Using Superheroes in Art Therapy through Counselling for Adolescents Boys in Conflict with Law: Illustrations from Juvenile Home in Ernakulam, Kerala

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Abstract: Art based therapies have proved to be effective for diverse issues related to mental health among children in conflict with law. Artistic expression and art-based therapies are found to stimulate self-awareness regarding latent fears, trauma, anxiety, affection, fantasy and desire. One of the multiple techniques falling under the ambit of art-based therapies is the application of the super hero metaphor in counselling and other therapeutic intervention. The present study is an illustration of a series of activities based on superhero introduced to a group of youths in a juvenile home in Ernakulam district of Kerala. The paper traces the steps used in the activities and discusses the hero as the symbol used by the youths in diverse ways. Grounded Theory and Visual thinking Strategies (VSTs) are employed to understand the nuances of the reproduction of the hero image by the youths. The VSTs are applied to the outputs generated by the client groups followed by detailed analysis of each elements emerging from the narratives of the superhero activity along with stage wise description of the therapeutic alliance.

Keywords: Art Based Therapies, Children in Conflict with Law, Superhero

Introduction

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act (2000) states that children in conflict with law are to be treated as a special constituency keeping in mind the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). This includes facilitating quality care and working towards the need for ensuring effective and right based justice system for children in need of care and protection and juvenile offenders or children in conflict with law. Therefore, there is a need to establish juvenile homes in each district of the country in order to provide a specialised systems for engaging adolescents in correctional services. The specialised system includes protectional services, both physical and mental health support, education and vocational development to ensure a period of genuine introspection.

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While in India, the state is catalyst for strengthening this support system, there are several non-profit and voluntary efforts to strengthen the efforts of the state. Narrowing down to the context of Ernakulam district in Kerala for illustration for the present study, the Bristol home receives up to hundred adolescent boys through the Juvenile Justice Board (JJB) who are at the juncture of conflict with law. While the system has placed the role of psychologists and counsellors, there are several organisations that work in tandem with these agencies to help the youths to positive change[1].

While art and play therapies are seen as allied yet crucial aspects of therapeutic engagements, there are only a few specialised professionals and agencies that work in this domain. One such specialised agency is "The Art Outreach Society" which conducts a series of art based therapeutic engagements with the youths in conflict with law. These engagements encourage the youths to relate their inspirations of superheroes and apply the same for countering their fears, inadequacy, insecurity and trauma etc.

This therapeutic plan acknowledges the influence of social-economic factors in determining the actions of juveniles/children who are in conflict with law. The conflict or offence, therefore, is assessed on a spectrum based on the broader socio-economic context in which the offence had occurred (such as poverty, marginalisation etc.) rather than looking at it in isolation. Within this structure grows the need for expression and innovative practices to help children work towards genuine introspection and self-efficacy. Studies indicate that children in conflict with law are exposed to a multitude of psychological and social issues common across institutionalised children. In such a scenario, there is a need for providing them platforms for emotional expressions. The therapists/social workers who practice and facilitate art-based therapies are dedicated to work with emotional expression through art. The engagement with children in conflict with law is crucial from various standpoints of mental health like anxiety, anger, frustration, guilt and trauma.

While working with the youth from the contingent situation, especially those falling under the domain of children in conflict with law, the broad objectives are to facilitate and introduce a medium of expression of diverse impending issues and to positively and constructively channelise their energies through artistic expression. When understanding children's anxieties and emotions becomes difficult for mental health professionals, several methods were suggested including comic books, analysing the way children used comic books to build their perception and more importantly vice versa, children's fantasies influencing the media and popular narrative on the whole. Psychoanalysts Freud and Jung have essentially stressed on symbols and individual's engagement with these symbols to reproduce an image or visual schemes of power and identity emerging from inadequacies and insecurities (Campbell, 2003). In defence of the comic books and fantastic recreation of the reality as perceived by children, Jones (2006) asserted that: 'children are not merely consumers of media texts, they are actively engaged in a range of activities - fantasies, make believe play, drawing, writing and other forms of meaning-making, reflecting, incorporating and commenting on these media texts' (p. 4). The assertion here is that children actively engage in creating these perceptions which the media borrows. Children are to be seen as active story tellers and the stories are inspired by their archetypes (Rubin, 2006), fears, fantasies, imaginations, anxieties, wishes. The imagery of superhero is largely an exaggerated version of children's perception

of themselves or an external entity as a '*protector*', '*benefactor*', '*hero*', '*liberator*', '*messiah*' etc. who are endowed with super powers and special characteristics (Campbell, 2008). Early archetypes had inspired Stan Lee, Archie and Marvel Universe and others to create *Spider-Man* (1962), *The Hulk* (2003), *Star Wars* (1977), and *The Fantastic Four* (2005), Harry Potter (2000), *Superman* (1938) and *Batman* (1939) to name a few. Narrowing down to Asian cultures, the archetypes are largely influenced by representations in religious texts which are sedimented through oral traditions. In the context of the present study, *Lord Krishna*, *Lord Rama*, *Lord Hanuman*, among others have been ingrained in the minds of the children through the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Other popular narratives such as *Amar Chitra Katha, Panchtantra* and more recently the televised series such as *Shaktimaan* (1997), and *Chota Bheem (2008)* have influenced Indian children and youth. In the current context, the superhero imagery is an amalgamation of those from the religious texts as well from the Indian cinema.

Power is a key aspect of the superhero imagery, the feature that segregates them from the rest of the society and makes them '*invincible*'. Rubin (2006) is of the view that, the notion of '*power*' stems from their own identity. Especially evident in at-risk children, it could be seen that adversity leads to assumption of certain powers which enhances self-efficacy and most importantly helps in building resilience. Frandkin and Yunes (2016) have identified Comic Superhero Strategy (CHS) as an approach to help children at risk, empower themselves, and work towards resilience. Campbell (2003) and Frandkin and Yunes (2016) mention the use of *invincibility suggestion*, a counselling technique introduced to children through play and art therapy to help them understand that like super heroes, anybody to acquire 'special powers' to adjust to and change the adverse situation they are in. Frandkin and Yunes (2016) list the context of several heroes and their contexts of abandonment and neglect to draw an image of how parallel comparisons with heroes can accentuate self-efficacy.

Further in the case of at-risk children and youth, narrowing to the case of juveniles in conflict with law, creative approaches and therapies have proved to be effective in providing space and opportunities for release of guilt, introspection, de-individuation (especially through drama therapy), release of anxiety, using guilt in a constructive manner, release of anger, understanding the importance of forgiveness and develop confidence.

Objective

The aim of the study is to understand the application of the concept of superheroes in enhancing self-efficacy of juveniles in conflict with law.

Methodology

To understand the impact of the activities facilitated with a group of 80 boys in the Juvenile Home in Kakkanad, Ernakulam, Kerala; Grounded theory and specifically Visual Thinking Strategies[6] were used to capture the perceptions of the youth regarding their creation. The methods used for studying the impact and the analysis of the outputs are qualitative. AtlasTi was used to understand the dominant themes and their inter-relationship using code association. The verbatim or narratives collected from the youths during the sessions were in Malayalam and Hindi, and are translated to English. All the boys in the particular juvenile home were included in the therapy sessions and therefore in the study, the respondents are a

heterogenous group of eighty boys of the juvenile home within the age range of 15-18 years. They belong to different linguistic and regional backgrounds namely Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Bihar, West-Bengal, Assam and Haryana. The range of crimes includes civil and criminal cases.

Activities	Objectives	Process Involved	Group/Individual	Intended Outcome	No. of Sessions and duration
Probing into individual's superhero perception	Initial understanding of the superheroes, construction of self and society	Reflective questions and discussions on what superhero means to them, using 'why', 'how they were constructed'. Encouraging everyone to participate in whatever language they can.	Individual	Sharings on perception of 'superhero', 'extension of self', etc	One session of two hours
Constructing the superhero image	To help the youth translate their superhero imagery to picture, explaining the construct through messages and words and work on team building and cohesiveness as auxiliary objectives.	To help give a form to the mental imagery of superheroes and understand their characteristic features, using team building as a medium to encourage discussions and use fo verbatim. The sessions included conversations about the outputs and intended messages and superpowers.	Group	Images of superheroes- Depicted in plate 1, 2,3 and 4	Two sessions of 2 hours each
'I am a superhero' - Role Playing	To personalise the image of superhero using role-play	Enactment through role-play, developing key features into props and making clear statements of their character's role	Group	Role plays by members of each group on their creation	One session of 2 hours
	Note: The impact of the three mentioned activities/sessions are assessed in the present study, while the module on superhero is continued for ten sessions and used intermittently and appropriately in other sessions.				

The activities planned over a period of two-months with process are as listed:

Application of Visual Thinking Strategies (VSTs) to outputs of activities

This section discusses the application of VSTs to the four significant outputs created by the participants. The first superhero image is that of "Damu". Superhero Damu knows King-Fu which he learnt from the Shaolin Temple in China, he believes in meditation and mind reading, he need not use any weapon. His weapon is his strong mind though which he controls everyone. He like to wear orange because it is the colour of courage. Just because he does not use weapon does not mean he is weak, he does not need them. He kills the enemies of justice with his kung fu and with his mind. Damu's eyes are closed as he is meditating, if he opens it means destruction.

The second image is that of "Don Marley". There is so much violence the world, this hero is Don Marley, he goes to gym regularly and uses his compass to locate enemies if they are hiding. He carries his dumbells which is a symbol of strength and health. The Nunchuka is also used to fight against those create problems in the society. The third super hero is that of a Swamiji who is simple in his lifestyle but is highly powerful. His symbol is peace and he fights for the innocent. He is also the protector of children. Swamiji knows everything through the meditation and he can hear the cries of the people, reach on spot and fight for them.

The fourth image is that of the *Jinn* or *Ginn* (spirit). He is armed with dangerous weapons but he attacks only those who are enemies of innocent people. He has three eyes, one located on his chest which can burn his adversary when he is angry. He smokes but he makes it a point to tell youngsters not to smoke as it is injurious to health. He can fly and take different forms.

Use of Weapons as Props or Symbols of Power

Almost all the depictions of the superhero by the youths in the juvenile home have certain common elements and the most common among them is the weapon, a key symbol of power. Of the two outputs presented by the groups, two of them have evident use of weapons. Rubin (2005) gives examples of cases of children with behavioural disorders, and says that the children reported that weapons yield power, security, and a feeling of protection. Discussing the case of Dorothy, Rubin adds that the cat woman is her superhero, who, holding an iron rod, defends herself and protects the people she is fighting for. The pictures of the juvenile home also show use of weapons. Even where the message was clear that they want to reinstate peace, justice and order in the society, their heroes were equipped with weapons.

A member from the group which created a picture of Don Marley shared, *"without his weapon, how is he going to punish the offenders, he keeps himself strong by gymming regularly (pointing to the dumbells he carries as an accessory), the Nunchaku was even used by Bruce Lee, Don Marley knows how to use it, and the axe helps him cut his enemies into two, the compass helps him locate enemies even from the corners, and he is able to kill them by locating them".* The sixteen-year old believed that the hero commanded respect with his complete outfit with the weapons and accessories, and his powers are limited without his complete outfit. Even in the role enactment activity, the participants carried make-belief objects with them to depict weapons and often used the same to complete their presentation. Jones (2016) was of the view that weapon and their use in the superhero activity hinders the therapeutic process by increasing the tendency for violence. He also termed the use of weapons as a sexist feature by raising concerns about its application in calming children. However, Holland (2003) and Boyd (1997) clearly stated that allowing children/youth to develop their own weapons was organic, and it will facilitate more space for them to explore their motives and use of weapons.

Holland shared that children often engage in creation of their own weapons, and it is an indication of their imagination and creativity at work, rather than a product of any gender bias or violent tendencies. With regard to the image of the Jinn, smoking a cigarette, a seventeen-year old remarked, *"…he wanted to take a break so lit a cigarette, he knows when it is correct and when not, it is a city that he is trying to save, he might be engaging in several wrong doing, but he knows when to do it, when nobody is watching, because he tells people that cigarette smoking is*

not acceptable." The impetus is that even though heroes have their own dark side, they are aware as to when to bring that side.

Masculinity and Gender in Images of Superheroes

Jones (2016) stated that gender is a key determinant of the use of weapon. However, Rubin (2006), explaining Dorothy's case, states that regardless of gender, weapons are seen as a part of the costume, grants a completeness to their hero schema. This imagery is to be seen as an accessory of powerful hero, and not just a symbolism of the angry hero.

Along with the image of heroes as alpha males, there are a few female representations like cat woman, wonder woman, super woman, and black widow among others. The outputs presented by the boys are all masculine with beards and moustache to reinforce their gender. Masculinity as a common theme could be attributed to the fact that they were all boys, and they are able to transform and translate their identities to a male more comfortably than a female.

Angry Young Hero?: 'Use' of Anger

When the participants were asked if their superheroes were angry, all of them said that through their heroes have a 'very bad temper', they would know when to use it. Nobody reported a Hulk Syndrome which is characteristic of Hulk (2003). In the popular culture, angry superhero is presented in a context where children who have been raised in adversity, insecurity have undergone trauma, loss or deprivation often channelise their frustration and anger when growing up through vetting out injustice and hurting offenders or villains as evident in the case of Hulk (2003), Wolverine (2013), Batman (1939) etc. The youths in the present study shared that their heroes are easy to be provoked to anger, while drawings of the superheroes were 'peaceful', the dramatic representations through role enactment were more *'aggressive'* and *'angry'*.

The anger was used constructively by the hero. When asked about their own anger, most reported being easily provoked to anger, some shared that they have learnt to control at times, but it is extremely difficult to do so. In the first activity of sharing about their superhero fantasy, anger was a key factor, one of the participants shared, "...*yesterday Rajesh (name changed) was angry at the dinner table because Vishnu (name changed) sat on his place. It led to some verbal duel and arm wrestling, despite Rajesh winning and getting to sit in his place, he punched Vishnu and hurt him, I think he does not know how to control his anger"*. This was later used after the third activity and Rajesh was asked how he feels about his hero. The figure of Don Marley was created by his group, and Rajesh, being a good at drawing and sketching, was instrumental in deciding the imagery of Don Marley. Rajesh also revealed later that Don Marley is his role model, and he displays anger only when he is provoked, and even then he will not hurt anybody.

The Seeker of Justice

While there is an assertion on routing anger through an acceptable manner such as 'against adversary' by the participants, the goal is to seek justice. The 'seeker of the justice' or the 'altruistic' hero is another common theme across the superheroes created by the participants. In the discussions with the children, it was observed that many phrases such as '*fight against*

evil', '*protector of the world*', '*war against injustice*' were in abundance in their speech. It indicates that they were fighting against injustice and everything '*wrong*' and '*evil*', just like their superheroes. 'The-end-is-not-defined-by-means' approach is evident in the outputs created by them. The societal goals range from peace and order in the society to communal harmony as shown in the case of Don Marley. However, in the two key outputs by two groups, the heroes are seekers of justice. They seem to be harbinger of peace, and are depicted either meditating or using their 'psychic powers'. The figure of Damu depicts meditation as a medium of power and the use of mind reading as a technique by the superhero to gain victory over the enemies. This, according to the group members, is one of the non-violent methods which uses the mind as a weapon. The following table shows some of the probing questions raised during, or at the end of each session and the corresponding targeted behaviour and beliefs of the youths.

Activities	Probing questions	Targeted behavioural aspects
Probing into individual's superhero perception	• What do you understand by superhero? • Who is your superhero? • What are the charachteristics of you superhero? • How does your superhero looks like? • What are their super-powers? • Where do they come from? • Are they loving and caring? • Do they lie? • Do they hurt others?	• Understanding how they are translating their own identity into their superhero • Use of self and extension of self • Latent or manifest anger • Masking of real self • Stimulating self awareness • Tendency for aggression and harmful behaviour • Guilt and low-self esteem • Internal or external locus of control
Constructing the superhero image	• Who is the person in the picture you have drawn? • What is the significance of the their costume? • What is the significance of those colours? • What are their accessories? • Do they have weapon? If yes what do they do with the weapon? • Do they have a vehicle? • What is their symbol?	• Use of self and extension of self • Creativity and imagination and using self through symbols • Symbolism • Anger management • Relationship management
'I am a superhero' -Role Playing	• What is the message that your superhero has for the society? • Is he angry? If yes why? • Will he hurt anyone? If Yes why and whom? • Why is he here today?	• Use of self and extension of self • Self-awareness • Creativity and imagination and using self through symbols • Symbolism • Anger management • Relationship management • Identity formation • Use of aggression and violence

Key assertions and the conclusion emanating from the therapeutic introduction of super heroes are as explained in the following stages:

First stage focuses on the formation of the therapeutic alliance with the youths. It includes

rapport formation and asking probing questions, and using reflective statements to explore their fears, anxiety, trauma, and, on the positive side, exploring their self-efficacy, self-esteem and resilience. The rapport formation between the individual/group and the social worker builds trust, and helps reflective questions to be sedimented and thought upon by the individual/group. Based on the assessments made in the first stage, the intervention plan is prepared. For instance, the first stage of super hero engagement was informal conversation and a scribbling activity which helped in breaking the ice and attempted to build a trusting relationship with the social workers(s).

The Second Stage of Narrative Identification is identifying oneself with an existing or imagined hero with special powers. The aim of the stage is to overcome the conflict and dissolution of the resistance by the relationship just formed. The activities could be initiated in the stage with short-term and long-term goals which would culminate in ample discussions and probing on both sides. The social worker has to carve a space for the client/group to discuss. Each superhero activity would culminate with presentation of the work and discussion on reflective questions and probing. Further issues with individuals in the group would surface, for instance, anger issues in Rajesh was a revelation, and the social worker could address them covertly and overtly in discussions later.

Narrative transformation is the third stage, which is characterised by conscious projection and reflection of one's negative and positive feelings and energies to the identified superhero. In this stage, there is increased involvement with art supplies, art activities, clients finding time for the activity, and taking keen interest in it. This could also be the stage where confrontation with more conflicts could happen. In case of group therapy, there is a need to address individual issues by worker's intervention.

The fourth stage is the concluding stage where resilience is key, and there would be attempts to reinstate calmness and acceptance along with anger management. Increased self-awareness and detachment from the hero image would set in, so that the clients would to understand the difference between the real self and the imagined. Follow-up and revisiting when required is a significant aspect as it will help the super-hero association play a vital role when clients encounter newer conflicts.

The role of the counsellor/art therapist/worker is summarised as follows:

1. The regularity and frequency of the interventions are important and one should plan interventions at adequate intervals to help them attach and detach with the heroic imagery.
2. The youths must enjoy the artistic expression, and the activity must be the one which does not require skill and expertise but could induce catharsis and emotional well-being.
3. When group therapies are to be initiated, and there is an evident heterogeneity in the group. Team building activities can be applied to enhance cohesiveness.
4. The youths look forward to engage with more tools and for longer duration of their engagement which forms the foundation of art-based therapies, therefore, social workers to facilitate the same.

Note

Section 1 (Article 19), The Juvenile Justice (Care and protection of Children) Amendment Act 2006

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