PANEL BY PANEL:

CHANGING PERSONAL NARRATIVES THROUGH THE CREATION OF SEQUENTIAL

ART AND THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

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CHANGING PERSONAL NARRATIVES THROUGH THE CREATION OF

SEQUENTIAL ART AND THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

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The creation of comics, or sequential art, as a therapeutic tool offers a way for artists and clients alike to transform their personal narratives through a medium that transcends both spoken and written language. Artists and writers have frequently used comics to translate stories of hardship, mental health, trauma, healing, and grief in the form of memoirs and autobiographical graphic novels. Recently, the field of mental health and creative arts therapies have begun to incorporate reading and creation of comics with clients in the therapeutic space. This research uses an arts-based heuristic methodology to examine the process of combining narrative therapy concepts and interventions with comics creation in order to add further dimension to the re-storying process. This is achieved through the creation of the author's own autobiographical graphic novella exploring a year of her early adolescence. Using the artmaking experience and the final product as a source for the collection of data, this research explores how combining literary and visual storytelling devices with narrative therapy interventions can facilitate therapeutic change. This research examines the possibilities of using comics creation in therapeutic spaces and illuminates the benefits of using graphic novels as an accessible tool of support and psychoeducation in populations with minimal access to mental health services.

Keywords: comics, sequential art, graphic novels, memoir, narrative therapy, art therapy, mental health, adolescence, arts-based heuristic inquiry

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Introduction

Found within the panels of comics and graphic novels are countless tales of love, hardship, adversity, strength, and growth—some real, some fictionalized, and some a mix of both. What cannot be said through words or pictures alone, comics find a way to express by weaving the two together. Comics transcend the boundaries of mere literary genre, embodying a powerful medium in its own right, and it is these transformative qualities that are now beginning to be embraced by the field of mental health and, specifically, creative arts therapies. For the field of art therapy, where facilitating connection and meaning-making through creative expression is crucial to the practice, comics as a medium hold incredible promise. Through their artwork, narration, content, and presentation, autobiographical comics tackle deeply personal experiences that have a profound potential to transform and impact those they engage with. These experiences may occur at the audience-level or the level of the creator, as this form of storytelling provides an opportunity for readers and creators to witness, confront, engage with, and process narratives through the gentle interlacement of memory and history (Orbán, 2007).

As an adolescent, I found solace and community through engaging with graphic novels and comics. The stories that reflected my personality and my challenges brought me comfort and a way to connect with others. I deeply cherish the insight and the empathy that was brought to me through these stories– stories that transported me outside the realm of my own experience. The passion for illustration and graphic narratives that flourished throughout my youth and well into my adulthood is partly why I wish to lend my voice now in drawing attention to their value in the therapeutic space. Given its roots in counterculture and the numerous misconceptions that have followed comics throughout the years, there are many challenges to be faced in the pursuit of acknowledging graphic novels as a potential therapeutic tool (Priego & Farthing, 2016). As art therapists, creating sequential art or comics can provide our clients with a creative tool to deconstruct and re-author traumas or difficult life experiences (Carlton, 2018; Drew, 2016; McCreight, 2018). For the field of mental health in general, graphic novels also offer an accessible means of emotional support and psychoeducation for clients who may feel alone in their experiences (McNicol, 2016; Mumbauer, 2017; Priego & Farthing, 2016).

This research addresses the ways sequential art and graphic novel storytelling methods can contribute to the therapeutic success of the narrative re-telling process. This will be explored through the creation of my own graphic novella, a small comic book that I have written and

illustrated over the course of this research. This novella explores a time in my adolescent experience that signalled the beginning of my identity formation, challenging my self-perception. Using the data and insights gathered from my heuristic exploration, I will examine the ways that this medium adds depth to the re-storying process, furthering its capacity to help individuals find alternative stories that highlight one's strength and resilience. This research aims to promote and support a deeper understanding of the place comics can occupy in the therapeutic space and its intrinsic value as a creative intervention.

Literature Review

Comics and sequential art, defined by McCloud (1993), are a sequence of images and illustrations juxtaposed in a way that conveys information or produces a response from the viewer (p. 20). Graphic novels refer to a serialized, published sequence of comics (Arffman, 2019). Comics and graphic novels have explored themes of attachment, trauma, grief, and healing in many ways since the birth of the underground *comix* movement in the 60s (Arffman, 2019). Within the last ten years, graphic novels caught the eye of not only comics enthusiasts, but also therapists and health care workers seeking to give their clients accessible and relatable tools for coping and healing (McCreight, 2018; Mumbauer, 2017; Priego & Farthing, 2016). Art therapists have also recently turned toward the medium of sequential art as a way for their clients to deconstruct, narrate, and re-author traumas or difficult life experiences in a medium that transcends language and enters the realm of visual expression (Carlton, 2018; Mulholland, 2004). To understand the potential that comics have as a therapeutic tool, we must first examine the separate histories of both comics and narrative therapy, and how they have converged throughout recent years.

A brief history of comics. Visual methods of storytelling have been used since the first cave paintings created by early modern humans (Hoff, 1982; McCloud, 1993). Throughout history, visual imagery has accompanied the literary narrative as a way of enhancing the understanding and accessibility of stories and myths, of significant cultural events, or even to describe political commentary (Eisner, 1983; Hoff, 1982). The traditional comic format we have grown accustomed to seeing today began in the mid 19th century with the publication of the first picture-stories and multi-panel comics in newspapers and magazines (Eisner, 1983; McCloud, 1993). Monthly periodicals and published anthologies of comics soon became more popular among artists and audiences of all ages, but as their production increased, the accessibility of

these visual narratives was questioned (Arffman, 2019; Saguisag, 2019). The depiction of violence and sexual themes in a medium so accessible to youth began a backlash towards comics that would seek to limit and even prevent artists from exploring narratives that diverted from child-friendly material (McCloud, 1993; Saguisag, 2019).

Following the introduction of The Comics Code Authority by the Comics Magazine Association of America in 1954, a de-facto censorship act that provided publishers the power to screen for taboo subjects like sex, violence, and drug use, comic artists turned to an underground publishing scene to disseminate their work (Arffman, 2019; Spiegelman, 2011). This censorship act largely became a catalyst for a turning point in comics culture, "helping comic books grow out of their infancy" (Arffman, 2019, p. 193) and move past their identity as a product mainly for children (Saguisag; 2019). Artists like Robert Crumb and Art Spiegelman, founders of two separate but prolific underground publishing anthologies, *Weirdo* and *Raw* respectively, turned to their own personal histories as subjects, creating adult-oriented and experimental comic vignettes (Arffman, 2019; Saguisag, 2019). Spiegelman became a pioneer for the graphic memoir genre through the re-telling of his father's experience as a Holocaust survivor with his multi-volume work, *Maus* (1996), known for its creative depiction of the Germans as cats and the Jews as mice (Arffman, 2019; Orbán, 2007). Crumb, on the other hand, was infamous for his unabashed depictions of sex, violence, alcoholism, and drug use in his serialized works like *Fritz the Cat* (Arffman, 2019; Saguisag, 2019).

While perhaps unintentional, these literary and visual passages into the personal realm, alongside the introduction of previously untouched, taboo subjects, came to inspire an entire genre of autobiographical memoirs in comic form. Graphic novels and comics such as Julie Doucet's *My New York Diary* (1999), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2004), and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), to name a few, emerged to address topics of family trauma, mental illness, and the struggle of "growing up." Works like *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2004), which depicted Satrapi's childhood experiences growing up during the Iranian Islamic Revolution, presented an outlook into cultural experiences and traumas that were previously unknown to many Western readers, becoming an accessible way to introduce Middle Eastern experiences and politics to a younger audience (Priego & Farthing, 2016). Artists began to find solace in the act of telling their stories, and audiences likewise found comfort in witnessing their own histories reflected within these panels (McNicol, 2016; Moon & Falk, 2010).

Narrative therapy. Founded by therapists Michael White and David Epston, narrative therapy is an approach to psychotherapy that examines the inherent use of stories and narratives in defining and providing meaning to an individual's experiences and relationships (White & Epston, 1990). These stories are heavily influenced by the social systems an individual has lived in and engaged with over time, from one's immediate family to cultural community (Lorås et al., 2017; White & Epston, 1990). By separating the story from the individual, narrative therapy seeks to address and resolve conflicting and potentially harmful narratives by giving a client the ability to re-author their lives in a way that encourages autonomy and repair (White & Epston, 1990). Narrative therapy is one approach to systemic therapy, a model developed from the incorporation of constructivist theories in family therapy practice, introducing the belief that individuals make meaning of the world from their own points of reference (Lorås et al., 2017). This encouraged a move towards understanding situations from the client's perspective, rather than approaching from the perspective of the "expert therapist" (Dallos & Draper, 2015, p. 66). The later introduction of social constructionist notions in therapy furthered this, suggesting that individuals co-create meanings through their experiences and relationships with others (Lorås et al., 2017). In the context of narrative therapy, the languages and stories we use to construct our reality are influenced by the narratives of those around us, with the power structures of our systems playing a role in what stories are to be told. Meanings are therefore dependent on context and thus limited to our own experience, which led to abandoning the idea of a singular truth, or objective reality, visible to therapists (Dallos & Draper, 2015; Lorås et al., 2017; McNamee & Gergen, 1992). Practitioners began to question and take into account their personal biases and positions of power in relation to their clients and how this may influence the way their experiences are viewed and understood in therapy (Besley, 2002; Dallos & Draper, 2015; Lorås et al., 2017).

In the conception of narrative therapy, White drew heavily upon theories of social constructionism, and the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, on the inseparable nature of power and knowledge (Besley, 2002; White & Epston, 1990). Foucault's work centred heavily on the relationship that power has with knowledge, examining the ways that institutions of power control what is understood, accepted, and deemed as truth in society, specifically within the fields of education, criminal justice, and sexual politics (Besley, 2002; Combs & Freedman, 2012). Narrative therapy's approach to therapeutic intervention acknowledges Foucault's theory

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of power and knowledge by creating the concept of a "dominant narrative" from Foucault's view of "dominant knowledge" (White & Epston, 1990, p. 18; Combs & Freedman, 2012). Dominant narratives exist as stories we create about ourselves and others that take precedence and hold authority over other interpretations, and which often dictate the way we view certain circumstances and personal experiences (White & Epston, 1990). Narrative therapy aims to identify, challenge, and deconstruct problem-saturated dominant narratives through identifying alternative stories. This is done by recognising what White referred to the "unique outcomes" of one's experiences (White & Epston, 1990, p. 15), moments that subjugate power and provide us with another way of forming the story of our lives.

Narrative therapy follows a sequence of interventions which centre on externalizing the problem, deconstructing the narrative, and re-telling the story, keeping conscious of the power that the language and structure have in this re-telling process (Besley, 2002; Combs & Freedman, 2012; White & Epston, 1990). Re-authoring narratives can help a person understand what was occurring in their lives, how it happened and how they responded, and what meanings can be ascertained from the experience (Madigan, 2019). Art therapist Shirley Riley became an early adopter of social constructionist models and narrative approaches in art therapy, describing the space artwork occupies in therapy as neither "right nor wrong" (p. 284), leaving behind the notion of therapeutic insight and favouring instead a co-constructed "outsight" (p. 284) of the artwork shared by the client and therapist (Riley, 1997). As art therapists working within the framework of narrative therapy, adding another dimension to the re-authoring process through the incorporation of artwork and visual expression can thus add another element of therapeutic benefit (Carlton, 2018; McCreight, 2018; Mulholland, 2004). The inclusion of a visual medium in therapy can further help the client identify unique outcomes and re-author their story by representing elements that spoken language may not be able to grasp.

Storytelling methods of the graphic novel. As comics moved underground in the late 1950s, comic artists became more experimental with their methods of storytelling. Playing with components of visual literacy within their stories, artists began to create new and subtle ways of portraying concepts such as emotion, time, and meaning within their works (McCloud, 1993). In his book *Understanding Comics* (1993), comics artist Scott McCloud provides an in-depth look into the many literary and visual devices comics use, often differing from culture to culture. He creates a comprehensive exploration of how words and pictures interact to tell a story, and his

work remains an influential guide to critically examining comics as both a literary and visual art form. This use of "multi-literacies" (Hughes & King, 2010, p. 20) provides an added element to the impact of a comic's storytelling ability by encouraging readers to engage with the text in a completely new way.

One distinct component of McCloud's exploration of comics is the way he presents the medium's appreciation of the audience within the reading experience. McCloud (1993) refers to the audience as the "silent accomplice" (p. 68), filling in the gaps between the panels of a comic with personal assumptions and ways of meaning-making–a natural and automatic thing we do to maintain the flow of a story. Another distinct element affecting the method of narration in comics is focalization, a narrative concept examining the different levels of consciousness within a story (Horstkotte & Pedri, 2011; Koch, 2016). Focalization compares the narration of the story as it is understood by the reader with the mental processing of the story by a specific character or narrator (Horstkotte & Pedri, 2011). The use of visual metaphor, subtle cues in imagery and staging, and other multimodal content in the graphic narrative adds an element of focalization that heavily involves the reader in the construction of the narrative, allowing the presence of the audience to powerfully influence the story being told (Horstkotte & Pedri, 2011; Koch, 2016).

Alongside the presence of the audience, an artist must also face their own presence within the story, as they repeatedly engage with depictions of themselves and their experiences on each page (Koch, 2016). Dodds' (2019) article on authenticity discusses how authors depict truth in graphic novel memoirs, and what authenticity means when retelling a story that is so reliant on memory. Should artists attempt to recreate this "vanished world" (p. 10) as authentically as possible, or do they acknowledge that the story has been reframed through the "prism of one's present" (Dodds, 2011, p. 10)? Art Spiegelman (2011), when writing about his work on *Maus* (1996), argues that authenticity is not achievable–that the ways in which an author depicts their memory become an essential part of the story they are telling. Spiegelman's task of depicting his father's experiences in *Maus* (1996) is reflected in Alison Bechdel's desire to share her father's history in her own graphic memoir, *Fun Home* (2006). The meaning of authenticity in both these works signifies the author's lived experience and understandings, their own personal truths (Dean-Ruzicka, 2013; Spiegelman, 2011). In addition, if an author chooses to disregard a certain element of the story, the significance of that omission could potentially be even more impactful

than its depiction: "[the] gaps in autobiography are necessitated by what is not known, what is forgotten, and what is untellable" (Kyler, 2011, p. 17).

Reading graphic novels within a therapeutic context. There are currently several ways to incorporate sequential art and the graphic narrative into the therapeutic space. The first is through bibliotherapy, an approach often used by counsellors and mental health professionals when working with adolescents and young adults (Mumbauer, 2017). Bibliotherapy uses literature, television, film, or other popular media to provide psychoeducation and support, often given in conjunction with traditional talk therapy or counselling (Drew, 2016; McDonnell, 2014). In an article introducing the concept of mental health literacy in academic settings, Mumbauer (2017) describes the mental health education and coping skills found within these books as having significant benefits on protective factors in youth, such as reducing drop-out rates in later school years. Bibliotherapy also provides an accessible way for marginalized and oppressed populations with limited resources to gain access to mental health support (McDonnell, 2014; Mumbauer, 2017).

Researchers like Priego and Farthing (2016) explore the benefits of mental health literacy through the use of "graphic medicine" (p. 1): the incorporation of mental health-related graphic memoirs and comics within the clinical setting. By sharing stories of personal health in comic-form, these graphic narratives can provide an educational resource for a client and their support system in the wake of a mental health diagnosis. It also gives clinicians and health practitioners the potential to better understand the experience of illness through the perspective of the client (McNicol, 2016). This prompts the potential for a critical examination of clinician's own biases and personal views, deepening their understanding of a diagnosis and how it affects their clients (McNicol, 2016; Priego & Farthing, 2016; Squier, 2015). Priego and Farthing's (2016) work also helped identify the challenges that the field of comics research faces, likely due to the stigma still associated with comics even years after the genre has grown out of its counter-culture roots.

Creating sequential art as a therapeutic intervention. Another method of using the graphic narrative in a therapeutic context is through the creation of sequential art as an art therapy intervention. Despite the growing attention given to graphic novels as a bibliotherapeutic tool, there are fewer resources available regarding the actual creation of graphic novels in a therapeutic setting (Drew, 2016; McDonnell, 2014;). McCreight (2018) is one of the mental health practitioners who seek to use comics and graphic novels beyond bibliotherapy. In this

article, he describes inviting his clients to create comics, giving them a space to externalize their problems and find containment within the panels of their comic sequence, "allowing [them] to approach the issue with a feeling of control or mastery that might elude them otherwise" (McCreight, 2018, p. 38). A specific intervention of his was to request the client to create characters based on an inner conflict they may have and draw out the dialogue that would occur between these two figurative representations (McCreight, 2018). As another therapeutic intervention, Drew (2016) writes about creating comics with adolescent clients as a way to address harmful life scripts in a distanced way, working towards repairing negative patterns of behaviour. Through addressing what is going on within the comic, therapists can engage clients in discussions about material that may otherwise have been too sensitive or anxiety-provoking to approach at the time (Drew, 2016). Although operating from an art education background, Mulholland (2004) had a similar encounter with the therapeutic nature of comics creation within his own artistic practice, his experience reinforcing many of the observations addressed above. Mulholland describes creating comics throughout his life that unknowingly confronted emotions he experienced during adolescence and life transitions, such as moving away from home and entering college (2018, p. 42). Characters experienced certain conflicts that paralleled his own, allowing him to work through challenges and play with resolutions within the bounds of the comic, providing comfort and a sense of agency over his situation (Mulholland, 2004). Sequential art and longer graphic narratives created with clients can also have benefits that extend long after their initial creation, as Carlton (2018) found when working with comics in her therapy practice. She recounts one client with whom she worked for two years creating a 68-page graphic novel that she found helpful to reread and reference as a resource for herself in her later life, even outside of therapy (Carlton, 2018, p. 121).

      Comics as a medium for heuristic arts exploration. By exploring the ways that the creation of a graphic novel can be used to re-story a narrative through a first-hand, heuristic experience, a more intentional and informed analysis can be performed that differs from looking at graphic novels already created by those not in the profession of art therapy. Furthermore, as growing therapists, the importance of self-reflection and understanding is crucial to an ethical and successful practice. It is normal for therapists to feel "overwhelmed, incompetent and self-doubting," (Parry & Doan, p. 191) especially when new to the field or when working under another, more experienced therapist. But regardless of age or experience, it is important for

therapists to look inwards and reflect on how their own narratives may affect their practice, and Parry and Doan (1994) show that narrative therapy can be a successful tool in addressing and re-visiting a therapists' own internal stories. Similarly, many art therapists take to artmaking as a tool for professional processing, supervision, and research (Fish, 2019; Leavy, 2015; Wadeson, 2003). Wadeson (2003) describes artmaking for professional processing as helping to nurture our "reflection, insight, understanding, and problem-solving around work with our clients" (p. 208). These benefits are not restricted to just response work. Barbara Fish, an art therapist with an extensive background on the benefits of response art, arts-based supervision, and arts-based research, has encouraged art therapists to engage with artmaking in order to "uncover strengths, possibilities and choices that are beyond our conscious knowing" (Fish, 2019, p. 130). Creating artwork with the aim of self-reflection and understanding can improve our capacity for empathy for others and inform us of transference and countertransference within the therapeutic alliance (Fish, 2019; Moon, 2001; Wadeson, 2003). In a chapter entitled "Comic Books, Connection, and the Artist Identity," art therapist Cathy Moon (Moon & Lucas-Falk, 2010) describes that the use of comics as a self-healing tool is rising "naturally within contemporary society… [and that it offers]… a compelling argument for its inclusion as a medium in art therapy" (p. 233). The various opportunities for personal growth that arise from artmaking can provide incredible benefits for an art therapist's capacity for empathy and self-understanding, thus allowing them to better understand and empathize with the experiences of their clients in turn.

Methodology

The following research is guided by two central questions. First, how does the act of drawing out a story reframe one's own personal narrative in a way that promotes healing and resilience? Second, in what ways do sequential art and graphic novel storytelling methods contribute to the therapeutic success of the retelling process? To answer these questions, this research process is informed by a heuristic, arts-based methodology. Moustakas (1990) describes heuristic inquiry as a process that "begins with the internal search to discover, with an encompassing puzzlement, (…) a devotion and commitment to pursue a question that is strongly connected to one's own identity and selfhood" (p. 39). Rather than seeking to determine a cause-effect relationship, heuristic inquiry aims to discover the meaning and experience of a certain phenomenon through the direct contact of said phenomenon via first-person experience (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). The search parameters for the sources used in this research paper

were broadened to account for the multimodal nature of comics as a genre and its relative novelty as a therapeutic medium. Search terms included a combination of "art therapy" and "narrative therapy" with words like "comic," "graphic novel," and "sequential art," and terms applying to graphic novels within an institutional setting, such as "bibliotherapy" and "graphic medicine." Sources were gathered from both social science and psychology databases (EBSCO, Elsevier, Taylor & Francis, SAGE) as well as databases involving clinical medicine (PubMed) and literary journals (JSTOR). An understanding of the history of comics was also relevant for the conduction of this research, as it provided contextual information on both the strengths of this medium as a therapeutic tool and the challenges it faces by having strong foundational roots in counterculture. The decision to approach the research from a heuristic standpoint has been informed by my personal connection with illustration and appreciation of comics and graphic novels since adolescence. Since these questions seek to inform arts-based therapeutic interventions, the choice was made to incorporate arts-based inquiry into the heuristic research process by creating a short graphic novel to provide the data for the research. This will serve to provide a deeper understanding of the therapeutic effects of the retelling process.

The heuristic arts-based process. Leavy (2015) writes that using an arts-based approach in research must be justified by showing that its use would provide results or insight otherwise unattainable by other means. She describes the advantage of an arts-based approach as providing the potential for a "created perspective" (p. 224) to be told through visual imagery, something that may not always be possible through mere literary methods of telling (Leavy, 2015). An arts-based approach to research aptly complements Moustakas' (1990) method of heuristic inquiry, which he developed upon conducting his own research on loneliness. Moustakas distilled his method of heuristic inquiry into six phases: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and finally, creative synthesis. These phases may not always manifest in a linear fashion and can occur cyclically as the researcher oscillates between engaging with and retreating from different material during the research process (Kapitan, 2018). The next sections will go over my methods of adherence to these six phases of heuristic inquiry.

Initial engagement. Moustakas (1990) describes this beginning phase as the moment when a researcher discovers "an intense interest, a passionate concern (…), one that holds important social meanings and personal, compelling implications" (p. 26). This is the initial spark that ignites the start of heuristic inquiry, leading to a defined and clarified question. In this

case, my desire to combine art therapy with my passion for illustration and comics led me to my topic, seeking to understand and share the therapeutic benefits of my own engagement with this medium.

Immersion. The next phase involves a total absorption of the researcher into the research material. Moustakas writes that the researcher "lives the question in waking, sleeping, and even dream states" (1990, p. 26). This immersion allows the researcher to become closely connected with the question, exploring it further through methods of self-dialogue and discoveries of deep knowledge, finding new ways to think about the material. During this phase, I elaborated on my literature review, engaging in discussions with others who have experience with creating comics, and most importantly exploring the medium itself. This involved reading graphic novels, taking notes on the ways that other creators have demonstrated certain themes or story-telling elements, and engaging with the coming-of-age genre that my story resides in.

Incubation. This phase involves retreating from the material to allow for new ideas and concepts to come forth. It is a necessary part of the process that, although halting the researcher's active seeking, gives the planted seed of their research "silent nourishment, support, and care that produces a creative awareness" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 27). During this phase, I took frequent breaks from my research process, allowing my mind the respite it needed before beginning to delve deeply into the creation of my story.

Illumination. Moustakas (1990) describes the illumination phase as the "eureka moment" (p. 27), caused by the receptive state of mind created by the previous phase. This phase, as well as the one before it and the one afterward, was repeated throughout the process of my graphic novel creation, as I created and added to my graphic novel, took a step back, and then reengaged with the material to find new meanings and themes in my work. In a written critique and commentary on Moustakas' heuristic method, Sela-Smith (2002) describes these periods of pendulation as waves of illumination, a process that occurs over time.

Explication. This phase begins the procedure of extracting and unfolding the themes and data that have come through in the illumination process (Moustakas, 1990). This also includes accepting any new unforeseen themes to be examined. A comprehensive representation of the material is distilled from the findings of the research in preparation for the researcher to "put them together into a whole experience (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28). I also returned to this phase

multiple times throughout my creative process, as new themes and data came to me during my illustration, analysis, and finalization process.

Creative synthesis. This is the last phase of heuristic inquiry, which involves combining all of the previous work into a final culmination of research. Moustakas (1990) writes that this may manifest as a narrative depiction of results and conclusions, but also can appear in the form of poetry, literature, music, painting, or another creative representation. The creative synthesis represents my final graphic novel piece as a whole and includes the process of finalizing my discussion and my artwork, creating a cover, and fully completing my comic.

Data collection and analysis. Data collection occurred during the creation of my own short graphic novel, or novella. This graphic novel depicts a moment in my childhood when I moved into the suburbs from the city, and changing my social and geographical landscape affected my identity formation as an adolescent. The creative process took me through the multiple phases of heuristic inquiry, many being cyclical and occurring more than once (Moustakas, 1990; Kapitan, 2018). First, a rough script of the story was created, followed by several sketches of major scenes that stood out to me upon my reflection of this time. These scenes were woven together as I sketched the panels of each page and incorporated my script. I created field notes about my experience throughout the more detailed illustration process of lining and cleaning up my artwork, noting any emerging insights and themes. These observations were responsible for the final direction of the narrative as I worked through my retelling process, incorporating an emerging alternative storyline in my final work. Sela-Smith (2002) defines this part of heuristic inquiry as a process of the researcher's self-transformation, which is then transmitted as a story to the reader, listener, or viewer. The analysis of the data concluded with a final overview of the graphic novella and my field notes, consolidating the visual and literary ways that the entire creative process affected the understanding of my experience, and how the artmaking contributed to a transformation of the narrative, however big or small.

Limitations, reliability, and validity. Though there may be some elements of this material that others identify with, I must acknowledge that my experience with the research material is not universal, given that the nature of heuristic research is particular to the individual. The nature of arts-based research often risks the potential for self-absorption into the material– and the presence of solipsism, according to Kapitan (2018), is the biggest threat to the validity of any heuristic research. This can be combatted by incorporating self-reflexivity into the research

process, a way of examining one's biases and assumptions by situating oneself in a context of intersecting principals such as socioeconomic status, gender, race, sexuality, ability, and the privileges that may come along with any of these social locators (Talwar, 2010; Kapitan, 2011; Leavy, 2015). By intentionally incorporating reflexivity in my field notes, I am able to maintain validity in my research while simultaneously preserving authenticity in my process—another key factor in maintaining the validity of heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990; Sela-Smith, 2002). Adhering to the six phases of heuristic inquiry as defined by Moustakas (1990) ensures that the method of my data collection and analysis demonstrates reliability despite the nature of this research being conducted through lived experience.

Ethical considerations. Considering the autobiographical nature of my graphic novella, I depict scenes of my adolescence that involve the stories and identities of others. In the spirit of respecting anonymity, backgrounds, names, and certain qualities of characters in the story are altered and fictionalized. As both a researcher and participant, I also acknowledge that parts of my personal reflections and explorations will become available when my graduate research project has been put on the public server linked to my university. For this reason, I have picked a point in my life that is transitional and formative, but not significantly personal, negative, or traumatic. The choice of which personal coming-of-age moments to explore in my research process was done in consideration of the public nature of the final results. While it was an option to share the complete graphic novella on Spectrum, Concordia University's open-access research database, I have decided to pursue other means of publishing that can allow the work to reach a larger audience, in print-form or virtually.

Findings

A story is a letter that the author writes to himself, to tell himself things that he would be unable to discover otherwise.

- *Carlos Ruiz Zafón, The Shadow of the Wind*

Feelings of anticipation, uncertainty, and insecurity struck me at the beginning of this research process. I began to realize how truly personal this heuristic inquiry would be, even though I thought I had been mindful to pick a period of my life that was not particularly difficult to re-live. I was overcome with feelings reminiscent of the ones I felt when I first stepped onto the courtyard of my new elementary school—the very same period of my adolescence my comic was about to explore. Suddenly I was eleven years old again, in unknown territory, unsure of

what to expect or how to prepare myself for it. What was I doing? Who was I trying to be? How did I think this could possibly go well? And, honestly… what would other people think? Sitting with these feelings and questions, "acknowledging my vulnerability" (p. 50), was an important step toward beginning my creative process, and an important factor in preparing myself for this personal exploration (Brown, 2006). Any potential shame, doubt, uncertainty, and insecurity I would feel during this creative process could be better dealt with through this acknowledgement of vulnerability (Brown, 2006).

Kapitan (2011) warns researchers against the dangers of getting caught in the "heuristic swamp" (p. 196), a drift towards solipsistic self-immersion that is a common threat when using personal exploration in research. She advises that researchers clarify their purpose and create a solid frame for research before beginning the deep dive (Kapitan, 2011). This is the advice I followed throughout my research, informing the approach I chose to write and illustrate my graphic novella. Through navigating a dance between distance and intimacy with my work, I was able to engage in my findings and maintain a level of reflexivity and objectivity in collecting my data. Applied narrative approaches in art therapy also provided a solid frame for this exploration, as the objective of creatively finding new outcomes and meanings to old "non-productive" stories through artmaking is a clear goal when working therapeutically (Riley, 1997, p. 282). Similar to how narrative therapists approach the stories their clients first bring to them, it was important that I asked myself what my reasons were for retelling these moments, and what I hoped would come from it (Duvall & Béres, 2011). This chapter presents a collection of findings and observations throughout each phase of the creative and narrative process.

The First Images

Beginning the process of mapping out my graphic novella, I first drew a series of ten images. These images illustrated moments that I remembered sharply from this period—the particular memories that surfaced the most when reflecting on this year. For example, a memory of hiding in a bathroom with my music Walkman while my sixth-grade teacher made the entire school leave the building for lunchtime. Or, the feeling of dyeing my hair black after convincing my parents to let me change my hair colour for Halloween (although this dark colour would end up sticking around for much longer). Exploring these memories through single moments helped to ground my experience and provide a framework for where I wanted the exploration to go— important anchors from which to navigate the rest of my creative process (see Figure 1). After

creating these images, I also engaged with other coming-of-age graphic memoirs and literature about comics creation and narrative therapy in order to inform my process and initiate the *incubation* phase of my research (Moustakas, 1990).

Figure 1.

Images that came from initial memories.

From Moments to a Story

Once I felt ready to continue my creative process, I developed a soft storyline that would guide me through the act of re-telling, using the images I had first created as points of reference. I explored the timeline of my story and asked myself what I was trying to accomplish by sharing it. I thought of the ways that these experiences changed who I thought I was and how it defined me later on in my adolescence—and in many ways, how those moments have left their imprint on me today. When looking at the broader picture of my adolescence, the events of this year were very much a precursor to what later would be a struggle with depression and anxiety in my

teenage years. After moving to a new town and experiencing a new depth to the shyness I had always struggled with, the soft-spoken side of my personality became a large part of my identity. I leaned toward extreme introversion, becoming more silent and more reserved throughout the years following the move. I thought of my desire to blend in with the background, gravitating toward wallflower-esque habits and ways of expressing myself, and I questioned when and how these changes happened. As I began to storyboard, sketch, and illustrate my novella, the re-telling process uncovered certain moments where meanings and interpretations of events could change, adopting a new life and importance of their own.

Filling in the Gaps

Through this process of externalization, alternative ways of interpreting my experience began to emerge within my story. With the addition of narrative and context, as well as my own hindsight, certain memories began to shift and take on new meaning. This was moved along by my efforts to stay reflexive in my process. In order to gain perspective and maintain distance, I took frequent breaks to set aside my work, shared my process with others to provide moments of triangulation, and continuously reminded myself of the research questions I had initially set out to explore. This prevented my research from spiralling in a self-referential vacuum, allowing me to see what ways my individual experience was influencing the research process, and what changes and distortions were beginning to form in my story. While helping to anchor my experience, the slow process of illustrating each page also provided moments of intuition and alternative ways of knowing (Kapitan, 2011). Through stepping in and out of my role as an artist and a witness, I began to notice unique outcomes emerging, and times when my chosen ongoing narrative began to adopt new and different meanings. After the storyboarding and sketching phases, the process of outlining the final piece and integrating my narration provided me with a different way to witness my work. This created an opportunity to realize and understand certain elements of my story that I may have missed during my initial phases, and the surfacing of an alternative storyline.

The absence of my voice. While there was a consistent thread of my present, real-time voice through the narration process, upon looking over the drafts of my pages I noticed I had not given much of voice to my eleven-year-old self. The only times I had referenced her speech were in panels showing her interaction with friends online, through typed instant-message or forum text. I realized that I had embodied the view of myself as a soft, silent person, and relied on using

the voice of myself as a narrator to speak for my past self (see Figure 2). The girl who never speaks in class also became the girl who never spoke in my comic.
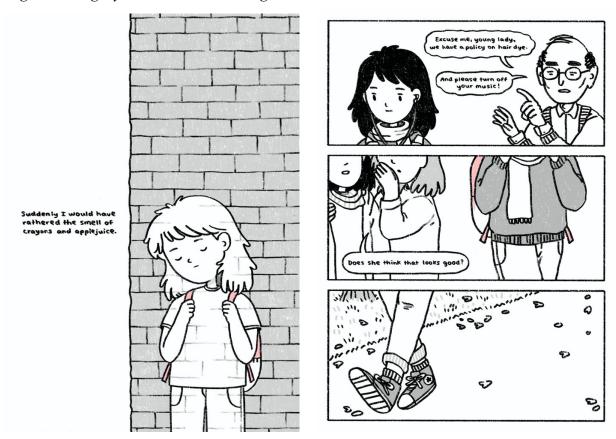
Figure 2.

Images featuring my lack of voice.

The presence of unseen support. In most of the panels, my adolescent-self interacting with friends and family, seeking connection or support from others, the "other" was left unseen. The loving and supportive words of friends were illustrated through the speaker of a telephone, the typed text of a message on my laptop, or through a speech bubble belonging to a figure off-panel (also shown in Figure 2). In a similar vein, the panels depicting my interaction with peers at school emphasized my isolation or feeling otherness often through the use of empty space, while panels showing my interaction with my long-distance friends have full backgrounds, often featuring their words in the background, showing myself literally surrounded by support. These depictions juxtapose the feelings of closeness that I felt toward the friends I had who were far away with the remoteness and isolation I felt from the peers I saw nearly daily.

Figure 3.

Images showing my inner and outer changes.

The change of my appearance. As the comic continues to guide the reader through the seasons of my sixth year of elementary school, my appearance began to change in ways that I had initially thought were contributing to my identity as a "wallflower": my clothes got baggier, my hair was dyed black and taking over more and more of my face, my wardrobe became some shade of dark gray. During the process of sketching and colouring, though, I began to notice that the ways that I changed my appearance actually had the reverse effect: I stood out in the panels, occupying more space and colour than I had at the beginning of the novella (see Figure 3). Rather than melt into the background, I inadvertently reflected my inner feelings of otherness through my outward appearance. Through this, I realized how important controlling and changing my physical appearance was for me in adolescence. Changing my appearance gave me an outlet for reflecting my inner feelings about being different, and this gave me the confidence

and the strength to embrace my individuality at a developmental time when appearances and identity are so important.

The re-storying process shed light on the protective factors of my life: my love for fictional worlds, my online relationships, my supportive parents, and the incredible impact artmaking had on my wellbeing. The process allowed a problem-saturated dominant narrative to be externalized (White & Epston, 1990), and thus gave visibility to unique outcomes when I felt strong and resilient, giving me an opportunity explore and expand on moments when my softness was not a weakness, but a strength and a positive part of who I was. Reinterpreting, or "creatively eliminating" (Riley, 1997, p. 284) my understanding of this year changed the ending of my narrative, something I had not wholly anticipated at the start of this research. Before my eyes, the story about a young girl being bullied in elementary school changed into a story about a young girl finding strength in her softness.

Discussion

In a book written during the growth of narrative therapy as an applied therapeutic approach, psychotherapists Jill Freedman and Gene Combs (1996) state that "transformative stories are performed stories" (p. 87). The act of performing can often bring visibility to previously unseen or unnoticed circumstances in which we acted against or in spite of problem-saturated stories that dominated our lives, exceptional moments that narrative therapists refer to as "unique outcomes" (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Madigan, 2019; White & Epston, 1990). Michael White and David Epston (1990) created narrative therapy with this idea in mind–that therapists can act as the co-constructors of their client's preferred stories, stories free from dominant narratives that are oppressive, destructive, or problem-saturated. This is accomplished by identifying moments of strength, resistance, or resilience, and using them as entry points to create alternative ways of storying our lives (White & Epston, 1990). The externalization of a story through the act of performative re-telling brings forth an opportunity for a transformation of the narrative (Duvall & Béres, 2011; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Madigan, 2019).

Lived experiences can be more easily pieced into linear stories or narratives, thus better facilitating change, by incorporating another medium of performance in the therapeutic space in addition to the usual conversational recounting of talk therapy (White & Epston, 1990). White and Epston used the intervention of letter-writing with his clients as a way to demonstrate the benefit of externalizing through another medium (White & Epston, 1990). This is where the field

of creative arts therapies rises to meet and complement narrative therapy practice so well, as the natural incorporation of another expressive medium gives more opportunity for the client and the therapist to witness, engage with, and change a client's storied universe (Kottler, 2015; McCreight, 2018; Mulholland, 2004). Kottler (2015) writes that where "ordinary language cannot do justice to traumatic stories, alternative or extraordinary language can do the job" (p. 166), referring to the language of play, music, dance, drama, poetry, and artmaking. Experiences that are often difficult to verbally recount have a new potential for expression through the use of creative arts therapies (Malchiodi, 2003).

Comics and sequential art have an exceptional ability to transmit multiple messages and meanings through their inherently creative, flexible, and multisensory nature. With comics, there is no singular way to depict an idea, person, emotion, setting, or passage of time (McCloud, 1993). It offers near-limitless ways of expression while providing the containment of a panel or page, and so much of its meaning is dependent not only on the creator's linguistic or artistic choices but on the direct experience the reader has with the comic as a witness (McCloud, 1993; McNicol, 2016). The ambiguous nature of comics allows for its ability to "capture [a] diversity of experiences" (McNicol, 2016, p. 21) and we have seen this with the multitude of subjects that comics are able to explore. My research set out to examine the place that graphic narratives occupy in the therapeutic retelling process given their remarkable ability to convey and transform meaning, and in doing so, I allowed myself to confront my own limiting narratives. While this experience was a self-explorative process and inherently different than the type of work done in a therapeutic relationship, this exploration can reveal some of the potential this intervention has if applied in a therapeutic setting.

The Tools of Re-Storying

The various literary and visual storytelling devices used by comic creators became my tools of expression, translating and witnessing my narrative when I used them to illustrate my own graphic memoir. Throughout my creative process and onward, after taking breaks to pause, step away, and return to engage with my work, I noticed the creative choices I was making corresponded to significant areas to explore according to narrative therapy. The following illustrates the ways that some elements of storytelling in comics can reflect and facilitate the witnessing of significant areas of exploration in narrative therapy.

Words, narration, and speech. McCloud (1993) extends the definition of language in comics past words and letters to also include pictures and icons, combined through creative uses of narration, speech and thought bubbles, and onomatopoeia. McCloud (1993) describes the common need for "unified language" (p. 49) involving the separation of images and words, but in many ways, comics show how both can be reconciled, working synergistically to move a story forward. Kottler (2015) also emphasizes the importance of language in the storytelling process with clients, noting that choice of third versus first person and past or present tense can indicate the level of distance the client feels from the described situation, or how present the feelings still are within them (p. 154). White and Epston (1999) remark on the significance of language as a culturally dependent map that represents the way we speak to our own selves and experiences. The method of illustrating dialogue between characters, depicting the voice of a narrator, or simply the use of language and words in comics in general all have similar importance.

Panels and the in-between. The way that a creator organizes a page and chooses to use panels to guide the reader's interaction with a story are important tools for storytelling. McCloud (1993) takes this further by indicating the importance of what occurs between the panels, arguing that, at times, this may be even more important. Panels can indicate a passage of time, a change of landscape, an introduction of a new idea, or the continuation of an old one. Elements such as steam coming from a pot of boiling stew or the sound of chopping a carrot can be confined to single panels, but in a page depicting a scene of a woman preparing dinner, our minds have a way of continuing these sounds and smells past their confinements and into the whole story, creating a multi-sensory experience (McCloud, 1993). Elements of the story that are left unsaid, panels left blank or pages with remarkably less detail have a powerful impact on the storytelling experience, sometimes more so than if their extensive detail had been included (Dodds, 2019; McCloud, 1993). Likewise, in the therapeutic setting, Kottler (2015) indicates that details left out of a story can hold a massive weight of significance on the re-telling experience. He encourages therapists to note when an overt amount of detail is used to tell a story versus when barely any is used, indicating that the importance of detail extends far beyond whether a person remembers it well or not and can speak to a trauma response, fragmentation or dissociation (Kottler, 2015).

Witnessing. McCloud (1993) argues that "every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice, an equal partner in crime known as the reader" (p. 68). Comics are created with an audience in mind, this is inherent in the medium—the

presence of the reader greatly affecting the way a story is presented on each page. When artmaking is brought into the therapeutic space, allowing for externalization into a tangible object, movement, or process, it can give the client the opportunity to witness themselves through their own artmaking (Rubin, 2016; Moon & Falk, 2010). White and Epston (1999) also write about the value of witnessing in narrative therapy, along with the concept of introducing "external audiences" (p. 17) to new stories through the act of performance. This is a way to encourage the endurance of an alternative storyline, ensuring the revision of the story becomes the new narrative (White & Epston, 1999). By externalizing my narrative into comic-form, I was able to become my own "silent accomplice" (McCloud, 1993, p. 68), experiencing my story in a different light, and thus better able to point out unique outcomes and alternative possibilities. It provided me with an opportunity to distance myself and witness my own experience in a totally new way, while giving me the tools to actively change the way I wanted my story to be written. Simultaneously, the act of performing my new narrative in such a way allowed me to engage with my audience and figurative readers, thus facilitating the permanence of my new outlook.

Implications

Further research into the use of comics creation in therapeutic settings is still needed in order to explore and understand the full capacity that sequential art can have on the re-storying process, especially when explored through a narrative therapy lens. This must be emphasized in the context of this research paper as well, due to the nature of this exploration taking place outside of a therapeutic setting. Much of the current applied research has focused on using comics creation and sequential art when working with adolescents and youth, likely due to the misconception that comics are a genre popular among this population only. In recent years, following the change of zeitgeist and the growing popularity of graphic novels, comics are flourishing as a medium (Smith et. al, 2011; Peltz, 2013). This evolving understanding of what comics consist of, how they can be as simplistic, ambiguous, abstract as we want them to be (Eisner, 1985; McCloud, 1993), can hopefully encourage practitioners to use comics creation in populations that may have not been considered previously. This includes but is not limited to older adults, seniors, families, disabled populations, and, in general, clients who may not define themselves as "artistically-inclined". One way this can be accomplished is by introducing the client to avant-garde artists who have used sequential art and illustration in unconventional ways. Stevie Smith's (1983) collected book of poems or, more recently, Liana Finck's graphic memoir

Passing for Human (2018), both feature drawings in styles that are awkward, uncanny, scribbly or imperfect, unlike most other published illustrations. Similarly, by adjusting the use of words, symbols, and metaphors, comics provide a flexible modality of expression that has the ability to meet an individual where they are at linguistically. The adaptability of comics as a visual and literary medium can provide a promising and accessible intervention for art therapists working with neurodivergent clients and clients coming from a range of backgrounds and abilities.

While the outcomes of this research primarily focus on the impact of creating comics and sequential art in the therapeutic space, it has also addressed the benefits of using comics in the therapeutic or clinical setting as reading material. Therapeutic witnessing acts as a key element to the successful practice of narrative therapy and art psychotherapy (Malchiodi, 2003; White & Epston, 1990), and the value of witnessing oneself within a story is one benefit to reading and engaging with comics in the therapeutic space (Mumbauer, 2017). The ambiguity that McCloud (1993) attributes to comics, the common simplicity of cartoon styles, are what allow the reader to easily relate to characters and see qualities of themselves within them: "The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled, an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm […], we don't just observe the cartoon, we become it" (p. 36). The messages that comics and graphic novels deliver are thus meant to be interpreted differently depending on the reader. By witnessing others with similar experiences, challenges, traumas, and heartbreaks we are able to be witnessed in a way that, while entirely different than being witnessed by a therapist, is still significantly healing and reparative (Mulholland, 2004). It also serves as an argument to the universality of human experience. Young adults may resonate with coming-of-age comics through relative proximity of age or experience, while older adults and seniors may see subjects within these comics that can reframe earlier experiences they remember from youth. Given its availability through stores, libraries, and online resources, comics can also surpass the barrier of accessibility that often limits who, how, and when individuals can receive mental health support (Mumbauer, 2017; Priego & Farthing, 2016). Further research may seek to explore the ways that marginalized populations with limited access to mental health resources can use graphic narratives and comics as a powerful tool for mental health literacy and support.

Limitations

This research follows the experience of myself, the researcher. Given the nature of arts-based heuristic research, the value of incorporating subjective, direct, lived experience has its

limitations given that my experience is different from so many others (Kapitan, 2018). There is a potential for self-absorption given the level of personal engagement involved and practices of reflexivity has been important in order to maintain the validity of this research. My history with comics, being an avid reader of this medium for many years, may have resulted in an increased level of literacy concerning the combination of words and illustration, using panelling and metaphor, and other literary devices common to this modality. Similarly, my illustration background and my relative comfort with expressing myself through artwork may affect the results of this research if applied to other populations. Being an appreciator of graphic novels made the process of creating my own comic more challenging at times, since easily accessible sources for inspiration became opportunities for comparison and disappointment. As this was my first attempt at a graphic novel of any kind, it was difficult not to compare my work to the work of artists I admire. An avid reader of comics or an experienced illustrator may find it more challenging to fully engage with comics creation as a therapeutic intervention for this reason.

It is also important to consider the limitations of this research surrounding the subject matter of my graphic novella. By choosing to depict a time in my life that I felt comfortable sharing with my peers and academic supervisors, I have limited the results of this research. The application of comics creation in a therapeutic setting where stories of trauma, grief, or abuse are being retold by clients may make the use of this medium encounter challenges that I have not experienced during my inquiry. This is also largely influenced by my privilege as a young White woman engaging with comics in Western society, where experiences of oppression and systemic violence have not been a strong part of my personal narrative. Given narrative therapy's history as an approach addressing social justice (Combs & Freedman, 2012; Duvall & Béres, 2011; Madigan, 2019) the use of comics creation with marginalized populations remains promising despite this limitation. Finally, this research involved the creation of a comic as a personal exploration over a limited time and did not occur within the frame of a therapeutic setting. Any therapeutic benefits, or level of insight and personal knowledge obtained in this process, would be subject to change if this exploration had occurred during the ongoing process of therapy.

Conclusion

Whether these images have been carved in stone, painted on walls, etched in paper, or found while we are browsing social media on our phones, comics can engage us as a medium that transcends what is visible and expressible (McCloud, 2003). Comics and graphic narratives

provide us with a possibility to communicate and translate what can be difficult to put into words alone, making them a precious medium for personal exploration. In recent years, comics have succeeded in shedding much of their past misperception as a brain-rotting, violent and infantile medium (Arffman, 2019) and instead have begun to occupy spaces in the field of therapy and mental health literacy (Priego & Farthing, 2016). The use of sequential art and comics in art therapy practice has been used as a way to explore themes of identity, family history, mental health, and trauma. When combined with narrative therapy practice, the visual and literary elements of creating a comic can scaffold a client's ability to address harmful narratives and reframe experiences in a different light, providing healing and resilience. This experience, though personal and brief, provided a level of insight I had not anticipated when I first embarked on this creative journey. Future research into the benefits of engaging with and creating comics in a therapeutic setting is still necessary, and I hope that my research will be one more voice in advocating for its use. I hope to use this experience to create more comics, use them as a material and intervention in my therapy practice, and allow others to experience the potential comics have to witness, express, and understand the human experience.

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