

USING

SUPERHEROES



**IN COUNSELING
AND PLAY THERAPY**

LAWRENCE C. RUBIN
EDITOR

About the Editor

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Using Superheroes in Counseling and Play Therapy

Edited by

LAWRENCE C. RUBIN, PhD, LMHC, RPT-S

 **SPRINGER PUBLISHING COMPANY**
New York

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Springer Publishing Company, LLC
11 West 42nd Street
New York, NY 10036
www.springerpub.com

Acquisitions Editor: Sheri W. Sussman
Production Editor: Tenea D. Johnson
Cover Comic Art: Nicholas Gallo-Lopez
Cover Design: Mimi Flow
Composition: Techbooks

07 08 09 10/ 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Using superheroes in counseling and play therapy/Lawrence C. Rubin, editor.
p. ; cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8261-0269-7 (hardback)

1. Play therapy. 2. Heroes. 3. Superhero films. 4. Fantasy. 5. Children—Counseling of.
I. Rubin, Lawrence C., 1955-

[DNLM: 1. Play Therapy—methods. 2. Counseling—methods. 3. Child Psychology.
4. Adolescent Psychology. 5. Fantasy. 6. Imagination. WS 350.2 U85 2006]

RJ505.P6U85 2006
618.92'891653—dc22

2006026582

Printed in the United States of America by Bang Printing.

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Contributors

Leya Barrett, LSW, is a therapist in Program 1, “The Field of Dreams,” at Onarga Academy in Illinois, where she has been employed for 7 years. The academy specializes in the treatment of adolescents with sexual behavior problems. She began her work with the academy as a case manager after obtaining her bachelor’s degree in social work. She later advanced to the position of unit coordinator. After returning to school and obtaining her master’s degree in social work, Leya started her journey as a family therapist. She enjoys using a variety of experiential therapeutic techniques with her clients. As a licensed therapist, she is always increasing her experience with expressive arts activities and finding new ways to bring treatment alive for her clients. The use of superheroes has been a natural fit with the adolescent male clients with whom she works. Although her knowledge of superheroes may be limited, avid interest and longtime acquaintance with comics have filled the void.

Michael Brody, MD, is a board certified child and adult psychiatrist in private practice. He was the CEO and creator of Psychiatric Center (2005), one the largest providers of outpatient care for the chronically mentally ill in the District of Columbia. He is chairman of the Television and Media Committee of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. He is a professor of American Studies at the University of Maryland, where he teaches a course on Children and the Media. He has published widely on child media issues including superheroes from Batman to Spider-Man. He recently wrote and produced the film *Fifty Years of Children’s Television, from Howdy Doody to Spongebob*, which focused on Batman, Superman, and the Power Rangers. He is also active in the Popular Culture Association, where he chairs the section on celebrity and posits that superheroes are true child celebrities. When he was 4 years old, he attempted to fly

off his bed, like Superman, but learned to read while recovering, by understanding the words in the balloons over Robin's head in *Detective Comics*. Unlike Dr. Fredric Wertham (*Seduction of the Innocent*) who vilified comic books, he has given balanced testimony on violence on kid's TV to Congress, the Federal Trade Commission, the Federal Communications Commission, the Department of Commerce, and the White House.

Jan M. Burte, PhD, MSCP, is a clinical psychologist who has taught and lectured nationally and internationally on hypnosis for the past 20 years. He is a past director of the Milton H. Erickson Institute of Long Island, past president of the New York Society of Clinical Hypnosis, and a certified and approved consultant in clinical hypnosis (ASCH). Burte has been published in numerous journals and books, appeared on radio and television discussing the applicability of hypnosis for a wide range of patients and conditions. In addition, he is a certified sex therapist (American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists), a diplomate in pain management (American Association of Pain Management), and holds a postdoctoral master's in clinical psychopharmacology. He is adjunct professor at Nova Southeastern University and is in private practice in Boca Raton, Florida.

George Enfield, MHR, MEd, NCC, PCC, is an Ohio licensed clinical counselor and president elect for the Ohio Play Therapy Association. He has master's degrees in human relations and education and has been working clinically with children since 1991. Over the past several years, Enfield has been a child therapist at Catholic Social Services, where he has also done group work with preadolescent and adolescent boys using tabletop and role-playing games to help develop problem-solving and predicting outcomes in social situations. Enfield grew up fascinated with heroes of all types, specifically Daredevil, the Mighty Thor, Hercules, Jason and the Argonauts, and Flash Gordon. Struggling early on to fit in socially and academically, he began to explore the world of the heroes, where he found both success and comfort. His growing fascination with heroes led him to miniatures, through which he formed connections with others. Enfield also struggled with learning difficulties and believes that his early experiences with these heroes gave him the skills and confidence to complete his education. It is his hope to use these experiences to help others to overcome their challenges.

Roger Kaufman, LMFT, is a licensed psychotherapist with a private practice in Hollywood, California, specializing in work with gay men

and lesbians. He is also an instructor at the Institute for Contemporary Uranian Psychoanalysis, where he teaches classes on gay-affirmative psychotherapy and integrating Freudian psychoanalysis, as well as on object relations and Jungian psychology. He received his master's in clinical psychology from Antioch University and his bachelor's in history from Brown University. His personal fascination with symbolic depictions of the gay psyche in science fiction and fantasy films has led to essays published in the *Los Angeles Times*, *White Crane Journal*, *Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide*, and in the anthology, *Finding the Force of the Star Wars Franchise: Fans, Merchandise, and Critics*.

John Shelton Lawrence, PhD, showed early behavioral disorders stemming from encounters with fantasy superheroes. He had a kicking tantrum when the news of Franklin Roosevelt's death interrupted the Lone Ranger's radio show. As a second grader, he donned a home-made cape and broke a neighbor's telephone line while leaping from a shed. His understanding of superpowers matured, however, when he read *Mad Magazine's* "Superduperman" in the early 1950s. That teenage skepticism grew into a philosophical teaching career, resulting in his current position as professor of philosophy, emeritus, at Morningside College in Iowa. With Robert Jewett, he developed the suspicion that America's righteous stance in the world often projects the story of the selfless crusader who can cleanly uses superpowers to rescue the innocent. They jointly authored *The American Monomyth* (1977, 1988), *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002, winner of the John Cawelti Award for the Best Book on American Culture), and *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil* (2003). He wrote "The 100 Million\$ Men" on presidential action heroes and prepared a presidential filmography for *Hollywood's White House* (2003). For *Hollywood's West* (2005), he wrote "The Lone Ranger and the Adult Legacy of the Juvenile Western." He has teamed with Matthew W. Kapell to edit *Finding the Force of the Star Wars Franchise: Fans, Merchandise, and Critics* (2006). He lives in Berkeley, California.

Harry Livesay, LCSW, is a licensed clinical social worker in Rosenberg, Texas. He currently works for the Memorial Hermann Lamar School-Based Health Centers, where he provides individual and family counseling services to noninsured and underserved students of the Lamar Consolidated Independent School District. A clinical social worker and therapist since 1997, he developed an interest in therapeutic play with superheroes in the "Silver Age" of the 1960s as a first grader who was labeled as having severe learning difficulties and assigned to a low-level reading group. With the help of a worried, supportive,

and innovative parent, Harry was introduced to the universe of comic books—a place of colorful covers showing powerful and confident women and men who live in a world of exciting adventures, vexing villains, and an infinite universe of new words and ideas. In his work as a therapist for a school-based clinic, Harry continues to share the benefits of superhero play with his clients by providing them a place to discover their own special powers and abilities and the opportunity to gain the same power and confidence through their interest in and enjoyment of superheroes.

William McNulty, LCSW-C, RPT-S, is a licensed clinical social worker and Registered Play Therapist Supervisor. He works in Rockville, Maryland, at the Reginald S. Lourie Center for Infants and Young Children as a therapist in the outpatient clinic and Therapeutic Nursery Programs. Superheroes have always been an important part of his life, first as a young child taking on the characteristics of superheroes while playing dress-up with friends and now professionally facilitating the play of clients who use superheroes in healing ways.

Cory A. Nelson, LPC, QMHP, is a licensed professional counselor in the state of South Dakota. He is currently working with adult males at the Mike Durfee State Prison in Springfield and doing contract work with children and adolescents for Lewis and Clark Behavioral Health in Yankton. Nelson got his first superhero action figures at age 3 and has been collecting comic books for more than 20 years. He first became interested in integrating comic books into therapy by using them as bibliotherapy with victims of abuse and neglect. As he continued to work with children, Nelson developed “What Would Superman Do?” as a way to help clients identify and incorporate superheroic traits into their own personalities and lives.

Jeffrey Pickens, PhD, is an associate professor of psychology in the Department of Social Sciences and Counseling at St. Thomas University in Miami, Florida. He received his BA and MA from the University of Florida, his PhD in Developmental Psychology from Florida International University, and his postdoctoral training at the University of Miami, School of Medicine, Mailman Center for Child Development. He received postgraduate training in attachment theory and evaluation as well as play therapy. Jeff is a lifelong Trekkie. He wishes to thank his wife, Frances, for her interest, support, and assistance in writing his chapter.

Robert Poole, BA, is the unit coordinator of Program 1, “The Field of Dreams,” at the Onarga Academy in Illinois for 14 years where

he started as a Case Manager. Robert holds a bachelor's degree in psychology from Eureka College, alma mater of President Ronald Reagan. Growing up in a small town, Robert cultivated an active imagination, as most young boys do, by playing army with neighbor kids and wanting to be a firefighter. Robert sees his superheroes as those who defend freedom, protect and help their neighbors in need, and instill healthy morals and values. His father is a former soldier and retired volunteer firefighter, his mother is the all-American stay-at-home mom, his sister is a nurse, and his wife works with Alzheimer's patients. Robert, too, is a volunteer firefighter. His superhero interests are of the human kind, and he strives to teach clients the value of real-life superheroes and role models.

Robert J. Porter, PhD, was involved in academic and clinical work at the University of New Orleans and the Louisiana State University Medical School for more than 25 years before moving to Tampa to pursue clinical interests in 1997. His clinical and research work has included speech and language, medical psychology, the relationship between psychological disorders, trauma, stress, and the body's physiology, and child and adolescent psychology. He was a principle architect of the Applied Biopsychology and Applied Developmental PhD programs at the University of New Orleans where he taught a wide variety of graduate and undergraduate courses. He currently teaches, on an occasional basis, at the University of Tampa and at Argosy University. Porter is internationally recognized for his work in psychology and brain function, biopsychology, and nonlinear chaos systems theory. "Dr. Bob," as his younger patients call him, has a private practice in Tampa where his primary responsibility is working with patients of all ages at Patients First Family Medicine. His interest in superheroes dates to his early childhood in rural New Hampshire where he would tie a towel around his neck and wonder whether he could fly off the barn roof. He says he still wonders.

Karen Robertie, MS, LCPC, is the clinical supervisor of Program 1, "The Field of Dreams," at Onarga Academy in Illinois. She has been employed by Nexus-Onarga Academy for more than 8 years. A licensed clinical therapist, she has almost 20 years experience working with survivors of trauma. She is currently working on her play therapy certification. When that is complete, she plans to begin working on her art therapy certification. Although her knowledge of superheroes is limited to her childhood desire to fly like Superman, and an adolescent crush on Robin, the Boy Wonder, Robertie later grew up to realize the power of creativity. Like her alter ego, "Create," she not only enjoys

being creative, but she also enjoys assisting others in realizing their own creativity and expanding their horizons. Under her tutelage as clinical supervisor, the Field of Dreams has implemented and expanded the expressive arts treatment modality. Robertie is just a kid herself and is fond of saying, “Treatment can be fun!” and “Anything can be a treatment lesson!” She is thrilled to have found a profession that allows her to merge all of her favorite things.

Jennifer Mendoza Sayers, PhD, trained in behavioral psychology at the University of California—Los Angeles, in humanistic psychology at Saybrook Institute, and in neuropsychology at Fielding Institute. She has taught psychology courses at the University of Texas and Barry University in North Miami, Florida. She has published two home studies and other evaluation instruments. Sayers has served as president of the Broward County Psychological Association and is currently in private practice specializing in clinical neuropsychology with children and adults. Her interest in using superheroes in therapy stemmed from her sons’ interests in comic books. Debating the premise that comic characters are literature, helped germinate the idea that these characters have depth applicable to therapy. She currently lives in Ellenton, Florida, with her family.

Patty Scanlon, LCSW, BCD, RPT-S, is in clinical practice in Indianapolis, Indiana. In 2003, she opened PlayJourneys, Inc., a private practice specializing in the use of play and sandplay therapy with children, adolescents, adults, and families. She specializes in the treatment of trauma and abuse, divorce, and autism spectrum disorders. Scanlon served on the board of the Indiana Association for Play Therapy from 1997 to 2001 and as InAPT President 1999–2000. Since then, she has been involved as chair of various committees of the Association for Play Therapy. She enjoys gardening and playing with her four dogs, Shiva, Erin, Kali, and Plato. As a young girl, she first attempted superhero flight off the side of the bathtub, using the shower curtain as a cape. She believes the curtain was too flimsy to fly. Her favorite superhero is the Cowardly Lion in the *Wizard of Oz*.

Ryan Weidenbenner, MS, LCPC, is the senior sexuality therapist working with children with sexual behavior problems at the Onarga Academy in Illinois; he has worked there for the past 9 years. He holds two master’s degrees from Illinois State University, one in psychology and one in counseling, or as he likes to refer to them, theory and practice. He is also a graduate of Wabash College, one of the nation’s few remaining all-male liberal arts colleges where he majored in psychology and English while minoring in speech and theater. These

creative influences are readily apparent in his therapeutic work with the Onarga clients. A lifelong fan of comic books, role-playing games, and horror and science fiction film as well as other traditional adolescent interests, Weidenbenner has been instrumental in developing creative therapeutic interventions for a program milieu, which has become represented more and more by clients with significant deficits within their cognitive, emotional, and social development.

Carmela Wenger, LMFT, RPT-S, is a licensed marriage, family, and child therapist; a Registered Play Therapist Supervisor, and a California Association of Marriage and Family Approved Supervisor, who is currently in private practice. She has pursued a career-long interest in traumatized clients who are attachment challenged through her work with Children's Home Society, the Humboldt Family Service Center (HFSC), and the Headstart and TAPPEN programs in California. It was during her tenure at HFSC that she authored "The Suitcase Story: A Technique for Children in Out of Home Placement" published in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. Wenger authors the "Ask the Experts" column for the California Association of Play Therapy newsletter, teaches seminars in play therapy and attachment-based treatment of adults, and provides clinical consultation for Youth Services Bureau Shelter and Launch Pad. Through her work, she has come to appreciate that the most resilient children are those who identify with the rescuer rather than the victim role, and as a result, she has developed an appreciation for the diagnostic utility and healing powers of superheroes in therapeutic work.

Foreword

Finding Ourselves in Our Superheroes¹

What is the social meaning of these supermen, superwomen, super-lovers, super-boys, supergirls, super-ducks, super-mice, super-magicians, super-safecrackers? How did Nietzsche get into the nursery?

—Dr. Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954, p. 15)

In my early years . . . at Bellevue Hospital when we were hard put to find techniques for exploring the child's emotional life, his mind, his ways of reacting, when the child was separated from the home and brought to us, . . . I found the comics early on one of the most valuable means of carrying on such examinations.

—Dr. Lauretta Bender, psychiatrist, and editorial board adviser to Superman comics (U.S. Senate, 1954, p. 152)

These contrary assertions by Drs. Bender and Wertham recall a time when superheroes had become public policy issues. Crime-themed comic books—even some featuring the perpetually beloved Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman—were a national concern. J. Edgar Hoover for the FBI, the American Medical Association, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the National Council of Juvenile Court Judges, the Catholic Legion of Decency, and the New York State legislature had all investigated comic books and at least partially condemned them (Beaty, 2005, p. 127; Nyberg, 1998, pp. 44–45). Cincinnati's Committee on the

¹ The author acknowledges valuable suggestions from Eric D. Lawrence, William Doty, Matthew Wilhelm Kapell, Roger Kaufmann, Carter Kelly, Marty Knepper, and Bernard Wittenberg.

Evaluation of Comic Books had reviewed 418 titles, finding the Lone Ranger, the Marvel Family, and Superman “objectionable” and Wonder Woman “very objectionable” (U.S. Senate, 1954, pp. 40–43).

Reflecting the grassroots fervor of the 1940s and 1950s, the *New York Times* reported comic book roundups and burnings instigated by the Catholic Legion of Decency and other groups (Catholic Students, p. 18; “Norwich Drive on Comic Books,” p. 70). Public passions eventually took a national policy focus during 3 days of the 1954 Kefauver hearings on comic books and juvenile delinquency, a venue where psychiatrists delivered expert testimony for U.S. senators (Kihss, p. 29). Both Lauretta Bender and Fredric Wertham testified, disagreeing about every issue they were asked to address.

The engagement of clinical professions with the evolutionary content of children’s consciousness then fit a pattern that has become far more recognizable now. Pulp novels, films, jazz, rock music, and girlie magazines had stimulated public anxieties before the 1950s; later cultural phenomena such as television, video games, rap music, electronic chat rooms, Internet surfing, and text messaging became new flashpoints for adult fear (Cohen, 1997). The great youth-focused cultural questions of the early 1950s were these: Are we, their elders, selling our next generation mind-poisoning fantasies? Are we granting access to technologies that will in turn endanger us—or even civilization itself? Psychiatrists, please tell us before it is too late!! At that time, the counseling professions lacked a unified, reassuring prescription, just as they do now.

Wertham shouted a resounding “yes” in response to these distressed questions, and for him responsible citizenship demanded an eradication of the superhero genre and, indeed, of all comic books from the lives of children. Because he did not believe in censorship for adults, he was willing to settle for age restrictions pegged at 15 years to keep the broadly defined “crime comics” from the hands of children.

Far more quietly and pragmatically, Bender said, “No, not at all” in response to questions about the alleged harms. She believed that therapy could not ignore what had increasingly become a part of the child’s experience. With fellow child psychiatrist, Dr. Reginald S. Lourie, she had presciently remarked in 1941, “Anyone in contact with children of school age, and particularly those working closely with children, sooner or later becomes conscious of the extent to which the constant reading of comic books has invaded their daily activities, and play” (p. 541). Bender had accepted that “invasion” as a tool of therapy.

The conflict between Wertham and Bender, two of the best known practitioners and children’s advocates of their period, is instructive in helping us frame the contributions of this fine book, one that advances the art of understanding the symptomatic expression of conflicts expressed by

superhero fantasies. As Lawrence Rubin's introductory chapter makes clear, the contributors lean toward Bender as they chart a path for exploring the child consciousness of today.

FREDRIC WERTHAM AND LAURETTA BENDER

In the 1954 Kefauver hearings, Drs. Fredric Wertham and Lauretta Bender were the star psychiatric witnesses. Thinking superficially, one might have thought that they would agree about comic books and superheroes. After all, their careers show so many striking parallels, with a common mentor (Adolph Meyer) and appointments at identical facilities (Phipps Psychiatric Clinic at the Johns Hopkins University, Bellevue Hospital, and the medical faculty of New York University). They both committed themselves to children's psychiatry in New York City and the problems of juvenile delinquency.

Addressing children's superhero fantasies, Bender published her first professional article on children in 1941 and elaborated her understanding several times thereafter in journals and books. In addition to having scientific stature among her peers, she, like Wertham, had a flair for making her work known to public media. In the period between 1935 and 1988, the *New York Times* printed dozens of articles about her discoveries and innovative treatment methods. Just one example was her partnership with artist Bernard Sanders: they collaborated in teaching Bellevue children to express their emotions through drawing (Shultz, 1937, p. N6).²

Wertham, who also based his views about superheroes on encounters with clinical populations in New York City, began to publish his first articles on the subject in 1948, typically bypassing professional journals. Because of his level of personal anger, he preferred the role of "social psychiatrist" and directed his appeals directly to the public in popular periodicals such as *Saturday Review of Literature*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Ladies Home Journal*.³ He sharply disagreed with Bender, often quoting her or like-minded colleagues in his writings without identifying the specific sources. He simply called her or anyone of similar opinion "an expert" or "one of the experts." This was quite unlike his practice of citing persons by name if they agreed with him. Aware that his deviation from the scientific style of attribution would be puzzling, Wertham created an elaborate explanation in his *Seduction of the Innocent*, a book published

² She was apparently a genial collaborator, her bibliography, by 1954, listed 11 coauthors for pieces on childhood symptom diagnosis and treatment (see Bender, 1954, pp. 261–262).

³ See Beaty (2005, pp. 218–222) for a complete listing of Wertham's articles.

without source listings or footnotes. His words betray a conspiratorial mind-set in approaching anyone who disagreed with his interpretation of the superhero phenomenon.

From magazines, newspapers and the radio, and from the endorsements on so many comic books, one may get the wrong impression that there are many scientific experts defending comic books. Actually the brunt of the defense is borne by a mere handful of experts. Their names occur over and over again. They are connected with well-known institutions, such as universities, hospitals, child-study associations or clinics. That carries enormous weight with professional people and, of course, even more so with casual lay readers and parents all over the country. In their actual effect the experts for the defense represent a team. This, of course, does not mean that they work as a team. They work individually. But their way of reasoning, their apologetic attitude for the industry and its products, their conclusions—and even their way of stating them—are much alike. So it is possible to do full justice to them by discussing them as a team rather than individually. There is little danger of quoting them out of context, for what they have to say is so cut and dried that one quotation from the writing of one expert fits just as well into that of another. (pp. 220–221)

But why was the conspiracy of this “mere handful of experts” opposing his views so pernicious? This takes us to the heart of Wertham’s view of the superhero.

In his book *The Seduction of the Innocent* and in his other popular writings of the period, *everything* associated with superheroes was maligned, including the ads for bodybuilding, breast enhancers, BB guns, and knives. Wertham conceded no merit whatsoever to the comic book. “Comic books have nothing to do with drama, with art or literature” (p. 241); they are merely “temptation, corruption, and demoralization” (p. 55). Because he believed that comics were calculatingly designed to “seduce the innocent,” he saw no evidence “that comic books come from the ‘unconscious’” (p. 244); thus, they lacked any expressive value in the lives of children, as Bender and Lourie had contended (p. 46). Notwithstanding his reactionary laments, Wertham was a precursor to feminists who deplored the victim status of women in entertainment media and the persistent linkage of violence and eroticism (p. 32), yet he intensely disliked seeing women in comic books “placed on an equal footing with men” (p. 234) as Bender and Lourie had approvingly noted (p. 549). And like civil rights advocates who later deplored the racial and ethnic stereotypes pervading popular culture, he believed that the comics promoted “race hatred” because they presented a world of athletically heroic White men pitted against “inferior people: natives, primitives, savages, ‘ape men,’

Negroes, Jews, Indians, Italians, Slavs, Chinese and Japanese” (p. 101). Adopting the language of Cold War patriotism to characterize comic book creators as reinforcers of America’s racism, he told a legislative committee in New York that “the crime comic book industry is one of the most subversive groups in the country today (“Psychiatrist Asks,” 1950, p. 50).

But it is the paradigmatic Superman that Wertham repeatedly denounced and used to define the subversive evil within U.S. culture: America’s children “have been nourished (or rather poisoned) by the endless repetition of Superman stories.” The toxicity stems from the fact that Superman is essentially “fascist” because he embodies “the Nietzsche-Nazi myth of the exceptional man who is beyond good and evil” (p. 97).

Here one can surely sympathize with Bender’s complaint to the Ke-fauver committee about Wertham’s ignorance. Not only was he culturally tone deaf to the portrayals of Superman’s strength—labeling him, for example, as “a symbol of violent race superiority” (p. 381). Wertham was equally obtuse in his application of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, accepting the Nazis’ deceptive equation of *Übermensch* with the so-called master race. However, Nietzsche’s icy ideal of self-transcendence is hardly a good marker because Superman so clearly stands within the pantheon of his own era’s American superheroes. He acts as does the radio’s Lone Ranger, selflessly restrained and precisely calibrating his often gentle strength, which he uses to bring evildoers to the doorways of the sheriff or police. And, above all, in his Clark Kent persona, Superman is depicted as lonely and insecure, as a teenage nerd who timidly craves his first date. It was because of his essentially Boy Scout demeanor and his iconic status as champion of “truth, justice, and the American way” that Superman could be used in World War II Bond drives. Wertham surely knew but did not acknowledge that Superman, Batman, and others had used their covers to promote the sale of war bonds during World War II (“War Bonds”). And speaking to the fascist themes in the superheroes, how could Wertham, a Jew, have failed to consider that comic artists such as Jacob Kurtzberg (aka Jack Kirby) had created a Captain America who presciently slugged Hitler’s chin on the cover of *Captain America* in March 1941—before the United States had entered the war in Europe? And that Kirby had served as a combat infantryman of Patton’s Third Army in France?

It is through such clear cultural identifications with America’s causes and values that children are encouraged to feel a sense of social solidarity when they experience the superhero fantasy. Such identification explains why so many adults feel comfortable in allowing their children to consume fantasies that Wertham treated as merely fascist atrocities. The fantasies of selfless, perfectly calibrated power may become malignant when translated into stances for domestic crime or foreign policy challenges. But the

notion of benevolent, overwhelming force is certainly less a contamination than it is a continuation of the “redeemer nation” ideal.⁴

One way of measuring Wertham’s ignorance of American mythology is to remind ourselves about the lives of some of the comics creators. In his *Men of Tomorrow* book dealing with the birth of the superheroes in the Golden Age of comics, Gerard Jones (2004) described several principals of the industry who had fought fascism in Europe and given to Jewish philanthropies. They, of all people, felt betrayed and wounded by Dr. Wertham (p. 274). The grievance is still felt in the comics community today, which often displays the kind of visceral contempt for him that he expressed toward superheroes, comic books, and their creators.

Anyone who reads Wertham’s anecdotes about his clinical sessions with comics-addicted children may get the sense that he is looking past their experience to locate the evil that he must destroy through social reform. He did in fact conceive of himself foremost as a “social psychiatrist,” who refused to locate pathological causes in patients themselves (Beaty, 2005, pp. 18–47). He saw himself as having clean hands because neither he nor his associates in fighting comics “got any money, ever” (Wertham, p. 82). It must have been difficult for him to contain his rage against producers in those clinical sessions where children confessed their corruption by comics and the ways in which their crimes merely copied the scripts they had learned (Wertham, p. 275).

BENDER AND THE SUPERHERO

By contrast, Laretta Bender presented herself in the Kefauver hearings as a paragon of therapeutic calmness. Rather than making one unitary judgment about the value and effect of superhero comics, she saw highly variable realities for different children. She volunteered that “the less intelligent children and those who have . . . less reading capacity collect the most comics” (U.S. Senate, 1954, p. 152). On the issue of destructive imitations of behavior, she testified that a few children might be provoked to acts of delinquency as a result of encountering fantasies (p. 159). She also related that children in her ward at Bellevue had made Superman capes for themselves in occupational therapy—followed by an epidemic of “bumps” as children wore them and leaped from radiators or bookcases. It was this clinical experience that led her to advise National Comics Publications *not* to market uniforms for children (U.S. Senate, 1954, pp. 157–158). As for children’s worried reactions to fantasy in

⁴ See Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil* (2003, pp. 55–78).

popular culture more generally, she reported that the Frankenstein monster films and Disney's "disturbing mother figures" proved far more troublesome. "The mothers were always killed or sent to the insane asylums in Walt Disney's movies" (p. 153). Because children identified with the characters who lost their mothers, the consequence could be nightmarish fears.

Bender believed that negative effects in superhero materials could sometimes be moderated by appropriate adult decisions, and, even if not, were outweighed, in her estimation, by the benefits of superhero fantasies. She felt that many children could resonate with "the concept of the body image and what can happen to it under different emotional circumstances," directing admiration to "the uncanny capacity for the script writers to delve down into their own unconscious and dig up these problems and depict them" (U.S. Senate, 1954, p. 160). She believed that the materials fulfilled many "psychological needs of the child," dealing experimentally as they did with "problems of the relationship of the self to physical and social reality," offering "continuity by a central character who . . . invites identification," and fantasies of conflict "with good ultimately triumphing over evil" (Bender, 1944, p. 226). In identifying with figures such as Clark Kent/Superman, the child's ego could expand, becoming "strong, brave, good" (p. 230). In the "girl characters," Bender saw an engagement "with the problem of passivity-activity, femininity-masculinity, or aggression and submission, and have dealt with these in as modern a way as the latest psychoanalytic studies." Although she did not find Wonder Woman's all-purpose lariat convincing as a symbol of power, she thought her "a good try at solving the very timely problems of the girl's concept of herself as a woman and her relationship to the world" (pp. 230-231).

Apart from questions about superhero representations and their effects, she found access to the superhero contents in children's minds a valuable part of therapeutic practice. In her article with Reginald Lourie (1941), she presented four clinical cases with children aged 10, 11, and 12 who constructively played with superhero themes in dealing with issues of personal boundaries, wavering superegos, and the transcendence of personal fears. One case involving a girl named Helen, age 11, is a concession that a comic book plot—amid many other stress factors, including grand mal seizures and her first menstrual period—precipitated a "state of great agitation" (pp. 543-544). In that case, the comic book plot helped the therapist understand the circumstances of family life that had produced such severe pressure for the child. In these cases, one gets a sense of a flexible, caring intelligence that recognizes the role of superhero themes and seizes them as opportunities to understand, and to perhaps help, in healing.

WHERE AMERICAN CULTURE WENT THEREAFTER

Every observer knows that Dr. Wertham lost his battle against the superheroes. He understood neither his adopted culture nor his own limitations in trying to change it. Although he did succeed in shaming the “true-crime” horror comics out of business, the superheroes that he loathed thrived and survived. The Congress that invited Wertham’s expert opinion took no legislative action, ultimately leaning in Dr. Bender’s direction when its posthearings Interim Report of 1955 stated, under its summary heading “Excessive reading of crime and horror comics is considered symptomatic of emotional pathology,” reached this psychiatric conclusion: “it appears to be the consensus of the experts that comic-book reading is not the cause of emotional maladjustment in children” (Senate Report, 1955, p. 16). Rather than legislating, Congress relied instead on the industry’s self-regulating Comics Code Authority, an outcome that Wertham called a betrayal of American families by Senator Kefauver (Beaty, pp. 163–64).

The superheroes themselves, like other market commodities, have had since that period their ups and downs and perpetually reinvent themselves to renew their appeal. But in recent decades they have become a dominant presence in American entertainment. Blockbuster films such as the Christopher Reeve Superman series, the *Spider-Man*, *The Hulk*, *Star Wars*, and *The Fantastic Four*, as well as television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*, all play on the big screen or on television and then are replayed in personal DVD players that are now common in children’s bedrooms. And in ways that Wertham could not imagine at the time, the superheroes evolved culturally, psychologically, and politically. Superheroes of assorted ethnicities entered a landscape that had been dominated by Caucasian men. DC, Marvel Comics, and smaller companies have developed an assortment of black superheroes.⁵ The young Powerpuff Girls “save the world before bedtime.”⁶ Darth Vader, one of the most widely known figures in history, is a morally dual figure who wavers between impulses to dominate or destroy and his willingness to be loved. The Hulk character, especially in Ang Lee’s film rendition of 2003, depicts the tragic consequence of great physical power in someone who becomes emotionally and socially isolated. With the introduction of Spider-Man in 1962, the superhero became more introspective

⁵ Like so many other superhero phenomena, they are well displayed on the Internet in the Museum of Black Superheroes: <http://www.blacksuperhero.com>.

⁶ “Saving the world before bedtime” was the tagline for the 2002 movie, *The Powerpuff Girls*. There is also a board game produced by Milton Bradley called *Saving the World Before Bedtime*.

and neurotically beset by normal problems—poverty, unemployment, and a sense of guilt about his uncle’s death among these issues.

These figures, and their ever-proliferating companions, who represent so many different ethnicities and statuses in our society, are surely subtle enough in their escapades to engage the minds and emotions of children. The larger cultural questions about whether our culture needs so many savior figures and how their symbolic values collide with or augment democracy are worth debating. But for the therapeutic, I vote with Dr. Bender, as do the contributors to this volume. Because superheroes are on our mind, let’s talk about them and see where the discussion takes us. There is also something democratic about a therapy that can respond empathically to the experiences that patients enjoy and feel that they understand emotionally. Healthful insights may lie on the horizon.

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Preface

Like scores of children, I spent countless hours following the exploits of a legion of colorful superheroes. Each had powers and abilities far beyond those of anyone I knew. Many nights, while concealed beneath my blankets, flashlight in one hand and comic book in the other, I was mesmerized and wondered silently and privately. What would it be like to have X-ray vision, to retreat to a secret cave in my own basement, to ensnare villains in a powerful web of my own making, to fly? And if somehow I did manage to obtain such powers, how ever would I conceal them from parents, teachers, and friends while confronting the daily rigors of childhood—all in a single bound?

Although I was to travel the long and treacherous road to adulthood, science fiction, fantasy, and outer space, with all of its strange inhabitants, was always a friendly rest stop for me. I journeyed with James Kirk and the crew of the U.S.S. *Enterprise*, eagerly anticipated each installment of the Star Wars saga, and ravenously consumed every new superhero television show and movie. Now that I am grown with children, I can relive my passion for all of it.

I am reminded of an old *MAD Magazine* cartoon strip that chronicled a boy's academic journey. Inspired by an encounter with his grandfather's pigs whose nasty smell and beady eyes upset him, it began with a second grade "What I did on my summer vacation" report. Although his spelling and grammar improved over the years, the boy's fascination with that early childhood experience lead him to revisit the topic in evolving venues from a high school term paper tie-in to a *Tale of Two Cities*, to a college introduction to psychology analysis of the long-term effects of childhood trauma (being stared at by smelly pigs). The crowning jewel in his academic crown was a PhD dissertation relating swine vision to behavioral disturbances in rural residents. You get the idea!

Was the little boy in the above scenario attempting to sublimate and thus overcome his childhood pig-related trauma through scholarly and professional pursuits? Am I somehow guilty of a similar intellectual opportunism—at the reader’s expense? Perhaps, perhaps not! As an academician and clinician, I have always found ways to integrate my passion for popular culture into my work, and it seemed natural to turn my attention to superheroes. Am I, just like this little boy, trying to work through, make up for, overcome, or resolve as yet unfinished childhood business? Is this why I have become a therapist—and for that matter, and of all things, a play therapist. Perhaps, perhaps not!

Far more interesting than my career motivation is the reason behind this book. I believe, as did Joseph Campbell, in the power of myth. I believe, as did Rollo May, that cultures cry for myth. I believe that today’s children need heroes, not only their parents but also heroes with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortals that stretch into the very recesses of their imaginations and the worlds of possibility—and impossibility. I believe that adults who value myths and legends of heroes and superheroes are the carriers of those stories. And finally, I believe in childhood!

Lawrence C. Rubin

Acknowledgments

This book is dedicated to my children, Zachary and Rebecca, who are beginning to sense their own powers and who bring out the superhero in me. This book is also dedicated to Randi, my wife, who has drawn me from my fortress of solitude. And finally, this book is dedicated to my parents, Esther and Herb, who bought me superhero comics when I was a child and had the good sense to save them for me over the years.

I thank Sheri W. Sussman of Springer Publishing Company, LLC who was willing to take a chance with this volume, one very different from those she has previously edited. I also thank John Shelton Lawrence for our fascinating musings on the subjects of superheroes and culture, as well as Sandi Frick-Helms who supported me in writing on the topic of superheroes in psychotherapy. I am, of course, indebted to the clinicians who have contributed to this volume as well as to all of the clients whose stories made it possible.

S E C T I O N 1

**Traditional
Superheroes in
Counseling and
Play Therapy**

Introduction: Look, Up in the Sky! An Introduction to the Use of Superheroes in Psychotherapy

Lawrence C. Rubin

In the safety of the playroom, a 5-year-old carefully divides superheroes by color into the forces of good and evil, their impending clash once again dramatizing the tension and confusion left in the wake of her parent's divorce.

An 8-year-old expresses powerful and aggressive fantasies in the form of an all-powerful "psycho-monster," whose efforts to destroy the universe are vanquished by a legion of benevolent and nurturing superheroines.

A reflective 11-year-old, fascinated by the relationship between Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker, carefully composes a new episode in the Star Wars saga, attempting to rewrite the history and outcome of his own adoption.

A depressed, substance-abusing 24-year-old law student labors to add another detail to the costume of his ever-evolving, alter-ego superhero, Courageous Cal, a cross between the Incredible Hulk and the Michelin Man.

—Excerpted from author's clinical casework (2000–2005)

Of the various theories, tools, and techniques available to the therapist, one of the most powerful resources for self-understanding, growth, and

healing may well be fantasy. It is the metaphoric place where problems of the past and present meet the possibilities of the future, in conflicts both minor and epic. It is the place in which children and adults escape from but also make sense of their worlds by creating and then living their stories—their own personal mythologies. As is often the case with the world around them, this inner place is typically populated by villains who hurt and heroes who help. Most special among the latter is the superhero—the unique, larger-than-life figure who by virtue of gift, accident, calling, or legacy possesses powers and abilities far beyond those of mortals. With the advent of mass media and technology in the early 20th century, superheroes have become a mainstay in popular and American culture. Given their endurance, ubiquity, popularity, and appeal, it is not surprising that superheroes have found their way into the fantasies and metaphoric stories of children, adolescents, and adults as well as the therapist's office. This book is written for those interested in how these superhero fantasies inhabit the minds of our clients, both the young and the youthful, and the accommodations that therapists need to make in recognizing and incorporating them into their clinical work with a broad range of clients.

IMAGINATION, FANTASY, AND FANTASY PLAY

With the exception of fantasies that isolate rather than aid socialization, impair rather than strengthen reality functioning, or arrest rather than enhance development, fantasy and imaginal activities have long been regarded as windows into and contributing forces in cognitive, social, and emotional growth.

From a cognitive perspective, fantasy play, with its reliance on internal representation and symbolism, has been linked to the growing child's ability to assimilate experience and in so doing to develop a sense of understanding and mastery (Piaget, 1962). For Piaget symbolic play "provides the child with the live, dynamic, individual language indispensable for the expression of his subjective feelings for which collective language alone is inadequate" (p. 167). Along similar lines, Erikson (1963) suggested that fantasy allows the child, freed from the constraints of reality, to alter and experiment with otherwise unalterable constructs such as bodily limits, gravity time, causality, and even identity. In keeping with Piaget's and Erikson's cognitive-developmental views, Sawyer and Horm-Wingerd (1993) suggested that whereas object-dependent (sensorimotor) play allows children to explore the properties of their physical world, object-independent (symbolic-representational) play, allows for social interaction and problem solving.

Vygotsky (1978) regarded fantasy play as a window into children's burgeoning understanding of their current reality, the limitations of their abilities within that reality, and as a stage on which they can experiment with competencies and understandings beyond the constraints of their intellect and experience. For Vygotsky, although imagination, fantasy, and symbolic play liberate a child from the constraints of objects, experience, and the immediate perceptual field, they also create a "zone of proximal development" in which a "child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior . . . as though he were a head taller than himself" (p. 102). In the context of superhero fantasy play, which is addressed in detail later, Vygotsky would likely argue that the child was exploring complex and as yet incomprehensible roles, rules, and concepts such as strength, power, justice, and morality.

Exploring the similarities between fairy tales and fantasy, Bettelheim (1975) noted that "fantasy fills a huge gap in a child's understanding which [is] due to immaturity of his thinking and lack of pertinent information" (p. 61). Bruner (1986) went one step further than these other cognitivists by studying the relations among imaginary play, language, and social development. For him, play was intimately connected to (social) problem solving, with the added distinction of being enjoyable, particularly when a partner or caring observer was present. He noted,

thought and imagination begin in the form of dialogue with a partner . . . the development of thought may be in large measure determined by the opportunity for dialogue, with the dialogue becoming internal and capable of running off inside one's head on its own. (p. 82)

Fantasy and imaginal activity are as profound in their adaptive impact in the social and emotional domains as they are on intellectual development. After observing a toddler engage in the creative enactment of the separation experience, Sigmund Freud (1920/1955) noted that "in their play, children repeat everything that has made a great impression on them in real life, and that in doing so, they abstract the strength of the impression and make themselves a master of the situation" (p. 17). Later, his daughter Anna Freud (1965, 1966) suggested that fantasy play could be considered both a means of working through intrapsychic (sexual and aggressive) conflicts and a form of regression in the service of psychic development. For her, fantasy play was also a tool, no less important than dream interpretation and free association for understanding how the child made sense of parents and family. Fantasies and fantasy play are, in a sense, externalized, action-based dramas that, although anchored in the present, provide the child with an opportunity to revisit past situations and problems, as well as venture into the future of possibilities (Miller, 1974). They are time machines for exploring inner and outer worlds.

Fantasy and imaginal play also provide the child with tension reduction that is often associated with conflict resolution. By structuring and restructuring social, moral, and emotional dilemmas in the imagination, children gain relief that comes with mastery, even though that mastery may be fleeting. For Landreth (2002), fantasy play is a safe and controlled way to express emotions, to assimilate novel experiences, and to distance oneself from otherwise painful events. Along similar lines, Irwin (1983) argued that children's symbolic play provides a means with which to understand better how they view themselves and others and express their worries, wishes, defenses, and worldview. In his treatise on the importance of fairy tales in child development, Bettelheim (1975) suggested that fantasy "provides a favorable solution to present predicaments because with hope for the future established, the present difficulty is no longer insufferable" (p. 125). He further noted that "while the fantasy is unreal, the good feelings it gives us about ourselves and our future are real, and these real good feelings are what we need to sustain us" (p. 126). Even violent fantasies and aggressive fantasy play have been regarded as important outlets for anxiety, a means of feeling stronger, and a way of moving children to new levels of cognitive and emotional development (Brody, 2005; Jones, 2002).

As this discussion of fantasy and imaginal play suggests, there is no one consistent function of fantasy and imagination. They serve the developing person on many levels and for many years, even beyond the point in life when fantasy is subordinated to so-called mature logic and more rational problem-solving processes. Vygotsky nicely summed up the issue by stating that "the old adage that a [preschool] child's play is imagination in action must be reversed: we can [also] say that imagination in adolescence and school children is play without action" (p. 93).

The Relationship Between Fantasy and Metaphor

Taking Vygotsky's notion on the relation between play and imagination one step further and into the realm of adulthood, it can be argued that metaphor accomplishes for the adult what fantasy does for the child. A metaphor, simply described, is one thing expressed as another. This is analogous to the symbol in fantasy play. During play, the child's block becomes a train, a pet morphs into a jungle beast, and, with outstretched arms, a bicycle ride is magically transformed into a jet-propelled adventure. For the adult fighting a progressive illness, searching for identity, trapped in an unsatisfying relationship, or attempting to balance priorities, a metaphor can communicate rich insights and generate possible solutions.

In the literature, metaphor has been described as a form of symbolic language that “allows more abstract ideas (like relationships) [to be] understood in terms of more concrete experiences (like journeys),” (Wickman et al., 1999, p. 389), as a tool that allows us to “explore and expand current experience into previously unrecognized possibilities” (Lyddon et al., 2001, p. 270), and as a “small unit in the narrative mode of thinking [that] helps us discover not only what happened but also the cognitive and affective significance those events have to the person” (Sims, 2003, p. 530). Taken together, these conceptualizations suggest that, like fantasy play and imagination for children, metaphor for adults is a potential resource through which they can connect with inner processes as well as with an attentive audience; travel between past, present, and future; and express and possibly alter their self-perceptions and worldviews. Furthermore, as play has been regarded the language of childhood and toys its words (Ginott, 1961; Landreth, 2002), metaphor has been considered an important mode of communication for adults that makes use of symbols, stories, and ceremonies to facilitate new patterns of thoughts and feelings (Combs & Freedman, 1990). Suffice it to say that as a potential vehicle for communication, insight, transformation, and growth, metaphor is as limitless as a child’s imagination.

THE SUPERHERO FANTASY

The superhero has captured the American imagination for nearly three-quarters of a century. A mere 3 years after the introduction of Superman, psychoanalysts Loretta Bender and Reginald Lourie (1941) explored the appeal and constructive therapeutic applications of superheroes in clinical work with children. They argued that as a mythological and folkloric icon, the superhero had a definite place in the playroom by helping children to deal with the real dangers of the world. Their young clients used Superman-based fantasy play for a variety of purposes, including for personal protection, as a barrier against antisocial behavior, as an ego ideal and a problem solver. A few years later, Bender, who had been monitoring the impact of comics on her clients, came to appreciate the power of the symbol of the superhero to “provide a step toward the final mastery of reality” (Bender, 1954, p. 233). Over the next 75 years, children, teens, and adults followed the exploits of a veritable galaxy of superheroes through comics, radio, television, film, video games, and mass-marketed action figures. Although it is difficult to determine exactly how many superheroes have come and gone over the decades, experts in the field suggest that the number is more than likely in the thousands (Lawrence, 2005, personal communication; McDermott, 2005, personal communication). What

exactly is the appeal of these do-gooders and their heroic adventures, and exactly why are they so perennially interesting to children, adolescents, and adults—and, as we shall see later, so very useful as therapeutic allies.

To answer this question, it is important to define sufficiently the concept of the modern superhero. Although several authors have provided important defining features (Fingerroth, 2002; Reynolds, 1992; Simpson, Rodiss, & Bushell, 2004), it is Lawrence and Jewett's (2002) integrated conceptualization, based on the notion that the genre is the modern-day variant of classical mythology, that is most informative. According to them,

The [American] monomythic superhero is distinguished by disguised origins, pure motivations, a redemptive task and extraordinary powers. He originates outside of the community he is called to save, and in those exceptional instances when he resides therein, the superhero plays the role of the idealistic loner. His identity is secret, either by virtue of his unknown origins or his alter ego: his motivation is a selfless zeal for justice. By elaborate conventions of restraint, his desire for revenge is purified. Patient in the face of provocations, he seeks nothing for himself and withstands all temptations. He renounces sexual fulfillment for the duration of the mission, and the purity of his motivation ensures his moral infallibility in judging persons and situations. When he is threatened by violent adversaries, he finds answers in vigilantism, restoring justice and thus lifting the siege of paradise. In order to accomplish this mission without incurring blame or causing undue injury to others, he requires superhuman powers. The superhero's aim is unerring, his fists irresistible, and his body incapable of suffering fatal injury. (p. 47)

This scenario is quite different from the paradigm of so-called classical mythology, in which the hero, arising from a besieged society undertakes a transformative and typically perilous adventure, after which he returns to reestablish harmony to that society. Unlike the classical hero, the modern superhero never fully integrates back into society and is continually confronted with irreconcilable tensions both within him or herself or the society. Lawrence and Jewett noted that whereas the adventures of the classical hero center on initiation, those of the modern superhero focus on redemption. They continued:

He unites a consuming love of impartial justice with a mission of personal vengeance that eliminates due process of law. He offers a form of leadership without paying the process of political relationships or responding to the preferences of the majority. In denying the ambivalence and complexity of real life, where the moral landscape offers choices in various shades of gray rather than in black and white [the superhero myth] gives Americans a fantasy land without ambiguities

to cloud moral vision, where the evil empire of enemies is readily discernible, and where they can vicariously (through identification with the superhero) smite evil before it overtakes them. (p. 48)

Lawrence and Jewett's (2002) insightful depiction of the nature and purpose of the superhero as well as his or her place in society is highly informative, both validating and expanding on Bender and Lourie's early therapeutic experience of and with the genre. As such, it quite neatly establishes a framework, or foundation for using superheroes in psychotherapy. Key aspects of the superhero motif are now discussed, and readers are asked to consider how each of these may have clinical utility in their own practices.

Origins

The traditional superhero has alien origins, as in the case of Superman's infant arrival from the doomed planet of Krypton and subsequent adoption; violent early childhood traumatization, as in the case of the murder of Batman's (Bruce Wayne's) parents; or is orphaned, as in the case of Spider-Man, who is subsequently adopted and raised by his aunt and uncle. Other superheroes, such as the X-Men, each born a mutant, are raised in a group foster home, where they learn to harness their mutant abilities, or are removed from their parents at birth to protect them, such as Luke Skywalker of the Star Wars saga. Still others, such as the underwater superheroes Aquaman and the Submariner, are born of fantastical unions—human fathers and Atlantian mothers. Finally, some superheroes lose their parents to seemingly natural disasters. Storm, one of the female X-Men, lost both of her parents in a hotel collapse, and in the spirit of Joseph Campbell's notion of the "call to adventure," sets out on a quest to understand and harness her ability to control the weather.

Regardless of origins, each of the various superheroes grows up without his or her biological parents in some variant of the traditional nuclear family. They rarely enjoy uncomplicated relationships with subsequent parent substitutes or surrogates. According to Reynolds (1992), "the [super] hero is [one way or another] marked out from society. He often reaches maturity without having a relationship with his parents" (p. 16). These unfortunate circumstances in the early lives of various superheroes are the first of many adversities they will face on the road to superheroism, laying the foundations for both their greatest failures and most glorious triumphs. Whether alone or as part of a superhero "family," they survive and ultimately rise above their early family disruptions.

Costume

As the mission of the superhero is typically driven by these early childhood experiences, so, too, is the formation of their superidentity. This identity is brought into bold relief by the super-costume—their trademark in the eyes of others—but, more important, the external signifier of their evolving internal experience of super-personhood. Whereas Superman came to Earth fully swaddled in the brightly colored material that would eventually become his costume, Peter Parker labored over the design for his Spider-Man outfit. Tony Stark wraps himself in super-strong armor in order to express his Iron Man invulnerability in the face of congenital heart disease; Batman's mysterious costume reflects the dark depths of his personal struggles, and Wonder Woman's scant yet patriotic costume, complete with lasso, is commentary on the fusing of sexuality and power. Reynolds (1992) further explicated the role of the costume by suggesting that it demarcates the superhero from ordinary people and from other superheroes and villains; symbolizes inner struggles; either accentuates or conceals sexuality; and, most relevant for therapeutic use, establishes the duality of the particular superhero.

Dual or Secret Identity

The issue of duality represented by a secret identity undergirds many of the superhero fantasies, often highlighting Jungian archetypical conflicts. The secret identity of the superhero ostensibly allows her or him to function at an everyday level—to blend into the crowd, so to speak—while also doing the difficult work of saving humanity. Who is not familiar with the image of Clark Kent dashing into the corner phone booth, emerging moments later as the Man of Steel? However, and at a much deeper level, dual identity allows the superhero to conceal and thus rise above vulnerabilities, to express her or his most primal longings and needs, and ultimately to provide a means with which to integrate otherwise irreconcilable oppositions in the superhero's (and our own) human nature. Through their dual natures, superheroes are also able to wrestle with, and at times break free from both societal and historic conflicts between good and evil, justice and power, strength and weakness, male and female, human and divine, science and faith, prosocial and antisocial, individual and collective. For Reynolds (1992), the dual nature of the superhero temporarily, albeit artificially, establishes neat boundaries or restraints around inherently gray and thus irreconcilable tensions.

By virtue of movies, action figures, and video games, and to a lesser extent comic books, most children and adults are familiar with the dual nature of blockbuster superheroes. The meek and passive Clark Kent

becomes the mighty humanist Superman, the philanthropic Bruce Wayne transforms into the vigilante Dark Knight known as Batman, meek Bruce Banner explodes through his clothing when angered to become the Hulk, and Amazon-princess-turned-commoner Diana Prince becomes powerful Wonder Woman. Equally powerful in their symbolic duality, although not as popular beyond comic book audiences, are civil engineer Alan Scott, who wields a object-changing ring as the Green Lantern; Norrin Radd, who as the Silver Surfer can rearrange molecules; teenager Serena, aka Meatball Head, who along with the Sailor Scouts battles evil as Sailor Moon; and finally every-guy Donald Blake, who, with his Uru Hammer, can control the weather, fly, and travel through dimensions as Thor. Each of these characters offers endless therapeutic opportunities.

Superhero Families—Ties That Bind

The superhero genre owes as much of its popularity and appeal to the superhero family as it does to the singular sensations, that is, Superman, Wonder Woman, and the Hulk. What consumer of comic or popular culture is unfamiliar with the Fantastic Four, the X-Men, the Avengers, the Justice League, Femforce, and even the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, and Powerpuff Girls. If it is indeed true that there is strength in unity, the universe of possibilities opens wide when we add superabilities to the unity. Paraphrasing Aristotle's conceptualization of partnership and friendship in the context of a prototypic superhero family, the Fantastic Four, Ryall and Tipton (2005) noted that

the superhero team [is] a vibrant family unit made up of friends who really care about each other, despite their differences and disagreements [and as family members] support each other (utility), enjoy each other (pleasure) and care about each other's good (virtue). (p. 126)

The superhero "families" unite under a variety of outlandish circumstances. The Fantastic Four (the Human Torch, the Thing, Invisible Woman, and Mr. Fantastic) accidentally acquire their superpowers following exposure to cosmic radiation, whereas the X-Men (Rogue, Storm, Mystique, Wolverine, Iceman, Phoenix, and Dr. Xavier), after experiencing an inexplicable leap in evolution, are born with latent superhuman abilities, which manifest at puberty. Members of the Justice League (Martian Manhunter, Green Lantern, Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, Aquaman, and the Flash) and the Avengers (Thor, the Hulk, Ant Man, the Wasp, and Iron Man), each have their own unique transformation legends. The Powerpuff Girls are, in essence, test-tube babies.

Regardless of their origins, each of these "families" is united for the purpose of serving the greater good, typically by fending off villains. As

discussed later, the ties that bind members of these various supergroups also impose on them struggles and conflicts readily encountered by everyday, run-of-the-mill, nonsuperheroic families. When they are not united against a world threat, they squabble, argue, and compete with and express love, anger, and jealousy toward each other. They continually struggle to balance individual and group needs and to reconcile their calling with the desire to blend back into the citizenry and escape the demands of their superheroic callings. They can be as dysfunctional as families can be, struggling with boundaries, betrayals, and threatened disintegration, and they can rise to the Aristotelian heights of utility, virtue, and pleasure—all the while saving humanity.

Superpowers and Fatal Flaws

The most defining and recognizable feature of the superhero is his or her unique gift and commitment to using it for the greater good—whether present at birth, acquired through accident, or learned through arduous training. The superhero “understands that we have our talents and powers in order to use them, and to use them for the good of others as well as ourselves is the highest use we can make of them” (Loeb & Morris, 2005, p. 15). To name just a few, these superpowers include flight, speed, invulnerability, acute sensory capacity, telepathy, invisibility, shape shifting, and genius. Conversely, each of the famous superheroes also possesses an Achilles’ heel, a vulnerability that imposes a limit on them and, in certain ways, infuses humility into their otherwise godlike persona. This juxtaposition of superpower and fatal flaw is the essence of the superhero’s (and our) basic conflicts, that is, between hurting and helping, connecting and isolating, self-indulgence and self-denial, persevering and giving up.

These Achilles’ heels reveal much about how superheroes balance mortality and immortality. Some superheroes are susceptible to the same natural threats that challenge mortals. Super-sleuth Batman, supersensitive Daredevil, lightning-fast Flash, brilliant and powerful Iron Man, the talented Huntress, and submariner Aquaman are vulnerable to such things as bullets, arrows, fires, heart disease, and alcohol. Other superheroes are threatened only by forces beyond those of our world, if at all, such as the mighty Superman, who is weakened only by Kryptonite, fragments of his destroyed home planet, and Wonder Woman, who as an Olympian goddess is virtually indestructible. Others superheroes who are otherwise magnificently gifted, can be defeated by forces that wouldn’t even scratch mere mortals. Green Lantern, who is able to change objects with the aid of his Lantern ring, is powerless in the face of wood and the color yellow; the strong and quick Blade can be weakened by exposure

to direct sunlight, and Submariner, who can breath and vanquish enemies underwater, doesn't do well in a waterless environment. Finally, several of the superheroes simply do not hold up well in the face of emotion. The Hulk, although exceptionally strong, cannot handle anger. Captain Marvel, who possessed a litany of mythological attributes, can be undone by his naiveté. Sailor Moon, who is a master of disguise, can be defeated by her crybaby alter ego Serena. The Silver Surfer, who can rearrange his molecules, could just as easily face defeat because of a loss of will.

Transformation

Most superheroes dedicate their powers and their lives to a calling, often sacrificing material pursuits, family bonds, and romantic ties to fight villains or uphold the greater good. Although many of them become aware of their superaptitudes (and superflaws) early on and slowly grow into them, others undergo a later transformation—either in adolescence or early adulthood. For some, the transformation is abrupt—the consequence of a scientific experiment gone awry, an accident or hubris. For others, the transformation follows a perilous journey to either the inner depths of the psyche or the far reaches of distant lands. Regardless of the scenario, the individual is forever changed. For Fingeroth (2004), “the hero can be said to be someone who rises above his or her fears or limitations to achieve the extraordinary” (p. 14). In his depiction of the hero of antiquity, Campbell (1956) described the calling, the journey away from the familiar through perils and otherworldly challenges followed by the enlightened return and redemptive acts. Reintegration into society is at the discretion of the transformed hero. For modern (super)heroes, the transformation leaves them isolated forever with reintegration possible only through renunciation of their super powers or concealment of those powers beneath a secret identity. In both scenarios, transformation is the heart of the mythology.

As noted earlier, the transformation may be abrupt and of scientific (or pseudo-scientific) origin. College biology major Jay Garrick was transformed into the lightning-fast Flash after accidentally inhaling fumes from spilled from chemical bottles; his successor, police scientist Barry Allen, was endowed with super speed when a lightning bolt hit chemicals with which he was working. Shy, self-effacing high school student Peter Parker developed the strength, agility, and sensory prowess of Spider-Man after being bitten by a radioactive spider. The Fantastic Four were instantly transformed when their test rocket ship was bombarded by cosmic radiation. Other abrupt transformations follow otherwise mundane circumstances. While saving a bystander from an oncoming truck, athletic bookworm Matt Murdock was doused with radioactive materials, later

becoming Daredevil. In contrast, other superheroes embark on transformative journeys. Following a severely traumatic early family life, Elektra Nachios studied exotic martial arts, through which she both fought villains and continued to struggle with good and bad as Elektra. Similarly, Ororo Munroe of the incredible X-Men, followed a calling to return to South Africa and trek across the Sahara desert, an adventure during which she became Storm. In the context of their use in psychotherapy, and regardless of the nature of their transformations, the various superheroes had to learn to harness their newly acquired super powers or fatal flaws.

Science and Magic

Technology lays the fruits of science at our feet. We routinely and quite unthinkingly use gizmos and gadgets in every facet of our lives, without questioning their underlying scientific principles. In the superhero universe, science is routinely “used as an alibi for magic” (Reynolds, 1992, p. 53). Rockets, robots, interplanetary and time travel, mutagenic cosmic radiation, not to mention a dazzling—albeit highly improbable—array of super powers including shrinkability, stretchability, combustibility, and invulnerability, are the norm. The superhero fan is asked to accept as possible all of these, just as scientists ask us to accept as fact their wondrous speculations. And we do! Koontz (1992) urged us to consider that

every time a superhero lifts a building into the air, why don't all the bricks, held together by cement and pressure suddenly start falling apart? Those are the types of ordinary problems that seem never to occur in any superhero adventures. Basically, superheroes perform super acts and the logic squad cleans up afterwards. (p. 3)

Clearly then, the price of admission into the superhero universe is suspension, or perhaps willingness to expand belief into the world of possibility, impossibility, and magic.

Technomythic has been offered by Lawrence and Jewett (2002) as a term to describe this incorporation of technology into the superhero genre. For them, “the technomythic mode in stories of superheroic redemption arose in conjunction with evolving technologies of presentation that functions to preserve their currency and aura of credibility” (p. 8). For superheroes to do what they do—fly, move planets, rearrange molecules, that sort of thing—we are asked to consider that today's realities are little more than yesterday's dreams. And dreams are the place where magic abounds. They are the place where the boundaries between reality and fantasy, past and present, inner and outer merge, often endowing the dreamer with powers and abilities much like those of superheroes.

The Villain

What would the world of superheroes be without the villains? From Beowulf to Batman, the forces of light and good have derived their meaning and importance only by virtue of the presence of darkness and evil. Both superheroes and super-villains, besides having traumatic origins and dual identities, are smart, resourceful, and powerful, not to mention colorfully clad. However, the heightened sense of morality and singular focus on the common good that characterize the superhero are brought into bold relief by the sadistic, megalomaniacal, and antisocial ways of their nemeses. Their bios and job descriptions are clearly quite different. Fingeroth (2004) drew a tongue-in-cheek analogy between the fireman and the superhero, noting, “The superhero’s role is to get the cat out of the tree, not to prune the tree or discipline the cat” (p. 162). Aligning the superhero with the fireman in this way, Fingeroth and others, most notably Reynolds (1992), have seen the superhero as reactive, or not out to change the world, whereas the villain is very much proactive and interested in change—almost exclusively to their benefit. Whether it is a need for revenge, power, display, or world domination, the villain exists to shake things up and in doing so gives meaning to the superhero’s quest. In the Jungian sense, the epic battles between superheroes and supervillains represent the battles within each of us. Whether the villains take the form of tricksters or shadows, they offer a vivid glimpse into the often-irreconcilable tensions in both the personal and collective unconscious. For Fingeroth (2004), “In confronting super villains, therefore, superheroes enact our own inner and societal dialectics about issues of life and death . . . they are very much the dream life—including the nightmares of our society” (p. 166).

To summarize, the superhero genre is a rich platform from which to explore a broad array of both personal and collective issues. Origins, dual identities, superpowers, fatal flaws, and stories of transformation are elements, among others, of the genre that enhance its richness. How can this richness be harnessed by clinicians working with children, adolescents, and adults? Superheroes and their adventures clearly entertain, but how can they help?

HOW SUPERHEROES CAN HELP

Undergirding the realm of children’s fantasy, fantasy play, and superheroes is myth and myth making. Whether we are talking of the “classical” hero’s right of initiation (Hercules, Prometheus, Odysseus) or the

contemporary hero/superhero trials of redemption (Superman, X-Men, Wonder Woman), cultures “cry for myth” (May, 1991). May speculated that through the collective storytelling that is mythology, people make sense in and of a senseless world, narrate patterns that give significance to their experience, and help to self-interpret in relation to others and society. Within these collective dreams and fantasies, the hero—or superhero in our case—helps us to focus and express ideals, carry hopes and aspirations for the future, and anchor us to history (Campbell, 1956). Myths do for society what fantasies and metaphor do for the individual.

Fantasy, play, and imagination function as a developmental time machine of sorts, transporting its occupant between past, present, and future in attempts to construct meaning, express emotion, find meaning, and explore identity. Much in the same light, myth for Rollo May, can be either regressive, by expressing archetypal struggles between primitive forces, or progressive, by revealing new social insights and possibilities. If we look at children’s fantasy play in general, and superhero play in particular, we see the great potential for the same process at work. Through superhero fantasy play or the use of superheroes as metaphor, children and adults can work on and resolve past crises (regressive), express current issues and struggles and experience catharsis around them, or relate desires for the way they would like things to work out for them (progressive). Within this broader context, superhero fantasy play and metaphoric storytelling are, in essence, personal myth making, no less epic or important to the individual as they are to the culture in which he or she lives. This is consistent with Campbell’s notion that dreams (fantasies) are personal myths, whereas myths are collective dreams (fantasies).

Facilitating personal myth making through superhero fantasy play may be a productive means to counter the ravages of contemporary society on childhood, which include consumerism, strained family ties, poverty, media saturation, and overstimulation (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997). Driven to produce, conform, adapt, and grow up quickly, children more than ever need heroes (not to be confused with celebrities) who are distinct from parents. In this regard, “as children shape their behavior and values, they may look to heroes and role models for guidance . . . and media [television, movies, comics, action figures] depict a variety of additional possible heroes” (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002, p. 181). On this latter point, it is not superhero fantasy play per se that will save the culture of childhood. Instead, this volume advocates that superhero fantasy play and its use in metaphor development are forms of personal myth making that can be a means for growth and change in the individual, just as it is an impetus on a larger scale for cultural self-expression and development.

Consider the following:

The best superhero comics, in addition to being tremendously entertaining, introduce and treat in vivid ways some of the most interesting and important questions facing all human beings—questions regarding ethics, personal and social responsibility, justice, crime and punishment, the mind and human emotions, personal identity, the soul, the notion of destiny, the meaning of our lives, how we think about science and nature, the role of faith in the rough and tumble of this world, the importance of friendship, what love really means, the nature of family, the classic virtues like courage . . . determination, persistence, teamwork and creativity. (Morris & Morris, 2005, pp. xi, 17)

How then, can the therapist harness the power of superheroes and their mythology to serve clients? In numerous ways! Just as superheroes have origin and transformation myths, clients both young and old continually attempt to understand their own origins, whether linked to violent betrayal or a seemingly uneventful adoption. Just as superheroes are transformed by circumstances beyond their control, so, too, are clients altered by adversities and vicissitudes that include abuse, divorce, illness, loss, and relocation. Their ability to adapt to these transformative experiences lays the groundwork for the struggles and triumphs to follow. Although clients do not have superpowers or fatal flaws, identifying with the physical and moral strengths of a superhero can be transformative and aid in overcoming disability and deficiency, whether real or perceived.

As is true for superheroes, clients have their arch enemies, either in the form of classroom bullies, abusive parents, toxic teachers, or labyrinthine legal systems. For the superhero, concealed and dual identities set the stage for externalization of inner conflicts, just as clients continually struggle to reconcile opposing inner forces and powerful conflicting emotions. Whereas the superhero takes up causes such as world peace, disarmament, and justice, clients struggle no less with their own personal battles for equality, esteem, and connection. Whether transformed by science or magic, superheroes rarely fit in, just as clients wrestle with gender, racial, and cultural disenfranchisement in the course of finding inner and outer peace. As children and adolescents begin to understand the abilities and limitations of their developing bodies and minds, they begin to ask questions about strength, mortality, gravity, consciousness, and morality (Bender, 1954). Superheroes are seemingly tailor-made vehicles for exploring these complex, often abstract issues. Finally, there are those amazingly colorful costumes that provide clients an opportunity either to identify with their favorite superhero or to establish the parameters of their own burgeoning identity.

In the chapters that follow, therapists from diverse theoretical orientations, who work with an array of challenging clients in various clinical settings will demonstrate how clients of all ages utilize the stories and adventures of the modern superheroes to create their own effective personal mythologies. While the cases are based on real clients or clinical amalgams, their identities have been protected.

Section 1 of the book, *Traditional Superheroes in Counseling and Play Therapy*, establishes the foundation for the use of some of the more popular superheroes in psychotherapy and play therapy. The current chapter has established the foundation for the relevance of superheroes in the treatment of children, adolescents, and adults. In chapter 2, “Superheroes in Therapy: Uncovering Children’s Secret Identities,” Robert Porter demonstrates how three superhero myth elements—fear of exposure, restrained hidden powers, and separation from true family—parallel common core elements of therapy with children and adolescents and, in so doing, point the way to meaningful and successful interventions. In chapter 3, “What Would Superman Do?” Cory A. Nelson introduces and illustrates a technique that helps clients reframe events and “act as if” they are either a superhero of their own making or one from a comic book. Through this process, they create their own healing and problem-solving metaphors. Chapter 4, “Superheroes and Sandplay: Using the Archetype Through the Healing Journey” by Bill McNulty, is based on the premise that (child) clients’ work in the sand tray parallels their journey, both in therapy and in life. Drawing on Campbell’s hero and Jung’s archetypes, it demonstrates how clients, just like prominent superheroes, can be transformed by their challenges and struggles. In chapter 5, “The Incredible Hulk and Emotional Literacy,” Jennifer Mendoza Sayers explores the concept of emotional literacy in children and teens, with particular therapeutic applications using various superheroes.

Section 2, “Superheroes and Unique Clinical Applications,” focuses on using superheroes with unique clinical populations and issues. In chapter 6, “Holy Franchise! Batman and Trauma,” Michael Brody argues that the Batman myth brings together Freud’s trauma theory and Erickson’s thoughts on personality development, thus serving as a tailor-made vehicle to help therapists communicate with and initiate the healing process with traumatized and sexually abused children. In chapter 7, “Making a Place for the Angry Hero on the Team,” Harry Livesay discusses the “angry” superhero, who, like many children, experienced early trauma and societal alienation resulting in anger and isolation. He demonstrates that just as the Justice League and the X-Men accept, heal, and assimilate their angry members, so can the angry child become a valued member of the team—at home, in school, and within the larger community. Chapter 8, “A Super Milieu: Using Superheroes in the Residential

Treatment of Adolescents With Sexual Behavior Problems,” Karen Rober-
tie, Ryan Weidenbenner, Leya Barrett, and Robert Poole explore and
demonstrate the appeal and practical applications of hero and superhero
mythology in the residential treatment of sexual offenders. They discuss
the relationship between the “super” and the “everyday” hero as it ap-
plies to treatment of this challenging population through the use of story-
telling, music therapy, role-playing, and comic-book drawing. Chapter 9,
“Superheroes Are Super Friends: Developing Social Skills and Emotional
Reciprocity With Autistic Spectrum Clients” by Patty Scanlon, explores
the role of superhero-based play therapy with young clients manifesting
symptoms along the autistic spectrum. In chapter 10, “Superheroes in
Play Therapy With an Attachment Disordered Child,” Carmela Wenger
explores and demonstrates the usefulness of superheroes and the super-
hero metaphor in the assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of a young
client with attachment difficulties. Chapter 11, “Luke, I Am Your Father!
A Clinical Application of the Star Wars Adoption Narrative,” I discuss
the case of Alex, an 11-year-old child, whose identification with Luke
Skywalker helped him compose a new episode in the Star Wars saga to
cope with the circumstances of his adoption.

Section 3, “Nontraditional Therapeutic Applications of Super-
heroes,” explores several unique applications of superheroes and their
mythologies in counseling with clients of all ages. In chapter 12, “Be-
coming the Hero: The Use of Role-Playing Games in Psychotherapy,”
George Enfield demonstrates how this unique genre, specifically applied
to superheroes, can provide the therapist with a springboard for problem
exploration, metaphor development, and treatment. In chapter 13, “To
Boldly Go! *Star Trek* Superheroes in Therapy,” Jeff Pickens examines the
allure of the *Star Trek* universe and its heroes and then outlines clinical
applications as well as related topics of racism, addiction, gender roles,
and prejudice. In chapter 14, “Hypnosis and Superheroes,” Jan Burte
demonstrates how superhero traits and abilities can be incorporated into
the hypnotherapeutic treatment of individuals experiencing pain, trauma,
and medical conditions. Finally, chapter 15 is titled “Heroes Who Learn
to Love Their Monsters: How Fantasy Film Characters Can Inspire the
Journey of Individuation for Gay and Lesbian Clients in Psychotherapy.”
There, Roger Kaufman explores how the heroes in films such as *E. T.*,
Lord of the Rings, and *Star Wars* can be understood in a way that is po-
tentially meaningful for any client coming to terms with the significance
of his or her gay desire.

The Appendix provides the reader with a thumbnail guide to the
potential use of superheroes in psychotherapy with children, adoles-
cents, and adults. Enter now, the realm of fantasy, imagination, and the
superhero.

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