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Literature Review: Parasocial Relationships with Fictional Characters in Therapy

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

5/4/2018

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Expressive Arts Therapy

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Abstract

Parasocial relationships are unrequited relationships with persons or characters that the admirer is unable to meet. These attachments are important to explore with a client in their therapeutic process, since there are many reasons why the client developed this relationship. This thesis is a literature review that examined academic and scholarly journals, as well as blogs, articles and websites created by people in fandoms of different medias. The topics that are explored in the literature review are: how parasocial relationships are developed, how parasocial relationships influence the creators' art making, and how to integrate the client's parasocial relationships into the therapeutic setting. Areas for further research is presented with parasocial relationships in mind, as many clients have this type of attachment to fictional characters. The glossary in Appendix A defines terms that may be used by clients with different parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships are part of many different clients' lives and can be an important topic to include in the therapeutic relationship.

Literature Review: Parasocial Relationships with Fictional Characters in Therapy

Introduction

In the world of binge watching on sites like Netflix, Hulu and YouTube, it is becoming easier to consume media. With the plethora of television series and movies that people talk about catching up on, it seems that people relate to the characters in these visual medias. There are some who also take their liking of a character to a higher level by dressing up or “cosplaying” as the character for conventions or for Halloween. Others make their own creations using these characters through fanart (visual artworks involving characters) and fanfiction (written works involving characters). These works are then shared across the fandoms (a group of people that like a movie, TV show, etc.) to further develop the bond with these characters. Often, the attachments being formed to these characters resemble friendships or even crushes. If these characters are fictional, how do people become so attached to them?

Parasocial relationships are a one-sided connection to a figure that either does not exist (as in a character in a comic book, movie, or TV series) or does not know the other party exists (as in a celebrity). These can include admirations for celebrities, sports players, or fictional characters (Hartmann, Stuke, & Daschmann, 2008; Banks & Bowman, 2016). These relationships develop after the viewing, reading, or playing of the media with the consumer somehow relates to the character or celebrity (Rosaen & Dibble, 2016). These relationships with fictional characters can be common among clients that are viewing, reading, or playing many different forms of media. With these attachments to fictional characters, it is curious to figure out as to why these unrequited relationships develop for people that are watching television shows and movies, playing video games, or reading books.

There are many different reasons why a client would develop parasocial relationship with a fictional character. For example, a client might be going through a similar experience as a character. Another way is that the character could have traits they admire, such as bravery or strength. Since it is not uncommon for people to have at least one fictional character in a piece of media that they feel a connection to, it could be an important topic for expressive arts therapists to explore these relationships with their clients.

In the following pages of this thesis, there is a literature review on the research that is already done on parasocial relationships. The topics of that are included are: how these relationships are developed, the existing art that is created inspired by a person's parasocial relationships, and finally how to integrate these relationships in the therapeutic process for clients. Due to the nature of the subject, in addition to traditional academic sources, additional resources have been examined, such as blog posts, articles, and websites created by people that have parasocial relationships to characters. Appendix A contains a glossary of terms that are frequently used on different social media sites, conventions, and in fandoms. These terms might be used by clients that hold these types of relationships, especially with younger clients that frequent these types of websites and engage in fandoms of their favorite pieces of media.

In addition to examining the literature for this thesis, topics are presented for further research in this field. One of the topics for further research is the impact of these relationships on clients that are engaging in social media or fan-made websites. Even though the characters are fictional, the cyberbullying that takes place for many fans that publish their work online is a very real threat. Since many fans are so attached to their parasocial relationship, there are many that bully or "troll" others that have an attachment to another character in the same media. Fans that are victims of this type of cyberbullying can bring in this topic during their counseling sessions,

and it is important for counselors to see the impact of the online world on their clients (Holfeld & Sukhawathanakul, 2017). Even though these relationships are one-sided they can be important ones for clients to have with these characters. Expressive arts therapists should include an exploration of these relationships in a client's life into the therapeutic process.

Literature Review

Parasocial relationships are bonds that are created with a media figure by an audience member. These one-sided connections are made by the fan of the work to fulfill needs, wants, and a desire to be with the character in either a platonic or romantic way (Rosaen, & Dibble, 2016; Tukachinsky, 2015). The relationships can lead to the creation of art and the facilitation of real relationships. There are real emotions and gratification through these parasocial relationships, even though they are with works of fiction.

In the following sections, parasocial relationships are discussed with different lenses. The development, emotions evoked, and meaning of the relationships are examined with a general lens. An artistic lens is also used to focus on different artforms that are being created with these characters. Finally, a clinical lens is brought in to view these relationships in a therapeutic setting.

In the parasocial relationships section, these types of relationships are discussed. Parasocial relationships can provide connection while the audience sees another go through similar events as themselves. Emotions can be evoked while viewing the stories that the characters live in. These relationships can help with the forming of one's identity. Romantic feelings can also occur in these parasocial relationships and can be beneficial by helping the individual conceptualize a future romantic relationship. Videogames have a different type of

parasocial relationship, as the audience plays more active role in the character's storyline (Banks, & Bowman, 2016). Many different types of media have a fan following or a "fandom" in which members share artwork created with the characters and converse about the media as a whole.

In the art making and parasocial relationships section, there is examples of how art is created while using the characters as inspiration. Through fanart and fanfiction, the artist and/or author is allowed to use the character in their own creative venture. In cosplay, the audience members can become the character for a short amount of time while wearing a costume and doing performance art with other fans of the media.

The last section describes how the parasocial relationships can be integrated into therapy. Different examples of how other clinicians have used fictional characters in their practice are offered. There are also suggestions made about how to begin the process of bringing these relationships into therapeutic space.

Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships are one-sided admirations of a character, celebrity, or other media figure (Branch, Wilson, & Agnew, 2013). Audience members create a bond to specific characters in the media that they are consuming. These bonds can be either platonic or romantic, as people sometimes develop crushes on these fictional characters. Even though these characters live in the fictional realm, real feelings develop in a parasocial relationship.

The study of parasocial relationships has been a continuing pursuit for many years. The term was coined by Horton and Wohl in 1956, for the relationship that audience members had created with media figures on television (Branch et al., 2013). Even though this work was originally based on media figures that were live action stars, the study of these relationships can

be applied to fictional characters and the bond that is created by the audience members watching them. In the following subsections, different aspects of parasocial relationships are discussed, including the development of the relationship, emotions evoked, romantic feelings, video games' active role of characters and fandoms of different medias.

Development of parasocial relationships. This first subsection is on the development of a parasocial relationship. There is discussion on how these relationships are formed by individuals with their favorite media characters. The relationship can be built through multiple viewings (Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015; Branch et al., 2013), through parasocial interactions (Branch et al., 2013), and by familiarity of the same characters in a new form of the media (Hall, 2017).

Audiences create intimate relationships with media characters in a parasocial relationship (Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015). Since the audience can see and learn about the character's whole story and life, it is almost like having a friend that confides in them and lives alongside them. These characters can evoke different emotions when they feel familiar to the spectators consuming the media (Hall, 2017).

The characters can become more familiar if their stories are viewed frequently. People have relationships with things that they encounter in their daily lives (Banks, & Bowman, 2016). Since media consumption is part of the daily lives of many people, it is possible for them to create a relationship with at least one character. Some people have rituals revolving around consuming media, such as watching an episode (or a few) of a favorite show on Netflix to decompress from the work day. Another is catching up on a show when it has a new episode released to avoid spoilers.

Parasocial relationships can be built through a parasocial interaction in which the character tries to connect with their audience (Branch et al., 2013). This can be viewed as when a character “breaks the fourth wall,” and speaks directly to the audience. This can even be a look into the “camera” (sometimes it is an actual camera, if it is a live action piece). An example of this is in the show *The Office* (American version) in which an event occurs that is seen as ridiculous by the characters and then they look straight into the camera to make sure their audience caught what just happened (Daniels, Gervais, Merchant, Klein, & Silverman, 2005).

These relationships usually develop after repeated viewing or playing of the media (e.g. watching more than one episode or playing a game in more than one sitting) (Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015). While watching or playing these medias, the characters’ personalities and storylines are revealed and the audience might become more invested in the plot and world that the characters are living in. During this process of vicariously living the characters’ lives, the audience member could become attached to both the media and the characters in it (Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015).

When this media ends, (i.e. cancelled, series concluded, or finishing of the media) there can be a sadness or anger experienced by the audience members (Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015). There are many petitions for shows that have cancelled to be “rebooted” (made again), since the relationships with the characters in the program were so strong. Sometimes there is more anger when the show is rebooted and does not match the quality of the original work. Recent examples of this include, the new *Powerpuff Girls* (which was a reboot of *The Powerpuff Girls* that originally aired in the mid-1990s) and *Teen Titans Go!* (which was a reboot of *Teen Titans* that aired in the early 2000s) (C. Linden, personal communication, January 25, 2018).

The more familiar a person is with a character, the more likely there is going to be a parasocial relationship to the character (Hall, 2017). When this relationship is built over time, the audience might believe that they can predict the behavior of the character (Branch et al., 2013). This could account for people that watch the same piece of media repeatedly and can quote each line as they watch it. Also, when new content is released, the audience will try to guess what the character is going to do next in their story arch.

People are more likely to have a stronger connection to a character that is introduced earlier in a piece of media than characters that appear later in the storyline (Hall, 2017). In a study done by Hall (2017), audience members were found more likely to have a strong parasocial relationship to Leia, Han Solo, and Luke Skywalker from the *Star Wars* franchise, than newer characters such as Rey, Kylo Ren, and Finn. This occurred because there was more of a connection to the characters built over years after the release of the first *Star Wars* movie in 1977 and subsequent releases of content (movies, merchandise, and other) made since then (Hall, 2017). The parasocial relationships are being built with the newer characters as well, since the movie franchise is still being released and the cycle repeats with the characters that appeared in previous movies versus characters that are introduced in each new movie.

Parasocial relationships can build over time, and the more that someone is viewing, playing or reading about a character's story the more likely that this connection to them will become more intense (Hall, 2017). Repeating the same media gives an opportunity for the relationship to grow and have the audience become more attached to this character (Branch et al. 2013). This could explain why there are many attachments to characters that are from movies and TV shows that people have watched repeatedly in their youth. This could account for

children that ask to watch the same movie over and over again since these characters are attachment figures.

Characters evoking or holding emotions. In this subsection, there is discussion on different ways that characters and their stories can cause an emotional reaction while providing other benefits for the audience. Characters can evoke different emotions, while helping with identity development. These characters can also provide a sense of connection if the audience has gone through a similar situation as the characters.

Characters offer different types of fulfillment by evoking emotions, an escape from a person's ordinary life, and providing the need for human connection (Hall, 2017). Tuning into a piece of media that is episodic (TV show, movie franchise, or lengthy video game) can be similar to talking to a friend (Hu, 2016). A character could be there in times of hardship when a person watches the media during a tough time in their lives. The character could make the audience member laugh, make them cry, and show them that they understand what they are going through.

Characters and the audiences that follow these stories could be going through the same emotions, events, or in similar circumstances. Other times, people can experience the characters and their situations vicariously. The aspect of empathy could be an important part of parasocial relationships for the person that has these connections since it is a response to another's emotions and is related to the intensity of the relationship (Derrick, Gabriel, & Tippin, 2008). Feeling the experiences that the character goes through in their point of view could enhance the parasocial relationship by giving the audience a more intense connection to the character. Also, when characters go through similar events as a person watching them, a more intense connection can be built.

Living vicariously through viewing, playing, or reading the characters' experiences can help provide a place for safety, connection and resolution of problems (Sullivan, 2008). Sullivan has witnessed, through working with clients that read different comics, that seeing other personas go through similar experiences, such as adolescence, can create a feeling of connection (Sullivan, 2008). Seeing someone go through these experiences will allow for a person to see how to work through certain problems and life events, especially if the person is having shame, guilt or fear of revealing these problems to someone in their lives. For example, the show *Big Mouth* on Netflix is about puberty and shows the characters having experiences, thoughts, and feelings that children going through their adolescence may be ashamed of telling their parents and/or guardians about.

These characters might also be having similar emotions to the audience member during these experiences. Kokesh and Sternadori (2015) have found through their research of young adult novels and interviews with the readers of this genre of books, that if the media is seen as realistic, then the people consuming it are more likely to develop a parasocial relationship with the characters. When people that are taking in the media felt that they shared experiences with a character, it is more likely that they will find the story more realistic (Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015).

Even if the media is not seen as realistic and lives in the fantasy realm, it can help audiences through difficult and scary situations. Characters could serve as a vessel for a person's fears and serve as a way of attaining mastery of their fears (Sullivan, 2008). For example, the children from the movie *It* (specifically the 2017 version) have fears that are reflected to them through the character of Pennywise (a shapeshifting creature that wants to eat the children's bodies and fears) (Lee, Lin, Grahame-Smith, Katzenburg, Muschietti, & Muschietti, 2017).

Through seeing their fears being worked through in literally beating Pennywise while he is shapeshifting, the audience could find their fears as something that they could “beat” or work through.

In addition to helping with conquering fears, a parasocial relationship can be a part of identity formation. Parasocial relationships can have impacts to the viewers’ lives especially when they are part of their development. People can be more likely to attach themselves to objects that have a significant meaning to their identity (Rahman, Liu, & Cheung, 2012).

Therefore, if a type of media was important in a time in someone’s life then it is more likely that they will attach themselves to the characters. Many people think fondly of characters that have part of their development in childhood. Shows like *Arthur*, *Blue’s Clues*, and *Sailor Moon* still have a large following because of the nostalgia aspect (C. Linden, personal communication, January 25, 2018).

People usually respond to their favorite characters in a similar way that they respond to someone that is close in their lives because the strong parasocial attachment (Derrick et al., 2008). For example, many people call their favorite characters pet names while they post pictures of them online. Many other people talk about their characters and their events as if they were talking about a friend that they saw recently. Others may gossip and make theories about what is going to happen to their favorite characters. People cry when characters go through hardships or die in their stories. There is a real emotional investment in these characters lives, even though they are fictional.

Parasocial romantic relationships. In this subsection, romantic feelings for fictional characters are discussed. In these fictionalized romantic relationships, there are many benefits

and some risks. These fantasized relationships are one-sided and may assist with the transition to real romantic relationships in a safe way (Theran, Newberg & Gleason, 2010).

In addition to having an emotional investment to characters, some audiences develop crushes on their favorite characters. These parasocial relationships can be safer to have for some people than engaging in a real relationship (Derrick et al., 2008). This is in part because the relationship is unrequited since the object of affection is fictional and cannot return the feelings that the audience member has for them. With the commitment to watching the character, there is gratification that occurs that is similar to the enjoyment from a romantic relationship to a person that is real (Branch, et al., 2013). The more enjoyable the character is for an individual, the more committed the person becomes to this parasocial relationship (Branch, et al., 2013).

Adolescents can use their parasocial relationships with their fictional crushes to ease the transition to their romantic relationships later in life (Theran et al., 2010). Through having these crushes, adolescents can figure out their sexuality and type of partner that they want in the future. These parasocial relationships provide fictionalized positive interactions, with no rejection or feelings of being unworthy of the partner (Theran et al., 2010). Through the fantasies involving the character, adolescents can have their needs met, unconditional regard, and acceptance while experiencing this faux-relationship (Theran et al., 2010).

Individuals with social anxiety and a fear of rejection could use to parasocial relationships as a means of safely imagining romantic encounters (Theran et al., 2010). Through these imaginary romances, scenarios can be played out in a fantasy that can ease anxiety for when a similar relationship occurs in reality. There are dating simulators that are a type of video game in which dialog options are offered with different partners. The goal of most of these games is to pick one of the options for a romance, while talking and going on dates with several

people in the game. One of the more recent games of this type is *Dream Daddy*, in which the player creates an avatar, and plays the story of a recently single dad is looking for a new relationship with a male partner while meeting his neighbors in a new town.

Having a parasocial relationship that is romantic or sexual might be beneficial to some people because there is no rejection from the other party (Derrick et al., 2008). Some audience members retreat to only having fictionalized relationships because of this safety of not being rejected. There have also been cases of people “marrying” objects that are a piece of merchandise of their favorite character. There is a joke that is pointed to some male members of the anime fandoms (which has appeared in both postings online and in different medias that parody fans) in which they only like “2-D girls,” or girls that appear in anime or in dating simulators. This tends to occur because romantic relationships are usually unrequited or seemingly unattainable for these fans and they prefer the fantasized company of a fictional character that can’t reject them.

While exploring these fictional relationships, there are times in which the venture turns toxic because it is only a fantasy. In having a parasocial romantic relationship, reciprocation of feelings can never occur (Theran, et al., 2010). There can also be a parasocial breakup in which the person no longer cares for the character for a variety of reasons (including scandals within the media, the character being significantly changed or lost interest) (Hu, 2016).

Having romantic parasocial relationships can ease the anxiety of starting a real relationship with a partner. While being a seemingly safer way of experiencing a fling, there are downsides to having a romantic attraction to a fictional character. Dating simulators can be viewed as a training course for some individuals to learn how to connect to others while playing a video game.

Video games versus other forms of media. In this subsection, there is a discussion on how the parasocial relationships between characters in videogames and other types of media are different. While playing a video game, the parasocial relationship can become more intense since the player is controlling the character through their story (Banks, & Bowman, 2016). There is a summary of a study done by Banks and Bowman (2016) that examined the relationship between what pronouns a player referred to their character as and the way that the player viewed their character (i.e. as an object or themselves or other).

Playing a video game is more active than watching a TV show or a movie (Banks, & Bowman, 2016). This is especially true when the game is a “first person shooter,” in which the video game is played through the eyes of the character. The player makes the character perform actions and help guide the story instead of idly watching someone else go through an adventure.

When people are playing a video game, the parasocial relationships are strengthened because the player is active in deciding the character’s actions and receives “damage” when the character is hurt (Banks, & Bowman, 2016). People sometimes vocalize when their character is hurt by saying, “ow” or they take out their frustrations of the character failing by either yelling or swearing. The relationship with the characters can also depend on how they are designed, either by the player or by the game developers. The characters in video games can be premade characters in the game by the developers, a character that can be customized but has a scripted story in the game or a customizable avatar in a game in which they can explore the open world of the game.

Avatars are personas that people use online in various ways (e.g. video games, social media sites, and forums). Avatars are used to portray an alternate self, in which many people choose to use a character with a different gender than their own for various reasons. Many avatars mimic human to human relationships by establishing a connection through the player (Banks & Bowman, 2016). Some avatars, usually through Massive Multiplayer Online (MMO) games, are actual people behind the screen that are interacting with the player, while in other types of games there are Non-playable characters (NPCs).

Avatars in the *World of Warcraft* game are customizable and can do many types of quests as well as mundane activities (such as eating, having sex, and going to the bathroom). During the hours of game play, the gamer can become attached to their avatar in different ways. In the study conducted by Banks and Bowman (2016), the relationship between the player and the character was explored using interviews with players of *World of Warcraft*. These interviews were then examined via a linguistic word count analysis for the content, word usage, and pauses between words (Banks & Bowman, 2016). One of the aspects of the study was to look at the pronouns (e.g. “I,” “they/them,” “he/him,” or “she/her”) that the player used while talking about their avatars (Banks & Bowman, 2016). From this, different types of relationships were theorized between the players and their characters, such as, the player seeing the character as an extension of themselves or seeing the avatar as just an object in the game (Banks & Bowman, 2016).

While the way that the players refer to their characters is part of this relationship, there is a connection being built while the game is occurring. Through playing games, the relationship can be strengthened with the character, especially if this is part of a game series. Game series, such as *Super Mario*, *the Legend of Zelda*, and *Mortal Kombat* have a fan following that is built

on the parasocial relationships with the characters, since the players are familiar with the playable characters from previous games.

Fandoms. In this section, the topics surrounding fan followings are discussed. There are positive aspects of fandoms, such as the opportunity for the creation of real relationships and the sharing of the love of the characters through different venues. There are also negative parts in being a member of a fandom, such as the arguments that occur over different components of the media which can turn into cyberbullying, and /or threats to individuals in these groups.

Although this relationship with video game characters is slightly different, there are fan followings to all different types of characters and medias. Fan followings can be also referred to as fandoms. A “fandom” is a group of fans of a piece of media that interact with the media in various ways. This includes, discussing the media on social networking sites, drawing fanart and/or writing fanfiction and sharing these works, and creating theories about the characters and the plotlines of the original work.

Duchesne stated, “fandom is a particular kind of performance that many members boldly explore, playing with identity and finding their own layers of meaning” (as cited in Rahman et al., 2012, p.320). Members of fandoms find their own meaning to the original work. They play with the identity of the characters, as well as forming their own identities through these characters.

Being in a fandom can have emotional benefits and can aid in the individual member’s identity formation (Tukachinsky, 2015). People in fandoms can communicate and build a friendship with other people in the fandom while discussing their favorite medias (Hiromi & Saori, 2015). With this connection, the parasocial relationships can become more intensified

because they are now associated with both the media and the friendships that are created from the shared love of the media (Hiromi & Saori, 2015). The more that a member identifies with a group, their view of self is linked to the group as a whole (Tukachinsky, 2015).

Since there may be a need to maintain and increase their sense of self in a fandom, members are driven to promote their fandom positively (Tukachinsky, 2015). This can be toxic in the way that other fandoms are bashed as a result. Also, the promotion of the original work, the preferred ships (pairings of characters that fans want to be in a romantic relationship with each other) and “fanon” (aspects of the work that is based on fan theory to the extent that it is seen as practically canon by some members), can cause tension between members of the same fandom (C. Linden, personal communication, January 25, 2018). This tension could lead to cyber bullying, threats, and/or fights between members of the same fandom (C. Linden, personal communication, January 25, 2018).

Through cognitive dissonance, members of a fandom can change their attitudes, thoughts and behaviors to restore the regulation between their own opinions on the content and the behaviors they display while on social media websites (Tukachinsky, 2015). This is why some fandoms are seen as “toxic.” An example of this is the fandom of the show *Steven Universe*. The show itself promotes love and acceptance of people from different walks of life, while the fandom is the polar opposite. There are “shipping wars,” which are arguments about which characters *should* be paired together (C. Linden, personal communication January 25, 2018). Also, much of the fanart is viciously criticized for not having the characters portrayed in a certain view (C. Linden, personal communication January 25, 2018; Guth, 2015).

Fandoms help promote the continuation of parasocial relationships with characters. The fandom of a particular media can assist with the connection to a character through discussions, arguments, theorizing, and art making of the character. Fanfiction, fanart, and cosplay pictures are shared in these fandoms through social media sites, which helps deepen the parasocial relationships for many audience members.

Art Making and Parasocial Relationships

Many people have attachments to fictional characters that can be likened to friendships, a form of an alternate self through vicarious watching or even through a romantic crush. The creation of fanart and fanfiction is an extension of this attachment with people creating a new form of their favorite medias. People can also become their character for a brief period of time through cosplay.

In the first section, fanfiction and fanart are discussed as two different types of ways to use characters in an artform. Fanart is a visual artform with a character represented in the piece created by an enthusiast of the original media that the character resides. Fanfiction is a form of writing that uses existing characters in a new storyline penned by a fan. These characters can be shifted into anything that the artmaker wants during the creation of a piece of fanart or fanfiction as exemplified by a study by Hiromi and Saori (2015) discussed about the fandom of “fujoshi” in Japan and the artwork that they create using existing characters. In the second section, the artform of cosplay is explained and discussed. Cosplay is the performing art of dressing as a character and these costumes are usually handmade by their wearers. A study by Rahman, Liu, and Cheung (2012) is examined about a cosplay subgroup in Hong Kong.

Fanfiction and fanart. Fanfiction is the creation of a story with existing characters, story universe, and/or alteration of an existing plot. Fanart is an art piece created with characters from a form of media. Both artforms express the creators' relationship with the existing media and characters. Many of these pieces can take hours, weeks, or even years to complete. Upon completion, these artworks are often shared via social media sites (i.e. Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram) or websites that are designed for sharing such works (e.g. Deviantart, Patreon, or fanfiction.net). Some creators also have tables at various conventions to display and sell their works to other fans. Even though creating fanfiction or fanart is often stigmatized in society by those that don't participate, it is a labor of love for many.

One of the types of media that is stigmatized in Japan is yaoi or boy love (BL), which centers around love stories between two men. Hiromi and Saori (2015) conducted a survey that focused on a fandom known as "Fujoshi," which translates to "Rotten girls." These fans are primarily heterosexual women that read romance graphic novels involving homosexual couples (Hiromi & Saori, 2015). Some of the fans, in addition to reading the manga produced by professional artists, create works of both characters in other "yaoi" works and characters in other popular series that are typically "boys'" media (i.e. manga in action, adventure or sports genres) (Hiromi & Saori, 2015). Fujoshi also share a bond of being in the fandom which separates them from non-Fujoshi in both positive and negative ways (Hiromi & Saori, 2015). One of the theories discussed as to why this genre is popular with the Fujoshi is that these women enjoy reading these stories because there are no female characters being forced to act submissive, which is an escape from the oppression of women (and their sexuality) in Japanese society (Hiromi & Saori, 2015).

Fanfiction and fanart are a type of love letter to the character that a person has a parasocial relationship with. These works are also shared among other fans in social media sites. Sometimes the comments that are made on this work can be positive and can raise the self-esteem of the creator of the work (C. Linden, personal communication January 25, 2018). These comments can also be very negative and damaging to the artist or writer's sense of self and creative ability (C. Linden, personal communication January 25, 2018; Guth, 2015). The creation of any art piece with a character as the muse helps strengthen the parasocial relationship that the artist, writer or cosplayer has with their favorite characters.

Cosplay. Cosplay is putting on a costume of a character. For many this is an important ritual that occurs before attending a convention or a Halloween gathering. Some make these costumes from scratch, which can often take months to complete, while others buy these costumes online. There are varying levels of skill in cosplayers, from beginner to expert or (referred in many online communities as) "God-level." One of the things that is common for all of these fans is that they are able to embody a character that they have a parasocial relationship with, even if it is for a few hours.

Rahman et al. (2012) conducted a study of the subculture of cosplay in Hong Kong using interviews and observations of cosplayers at a convention. The researchers participated in cosplay while interviewing members of this subculture, as well as photographed the experience. There were fifteen participants in this study and were interviewed both during causal conversations (twelve participants), and structured in-depth interviews (two participants) (Rahman et al., 2012). All of the participants were cosplayers of various skill levels and had varying opinions of the subject. One of the novice cosplayers was nervous putting on the costume and becoming the character (Rahman et al., 2012). Another participant, who saw herself

as a “professional cosplayer,” felt that certain people wearing costumes are not actually cosplayers and that others should put more effort into their cosplay costumes and personas (Rahman et al., 2012). Rahman et al. stated, “Cosplay enables enthusiasts to imitate the personas of their adored characters and to re-create an imaginative self in reality” (2012, p.321).

Cosplayers usually put their photos of their costume on display via social media sites, on Halloween and at conventions, such as the San Diego Comic Con. During this period, a person can embody their favorite characters for a short amount of time, get pictures taken of them and meet other fans of the original medias. Becoming a different person could be a therapeutic experience for some fans because it can give them strength, confidence and an escape from reality while wearing the costume.

How Parasocial Relationships Can be Integrated into Expressive Arts Therapy

Parasocial relationships are an integral part of some people’s lives. Through the development of the relationship, the strengthening of it during the creation of fanfiction, fanart and cosplay, and the emotions that are evoked through viewing the character’s story audience members connect to these fictional characters. Derrick et al. (2008) stated, “...although people consciously know that parasocial relationships are not real relationships, in many ways they feel psychologically real and meaningful” (p.262). These relationships impact people’s lives that become clients in therapy. Sometimes these clients do not know of the impact that these relationships have in their lives. It may be important to discuss these relationships in therapy for many reasons.

In the following sections, there are examples of how to integrate these relationships into therapy. In the first section, it is discussed how these relationships can be used in the expressive

therapies through play therapy, role play, and bibliotherapy. The second section is how clinicians can start this integration process in their own work.

Expressive arts interventions. Since parasocial relationships with fictional characters can be part of a client's life, it is important for the clinician to be able to hold the space to allow discussion of this connection in the therapeutic process. There are different ways that these relationships could be affecting the client, such as being a vision of an ideal self and a metaphor for the healing process itself.

One of the types of characters that are often used as metaphors are superheroes. By using the superhero metaphor in therapy this could help the healing process with many clients (Rubin, 2008). This could include an origin story or backstory, aspects of duality through aliases, the hero's journey, and the battle between a hero and their villain (Rubin, 2008).

Superheroes and their stories are myths that contain origins and transformations and can be utilized in therapy (Rubin, 2007). These superhero stories can be used in metaphors for personal myth making that can facilitate growth, change and self-expression for clients (Rubin, 2007). Superheroes are often transformed through situations that are out of their control and this metaphor can be powerful for clients that have been through traumatic events and/or personal hardships (Rubin, 2007). Superheroes also go through internal struggles, fights with enemies, and conflicting situations with their alter egos (Rubin, 2007).

Children often use the metaphor of a superhero to process their feelings of weakness or strength and compare the hero's qualities with aspects of their ideal selves or others in their lives (Porter, 2007). Using superheroes in play facilitates the exploration of a client's personal life, develop a sense of self, and helps with self-regulation (Porter, 2007).

Having a superhero be a metaphor for a client can allow for the creation of a story. Many techniques in therapy that use stories are intended to create fictional scenarios that can help the reader through processing their own situations with maintaining safety and distance (McNulty, 2008). The stories created can help the client go through difficult times in their lives and give them a sense of strength when they feel their weakest. For example, when some fanfiction writers use “strong” characters that they have a parasocial relationship with, such as Batman, The Powerpuff Girls and Iron Man, to create scenarios that mirror the writers’ experience with trauma, loss, and other difficult situations as a way of processing what they went through (C. Linden, personal communication, January 25, 2018). These stories could be brought into the therapeutic setting to discuss the process of creating these scenarios, positive and negative outcomes of the experience, as well as, new insights that have been realized through this artmaking.

Another form of using stories in therapy is through the application of bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy is the use of literature as a part of treatment in therapy (Betzael & Shechtman, 2017). Superhero stories, cartoons and movies can contain themes of grief, trauma, and resilience (Betzael & Shechtman, 2017). As seen in the movie *Iron Man 3*, Tony Stark has several flashbacks to when he almost died, heroes can experience symptoms of PTSD while attempting to save the world. During the movie, Tony processes his traumatic event while he is attempting to stop a villain. There is a powerful scene in which he is without the suit that gives him powers and goes on a stealth mission to the villain’s headquarters, showing that he can be brave and fight without relying exclusively on his “Iron Man” suit (Feige & Black, 2013).

In Betzael and Shechtman’s study (2017), children that have lost their parents used bibliotherapy for their treatment using stories that contained superheroes and stories that did not,

as well as a control group in which bibliotherapy was not utilized. This study found that children that read the stories containing superheroes had more goals for the future, a decrease in anxiety, aggression, and violent behavior, and became more motivated than children that read stories not containing superheroes (Betzalel, & Shechtman, 2017). Since many superheroes go through a traumatic event, such as losing their parents, it is possible that these children could connect to these characters on an emotional level (Betzalel, & Shechtman, 2017).

Parasocial relationships with superheroes and other fictional characters can make their way into a therapeutic relationship. Clinicians can utilize these characters and stories as metaphors for strength, courage, and the healing process. To use these characters is part of a process of learning how to examine these parasocial relationships that clients have to fictional beings.

Integrating parasocial relationships into clinical work. For clinicians that want to utilize these relationships into their work, there are many options. For a play therapist, or a clinician that will be working with children, toys can be bought that are of the characters that are popular today with that population. Research can be done by observing what movies are playing in theaters, shows that are on different television networks and by looking at the top selling comic books, graphic novels, and manga during the course of a year.

Another step is to engage with this media on the therapists' own time. As Rubin (2008) states, "the very first step is for the interested clinician to butter up some popcorn and set aside time to become familiar with the numerous cartoons available to today's viewer" (p.239). While consuming this media, the therapeutic applications can be examined as well as the reasons why clients are attached to these characters (Rubin, 2008). There are many ways to access this media now with Netflix and other streaming websites.

In addition to consuming the media, there are other ways to use the characters in a therapeutic setting. Clients might choose to read a book or watch a movie with a character that went through a similar situation as them. For an intervention that utilizes bibliotherapy, clients should choose a story that they can connect to either consciously (e.g. the main character is going through a similar life event), or unconsciously (e.g. the cover speaks to them) (McNulty, 2008).

Another way to integrate these characters in a clinical relationship is to bring clips, comic books, and other stories into the space. Different clips from movies and TV shows can be brought into the session as a way into talking about a topic with clients (Meyers, 2017). Topics such as addiction, family dynamics, and more are in different forms of visual media through metaphors that are represented by the characters (Meyers, 2017).

Clients might prompt themselves and the therapist to engage with the character through play therapy. Rubin (2008) offered a case study of a client that used play therapy to embody the character of Naruto (from the anime/manga series *Naruto*), who is training how to be a ninja and goes on adventures while learning about how to control the powers that lie dormant in him as “The Nine Tailed Fox.” This client and Rubin used the character to as a metaphor of the child’s difficulties that he was having while asking what Naruto would do in different situations and the feelings that came up for Naruto during these scenarios (Rubin, 2008).

Clients could use a character for their own inspiration and metaphors. Rosenberg has stated that the character of Batman could be a “meaningful cosplay choice for someone coping with trauma” (as cited in Weisberger, 2016, para.14). Since Batman has experienced trauma in different aspects of his own life, his story inspires his fans to process their experiences with trauma (Weisberger, 2016). Bringing these characters into the work as therapists can be impactful for the client since they can relate to the experiences that they had in their own lives.

Rubin (2008) advised that therapists should not impose a certain TV show, movie, or other media on a client that has some parallels to the characters in these stories. He argued that clients should be the ones to mention a piece of media and the clinician engages with the client about these stories and characters. In having the client direct the conversation, it gives the client the opportunity to be the expert on this topic and a chance to build rapport while talking about an enjoyable aspect of their lives.

Utilizing parasocial relationships in a therapeutic setting can help clients through the therapeutic process. It gives metaphors that the client can help build and understand. These relationships could meet the needs and wants of a client through fantasized stories. Using the stories of fictional characters can have benefits to both the clients and the therapists through building rapport, metaphors, and skills in the healing process.

Discussion

Parasocial relationships impact people's lives in a meaningful way. There are benefits and risks to having this type of relationship with a fictional character. Real emotions are felt in these connections for the audience members. These parasocial relationships should be a part of the therapeutic relationship because they are parts of the client. Some clients could benefit greatly from using characters in their treatment. People have found symbols, inspiration, and therapeutic release from their own work with these characters through cosplay, fanfiction, and fanart. There is something powerful in dressing up as a character or using them in a metaphor.

The characters and the relationships to them can also be great metaphors for clients in the healing process. As the creative process in expressive arts therapy utilizes metaphors (Halprin, 2003), the use of a character and their story in the clinical space can impact the therapeutic

relationship positively. Some of these images can be part of the pop culture, such as Superman as a symbol for strength. Other images can be more personal.

Using characters can be more of a personal metaphor for someone than others. Plus, they could include a whole story that both the client and the therapist are familiar with. It also provides a safe distance for clients using this metaphor through characters. An example of this can be a client that refers to themselves as the Hulk when they are upset instead of saying that they get into a violent rage. It allows for language for a client that is more comfortable with and that can be later transitioned to more therapeutic language (Meyers, 2017).

Nostalgia and the remembering with fondness of characters is something that is part of this relationship. Some of these characters and medias help raise people as shows, movies and games that were experienced when they were children. These are identity forming relationships that are still held by these people sometimes long after the media has been viewed. Since sometimes these relationships helped form the identity of clients how can they be ignored by a clinician?

Characters provide safety for clients. Characters can be used as transitional objects that can enter the therapeutic space. Rapport can also be built through talking about these characters (Meyers, 2017). Trust is important and these conversations about different characters could ease the process of therapy. Through this lens of parasocial relationships as being a large part of clients' lives, clinicians can use this in their work with children, adolescents, and adults. The client is saying important details about their own lives when they talk about their favorite characters. Also, sometimes a character is just a character and does not hold a particular meaning to a client. And other times, they hold a very special meaning for a person.

Although the characters can have a positive impact in a client's life, there are some downsides to having a parasocial relationship. Some people with parasocial relationships are in a high-risk group for depression, anxiety, bullying, and other problems (Holfeld & Sukhawathanakul, 2017). One suggestion for further research is to look into how cyberbullying impacts a client with an online presence. There are many artists, writers, and cosplayers displaying their work on the internet where it can be seen by anyone across the globe. People that these creators haven't met can comment on their work either positively or negatively. Most of the negative comments are from bullies that are referred to as trolls that give vicious critiques and threats to creators and other types of bloggers.

Trolls are a problem in fandoms and create an atmosphere of the group to become toxic. Although many fandoms have a toxic side, it tends to be around one percent of the members that are contributing to the toxicity (C. Linden, personal communication January 25, 2018). There was a case of a girl in the *Steven Universe* fandom that attempted suicide due to online bullying and death threats of her fanart because she did not draw the characters the "right way" (Guth, 2015, para. 20). Receiving these types of threats and cyberbullying is an all too real experience for many people online that participate in fandoms. Most of these people are also adolescences or young adults on both sides of the screen. Therapists should be aware of what posts, comments, and attention the clients are getting while they are posting online because it could be a cause of anxiety, depression and other symptoms (Holfeld & Sukhawathanakul, 2017).

One of the best ways to integrate parasocial treatments in therapy is to be open to learning about these characters through the client's perspective. When a client brings up a particular piece of media that they are particularly excited about, a clinician should ask questions about it. This both builds rapport with the client and gives them the power to be the expert on a

subject that they know about (Meyers, 2017). Many clients would love the opportunity to talk about their favorite show with someone, especially if other people in their lives will not.

Expressive arts therapists can streamline the process between art that is already being made with these characters into using it in a therapeutic setting. It might be easier for clients to bring in their existing work with the character as a muse, especially if they are uncomfortable making art in the space. Clients should be encouraged to bring in this artwork, because hard work is put into these pieces. Clinicians can have clients look at their own artwork and their parasocial relationship in a new light. Both the client and therapist can figure out as to why this relationship is important for the client and what meanings can be pulled from this relationship to relate to their own lives.

Therapists should not just ask “how is your relationship with your mother?” but should additionally ask, “what is your relationship with your favorite fictional character?” These relationships have real value in many people’s lives. They help shape morals, identities, and selves all while being fictional. These aspects of these characters are very real despite being works of fiction.

Some clients feel a deep connection with a fictional character for many reasons. The reasons could vary from the character going through similar experiences as the client (e.g. traumatic events, mental diagnoses) to the character having aspects the client admires (e.g. bravery or strength). Even though these relationships are one-sided they can be important ones for clients to have with these characters. Expressive Arts therapists should include an exploration of these relationships in a client’s life into the therapeutic process.

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Appendix A

Glossary of Terms

Anime- (noun) Animation from Japan. Is categorized in different genres and is as diverse as American Television media.

Bae- (noun) Shorthand for “Before Anyone else.” In reference to a character, it is one that a person has a crush on or is their favorite in a piece of media.

BGM – (noun) Shorthand for “background music.” This is the soundtrack of a piece of media that is played in the background of scenes and gaming.

Canon-(noun) Events, character’s personalities, pairings, and more that happen in a plot in the original media.

Convention- (Noun) An event that takes place for pop culture, media, comic books and/or anime. Usually held in a big venue. People show up to these events in cosplay, take pictures, buy merchandise from their favorite medias, and meet other fans. Special events are also held within the convention that are autograph and/or question and answer sessions with people involved in making the media (i.e. directors, actors, producers).

Cosplay – (noun) A costume of a character. (verb) To dress and act as a character usually at conventions.

Deviantart-(noun) A website that artwork can be posted. It is a popular site to post works of fanart.

Fanart – (noun) A piece of visual art that features characters that already exist in some form of media (i.e. video games, cartoons, anime, etc.).

Fandom- (noun) A fan following of a piece of media. These are groups that discuss, make art, post content and theories, and connect to this piece of media.

Fanfiction- (noun) A piece of writing that features characters that already exist in some form of media (i.e. video games, cartoons, anime, etc.) in a new plotline or from a different point of view.

Fanon- (noun) Events, character's personalities, pairing and more that are theorized by the fanbase of the media. Sometimes the theories are so thought of to a point in which some fans claim they are a part of the original work.

GIF- (noun) An image that moves.

Manga – (noun) Japanese graphic novels. Is categorized in different genres and is as diverse as American comic books and graphic novels.

Mary-Sue/Gary Stu- (noun) Original characters that are seen as bland and without personality. Often, they are self-inserted characters of the author. This is also used as an insult for some characters that are seen to have little or no personality.

Meme- (noun) Jokes that are online, usually in a picture format. Most memes are from a piece of media (sometimes the source is unknown), and are often changed to fit a situation, person or other piece of media.

MMO- (noun) Shorthand for “massive multiplayer online.” These are games that are played online with players around the world that can log onto the game at any time. An example of this type of game is World of Warcraft (WOW).

Mood- (noun) Used when a person agrees or emotionally connects with a certain post, picture or statement. Sometimes this term becomes “big mood” when this emotional connection is felt strongly.

NPC-(noun) Shorthand for “non-playable character.” These characters play a variety of roles in video games, including the love interest, bosses, and more. Usually when this term is used it is

referring to characters that give quests to the player or are characters that are standing in the background of a game.

NSFW- (noun) Shorthand for “not safe for work.” Images that are highly sexual, pornographic, very violent, and/or contains gore.

OC- (noun) Shorthand for “Original character.” These types of characters that are created in a person’s own story. In fanfiction, these are characters that the author has created in their piece of writing. (See also Mary-Sue/Gary-Stu).

OOC- (adverb) Shorthand for “Out of character.” This is when a character does something that is seen as out of their usual personality. This term is often used as a criticism in fanfiction, fanart and original works with established characters.

OST – (noun) Shorthand for original soundtrack. The whole soundtrack of a piece of media including the background music, theme songs and other songs.

RPG-(noun) Shorthand for “Role playing game.” It is a game that is created by the group of people playing it, in which the stories and characters are made up as the game is played. An example of this is Dungeons and Dragons (D&D).

Ship- (verb) Fans pairing two characters together romantically. (noun) A pairing of a couple of fictional characters.

Toxic Fandom- (noun) Fandoms that have a lot of fighting, abuse, and other toxic behaviors.

Trash- (noun) A “die-hard” fan of a fandom, ship or character. Usually the name of the fandom, ship, or character is said before “trash” when used (e.g. “Fandom Trash”).

Tumblr – (noun) A social media website that has blogs including fandom blogs. Art, videos, pictures and more are posted on this site and the users tend to use screennames to remain anonymous.

Waifu/Husbando- (noun) A character that a person has an intense crush on. It is similar to calling a character a “girlfriend” or “boyfriend.” These terms are usually used for anime characters since these terms are based on Japanese pronunciations of “wife” and “husband.”

Weeaboo – (noun) Someone that is obsessed specifically to anime and other Japanese media to a large extent. This type of person is usually looked down on in the rest of the “geeky fandoms” because of their extreme obsession with Japanese pop culture.

WIP- (Noun) Shorthand for work in progress. A piece that an artist or writer is currently working on.

Vine – (noun) Originally a website for posting short videos (which was taken down). Now it refers to videos that are a few seconds long that are usually humorous.

THESIS APPROVAL FORM

**Lesley University
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences
Expressive Therapies Division
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Expressive Arts Therapy, MA**


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Type of Project: Thesis Literature Review

Title: Parasocial Relationships with Fictional Characters in Therapy

Date of Graduation: 5/18/18

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor:  Skellogg