study and partly on my own personal experience as a cartoonist. A number of variables occur when a *reader* decodes a cartoon and, therefore, is subject to misinterpretation depending upon those variables. Apart from one student scoring a possible five on one of the cartoons, no one was in complete agreement with any of the cartoonists' *intended messages*. As expected, students in the higher academic groups were able to interpret the cartoonists' *intended messages* better than those students from the lower academic groups.

A large percentage of the *high band* students were in partial agreement with the *intended message*. By comparison, the greater percentage of *low band* students were in complete disagreement with the cartoonists' intentions. These generalisations are applicable to three out of the four cartoons, with only Trace Hodgson's (Cartoon #3) image being the

exception. In all four sample groups, very few students achieved a high score, and the larger percentage of all scores was two or below.

- (1) CARL, LeRoy M. (1968) *Editorial Cartoons Fail to Reach Many Readers*, Journalism Quarterly 45, pp 533-535

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the contribution to the art of editorial cartooning by one of New Zealand's greatest cartoonists — **Sir Gordon Minhinnick**. Since the 1920s, "Min's" work has appeared in the "New Zealand Herald" which placed him alongside Sir David Low as the most influential and respected New Zealand cartoonist this century.*

Sir Gordon passed away in February 1992, the day I completed my thesis. This study is dedicated to his memory.

As with all research studies, there are a number of people who need to be acknowledged. A mention on this page seems scant recognition, but as soon as I sell the movie rights to this thesis, it will be my shout, so name your poison!

Firstly, to the staff and participating **fifth form students at James Hargest High School** I wish to record my appreciation for their patience and enthusiasm, especially **Carole Worley** in her capacity as head of the English Department.

Without the essential ingredients — the cartoons — this study would not exist. Thank you to **Tom, Trace and Bob** for allowing me to throw their work to the "wolves" for analysis.

The "Literature Review" Chapter would not resemble its present form if **Marilyn Bunce** from the Invercargill Public Library's Information Section had not tracked down my extensive "shopping list" of books, articles, research papers and relevant texts. Indeed, the entire thesis would not have taken shape if it wasn't for the typing abilities of **Lynn Thomas and Joan Rizzi** — such long-suffering with indecipherable copy and intriguing variations to the English language can only be rewarded in heaven.

Since I am the worst mathematician on the planet, **David Williams** came to my rescue. He gave up his well-earned holidays to reconstruct my statistics into understandable form. I now know that "Chi-Squared" is not a conservative Asian.

And finally, a big thank you to my supervisors, the dedicated duo: **Chris Watson and Roy Shuker**; I hope the time invested in this project was enjoyable and worthwhile.

MARK WINTER
Invercargill
February, 1992.

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INTRODUCTION

"Part of a cartoonist's job is to confront people with things they don't want to see." Tony Auth, *Political Cartoonist for the "Philadelphia Inquirer."*⁽¹⁾

My initial interest in the cartoon was as a practitioner. Having majored in education for my undergraduate degree, it seemed only a matter of time, however, before these two *components* met and had a relationship. This study chronicles that event. There is no definitive *text* on cartoon interpretation in New Zealand and very little research has been undertaken in this country on the *decoding* of this popular form of communication, nor on how to teach the subject.

For this study, I have focused on fifth form students and the School Certificate Examination — in particular, the section on *static images*, which often involves the interpretation of the cartoon. This *area* is small enough and sufficiently specific to work with satisfactorily.

There are six main research concerns that have formed the foundation of this thesis:

- (1) The students' cartoon interpretation scores in relation to the cartoonists' *intended meanings*.
- (2) The comparison between the *high band* and *low band* students and their cartoon interpretation scores.
- (3) The comparison between the students' genders and their cartoon interpretation scores.
- (4) The frequency of cartoon observation compared with the students' cartoon interpretation scores.
- (5) The comparison between the students who received a lesson in cartoon cognition and those who did not, with their cartoon interpretation scores.
- (6) The comparison between the students' cartoon interpretation scores and their parents' occupations.

My primary concern was the basis from which students' answers in the *static images* section of the School Certificate Examination were assessed. The students' responses are judged on the interpretation of the Chief Examiner and his panel who set the paper. Their *decoding* may or may not be accurate in terms of the artists' *intended meanings*. It would, therefore, seem logical and sensible in the interests of accuracy to use the cartoonists' *intended meanings* as a basis for assessment, rather than the interpretation of the Chief Examiner and his assessment panel.

I have no direct evidence to suggest that the panel's interpretations vary from those of the cartoonist, but the possibility that an *interpretative error* could occur appears high when one compares it with the relevant research, which suggests that few people are actually in complete agreement with the cartoons' *intended messages*. I am not saying that errors have occurred in the marking of past School Certificate papers, but a *fairer* system would, in my opinion, be to use the cartoonists' *intended meanings* as a basis for the marking schedule. This may also provide a platform for further study to compare the panel's *model* answers with those of the cartoonists and then correlate them with the students' responses.

The Chief Examiner's reply to me (Appendix 1), states that the *static images* question is always popular, but he did not know whether this was because the topic is widely taught or because it looks easy or interesting. "My impression is that generally School Certificate candidates do not understand many cartoons well. They can cope with the obvious, but struggle with the visual metaphor and lack familiarity with many cartoon conventions and clichés that seem commonplace to educated adults."

When setting questions, the Chief Examiner and his panel's main objective is to "rank students in order of ability and provide a score distribution approximating the normal curve." But there is no *valid yardstick*, which proves that any answer is of a particular standard. Indeed, the Chief Examiner confirms this with his statement, "there are no absolute standards in competence in English." He concludes that ". . . if the job of

setting the examination is done well, candidates will handle **all** questions equally well. As I have a panel of *experienced* and *competent* people, we set good examination papers."

His statements are, as he points out, subjective. But it leaves me with the impression that a number of assumptions have been made about examinations and their candidates by the Chief Examiner and his panel, in order to achieve their main objective, which is to rank students in order of ability. Words such as *experienced*, *competent*, and *good* have no real value unless they are used in relation to some relevant terms of reference. Are the panel members *experienced* and *competent* in setting the examination questions or in the case of the *static images* section, are they *experienced* and *competent* in *decoding intended messages*? What is meant by a *good* examination paper? — *good* in relation to what? I suspect it is *good* in relation to assessing the candidates' abilities and then ranking them, nationally, so they can produce a *normal curve* score distribution.

The Chief Examiner's final comment is that ". . . students handle this question quite well", which seems an apparent contradiction to his earlier statement when he said that "candidates do not understand many cartoons well". The common denominator is the word *well*, it's the adjective that qualifies it which is vague. What is meant by the word *quite* in this context? I was unsuccessful in trying to obtain statistical information on how well students perform in this section of the English examination. A number of requests to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority went unanswered, so I have no empirical data to clarify this vagueness.

My interpretation is that most candidates who attempt this question are able to produce a *satisfactory* answer that encompasses the main points, but not necessarily all the required responses, to receive a maximum grade.

For this study I have used the *intended meanings* of the cartoonists themselves as a basis to judge the students' interpretations. My primary source is LeRoy Carl's (1968) doctoral

dissertation, *Meanings Evoked in Population Groups by Editorial Cartoons*.⁽²⁾ Dr Carl's study compared the interpretation of 340 cartoons by the public with the cartoonists' *intended meanings*. His results concluded that a large percentage of the sample group was in complete disagreement with the cartoonists' *intended meanings*. I would assume that it would depend on the complexity of the cartoon itself and its context as to the level of understanding.

As the Chief Examiner did point out, ". . . most students who attempt the *static images* question in the School Certificate English examination can *decode* the more obvious aspects of the image, but struggle with the more subtle and ambiguous cartoons, which results in a larger interpretation variance." What is *obvious* and what is *subtle* are also subjective terms and depend upon a number of variables so what is *obvious* to some may not be clear to others.

Carl believes that "one's ability to perceive details, their ethnic background, environment, psychological set, knowledge of current and past events, ability to see analogies or knowledge of allegories, plays a role in interpreting editorial cartoons".⁽³⁾ Therefore responses from such a study, with all these *forces* at work, could vary considerably.

My tentative theory is that very few, if any, participants in this study will be in complete agreement with all the cartoonists' *intended meanings*. There will be significant variations depending upon the complexity of the cartoons. As a cartoonist, I assume, along with many of my colleagues, that the reader can understand all the symbols, visual metaphors, clichés and captions chosen to convey a message in cartoon form. That assumption may be ill-founded.

For example, in order to fully understand the cartoon of Bob Jones as the leader of the New Zealand Party leaving a tent in a blizzard stating, "I am just going outside, I may be some time", the viewer not only has to recognise the main character, but understand the caption in relation to the central character's plight and the historical analogy used.



The reader would have to be familiar with the fact that the defeated political party's leader, Bob Jones, stated after the election that he was taking a *temporary rest*, but it was obvious he was leaving his fledgling group on a more permanent basis. The cartoonist uses the analogy of Scott's fateful expedition to the South Pole, when one of his team, Oates, intentionally walked out into a snowstorm and made the same comment as that captioned in the cartoon, knowing he would never return. To understand the *intended meaning* of the cartoon, the reader would need to be aware of these crucial pieces of information. From my experience with intermediate and secondary school students, the "Scott expedition" analogy is rather obscure today because very few of them are familiar with that historical event. I have been asked to conduct a number of lessons on cartoons and how they *communicate* their message to students over the past six years, and have used the Jones cartoon often. Very few students actually grasp the historical significance and with Bob Jones fading from the media spotlight, his caricature becomes less recognisable

At this point it seems appropriate to define the main subject — what is a cartoon? They

have been described as the most powerful and pithiest form of communication used universally in many forms. Webster (1971), defines the cartoon as a "drawing, as in a newspaper or magazine, caricaturing or symbolising, often satirically, some action, situation or person of topical interest".⁽⁴⁾

Mischa Richter (1980), defines a cartoon as a "visual, humorous comment about something that is familiar to all of us."⁽⁵⁾ Ed Koren (1963), views a cartoon as "a combination of visual and verbal jokes — a convention of life turned on end, done quickly and succinctly. If you don't *get* a cartoon right away, you don't hang around to find out why."⁽⁶⁾ Cartoonist Jules Feiffer simply sees the cartoon as "a form of therapy".⁽⁷⁾ New Zealand's most distinguished cartoonist, Sir David Low, defines the cartoon in the *Encyclopedia Americana* as "a drawing, representational or symbolic, that makes a satirical, witty or humorous point. It may or may not have a caption and may comprise more than one point."

Harrison (1981), comments, "Certainly, as typically used, the term *cartoon* conjures up connotations of fun and entertainment, but some have questioned whether the cartoon has to be humorous. Perhaps it is simply a drawing, which distills and distorts. The effect may leave the viewer in tears and trauma, rather than in smiles and laughter."⁽⁸⁾

The cartoon appears in many guises and is divided into a number of sub-sets and they need to be identified for the purpose of this study. The four cartoons used in this research study are described as *editorial* cartoons because they usually appear on the editorial page of their respective publications or accompany appropriate text and serve to illustrate the point being made. They are sometimes labelled *political* cartoons because the majority of them that appear in newspapers concentrate on political activity and its consequences. They can also use social, historical, economic and other relevant themes, to comment on current events. The format is usually a single panel, but they can use multiple panels (such as the Scott cartoon in this study), which is more readily utilised for the *cartoon* or *comic strip*.

Gerberg (1983), also makes some observations about the various forms the cartoon takes. "*Political cartoons* are also called *editorial cartoons* since they are usually found on editorial pages of the newspapers which are vehicles of strong opinion. Political cartoonists are a special breed, who seem motivated by anger. In addition to a negative attitude, a political cartoonist should have several other strong traits, among them a genuine interest in politics, a good sense of history and sharp journalistic instincts. Where a *gag cartoon* or *comic strip* is instant communication of a *funny* idea, on any subject, a *political cartoon* is instant communication of a provocative idea on a topical subject, often done funny."⁽⁹⁾

Gerberg points out that the prime purpose of a *gag cartoon* is to be humorous on one level and may comment on some current condition on another level. The *political cartoon* however, works in reverse, according to Gerberg. Its prime purpose is to make the comment and in the process it may be humorous. He also states that the outstanding element of political cartooning is *caricature* and a good cartoonist can not only maintain the essence of personality, but can render the *victim* with readily-accepted images.⁽¹⁰⁾

The basic magazine *gag cartoon* mentioned in Gerberg's previous quote is defined by him as instant communication of a funny idea that is usually presented in a single panel. It uses the *visual cliché* more than the *editorial cartoon*. The clichés, such as stop signs, escalators, bicycles and telephones, are used by the cartoonists to send their messages. They enable the cartoonists to attract the readers' attention and interest with the familiar in words as well as pictures.

In captions, the cartoonist uses fashionable colloquialisms and catch-phrases. *Spot* cartoons are usually decorative or conceptual and while there are many varieties, all serve the same purpose to provide visual support to the editorial text.⁽¹¹⁾

However, of all the cartoon forms, the *comic strip* is the most widely read. They fall into two broad categories — the continuity/adventure strip and the gag-a-day humour

strip according to Gerberg. An example of the former category is "Little Orphan Annie", and an example of the latter is "The Wizard of Oz" or "Peanuts".

Gerberg states that there are conceptual differences between *gag* panel cartoons and *comic strips*. "

- (1) A *comic strip* has the added dimension of time — it is sequential.
- (2) The comic strip always deals with the same world — it repeats characters and themes for a lifetime, unlike the *gag* cartoon, which always presents different characters and themes.
- (3) The *comic strip* appeals to a broad general audience — a vast readership that shares common interests."⁽¹²⁾

There may well be exceptions to these generalisations, but in the main, Gerberg's observations are an accurate assessment of the cartoon variations. He also comments on the formats of the various cartoon styles: "In the multi-panel cartoon, it is essential to the humour for the reader to experience some time sequence. If the single-panel cartoon is a freeze-frame depicting the quintessential moment in an action, the multi-panel is several freeze-frames depicting several quintessential moments of an action, usually ending with a final twist. The multi-panel frames do not always occur consecutively, they occur selectively and represent some lapsed time."⁽¹²⁾

One of the important factors in my study was the limited sample size — 81 students, incorporating 54 females and 27 males from James Hargest High School in Invercargill. When I approached the school with my research study request, I asked to use the entire fifth form as a sample. That proved impractical and would have resulted in major disruptions. Therefore, the sample size was determined by the Principal and the head of the English department. It was a compromise that allow me to collect my required data without too much interference in the school's routine.

Students in the top two classes (*high band*) and bottom two English classes (*low band*)

participated in this study. Fifth form class membership at James Hargest High School is determined by the academic results of the students in their third and fourth form years.

My lesson in cartoon interpretation and subsequent questionnaire were administered in February 1991 before the academic year moved into full stride, which also made it easier to accommodate the school's timetable. Although the sample size was smaller than I had hoped, it did allow me to cover the six research areas that I listed earlier in this introduction, and did provide me with a cross-section of the fifth form population at James Hargest High School.

In terms of the study and drawing conclusions from the results, I anticipated difficulty applying any complex statistical analyses to the small sample. Therefore, any conclusions must be tentative when drawing comparisons between the four groups and their cartoon interpretation scores.

However, since the primary purpose of this study is to compare the students' responses with the cartoonists' *intended meanings*, I believe the sample size was satisfactory to give a general indication of fifth formers' *decoding* ability in relation to the *intended messages*.

Obtaining information from every unit of a small population is not as difficult compared with data collection from a total population, but the findings are not really applicable to any population other than the group studied. I can draw generalisations from the data, but cannot necessarily claim that these generalisations would be *true* or *accurate*, in any other school. The 81 students who participated in this study, in spite of the small unit size, accurately represented the characteristics of the population and generalisations based on the data obtained from them may be applied to the entire group.

While I did not seek data on the ethnic composition of the sample group, I did collect information regarding gender and socio-economic status in order to establish whether or

not the group was representative of the population. Female students outnumbered male students by a ratio of nearly 2:1, but the parents' occupations did reflect a *representative* cross-section.

In relation to the background and knowledge required in order to interpret a cartoon, intelligence or assimilation of all the information given and assessment of the image to determine the message(s) is important. For this study, the four sample groups were selected on the basis of their academic performance in the third and fourth forms, especially in the core subjects — English, Science and Maths.

My hypothesis is that *high band* students should perform better than *low band* students. To add a further dimension, a *high band* and a *low band* class were given a lesson on *cartoon interpretation* to equip them with some concepts to assist them to decode the four cartoons. I assumed that the *taught* students' scores would reflect a better understanding of the cartoons compared to the students in the remaining two groups, albeit it marginally, because it was only a single lecture. It is important to note that none of the sample group had attended any *cartoon classes* before my lesson was delivered to the two groups.

Carl's (1968) study also took into consideration the correlation between gender and the scores as well as employment levels and class status, which separated into *white collar* and *blue collar* groups. His study sampled people from three centres — Ithaca, where the population is dominated by Cornell University; Candor; and Canton. With regard to gender, Carl concluded from his extensive data that men in the Ithaca sample (containing a high percentage of professional and academic people) grasped the cartoonists' meanings to a greater degree than women. The reverse applied in the other two sample centres. Carl also concluded that interpretations by *white collar* groups were in closer agreement with the cartoonists' intentions than those of the *blue collar* groups.⁽¹⁴⁾

My theory concerning the comparison between gender and cartoon interpretation is that

gender makes no difference; it may only be relevant in terms of some sensitivity to certain subjects, but I do not believe one could make a hard-and-fast rule regarding the importance of gender in *decoding* static imagery.

The degree of exposure to cartoons may or may not affect their *decoding* by a reader. I have no evidence to suggest that the amount of *cartoon consumption* helps the viewer understand the meaning of the image any more than it helps those who only occasionally glance at the cartoon in their daily newspaper.

McMahon and Quin (1984) suggest that it would be useful for students to develop the habit of reading at least some of the newspaper each day. "Familiarity with current events will ensure that most newspaper cartoons will be understood. Regular attention to the cartoons will make it possible to recognise even the most distorted caricatures. In addition, recognition of the simplified symbol systems of cartoons will make them more comprehensible to the reader."⁽¹⁵⁾

I would assume that constant, conscious cognition of a cartoon allows the reader to analyse its various components and then assess these to formulate an understanding of the cartoonist's intentions. It should *sharpen* the reader's perception of the *codes*, *contexts* and *conventions* utilised in cartoon construction. But this does not necessarily allow the reader to interpret the *correct* or *intended meaning*. My expectations of the data collected on the frequency of cartoon observation would be that more students would possibly read *comic strips* than the *editorial cartoons*, because they appear to be more popular and easier to understand. Murray Ball's "Footrot Flats" for example, has a large readership, both here and in Australia, and this is reinforced by the sales of his books each year. Similarly, "Peanuts" and "Garfield" enjoy the same success.

My tentative theory regarding the correlation between the frequency of cartoon observation and the sample group's responses 'is that constant exposure to cartoons should marginally assist students to develop a better understanding of the image. The

data collected should give an indication as to whether or not there is a significant difference within the restricted parameter of a small sample size.

The final consideration was to compare the occupations of the sample group's parents with the students' cartoon observation scores in a similar way to Dr Carl's study. The popular assumption is that parents with *higher status* occupations and resulting higher incomes were able to afford more books and resources to *broaden* their children's general knowledge. Much more problematic is the assumption that in order to attain such vocations, one needs to be intelligent, which could be genetically transferred. For this study I have used the *Elley-Irving Socio-Economic Scale* as the basis to compare the parents' socio-economic status with their children's scores.⁽¹⁶⁾

My interest in this area of the research is influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his theory of *cultural capital*. Bourdieu's basic theses on education and culture is "Durkheimian" in that he sees the school functioning to reproduce the social order through its legitimation of the world view of the dominant class (Bourdieu 1972, 1977). It is a *cultural reproduction* theory that allocates to schooling a central role in the replication of the social order. The emphasis is on the *power* that certain groups have through control over symbols (Bourdieu, 1973). Through *symbolic power* a group or class can impose their own view of reality on society through the school. The student acquires, quite unconsciously, a whole system of categories of perception and thought.⁽¹⁷⁾

Bourdieu is concerned not only with the reproduction of the social order, but with the reproduction, specifically of a *class society*. It is through its control of the education system that the *dominant* class ensures the reproduction and legitimation of its own culture. Bourdieu refers to this as *cultural capital*.

This *capital* is concentrated in the families that make up the dominant class, so that children from this class come to school already enjoying a relationship to cultural pursuits denied to children of other social classes.⁽¹⁸⁾

Capital, in the sphere of material production, gives its owners power over non-owners, and so does *cultural capital*. Both can be inherited.⁽¹⁹⁾

I would expect that the cartoon interpretation scores of those students with parents who have *high status* occupations (according to the *Elley-Irving* scale) would be higher than their *low status* counterparts.

A number of other possibilities could also have been looked at such as age, ethnic comparisons or the responses of urban students compared with their rural counterparts, but then do urban cartoonists predominantly use *urban* imagery, or are they more universal in their choice of symbols? Such concerns could provide the basis for further study in cartoon cognition.

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