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The Drawn-Out Battle Against Stigma: Mental Health in Modern American Comics and Graphic Novels

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The drawn-out battle against stigma: Mental health in modern American comics and graphic

novels

This paper will discuss the potential of comics and graphic novels in de-stigmatizing and

educating the public about mental health issues. Popular comics in America have been criticized

for perpetuating misinformed stereotypes about mental illnesses and worsening the stigma at-

tached to them. However, they also have the potential to mitigate stigma. Recently, mental illness

has emerged as a focused topic for graphic novels and comics in the United States, United King-

dom and Canada in the past decade, in both fictional stories and personal accounts of mental ill-

ness. By analyzing three examples of comics or graphic novels where mental health issues are

portrayed sympathetically, I will argue that this medium is well-equipped for educating the pub-

lic about mental health, and can even perform therapeutic functions for mental health patients.

Mental illness and stigma in the United States

According to *Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General*, "Mental illness is the

term that refers collectively to all diagnosable mental disorders. Mental disorders are health con-

ditions that are characterized by alterations in thinking, mood, or behavior (or some combination

thereof) associated with distress and/or impaired functioning."[1] The mental hygiene movement

in the United States arose in the beginning of the twentieth century, aiming to prevent mental ill-

ness, spur psychiatric research and educate the public. By World War I, the National Committee

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[1] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General*. (Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Mental Health, 1999.)

for Mental Hygiene had begun to focus on mental health problems in the armed services.[2] In

1943, the War Department Technical Bulletin, Medical 203 was published. It was the predecessor

to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), published by the American

Psychiatric Association in 1952.[3] Since then, the DSM has been revised a few times to reflect

advances in psychiatry. The mental hygiene movement was eventually incorporated into main-

stream psychiatry by the 1960s.[4] However, even though the existence and nature of mental dis-

orders are recognized, mental health issues are still stigmatized, impeding people from getting

the care they need. Stereotypes reinforce misunderstandings, such as the assumption that mental

health patients are violent or somehow dangerous. Public education is still needed to correct mis-

conceptions and increase awareness that mental health disorders are treatable.[5]

Comics and mental health stereotypes

As with any other form of media, comics can reinforce negative mental health stereo-

types. In the *Batman* series of DC Comics, villains' characteristics are wrongly described with

the terminology of mental disorders: Two-Face's split personality is wrongly attributed to

schizophrenia, and the Joker is called "psychotic", although his behavior is more accurately de-

scribed as "psychopathic". In a recent op-ed in the New York Times, three psychiatrists called on

DC Comics, one of the largest producers of American comic books, to correct their depictions of

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[2] Wallace Mandell, John Hopkins University, "The Realization of an Idea." Last modified 2011. http://www.jhsph.edu/dept/mh/about/origins.html. (accessed November 11, 2011).

[3] Arthur C. Houts, "Fifty Years of Psychiatric Nomenclature: Reflections on the 1943 War Department Technical Bulletin, Medical 203." *Journal of clinical psychology* 56, no. 7 (2000): 935-936.

[4] Hans Pols, "Mental Hygiene - Origins of the Mental Hygiene Movement, Mental Hygiene and the Educational System." Internet FAQ Archives. http://www.faqs.org/childhood/Me-Pa/Mental-Hygiene.html (accessed November 17, 2011).

[5] The President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health. "Achieving the Promise: Transforming Mental Health Care in America." July 22, 2003. Accessed November 11, 2011. http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=Policy&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=16699

mental health stereotypes.[6] This appeal was lauded by the Mental Health Association of New York City.[7] These advocates of mental health education clearly recognized that comic books can shape the public's view of many issues, including mental health. The reaction to stigmatizing portrayals is part of a larger movement of advocacy for mental health awareness, which includes the efforts of organizations such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), founded in 1979, and the National Stigma Clearinghouse, active since 1990. But can we expect mental health issues to be sympathetically and accurately portrayed in comics?

Comics and mental health education

In 1952, the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene enlisted the characters of Chic Young's comic strip, *Blondie*, to propagate basic mental health messages in a "bona fide comic book". The reasons cited for choosing a comic book medium included its attractiveness to "both children and adults" and its use of humor and entertainment in the service of a "serious purpose".[8] This is a rather early example of a well-known comic being used in mental health education. Comics had long been seen as children's entertainment, so the N.Y. State Dept. had to stress that it could indeed be used for something "serious". But they did recognize that comics, which convey messages by a combination of visual images and text, could help in public health campaigning. Unfortunately, in the time since, it seems that comic portrayals of mental health have mostly worked against greater public understanding.

Recently, however, there has been a notable trend of comics tackling mental health issues in more sympathetic ways, whether as an element of the plot of an independent graphic novel, or

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[6] Eric H. Bender, Praveen R. Kambam, and Vasilis K. Pozios. "Putting the Caped Crusader on the Couch." *The New York Times*, September 21, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/21/opinion/putting-the-caped-crusader-on-the-couch.html?_r=1 (accessed November 12, 2011).

[7] Giselle Stolper. "When Comics Depict Mental Illness." *The New York Times*, September 27, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/27/opinion/when-comics-depict-mental-illness.html (accessed November 12, 2011).

[8] "Comics used for mental health education." *Ment. Hosp*. 1, no. 9 (1950): 2-d.

as an overt public health message conveyed by popular characters. I will discuss three examples

from the last decade, each depicting a different mental health disorder: post-traumatic stress dis-

order in Garry Trudeau's comic strip, *Doonesbury* (around 2005-2006); schizophrenia in a

standalone graphic novel by Nate Powell, *Swallow Me Whole* (2008); and depression in a short

Captain America comic (2011).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Doonesbury

In 2005, one of the characters of this long-running daily comic strip, B.D., lost his leg in

an explosion while fighting in the Iraq War. Subsequent strips described his recovery and pro-

gress. A number of these strips was published in a print collection, *The Long Road Home*.[9] With

tasteful wit and biting humor, the strip walks us through B.D.'s journey: how he broke the news

to his family, had surgery, got a prosthetic leg, underwent physical therapy, and adapted back to

life and home... and how he dealt with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

One story arc explicitly discussing PTSD has B.D. expressing reluctance to seek counsel-

ing. Eventually, he visits a local veteran's centre, intending to look around and leave, but the

counsellor manages to hold his attention enough to get him to sign up for an appointment. As

B.D. begins counseling, he is very guarded and skeptical, but eventually manages to talk about

his experience in the war. A variety of reasons, including stigma, often discourages veterans with

PTSD from seeking treatment[10], but B.D.'s character gives such veterans and their families an

idea of what to expect, while not evading their doubts and concerns.

This came at a time when U.S. troops were taking many casualties, and Trudeau wanted

to reflect the sacrifices of these soldiers. To depict their situation realistically and help the

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[9] G. B. Trudeau, *The long road home: one step at a time* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel, 2005).

[10] Ilona Meagher, "Doonesbury this Week: One Vet's PTSD Struggle." PTSD Combat: Winning the War Within. http://ptsdcombat.blogspot.com/2005/12/doonesbury-this-week-one-vets-ptsd.html (accessed November 12, 2011).

American public understand it, Trudeau drew his material from visits to the Walter Reed Army

Medical Centre. Amputee soldiers have called his efforts his way of "therapy" for them.[11] The

impact of the strip extended beyond education and comfort, too: the proceeds from selling the

published collection of strips benefited Fisher House, a recovery centre featured in the comic.[12]

Doonesbury illustrates how comic strips can be used for mental health education: first,

humor allows taboo and awkward topics to be discussed without hard feelings. (A soldier with a

prosthetic hand says to B.D., "Whoa... see that chick over there? She's checking me out!" B.D.

replies, "I think it's more like staring, Eddy.") Second, the use of a long-running character in a

popular daily strip makes the issue high-profile and raises awareness. Third, since the strip is a

daily, the long-term concerns and journeys of people with PTSD can be discussed over time.

Schizophrenia: Swallow Me Whole

This graphic novel follows the lives of a pair of step-siblings, Ruth and Perry, who both

have visual and auditory hallucinations. Ruth is diagnosed as having schizophrenia, but Perry is

never formally diagnosed. Ruth compulsively collects insects, and Perry is urged by a wizard on

his pencil to draw. Both face some difficulty in school as their home life deteriorates. One day,

Ruth hits a teacher in the face with a book for making a racist remark and is afterwards dismissed

as a mentally ill and out of hand student. After this point, she completely gives in to her delusion

that she is the "chosen one" for the insect kingdom.[13]

While not intended to educate the public about schizophrenia, this graphic novel still

treats the topic sensitively. It actively criticizes certain social attitudes surrounding mental ill-

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[11] Kelly Kennedy, "He's found a way to do his own therapy for us." *Army Times*, July 3, 2006.
http://www.armytimes.com/legacy/new/0-ARMYPAPER-1889390.php (accessed November 12, 2011).

[12] Trudeau, *The Long Road Home.*

[13] Nate Powell, *Swallow me whole* (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf, 2008).

ness: for example, boys and girls with mental illness are treated differently. Perry, the brother, never has social problems arising from his hallucinations, as people take his slightly strange behavior to be part of his creativity and his being a teenage boy. On the other hand, Ruth's diagnosis allows the school administration to pin her difficult behavior on her mental illness. Having understood Ruth's character in the context of the story, we are reluctant to agree with the teacher's hasty judgment of her. Powell's depiction of Ruth is very well-rounded; she is not defined by her illness. Perry and Ruth's hallucinations are also depicted visually, helping readers to imagine what it might be like to have schizophrenia. In this respect, the visual nature of comics allows the depiction of certain symptoms to the reader, in a way that a textual memoir cannot.

Swallow Me Whole reverses the trend of stereotyping of mental health patients in comics. Its strengths lie in mature writing and sensitive storytelling, complemented by striking images which stir the imagination. In this comic, the stereotype of the one-dimensional schizophrenic villain is displaced by a portrait of a pair of siblings who are shaped but cannot be defined by their mental disorder, cultivating sympathy in the readers and challenging assumptions that people may have about people with schizophrenia.

Depression: Captain America

In 2011, Marvel Comics published a 12-page short featuring Captain America, entitled *A Little Help*. The first two pages consist of a collage of images, intended to give us an insight into the life of the main character, a teenage boy. A tall apartment building, a neglected home, unpaid bills, a bad report card, a breakup text from a girlfriend: we see that life is not going well for this young man. In the next page, he hovers at the edge of the building's roof, and eventually takes the plunge. At that very moment, he is blown back by an explosion. Right under his nose, Cap-

tain America is battling a horde of unknown enemies. Suddenly, Captain America loses his shield; the boy tosses it back to him and hits a giant robot, which turns menacingly on the boy. The boy cowers in fear of certain death, but Captain America destroys the robot and gives the boy a thumbs-up. The last page prominently features the Suicide Prevention Lifeline and its number, and the comic ends with the only spoken words in the whole spread: "I need help."[14]

This comic deals with depression in a very compressed way, outlining quickly the precipitating factors and the possible risk (suicidal thoughts) ensuing from it. The focus of the comic, however, is suicide prevention. The main message is that there is help available; suicide is not the answer. Although the teenager takes the initial step off the building to commit suicide, we see him later in the comic trying to avoid death. This suggests that his decision to commit suicide was pushed by his life circumstances, and it is not something he really wants deep inside. Also, if he had successfully committed suicide, Captain America might have been killed. As it is, he saved this superhero, and in return, Captain America affirms him: life is worth living. Finally, he is not as alone as he thinks he is. He manages to find the Suicide Prevention Lifeline number and acknowledge his need for help; help is available and it is not shameful to ask for it. In this way, the comic is meant to encourage and motivate people with suicidal thoughts to seek help.

This comic is well-placed for promoting suicide prevention awareness: its audience is primarily tech-savvy young adult males, who are one of the higher-risk groups for contemplating suicide.[15] It was written by a psychologist, ensuring an informed treatment of the topic. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline welcomed the comic as a way to reach at-risk people, and

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[14] Nick Dragotta. "Captain America: A Little Help (2011) #1." Marvel. http://marvel.com/comic_books/issue/38864/captain_america_a_little_help_2011_1 (accessed November 12, 2011).

[15] John Draper, "Captain America Promotes the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline." SAMHSA Blog . http://blog.samhsa.gov/2011/01/25/captain-america-promotes-the-national-suicide-prevention-lifeline/ (accessed November 12, 2011).

noted that the visual medium vividly illustrated that there was a way out.[16] The use of a well-known character such as Captain America possibly boosted the message's credibility for fans.

Comics as therapy for mental health patients

The *Blondie* comics about mental health, mentioned above, were used not only to educate the public, but also to help mental health patients. Newton Bigelow, a mental health official in New York, used the comics in group therapy for mental health patients.[17] The value of comics has been recognized in another area of medicine: a 2010 study on comics and cancer recommended their use in patient care and education. As comics are a primarily visual and not textual medium, they may be more useful in getting the message across to more linguistically and educationally diverse audiences. Also, they are a less threatening way for patients to learn about their condition. The narrative arc of the story of a patient in a comic may also give real-life patients a model for handling difficult situations[18] — as illustrated by the Doonesbury comic. While this study focused on comics related to cancer, it is not difficult to imagine extending these principles to the field of mental health.

But comics can do more. Creating comics about their experience can serve as therapy for mental health patients; firsthand accounts of mental illness serve a dual purpose of public education and catharsis. Such accounts have become increasingly common since the 2000s, not only in the United States, but also in the United Kingdom and Canada. Examples include *Bitter Medicine: a graphic memoir of mental illness* (2010), published in Canada by a pair of brothers, one of whom suffered schizophrenia at a time when mental healthcare in Canada was being restruc-

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[16] "Captain America puts focus on suicide prevention." *USA Today*, January 12, 2011. http://www.usatoday.com/life/comics/2011-01-12-captainamerica-suicide12-ST_N.htm (accessed November 12, 2011).

[17] "Newton Bigelow, 87, Mental Health Official." *The New York Times*, February 9, 1991. http://www.nytimes.com/1991/02/09/obituaries/newton-bigelow-87-mental-health-official.html (accessed November 11, 2011).

[18] Michael Green, and Myers Kimberly. "Graphic Medicine: use of comics in medical education and patient care." *BMJ* 340 (2010): c863. http://www.bmj.com/content/340/bmj.c863.full (accessed November 11, 2011).

tured[19]; *Psychiatric Tales* (2010), a British male nurse's explanation in comic form of various mental disorders and his personal account of his own depression[20]; and the U.K.-based website, *Better Drawn*, where people who have lived with long-term mental and physical illnesses post their experiences in comic form, which would otherwise be difficult to discuss directly[21]. As more comics portray mental illnesses in a sympathetic way, more mental health patients and their caregivers could feel comfortable sharing their stories through comics, too.

Conclusion

We live in a time where stereotypes of mental health patients are less and less tolerated, and where multiple groups recognize the need to remove the stigma surrounding mental disorders. While comics were once one outlet of the media that participated in forming these negative stereotypes, we can now find comics which deal with mental health issues in a sensitive manner. Comics in the United States are uniquely placed in mental health education as they can reach an at-risk target audience, convey their messages in a visual and non-textual way, use narrative to present important issues in an accessible manner, use humor to enable discussion of taboo topics, and, in some cases, use popular characters to raise the profile of a certain issue. Besides their use in public health education, comics also have the potential to serve as therapy for mental health patients directly, a trend more visible in the United Kingdom and Canada. Overall, there is a larger trend of the media moving away from stereotyping and towards a greater visibility and understanding of mental health issues, and comics are finding their place in this movement.

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[19] Clem Martini, and Olivier Martini, *Bitter medicine: a graphic memoir of mental illness* (Calgary: Freehand Books, 2010).

[20] Darryl Cunningham, *Psychiatric tales* (London: Blank Slate Books, 2010).

[21] Simon Moreton. "better, drawn." http://www.betterdrawn.com/ (accessed November 12, 2011).

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