






The pre-cloak superhero: a tool for superhero play and intervention

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 1940s, superheroes have been used by educators and clinicians to instill community and confidence; resiliency and courage; tolerance and sharing among children. Through superhero play, the early childhood classroom has become a laboratory filled with capes and costumes. In the therapist's milieu, the empowered superhero provides a model for children to aspire to. But both of these environments – the classroom and the counselor's office – use the fully powered superhero. While the literature attests to health benefits provided through use of the empowered superhero, this article draws attention to a resource often overlooked: the pre-empowered, pre-cloak superhero. As many popular superheroes (~86%) were orphaned or abandoned, prior to acquiring superpowers, the article focuses on the adversities they share with these two specific groups of vulnerable children. With orphaned and abandoned children as the treatment group of focus, the article proposes environments for pre-cloak interventions. In addition, the article proposes a dual-stage program, which would combine pre-cloak interventions with superhero play. For the educator and clinician, possibility awaits through this expansion of the superhero palette.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 November 2016
Accepted 1 February 2017

KEYWORDS

Children; empowerment;
orphans; resilience;
superhero

The use of superheroes for classroom play and intervention has had its advocates and critics. Its advocates (Burke, 2007; De-Souza & Radell, 2011; Hoffman, 2004; Marazi, 2015) insist that fantasy play is essential for the formation of the child's identity; while its critics (Brown, Lamb, & Tappan, 2009; Holland, 2003; Jones & Brown, 1999) see the practice as gender-stereotyped and violent. In the therapy environment, the jury there is split. While numerous practitioners (Bender & Lourie, 1941; Rubin, 2006, 2007; Sayers, 2007; Scanlon, 2007) have supported the practice since the 1940s, the American Psychological Association has yet to offer its

endorsement (Suskind, 2014). Amid these advocates and critics, this paper draws attention to the pre-cloak superhero: a tool for superhero play and intervention.

Superhero play and interventions

A recent article (Harris, 2016) entitled 'Heroes of resiliency and reciprocity: teachers' supporting role for reconceptualizing superhero play in early childhood settings' presents a compelling case for the developmental benefits of incorporating superhero play into the schoolday curriculum of young children. The author, early childhood educator Kathleen I. Harris (2016), employs the empowered superhero to inspire and motivate her children. When enrobed in cape and costume, she finds the child is now equipped to fathom fears and hopes with superhero courage (Hoffman, 2004). This focus on empowerment is consistent with the tenets of *positive psychology* (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Harris (2016) describes a boy named 'Ian' as socially delayed, who when in cape and costume conjured unknown confidence that enabled him to play with peers at playtime. Harris also cites the compassion of the superhero as a tool to curb potential bullying. Thus, she uses the empowered superhero to bolster courage and compassion in the classroom.

Likewise, therapist Cory A. Nelson (2007) employs the empowered superhero in his therapy work with troubled children. Nelson uses a 'What Would Superman Do' (WWSD) technique, which helps these children 'identify and incorporate superheroic traits into their own personalities and lives' (Rubin, 2007, p. xiv). To do this, Nelson works within a four-stage Adlerian framework (Kottman, 1995). Within this structure, he establishes a therapeutic relationship with the child; assesses the child's lifestyle, in terms of goals and expectations; offers alternatives to the child's maladaptive thoughts and behaviors, such as: *In this situation, what would Superman do?*; and reorients the child, so they can use the WWSD technique in interactions with their family and their peers. Nelson reports success with this technique, provided that the child has connection with comic superheroes. Similarly, therapist Jennifer Mendoza Sayers (2007) uses empowered superheroes – in particular, The Hulk – in her work with emotionally dysregulated children. In treating the 'Incredible Hulk syndrome' (Potter-Efron & Potter-Efron, 1995), Sayers helps these children in transforming their raw, destructive anger into adaptive, so-called 'healthy anger' (Sayers, 2007, p. 90). And finally, therapist Patty Scanlon (2007) recounts success with a child on the autism spectrum. Over several sessions, Scanlon noted a decrease in aggression and 'newfound social skills,' once the patient donned Superman's red cape (p. 187).

Thus, the empowered superhero is present in the classroom, and present in the therapist's milieu. But what about the hero prior to their empowerment: before they donned their costume or their cape?

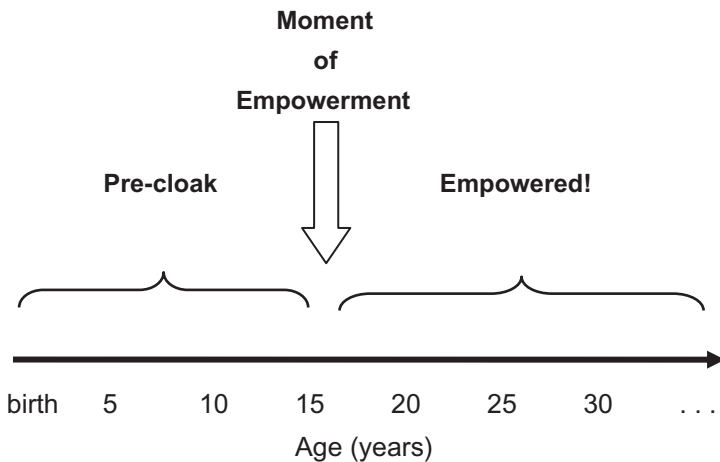


Figure 1. Developmental stages of a comic superhero. Ex: Spider-Man.

The pre-cloak superhero

Although not presently a fixture in Dr. Harris' classroom, the 'pre-cloak' superhero (see Figure 1) is very much alive and shares a history with many at-risk children. Peter Parker (AKA Spider-Man), for example, lost his parents at age six (Ziskin, Bryce, & Raimi, 2002); Superman lost his before age one (Spengler & Donner, 1978); Captain America was bullied and grew up in poverty (Feige & Johnston, 2011); Black Widow was abandoned at age three (Roemmich, 2010). In an indexing of the adversities of the top-20 comic superheroes, a recent study (Fradkin, Weschenfelder, & Yunes, 2016) noted that '86% were either orphaned or abandoned; 49% had at least one parent murdered; 15% were kidnapped; 29% were bullied; and 29% endured economic limitation' (p. 412) (see Figure 2).

This common history of pre-cloak adversities has potential for the empowerment of children: especially those orphaned or abandoned. Studies (Cole, 2014; Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005) find that children from these groups (termed 'vulnerable children') have higher rates of problems than children in the general population. They have higher rates of behavioral problems, including unprotected sex (Thompson & Auslander, 2011), truancy (Christian, 2003), and substance abuse (Hjern, Lindblad, & Vinnerljung, 2002). They also have higher rates of psychological issues, including conduct disorder (Shin, 2005), low self-esteem (Luke & Coyne, 2008), and suicide attempts (Keyes, Malone, Sharma, Iacono, & McGue, 2013).

Classrooms overflowing with these children can be found in youth detention centers. Known as 'juvenile halls,' in the American criminal justice system, these facilities house youth – per order of the courts – who have committed crimes and are awaiting legal hearings (Leone & Wruble, 2015). These environments are ideal for superhero programs, as a disproportionately high number of these children are orphaned or abandoned (Naranjo, 2013). In the absence of role models, these youths may find their mentor in the guise of Superman (or Spider-Man). With

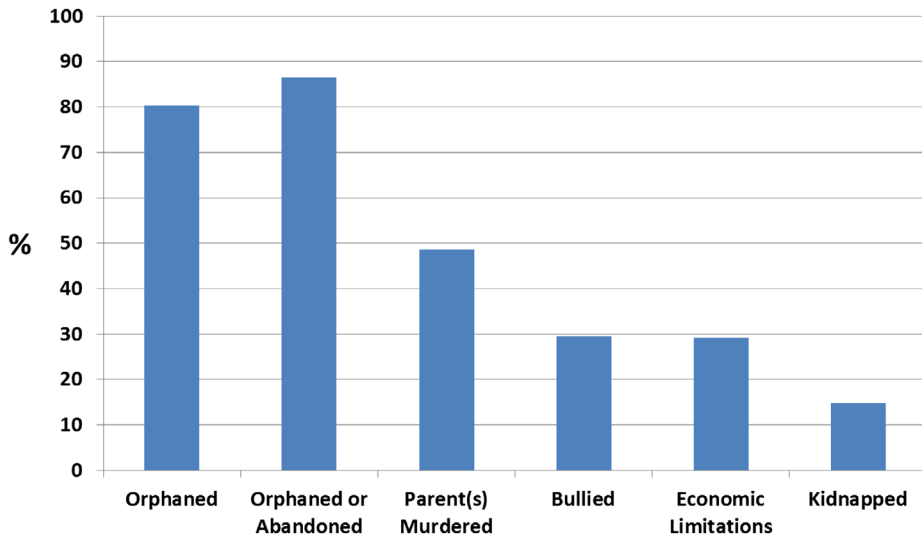


Figure 2. Weighted prevalences of childhood adversities among the top 20 comic superheroes. Note: See Fradkin et al. (2016) for sample details and weighting algorithm.

positive role models, these youths may find direction. Through direction, they may find empowerment.

Another set of classrooms ideal for superhero sessions can be found in inner-city, after-school programs. Among the minority youth that fill these lower income programs, there is a disproportionate absence of male role models (Kreider & Fields, 2005). In fact, nearly 50% of all African-American youth grow up in homes without a father in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). In the absence of a father, for these youths to learn that Batman grew up without a father too, may foster hope where hope had not existed: 'If Batman can survive growing up without a father, maybe I can survive without one, too,' these youths may say. And in cities rife with crime, and dangerous distractions, for these youths to learn that Batman dedicates his life to others, may foster empathy and hero-like behaviors.

Yet another set of classrooms ideal for superhero sessions would be in 'shelter institutions,' a term used in Brazil for government-funded facilities that house children who have been removed from their biological parents for reasons of neglect, abuse, abandonment, domestic violence, or parental substance abuse (Guilherme, Duarte, Farias, & Steidel, 2016). In the absence of role models, youths in these institutions may find direction and hope, through the tales of superheroes, serving proxy in the absence of their parents.

A final set of classrooms ripe for superhero sessions would be the mainstream classrooms, but with a focus on children of adoption. Rubin (2007) describes the two main themes in the journey of adoption as 'the search for identity and loss' (p. 240). As the adoptive father of two children, Rubin believes that for the adopted child, this search for identity can be expedited through superhero sessions, and

the acceptance of their loss by the same. In his practice, Rubin uses the 'superhero adoption narrative' to emphasize the pre-cloak adversities his adopted patients share with several popular superheroes (Superman, Batman, Spider-Man). Rubin finds this pre-cloak narrative invaluable for his adopted patients on their 'healing journey' (p. 250).

The global stage

Up to this point, we have spoken of the potential of superhero play and intervention, within the context of the English-speaking world; and more specifically: the U.S. But what of their potential outside of the U.S.? Their potential outside the English-speaking world?

While the most popular comic superheroes are creations of DC and Marvel Comics, based in the U.S. (Lavin, 1998), their impact resounds on the global stage. Through film sales and merchandising, their proliferation transcends all boundaries and all borders. 'Why is this?' one might ask. 'What is the reason why?' Mythologist Joseph Campbell (2008) would attribute this success to the 'monomyth,' hinting at the universality of superhero storylines and archetypes. In truth, the superhero stories conform nicely to Campbell's 'The Hero's Journey,' in which the protagonist is called out to adventure; faces trials and tribulations; and through the process returns home, a transformed man. Through these superhero stories, Campbell's archetypes abound: the mentor (Uncle Ben from *Spider-Man*), the ally (Robin from *Batman*), and the trickster (Loki from *Thor*) are a few that inhabit these monomythic tales.

This universality can be seen in a classroom in Rwanda, where therapist Lisa Meaney uses superhero stories in her efforts to empower orphaned children (Fradkin, 2016). Using origin stories, Meaney inculcates the children to the hardships suffered by the heroes: the adversities they faced and overcame. She reports (personal communication, 22 April 2016) her children do not see a 'white' superhero: they see an example of what their lives could be. What gives these children power is not shared race/ethnicity; rather, it is shared adversities.

Dual-stage play and interventions

In a classroom setting, a fine line exists between superhero play and superhero intervention. The Harris (2016) article looks at superhero play that aspires for positive relationship between children. In the early childhood classroom, this use of superhero play has immense value for the reasons that she states: socialization, reciprocity, resiliency building, community building, and child empowerment. In this sense, superhero play could be seen as a remedial program.

In contrast, our proposed usage of comic superheroes among vulnerable child and adolescent populations (Fradkin et al., 2016) would be more accurately described as rehabilitative. Because of their misfortunes, these orphaned

and abandoned children have experienced far more trauma and abuse than their cohorts in the general population (Euser, Alink, Tharner, van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2013; Wathier & Dell'Aglio, 2007). Thus, their situation calls for intervention.

These applications, however, are not mutually exclusive. Within an orphaned population, the pre-cloak program, for example, could be supplemented by superhero play. The overlap, in fact, would serve them well. We might assume, in this example, that the treatment group would be comprised of older children: adolescents. Nonetheless, the benefits described by Harris (2016), in terms of socialization, empathy, and community building, could be instilled in this older treatment group. Key would be the sequencing of treatment. The pre-cloak treatment would be first – laying foundation where there was none; shining light through shared backstories of adversity. Once connection was established, between the treatment group and superheroes, superhero play could be incorporated. Thus, the pre-cloak intervention could work hand in hand with superhero play.

Conclusion

Superhero play and intervention has shown promise in the classroom, as well as in the clinical environment (Harris, 2016; Rubin, 2007; Sayers, 2007). This promise has been built primarily on the strength and the appeal of the empowered superhero. While we acknowledge the importance of the work that has been done, we believe the group at highest risk has been neglected. Children orphaned or abandoned have needs different than those not (Euser et al., 2013; Rubin, 2007); and for this reason, interventions must be tailored (Fradkin, 2016; Fradkin et al., 2016). For this vulnerable population, the pre-cloak superhero may provide a starting point. Be it in the formal or the non-formal educational context, the time is ripe to test the value of these stories.

The idea of comic superheroes as a tool to help our children has sparked interest since the early 1940s (Bender & Lourie, 1941). Superman, back then, was all of three years old; today he is a billion-dollar empire (Strube, 2015). As is Spider-Man and Iron Man: all three orphans who rose above their stations. Their stories are of value; they are the 'folklore of the times' (Bender & Lourie, 1941, p. 550). Joseph Campbell describes them in 'The Hero's Journey' (Campbell, 2008, p. 210). In these pre-cloak stories – in these shared adversities – is a resource for educators and clinicians.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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