Art Therapy, Narrative Therapy, and the Comic Format:

An Investigation of a Triadic Synthesis

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Abstract

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This paper is a synthesis of ideas and themes found among three separate disciplines: Art

therapy; Narrative therapy; and Comic Book literature. Using the

historical/documentary method, this author has done an extensive review of existing

literature from these areas of focus. This literature review will first familiarize the

audience with the relevant aspects, historically and thematically, of Art therapy, Narrative

therapy, and Comic Book literature as separate elements. Secondly, the author explores

literature in which these themes are discussed as interrelated elements. Finally, the

author has integrated these elements to examine new ways which provide therapists from

many different disciplines with new and innovative ways to assist mental health

consumers deal with presenting issues.

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Introduction:

This research paper is an exploration of a triadic synthesis of existing information and this author's ideas regarding three distinct subject areas: art therapy, narrative therapy, and the comic book format. This author will investigate questions surrounding how a merging between elements of art therapy and elements of narrative therapy, within the framework of the comic book format, might provide therapists with a potentially powerful tool for intervention.

Beginning with a review of existing literature, this author aims to construct a modest base of information concerning the historical, theoretical, and functional underpinnings of both narrative therapy and art therapy. As well, the literature review will explore the subject of the comic book format. This portion of review into the existing literature will, at once, both touch on historical elements which speak to the evolution of the comic book as a medium, along with investigating more technical aspects, such as how the comic book format functions as a vehicle for the narrative.

Following this review, how art therapy, narrative therapy, and the comic book format have been previously connected in the literature will be presented. After which, an exploration, the evolution, and potential significance of unique, unexplored triadic connections, ideas, and applications will be proposed. Areas wherein this author feels that the three elements of the triad; art therapy, narrative therapy, and the comic book format, simultaneously cross theoretical and functional paths.

Methodology:

This research paper is theoretical in nature. The Historical-Documentary method was chosen for the construction of this paper. Described as "the writing of an integrated narrative about a topic based on critical analysis and synthesis of sources" (Art Therapy research paper/project policies and procedures handbook, 2003, p. 13) the historical/documentary method's focus is on the "investigation, critical analysis and synthesis of ideas" (2003, p. 13)

In writing about guidelines for this method, Mary Lynn Rampolla, historian, writes of primary research sources as "the basic material of the historian." (2001, p.15). As for the critical analysis of *all* sources, Rampolla urges researchers using the historical-documentary method to be as "good detectives...evaluating the evidence and approaching their sources analytically and critically" (p.15). Other essentials for the application of this research method include: a high level of organization of sources, detailed note taking, and response to counter-evidence (Rampolla; Williams, 2003).

The subject of this paper is an investigation into information and ideas pertaining to the area of a triadic synthesis between art therapy, narrative therapy, and the comic book format. Combining the required diligence in regards to education on all three subjects in the triad, with the fact that this author's hope is for this paper to serve as the jumping off point for further inquiry into this subject area. Thus, it made sense to take this opportunity to explore the existing literature in a comprehensive fashion, and to employ the historical/documentary method.

This exploration's purpose is to go beyond the compilation of existing theory to make new and significant connections between the identified elements (Art therapy research paper/project policies and procedures handbook, 2003).

Art Therapy:

Vick (2003) discuses the creation of art and its use in healing processes as being innately human endeavors, and goes on to quote Junge and Asawa (as cited in Vick, 2003, p.6), in which it is proposed that "the development of the profession of art therapy can be seen as the formal application of a long-standing human tradition influenced by the intellectual and social trends of the 20th century".

Some have written about art therapy's long-standing human tradition by drawing attention to the similarities between the art therapist and the *shaman* or *medicine man*, a recognized community healer common to many ancient cultures (McNiff, 1983; Moon, 1995; Rubin, 1998). These authors describe the shamanic tradition as a belief in a subconscious ability for human beings to heal themselves from within. The shaman's role is primarily to act as an experience educated facilitator for a given individual's journey toward activating this self healing ability.

In terms of the influence of the prevailing trends of the late 19th and 20th centuries, an increase of the interest for the art of individuals with mental illness during this period resulted in the emergence of several volumes of the reproductions of the artwork of this population. The most well documented would probably be *The Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, published by German psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn in 1922; this, and similar publications seemed to serve as a catalyst for renewed interest into the redefinition of the

relationship between works of art and their creator, wherein the art product reflects the internal world of the artist (Rubin, 1998; Vick, 2003).

The concept of art representing the unseen or inner world of an individual was gaining interest at this time, and this corresponded with a simultaneous rise of psychoanalysis (Rubin, 1998; Vick, 2003). With concepts such as the revealing of the unconscious (Rubin, 2001) amongst its foundational structures, and heavily influential founding member Sigmund Freud being a believer in the potentials of the art product as a therapeutic tool (Rubin, 2001), psychoanalytic theory played a large role in the early development of art therapy. Two individuals, Margaret Naumburg and Edith Kramer, both of whom were one time students of Freud, are often identified as driving forces behind the creation of the two main schools of art therapy during its formative years: Art psychotherapy-Naumburg and art *as* therapy-Kramer (Rubin, 1998, 2001; Vick, 2003).

Art Therapy:

Art Psychotherapy:

Judith Rubin (2001, p.15) has referenced a quote from Freud, which was often used by Margaret Naumburg as she explained her ideas of art therapy, "We experience it (a dream) predominantly in visual images…Part of the difficulty of giving an account of dreams is due to our having to translate these images into words. 'I could draw it,' a dreamer often says to us, 'but I don't know how to say it'".

Naumburg gravitated towards working with art and the art product as a vehicle for psychotherapy, wherein individuals' free associations, their verbal descriptions of their spontaneous artwork, were used as a pathway to bring unconscious material to the surface

The aim was to reveal previously *hidden* psychological conflicts etc. where they might then be examined, transformed, and worked through with the aid of an art therapist (Malchiodi, 2003). Within this framework, the emphasis is placed on the content of the artwork rather than its aesthetic merit, which hopefully will allow the client to feel less pressured and self conscious about their artistic abilities and be more spontaneous and 'free' in their expression (Malchiodi).

Along with psychoanalytic ideas such as free associations and revealing hidden, or unconscious internal conflicts, art psychotherapy also draws on the concepts of transference, "the symbolic ways in which the patient perceives and responds to the therapist" (Rubin, 2001, p.17) and countertransference, "the symbolic ways in which the therapist perceives and responds to the patient" (Rubin, p.17).

These two processes, transference and countertransference, allow for information regarding the patient's unresolved, relationship based conflicts, to come to the surface and be examined. The therapeutic relationship between patient and therapist acts as a 'sounding board' for experimenting with new ways of relating to one's self and others (Malchiodi, 2003; Rubin, 2001). In terms of art psychotherapy, there is a belief that the patient/client also experiences the process of transference not only to the therapist, but also within the process of art making and to the art product (Malchiodi, 2003; Rubin, 2001).

Art psychotherapy also includes concepts drawn from Carl Jung (Edwards, 2001; Malchiodi, 2003). From this perspective expression through artwork is not only a vehicle for the revelation of unconscious material, but also as a way in which "the psyche's intuition and the individual's internal curative potential" (Malchiodi, 2003, p. 47) can be

expressed.

Amplification and active imagination are also components of art psychotherapy which originate with Jung's theories (Malchiodi, 2003). Amplification refers to the process of examining a client's artwork through the drawing of comparisons of the art to more archetypal symbology, to universal and ancient themes. The artworks' meaning is considered outside of solely the personal realm and moves it into a more universal context (Malchiodi, 2003, p. 50), which may assist with the client's attempts to start a relationship with the image and the therapeutic process.

Active imagination refers more to the process of continuing exploration of a given image, wherein the client will continue to think about and picture mentally, more personal connections and possibilities in an effort to expand the meaning and potential for deeper insights. These deeper connections may well serve as a vehicle for further artwork and impacting therapeutic discoveries (Malchiodi, 2003).

The psychoanalytic school of object relations has also had a major influence on art psychotherapy (Malchiodi, 2003; Robbins, 2001). Malchiodi notes that an object relations approach to therapy denotes a belief that "humans have an innate drive to form and maintain relationships and it is through our relationships with people around us that shapes our personality" (p. 53). Object relations theory suggests that through the seeds fostered within early parent-child experiences, we learn to differentiate ourselves from others and begin to develop a sense of self (Malchiodi; Robbins).

Within an art therapy context, an individual can revisit these potentially disrupted processes and relive, review, and repair relationships through the use of the triad between artist, artwork, and therapist. The art making process and artwork act as a 'playspace'

within which an individual can be free to explore, at a comfortable psychological distance, how they have constructed their perception of themselves and the world in which they exist (Malchiodi, 2003; Robbins, 2001).

The preceding passages have been a short look into some of the main concepts within the school of art psychotherapy focusing on the influence of Freud, Jung, and object relations. The other main arm of art therapy is art *as* therapy, initially proposed by Cane, Naumburg's sister. But it was Edith Kramer who became its earliest and strongest voice.

Art Therapy:

Art *As* Therapy

Edith Kramer worked with the idea that the creative process itself is inherently therapeutic (Malchiodi, 2003; Rubin, 1998). Combining elements of psychoanalytic theory such as sublimation, with the act of art-based creation, Kramer described an internal process whereby pressure from instinctual drive energy which is serving no productive purpose, and in fact may be the source of significant distress for a given individual, is refocused, transformed, and externalized in 'socially acceptable' ways through the creative process. (Kramer, 2001; Malchiodi; Rubin). Though transformed, within the reformed energy there still remains some essential connection to the original drives, and ideally a cathartic relief for the individual is facilitated (Kramer).

Kramer (2001) writes of why she feels that sublimation through art may have more power for an individual than sublimation achieved through other means, when she tells of the products of sublimation through non artistic means often being devoid of emotional content, whereas art:

> Retells the story of transformation; it offers primarily the pleasure of witnessing the process. Art's value to society consists in stimulating sublimation and influencing its direction. Artist and audience travel together in two directions, from the primitive source of the creative impulse toward its final form, and again from the contemplation of form to the depth of the complex, contradictory, and primitive emotions. In this adventure conscious, preconscious, and unconscious processes complement each other (p. 39).

From these beginnings, mothered by Naumburg and Kramer, art therapy has grown and evolved to include practitioners and theorists who have made multitudes of investigations into how art therapy can be a productive therapeutic tool when looked at through and combined with other theoretical frameworks. For a comprehensive and definitive description of modern art therapy, and to conclude this brief outline of the historical, theoretical, and functional underpinnings of art therapy the American Art Therapy Association (2004) definition will be used:

> Art therapy is a human service profession which utilizes art media, images, the creative art process and patient responses to the created art productions as reflections of an individual's development, abilities, personality, interests, concerns, and conflicts. Art therapy practice is based on knowledge of human developmental and psychological theories which are implemented in the full spectrum of models of assessment and treatment including educational, psychodynamic, cognitive, transpersonal, and other therapeutic means of reconciling emotional conflicts, fostering self awareness, developing social skills, managing behavior, solving problems, reducing anxiety, aiding reality orientation, and increasing self esteem.

As a hybrid profession, art therapy relies both on psychology and art to create a therapeutic space and relationship. Art psychotherapy relies more on the verbal processing of the final art product, while art as therapy values the *process* of making art as inherently therapeutic. Each arm of art therapy has seen much development over the last 50 years, more recently in the area of narrative art therapy (Carlson, 1997; Riley, 2001). The narrative perspective in therapy is the next step in this exploration of a triadic synthesis of art therapy, narrative therapy, and the comic book format.

The Narrative Perspective

1.Postmodern and Social Constructionist views:

Narrative therapy originated from concepts developed in postmodern and social constructionist theory (Alter-Muri, 1998; Freedman & Coombs, 1996; Riley, 1993). Social constructionist/postmodern views involve many shifts from the modern view in regards to elements such as language, the concept of self, and the construction of reality (Freedman & Coombs, 1996; Neimeyer, 1998).

Where in the past, language has been seen as a mode of description, most often used to categorize and label aspects of the worlds within which we all exist, the social constructionist view of language as "the very medium by which by which social reality is constructed" (Neimeyer, 1998, p.4). Neimeyer notes that the goal of social constructionist examinations of "spoken or written texts" or narratives, is to "search for a pragmatically useful 'reading' of the text that supports valued social change" (p. 4).

When one considers language from this perspective, in which the very fabric of one's reality is formed by language at some level, it dictates that there is no separation from the

influence of one's social environment. What then must that mean to concepts such as self and identity? Neimeyer (1998, p.4) contends that the concept of self is in large part a reflection of the language which dominates "one's place and time", and that "like a foetus floating in an amnion of culturally available signs, symbols, practices and conversations, the 'self' symbiotically depends for it existence upon a living system that precedes and supports it". Shirley Riley (1993) cites Real's description of social construction theory, when she talks of reality and the self as not being formed in isolation from, but rather in conjunction with and dependant on social interaction. It is this reciprocal interaction through which an 'agreement' is made on labels for the tangible.

Freedman and Coombs (1996) write of the processes by which we form our personal realities, and the influence that our society has on the development of these interpretations. They state that "these realities provide the beliefs, practices, words, and experiences from which we make up our lives, or, as we would say in postmodernist jargon, 'constitute ourselves'" (p.16).

Freedman & Coombs (1996) have distilled the vast concepts of these theoretical positions into a list consisting of four fundamental ingredients in a postmodern/social constructionist view: 1.Realities are socially constructed. 2. Realities are constituted through language. 3. Realities are organized and maintained through narrative. 4. There are no essential truths. This means that when something is said to be 'true' it is more accurately described as something which a particular cultural majority is currently choosing to accept as true (Smith, 1997)

Simone Alter-Muri (1998) has identified postmodern concepts which can be applied to the therapeutic process. Alter-Muri (1998) points first to the idea of a "shared reality"

(p. 245) within the therapeutic alliance, noting that communication, both linguistic and visual are important therapeutic elements which help to create and shape the reality of the therapeutic space. Utilizing the idea of socially constructed realities can then assist the therapist in paying due diligence to the multitude of societies or cultures to which a given individual may belong; including family, religion, economic, and community. The therapist considers how each culture both independently, and in conjunction with others have led to a given individual's constructs of things such as the self (Alter-Muri). Postmodern social construction theorists, being concerned with the construction of reality through cultural/societal experience and language are to be inevitably drawn to the subject of how elements of exposure, experience, and language become as a cohesive whole. How are the elements put together as to form a meaningful "particular version of events"? (Neimeyer, 1998, p.3)

It was the under the influence of postmodern social constructionist viewpoints such as the above described, including the questions surrounding how individuals combined the elements of reality that the move towards the conception narrative therapy began (Carr, 1998; Cattanach, 1997; Freedman & Coombs, 1996; Hester, 2004; Riley, 1993).

The Narrative Perspective

2.Narrative Therapy-An Evolution

As discussed in the previous section, narrative therapy grew out of postmodern social constructionist theory (Freedman & Coombs, 1996; Neimeyer, 1998). There is agreement within the literature (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Coombs, 1996; Morgan, 2000) that the two individuals who are to be credited with the formalization of

narrative therapy are David Epston and Michael White. White, in White and Eptston's (1990) landmark publication *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* cites the contribution that specific authors and theorists made to his personal journey towards the conception of narrative therapy.

Bateson (as cited in White & Epston, 1990) introduced White to the ideas that "all knowing requires an act of interpretation" (p. 2), and that an individual's experience can only be processed or interpreted by the individual in relation to what that individual has already experienced. This previous collection of experiences forms a "map", or a pattern of what these experiences have meant. How an individual makes sense of any events is determined in large part by the way in which an individual fits the given experience into these preexisting patterns. Bateson (as cited in White & Epston) adds that if a given happening cannot be comfortably fit into an established pattern, that this experience is not assimilated into the interpretive tool of the individual. Thus, the experience is essentially ignored.

White and Epston (1990), write of being influenced in another way by Bateson, specifically noting the consideration that Bateson gives to how the collection, organization, and interpretation of experience are unavoidably affected by the concept of time. Bateson (as cited in White and Epston, p.2) wrote from the position that all new experience or information is "news of difference" to a given living system; and that living systems, such as humans, have their processing mechanisms activated by the perception of such difference. Further, that humans can perceive these differences *only*, and that these differences must then be organized in terms of how they fit into the overall chronological structure (i.e. relate to the past) of the individual's experience in order for

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that individual to make sense of the change to the present that this news of difference might represent.

Also at play within the development of a narrative approach to therapy was an idea promoted by David Epston's anthropological (and beyond) work in which he drew from the social sciences concept of "the text analogy" (White & Epston, 1990). This analogy for socially constructed realities dictated that individuals exist in the roles of authors and readers. These roles allow one to "conceive of the evolution of lives and relationships in terms of the reading and writing of texts, insofar as every new reading of a text is a new interpretation of it, and thus a different writing of it" (White & Epston, 1990, p.9)

The two concepts: regarding the interpretation and organization of experience into a recognizable pattern, and that this organization can only be achieved in the context of how the experiences relate to chronology coupled with this view of the interpretation and organization of experience as a "storied text" (Abels & Abels, 2001; Covington, 1995; White & Epston) led to the consideration of these elements in relation to the idea of the narrative.

A narrative has been defined in many ways. Combining the ideas of several authors, narrative can be described as: a representation of events, or a sequence of events, wherein at least one event occurs at a time and is followed by a series of events in chronological order (Genette, 1982; Onega and Landa; 1996; Prince, 1982).

White and Epston (1990, p.3) saw connections between Bateson's idea of a constructed "map" or pattern of experience through time and the concept of a constructed narrative as a mode for the interpretation of experience. The authors saw that a narrative approach to therapy could offer a way to combine these two concepts. The interpretation

of experience using the narrative framework dictates that the element of time, or the 'temporal dimension', be dealt with and that "the notion of narrative...requires the location of events in cross-time patterns" (White & Epston).

Through these areas of inquiry and investigation, White had come to the conclusion that the narrative approach to constructing an individual's pattern of the world could encompass the ideas of allowing for recognition, and interpretation of new experience as well as dictate a comfortable and facilitating natural order, based on the concept of temporal sequence (Abels & Abels, 2001; Semmler & Williams, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). Bruner (1991)concurs saying that "we organize our experience and our memory of human happening mainly in the form of a narrative - stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on" (p.4).

Subsequently in the evolution of narrative therapy was a consideration of how Bateson's (as cited in White & Epston, 1990, p.2) idea that "all knowing requires an act of interpretation" fit into therapeutic practice. Whilst considering the details of how experience is organized and understood as a narrative in relation to the issues which families in their family therapy sessions were presenting, White and Epston began to contemplate the idea of a family existing as a system, and the narrative, or storied text of these systems as representing the lens through which every new experience encountered was 'known', or viewed and interpreted. If then, the most impacting history of this system (family) had been interpreted as problematic, then it would follow that all new experiences would be viewed and interpreted through the lens of this problem dominated narrative (Barbee, 2002; Carr, 1998; Gremillion, 2004; Freedman & Coombs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990).

What then does it mean for a system, such as family or individual (Abels & Abels, 2001; Morgan, 2000), to be authoring a personal map, text, story, or narrative of their existence (and therefore the self), which is dominated by problematic elements? The patterned map or text has been established, and the elements of experience which do not easily fit into that pattern are essentially ignored. Thus, the individual author of a problem dominated narrative will then only select elements perceived as contributing to these problems for acceptance into the newest version of their text. This process then, will lead to the individual's selections resulting in the continuation and strengthening of the problem dominated narrative.

The fact that the narrative is problem dominated or "saturated" (White & Epston, 1990, p.4) serves to perpetuate the interpretation of all new events as elements of the problem(s). Events which are counter to this view, such as times when an individual made choices which were 'anti-problem' are omitted (Abels & Abels, 2001; Carr, 1998; Hester, 2004; White & Epston, 1990). Bruner (as cited in White & Epston, 1990, p.11) writes of this notion, "Narrative structures organize and give meaning to experience, but there are always feelings and lived experience not fully encompassed by the dominant story"

Narrative theory holds that one of the essentials to an individual successfully beginning the therapeutic process of reexamining or "re-storying" (White & Epston, 1990, p.17) their text is for them to somehow begin to acknowledge these instances of experience which do not fit into, and are therefore omitted from, the dominant problem saturated narrative (Abels & Abels, 2001; Carr,1998; Cowley & Springen,1995; Freedman & Coombs, 1996; Gremillion,2004; White & Epston). White and Epston call

these omitted experiences "unique outcomes", a term borrowed from Goffman (p. 15).

In order to identify these previously omitted unique outcomes, the narrative therapist encourages the client to "externalize" the problem saturated narrative (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Coombs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990). This externalization process often starts through a series of directed questions about how the problem has affected the client's life and consequently the present interpretation of experiences and relationships. The problem then starts to take on an identity of its own, which separates it from the individual's core personality. The *person* isn't the problem; the *problem* is the problem (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Coombs; Gremillion, 2004; White & Epston).

Narrative therapists are interested in having the individual describe his/her problem saturated story in as rich and detailed a way as possible. This is known as working towards a "thick description" of the narrative (Morgan, 2000, p.15). This process allows the individual to begin identifying how the problem has woven its way into the very fabric of their lives (Morgan). The therapist can assist the individual by looking for specific ways in which the problem 'works' such as what are the problems tricks, tactics, ways of operating, intentions, plans, beliefs and ideas, rules, techniques, allies, lies...etc (Morgan). These types of inquiries serve to further "personify" the problem, which allows for further separation from the individual. Often the individual and the therapist will go as far as to name the problem (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Coombs, 1996; Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990).

Once the problem has been separated from the individual and there exists a rich description of the problem's influence on the life of an individual, the process of narrative therapy then follows a path of further investigating, through directed questions,

the areas of the unique outcomes, or areas in which the individual has perhaps shown resistance in the face of the problem (Freedman & Coombs, 1996; Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). The therapist might ask questions such as 'tell me about a time when you were able to resist what the problem was trying to do?' The client might be able to remember a time when and how, for example, they were able to choose not to do drugs. Drug addiction, in this example, would represent the problem, and what the problem was trying to do was to have the individual continue down a path of drug use, which has caused much difficulty and turmoil in the client's life.

With these questions, the omitted, and essential material of unique outcomes comes to light and can then be used to start investigating what enabled the individual to make more constructive and positive choices at this particular time. The person may be able to learn about his/her own potential to make healthier choices in the face of the problem's influence on other occasions (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Coombs, 1996; Morgan, 2001; White & Epston, 1990). These discoveries enable the individual to then begin to 're-author' the narrative with more positive and empowering details of his/her story, wherein the client is in control as opposed to the problem being in control.

Morgan (2001) proposes that when these instances wherein the individual has made positive choices were hidden within the language of the problem saturated narrative. the skills that they represent would be very difficult to identify. When the client investigates these examples of positive choice making they can then "reconnect with their preferences, hopes, dreams, and ideas" (2001, p. 59).

This approach has now led the individual to the beginnings of a new 'alternative narrative' (Morgan, 2001; White & Epston, 1990). The narrative approach then

encourages the individual to continue to fill out the new story by exploring it through the path of as rich and detailed a description as they can. Directed questions are then asked about how this new story fits with how they wish to exist in their world and relationships. This investigation then plays a large part in 'thickening' the new narrative much in the same way that the problem saturated narrative was thickened as to allow expanded understanding (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Coombs, 1996; Morgan; White & Epston).

This expansion of the new narrative can be facilitated in many other ways by the therapist. One such way is to find other people in the client's life who can act as witnesses to this creation of a new story. These witnesses can then become powerful allies in the continuation of this new story (Morgan, 2001; White & Epston, 1990). Finding some way(s) in which these people can become actively involved in the carrying out of the new narrative is more powerful than witnessing alone (Morgan, p.74).

Ways in which the new narrative can be perpetuated without the direct involvement of others include "therapeutic documentation-including declarations, documents, certificates, handbooks, notes form the session, videotapes, symbols, lists, pictures, and letters" (Morgan, 2001). With this new narrative identified and authored, and the strategies for its continued existence and implementation, the hope is that the individual will be able to break away for their old, unhealthy patterns of existence, and discover new and healthy ways to be in their world and relationships.

This section has been a general description of the intricacies of the narrative approach to therapy, as it is a very rich and detailed way of working. The primary elements of narrative therapy to consider for the current investigation into the triad of art

therapy, narrative therapy, and comic book are: individuals author their narratives

through the organization of experiences in a sequential pattern; if the individual's

existence has been interpreted as problematic, the narrative can become problem

saturated; experiences which do not easily fit into this established, problem dominated

pattern are often omitted; these omitted areas are referred to as unique outcomes;

investigation of these unique outcomes can provide rich material with which to begin the

process of creating a new alternative narrative; the process of expanding and integrating a

new narrative can be encouraged through the involvement of people with whom the client

has personal relationships; other tools such as letters and pictures can also help with the

creation and continuation of a new narrative.

The Comic Book Format:

The Comic Book- a Brief History:

The origin of comic books, a common form of the visual narrative or picture story,

can be traced back as far as cave drawings depicting events such as the hunt for game

animals, Egyptian hieroglyphics and gothic manuscripts (Eisner, 1985; Hoff, 1982;

McCloud,1993, 2006; Overstreet, 2002). All represent the storying of events in a

narrative supported mainly through the use of visual components.

In a more recent sense the modern history of comics is most often traced back to the

publication of *Odadiah Oldbuck*, a 40-page long picture story by Swiss author Rudolphe

Topffer originally publish in 1837 (Eisner, 1985; Hoff, 1982; McCloud, 1993; Overstreet,

2002). Topffer is credited with the creation of the comic strip and the comic

book/graphic novel (which is basically an extended collection of the comic book) (Eisner;

Hoff; McCloud). *Odadiah Oldbuck* contained no word balloons, but rather the narrative was propelled through the pictures and by text located under the panels to describe the story (Coville, 1996; Overstreet).

Several magazines capitalized on the success of this first picture story, and in 1887, magazine such as *Harper's, Puck, Judge, Life*, and *Truth* along with some newspapers began to add a Sunday comics feature in an effort to appeal to market trends and increase sales. One of the most popular characters at the time was the *Yellow Kid*, written and drawn by Richard F. Outcault (Coville, 1996; Eisner, 1985; Hoff, 1982; McCloud, 1996; Overstreet, 2002).

Outcault went on to create many other popular comic characters, such as *Buster Brown*, first published in 1902. This character was adopted by advertisers who printed small runs of the comic character's adventures to offer as incentives for consumers to purchase their products (Coville, 1996; Overstreet, 2002).

In 1912, the first monthly comic book was published, the title was *Comics Monthly* and each issue featured a popular comic strip character which had arisen in the recent previous years (Coville, 1996; Overstreet, 2002; Tychinski, 2004). During the 1930s free comic books became very popular. Thousands of issues were given away during these times as a way to keep printing houses running during the Depression and as a way for advertisers to draw in customers. The two characters in particular that were very popular at this time were *Little Orphan Annie* and *Buck Rogers* (Coville, 1996). In 1933 Procter and Gamble, commissioned the printing of a comic book entitled *Funnies on Parade*, of which 1 million copies were given away. This comic was the first to be printed in the 8" x 11" format which is still used for the printing of most comic books today (Coville;

Overstreet, 2002).

With the publication of the first issue of *The Phantom*, in February 1936, the world was introduced to its first costumed super hero. "The Phantom was the kind of hero who despite his normal 'human' capabilities, fought crime with bravery and death defying stunts" (Coville, 1996, p.13). Following this, in 1938, the first issue of *Action Comics* was published and featured a now famous and ubiquitous character named *Superman*, created by Siegel and Shuster (Coville; Eisner, 1985).

Other costumed characters were soon to follow, such as *Batman*, in 1939, who introduced comic audiences to a more realistic and 'gritty' super hero, who relied on his intellect as much as any super powers (Coville, 1996; Overstreet, 2002). Later in 1939, Superman became the first comic character to be given a separate comic book series dedicated solely to his adventures (Coville; Overstreet).

In 1940, Dr. Frederic Wertham, an American psychologist who was concerned with the negative effect that comic books might be having on the youth of the day published several works on the subject; he wrote:

> Badly drawn, badly written, and badly printed-a strain on the young eyes
> and young nervous systems-the effect of these pulp-paper nightmares is
> that of a violent stimulant. Their crude blacks and reds spoils a child's
> natural sense of color; their hypodermic injection of sex and murder make
> the child impatient with better, though quieter, stories. Unless we want a
> coming generation even more ferocious than the present one, parents and
> teachers throughout America must band together to break the 'comic
> magazine. (cited in Coville, 1996, p. 18).

It took some time for the emerging comics industry to recover from this commentary, and it resulted in the creation of 'The Comics Code Authority', a body developed to monitor the content of comics from this point on (Coville, 1996; Overstreet, 2002).

Some mark the return of the comic book as starting with the publication of a comic entitled *Showcase* #4, which featured a super hero named *The Flash* (Coville, 1996; Overstreet, 2002). Other titles which had some success in this time of rebuilding included *Mad* #1, and *Uncle Scrooge* Four Color #386 (Overstreet). Titles such as *Batman* continued to sell relatively well through the period of the 1950s and 1960s, partly fueled by the success of the television series based on the popular comic; however, when the standard comic book price was raised from 12 to 15 cents, the sale of all comics suffered (Coville; Overstreet).

In the late 1960s and into the 1970s a new 'underground' movement began to emerge in the world of comics; these titles such as *Zap Comics*, "almost single handedly spawned an industry with tremendous growth in alternative 'commix' running through the 1970s...being issued without a comics code 'seal of approval'" (Overstreet, 2002, p.310).

This resurgence of popularity in the 1970s allowed major publishers such as Marvel and DC comics to begin introducing new types of heroes to the market. Heroes such as *Conan the Barbarian*, whose stories were adapted from the immensely popular novels of Robert E. Howard (Overstreet, 2002) became widely held. DC introduced more serious and socially relevant story lines during this time period. One such example was the *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* #76 issue, which dealt with the issues of drug addiction and homelessness (Coville, 1996; Overstreet).

In 1975, with the introduction of a team of super heroes called *The X-Men*, Marvel comics introduced a multi-ethnic band of heroes whose countries of origin ranged from Canada (Wolverine), to Russia (Colossus), to Japan (Sunfire), to Kenya (Storm)

(Overstreet, 2002). These characters reflected the growing popularity of comics all over the world, and were taking different directions in these places as well (Tychinski, 2004). In countries such as Japan, a form of comic art known as *Manga* was becoming popular and was being published in collected graphic novel format. This was also happening in countries such as France where titles such as *Tintin*, which chronicled the worldly adventures of a young boy and his dog, were also being collected and published in graphic novel format (Tychinski, 2004).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s in North America, the super hero genre continued to reign supreme, although the story lines and subject matter were reflecting the increasing maturity level of the comic book audience in their dealings with serious personal and political social issues (Coville, 1996; Overstreet, 2002; Tychinski, 2004). The release of such comics as *The Watchmen* in 1985, which looked at the life and times of a band of heroes who were far from the perfect image of past heroes such as Superman, heralded a new era in which the comic book hero reflected a more realistic and down to earth individual with real life problems, with whom the comic audience could more readily identify (Overstreet, 2002).

Comic books and the comic book format have continued to develop and mature during the time period of the 1990s and into the 2000s. The proliferation of real life stories and characters has spawned an industry wherein the subject matter ranges from investigations of Holocaust survivors such as in Art Speigleman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (Bosmajian, 1998) to tales of growing up as a young female in the war torn country of Iran, such as does Marjane Satrapi's (2003) epic graphic novel *Persepolis: The story of a childhood*. These became the norm rather than the exception. This trend is contributing

in a major way to growing consensus within public perception that the comic book format

deserves to be considered amongst other so called legitimate art, literary and narrative

forms (Eisner, 1985; McCloud, 1993; McCloud, 2006).

The Comic Book Format:

The Comic book Format - A Vehicle for Art and Narrative:

Will Eisner (1985, p.8) is one of the few authors who has written about the

legitimacy of the comic book format:

> The format of the comic book presents a montage of both word and image,
> and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive
> skills. The regimens of art (e.g. perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the
> regimens of literature (e.g. grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed
> upon each other. The reading of a comic book is an act of both aesthetic
> perception and intellectual pursuit.

Eisner defines the comic book format as "sequential art" (Eisner, 1985, p. 8). Scott

McCloud (1993, 2006), has written the definitive work on the comic book medium. He

examined the format in more detail and has come up with a definition which seems to

capture the format in a more comprehensive way. McCloud states that "comics" (more a

genre than an object, such as a comic book) are "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in

deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic

response in the viewer" (McCloud, 1993, p.9).

Within his definition McCloud (1993) is quick to point out that there is no mention

of super heroes, funny animals, fantasy/science fiction, reader age, specific genres,

subject matters, or styles, specific ink or paper, nor any other materials. There is no

mention of black lines, flat colored ink, exaggerated anatomy, representational art of any

kind. Nor is there any mention of specific schools of art, or philosophies, movements, or ways of seeing. In pointing out what his definition does not include, McCloud (1993) is commenting on the fact that the comic book format has all of history, including art and literature at its disposal for the continued evolution of the format.

One of the tools that the comic book format offers to the creator/author is the ability to move between 'cartoonish' art and photo realistic art. McCloud (1993) contests that when a comic artist depicts images in a traditional cartoon style, which is a very pared down and simplified version of reality, it allows that artist to reflect aspects of the self. This process is due to what McCloud calls "amplification through simplification" (p.30)., It is a process which reduces an image to its most basic elements, or meaning That same meaning can then be amplified, due to the fact that the image is now more open to any impositions that the reader may want/need to place upon it. McCloud goes on to explain that these simplified images are now more universal as well. Because of their lack of specificity, they can stand in for more varied subjects.

In terms of more realistic artistic styles, McCloud (1993) argues that this type of image can allow the comic artist to represent the outer world, due to the inclusion of more specific details. This moves away form the universal to the specific, and therefore from the personal to the external. Japanese comics have truly embraced this concept, where even within one panel, a main character with which the reader will hopefully identify personally, is depicted in a simplified, cartoon style, while another character, for example a villain will be depicted in a more realistic style. This juxtaposition can help to "objectify" and separate them from the main character and reader (McCloud).

Another aspect of the comic book format which both Eisner (1985) and McCloud

(1993) deal with is the function of the text, or the written word in comics. Both authors are of the mind that letters, making up words are actually another form of image (Eisner; McCloud). Eisner points to examples such as Chinese characters (letters) as being representational of actual figures instead of merely abstract concepts. This idea opens up many avenues for the comic artist, which are usually not dealt with in traditional written modes of expression. For example, letters can be images, which allows the author/creator of comics to use the letters as part of a given illustration, wherein the style, font, and size of the letters can add to the overall meaning and message of the image (Eisner; McCloud, 1993, 2006). For example, if one wanted to clarify the message that a certain character was yelling in a given panel, one could simply use very bold font, and increase the size of the letters to achieve this message.

Speech in comics is usually contained in what are commonly known as "speech bubbles" (Eisner, 1985; McCloud, 1993). These are the oval shaped 'balloons' that appear over a character's head to indicate who is doing the talking. Within this device there are many options which are available to the comic artist which can very clearly convey intensity, volume, type of speech, sounds and emotion (Eisner; McCloud). For example if one wanted to amplify the fact that a character were yelling beyond the techniques available for lettering alone, one could depict the speech bubble as having very jagged, pointed edges to visually amplify the fact that the speaker is yelling. This device also allows for the artist to show that the speech is actually an internal monologue. This can be achieved with the traditional technique of having the speech bubble appear as a cloud like thought bubble (Eisner; McCloud). The speech bubbles form can be altered in many ways, limited only by the artist's imagination, which can convey, and clarify

many different aspects of how and why the characters are speaking or thinking.

Speech bubbles also convey the concept of time in a comic. They can indicate this by their arrangement on the page, or within a panel, which of the characters are speaking first, or indeed if all characters are speaking at once, by overlapping the bubbles, for example (Eisner, 1985). The aspect of time is very important to the construction of the comic format. Being sequential in nature, the arrangement of illustrations, words and panels gives the reader a sense of how the narrative flows through time (McCloud, 1993).

McCloud (1993) investigates the process of representing time in comics by looking at an idea that he calls "closure". This concept has its origins in Gestalt psychology, wherein it is assumed that there is a natural human tendency to want to make wholes out of segmented parts (Rhyne, 2001). Within the realm of the comic format, McCloud refers to the space which exists between comic panels as "the gutter" (p. 66), and contests that it is within this space that the reader of the comic performs the action of connecting what has occurred from panel to panel (the segments), and what this occurrence means to the narrative (the whole). "If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is the grammar" (McCloud, p. 67). This process of closure demands active participation on the part of the reader and allows for individual interpretations of the events depicted (Versaci, 2001).

In a further expansion on his ideas of closure in comics, McCloud (1993) argues that this act of closure can also occur within panels, as it is the artist's choice of what details to include in a given illustration. The artist can choose to show partial images, or in fact, show nothing at all, other than a series of illustrated sounds and speech (McCloud), which engages the reader in active interpretation of what is happening having been given

only fragments of the whole.

The concept of depicting aspects of time is also dealt with in other ways in the world of the comic. Time and its passage can be expressed in many ways in comics. Simple, logical movement from panel to panel is one way, but the comic offers things such as one panel depicting many actions happening simultaneously as a vehicle for depicting time as well (McCloud, 1993). Even the form of the panel itself can change the reading of time within a comic (Eisner, 1985; McCloud). For example, the artist could place many small, separate panels side by side, which depict minute changes in the sequence of action being performed, and this would give the reader a sense of quickness and rapid passage of time; however, if the artist chose to place a physically lengthened panel in between these smaller ones, it would denote that the passage of time had slowed for the period represented within this particular panel. Thus, the form of the frame forces the reader to slow down and interpret the particular panel (Eisner, 1985; McCloud, 1993). This is just one example of how the shape of the panel itself might affect the reading of time in a comic, but here it stands as an example of a range of possibilities, which again are limited only by the artist's imagination.

For the purposes of this research paper, the unique aspects of the comic book include: the combination of both word and image; the ability for the artist to move between cartoon and realistic forms of representation; the use of written text as image; the tool of the speech bubble, which opens up avenues to express emotion; the use of sequential panels, and the resulting space between panels referred to as the gutter, in which the reader is required to interpret the passage form one panel to the next-the act of closure. Very little has been written on the 'dialogue' between the triadic elements of art

therapy. narrative therapy. and comic books, and none has been written on the three together as a potential tool for art therapy. The following section considers the dialogue between each of the elements.

Art Therapy, Narrative Therapy, and the Comic Book Format:

Existing combinations in theory and literature:

Within most of the narrative therapy literature reviewed here. there is a tendency to mention art very briefly. if at all. If mentioned it usually places art in an adjunctive position and not as the main mean of experiencing the narrative. Most authors let literary vehicles assume this position (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Coombs. 1996: White & Epston. 1990)

Shirley Riley (2001) adopts in her art therapy practice a social constructionist and narrative perspective. Riley notes that a significant shortcoming of the narrative approach is the omission of a visual component. She continues to say that the addition of a visual component to the approach can create a more visceral experience for the artist/storyteller, and also can make the story more "real" by bringing the "here and now" into the equation for her client(s). "The interplay- between the verbal explanations and the visual renditions-greatly enriches the opportunities for the client" (Riley, p. 283).

Riley (2001) also points out that the physical act of creation can add a very beneficial slant to the therapeutic process. Taking cues from Edith Kramer's (2001) art as therapy approach, Riley notes that in her work with early stage dementia patients. the addition of sensory and kinesthetic pieces in therapy helped the clients to become "less forgetful, less unfocused, more able to make connections, and more cognitively

competent" (Riley, 2001). Thomas Carlson (1997) supports this theory as well, commenting that the act of creation can help a client begin the process of redefining his/her perceived relationship to the problem.

As discussed earlier, the recognized first step in the narrative process is for the therapist to assist the client to externalize the elements of the problem saturated narrative (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Coombs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990). Several authors have commented on the ability of artwork to assist with this process. The art product as an externalization of the internal is not a new idea to art therapy, given its partial origin in the realm of psychoanalytic theory (Malchiodi, 2003; Rubin, 2001). Riley talks of the fact that once a tangible art product exists, the client and therapist can then take it in together and work with the image from a comfortable psychological distance.

Carlson (1997) adds that "having clients draw their problem is a very dramatic way to separate the problem from their lives. It is externalization in the most literal way" (p. 277), but does caution that drawing does not necessarily *equal* externalization, as an art piece may still "reflect the problem in an internal way" (p. 277). Carlson looks at art as a vehicle for the externalization process to begin, which can then be built on through further verbal and visual strategies.

Narrative therapy, as discussed earlier, often encourages the client to write a series of letters and other written declarations in an effort to recognize and record the therapeutic process of re-authoring an alternative narrative (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Coombs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990). This recognition and documentation is another area where artwork can offer an effective addition to the

narrative process, as Carlson (1997) writes "art can serve much the same purpose as letters in amplifying alternative stories" (p. 279).

Carlson (1997) elucidates through a case example, wherein a young girl, whose externalized problem was her relationship to anger. She would draw self portraits showing her relationship to the problem by having percentages of her face dedicated to happy and angry. These drawings then served several purposes, that of a tangible product which launched many productive discussions, and also as documentation of progress. Early drawings showed a higher percentage of anger, whereas later drawings depicted a face where happy dominated. This allowed the client to trace her progress throughout the therapeutic process, and acted as a reconfirmation that she had indeed been gaining control over her problem, which served as fuel for her alternative narrative to continue. Shirley Riley (1993) sums up these concepts succinctly:

> Discussing the illustrations stimulates the language and the conversation...There is a better chance to find new themes, new histories, create an alternative view of their problem, to invent a new reality. Fresh explanations that remove a negative label on the problem-to view the situation in fresh light-leads to the process of change (p. 264)

The narrative approach has been used in corollary fields of creative arts therapies in drama and play therapy. These therapies explore the realm of role play, wherein the client is assisted in acting out the roles described in their narrative (Cattanach, 2001; Ciona, 2001). Cattanach points out an advantage of bringing aspects of the creative arts therapies into narrative therapy in that the arts approach has a more direct focus on the emotions connected to a narrative, an area which she feels can be somewhat neglected in the traditional narrative approach to searching out the problem.

In terms of where the comic book format has fit in to this picture thus far, there is

very little that exists. One of the few authors is who has written of the subject is Matthew Mulholland (2004) who relates his personal experience with the comic format as therapeutic agent. Mulholland points out the current trend within the comics industry, where major publishers are focusing on stories which reflect the real life experience of the authors. The existence of this comics material encouraged Mulholland to create his own comic stories populated by self referential characters, who could don super hero costumes and "overcome any obstacle" (Mulholland). Mulholland goes on to describe that he was able to express and work though significant grief in relation to a personal tragedy by penning a serious graphic novel about his experience (a sophisticated, elongated comic format). Mulholland (2004) also suggests that the comic format has therapeutic value because of the control the artist holds over the characters. They can express their issues at a pace with which they are comfortable.

Abels & Abels (2001) briefly mention a case study in which a group of 10- and 11-year-old boys wrote stories which used existing characters such as Superman, to work through issues that they were struggling with in their own lives. The comic format and the use of familiar and powerful characters assisted the boys in the beginning explorations of their ongoing issues.

Finally, in an article documenting her battles with cancer, Wendy Heath (2000) described having read some cartoons soon after being diagnosed which dealt with cancer in a humorous way. Heath explained that these cartoons which dealt with her diagnosis in an easily accessible manner inspired her to create her own cartoons and comics about her experience. This process has grown into a thriving, self created website which has allowed her to continue with her comic creations, as well as offering a place for others to

do the same.

Each of the three aspects of the proposed triad has unique beginnings and have been shaped distinctly over time. Art therapy has as its roots psychoanalysis, narrative therapy, as social constructionism, and comic books as a medium which has moved from a cheap advertising gimmick to a respected artistic and literary mode. Each bring distinct strengths and in some cases as noted above, have been combined. However, this final section will propose a triadic synthesis of the three elements for use in art therapy.

Art Therapy, Narrative Therapy, and the Comics Format- A Triadic Synthesis::

Artistic Developmental Stages:

Many people may perceive that comics are for kids/adolescents only. Diamond Comics, the largest distributor of comics in the United States notes that the average age of comic readers was identified as 29 (Brenner, 2004). Nevertheless, my bias is that the majority of people asked would say that comics are a childhood/adolescence-based medium. Perhaps though, this (mis)perception does not have to be a negative thing.

By saying this I am referring to my idea that the comics connection to childhood may serve as a way in which adult clients might, through the use of this medium, return to subconscious areas of their childhood wherein the first constructions of their problem saturated narratives might well exist. This connection to childhood and to playful ideas gives the comic a distinct advantage over art forms which may be viewed as more serious, and therefore more intimidating.

Victor Lowenfeld (1964), an art educator wrote about the developmental stages of art. Lowenfeld (1964) described the style of art which exist through the ages of 12-14 as

the Pseudo Naturalistic stage He detailed this stage as a time in which artists are becoming aware of shortcomings in their representational skill. This identification of skill deficits can often lead to the art of this stage becoming a sort of shorthand notation of representation, and results in a cartoon style. Lowenfeld goes on to describe the art of adolescents from 14-17 as a continuation of the Pseudo-naturalistic style because they often have a lack of exposure to art and drawing practice. Along with a tendency to exaggerate detail for emphasis, and often the imaginative use of the figure to express satire, adolescents often continue in this cartoon or comic style.

Cathy Malchiodi (1996) also writes of the tendency for adolescent clients to draw in a cartoon or comic style. She feels that this is mainly an effort to compensate for limited representational skills. I mention these artistic stage descriptions in reference to the fact that many adults, due to lack of continued practice with artistic representation, never get past these stages (Hoff, 1982). Therefore, the comic format might offer, certainly adolescent clients, but adult clients as well, access to the world of art and narrative without the added pressure of 'making good art'. So, the comic format can potentially offer clients of all ages an entrance into the world of illustrating their life story. Embedded in the comic book are the functional and technical aspects discussed earlier, which could add to the therapeutic potential.

Speech Bubbles:

During the discussion of the comic book format, functions of the speech bubble (Eisner, 1985; McCloud, 1993) included: indicating which character as speaking; illustrating the intensity, volume, types of speech, sounds and emotions; indicating an internal monologue.

The use of the speech bubble can offer an individual exploring their narrative many ways in which to express their ideas. Within an image, there is much room for communication, but when one's representational skills are limited (and even when they are more advanced) the communication of clear, concise ideas is a real challenge. The speech bubble offers a format in which, through combination with the artwork, the written word can act as a way for ideas and thoughts to be clarified.

For example, if a particular illustration depicted a self referential character listening to another character tell them how worthless and pathetic they were, a cloud shaped balloon might indicate that the self referential character is thinking to him/herself how being talked to this way is affecting them in a negative way, how language such as this makes them feel. The balloon could show that the person would usually just listen to what was being said instead of letting his/her true feelings be known. This could, in turn, allow for the artist to explore these feelings as well as investigate and discuss what might happen if they were to tell the speaker what they were experiencing.

With the possibilities for the speech bubble to express both internal and external dialogue (Eisner, 1996; McCloud, 1993), the client has the opportunity to explore ideas related to his/her narrative by depicting what a character is thinking inwardly, and saying outwardly. These inner and outer expressions may not always be the same. A client

could explore in a visual way, what the experience of thinking one thing, while saying another might look like.

For example, an illustration of a conversation between a self referential character and a family member might show the client involved in a back and forth conversation where the client is telling the family member that they have everything under control. While this is taking place, a thought balloon could be side by side to the client's audible speech, in which the client is thinking about the fact that they feel out of control and that they wish with all their heart that they could just say what is really happening with them. Through this exploration the therapeutic team of client and therapist can examine the reasons of how and why a person engages in this activity, and how this act might be contributing to the perpetuation of his/her problem dominated narrative.

To continue with thoughts on the use of the speech bubble, clients could create different versions of the same text by using various forms of the speech bubble. As discussed earlier, the form that the speech bubble takes, for example jagged edges as loud/angry, can be very indicative of what the context and emotion behind the speech is (Eisner, 1985; McCloud, 1993). If the artist is exploring how one particular problematic interaction with another individual might look if it were handled differently, a picture/panel of the encounter could be made and different version of speech bubbles, with different edges and font, could be created, cut out and interchanged within the image to spark discussion of how the encounter may have been altered, for better or worse, with the use of different linguistic choices. The words within the bubbles could also be changed or rearranged to investigate the results.

What if one takes the social constructionist view of language as the mode of creating a problem saturated narrative (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Coombs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990) to the realm of the speech bubble? The client could potentially create a character which *is* a speech bubble, containing a particularly problematic statement with which the client describes their life. For example, the speech bubble character might consist of the sentence 'I am incapable of making healthy choices'. The possibility then exists for that speech bubble character to speak within its own bubbles, showing its thoughts, and ideas through its own text. The client could have the bubble interact with other characters and have the other characters ask questions as to why the bubble talks this way, or what its motives are, what it wants from the client, all of which are questions that a narrative therapist often asks clients to describe (White & Epston). This exploration which brings a visual, artistic twist into the mix might assist the client in working through this exercise, and allow for the externalization and separation process.

Panels, & Panel to Panel Progression

The fact that the comic book format is traditionally constructed from separate, and framed panels offers a wide range of possible applications with the triadic relationship. Take for example the idea that the panels might exist as separate works, on separate sheets of pieces of paper (or canvas, or photos, or whatever the artist's imagination allows), then one can imagine that the order, spacing and placement of these separate panels might be rearranged in order to examine aspects of the client's narrative.

For example. if a series of panels depict an individual being asked to engage in a criminal activity, such as breaking into a store; the order of the panels is that the client is low on money, is then asked by associates to steal some merchandise to make money, then the crime is committed and the client is caught by the police. then while in custody the client thinks to him/herself that they shouldn't have done this crime, that they should have asked someone for help. If one were to place this last panel, which depicts a potentially helpful thought process about consequences in between the panels where the crime is proposed and then committed, the client might be able to envision making a different choice. With this examination, the client may identify and begin to incorporate a strategy into their new narrative which may help them to make better choices when temptations arise in the future.

Another approach could take a series of sequential paneled descriptions of a given event. and looking at how the sequence and outcome might be altered if one problem saturated panel were removed and replaced with a panel which instead reflects the emerging strategies and concepts of the alternative narrative. This process could include revisiting older sequences which can serve as a documentation of the past narrative, and inserting brand new panels, created much later in the therapeutic process.

The panel format also allows the client to discover ways of breaking out of the 'frame' of their present narrative. One can imagine an image or text, or both, as smashing through the borders of a given panel, in a triumphant metaphor wherein the new story is transcending the confines of the problem dominated story. This metaphor might be taken to the other side as well, where the problem is 'contained' in a very manageable space, with which the artist can do as they please. The frame can be made

smaller, made bigger, made into replications of itself, made empty, made in any fashion

that the artist can think of, which could help to propel the new narrative by, in essence,

controlling the old one.

With the panel being the main vehicle by which the comic format depicts the idea of

time and sequence, the client has unlimited opportunities to play with these concepts

here. One can go from the present, to the past, to the future all in the space of three

panels, which would allow for the visual examination of time separated events in a very

small space. This might permit the client and therapist to see experiences in new and

interconnected ways, or to identify patterns in action, all of which would contribute to the

deconstruction of the problem saturated narrative, and therefore to the construction of an

alternative version.

Another interesting possibility which the comic panel could offer a client is the idea

discussed earlier, where any number of simultaneous events can potentially exist within

one panel (McCloud, 1993). In utilizing this idea, a client might depict one seemingly

singular event whilst examining multiple aspects of the same. For example,

repercussions of an event might ripple through a crowd of people in one panel with

whom the client is currently involved in relationships. This type of image could permit

the explorations of how an event, or action, by themselves or with another, impacted their

narrative in an instant. A study of how one word or action can have immediate and long

lasting consequences. It would also be a good exercise in examining a client's

perceptions of how others are affected by aspects and events within their narrative.

The Gutter:

As described earlier, McCloud has named the seemingly empty space that exists between panels as "the gutter" (McCloud, 1993). McCloud goes on to contest that this space is anything but empty, that it is within this space that the process of closure occurs and the reader prescribes meaning to the events depicted. The gutter has very important triadic implications as well.

With the existence of this space between panels, comes an opportunity for the therapist to ask of the client, directed questions about what may have come between these panels, in terms of the sequence. Questions such as, "what happened before this panel", and "what happened in between these two panels", would contribute to increasing the richness of the narrative, or in narrative terms, 'thickening the plot' (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Coombs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990)

This space could also act as the area in which omitted material lives. This omitted material then would become the arena of the 'unique outcome' (White & Epston, 1990). Through the exploration of what the artist has chosen to leave out in the progression from panel to panel, the client and the therapist can search for instances in which the client acted in a way that could be described as 'anti-problem', and thus identify any successful strategies that the client may have been previously unable to include in his/her narrative (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Coombs, 1996; Neimeyer, 1998; White & Epston, 1990). The client and therapist can then embark on creating alternative panels which would fill in the gutter and offer new readings and interpretations of the client's narrative.

Summary of Triadic Approach

With this exploration into a proposed triadic synthesis between art therapy, narrative therapy, and the comic format, it is this author's position that this combination has connections to both art psychotherapy, in the ability to uncover and explore unrevealed psychological material; as well as the art as therapy approach in which the very act of creation may provide a cathartic relief of some kind for the artist.

I have attempted to show areas in which I feel that the three elements of the proposed triad might offer each other new possibilities for therapeutic work. Areas such as the unique combination of text and image; text as image; possibilities for the expression of inner and outer dialogues through use of the speech bubble; expression of emotions through the use of stylized text and speech bubble formats; the use of the comic book format as a non-intimidating introduction into art making; the use of sequential panels and the format of panels as a tool of narrative exploration have been amongst the topics that have been explored.

There are many more possibilities for this triadic synthesis of art therapy, narrative therapy, and the comic format. For now, it is hoped that through the presentation of the ideas contained in this research paper, others may see the potential that I propose exists within the combination of art therapy, narrative therapy, and the comic format, and will further the investigation into its potential for themselves and for their future clients.

Limitations of this Study:

A limitation to the scope of this exploration was the existence of limited relevant literature concerning the comic book medium. In depth explorations of the comic book as a legitimate medium with which can be expressed serious and meaningful ideas through sophisticated means seem to be relatively scarce. This situation dictated two strategies that the author utilized. Firstly, that upon identifying important sources relating to the comic book format I would concede that these would serve as the majority of the literary support for attempted triadic connections.

Secondly, it meant that I would use internet sources whose credentials are limited to the *comic book scene*. With conclusions based on the results of an application of the same questions a researcher using the historical/documentary method would ask of a similar printed source (Rampolla, 2001), it is my position that the authors of the internet sources referenced in this paper are qualified to write on the chosen subjects, and are respected in their area of expertise.

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