

**Telling Stories, Making Meaning:  
Art Therapy as a Process for Refugee Children to Make Sense of their Experiences**

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## ABSTRACT

Telling Stories, Making Meaning:

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Paola Bresba

Children who come to Canada as refugees are at risk of having lived through traumas. These traumatic experiences can profoundly affect their global meaning system – foundational to their way of understanding themselves and their place in the world. Narrative is a way in which people organise, process and understand their experiences. When trauma violates refugee children's global meaning system narrative is a way for them to work through the discordant information and find a way to incorporate difficult experiences into their overall life stories.

Through the use of instrumental case study methodology, I examine refugee children's process of meaning-making, in response to trauma, through the observation and analysis of one child's narratives in art therapy. The findings show that, over time, the client's narratives illustrate a change in his perspective of himself, his world concept and his relationship to the world, suggesting a transformation in the child's global meaning system. The findings unexpectedly reveal the presence of parallel narratives, which are not authored by the child but have the potential to influence the child's view of himself and the world. This case study demonstrates how art therapy can help refugee children repair and adjust their global meaning system. It also highlights the importance of being aware of the presence and influence of parallel narratives.

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And finally, with humility, I thank my family, who supported me during my times of delight and accomplishment as well as my storming and fretting.

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this research paper to Sansaar and his family and all those who find themselves seeking refuge. I pray that every person be given a chance to build a home in safety and every story has the opportunity to be told.

## TABLE OF CONTENT

<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> .....	ix
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	1
Refugees: Members of Canadian Society.....	1
<b>Chapter 1: Trauma and the Refugee Experience</b> .....	3
Defining Trauma.....	3
Trauma and the Phases of the Refugee Experience.....	5
Preflight Traumas and Stressors.....	5
Flight Traumas and Stressors.....	5
Resettlement Traumas and Stressors.....	6
Refugee Children: Specific Concerns.....	7
Stress on the Family, Stress on the Child.....	8
Responding to Trauma: Therapeutic Objectives for Refugee Children.....	10
Initial Treatment Goals.....	10
Subsequent Goal: Addressing the Trauma.....	11
Sharing Experiences and Feelings.....	11
Meaning-Making.....	12
<b>Chapter Two: Meaning-Making</b> .....	12
Culture and Meaning-Making.....	13
Narrative and Meaning-Making.....	13
The Impact of Trauma on Meaning.....	16
Meaning-Making: A Response to Trauma.....	17
<b>Chapter Three: Making-Meaning Through Narrative and Art</b> .....	17
Art Therapy With Refugees.....	17
Making Meaning Through Narrative.....	18

<b>METHODOLOGY</b> .....	21
Purpose of the Research.....	21
Operational Definitions.....	22
Refugee.....	22
Meaning-Making.....	22
Primary Research Question.....	22
Subsidiary Research Question.....	23
Research Participant.....	23
Sansaar: Description, Family History and Reason for Referral to Therapy.....	24
Research Design.....	25
Instrumental Case Study.....	25
Qualitative Data Collection.....	26
Data Analysis.....	27
<b>FINDINGS</b> .....	28
Early Sessions.....	28
Summary of Session 1.....	29
Narratives Told by Sansaar in Session 1.....	31
Parallel Narratives.....	32
The Hero Project: Sessions 5 – 9.....	33
Summary of Sessions 5 – 9.....	33
Narratives Told by Sansaar in Sessions 5 – 9.....	36
Parallel Narratives in Sessions 5 – 9.....	38
Middle Sessions.....	39
Middle Sessions: Identity.....	39
Summary of Sessions and Artwork.....	39

The Narratives Regarding Identity.....	42
The Parallel, Outside Narratives.....	44
Middle Session: Being Different.....	44
Summary of Sessions and Artwork.....	44
The Narrative Regarding Being Different.....	45
Middle Sessions: The Place for Mistakes.....	45
Summary of Sessions and Art.....	45
Narrative Regarding Mistakes.....	46
Middle Sessions: Alternative Responses to Conflicts.....	47
Summary of Sessions and Art.....	47
Narratives About Conflicts.....	49
Closing Sessions: Final Image and Reporting Back to Others.....	51
Summary of the Closing Session and Meeting With Staff.....	51
Narratives Found in the Closing Session and Meeting With Staff.....	53
<b>DISCUSSIONS.....</b>	<b>55</b>
The Human Face of a Complex Issue: Therapy With Refugee Children.....	55
Setting Appropriate Goals: Following the Pace of the Client.....	56
Narrative in Meaning-Making: Working Through Trauma.....	58
The Needs of the Client Versus Outside Expectations.....	61
<b>CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>APPENDIX A – LETTER OF INFORMATION.....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>APPENDIX B – CONSENT FORM.....</b>	<b>71</b>



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 – Abstract: mixed media on bond paper, approx. 24” x 17”.....	28
Figure 2 – Self-portrait: gouache on white bond paper, 8 ½” x 11”.....	30
Figure 3 – Hero sketches: pencil on bond paper, 11”x 8 ½”.....	34
Figure 4 – Hero scene: mixed media on bond paper, 11” x 8 ½.....	34
Figure 5 – Abstract: paint on manila paper, approx. 24” x 17”.....	36
Figure 6 – Animals: pencil on bond paper, 11” x 8 ½”.....	40
Figure 7 – Reflections on animals: pencil on bond paper, 8 ½”x 11” .....	40
Figure 8 – Book cover: paint, collage and leather on cardstock paper, 10” x 14”...	42
Figure 9 – Woman’s portrait: chalk pastel on bond paper, 8 ½” x 11”.....	46
Figure 10 – Battle scene: pencil and pen on bond paper, 11” x 8 ½” .....	48
Figure 11 – Wind creature: pencil on bond paper, 8 ½” x 11”.....	48
Figure 12 – Bird: placticine, 3” x 2” x 3” .....	49
Figure 13 – Goodbye card: mixed media on card stock, 3 ½” x 5”.....	52

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Refugees: Members of Canadian Society

As a signatory of the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, Canada assumes the responsibility of providing sanctuary to refugees who come to its borders. According to the convention, a *refugee* is a person who is outside of his<sup>1</sup> country of nationality due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on his race, religion, political opinion, nationality or membership in a particular social group, and cannot acquire protection from his home country (United Nations High Commission for Refugees [UNHCR], 2007). *Asylum-seekers* are people who have applied for recognition as refugees under the convention; *convention refugees* are those who have had their applications approved (UNHCR, 2001-2008). In 2008, the population of Canada included 173,651 refugees recognised under the convention and 54,202 asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2009). These figures do not include the substantial number of people who once came to Canada as refugees but have since been granted permanent residence status or Canadian citizenship.

People arriving as refugees make up a significant portion of the Canadian population. For this group, psychological health needs may arise because of the exposure they have had to traumas both pre- and post- arrival. Indeed, traumatic experiences precipitated their flight from the home country, occurred during their search for asylum and arise in the course of the resettlement process. Despite this, only a minority of

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<sup>1</sup> The refugee population includes both men and women. However, as the subject of this case study is male, and for simplification purposes, I will use the masculine pronoun throughout this paper.

refugees develop mental health problems diagnosable under the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (text revision; *DSM-IV-TR*) (Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 2005; Papadopoulos, 2005).

However, refugees commonly experience feelings of overwhelming anger, fear and sadness, in response to lived traumas (Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 2005). Trauma can undermine a person's ability to make sense of the world and can be difficult to integrate into one's larger life narrative. Children find greater difficulty processing their past experiences in the context of their new surroundings and have trouble finding meaning when the adults in their lives are unwilling or unable to guide them through these processes (Wertheim-Cahen, 1998). Adults may fail to do this for children because: (a) they are too overwhelmed by their own traumatic experiences to concentrate on the children's needs (Fantino & Colak, 2001), (b) they are beleaguered or disempowered by their own acculturation difficulties (Allen, Basilier Vaage, & Hauff, 2006; Blackwell, 2005; Gonsalves, 1992), and (c) they lack the support of an extended community to assist and support them in this task (Sourander, 2003).

Art therapy can facilitate meaning-making for refugees and has been used as a way of integrating the past, present and future into a narrative whole (Fitzpatrick, 2002; Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 2005; Kellogg & Volker, 1993; Wertheim-Cahen, 1998). Narrative in art therapy has been identified as a meaning-making process that therapists can use in working with refugee children (Kellogg & Volker; Rousseau & Heusch, 2000; Rousseau et al., 2005; Rousseau et al., 2003, Stepakoff, 2007). It can assist clients who are struggling to integrate traumatic experiences into their understanding of themselves, the world and the relationship between the two.

Through case study research in the field of art therapy, this paper examines the themes presented in the narratives of a refugee child over the course of treatment, and explores how he used these narratives in his meaning-making process. This research initiative is intended to provide information relevant to clinical work with refugees by adding to the body of knowledge regarding meaning-making for this population. New research in this specific area may facilitate the development of therapeutic interventions to address their need for meaning-making in response to trauma.

## Chapter 1: Trauma and the Refugee Experience

### *Defining Trauma*

The word *trauma* originates from the Greek word ‘traumatizo’, which means *to wound* (Trauma, 2009). Initially used to express a physical injury, the word trauma now also refers to psychological and social injuries, or the experiences that produce such injuries (Leydesdorff, Dawson, Burchardt, & Ashplant, 2004). Within research, the definition of trauma varies, depending on the researcher and the discipline in which it is being examined (Leydesdorff, et al.). Clinical psychiatry professor Judith Herman (1992) writes that “traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence or death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror...” (Herman, p. 33). This description aligns with the one contained in the *DSM-IV-TR* (2000).

However Herman (1992) argues that trauma research should expand beyond the view of trauma as a one-time catastrophic event. Through the course of her clinical and research career Herman has found that, in many instances, trauma is chronic, as is the

case for many victims of incest, survivors of concentration camps and civilians living in war zones. In the case of people who have had a single trauma, intrusive symptoms brought on by the trauma often dissipate over time (Herman). In cases of chronic trauma, Herman found that symptoms can be persistent because the person learns to anticipate further trauma.

Erickson agrees that the concept of trauma needs to expand beyond the notion that it is a single, discrete event (Erickson, 1994 cited in Leydesdorff, et al., 2004). However he takes the argument further, writing that traumatic experiences are not necessarily acute, either. Rather, trauma can be caused by a collection of social conditions (Erickson, cited in Leydesdorff, et al.). Trauma then can be an acute experience, such as a car accident, or the witnessing of a violent crime, or a series of challenging, stressful events, such as chronic poverty, combined with an unstable home environment and lack of legal status in a country. For the purpose of this paper I will be using a definition of trauma that includes single and ongoing traumas, of acute or lesser intensity.

Given that traumatic experiences challenge a person's sense of meaning, refugees are particularly susceptible to this dilemma due to the stressors they have faced before and after their arrival in the host country. These traumas may have shattered their previously held notions of how the world works and prior methods of processing experiences (Janoff-Bulam, 1999; Wilson, 2006). This topic will be further explored in chapter 2.

Gonsalves (1992) categorizes the refugee experience into three phases, each of which has associated traumas to which refugees are susceptible. Each phase, preflight, flight and resettlement, will impact a person's psychological well-being (Gonsalves).

## *Trauma and the Phases of the Refugee Experience*

### *Preflight Traumas and Stressors*

The very definition of refugee implies lived trauma. Refugees experience forced departure from the home country (Gonsalves, 1992; UNHCR, 2007) because of war, persecution and/or political oppression. These methods of repression are used to demoralise, defeat and destroy a people (Blackwell, 2005) and to attack their identity, meaning and existence (Woodcock, 2001). Within this violent context a refugee may have been subjected to or have witnessed torture, intimidation, rape or murder (Blackwell). Such experiences can trigger: (a) post-traumatic stress, (b) depression, (c) anxiety, (d) fragmentation, (e) loss of hope, (f) feelings of futility and disintegration (Blackwell; Möhlen, Parzer, Resch, & Brunner, 2005) and (g) disruption to a person's perception of life as meaningful (Fitzpatrick, 2002).

### *Flight Traumas and Stressors*

Added to the original trauma is the perilous journey to the host country: a journey that involves risk and loss (Allen et al, 2006; Fitzpatrick, 2002; Gonsalves, 1992). Undertaking it often implies risk of death, physical or sexual assault, exploitation, theft, injury, hunger and extreme physical challenges. The journey may include time spent in a refugee camp (Gonsalves). Leaving the country of origin usually entails separation from family, friends and community, and loss of material possessions (Allen, et al.; Fitzpatrick). The journey may be prolonged into weeks, months or years.

### *Resettlement Traumas and Stressors*

Initial relief in reaching a safe country is followed by an awareness of the daunting tasks and difficulties that remain to be faced (Ying & Akutsu, 1997; Gonsalves, 1992). Psychological needs are often denied or left unattended due to survival needs, which may seem more pressing (Gonsalves). These include the need to acquire permanent asylum status and to settle in a new cultural environment.

Most newly-arrived refugees do not have permanent status in Canada and must apply within a set time frame (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada [IRB], 2008). Failed claims result in repatriation to the country of origin (Allen, et al., 2006; IRB). Anxieties due to uncertainty regarding the claim's outcome can be aggravated by a past experience of persecution (Callaghan, 1998).

While working to secure permanent legal status in the country, refugees must also manage numerous and frequently overwhelming settlement obligations: acquire housing, obtain legal advice, learn a new language, secure funds, enrol children in school, find work, and familiarise themselves with the systems in the new environment. An unavoidable challenge during the resettlement phase is acculturating to the new environment.

Culture provides people with a framework for understanding themselves and the world (Sam, 2006). Each culture has a particular way of framing information. Living outside of one's culture offers challenges. It requires that a person adjust their way of knowing in order to factor in the particular ways of thinking and acting specific to the culture of the new environment (Berry, 2003 cited in Sam). This adjustment process is known as acculturation. Acculturation puts strain on a person's ability to make sense of

his life, feelings and experiences because it requires a change in ways of thinking ingrained from childhood (Ying & Akutsu, 1997).

Acculturation stress can negatively impact settlement (Allen et al., 2006). Moreover, the ability to adapt ones way of thinking may be impeded by past trauma, which challenges a person's trust that meaning exists in a world where atrocities are committed (Allen et al., 2006). Trauma can undermine a person's belief that there are patterns and coherency to how life unfolds. Ying and Akutsu (1997) describe a person's sense of coherence as their perception of the world as comprehensible and meaningful. Through quantitative research Ying and Akutsu found that a refugee's sense of coherence is a significant predictor of their psychological adjustment in the new country.

### *Refugee Children: Specific Concerns*

Refugee children are not immune to the stressors and traumas faced by their adult counterparts. Moreover, they must simultaneously contend with the developmental hurdles that mark the lives of all children (Berman, 2001). Over the course of their life people mature and develop, physically, mentally and socially. Childhood is a particularly concentrated period of growth and learning. According to Erik Erikson a person's psychosocial development is related to specific social conflicts that each person faces over the course of their lifetime (Engler, 2006). He argues that the development of a healthy personality is dependent on the successful accomplishment of the developmental tasks specific to eight life stages that he has identified.

The particular crisis associated with each stage challenges the person but also presents the opportunity for growth (Erikson, 1968). Erikson names the stages in



accordance with what he sees as the polarities faced at each period. Five of the eight stages occur pre-adulthood, and are therefore relevant to the welfare and development of refugee children. The stages are: (a) basic trust versus basic mistrust (during the first year of life); (b) autonomy versus shame and doubt (in the second and third year of life); (c) initiative versus guilt (between ages three and five); (d) industry versus inferiority (between ages six and eleven); and (e) identity versus identity confusion, (between the ages of twelve and eighteen) (Erikson). Therapists working with refugee children must keep in mind that, while dealing with their refugee experience, these children are simultaneously dealing with the same psychosocial, developmental hurdles faced by their non-refugee counterparts. Their refugee experiences and psychosocial development are likely to influence each other.

Family and community are major contributors to the mental health of refugee children (Garmezy, 1983 cited in Berman; Smith et al., 2001 cited in Möhlen, et al., 2005). Family relationships provide a context within which refugee children tend to process their experiences (Weine et. al, 2004). The qualitative research of Weine, et al. found that Bosnian refugees in Chicago tended to rely on family as their key social support and to assess their experiences within the framework of their family relationships. For this reason, to effectively treat refugee children, the well-being of the entire family must be considered.

### *Stress on the Family, Stress on the Child*

Given the importance of the family in relationship to the mental health of the child, it is important to be aware of the numerous pressures that may be acting on the

parents or family system of refugee children. Flight from the home country cuts the family off from its community of support, therefore reducing the sense of security required for effective child-rearing (Sourander, 2003). Traumas in the preflight, flight and resettlement phases may have undermined the parents' ability to provide safety for their child. The child may have witnessed the beating, rape or humiliation of a parental figure (Blackwell, 2005).

In the new country, parents may have difficulty providing for their children's material needs. The power dynamics in a family may be further compromised by the fact that refugee children tend to learn the nuances and language of a new cultural environment before their parents and use different strategies to acculturate (Allen et al., 2006; Blackwell, 2005; Gonsalves, 1992). Any one of these may result in a child feeling that the adults in his life are unable to protect him, creating a major obstacle to the child's stability and well-being (Berman, 2001).

All of these issues can add to the confusion and difficulty refugee children face once they have arrived in the host country. It is recommended that therapeutic interventions for refugee children enable them to process the events and emotions associated with being refugees, and to focus on their strengths and resources and those of their families (Berman, 2001; Weine, et al., 2004). Berman further recommends children have an opportunity to share their experiences and feelings with their families and their larger community. When parents are unable to provide children with the necessary supports to assist them in dealing with the traumas they have experienced, therapy is all the more appropriate (Werthein-Cahen, 1998).

## *Responding to Trauma: Therapeutic Objectives for Refugee Children*

### *Initial Treatment Goals*

Safety is the essential, preliminary concern in treatment of trauma survivors (Courtois, 2004; Herman, 1992). For refugees, this includes escaping the dangers in the country of origin, acquiring permanent status in the host country, and resettling in the new environment. Often refugees are unable to focus attention on psychological needs arising from their trauma history because they are overwhelmed by resettlement responsibilities (Gonsalves, 1992). For children, resettlement must include the provision of a safe living environment. In therapy, clients should not be encouraged to explore their trauma history without there first being enough safety established in the sessions and in their lives. Physical and psychological supports can protect refugee children from becoming re-traumatized during treatment (Courtois; Wertheim-Cahen, 1998).

Developing coping skills, learning to manoeuvre effectively in the new culture, and acquiring the competencies necessary for successful resettlement are all necessary components in the trauma recovery process of refugee children (Courtois, 2004). Skill building endorses a sense of accomplishment and capability. It promotes empowerment, which forced migration undermines (Blackwell, 2005).

Therapists who work with refugees must be extremely sensitive to the issue of power within the therapeutic relationship (Courtois, 2004). Papadopoulos (2005) warns practitioners not to pathologize their clients, seeing them as victims because of their refugee status. Therapeutic programs and interventions should include a focus on the

strengths of the child. This will help the child identify with the resources and powers he has rather than the role of victim or the hardships he has endured (Courtois, 2004).

*Subsequent Goal: Addressing the Trauma*

Once safety and stability have been established in the life of the client, therapy can focus on trauma processing (Coutois, 2004). Key goals are communicating the trauma and creating a sense of coherence and meaning.

*Sharing experiences and feelings.*

Silence and secrecy exacerbate psychological problems (Stepakoff, 2007). Despite this, refugees may not speak about past and present traumas for numerous reasons: secrecy was a safety precaution in the home country (Woodcock, 2001); past traumas are considered best left alone (Kellogg & Volker, 1993); sharing painful memories and feelings is thought to be burdensome for others (Weiner et al., 2004); and time and energy are limited and cannot be afforded to this tasks (Gonsalves, 1992). However, secrecy prevents the release of emotions, can cause feelings of isolation, and often results in misunderstandings. Without open and accurate information sharing, children are particularly vulnerable to developing erroneous interpretations of situations. They may believe that they are responsible for deaths or other losses in the family (Woodcock). Sharing traumatic memories in individual, group or family therapy offers emotional release, reduction of isolation, validation of feelings and experiences, and opportunities for the correction of misunderstanding (Grove & Torbiorn, 1985 cited in Gonsalves; Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 2005; Stepakoff, 2007; Weiner et al.). For some

people, it is a necessary first step in processing and coming to terms with the trauma (Kalmanowitz & Lloyd).

### *Meaning-making.*

Woodcock (2001) describes war and political oppression as tools used to attack the identity, meaning and existence of a specific population. Acculturation puts further strain on a person's ability to make sense of his life, feelings and experiences.

Quantitative research by Ying and Akutsu (1997) found that a sense of coherence, which they describe as a person's sense of the world as comprehensible and meaningful, is a significant predictor of a refugee's psychological adjustment in the new country. They, among numerous others professionals, recommend therapeutic interventions with refugees that facilitate meaning-making in response to traumas (Berman, 2001; Woodcock; Ying & Akutsu). In the next chapter I will explore the definition of meaning-making, the use of narrative to create meaning, and the effects that trauma can have on a person's sense of the world as meaning-filled.

## Chapter 2: Meaning-Making

Bruner is a psychologist who advocates the study of meaning-making – how people construct meaning in their lives (1990). *Meaning-making* is defined as an interpretive process through which a person constructs a coherent understanding of themselves, the world and the relationship between the two (Bruner). According to Bruner, investigating meaning-making is not a straight-forward exercise of determining the cause-and-effect link between thought and action. Rather, such investigations involve

exploring the meaning that individuals or societies create, and then formulating plausible interpretations regarding the process they used to come to such conclusions (Bruner).

### *Culture and Meaning-Making*

According to Bruner, meaning-making does not occur within a vacuum (1990). People live within a cultural context. It is within this context that people develop their concept of the world and themselves, and interpret their experiences (Bruner). In fact, individuals not only form their interpretations within a culture, but they themselves are also formed, and function, within a culture. As social beings, organised in structures such as families, communities and cities, human survival necessitates the creation of shared meanings and concepts (Bruner.) Without them, people would be estranged from each other, baffled by the actions, motivations and utterances of others.

Fortunately, culture provides shared cultural tools to facilitate interactions with others and the wider world (Bronfenbrenner, 1979 cited in Smidt, 2006). We use these tools, including signs, language, institutions and religions, to formulate our concepts regarding ourselves, the world, and our role within various contexts (Bronfenbrenner cited in Smidt). Moreover, culture provides norms regarding the world: including how life unfolds, how people think and behave and what is good and what is bad (Bruner, 1990). These norms are organised into narratives (Bruner)

### *Narrative and Meaning-Making*

For Bruner (1990), *narrative* is culture's key contribution to meaning-making. Narrative is a primary tool for explaining experiences and facilitating meaning-making.

He writes, “Our capacity to render experiences in terms of narrative is not just child’s play, but an instrument for making meaning that dominates much of life in culture – from soliloquies at bedtime to the weighing of testimony in our legal system” (1990, p. 97).

Our human predisposition towards narrative is observable very early on in development. One of the earliest tasks for each child is to learn the cultural tools available to him (Bronfenbrenner, 1979 cited in Smidt, 2006) and grasp the body of narratives at his disposal (Bruner). This learning is crucial in order for a person to make sense of himself and his life (Bronfenbrenner cited in Smidt; Bruner). Children learn to recognise narratives and to create their own in order to evaluate and work through problems, structure experiences and formulate perspectives regarding themselves and the world (Bruner).

Each culture possesses a body of narratives, which are the norms or “canons” within that culture (Bruner, 1990). As a child develops, he learns to recognise these canonical narratives, as well as deviations from the norm (Bruner; Lucariello, 1990). When deviations are detected, the child constructs narrative extensions to resolve the discord created by the deviations, and to reincorporate the deviation back into a normative context (Bruner; Neimeyer & Levitt, 2000). Simply put, ordinary behaviour is what we expect of ourselves, others and our world. Ordinary behaviour is not questioned because it fits into our expected norms. When something unordinary occurs one creates stories to explain it, to make meaning of the anomaly.

Lucariello (1990) designed an experiment that illustrates how children as young as five and six are capable of (a) identifying canonical and deviant narratives, and

(b) using a narrative-based, meaning-making process to address breaches to canonical narratives.<sup>2</sup>

Lucariello (1990) concludes that even young children can identify stories that breach norms. Moreover, the contradictions to standard, culturally-accepted storylines trigger children to create new information, which they incorporate into the original narrative. Lucariello suggests that the story additions are intended to bring the story back within a larger, normative context.

Storylines created to integrate deviant information into culturally-accepted narratives have two purposes: (a) constructing a motivation for the person's behaviour and (b) incorporating additional canonical information that can account for the behaviour (Bruner, 1990). The narrative additions made by the children in Lucariello's (1990) experiment attributed culturally appropriate motivations to explain unexpected

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<sup>2</sup> For her research Lucariello presented 45 kindergarten children with one of a set of six versions of a "birthday party" story and 44 kindergarten children with one of a set of six versions of a story regarding a "cousin's visit." The original version of each story was canonical, in accordance with the culture of the subjects. The original birthday party story involves a child waking up on her birthday, having a party and blowing out the candles on her birthday cake (Lucariello). Several adapted versions of the "birthday party" story have new elements that do not transgress cultural norms regarding children's birthdays. Other versions have elements that transgress cultural norms: the birthday girl "was very unhappy" (p. 136) and/or the child "threw water on" (p. 136) her birthday candles. Changes made to the story of the "cousin's visit" include additions regarding the main character's affect (happy or sad) and variations in behaviour, but none of the stories break from what Bruner (1990) and Lucariello consider culturally-determined, canonical narratives within Western culture.

After hearing one version of the stories, the kindergarten children are asked questions. Results from the experiment show a significant difference between the answers given by subjects who heard stories that breach cultural norms and the answers of the subjects who heard stories that did not breach norms (Lucariello, 1990). There was a higher tendency for those who heard stories that breached norms to give answers that include new information regarding the affect, motivations and actions of the characters in the stories. When asked to provide reasons for the character's culturally normal affect and behaviour, such as being happy when a cousin was visiting or blowing out birthday candles, the subjects tend either not to answer or to reiterate information already presented in the story. On the other hand, when asked about non-canonical behaviour and affect, children tended to compose narratives to explain the deviations (Lucariello). As an example, asked why the character was unhappy on her birthday, which is culturally-abnormal behaviour, one child states "she might not have wanted her birthday to be on that day... cause she probably um thought it was gonna be on the next day and then when she wore up she remembered it was gonna be on that day and she didn't know what to wear" (Lucariello p. 146).



behaviours within the context of the cultural norms (Bruner). The narrative process is a way of negotiating a place for the discrepant information within a larger context, in a way that explains away the discord through the use of additional norms contained within the community's body of narrative resources (Bruner).

### *The Impact of Trauma on Meaning*

People notice deviations, not confirmations, of norms (Lucariello, 1990). People remain largely unaware of the fundamental assumptions embodied by cultural narratives to which they subscribe, unless they are challenged (Janoff-Bulman, 1999; Janoff-Bulman & Berger, 2000). A minor, unthreatening deviation from a canonical narrative may prompt the sort of corrective story telling process described in Lucariello's research. However when core assumptions are challenged a person's overall understanding of the world as a meaning-filled place is destabilized (Herman, 1992; Janoff-Bulman; Neimeyer & Levitt, 2000).

Park and Ai (2006) reviewed literature on trauma and recovery, with a focus on meaning-making, and found that people have *global meaning systems*. A person's global meaning system encompasses their schemas for interpreting the world and their sense of purposefulness in life. People typically believe that the world is fair, they are good and the bad things do not happen to good people (Janoff-Bulman, 1999; Janoff-Bulman & Berger, 2000; Janoff-Bulman & Frantz, 1997 cited in Park & Ai). "Across different cultures, people strive to believe that harm and misfortune are not arbitrary, random events, but rather that their world makes sense" (Janoff-Bulman & Berger p. 31). People

tend to believe they have earned good outcomes by being good, and so traumas should not befall them (Janoff-Bulman; Janoff-Bulman & Berger).

Traumatic experiences can have a profound effect on a person's global meaning system as it can shatter assumptions regarding oneself, the world and fair outcomes (Janoff-Bulam, 1999; Wilson, 2006). Past global narratives can be rendered incomprehensible in the face of traumas that disrupt the old narratives. Old narratives are no longer affective for: (a) processing and integrating past experiences, (b) situating oneself in the present, and (c) allowing one to imagine future (Neimeyer & Levitt, 2000).

### *Meaning-Making: A Response to Trauma*

Trauma violates a person's established system of global meaning, creating a discrepancy that "people typically attempt to reduce ... through a process of meaning making" (Park & Ai, p.392). This process involves a review and possible reinterpretation of both the traumatic experience and of personal beliefs and goals in order to establish consistency between the two. The final outcome may be a new found sense of one's strength as a result of being able to overcome adversity (Janoff-Bulman & Berger, 2000) and new answers to one's questions about meaning and the world (Wilson, 2006).

## Chapter 3: Making-Meaning Through Narrative and Art

### *Art Therapy with Refugees*

Art therapy has been found to be an effective method for addressing the psychological needs of refugees (Fitzpatrick, 2002). First, on a basic level, the creative

process can provide satisfaction, empowerment, autonomy and pleasure (Werthein-Cahen, 1998). Second, the motor and sensory aspects of art-making can offer clients a release of tension and pent-up emotions (Werthein-Cahen). Third, it facilitates the concretization of undifferentiated internal memories and feelings, enabling them to be processed and shared (Stepakoff, 2007). Fourth, as a non-linear language, art can simultaneously communicate multiple realities within one body of work (Woodcock, 2001). Fifth, art can provide a safe way to explore themes of loss, war, oppression, exile, resettlement, mourning and other experiences thought to be too shameful or painful to express in traditional verbal format (Kellogg & Volker, 1993; Stepakoff). Sixth, art may be the most appropriate alternative for refugees who have been required to tell and retell their story to officials during the refugee claim process and do not want to talk about it again in therapy (Werthein-Cahen). Seventh, art allows for greater dialogue between peoples of different linguistic backgrounds (Werthein-Cahen). It also permits group therapy with refugees from heterogeneous backgrounds. Eighth, art allows children to be on a similar expressive level as adults, providing them with a vocabulary to express themselves in individual, group and family therapy (Kellogg & Volker; Werthein-Cahen).

### *Making Meaning Through Narrative*

Traumatic experiences can dominate a person's life story and sense of self (Herman, 1992). Narrative, through verbal or non-verbal techniques, allows for the processing and integration of traumatic events into the larger context of a person's life and identity (Berman, 2001; Courtois, 2004; Fitzpatrick, 2002; Kellogg & Volker, 1993; Möhlen, et al., 2005; Rousseau, et. al, 2005; Rousseau, et. al, 2003; Rousseau & Heusch,

2000; Woodcock, 2001). With its implied beginning, middle and end, narrative acts as a container for conflicting information (Woodcock). Stepakoff (2007) saw this in her clinical work with a Liberian boy. Art was used to create a book that contained both positive memories of the child's father and gruesome depictions of the past, such as the father's murder. Structuring these memories within the context of a story reduced the child's confusion and his feelings of being overwhelmed by the traumatic memories.

Part of the power of narrative is that it provides opportunities for symbolization, which gives form to internal information (Stepakoff, 2007). Unformed, traumatic experiences and emotions cannot be processed and shared. Through symbolization, structure is given to otherwise overwhelming experiences and relief is achieved by the sharing of trauma narratives (Stepakoff).

For years Rousseau and her peers have been researching art with refugee and immigrant children as a means for the children to reconstruct meaning and integrate the past, present and future (Rousseau et al., 2005; Rousseau et al., 2003; Rousseau & Heusch, 2000) Results show that linking the past and present can help children imagine a future for themselves (Rousseau & Heusch) and myths allows refugee and immigrant children to explore themes of loss, separation, and trauma while maintaining a necessary safe distance from the topics (Rousseau et. al., 2003). A quantitative research project, investigating the clinical value of earlier findings, found statistically valid improvements in the average self-esteem and mental health of children participating in creative expression workshops in comparison to the control group (Rousseau, et al., 2005).

Traumatic experiences can challenge a person's sense of global meaning and create disequilibrium. Clinical interventions with refugee children have combined art and

narrative to promote connections between past and present in an effort to help them imagine a future for themselves (Kellogg & Volker, 1993; Rousseau et al., 2005; Rousseau et al., 2003; Rousseau & Heusch, 2000; Stepakoff, 2007). While quantitative research demonstrates that refugee children benefit from this type of intervention (Rousseau, et al., 2005), there is a lack of information on how a refugee's sense of meaning can develop over the course of treatment in art therapy. Further research in this area would be beneficial to clinical work with refugees.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Purpose of the Research**

Literature written by researchers and clinicians has provided descriptive information regarding traumas frequently experienced by refugees and the effect that such traumas may have on their global meaning. A sense of meaning and the ability to integrate the past and present has repeatedly been identified as vital to the psychological well-being of refugees. Current qualitative research, as outlined in the literature review, supports this theory. Quantitative research in the field of art therapy with refugee children that identifies some indicators of successful assimilation of past and present, home culture and host culture (Rousseau, et al., 2005). Narrative in art therapy has been identified as a successful meaning-making process to use with refugee children struggling to integrate traumatic experiences into their understanding of themselves, the world and the relationship between the two.

This case study is designed to add to the body of knowledge concerning refugee children's process of meaning-making to resolve conflicts to their global meaning (as defined in the work of Park and Ai, 2006). I will look for themes in the works of the participant and changes in themes over time. I believe this research will contribute valuable information regarding the process of meaning-making for this population and have implication in the clinical practice of art therapy with refugee children. New research in this specific area may facilitate the development of therapeutic interventions to address refugee children's need to process and make sense of lived trauma.

Assumptions being made include: change in meaning-making will be observed over the treatment period; abstract ideas expressed regarding meaning can be accurately interpreted by the researcher; the participant involved in the case study will represent a typical case of the population being researched; and the information collected, while specific to the individual case, will provide information relevant to treatment needs of the population as a whole. A limited sample size will provide in-depth, descriptive data on the topic rather than an overview of the area of interest.

### Operational Definitions

#### *Refugee*

A person who once was, is currently, or has applied to be recognised as a refugee as defined by the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or someone who identifies themselves in terms congruent with the definition and whose life experiences justify this.

#### *Meaning-Making*

An interpretive process through which a person constructs a coherent understanding of themselves, the world and the relationship between the two.

### Primary Research Question

How do refugee children use story telling in art therapy as a way to incorporate their experiences into their sense of identity and to address their personal sense of meaning in their lives?

### Subsidiary Research Question

What story themes and subjects is the participant presenting, in words and images, during art therapy?

### Research Participant

I selected the participant for my research from the individual clients I was seeing during my final year of training in art therapy at Concordia University. I was an art therapy intern at a collection of community health centres and worked predominantly with children and youth who were first and second generation immigrants or refugees. The option of participating in the research project was presented to both the client and his parents, who gave oral and written consent to their child's participation.

I was cautious about selecting Sansaar as the subject for this case study because his refugee narrative is not straightforward. He does not exemplify the textbook refugee described in most of the literature I have read on this topic. His journey as a refugee has been atypical. As far as I am aware, there is no major trauma that has marked his life. His flight experience and process of applying for refugee status were long and indirect. Many of the traumas Sansaar has experienced are not acute, but rather ongoing stressors, such as poverty, the lack of legal status, a "broken" family, the witnessing of conjugal violence and social isolation because of differences.

However, I would argue that by not fitting into a simplified definition of refugee, Sansaar exemplifies the complexity of the refugee experience. Through working with Sansaar I came to recognise that the abnormal case, while not conventional, is common. Given this, Sansaar proved to be an ideal participant choice for my research.



*Sansaar: Description, Family History and Reason for Referral to Therapy*

Sansaar was twelve years old when he and I began art therapy sessions together. He is Sikh and the only student in his school who wears a turban. He has lived in numerous cities and was in Canada without status for several years. At the time of therapy he and his family members had been accepted as convention refugees.

The details of his parents' refugee claim were not made available to me and his file at the health centre contained only limited client information and family history. I am unaware of what precipitated his parents' departure from the Punjab region of India. In Punjab, there has been long-standing violence between Sikhs and Hindus. Terrible human rights abuses have been committed against tens of thousands of people. Sansaar, his parents and his two older siblings, moved to the Philippines when he was an infant, presumably to escape the sectarian violence.

While Sansaar was still very young his father was deported from the Philippines for lack of status and he took Sansaar's siblings with him back to India. Sansaar has not lived with his siblings since then. His father then returned to the Philippines without the two older children, and Sansaar and his parents soon moved to Vancouver. There they lived in hiding for years, without status. For fear of the "authorities", Sansaar was not enrolled in school and did not seem to have had opportunities to socialise.

At some point his parents divorced and his mother remarried. She had a fourth child – a daughter. Sansaar was six at the time of his half-sister's birth. There was conjugal violence and the second marriage ended in divorce. As I understand it, Sansaar's arrival to Canada, his parents' divorce, his mother's second marriage, the birth of his sister and the end of the second relationship all occurred within a few years.

Sansaar was ten or eleven when he, his mother and younger sister moved to Montreal. It was after this move to Montreal that he was enrolled in school for the first time since coming to Canada. At the commencement of therapy, after an eight year wait, Sansaar and his family had been recently accepted by Canada as convention refugees. As a result they finally have stable status within Canada.

His father moved to Toronto and has infrequent contact with his son. He is a temple singer. He was described as not having stable housing or work. The father was physically violent with Sansaar when he was very young. Though Sansaar has memories of this, Sansaar wants to maintain a relationship with his father.

Within the Sikh community in Montreal, Sansaar's family was considered non-traditional because of his mother's two divorces. At school Sansaar was considered unusual because of his turban. He was referred for art therapy at the start of his first year of high school because of fighting, aggressive behaviour and an inability to establish friendships. For his part, Sansaar reported taunts from school peers and unfair management of these fights by some school authorities. Some school staff described him as the instigator of these conflicts. The main goals of art therapy were to build up Sansaar's self esteem, to help him regulate his emotions, and to create a space to express his feelings regarding the many past and current stressors in his life.

### *Research Design*

#### *Instrumental Case Study*

I have selected to use the case study methodology as the area of research I have chosen is relatively new. Case study research allows for an in-depth look at the topic of

interest while remaining responsive to the data and open to discoveries that may result in the formulation of hypotheses (Bolgart, 1965; Creswell, 1998). Case study looks at the uniqueness of a case, studying the nuances (Stake, 1995). My plan is to conduct an instrumental case study, which looks at the individual in order to gain insight into something larger (Stake). By using this method I hope to refine the information currently available on meaning-making (Stake). I will approach my role as researcher from the perspective of teacher and interpreter (Stake, 1995). I intend both to inform my readers as well as to suggest how the information presented can be understood.

### *Qualitative Data Collection*

Clinical data was collected over the course of twenty-two art therapy sessions with Sansaar, held over the course of seven months. Initially sessions were held in French but by the third session Sansaar switched to English, with some French. Data sources are my clinical observations, my progress and process notes and the art of the participant. This follows the theory of naturalistic inquiry. It argues for humans (in this case myself) to be the primary data-gathering instrument because of their ability to adjust, evaluate, and take into account biases during the course of data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The focus of the data is the narratives I observed in word, art and actions. The following data consists of: (a) the narratives the participant wove, in his art, actions and words; (b) the themes, patterns and relationships I drew from these narratives; and (c) my reflections on how this information may relate to the participants life narratives as presented in his case history. Sessions are divided chronologically. For each section I provide: (a) an overview of the sessions; (b) the narratives Sansaar told through his art,

spoken word and behaviour; and (c) parallel narratives that were constructed and communicated by me, as his therapist, his social worker, his parents and school staff.

### *Data Analysis*

My data analysis method will follow Stake's (1995) direction for case study research: look at the parts and see how they relate to each other. I will look at the narratives the participant wove in his art, actions, words and other forms, draw out the themes, and look for patterns and relationships. I will reflect on how this information may relate to the participant's life as presented in his case history. I will approach my data in an open fashion in order to allow room for the discovery of unexpected information.

To achieve data source triangulation I will gather clinical and literary research data from numerous sources. Gathering information over a seven months period lets me see whether information is repeated over time, offering further triangulation (Stake, 1995).

As with all naturalistic inquiry I will play a fundamental role in analysing the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1995). Research biases will be revealed through transparency. The way in which data and its analysis are presented in the research will be in line with a constructivist research model, which acknowledges that all knowledge is constructed, not discovered (Stake, 1995). My research will provide many details so the reader too can construct meaning from the data and so play a part in the data analysis process (Stake).

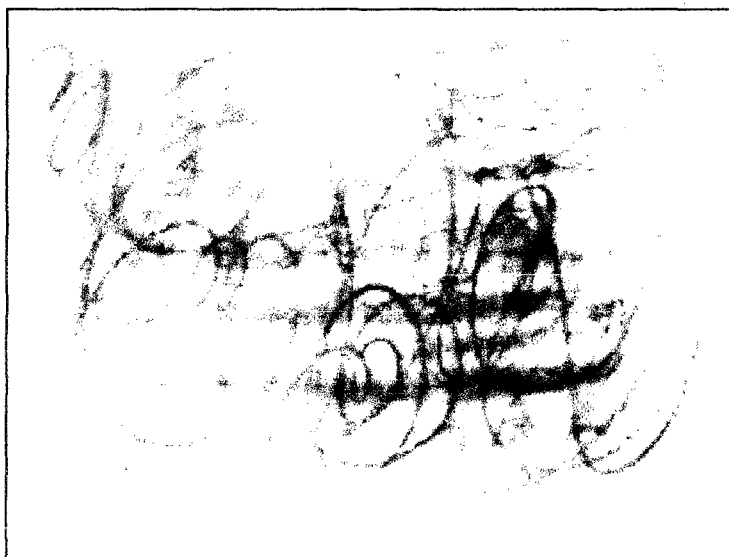
I expect that the data will reveal themes, and patterns in themes, that will elaborate on existing knowledge regarding the process of meaning-making specific to this population. However, as with all qualitative research, I will remain open to the unexpected discoveries that the research may reveal, and adjust my inquiry accordingly.

## FINDINGS

I have separated the findings into four chronological sections: (a) early sessions; (b) the hero project; (c) middle sessions, subdivided into identity, being different, the place for mistakes and alternative responses to conflict; and (d) closing sessions, which includes the a) final session and b) summary meeting with staff and family.

### Early Sessions

Sansaar's first four therapy sessions can be seen as a whole. The same themes reappeared throughout these sessions. Sansaar's focus was exploring the various art materials in the therapy room; a different medium was used for each project. Every session he made an artistic rendering of his name. He even saw his name within an abstract image made while doing an improvisational, warm-up exercise (Figure 1). Sansaar presented himself as a competent artist and frequently did not acknowledge any



*Figure 1*

unsolicited advice I offered regarding art techniques. On one occasion, when testing out a new material, he said, *"I'll pretend I'm a beginner."* This suggests that he was distancing himself from the idea that he was a beginner, and therefore not skilled in the use of the particular material.

During these first sessions Sansaar only referred to the sessions as art lessons and did not verbally respond to my comments regarding art therapy goals or the reason for his referral. I repeatedly tried to "convince" him of the therapeutic nature of the sessions.

At this time I also attended several meetings with his social worker and staff from his school. These meetings focussed on his recent fights and his behavioural problems.

I will present, in detail, the events, themes, and narratives of session 1, as it epitomizes the first four sessions.

### *Summary of Session 1*

At the time of the first session, Sansaar's parents were having a meeting with Sansaar's social worker. Sansaar and I met separately and I explained art therapy to him. I emphasised that the sessions would be an opportunity for him to express himself. I talked about his referral to therapy in the context of the problems he was having at school. However Sansaar told me he did not know what to do in the sessions. Finally he stated he would like to use the time to learn new art techniques. I reiterated the purpose of the sessions but accepted his idea as an additional goal for the sessions. Several times during this discussion, and over the course of the session, Sansaar seemed to be ignoring me, and did not acknowledge my comments or questions.

Sansaar moved into art making. His first act was to write his name three times, in various materials and colours, then decorate the sheet with rainbows. This work seemed to be an exploration of the art materials available to him. Sansaar then spent a great deal of time and effort to make a self portrait (Figure 2). He selected the lightest of the four skin tones available in the paint set, though his own skin tone is noticeably darker.



*Figure 2*

When discussing the image at the end of the session he described it as himself, though he noted he had forgotten to include his glasses. The portrait is of a beautiful, young boy, rendered in a Japanese animation style called Manga.

The session was interrupted once by his social worker, who discussed with Sansaar his recent achievement of earning a reward coupon at school. Asked what his parents had said about this, he first answered “nothing.” Pressed, he said his parents told him to earn four more, so as to be on par with the most successful student in his class.

At the end of session Sansaar accepted to have his parents and social worker see his two images. He initially seemed proud to show his art. Both parents expressed approval of the work but then his father said it must be a portrait of Sansaar when he was younger because he is fat now. Sansaar became sullen. He no longer made eye contact with anyone in the room and when he left with his parents he did not say goodbye to me.

### *Narratives Told by Sansaar in Session 1*

In the first session there were three messages that Sansaar was expressing through his words, art and actions. It was his repetition of these messages, over months of therapy, that helped me recognise what he was expressing to me. I came to recognise that they were part of a larger narrative regarding his identity.

The first message was one of resistance to therapy. Despite earlier conversations about art therapy, Sansaar still expressed confusion about the nature of therapy and what was expected of him. He did not respond to references to his aggressive behaviour at school, which led to his referral. He ignored some of my comments and questions on the subject. Instead he reframed the sessions as opportunities to improve his artistic strengths.

The second message was a declaration of his presence. He tested out the materials in the room by carefully, but boldly, writing his name three times then adding rainbows. He then meticulously paints his portrait. Both works declare "I am."

The third message was an assertion of his beauty. He added rainbows to his name. His portrait emphasised fine bone structure, rosy lips, large eyes, but did not include his glasses, which may convey a flaw. The portrait was rendered using the features emphasised in Japanese animation, which Sansaar admired, rather than being a realistic



rendering of Sansaar's appearance. He also portrayed himself as having a skin tone that was much lighter than his own. Instead it reflected the dominant skin tone of the region in which he lived. He seemed to portray himself using symbols of beauty that appealed to him. The images seem to state "I am beautiful."

All three themes are part of a larger narrative about Sansaar's identity. He appeared to be rejecting the idea that he may have weaknesses, manifest by his referral to therapy, his difficulties at school and his need for glasses, and presented himself as flawless. However this narrative of Sansaar was being challenged by parallel, negative narratives being told by me, his parents, his social worker, and school representatives.

### *Parallel Narratives*

His parents were communicating a narrative that said their son needed to improve. When Sansaar earned a reward coupon at school, the achievement was described as being beneath his parents' expectation. He was expected to match the accomplishment of the top student. Moreover, his father, backed by his mother, rejects the idea that Sansaar's painting was of their son. Rather they identify the beautiful boy in the portrait as the person Sansaar once was, and presumably, who they wished their son could be again, if only he lost weight and behaved at school. This narrative paralleled Sansaar's. It portrayed Sansaar in a more critical light. Sansaar seemed to respond to it with shame, shutting down for the remainder of the session. Interestingly, in later sessions he seemed to have adopted his parents' interpretation of the portrait, and abandoned his own.

I myself presented a narrative, which contradicted Sansaar's, and was more similar to his parents. By pressing the point that Sansaar and I were meeting for therapy,

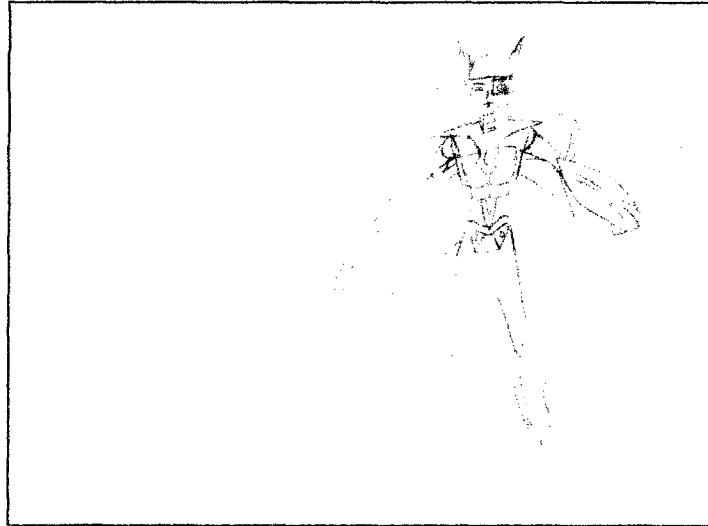
not art classes, I communicated that Sansaar was flawed and in need of my treatment, in order that he might be restored to wholeness.

Most of the staff working with Sansaar told a similar story. The mental health worker who made the art therapy referral described him as smart, but struggling to adapt in his current setting. As is so often the case in referrals, focus was placed on Sansaar's weaknesses. His social worker talked to me about his aggression at school. One of the school representatives described him as being potentially violent, provoking negative responses from other students and not trusting the school staff to be fair and protective of his rights. She even saw fit to describe his eating habits, which she characterised as "inhaling food." This behaviour may, in fact, have been a response to past trauma or loss - an attempt to quench an insatiable emotional hunger. I doubt it was merely a "character flaw" which seemed to be the implication made by the school representative.

#### The Hero Project: Sessions 5 – 9

##### *Summary of Sessions 5 – 9*

In session 5 I suggested Sansaar create a hero figure that could represent him. This became his main focus for next five sessions. He began by brainstorming several options regarding the characteristics of his hero: "nature, animaux, humain, X-pollution, robot, garçon, fille" (Figure 3). Sansaar chose to create a male hero that was part man, part machine and part fox. He then drew an intricate action scene in which the hero was catching a baby that had fallen from a bedroom window of a sky scrapper. A woman looked on in horror (Figure 4).



*Figure 3*

Over the course of the project Sansaar only initiated conversation about the art materials and his artistic process. With explicit direction from me he eventually told an accompanying story, which he seemed to enjoy recounting. The hero he created was named Fox. Fox had lost his arms and legs in an accident. When people would see Fox outside of his hero persona, they had no idea he was a superhero because all they saw were his disabilities. As a superhero, Fox had bionic parts that Sansaar speculated a younger brother or cousin must have helped him make.



*Figure 4*

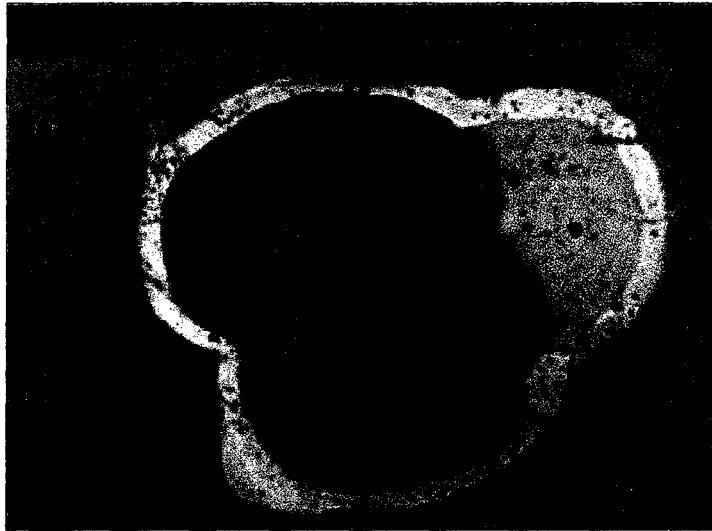
The baby in the image was described as a little girl. Though her room looked happy and safe, Sansaar explained that it was not because of the open window, through which she had fallen. The woman, first identified as the mother, was described as being full of fear for the child's safety. I presumed that she was not capable of helping despite her concern for the girl. Fox, on the other hand, was feeling good because he had saved someone. Upon later reflection Sansaar decided the woman was too young to be the mother and was likely the babysitter. The father was at work and remained unaware of the problem. The child had siblings but they were at the park.

There was a second story that marked this period in Sansaar's therapy. Sansaar had been in a fight at school and had been suspended for several days. He did not bring up the topic during our sessions but, as I had been pre-advised of the incident by his social worker, I encouraged discussion of the topic.

Sansaar described it as "one of [his] worst experiences ever." Initially he said that the fight started because, in his words, "they called [him] bad names, said bad things about [his] religion and made fun of [his] turban." This first synopsis suggested multiple aggressors. As we explored the story further it became apparent that the conflict was between him and one other student, with whom he had had an earlier argument. In an earlier conflict Sansaar had called the boy a nerd. Sansaar said the taunts he received may have been "revenge" for his earlier insult.

During the session in which we discussed the fight at school Sansaar decided he wanted to work on an art piece other than his hero scene, which had not yet been completed. I encouraged him to work spontaneously and loosely, with liquid paints, in contrast to his customary controlled and pre-planned style. However the image he made

resembles a colour wheel, the colours of which he mixed methodically (Figure 5, with his name covered over digitally). To complete the image he scrapped his name across the centre of the piece. He expressed pride in the image and a desire to show it to his parents.



*Figure 5 (with his name covered over digitally with a purple square)*

#### *Narratives Told by Sansaar in Sessions 5 – 9*

The most obvious narrative was the hero story, which he told through images and words. In many ways the story seemed to refer to Sansaar's own life story. Perhaps the baby and Fox characters reflected aspects of Sansaar. The child was in danger. Though the baby's room seemed to be a happy place, communicated through the smiley face poster on the wall and the mobile over the bed, it failed to provide safety. Moreover, the parents were not present when the accident occurred. The father was described as unaware that there was a problem. Even the siblings were unaware of the problem, as they were enjoying themselves at the park. Despite the dramatic situation unfolding, the rest of the family seems to be obliviously going about their day. The only adult figure to be a witness was the sympathetic but powerless babysitter.

There seemed to be parallels between Sansaar's life and that of the baby. Sansaar and his siblings were living apart, having only been in the same country for a few months of their lives. Sansaar's father was also largely absent from his life. With the social workers encouragement, Sansaar's father had come from Toronto to visit his son in Montreal and to attend several family meetings at the health centre. However, by December he had again stopped having regular contact with his son. He had reneged on his promises to visit during the winter holidays and to send for Sansaar to visit him in Toronto. It is quite possible that Sansaar's father, like the father in the story, was unaware of his child's current situation.

It may also be that the plight of the baby in the picture represented the many years in which Sansaar's parents could not provide him with a safe place to live. Instead, for years, Sansaar had to live in hiding in Canada and miss out on school. It is not uncommon for a child to question his parent's ability to keep him safe when he witnesses his parents' powerlessness, as in the case of forced exile from their home country (Berman, 2001). Sansaar's sense of security may have been further undermined by the fact that he had adjusted more quickly to the culture of new country (Allen et al., 2006; Blackwell, 2005; Gonsalves, 1992) and was far more proficient in the languages of the new environment. A child's greater proficiency in the culture and language of the host country may force him into the role of intermediary and translator for his parent (Espín, 2006). This scenario may be interpreted by the child as evidence that his parents are now unable to protect their children (Berman; Espín).

The hero, Fox, may have been a layered portrait of Sansaar. The character had been crippled. Sansaar might also have been feeling damaged in some way, perhaps as a

result of the numerous traumas and stressors in his life. Though he never referenced to personal weaknesses in sessions, perhaps through the metaphor of the hero he was able to show some vulnerability. It was striking that in the story people could not see beyond Fox's disabilities in order to see that he saved lives. Sansaar, too, seemed surrounded by people who categorised him in terms of his weaknesses and differences, not his strengths.

The second powerful narrative from these sessions was Sansaar's retelling of the school fight. In the initial telling "they" attacked him. Closer inspection of the incident revealed that the fight was with only one person. Yet the word "they" seems to convey the isolation Sansaar may have been feeling from all of his peers. Given that some school staff saw him as bringing problems upon himself, it would not be unreasonable for Sansaar to feel that they too were against him. Sansaar had been described as suspicious of the trustworthiness of authorities. If this were so, it would not be surprising given that he had been made to live in hiding for years and the authorities had only recently recognised his legal status.

The art he made after talking about the fight was a controlled image (Figure 5), which guaranteed good results. He was pleased with the piece and wanted his parents to see. Perhaps he had wanted to show them his latest accomplishment to counterbalance the negative image his fight had caused.

#### *Parallel Narratives in Sessions 5 – 9*

Throughout this time Sansaar continued to categorise the sessions as art classes and I repeatedly tried to correct him. By session 7 I stopped, as he was clearly not receptive to the idea that we met for therapeutic reasons. I also introduced another

narrative: that of the acceptable mess. When Sansaar used splattering as a painting technique, three walls inadvertently were covered in paint. I casually pointed out the situation, at the end of the session, making an effort not to describe it as a problem. We worked together to clean it up. I suggested that it could be a metaphor for the times in our lives when our actions result in unpredicted outcomes that need resolving. I suggested that mistakes and mending were acceptable parts of life.

### Middle Sessions

From January until mid-April, Sansaar and I had ten more sessions. During this time he explored various themes and we co-wrote a new narrative regarding mistakes. The main narrative themes were (a) identity exploration, (b) the experience of being different, (c) the place for mistakes and (d) alternate responses to conflict.

#### *Middle Sessions: Identity*

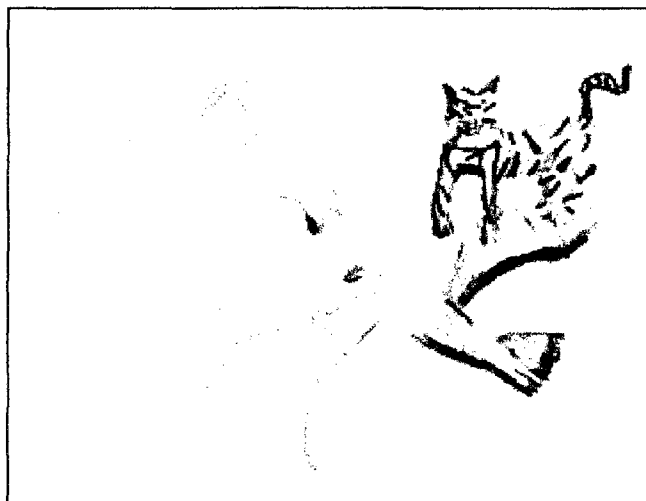
##### *Summary of Sessions and Artwork*

During the middle phase of therapy Sansaar produced several projects that contained symbols of how he saw himself. The first was a pencil drawing of animals and the second was a book that he worked on over the course of five sessions. During this time he also was part of another fight at school.

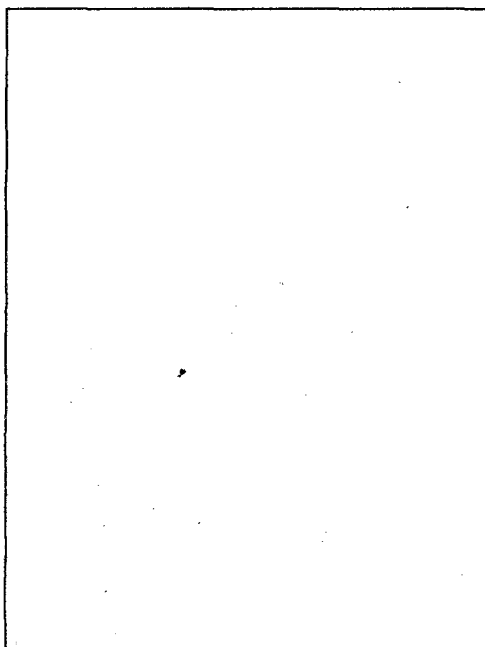
Sansaar often chose his own themes and projects. On one occasion he made a pencil drawing of a jumping fish, a tiger, an eagle, a lion and a dragon (Figure 6). I invited him to journal about his animal choices: the characteristics they represented for



him and what he shared with the animals (Figure 7). He wrote he was like the fish because he “likes to swim”; the eagle because he “likes the wind”; the tiger because it is the king of the jungle and he “wish[ed] to be king”; the lion “because [his] second name is Singh [which] means lion; and the dragon because he “protects [his] stuff from theft.” It should be mentioned that in 1699, in response to the caste system, which was a method



*Figure 6*



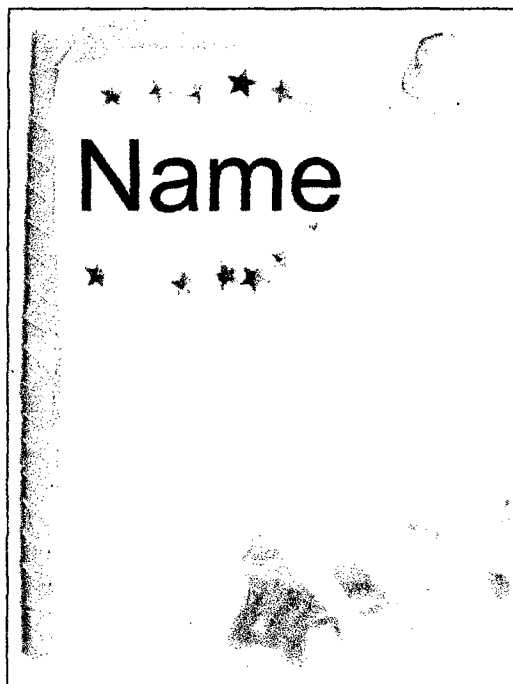
*Figure 7*

of social stratification in Indian culture, the Sikh faith initiated a reform to the way people were named (Sikh Names, 2009). As a person's caste level could be ascertained by their last name, all women were given the last name 'Kaur', which means prince, and all men were given the last name of 'Singh', which means king and lion (Sikh Names).

Another artwork made by Sansaar at this time was a book. The production of the book was a laborious task, for which he made the front cover, punched holes through all the pages with an awl, and bound the book with a needle and thread. The cover image (Figure 8) took four days to complete. Sansaar cut his name out of a piece of leather that he had painted in rainbow colours. Stars-shaped sparkles were positioned around his name, attached with needle and thread. This alone was a two-session task. The image consisted of Sansaar's name, hovering in space above the Earth. The Earth was tilted so that North America was visible. After meticulously painting the planet, Sansaar covered it in clouds, which, he said was the authentic way it would appear from space.

Sansaar collaged the figure of a lion with a fish's tail onto the book cover. The animal was incorporated into his work just after an incident had occurred at school. Sansaar had been suspended for hitting a girl and was concerned about missing more school. The incident had happened while he was in the lunch-line. After observing another student letting numerous peers into the line, Sansaar too invited a friend to join him in line. A girl behind him challenged his actions, though she had said nothing to the other student. A fight escalated and Sansaar lashed out physically.

Sansaar explained he had felt "insulted and ashamed" by the girl's comments. Presumably he was responding to the unfairness of the situation. I wonder whether he had felt he had not been given the same rights as the first person letting friends into the line.



*Figure 8 (Name obscured digitally)*

Sansaar said the lion-fish was a symbol of how he thought others saw him. It embodied his anger and the roar of his raised voice. He went on to say the lion was “the king of the animals and the winner of wars.” Yet Sansaar also remarked that people do not see his gentle side. He seemed to be saying he felt misunderstood. He also said that, as king, the lion needed to be aware of the needs of all the other animals.

### *The Narratives Regarding Identity*

By this point in therapy Sansaar was speaking more often and more personally in sessions. His perspective on his artwork and life became more explicit. The animal portraits, retelling of the school conflict, and the symbol of the lion fish were all self explorations in the context of the wider world. One of the repeated themes was that the world was unfair. The dragon needed to protect his things from the world. Moreover, the

world seemed to have different rules for Sansaar, as the school story showed, and cast him in a sinister light, like the lion fish that represented the one-sided perspective people seemed to have of Sansaar. From his view point, the world acknowledged his anger and ignored his gentle side. However Sansaar has already stated that the lion also bears the responsibility of knowing the needs of others. People did not recognise the responsibility he believed he had to know the expectations of others. Clearly I, his parents, his social worker and his school had expectations of Sansaar. His family's protracted refugee journey also exemplified the reality that countries and agencies have expectations that, if not met, could have a negative impact on one's life.

I am suggesting that these narratives reflected Sansaar's fundamental assumptions about the world - a narrative regarding his place in the world that may have been influenced by his refugee experience. As refugees, Sansaar and his family experienced injustice. Sectarian unrest forced them from their home country, but neither the Philippines nor Canada welcomed the family when they were in need. Sansaar was stateless, living outside the law, for most of his life. Given these hardships, Sansaar may have questioned the world's fairness, or wondered whether he and his family had not earned a place of safety in the world. Janoff-Bulman (1999) identifies these as common, but unnerving, viewpoints that trauma survivors might consider after hardships have shattered their fundamental assumptions about the fairness of the world.

As a whole, Sansaar's pencil drawing (Figure 6) contained symbols that contrasted with common descriptors of the refugee experience: suppression and powerlessness. The swimming fish and the wind-loving eagle personify freedom. The lion, tiger and dragon are figures of strength. For Sansaar the tiger was king, which

means he has authority and the obedience of others. A king is not at the mercy of others, as Sansaar was when he was stateless and in hiding. The five animals of this drawing represent a Sansaar that is free, unhidden, strong, and the maker of rules, not their victims.

### *The Parallel, Outside Narratives*

During this period of therapy, the main information passed on to me about Sansaar was about his fight at school. I was told about his problems, not his accomplishments. Further more, from my conversations with Sansaar's social worker, I interpreted a subtext that indicated that (a) I was expected to use therapy time to explicitly address Sansaar's school problems and (b) the success of our sessions would be measured by whether or not the fights end.

### *Middle Session: Being Different*

#### *Summary of Sessions and Artwork*

Over the seven month of therapy Sansaar frequently made portraits. His figures always had the same skin tone, a light, yellow-cream colour, never his own brown tone. On one occasion Sansaar commented on the yellowness of the colour. I asked him who had that skin tone. He suggested that a Chinese person may. This led to a discussion about Chinese students being in a minority at his school. I wondered aloud whether it was hard for them to be minorities. Sansaar replied that he was the only person in his school with a turban and so people could pick him out "from a mile away." This was a new experience for him as at his elementary school 10% of the student population was Sikh. I

acknowledged that it must have been challenging for him to have his beliefs made visible to all, particularly if they distinguished him from everyone else.

### *The Narrative Regarding Being Different*

This discussion highlights a narrative that he lived daily at school. It regarded Sansaar's identity within his world context. Within his school, which made up a significant part of his world, Sansaar did not quite fit in. At his school he was unique, which may have made him feel like an outsider. The way others saw and judged Sansaar may have reflected their assumptions about Sikhs in general and not who he actually was in particular. Perhaps assumptions coloured the opinions of staff as well as the students.

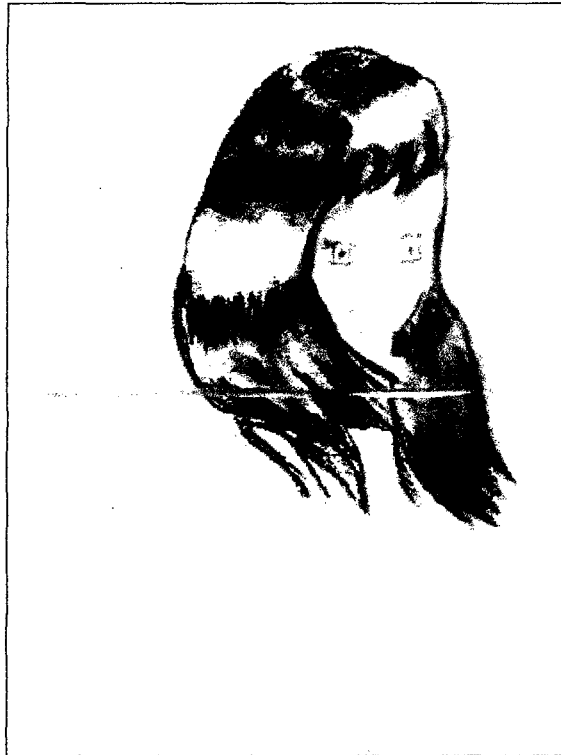
### *Middle Sessions: The Place for Mistakes*

#### *Summary of Sessions and Art*

In the early sessions Sansaar demonstrated a tendency toward perfection. Over the course of the winter Sansaar had difficulties with several of his images. He worked hard to resolve images that did not meet his standards. When he felt an image could not be corrected, he threw it away. The first time this happened he was working on a portrait of a young woman, rendered using chalk pastels. The black from her hair kept smearing into her pale skin. He fixed the problem at least six times but finally gave up on the image. He folded it in two, threw it in the garbage and started a new image. At the end of the session I requested permission to photograph the work that he had thrown away, promising to return it to the garbage if that was what he wanted. At this point Sansaar took the image

from the garbage and decided he could salvage it by cutting it where it had been folded, discarding the bottom (Figure 9, image with discarded part below).

In the following session he again had smudging problems that he felt he could not repair. He began to fold the offensive image, then looked at me. I suggested he keep it as a draft, which he did. The very next session he worked on a third image that disappointed him. When he said he did not like it I asked if he would be keeping it. He smiled and said it would be “a draft.”



*Figure 9 (kept part at top and discarded part below)*

### *Narrative Regarding Mistakes*

Given the high expectations people seemed to have for Sansaar, the place for mistakes seemed like a pertinent topic of exploration. At first Sansaar has no room for

imperfections in his portfolio of works. On one level the portfolio represented Sansaar; it contained his creations. By only choosing to include perfect works, Sansaar was saying mistakes did not belong in his portfolio. This seemed in line with his earlier rejection of the idea that his referral to therapy was a response to problems he was having. Both were rejections of the possibility that he had limitations.

Sansaar had set very high standards for his artistic work. However, he accepted the invitation to salvage imperfect images. Over the course of therapy Sansaar became more comfortable keeping faulted images and made room for them among his masterpieces. Together, Sansaar and I co-created a new narrative regarding the acceptability of mistakes. While this new narrative was explicitly about Sansaar's portfolio of art, it could also have implications on how Sansaar saw himself.

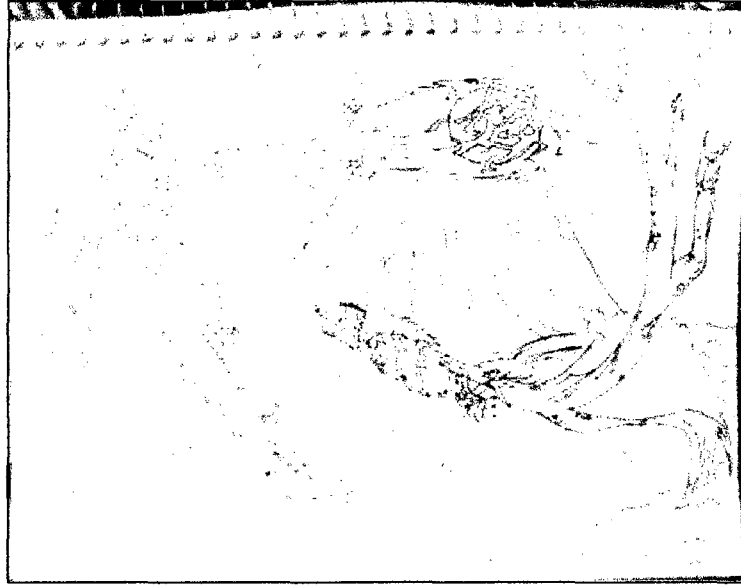
### *Middle Sessions: Alternative Responses to Conflicts*

#### *Summary of Sessions and Art*

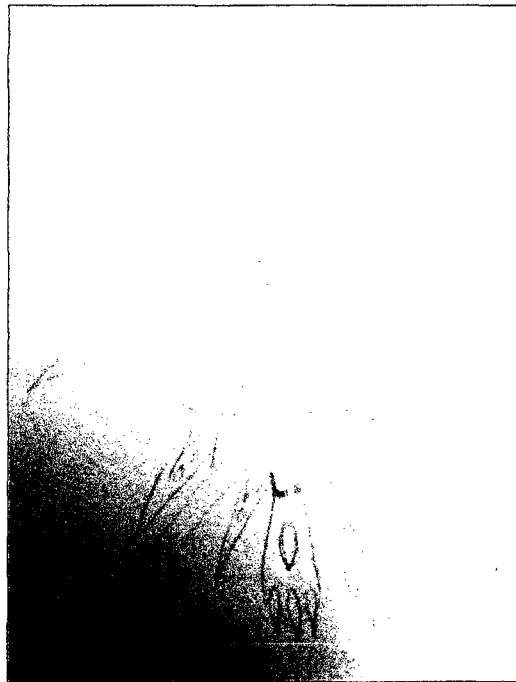
One day Sansaar brought in a picture he had made outside of therapy (Figure 10). It depicted a water creature and a fire creature fighting over who was best. However Sansaar told me that their fight was causing volcanoes, smoke, tornadoes and the death of all the people around them. Then, in session, Sansaar drew the image of a wind creature, who was ordering the other two to stop. The wind creature wanted to save the people being hurt by the conflict (Figure 11 with contrast heightened to facilitate reproduction).

Ten weeks after that session, Sansaar was involved in another incident at school. During class a fellow student made a juvenile but embarrassing comment about Sansaar.





*Figure 10*



*Figure 11*

Other students in the class reacted by moving away from Sansaar. Sansaar shouted at the student who had made fun of him and was reprimanded for his disruptive outburst. His social worker was notified of the event and passed the information on to me.

Reflecting on the incident in our next session, Sansaar said he had felt powerless and ashamed because of the comment of the one student and the response of the others. Invited to make an artwork inspired by the event, Sansaar made a sculpture of a bird (Figure 12). He described the bird as large – the size of a tree – but a vegetarian. Sansaar said he wishes he could have flown away from the conflict. He would have flown home, in order to “relax and refocus” so he could have returned to the situation feeling stronger.



*Figure 12*

### *Narratives About Conflicts*

The story of the battling characters, fighting to see who was best, made me wonder whether there had been increased fighting between his parents at the time. The image had been drawn some time after his father had become less involved in his son's life. The third character, who tried to stop the fight, was a wind creature. As Sansaar had repeatedly stated that he loves the wind, the figure may represent him. It is possible that Sansaar was finding himself both a casualty of and a mediator to parental conflict.

Whether or not this was the case, the narrative communicated the severe pain caused by conflict and a desire to end it. Perhaps the story reflected his inner battle to avoid conflicts at school.

An alternative interpretation of Sansaar's aggression at school and his introduction of battle scenes in his art may be related to his father's renewed absence. The loss of this significant, supportive figure in his life may have increased his feelings of vulnerability. Without his father backing him up Sansaar may have felt an increased need to prove his power through aggression.

Sansaar's aggressive yelling in response to his peer's comment seems to demonstrate how sensitive he was to teasing. His classmates' response, moving away from him, may have resonated as a narrative of the ostracisms that he had already experienced. It may have accentuated pre-existing feelings that he was different from everyone else at school because of his turban. It may have brought to mind feelings of exclusion that might have remained from the many years he was denied legal status in Canada and the Philippines. An incident that others may have brushed off easily, seem to have hit a nerve for Sansaar.

Yet, during the incident Sansaar did not resort to violence. He yelled, perhaps with the lion's roar he described himself as having. Yelling got him in trouble. Yet Sansaar felt it was a success that he refrained from using physical violence. The sculpted bird, which seemed to be a representation of him, was big and strong but also peaceful in nature, because it was a vegetarian. The narrative he created allowed him to fly to safety in order to centre and re-empower himself and then return to resolve the conflict.

The stories of the wind creature and the bird are peace-focussed stories. Even his latest real-life fight narrative was less aggressive. These narratives contained non-violent

resolutions to conflicts and provided alternatives to the narrative trajectories of his earlier encounters. Through the bird creature, Sansaar was able to envision a protagonist that maintained a powerful identity despite being attacked. In this new narrative, the protagonist is not disempowered by the aggression he encounters in the world, nor does he need to resort to violence in order to defend himself. For his part, in the most recent conflict Sansaar's reaction was exaggerated, but he came from it feeling proud of the non-violent example he had set for himself – a standard upon which he can build

### *Closing Sessions: Final Image and Reporting Back to Others*

#### *Summary of the Closing Session and Meeting With Staff*

In our final session Sansaar and I went over his accomplishments and made farewell cards for each other. He was relaxed when I mentioned his past struggles in the context of his accomplishments. When I mentioned his past frustrations with smudging, Sansaar smiled, added details to the story and pulled out the “offensive” image.

Sansaar talked more freely in the latter half of our seven months together. Perhaps he had grown to trust me. The first eleven sessions had been marked by periods of silence and moments when Sansaar ignored my comments and questions. Yet in his card he thanked me “for all [the] time we got to talk and do art” which, he wrote, he would miss.

The image on the front of the card had a celebratory feel (Figure 13). He explained that the three stars represented joy, the pink flower was memories and the butterflies were symbols of hope rising out of a volcano. The volcano reminded me of the death and destruction that the battling figures of his earlier work had caused (see Figure 9). Now hope, not violence, was coming from the volcano.



*Figure 13*

Perhaps the most significant element of our therapy wrap-up was our meeting with his mother and all the staff involved in his case, including the school representative who had painted a negative image of Sansaar. This meeting was an opportunity for Sansaar to share his successes and present an alternative narrative to the dominant, negative one that was being woven about him, consciously or not.

For the meeting Sansaar had decided to present and speak about a selection of his works. Images he selected included his first self-portrait (Figure 2), his book (Figure 8), and the bird (Figure 12). Interestingly, when he showed the self-portrait (Figure 2) he described it as an image of him when he was younger, in keeping with his parents' reinterpretation of the image. His art pieces were admired and his accomplishments were acknowledged by all of the people in the meeting. I emphasised that it had been a pleasure for all of us to work with him, not because he had accomplished various goals set by us for him, but because of who he is, good and bad.

*Narratives in the Closing Session and Meeting With Staff*

The dominant narratives in the final session and closing meeting with staff have themes that had an ongoing presence throughout Sansaar's treatment. They involved: the tolerability of mistakes and vulnerabilities, Sansaar's identity in relation to his world, and the aftermath of conflict.

When Sansaar and I first began our sessions together, my mention of certain things, such as conflicts at schools and inexperience with certain art materials, was always ignored by him. By our final session, when his past and present difficulties were brought up within the context of our entire time together, Sansaar seemed to be comfortable and accepting of the topic. This may have reflected a change in the narratives with which he and I had become comfortable. Weaknesses and mistakes were tolerable. This included his acceptance that he was fallible. It also included my increased realization of, and comfort with, the fact that I must not prioritise the expectations of outside forces, such as the social worker who understandably, but inappropriately, tried to direct our therapy goals to match her objectives.

Over the course of our sessions I moved from the position of observer of his weaknesses to witness of his strengths. Once I switched my perspective, I was able to encourage Sansaar to reflect on his struggles and mistakes in a non-threatening manner. This reflected a change in my narrative about Sansaar.

Sansaar too changed the narrative he presented about himself. He was accepted struggles as tolerable parts of the story he told about himself. He also demonstrated a greater comfort and enjoyment in sharing his story with me, attested through his behaviour and his card to me.

The concluding meeting with his mother, social worker and school staff provided Sansaar with a platform to challenge the unfavourable, parallel narratives that were being woven about him by the various authority figures. Communications between Sansaar's parent and numerous staff often focussed on his faults and outbursts. Little attention had been placed on his strengths. Sansaar's presentation of his art work allowed him to contradict the parallel narratives and demonstrate that, at best, they only presented partial truths. Perhaps by supporting a positive narrative of Sansaar, I added to its legitimacy.

By recognising and reflecting upon the parallel narratives, I was reminded of the importance of remaining attentive to the client's perspective and of being alert to potentially competing voices. I was alerted to the influence of alternative narratives when I witnessed Sansaar accepting the parallel narrative of his parents regarding his first self-portrait (Figure 2) at the expense of his own. Parallel narratives about others can have a detrimental effect on the subject's self-esteem. They have the power to negate the original narratives, giving a person the sense that they are not the author of their own story, but rather a powerless observer.

Sansaar closed our sessions together with a powerful symbol. The image of the butterflies rising from the volcano is, as Sansaar said, a symbol of hope. It suggested that something good and living can arise out of the ashes of violence and struggles. The image stands as a symbol of what Park and Ai (2006) describe as a new line of inquiry emerging in the field of trauma research – one that encompasses the positive growth that can come from tragedy.

## DISCUSSION

### The Human Face of a Complex Issue: Therapy with Refugee Children

A refugee child is at risk of having lived various traumas: (a) loss of family, home, social network, and homeland (Allen, et al., 2006; Fitzpatrick, 2005; Gonsalves, 1992); (b) demoralisation through persecution and oppression (Blackwell, 2005); (c) the witnessing or experience of atrocities (Blackwell); (d) difficulty obtaining secure status in a host country (Allen, et al.; Callaghan, 1998); and (e) problems settling into the host culture (Allen, et al.; Ying & Akutsu, 1997). The stability and health of the child's family also impacts the mental health of the refugee child (Berman, 2001; Blackwell; Gonsalves; Sourander, 2003).

Sansaar's case provides an example of the multiple stressors that a refugee child may face. He had been (a) forced by political conflict to live outside his country of origin; (b) denied refugee status in various places, resulting in forced moves and the constant threat of repatriation to his country of origin; (c) separated from his older siblings and extended family; (d) witness to his parents' inability to protect him from hardship and provide him with an education during the time they lived in hiding; and (e) required to adjust to three new cultures over the course of thirteen years. Moreover, he had to (a) endure physical abuse by his father, the divorce of his parents, and his father's subsequent inconsistent presence in his life; (b) adjust to his mother's second marriage, which also ended in divorce; (c) witness the abuse of his mother at the hand of her spouse; and (d) live through economic hardship.



Sansaar's complicated and difficult life history reflects the complex reality of the refugee experience. The collection of stressors faced by Sansaar put him at risk of trauma, as defined by Erickson (Erickson, 1994 cited in Leydesdorff, et al., 2004). It is not surprising that Sansaar was exhibiting aggressive behaviour at school and was having difficulty establishing social relationships. His case illustrates the vulnerability of this population and their need for appropriate therapeutic services.

### Setting Appropriate Goals: Following the Pace of the Client

Literature shows that trauma can disorientate a person, shattering core assumptions about the meaning behind life experiences, (Herman, 1992; Janoff-Bulman, 1999; Neimeyer & Levitt, 2000; Wilson, 1996) and acculturation puts strain on a person's ability to make sense of their life (Ying & Akutsu, 1997). Trauma can impact a person's beliefs – challenging their understanding of themselves as good people, deserving of justice, safety and happiness, and the world as a fair and good place (Janoff-Bulman, 1999; Wilson, 2006). Sansaar's difficulties at school were interpreted at the health centre as signals of unresolved traumas, endured over the course of his life. His aggression and problems forming social bonds may have been related to low self-esteem, denigrated by traumatic experiences, coupled by doubt in the world's goodness. Therapy was presented to him as an opportunity for self-expression. I envisioned our sessions as a safe space for Sansaar to address these issues.

An array of sources advocate the use of narrative as a therapeutic method for refugees to address, share, process and incorporate their traumatic experiences into their overall life narrative (Berman, 2001; Courtois, 2004; Fitzpatrick, 2002; Kellogg &

Volker, 1993; Möhlen, et al., 2005; Rousseau, et. al, 2005; Rousseau, et. al, 2003; Rousseau & Heusch, 2000; Woodcock, 2001). Narrative allows clients to explore the meaning behind their experiences. However, prior to addressing trauma in therapy, the client's safety and confidence, built through empowerment and skill building, must be the first priorities (Blackwell, 2005; Courtois, 2004; Herman, 1992).

Sansaar's need for safety and empowerment were the primary issues at the commencement of therapy. I mistakenly assumed that, because at the time of our sessions Sansaar had refugee status, stable housing and school, and a fluent grasp of both of Canada's official languages, Sansaar was at a stage in which he was ready to begin addressing his traumatic experiences.

It was my incorrect assumption that led to initial frustrations on my part and perhaps Sansaar's as well. By underestimating his need to feel safe and powerful within our sessions I did not recognise that (a) his insistence on labelling our sessions as art classes, rather than art therapy; (b) his focus on the process of art making rather than the content of his work; and (c) his silence in sessions and resistance to discussion were ways for him to protect himself from addressing topics in therapy before he felt safe to do so.

It was when I recognised that Sansaar was using his art to promote a positive self-image that I understood that he needed me, as his therapist, to know and profess this as well. Sansaar's ongoing assertion of his self-worth provided him with security during therapy and reduced the power differential between us.

A significant and positive turning point in our therapeutic relationship occurred when I set aside my presumptions regarding how our therapy sessions would evolve and what would be addressed, as well as the pressures I felt from Sansaar's school and social

worker to orchestrate the end of his conflicts at school. I learned to appreciate the importance of acknowledging the strengths of my client and of demonstrating, through my support, that I valued him, his strengths and the direction he wanted to take in therapy. When I did this our relationship became stronger and he trusted me enough to allow me to sometimes introduce difficult topics into sessions, such as his fights at school.

### Narrative in Meaning-Making: Working Through Trauma

Following the research approach advocated by Bruner (1990), this paper explores the meaning within Sansaar's narratives, and suggests plausible interpretations regarding his use of a narrative process to make meaning in the context of trauma. The themes of Sansaar's narratives, collected over the course of treatment, and the changes in these themes illustrate Sansaar's process of working through issues relevant to his global meaning system (Park & Ai, 2006).

Global meaning systems address a person's view of themselves, the world and their interrelationship (Janoff-Bulman, 1999; Janoff-Bulman & Berger, 2000; Janoff-Bulman & Frantz, 1997 cited in Park & Ai ; Park & Ai, 2006; Wilson, 2006). Through the safety of metaphors and symbols, as well as stories from his life, Sansaar used narrative to work through his beliefs about himself, the world and his place in the world.

Sansaar used the initial sessions to affirm his goodness (see Figures 1 and 2). This is a key task for trauma survivors as their experiences can lead them to wonder whether they had earned their hardships (Janoff-Bulman, 1999). The theme of self-worth was ongoing in Sansaar's treatment. It was also a part of his processing of the meaning behind his traumatic experiences and their implications on his identity. I speculate that the lack

of welcome he and his family received in India, the Philippines, Vancouver and Montreal; his time living in hiding; and the limited presence of his father in his life contributed to feelings of low self-esteem. It may have led him to question his importance in the world. Identifying himself as an accomplished artist may have helped Sansaar dispel doubts he may have had regarding his right to be safe, happy and valued. However once his goodness was acknowledged within the therapeutic space and a sufficient amount of safety was established, Sansaar moved onto exploring additional topics.

The second phase of therapy, distinguished by the hero project, continued to explore identity but also addressed Sansaar's view of the world (see Figures 3 and 4). His refined art style continued to affirm his artistic strengths but his hero story addressed issues of danger, vulnerability, the limits of parental protection and the judgements of the world. His hero figure, Fox, suffered great wounds, which might be a metaphoric acknowledgement by Sansaar that he was not completely whole and healthy. The hero's injuries allowed Sansaar to acknowledge his own losses and hurts. Through Fox, Sansaar could explore the implications of being a trauma survivor. This hero figure contradicted the notion that bad things happen to bad people as Fox was a person that had experienced trauma, loss and vulnerability but was also a strong, heroic figure.

The story explored questions regarding the nature of the world. It expressed the idea that the world can be dangerous, parents cannot always protect or save their children, and the world may judge you unfairly, as it did Fox. His recounting of a fight at school demonstrated that Sansaar had been feeling he was at odds with the entire world.

Sansaar's exploration of identity continued into the middle phase of therapy. He struggled to accept his flaws, manifest through his technical difficulty with several

drawings (including Figure 9). He grew to accept imperfections within his portfolio of works. This may also have impacted his views on his personal weaknesses, a concept he initially rejected. His denial of any weakness may have been rooted in a concern that such weaknesses justified any ill-treatment he suffered. Sansaar's growing comfort with his own imperfections suggested he was moving beyond the idea that a person earned the world's goodness and must, for their own safety, achieve perfection at all times.

Sansaar further explored his views on the world and his place in it by vacillating between conflicting narratives on the subject. Sansaar described the world as a place of danger and theft but he wanted to be king (see Figure 6, 7). The world could be unjust and make him feel shame, as was the case during the conflict in the lunch line. At times he felt that he was seen as different because of his turban and therefore did not fit into the world around him. On the cover of his book, Sansaar portrayed the world as beautiful but he still remained apart from it, his name hovering above, not yet integrated (see Figure 8).

Eventually, in the figure of the bird, Sansaar created a character for himself that modeled strength and freedom in the face of conflict (Figure 12). The bird sought refuge from the world when necessary, but then reengaged with it once it had been able to recompose itself. Through this character Sansaar seemed to be exploring successful ways to fit into the world, while still identifying it as a place where conflicts occur, and from which he sometimes needs to flee.

By the closing session Sansaar demonstrated a comfort, within our relationship at least, in discussing his weaknesses in the context of his strengths. By that time his meaning-making narratives did not seem to require that he be perfect. His final image contained a symbol of the past, the volcano that could produce destruction, and butterflies

of hope, suggesting a looking forward to the future (Figure 13). The narrative projected a positive outlook without denying the struggles of the past.

### The Needs of the Client Versus Outside Expectations

A significant outcome of this research project was the unexpected information gathered regarding the impact of outside voices on the narratives of clients. These outside voices have the potential to influence the direction of therapy. In the Findings the parallel narratives are presented. These are the storylines that were recounted by people other than Sansaar but that impacted his well-being. It was through the review of my data that I recognised that these narratives existed and were at odds with those of the client.

Moreover, I came to recognise my participation in the chorus of parallel narratives. This awareness allowed me to make a conscious choice to realign myself so that I stood in support of my client. My conscious efforts to correct my mistake, and focus on the needs of the client rather than my own expectations or those of his parents, school or social worker, allowed the therapy to move forward. Eventually the therapeutic goals I had initially assumed our sessions would address at the onset – Sansaar's processing of his traumatic experiences – were addressed. However it happened at the pace of the client.

This case study demonstrates that outside pressures can act upon the therapeutic relationship and negate client narratives. The primary need of the client was to be seen and accepted after a lifetime of being hidden and rejected. Our final meeting with family, school representatives and the extended treatment staff allowed Sansaar to educate these authority figures, as he had educated me, on the complex and rich nature of his identity and share with his audience his evolving relationship with the world around him.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Narrative offers refugee children a way to process the meaning of their traumatic and difficult experiences by providing a medium to express, organise and work through ideas regarding their identity and their perspective on the world. Sansaar's case demonstrates that issues regarding a person's global sense of meaning do not need to be addressed explicitly in therapy for a positive change to occur. Sansaar frequently used metaphors and symbols in his visual and spoken narratives to negotiate various ways of engaging the world and to address issues of self-esteem and identity. His bird sculpture is an example of how he used imaginative elements to construct a new ending to a frustrating life experience.

Analysis of his narrative themes over time demonstrates that the content regarding self-identity and the world changed over the course of therapy, becoming more accepting of personal limitations, more reflective of differences, and a greater engagement with a world that was described as less threatening over time.

Sansaar's case illustrates that a child is influenced, for better or worse, by the words and stance of the people around him. Sansaar abandoned his original narrative about his first and only explicit self-portrait (Figure 2) when he was presented with his parents' alternate interpretation of his image, which I name a parallel narrative. Parallel narratives come in various forms. This case study presents the various parallel narratives being recounted about Sansaar and speculates that these narratives had a potentially damaging impact on the client. It illustrates how trust can be fostered in the therapeutic relationship when the therapist remains sympathetic to the voice of the client rather than the parallel narratives.

Allowing the client to lead the therapy may mean, as in this case, changing the pace and goals of therapy to match the needs of the client. Sansaar's therapy became more effective once I recognised that, in the first months, he was not ready to discuss conflicts or past traumas. Rather, he needed an extended period of time to establish safety and to feel empowered in the art therapy sessions. Following his cues, rather than my own or any other person's agenda, allowed a strong therapeutic alliance to develop slowly, creating a space where the client could increasingly explore difficult materials.

In this particular case the client had a history of negative experiences interacting with the world, be it refugee authorities, school officials, or critical and sometimes violent parental figures. The case demonstrates that the therapeutic relationship can be a medium through which the client's relationship with the world can be addressed. The therapist can act as an ambassador, modelling a benevolent, open side of the world. In therapy, the client has an opportunity to experience the world as open and responsive.

The therapist's support of the client's narratives may require a proactive stance. The therapist may be called to advocate for the client by helping to promote his voice and his version of the story so that it may be heard by the significant figures in his life. In this case, the closing meeting with Sansaar's family, school representatives and case workers at the health centre provided him an opportunity to present his art and, through it, his views of himself, his situation and the world around him. Such a meeting or similar opportunities, can be occasions to educate others on the importance of listening to the client rather than trying to edit him.



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## APPENDIX A – LETTER OF INFORMATION

### CONSENT INFORMATION LETTER

**Art Therapy Student:** Paola Bresba, Concordia University  
**Supervisor:** Bonnie Harnden, Professor of Art Therapy at Concordia University

You are invited to have your child's art therapy experiences written about in a paper.

**PURPOSE:** Research shows that art can help children better understand difficult things that have happened to themselves, family and friends. I am writing a paper to better understand this and would like to include information from your child's art therapy experiences in my investigation.

Agreeing to have your child's art therapy experiences included in my paper will not change the treatment your child receives from me. My responsibility as your child's therapists remains the most important part of my work at the CSSS de la Montagne. The information I would collect and use in my work would include the art your child makes in the art therapy sessions and the stories he or she expresses using words, play and the many other ways that stories might be told.

My final paper will include reproductions of your child's art and narrative accounts from the sessions, using pseudonyms to protect the identity of your child. Bound copies of the paper will be kept in the Concordia Library and in the Creative Arts Therapy Resource Room.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Confidentiality of participants will be respected in every way possible. Names and identifying information will not be included in the publication. Instead pseudonyms will be used.

**RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:** As you child's legal guardian you can withdraw your consent to have your child participate in my project, without giving a reason, by phoning me at (514) 273-3800 x6965. Your child can continue receiving art therapy treatment.

**ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES TO GIVING CONSENT:** To my knowledge you and your child would experience no personal inconveniences or disadvantages if consent is given. Whether you do or do not give permission will have no effect on any aspect of your child's treatment. You can consent to all or just some of the requests on this form.

**If at any time you have questions about your rights or the rights of your child regarding my final paper, you may contact Adela Reid, Compliance Officer, in the Office of Research.**

**Building:** GM-1000, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec H3G 1M8  
**Phone:** 514-848-2424 ext. 7481  
**Email:** Adela.Reid@concordia.ca

**APPENDIX B – CONSENT FORM**

**CONSENT FORM**

**I have carefully read the Consent Information Letter form and understand it. I have asked Paola Bresba to clarify any information that was not clear in the letter. I freely consent and agree to have my child \_\_\_\_\_ (child’s name) participate in the study.**

I give permission to Paola Bresba to collect and use information for her paper by

	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Photographing my child’s artwork	_____	_____
Video taping my child’s art therapy sessions	_____	_____
Writing case notes	_____	_____

I give Paola Bresba permission to publish this information for educational purposes, provided that reasonable precautions are taken to maintain confidentiality.

However, I make the following restriction(s):

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Signature of Parent

Date

Signature of Parent

Date

Signature of Witness

Date